

Providing Better Support to Students of Color: The Importance of School Climate, Belonging, and Well-Being

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Underlying student academic achievement and disciplinary actions are the everyday interactions that students have with their peers, teachers, and administrators. Unfortunately, these experiences, which profoundly impact students' self-perception, are not always positive. Consequently, students in public and private schools have taken to social media to document the racist actions occurring at their schools. The sobering reality is that parents of color still have to grapple with whether their children will be treated unfairly because of their race. Parents of color often want to know whether it is worth sending their children to schools where most students are white. These concerns were further highlighted in 2020, when social media movements such as "Black at" highlighted the experiences that Black students have at majority-white schools.

In the face of social unrest resulting from the deaths of Black people at the hands of law enforcement, persisting racial disparities, and discrimination, schools and universities are increasingly exploring the experiences that support or threaten students' sense of belonging. As schools seek to improve racial equity, school climate will play a large role because it comprises several critical qualities of the school environment, such as physical and social-emotional safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and school connectedness. Education reform efforts often overlook or minimize the importance of school climate and belonging to student achievement, but research indicates that these are interrelated, meaning that improving school climate can improve student achievement by supporting students, increasing their confidence, and ensuring their safety.¹ Accordingly, a holistic approach to addressing student needs should focus not only on academic outcomes but also on nonacademic supports.

Although the achievement gap among different racial and ethnic communities is well established, the gap in perceptions of school climate—called the racial school climate gap—is less known.² This gap exists not only across schools but also within schools that are racially diverse: Black and Hispanic students often report that their schools' climates are less positive than do their white and Asian counterparts. Being ostracized for their race and ethnicity can lead students to develop negative racial

¹ Ruth Berkowitz, Hadass Moore, Ron Avi Astor, and Rami Benbenishty, "A Research Synthesis of the Associations between Socioeconomic Background, Inequality, School Climate, and Academic Achievement," *Review of Educational Research* 87, no. 2 (2017): 425–69; John Shindler, Albert Jones, A. Dee Williams, Clint Taylor, and Hermenia Cardenas, "The School Climate-Student Achievement Connection: If We Want Achievement Gains, We Need to Begin by Improving the Climate," *Journal of School Administration Research and Development* 1, no. 1 (2016): 9–16.

² Adam Voight, *The Racial School-Climate Gap* (San Francisco: WestEd, 2013).

identities, and the trauma from those experiences can be long lasting. Research has found that mental health issues for youth in the US have become progressively worse over the past decade. Only 35 percent of students with a mental health need receive the care they need, as schools lack sufficient resources to help students deal with trauma and mental health concerns.³ School leaders should address the following issues to close the racial school climate gap:

- Students need a safe and supportive school environment to learn effectively.
- There is a need to center equity, well-being, and belonging in school climate. We know that students belonging to different racial communities continue to be treated differently. This acknowledgment has fueled a significant amount of research demonstrating the importance of diversifying the teacher workforce. Proactive action should be taken to mitigate racist actions and to foster healthy school environments where all children can learn without worrying that they will be treated unfairly because of their race.
- Students face many challenges (such as trauma) inside and outside their schools, yet many lack sufficient school supports. The lack of critical counseling resources places an additional strain on teachers and other school staff, strain that was felt acutely in 2020 because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Need for Further Analysis

California is one of the few states with publicly available data on school climate broken down by demographics such as race, ethnicity, and gender. An analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey finds that Black students in California are more than twice as likely as white students to report low school connectedness (19 percent and 8 percent, respectively).⁴ Statewide, Asian students (27 percent) were the most likely to report having experienced at least one instance of harassment because of their race/ethnicity, followed by Black students (22 percent). At least one-quarter of all students reported feelings related to depression; this was most common among Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students (33.2 percent), followed by Hispanic/Latino students (30.3 percent) and multiracial students (30.3 percent).

Collecting state data by race and ethnicity on what students need to feel supported and safe will help us target issues contributing to negative school experiences among students of color. One approach that has been taken to improve school climate is the introduction of social-emotional learning programs, which many school districts have invested resources in implementing. An important question is whether those schools and school districts have better school climates and fewer accounts of racist actions than schools that have not implemented social-emotional learning programs. Research could

³ “Blue Shield of California Launches Statewide, Multi-Year Initiative to Support Mental Health for California Students,” Blue California, December 2, 2019, <https://news.blueshieldca.com/2019/12/02/bluesky-release>.

⁴ The California Healthy Kids Survey measures student connectedness based on the extent to which students feel happy, safe, close to people in the school, that they belong at the school, and receive fair treatment from teachers.

also elucidate which accountability mechanisms are common in schools with positive school climates across student groups.

Maximizing Impact

Philanthropy can play a critical part in supporting the reality of racially integrated and healthy school environments. School leaders increasingly desire resources that can help them hold conversations about race and ensure that policies and practices are equitable. Efforts such as the California Healthy Kids Survey can be replicated in other states to help them understand the social and emotional supports that students of color have across schools with different student populations.

Philanthropy can also play a role in funding the implementation and evaluation of interventions intended to improve school climate and racial equity. In addition, data collection can be improved by funding not only survey research but also the collection of rich qualitative data from students, parents, and school staff—people who can offer solutions as well as stories. Stronger data would enable researchers to determine the most effective school climate interventions and the key components that make them effective.

Much work remains to create school environments where race does not determine academic success, the likelihood of students feeling they are supported at school, or suspension rates. Student belonging and understanding across racial and ethnic differences are essential to a future where schools are not just diverse but inclusive.

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