



A Struggle for Racial Equity in Philadelphia Public Schools

AFRICAN COMMUNITY LEARNING PROGRAM
WHERE CULTURAL DIVERSITY MEETS INCLUSION.



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WRITTEN BY

Aminata Sy, Founder & President, African Community Learning Program

CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Monica Behn, Policy Intern, African Community Learning Program
Allison Kaczmariski, Policy Intern, African Community Learning Program

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INTRODUCTION

Philadelphia's public schools have struggled with long-standing racial inequities and injustices, crippling its students' education and disadvantaging its educators. This paper analyzes the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) Equity Coalition through social construction theory by looking at its agenda-setting, policy-formation, and decision-making stages. This paper raises the following key questions: How did an equity coalition in public schools reach the policy agenda? What were the internal and external factors that led to the establishment of an equity coalition for Philadelphia's public schools? How was the problem defined? Who were the key actors that supported the equity coalition? How did previous policies impact the formation of an Equity Coalition in Philadelphia public schools? Some major areas of racial inequities have emerged in the research. Students of color experience disadvantages and disparities in the school system — especially Black students, in the areas of achievement, discipline, and access to elite classes and schools.^{1,2} Also students' educators tend to lack cultural competence.^{1,2}

OVERVIEW OF SDP EQUITY COALITION

SDP launched an Equity Coalition in the summer of 2020 in response to U.S. nationwide and global protests of racial injustice, including in Philadelphia. The Equity Coalition is a representing body of every operating aspect of SDP aiming to create leadership and structure that promotes increased equity by eliminating policies, processes, and practices that perpetuate systems of privilege and power in its school community and workplaces, starting with racial inequity.³ This coalition has seven core objectives: 1) identify and understand the district's population through a comprehensive analysis, 2) provide the framework and structure defining the equity goals, 3) have an equity audit and short and long term action plan, 4) create and improve the district policy and that of community partners, 5) increase cultural awareness and competence, 6) incorporate educational equity in all professional development trainings, and 7) work with local and national organizations focusing on equity efforts.³ The Equity Coalition has seventeen subcommittees categorized in five main areas: projects, research, professional development, partnerships, communication, and marketing.³ SDP's staff describes equity with many words including the following: emancipation, accountability, fair shot, affirmation, birth right, action, access, empowerment, anti-racist, fairness, inclusion, love, freedom, opportunity, justice, reparations, and representation.³ The SDP Superintendent Dr. William Hite said that the Equity Coalition aims to tackle generational systemic racism and has strong support among its staff.⁴

1. Masterman Alumni for Change. "Masterman Alumni for Change Charter." Published July 6, 2020, from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AiW8U6D42o3TuStz0cqbVfithNM03uGAfypSwsCAqUaw/edit?pli=1>.

2. Sissoko, M. "Statement: demands to improve Black student life at Central High School." Published July 8, 2020, from <https://thenotebook.org/articles/2020/07/08/statement-demands-to-improve-black-student-life-at-central-high-school/>.

3. "Equity Coalition." Published September 15, 2020, from <https://www.philasd.org/equity/>.

4. CBS3 Philly. "Philadelphia School District Launching Equity Coalition." Published September 2020, from <https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/video/program/756/4709027-philadelphia-school-district-launching-equity-coalition/>.

He added that, because of poverty and its impact in Philadelphia, the Equity Coalition is a long-term undertaking to understand and change issues facing SDP.⁴ He noted, "We want to disrupt and eliminate all of those systems that have disadvantaged some individuals by not providing access to those types of opportunities based on where they lived and who they were."⁵ Thus, the Equity Coalition is a response to ingrained racial inequities and injustices in Philadelphia public schools propelled by internal and external pressures. However, given the long history of these inequities in Philadelphia, why is the equity coalition a new initiative?

INTERNAL FACTORS FOR THE EQUITY COALITION

SDP STUDENTS' DEMAND FOR EQUITY

Following the death of George Floyd, SDP's students and educators consistently spoke out against racial justice issues impacting their lives.⁵ George Floyd was a Black American man who was murdered on May 25, 2020 by a white police officer. The ordeal was filmed by onlookers, subsequently going viral throughout the U.S. and the world, and leading to massive protests and civil unrest.⁶ Students and educators across the U.S., including in Philadelphia, seized the moment to air their demands to change long-standing racial injustices in society, namely in education. About 125,000 students attend SDP and are impacted by the ongoing racial unrest in the U.S. and in Philadelphia.⁷ In June 2020, Philadelphia's Central High School students [wrote](#) that it is "a moment to restructure the anti-Black environment Central High School fosters. It is time for Black students to be seen, to be heard, and to take action now more than ever".² Students emphasized that Central High School Black and Brown learners are disenfranchised, mistreated, and not provided equal access in their education, and they outlined ten demands insisting that their school act on them. The demands range from reviewing disciplinary action and changing the curriculum, highlighting the accomplishments of African-Americans, including reading more books by Black authors to recruiting students for advanced classes, hiring more Black educators, and addressing implicit bias related to racism and inclusion.² Correspondingly, Masterman High School students and alumni [wrote](#) in a 13-page document in July 2020 that their school administration and SDP "have a legacy of failing their Black students" and advocated for change in the areas of admissions, faculty makeup, curriculum, and school culture.¹ They insisted that systemic and individual racism have existed in the U.S. since its inception and are reflected in its education.¹ Therefore, the local, national, and global responses to George Floyd's death and SDP students' voices played a key role in the creation of the Equity Coalition.

5. DeNardo, M. "School District of Philadelphia launches 'Equity Coalition' to root out racist practices." Published September 20, 2020, from <https://www.radio.com/kyjnewsradio/news/local/school-district-of-philadelphia-launches-equity-coalition>.

6. BBC. "George Floyd: What happened in the final moments of his life." Published July 16, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726#:~:text=George%20Floyd%20died%20after%20was%20pinned%20to%20the%20floor&text=The%20key%20events%20that%20led%20happened%20within%20just%2030%20minutes>.

7. Graham, K. A., & Hanna M. "It's time to challenge what has become normal": Philly schools move toward antiracism." Published July 11, 2020, from <https://www.inquirer.com/education/anti-racist-black-lives-matter-philadelphia-school-district-equity-20200711.html>.



SDP EDUCATORS' DEMAND FOR EQUITY

Likewise, in July 2020, SDP's educators demanded equity and racial justice in the education system. Data from the 2018-2019 school year shows that Philadelphia public schools have about 70 percent of White teachers and 28 percent of Black teachers when an estimated 48.5 percent of its students are Black.⁸ Some educators insist on a Black Lives Matter curriculum to affirm students while others feel uncomfortable with the idea.^{7,9} School leaders expressed skepticism that after Floyd's death stopped dominating headlines, that racial injustices and inequities in SDP could be relegated to the background once again and added that White teachers must contribute in addressing these issues.⁷ Still, Kathy Cohen Volin, a White teacher at Greenberg Elementary in Northeast Philadelphia, believes that the opinions about racial issues have changed, adding that "teachers went from feeling like, 'I feel unprepared to talk about racism, so maybe I shouldn't,' to 'it doesn't matter that I don't know how to talk about this, we need to talk about it'".⁷ SDP educators' sense of urgency in addressing racial inequities and injustices echoes that of students and further encouraged the creation of an Equity Coalition.

EXTERNAL FACTORS FOR THE EQUITY COALITION

The U.S.'s foundational history with slavery and racism continue to hunt every aspect of society and are reflected in the issues Philadelphians endure — especially its Black population.¹⁰ The achievement gaps between Black and White students in America have persisted for decades with progress barely made in the last 50 years.¹¹ An NPR analysis shows that educational disparities continue in the context of race and special education status.¹² White students in the U.S. enroll in Advanced Placement classes at 1.5 times higher rates than their Black peers.¹³ U.S. School Districts' disciplinary "zero tolerance" policies implemented since the 1990s to address bullying, violence, school shootings, and drug use lead to harsher punishments for minor issues and impact Black, Latino, and disabled students the most.¹³ For example, in Philadelphia, Black students are being suspended at 3.1 times higher rates than White students. Black students have long-suffered injustices in U.S.'s public education system across the country, including in Philadelphia.

8. Caucus of Working Educators. "Teacher Racial Demographic Data is Now Public!" Published September 16, 2019, from <https://www.workingeducators.org/teacher-racial-demographic-data-is-now-public#:~:text=The%20numbers%20included%20in%20this%20of%20teachers%20identifying%20as%20white>.

9. Graham, K. "Black Lives Matter week 'an affirmation' for students, Philly teachers say." Published January 26, 2017, from <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/education/Black-Lives-Matter-week-affirming-for-students-Phila-teachers-say.html>.

10. Solly, M. "'Resources for understanding systemic racism in America.'" Published June 4, 2020, from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/158-resources-understanding-systemic-racism-america-180975029/>.

11. Camera, L. "Achievement Gap Between White and Black Students Still Gaping." Published January 13, 2020, from <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2016/01/13/achievement-gap-between-white-and-black-students-still-gaping>.

12. Kamenetz, A. "Suspensions Are Down In U.S. Schools But Large Racial Gaps Remain." Published December 17, 2018, from <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/17/677508707/suspensions-are-down-in-u-s-schools-but-large-racial-gaps-remain>.

13. Sanchez, C. "Obama Administration Has Little Love For 'Zero Tolerance.'" Published January 8, 2014, from <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/08/260808007/obama-administration-has-little-love-for-zero-tolerance>.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates Philadelphia’s population at 1,584,064 people as of July 1, 2019. Of the population, 21.6 percent are under 18 years of age, 43.6 percent are Black or African American, 44.8 percent are White, 15.2 percent are Hispanic or Latino, 13.9 percent are foreign born, and 23.1 percent of children aged five years and older speak a language other than English at home.¹⁴ Immigrants in Philadelphia went from less than seven percent in 1990 to over a quarter of its people being immigrants or having a foreign-born parent.¹⁵ The median household income of Philadelphians stands at about \$43,744, with an estimated 24.3 percent of people living in poverty. Roughly 83.9 percent of people aged 25 years and older have a high school diploma or higher.¹⁴ Only about 25.6 percent of people aged 25 years and older have a bachelor’s degree or higher.¹⁴ Moreover, Philadelphia deals with high rates of gun violence, with the recent police killing of Walter Wallace Jr. on October 26, 2020 erupting unrest throughout the city once again.^{16,17} As of 2019, about 500 juveniles in Philadelphia have been incarcerated, costing an estimated \$160,000 per child a year. Meanwhile, the SDP spends less than \$15,000 to educate a student a year.¹⁸ Almost three-quarters of Philadelphia children regarded as “delinquent” by courts are Black.¹⁷ The city of Philadelphia has become increasingly diverse with almost half the population being Black and enduring injustices and inequities across the board with racism at its roots.

Many Philadelphia public officials support equity initiatives, including Mayor Jim Kenney. A press release on January 1, 2020 reported that Mayor Kenney signed an executive order to include the following: “renaming the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to include ‘Equity,’” “introducing the City-wide Racial Equity Initiative,” and “mandating diversity, equity and inclusion training.”¹⁹ Philadelphia is currently ranked the poorest big city in America; 1 in 4 families live below the federal poverty line, described as a family of three being able to survive with \$21,720 a year.²⁰ Philadelphia City Council members announced a poverty action plan on March 3, 2020 “to lift 100,000 Philadelphians out of poverty by 2024”.²¹ The plan included increasing earnings to support families and SDP partnerships with community college and universities to increase community schools and job training programs.²⁰ The SDP Equity Coalition aligns with Philadelphia elected officials’ policy agenda for the city.

14. U.S. Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Philadelphia county, Pennsylvania.” Published 2019, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/philadelphiacountypennsylvania>.

15. Pew. “The State of Immigrants in Philadelphia.” Published April 11, 2019, from <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/04/the-state-of-immigrants-in-philadelphia-2019>.

16. Hughes, Z. “Shootings are up 67 percent in Philly, but few can yet say why.” Published June 13, 2020, from <https://whyu.org/articles/shootings-are-up-67-in-philly-but-few-can-yet-say-why/>.

17. Brooks, B., & Cuellar, D. “Philadelphia officers in Walter Wallace Jr shooting identified; bodycam video released.” Published November 5, 2020, from <https://6abc.com/city-to-release-bodycam-video-of-walter-wallace-shooting-today/7635469/>.

18. Dale, M. “Philly DA aims to limit juvenile arrests, jail placements.” Published February 6, 2019, from <https://qnews.com/article/0600beab23894a4a8de5cd365013e044>.

19. Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Office of Mayor. “Mayor Kenney Signs Executive Order on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.” Published January 6, 2020, from <https://www.phila.gov/2020-01-06-mayor-kenney-signs-executive-order-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion>.

20. Parkes, F. and M. Bellesorte. “Philadelphia’s poverty problem is bigger than you ever imagined.” Retrieved November 9, 2020, from <https://generocity.org/philly/2020/03/16/philadelphias-poverty-problem-is-bigger-than-you-ever-imagined/#~:text=>.

21. PHL Council. “City Council announces action plan with new investments and strategies to lift 100,000 Philadelphians out of poverty by 2024.” Published March 3, 2020, from <https://philcouncil.com/council-announces-poverty-action-plan/>.



The need for equity and justice in U.S. and Philadelphia public schools expands across government levels. Given the scope and complexities involved to address inequities and injustices in society, many Philadelphia public officials are invested in achieving educational equity for the long run.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION THEORY CONNECTION TO EQUITY

As detailed, the creation of the SDP Equity Coalition was a result of many factors and took into account various considerations. Social construction theory argues that the manner in which some populations are viewed in society influences public officials, policy agenda, and design.²² Social construction theory offers a way to understand the state of Black people in America, including in Philadelphia. Key actors, such as students, educators, and public officials, described issues of racial inequities and injustices as urgent, multilayered, long-standing, and impacting Black people in the U.S. and Philadelphia across sectors, namely education. People of color and poor individuals in the U.S. fall under the category of powerless and deviant populations who are “treated negatively in public and punished by policy,” as described by social construction theory.²¹ Systemic racism and social inequities in the U.S. hit people of color the hardest, especially Black people in the country, and the poor.²³ As previously stated, the inequities and injustices that Black Philadelphians experience in education received the attention of public officials only after persistent outrage and pressure triggered the brutal murder of a Black man seen by the world.⁶ This long-overdue response means that public officials undervalue Black Philadelphians and disregard their issues. Moreover, the inequities and injustices that Black people experience in the U.S. and Philadelphia illustrate that policies tend to punish them.²¹ Public officials have had centuries to at least acknowledge systemic racism as a major problem but have failed to do so.¹⁰ Instead, public officials have attempted to mitigate social inequities but have not provided comprehensive solutions that could lead to stable, productive lives for Black people in the U.S. and Philadelphia. Social construction theory captures why Black people in the U.S. and Philadelphia are being neglected by their public officials and punished by policies.

SCHOLARS ON K-12 EQUITABLE EDUCATION

Scholars have agreed on the importance of an equitable public education in the U.S., especially for Black students. Kindergarten through twelfth grade students in the U.S. tend to learn from a Eurocentric perspective rooted in the country's history.²⁴ Gary Howard insists that a U.S. education that promotes democratic values of equal access for its students must question White dominance — that is the European hegemonic establishment. Thus, curricula that take into account the cultural diversity of students in the U.S. need to be an essential part of pedagogy.²³

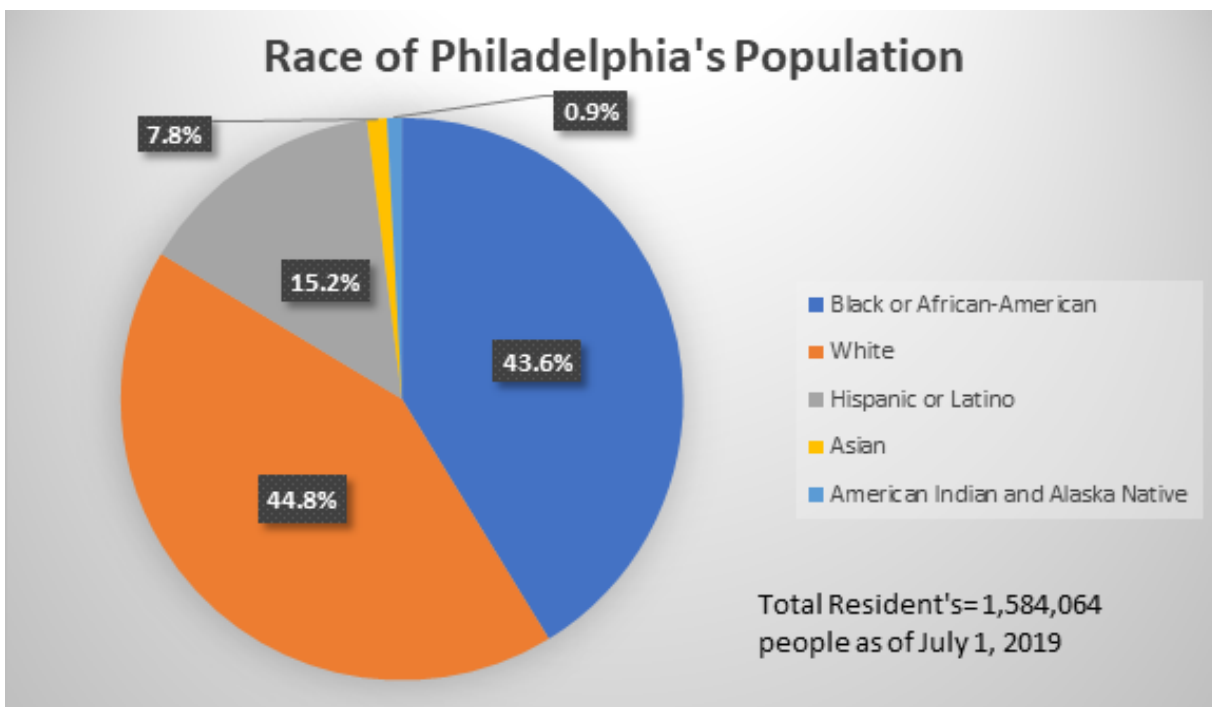
22. Ingram, H., Schneider, A., & DeLeon, P. Social construction and policy design: Theories of the policy process 2 (2007). Ch4: 93-126.

23. Neumann, J., & Mucciolo, L. “Poor Kids.” PBS. Published November 22, 2017, from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/poor-kids/>.

24. Howard, G. *We can't Teach What We Don't Know*. (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1999).

Howard identifies five key reasons for culturally responsive teaching: 1) to allow teachers and students to learn about their racial and cultural heritage, 2) to appreciate others' cultural backgrounds, 3) to diversify perspectives, 4) to understand history and interplays of dominance, 4) to nurture a commitment for social justice, and 5) to gain skills for social action.²³ Others, including Jackson & Boutte, have echoed Howard in insisting that, in order for teachers to embrace culturally responsive teaching, they first have to believe that social justice is needed for those who have suffered injustice.²⁵

Ukpokodu argues for an Ubuntu-style of teaching, which urges educators to be deeply aware that their humanity is intertwined with that of others.²⁶ Operating from such knowledge allows educators to understand that validating others' humanity simultaneously validates their own.²⁴ Scholars agree that teachers must strive for cultural inclusion in the classroom and use students' "funds of knowledge" to guide teaching by knowing what they teach, who they teach, and how they teach.²⁷ Kendi argues that antiracism is about freeing oneself from racist ideas while avoiding to blame people for their circumstances and recognizing that policy and power are the fundamental problems.²⁸ The consensus among scholars on education equity is clear: students' backgrounds and experiences inform who they are and how they see the world; therefore, educators must teach with that understanding and through learners' perspectives.



SOURCE: Data by U.S. Census Bureau as of July 1, 2019 | Graph by African Community Learning Program

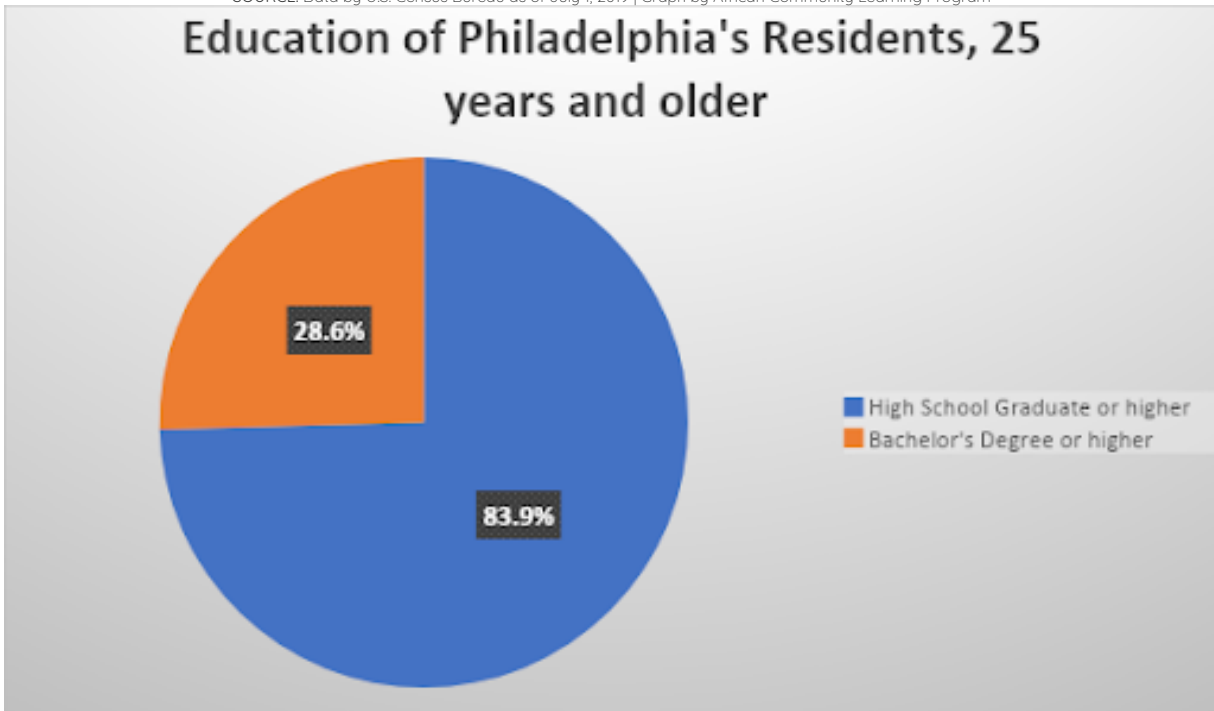
25. Jackson, T & Boutte, G. Exploring culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy as praxis in teacher education. (The New Educator, March 2018). 14 (2), 87-90.

26. Ukpokodu, O. You can't teach us if you don't know us and care about us: becoming an ubuntu, responsive and responsible urban teacher. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2016).

27. Richards, H., Brown, A., & Forde, T. "Addressing diversity in schools: culturally responsive pedagogy." Sage Journals." (2007) <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990703900310>.

28. Kendi, I. How to Be an Antiracist. (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).

SOURCE: Data by U.S. Census Bureau as of July 1, 2019 | Graph by African Community Learning Program



CONCLUSION

Black people in the U.S. and in Philadelphia have experienced inequities and injustices in the country since its founding. The SDP Equity Coalition is a response to local, national, and international outcry against racial injustice. Students and educators across the U.S. and Philadelphia are saying that the ongoing racial injustice is enough and that change is needed now. Philadelphia public officials seem to have finally acknowledged the grievances of educators and students — especially Black learners. Nevertheless, if the SDP Equity Coalition is to equitably serve the students and educators of Philadelphia, it needs to deliver sustainable concrete change.

