

# RACIAL JUSTICE REPORT CARD ON CALIFORNIA EDUCATION POLICY

## An Education Climate With Opportunity for Change

Governor Schwarzenegger has named 2008 the Year of Education. A clear opportunity for big change has been spotlighted in California education policy, and in response policy makers, committees, and organizations will be 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).**



attention to the on-the-ground learning experiences of students of color. Our current school system was built around the education of white students, and addressing issues of language and culture are necessary in order to make schools into places that fully serve students of color.

The Council's recommendations about the core infrastructure that would support high quality pre-service preparation and professional development necessary for addressing culture were not strong. California's existing system of uneven teacher and principal preparation and deficient infrastructure for professional development do not provide the right foundation for bringing about cultural competence.

Beyond the issue of cultural competence, other Council recommendations also touched on the need for professional developments on various topics related to racial inequity. These recommendations emphasized the use of websites and on-line tools as the main vehicle for professional development. A good website can be a great vehicle for gathering information and supporting peer learning and mentoring. But, as indicated above, educators in California face an under-resourced and uneven preparation infrastructure, insufficient learning and planning time, lack of access to coaching and mentoring, and lack of a system-wide high quality professional development infrastructure. Websites are not an appropriate state-level policy response to these problems. They may supplement other solutions, but should never act as a substitute.

We suggest that for its final set of recommendations, the Council take a closer look at the financial supports, state infrastructure, and time allotted to pre-service preparation and professional development that is necessary to fully realize their intent.

*Curriculum.* The P-16 Council is making an effort to look at some curriculum issues that are critical to addressing racial inequity. They are beginning to think about how the volume of standards hurts the learning process. They are concerned that graduation requirements, A-G requirements, and other specialized requirements are making it difficult for students to explore both career and college interests in high school. However, the language of their current recommendation to "develop graduation requirements that align with postsecondary and real world expectations," could be misinterpreted to mean that requirements should include additional layers and become more rigid, rather than the reverse. The focus on alignment of requirements suggest an orientation to a system shaped by mandates, rather than moving towards a system that is deeply grounded in developing critical thinkers and using standards and graduation requirements to support strong, engaging learning experiences.

The Council's emphasis on curriculum and standards relevant to the "real world" appears to translate only to content related to careers and higher education. For students of color to flourish across the state, curriculum needs to also have content that is relevant to their cultures, communities, and interests and that prepare them to be deep thinkers who can strengthen our democracy. Ironically, the professional development that the Council recommends on culturally relevant curriculum could lead to a lot of frustration as educators contend with state curriculum standards and guidelines that have not become any more culturally relevant. We suggest that the P-16 Council build on the important issues it has raised about standards and curricular requirements and tackle the tough and neglected area of reforming California standards and curriculum so that they support, rather than impede, high quality learning and thinking experiences for students of color.

*Assessment and Accountability.* The Council recommendations do not directly address issues of assessment and accountability. However, some recommendations open the door to richer forms of assessment and an accountability system that supports more engaging, holistic, and rigorous learning experiences for students of color. They call for gathering a richer set of data and making major changes to the Academic Performance Index or creating new indicators. The recommendations say little about what new information would be collected or how it would be used. As the Council fleshes these issues out, we suggest that they address how assessment and accountability can be re-shaped so that it enables, rather than impedes, strong learning experiences for students of color.

*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. The P-16 Council recommendations did not directly address the needs of English learners. A final set of recommendations should address the serious shortcomings in the state in terms of what research has documented is needed for training, materials, and assessment to provide this group of students with the education they deserve.

*Preschool.* The Racial Justice Report Card does not set criteria for policies related to preschool because this was not an area that was addressed by the study that the report card is based on. However, preschool is a very important racial justice issue. The P-16 Council has a strong set of recommendations related to providing a core infrastructure of high quality teacher preparation, appropriate class sizes, access for working parents, and more. While the recommendations touched on culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices, it is not clear what mechanisms would make sure that these areas were seriously and consistently addressed.

*What Is Missing?* The P16 Council's recommendations do not address many of the areas that are vitally necessary for building a racially just school system. Their recommendations do not urge that any action be taken on recruitment of educators, assessment, accountability, school organization, governance, postsecondary supports, and funding levels and mechanisms. Because the current recommendations only address a few of the pieces that are needed to bring about a racially just school system, their ability to close racial gaps will be limited.

We commend the P-16 Council for seeking input on these draft recommendations before finalizing them. We hope that their final recommendations will receive an A for honestly speaking to and laying out action steps for what it will really take to bring about racially just schools in California.

# 2008 RACIAL JUSTICE REPORT CARD

## for California Education Policy

KEY POLICY AREAS	CORE INFRASTRUCTURE	↑, -, X or ↓	RACIAL JUSTICE POLICY CONTENT	↑, -, X or ↓
<b>Recruitment and Preparation of Strong Teachers and Principals for Students of Color</b>	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	—	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	—		
<b>Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability</b>	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	X
<b>Postsecondary Access and Supports</b>	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
<b>Organization and Governance</b>	Professional (vs. bureaucratic) forms of accountability that strive to develop knowledgeable educators who can be trusted to make responsible decisions about practice	X	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	X
	Monies allocated to facilitate involvement of students' families and community members in schools	X		
<b>Funding That Shapes How Resources Are Allocated to and Used in Schools</b>	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