

RACIAL JUSTICE REPORT CARD ON CALIFORNIA EDUCATION POLICY

BY Justice Matters

An Education Climate With Opportunity for Change

When Governor Schwarzenegger named 2008 the Year of Education, a clear opportunity for big change was spotlighted in California education policy. In response policy makers, committees, and organizations are issuing policy agendas.

State Superintendent of Instruction Jack O'Connell has noted that race is, yet should NOT be, a determining factor in the academic success of students in California. As policy agendas from the Governor's Advisory Committee on Education Excellence, Superintendent O'Connell's California P-16 Council and others are brought forth, it is important to evaluate whether these policies will truly move California toward a vision for racially just schools. There is cause to be wary as past efforts to reform California education policy have been deeply deficient in bringing about improvement in the quality of education for students of color.

Is Racial Justice in Education on the Horizon?

Many of California's schools serving students of color are hostile and dehumanizing places that track them into low-wage jobs and prison. Mainstream education policy is disconnected from an understanding of what strong learning experiences for students of color really look like. To build and support racially just schooling, education policies must 1.) seriously invest in a much-needed core policy *infrastructure*, AND 2.) ensure that this infrastructure addresses the necessary racially just policy *content* for a high quality learning experience for students of color.

Justice Matters has developed a report card to evaluate policy agendas being put forth for the Year of Education on how well they address these needs, how far they push us toward a vision of racially just schools. This report card is based on information and ideas from a recent study on policy supports for student learning in communities of color.

High Schools for Equity: Policy Supports for Student Learning in Communities of Color

was conducted by Justice Matters and Linda Darling-Hammond and the School Redesign Network at Stanford University (SRN LEADS). *High Schools for Equity* offers powerful and vivid examples of schools that are interrupting the status quo by providing real opportunities for low-income students of color to become critical thinking leaders with opportunities for their futures. However, these schools will remain anomalies without substantive policy changes.

The report card that emerges from this study is a tool for evaluating whether education policy agendas are connected to a vision of learning for students of color, or whether they simply perpetuate the status quo as it contributes to the growth of the poor and poorly educated in communities of color. Policy recommendations that receive high marks will not only dramatically improve learning for students of color, but they will also enrich and deepen learning for all students.

Building Policy With a Racially Just Vision of Student Learning

California's current educational system is based on antiquated notions of learning and short-sighted measures of achievement driving curriculum, pedagogy, and learning to narrow ends, especially in schools today serving low income students of color. Attempts at closing the "achievement gap" fall short of a truly racially just vision of education and, in many cases, impede rather than supports a learning environment in which students of color can achieve academically in meaningful ways that far exceed scoring well on standardized tests. To truly build racially just policy, we must begin to base education policy-making on a richer picture of what a strong learning experience in schools can be for students of color. This entails addressing the wide range of interlocking policies that actively shape the day-to-day learning experiences for students of color inside the classroom. In this way, we can ensure serious investment not only in a sorely lacking core policy infrastructure, but an infrastructure that addresses the necessary racially just policy content to bring about an intellectually rigorous, responsive, and culturally relevant learning experience for students of color.

HIGH SCHOOLS FOR EQUITY: POLICY SUPPORTS FOR STUDENT LEARNING IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

High Schools for Equity is the only research available that identifies policy areas that have major influences on the ability of high schools to provide learning experiences that are academically rigorous, relevant, and address the learning needs of English learners enabling our most underserved students to succeed. The study focuses on five California non-selective public high schools serving a majority low-income students of color. These schools not only graduate students and send them on to college and careers, but also are healthy places for students of color to develop their identities, envision and realize a broad range of future opportunities, and become vital members of their communities. *High Schools for Equity* identifies the policies that would be needed for other schools to undertake the practices of the schools in the study. Many of the findings have implications beyond the high school level and identify policy needs throughout the K-12 system as well as at the postsecondary level.

This report card framework is endorsed by the Applied Research Center, Californians For Justice, California Tomorrow, César E. Chavez Institute of San Francisco State University, and Community Asset Development Re-defining Education (CADRE).

Finally, Superintendent O'Connell's proposals fail to address major aspects of the education policy landscape that are having a huge impact on racial inequity. He does not speak at all to the needs of English learners, one of the largest sub-groups among students of color in California. Our C- grade for the Superintendent's proposals reflects our conclusion that overall, the proposals will have little impact while running the risk of misleading the public into thinking that racial inequity has been adequately addressed.

Elevating and Framing the Issue of Racial Equity

Superintendent O'Connell has made a very important contribution by saying that racial inequity exists in our school system and that it must be our priority to do something about it. In a society that avoids directly engaging with institutional and structural racism and where many believe that racism has already been done away with, such words from the State Superintendent of Education are quite meaningful.

In his State of Education speech, Superintendent O'Connell made a number of points that are important if we are to make headway in moving towards racial justice. He said that the state must hold itself accountable for addressing racial disparities rather than passing the responsibility on to lower levels of the system. Since state-level policies so deeply shape the learning experiences of students of color, state-level accountability for racial equity is crucial. The Superintendent explained the connection between racial equity and the collective fate of all Californians. He described how the prevailing "color-blind" orientation to the world that seeks to ignore race actually moves us farther away from racial justice rather than bringing us closer. Instead, we must explicitly discuss race and identify racism in order to root it out. Finally, he prepared his listeners for the "discomfort" they may feel as they strive to engage in such efforts. This part of his speech was particularly important for white listeners who are often the most insulated from awareness of racism and most fearful of dealing with it directly. Superintendent O'Connell described his own experience of having "struggled and stumbled" as he talked about race, while emphasizing how such conversations were necessary to bringing about institutional change.

Below, we discuss how well Superintendent O'Connell's proposals for action live up to his rhetoric.

Preparation of Strong Teachers and Principals for Students of Color.

One of Superintendent O'Connell's most important recommendations relates to preparing teachers and principals to incorporate cultural knowledge into their work. In a time when the role of culture in the teaching and learning process is either completely discounted or given perfunctory lip service in Sacramento, the Superintendent's emphasis on this issue stands out and shows that he is paying attention to the on-the-ground learning experiences of students of color.

Superintendent O'Connell did a good job of explaining why it is important for educators to know about their own cultures and the cultures of their students. He explained that "we are all, to some extent, trapped in the perspectives, experiences, and assumptions of our own culture." Institutions are built around cultural assumptions. Educators must consciously examine their own cultural assumptions and the assumptions of the institution of school, so that their actions do not reflect the "historical, institutionalized habits that have disadvantaged students of color." One of the ways in which cultural assumptions play out to the severe detriment of students of color is when educators attribute deficits and deficiencies to students simply because they are different. We would add that when educators see students of color in terms of deficits, they lose the capacity to identify and build on students' strengths and knowledge and to build respectful relationships with them. Since cognitive development, language, and communication are all mediated through culture, when educators are not knowledgeable about students' cultures, they lose access to a wide range of tools for teaching them effectively.

The significance of a State Superintendent of Education talking about the central role of culture—explaining the interconnections between culture, educators’ assumptions, institutional bias, and deficit perspectives about students of color—cannot be overstated. These major issues have been missing in action in state policy discussions about education.

Superintendent O’Connell addresses the centrality of culture through recommendations related to the preparation and professional development of educators. He builds on the findings of his P-16 Council that much of the existing training for educators that relates to cultural issues is of limited quality. Therefore, he plans to convene experts from around the country to develop high quality professional development on how educators can be culturally responsive to their students. Furthermore, he will work with the deans of California’s schools of education to bring this content into teacher preparation programs.

In addition to his focus on the role of culture in teaching and learning, Superintendent O’Connell calls for the creation of professional development materials and information on other topics that also directly relate to racial inequity. For example, he proposes the development of tools that help raise teachers’ expectations for the level of work and thinking that their students of color can successfully carry out.

Unfortunately, the Superintendent failed to address California’s completely inadequate system for delivering professional development to educators. California educators contend with an under-resourced and uneven preparation infrastructure for teachers and principals, insufficient learning and planning time once educators are in schools, lack of access to coaching and mentoring, and lack of a system-wide high quality professional development infrastructure. Superintendent O’Connell’s proposals for making sure all schools are connected to high-speed internet (to access information about teaching and learning on-line) and the development of web-based professional development resources cannot begin to address the deficiencies in the preparation and professional development infrastructure. Accessing information via the computer may be useful in a business-as-usual context when a teacher or principal needs to quickly find a piece of information that can be easily incorporated into their current way of working. But deeper changes in practice require working with a coach or mentor who can observe an educator in action and provide feedback and opportunities for on-going learning, planning, and collaboration. Until the state provides educators with time for professional development and an infrastructure of coaches, mentors, and high-quality trainers, O’Connell’s professional development efforts may not translate into much change in the daily experiences of students of color.

Accountability.

In his State of Education speech, Superintendent O’Connell re-affirmed his position that the Academic Performance Index, which is based on standardized test scores, is a strong and sufficient measure of student learning and a positive driver of accountability. We disagree. While high-stakes accountability based on narrow standardized tests has improved student learning in specific areas in some instances, it has also contributed to students of color receiving a narrowed curriculum, more superficial teaching approaches, and less individualized support. This system has also been a force for pushing many students of color out of our schools. Until we develop an accountability system that measures student learning in ways that support high quality teaching methods that are effective with students of color, we will limit how far we can go in building a racially just school system.

However, Superintendent O’Connell is taking steps to improve the accountability system through supplementing the Academic Performance Index (API). He is planning to report other data about each school alongside the API. This new reporting tool will focus on practices that research shows will promote racial equity. Some of the indicators under consideration, such as an indicator for how schools work with parents and an indicator for equitably assigning experienced teachers, are very important for improving learning for students of color. We believe that this set of indicators will start to point the system in the right direction in terms of practices that are good for students of color and is a welcome move away from the current standardized-test-centric accountability

approach. We recommend that the Superintendent also include richer forms of student assessment as indicators that would promote more well-rounded and rigorous learning experiences for students of color.

Student Support and School Climate.

Superintendent O'Connell made a number of proposals designed to increase non-academic supports that students might need in order to succeed and to create a school climate where students of color feel "safe, encouraged, and empowered to learn." The indicators that would be reported alongside the API would likely include measures that would encourage schools to provide non-academic supports for students. The Superintendent also encouraged districts to form a range of community partnerships that could bring more supports to bear for students. And he will require the "Healthy Kids" survey that the state conducts every year to include items about school climate as it relates to students' race and culture.

We believe that some of these steps may result in more non-academic supports for students (insofar as this is possible without additional funding). But too often, services for students are provided in a fragmented way that detracts from students' school experience and impedes schools from creating a unified community centered on a coherent vision for education. The Superintendent does not appear to have developed measures to ensure that student supports are provided in a holistic and integrated way. As to school climate, without further planning and infrastructure, we think that the important data that the Healthy Kids survey will collect on the racial and cultural dimensions of school climate will not translate into actual changes.

English Learners.

Approximately one quarter of California's students are English learners. The vast majority of these students are children of color so teaching them well is a necessary part of closing racial gaps in education. By a wide range of indicators, these students are being very poorly served in our schools and are suffering the results. Superintendent O'Connell's recommendations did not directly address the needs of English learners, although research shows that in order for English learners to be successful, specific materials, practices, and assessments must be in place. We are concerned that the Superintendent's actions related to preschool (see below) may actually worsen learning for English learners.

Preschool.

Superintendent O'Connell's proposals lay groundwork for children who are in state childcare programs that do not formally offer preschool to have higher quality learning experiences. He also released a document called "Foundations of Learning." This document provides guidelines for high quality preschool programs. Many early childhood educators and experts are concerned that these guidelines do not support developmentally appropriate learning for young children, and instead promote teaching approaches that could increase the likelihood of school failure. Furthermore, although "Foundations of Learning" has a section focused on English learners, educators and experts are concerned that because the guidelines related to language and literacy are targeted only at students who are native English speakers, that English learners' needs will not be met in the areas of language and literacy.

What Is Missing?

The Superintendent's proposals do not address many of the areas that are vitally necessary for building a racially just school system. He does not urge that any action be taken on recruitment of educators, assessment, school organization, postsecondary supports, and funding levels and mechanisms. Because the current recommendations only address a limited number of the pieces that are needed to bring about a racially just school system, their ability to close racial gaps will also be limited.

2008 RACIAL JUSTICE REPORT CARD for California Education Policy

KEY POLICY AREAS	CORE INFRASTRUCTURE	↑, -, X or ↓	RACIAL JUSTICE POLICY CONTENT	↑, -, X or ↓
Recruitment and Preparation of Strong Teachers and Principals for Students of Color	Proactive recruitment of strong future teachers and principals	X	Recruitment of teachers and principals from demographic backgrounds that will reflect the diversity of their students' communities	X
	Level of financial support to allow teachers and principals to participate in high quality pre-service preparation and professional development	X		
	A statewide infrastructure of high quality teacher and principal pre-service preparation, professional development, and teacher and principal mentoring	X	Teacher and principal preparation, collaboration, and professional development that equip them with skills and knowledge to provide and support intellectually rigorous content through adaptive and culturally relevant pedagogy, to support English learners, and to build relationships with students and their families	↑
	Adequate time built in for high quality professional development, and teacher planning and collaboration	X		
Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability	Investments and structures to ensure students are provided personal and academic supports in a holistic and integrated way to enable their success in their academically rigorous courses and readiness for higher education	—	A-G curriculum requirements that acknowledge more modern conceptions of learning and curriculum, including interdisciplinary, culturally relevant, hands-on approaches and emphases on technology	X
	Investments and structures to ensure students are provided eligibility for higher education	—	The quantity and content of curriculum standards and guidelines that enable, rather than impede providing intellectually rigorous content through adaptive and culturally relevant pedagogy, supporting English learners, and building relationships with students and their families	↓
	Investment in assessment development and a state and local infrastructure that enables appropriate use of high quality rigorous and authentic assessment	X	Assessments and the stakes attached to them that enable rather than impede providing intellectually rigorous content through adaptive and culturally relevant pedagogy, supporting English learners, and building relationships with students and their families	—
Postsecondary Access and Supports	Reinvestment in higher education to keep the college and university systems affordable, accessible, and high-quality	X	Passage of the Dream Act into law to allow immigrant students the place in college they have earned and deserve	X
		X	Increases in financial aid to equitably reach students of color	X
Organization and Governance	Professional (vs. bureaucratic) forms of accountability that strive to develop knowledgeable educators who can be trusted to make responsible decisions about practice	—	Increases in local autonomy paired with investments in: 1) School capacity and professional knowledge and skill for school leaders and educators to know how to effectively provide a rigorous, culturally relevant, and responsive education to students AND 2) Authentic involvement, capacity and authority of students, their families and community in decision making processes	—
	Monies allocated to facilitate involvement of students' families and community members in schools	X		
Funding That Shapes How Resources Are Allocated to and Used in Schools	Increase funding to address policy needs listed in above sections	X	Funding that is directed to the resources that are most important for providing intellectually rigorous content through adaptive and culturally relevant pedagogy, supporting English learners, and building relationships with students and their families	X
	Consistent and stable approach to funding facilities	X		
	A weighted student funding formula that replaces fragmented funding streams and levels up resources	X	A weighted student formula, that ensures equitable distribution of funds by allocating additional funds to populations of students that schools have a poor track record of supporting, such as students of color, low-income students and English learners	X

Key: ↑ Addresses this need in a serious way, — Does not address this need in a serious way, X Does not address this need, ↓ Worsens this need