



Culturally Responsive  
Teaching Recommendations  
for the SDP Equity Coalition

**AFRICAN COMMUNITY LEARNING PROGRAM**  
WHERE CULTURAL DIVERSITY MEETS INCLUSION.



# Culturally Responsive Teaching Recommendations for the SDP Equity Coalition

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## BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) has dealt with long-standing issues of racial inequalities and injustices impacting its students and educators.<sup>1,2</sup> During the summer of 2020, the civil unrest across the U.S. and in Philadelphia triggered by the murder of a Black American, George Floyd, and persistent demands by students and educators led the SDP to create the Equity Coalition to address racial inequities in Philadelphia public schools.<sup>3</sup> This memo examines patterns of successful U.S. school districts in terms of student achievement, draws from culturally responsive teaching practice and research as well as social construction theory to propose policy recommendations for the SDP Equity Coalition initiative. The policy recommendations connect to the SDP Equity Coalition's goals to increase cultural awareness and competence, work with local and national organizations focusing on equity efforts, identify and understand the district's population, and create and improve the district policy.<sup>3</sup>

## PRACTICE AND RESEARCH ON STUDENT SUCCESS

A clear pattern emerged after I examined 50 top-ranked U.S. school districts in terms of student academic achievement for the purposes of implementation and evaluation of best practices for promoting equity in Philadelphia's public schools. Thomas Birkland, a public policy scholar, insists that "the choices made in the design of a policy will profoundly influence the way a policy is implemented".<sup>4</sup> Some key determining areas of students' academic achievement in the 50 top-ranked U.S. school districts I examined include learners' economic status, adults' education level, and the student-to-teacher ratio.<sup>5</sup> Children raised by parents with a college education are more likely to perform well in school.<sup>5</sup> Adults in these school districts with a bachelor's degree range from 31.3 percent to 89.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> The spending per student across these school districts varies from as low as \$6,819 to as high as \$27,530, with learners living below the poverty line ranging from 2.6% to 6.5%.<sup>5</sup> Students enrolled in AP courses range from 7.9% to 31.3%, with learners' SAT scores ranging from 1300 to 1310 and ACT scores from 28 to 30. Learners' high school graduation rates range from over 85 percent to over 97 percent, and the student-to-teacher ratio ranges from 9.5 to 1 to 16.9 to 1. The combination of college-educated parents, low student poverty rates, and low student-to-teacher ratio tends to lead to learners' academic achievement, as shown by their test scores and increased high school graduation rates.

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

2. "Statement: Central Teachers Stand with Black Students in Demanding Racial Equity ." The Notebook. Jul. 08, 2020, <https://thenotebook.org/articles/2020/07/08/statement-central-teachers-stand-with-black-students-in-demanding-racial-equity/>.

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

4. Birkland, Thomas A. "Chapter 10. "In An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making." 331. 4th ed.

5. 5 Stebbins, Samuel, and Michael B. Sauter. "Making the Grade: Students Are Most Likely to Succeed in These School Districts across US." USA Today. Mar. 12, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/03/12/great-schools-students-most-likely-succeed-these-districts/4999928002/>.

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However, research has consistently shown that Black students' academic achievement is intertwined with the disciplinary actions they experience in schools.<sup>6</sup> Social construction theory argues that the manner in which some populations are viewed in society influences public officials, policy agenda, and design.<sup>7</sup> Black people and poor individuals in the U.S. are "treated negatively in public and punished by policy," as described by social construction theory.<sup>7</sup> Black students, boys, and learners with disabilities are being overly disciplined across U.S. schools at a high rate, including in the SDP.<sup>6,8</sup> This memo's policy recommendations reflect the following eight criteria for culturally responsive teaching as determined by New America: educators' self-reflection on their cultures, identifying and addressing systemic bias, incorporating students' cultures into the curriculum, including real-world problems in instruction, establishing high expectations for all learners, encouraging respect for learners' differences, and partnering with students' families and their communities to foster learners' academic achievement.<sup>9</sup> The policy recommendations also draw from practical experience in culturally responsive teaching through African Community Learning Program (ACLP), a nonprofit organization based in West Philadelphia serving Black students since 2017, mostly elementary and high school learners in Philadelphia public schools as well as first-generation Americans and immigrants from the African continent.<sup>10</sup> The SDP Equity Coalition could consider the following recommendations, as they all align with its objectives.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Staff schools with experienced educators, therapists, academic and career advisors, librarians, and nurses while eliminating law-enforcement personnel and keeping suspensions and detentions to a minimum to encourage learning, not punishment.
- Create safe schools and classrooms in-person and online, where students across backgrounds, including Black students, immigrants, and English learners, can express themselves, feel welcomed, valued, and heard, and where bullying is constantly being discussed and discouraged.<sup>10</sup>
- Keep class sizes to around 15 to 20 students per teacher to position learners for academic achievement and to avoid overwhelming their educators.<sup>5</sup>
- Promote excellence by setting high expectations for students and measuring variables, such as learners' level of understanding lessons and their engagement during class and with materials, instead of prioritizing testing and grading.<sup>10</sup>
- Partner with Philadelphia elected officials, Community College of Philadelphia, local universities, and GED programs to provide parents with opportunities to pursue a GED and college education as a potential way out of poverty for them and their children.

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6. "K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities." Report to Congressional Requesters. March 2018. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/690828.pdf>.

7. Ingram, H., Schneider, A., & DeLeon, P. Social Construction and Policy Design: Theories of the Policy Process 2 (2007). Ch.4; 93-126.

8. Youth United for Change, and Advancement Project. "Zero Tolerance in Philadelphia: Denying Educational Opportunities and Creating a Pathway to Prison." January 2011. [https://b3cdn.net/advancement/68a6ec942d603a5d27\\_rim6yunnit.pdf](https://b3cdn.net/advancement/68a6ec942d603a5d27_rim6yunnit.pdf).

9. "Culturally Responsive Teaching." New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/culturally-responsive-teaching/understanding-culturally-responsive-teaching/>.

10. Sy, Aminata. "African Community Learning Program Report 2017-2019." African Community Learning Program. <https://www.weareaclp.org/annual-report>.



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## CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

- Learn about students contextually, including their neighborhoods, socioeconomic statuses, races, and ethnicities as well as individually in areas such as personality, learning style, strengths, and weaknesses to tailor curriculum and instruction accordingly.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Teach students about people who share their cultural backgrounds and celebrate those individuals' accomplishments throughout the school year and across subjects, such as language arts, history, geography, and social studies while including the works of diverse authors in the curriculum — namely Black writers.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Teach students comprehensively about U.S. history, its negative and positive aspects, through many perspectives, including the voices and experiences of oppressed minorities, such as Black Americans, as well as discuss current events impacting learners' lives, connecting them to the past.<sup>11</sup>
- Accommodate English learners in curriculum and instruction by providing them with books, materials, and translation at their levels along with tutoring support and "slowing down" while teaching to allow them to understand lessons and encourage them to participate in class discussions.<sup>10</sup>

## EDUCATORS' CULTURAL COMPETENCE

- Encourage educators, regardless of background, to teach from a social justice perspective through self-reflection of their identities and teaching and a critical societal examination of the U.S. and Philadelphia in connection to their students' lives.<sup>10,12,13</sup>
- Train all educators continuously in culturally responsive teaching and antiracist frameworks to better understand the oppression of minorities in the U.S., especially Black people, to incorporate that knowledge in their instructions to empower their students.<sup>14,11,9</sup>
- Hire, retain, and support more Black educators across the board including, teachers, principals, translators, and counselors, to teach and uplift many of their students on a more personal level and to promote diversity and inclusion in the SDP workforce.<sup>15</sup>

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11. Kendi, Ibram. *How to Be an Antiracist*. (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).

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

13. Ukpokodu, Omiunota. (2016). *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.

14. Chrystal S. Johnson, Jennifer Sdunzik, Cornelius Bynum, Nicole Kong & Xiaoyue Qin (2019). "Learning about Culture Together: Enhancing Educators Cultural Competence through Collaborative Teacher Study Groups," *Professional Development in Education*, doi: 10.1080/19415257.2019.1696873.

15. Danielle Magaldi, Timothy Conway & Leora Trub (2018) "I am here for a reason": minority teachers bridging many divides in urban education," *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21:3, 306-318, doi: 10.1080/13613324.2016.1248822.



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