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## Cultural Competency: Educating the “Whole” Student

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### Problem

Teachers in public schools that serve students of color are not always successful in meeting the social, academic and emotional needs of their students further attributing to the education gap.

### Executive Summary

If educators understood students backgrounds many critical educational problems within communities of color could be alleviated including: low academic achievement, disproportionate representation of minority students in special education and student moral. Students of color enrolled in public schools across the nation has been rapidly increasing every year. This has caused our public schools to become more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse and different than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Educating culturally diverse students has become more important in education because educators understanding, beliefs and attitudes towards different cultures is correlated with the education that students of color receive.<sup>2</sup> Our education system is facing significant challenges in preparing all students for success. Since *Brown v. Board of*

Education, progress has been made since racial segregation was ruled unconstitutional in public schools but it has been slow in keeping up with the rapidly changing student demographics. Currently, educators who serve in communities of color are not well equipped to instruct in a way that meets the social and emotional needs of their students with backgrounds different than their own thus further contributing to the causes of current academic achievement gaps.

### Background

Success in today's schools is inequitable for students who identify as a person of color, live in poverty, are immigrants, have limited English proficiency or live with a learning or developmental disability. In public education, deficit thinking is an unspoken issue that neglects to affirm the unique cultural capital held by traditionally underrepresented student groups and results in stereotyping and bias towards academic ability.<sup>3</sup> Educators with deficit thinking tend to believe these students' academic failure is due to: lack of experiences for schooling, poor English proficiency, motivation, inferior intellectual abilities and parents who do not

value education.<sup>4</sup> These factors undermine students' ability to learn and should be considered when building support systems within our public education to provide all students with equitable learning opportunities.

While conversations within education policy center around common core standards, standardized testing, and charter schools; minority students continue to be less successful in school than their white counterparts. There is a “need for teachers to recognize and embrace their students' lived experiences within their curriculum and classroom community in order to better respond to the complex issues their students face.”<sup>5</sup> This lack of action has caused 56% of black students and 45% of Latino students unprepared for college level coursework at four-year institutions.

### Policy Option One: Enforce Cultural Competency Training in Teacher Preparation Programs

Cultural competence in the classroom is a key factor in ensuring that educators influence and impact all communities of students—even those with cultures different than their own.<sup>6</sup> There is

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an absence of formal cultural competency training for educators entering districts that serve students of color. Institutions with teacher preparation programs have a responsibility to prepare their future educators to be successful in implementing teaching strategies that meet the needs of all students. According to Teaching Tolerance, a project through the Southern Poverty Law Center, “culturally responsive curriculum is a critical element in reversing poor academic performance in students of color”.<sup>7</sup> Educators without cultural competency to aid them in developing their classroom cultures risk falling into a deficit model of instruction that forces students to fit into the existing teaching and learning systems that do not showcase the strengths of students cultural characteristics of learning.<sup>8</sup> This instruction would provide educators with the understanding to develop culturally responsive curriculum that integrates multiple cultural perspectives. Being exposed to culturally responsive teaching pedagogy in teacher preparation programs would allow future educators to understand how to diagnose student needs, create curriculum content, provide counseling and guidance, implement instructional strategies and increase the academic performance for their students of color.<sup>9</sup>

Under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), three quarters of states have already begun including expectations of what it looks like

for educators to be culturally responsive based on their states’ student demographics.<sup>10</sup> ESSA allows states to identify what good schools and good teaching looks like in an increasingly racially diverse nation.<sup>11</sup> As a result of enforcing cultural competence training in all teacher preparation programs, the teacher workforce will be prepared to challenge and reimagine the education students of color receive thus actively striving to close the academic achievement gap.

### **Policy Option Two: Recruit More Teachers of Color**

There is a lack of teachers of color entering the teaching profession. A diverse teacher workforce is critical to addressing the educational achievement among students of color. While people of color make up about 40% of the population, only 20 % of the teacher workforce identified as a person of color in 2016.<sup>12</sup> According to the Department of Education, in 1997, students who identified as white made up 63.4 percent of public school enrollment, but by 2022 it is projected that minorities will make up 54.7 percent of the public school population and whites making up only 45.3 percent.<sup>13</sup> As students of color from low income communities continue to make up most of the public school students, our education system is struggling to address their diverse needs. Specifically, demographics of educators entering diverse public schools remain relatively unchanged.

Investment in diversifying the teacher workforce and funding programs that assist in supporting teachers of color to stay in the classroom is critical to meeting the academic, social and emotional needs of all students. Teachers of color reach students of color in ways that white teachers have difficulty reproducing. Studies have shown that diverse teachers enter minority serving schools with more positive perceptions of students thus encouraging students of color to hold higher and meet higher standards of academic achievement, have lower behavior interruptions and are less likely to drop out of school.<sup>14</sup> However, diverse teachers benefit all students because they help in reducing stereotypes and actively encourage cross-cultural social interactions.<sup>15</sup> Diversifying the teacher workforce will improve students academic outcomes and push efforts in closing achievement gaps between students of color and white students. This can be accomplished by prioritizing funding towards recruiting teachers of color in higher education and teaching credential programs.

### **Policy Evaluations**

Our public education system serves to support students academic journeys while preparing them to become constructive citizens. The proposed policies would both benefit and improve the structures in how our public education currently serves students. They each have strengths in efficiency, cost and urgency.

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The first policy option, “Enforce cultural competency training in teacher preparation programs,” will produce a stronger foundation for ensuring a pipeline of quality teachers prepared to serve all communities of students and families. Enforcing accountability for institutions of higher education would further encourage the importance of cultural competency in the teacher workforce and ensure that future educators are exposed to the diversity of the student population before they enter the classroom. This policy would build off of already established curriculum and courses various institutions offer as an elective for future educators.

The second policy option, “Recruit more teachers of color,” would address the teacher shortage crippling our districts across the nation. Apart from the teacher shortage threatening students ability to learn, it is also making it difficult to re-establish the reputation of the teaching profession—further perpetuating the shortage and the inequitable education students receive across the nation.<sup>16</sup>

Recruiting more teachers of color will diversify the workforce and also bring in personal perspectives for providing the best educational outcomes for our minority students. Teachers of color come into the profession with a cultural understanding that allows them to make unique connections with the students they serve. However, this policy option yields a high cost as the current recruitment efforts to address the teacher shortage remain high.

## Conclusion

By not directly addressing the social and emotional needs of our students of color who continue to fall behind academically in comparison to their white counterparts, further perpetuates deficit thinking and allows educators to enter communities of color without a deep understanding of the relationship minority students have with education. If we focus efforts on preparing our future educators to be culturally competent we allow students of color to embrace the way their background affects their way of thinking and learning. Thus providing a foundation for educators to develop their teaching to fit the holistic needs of their students. Relatable, diversifying the teacher workforce would bring in personal perspective of cultural competency that would aid in further acknowledging the diverse learning styles minority students require to be successful academically. This work would make strides in addressing the academic achievement gap and ensure that students of color are prepared to enter higher education institutions and/or the workforce.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Gay, G. (2002a). Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (QSE)*, 15, 613-629.

<sup>3</sup> Kanagala, V., Rendón, L., & Nora, A. (2016). A framework for understanding Latino/A cultural wealth. *Diversity & Democracy*, 19(1), 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Crosby Shantel D., Howell Penny & Thomas Shelley (2018) Social justice education through trauma-informed teaching, *Middle School Journal*, 49

<sup>6</sup> “Why Cultural Competence?”. NEA

<sup>7</sup> Culturally responsive curriculum at a glance. (n.d.). *Teaching Tolerance at The Southern Poverty Law Center*

<sup>8</sup> Douglas, Bruce et al. “The Impact of White Teachers on the Academic Achievement of Black Students: An Exploratory Qualitative Analysis”. *Educational Foundations*. Vol. 22, 2008, pp. 47-62. Winter-Spring.

<sup>9</sup> Irvine, J. J., & Armento, B. J. (2001). *Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 5

<sup>10</sup> Schettino, I., Radvany, K., & Wells, M.S.. *Culturally responsive education under ESSA: A state-by-state snapshot*. 2019. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 101 (2), 27-30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>13</sup> Hussar, William J., and Tabitha M. Bailey. “Projections of Education Statistics to 2022.” *The National Center for Education Statistics*, no. 41, Feb. 2014.

<sup>14</sup> “The State of Teacher Diversity Executive Summary”. Albert Skanker Institute. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> García, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. “The Teacher Shortage Is Real, Large and Growing, and Worse than We Thought: The First Report in ‘The Perfect Storm in the Teacher Labor Market’ Series.” *Economic Policy Institute*, 26 Mar. 2019.