

A Vision Statement on Racial Equity and Antiracist policies in SBCSC Stuart Greene (3/12/2021)

Equity is the intentional allocation of resources, instruction, and opportunities according to need, requiring that discriminatory practices, prejudices, and beliefs be identified and eradicated (NSBA, [2016](#)).

The South Bend Community School Corporation (SBCSC) made a promise of racial equity in response to the 1980 Consent Decree resulting from the Federal Government's lawsuit against the Corporation for "engaging in acts of discrimination." According to the lawsuit, the result of these discriminatory acts was to create a segregated system of education for black and white students that defied the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board*. Despite the promise to provide educational opportunity to black students in 1980, a report commissioned by the Community Foundation twenty years later found that the Corporation's "inaction" contributed to a widening achievement and opportunity gap between black and white students. In 2010, the authors of a second report commissioned by the SBCSC Board of Trustees observed that students of color were still underperforming and that the Corporation had not responded to black students' disproportionate suspensions and expulsions and placement into special education. The authors of the second report concluded that the Corporation had failed to educate black *and* brown children well; there was a cultural gap between students of color and their white teachers; resources had not been distributed equitably to schools populated by a majority of black and brown students; and students of color did not have equal access to quality education. The authors of the 2010 report concluded that structural racism was the root cause of the problems they identified.

Racial equity has to be at the forefront of any efforts to make things right and to begin healing from past harms. Despite attempts to create opportunities, initiatives such as Plan Z exacerbated structural racism by creating magnet programs that segregate students within schools. Developing a school choice program has over the years segregated students within the district as a whole. It should be the SBCSC Board of Trustees' aim to disrupt and transform structures that have for decades disenfranchised students of color. After all, the National School Board Association (NSBA) has established the "Dismantling Institutional Racism in Education" (DIRE) project motivated by a 2016 NSBA brief. The authors of this brief framed equity as "the intentional allocation of resources, instruction, and opportunities according to need, requiring that discriminatory practices, prejudices, and beliefs be identified and eradicated."

Racial equity is an antiracist project that needs to be placed front and center in the board's Strategic Plan. Antiracism is often associated with the "biases that are so attached to the fabric of our world that they seemingly go unnoticed by many people" (Edutopia, [2021](#)). Antiracism is a verb, an action, not a noun, that entails eliminating biases in policies and practices that have long disenfranchised students of color and other marginalized groups. Focusing on gaps in achievement and opportunity will simply fuel the tendency to center whiteness in discussions by measuring marginalized groups against white students.

To be anti-racist will mean removing structures that have harmed students of color and other marginalized groups and listening to the voices of the people who have been silenced. It is not sufficient to be comply with federal mandates in order to dismantle inequality. Unfortunately, schools have been designed to disenfranchise people with the least, and it's time to hold ourselves accountable to being equitable and antiracist; to stop the unequal treatment of people who have been treated unfairly; and develop accountability measures that help us pinpoint areas of growth and areas we need to work on. Indeed, we need to be vigilant about centering the experiences of the kids who have not thrived in a system that works against their interests. To be antiracist means reimagining the purpose of school as a space that centers our students' stories, affirms their genius, and nurtures who they are and aspire to be.

It will also be necessary to engage in deep reflection about the mindset that reinforces a deficit view of children of color (“These kids can’t,” “These parents don’t care”) if we are to dismantle inequitable conditions in our schools. Many of our students are underserved, not “under-prepared” or “at risk.” Language matters, and it is important to see that the problems we need to tackle are located in institutions, structures, and systems, not individuals or their families.

The SBCSC Board of Trustees has put forth a strategic plan that mandates (a) a culture of educational excellence; (b) conveys the importance of respecting, admiring and celebrating personal and cultural diversity; (c) stresses the importance of cultivating relationships with students, staff, families, and community through restorative practices; (d) extends and deepens relationships with families and community stakeholders; and (e) ensures that our schools are safe spaces where students and adults can thrive. As illustrated in the figure below, equity, inclusion and justice are at the heart of a Strategic Plan aimed at fostering academic excellence, financial stability, and community partnerships.

The plan conveys a commitment to racial equity – not just “equal” treatment, opportunities, and resources – at a time when it is clear we are limiting the life paths of students of color. The distinction between equity and equality is significant as we make decisions as a governing board. After all, if we’re talking about school funding, advocating for equality would mean ensuring that all schools have the same amount of resources per pupil. Advocating for equity would mean recognizing that some schools will actually need *more* resources (e.g., funding, experienced teachers, relevant curriculum, robust systems of care).

As a governing body, we need to take responsibility, and be accountable, for holding every student to high expectations. This will mean changing the culture of our schools and accepting that all children have the capacity to thrive. This also means removing all barriers to excellence. While we have excellent programs in the corporation, it is a fact that students of color make up such a small percentage of students in our highest achieving primary, middle, and high schools, in our Engineering magnet and Arts programs, or in our IB programs. It’s hard to ignore the trend during the past twenty years toward creating a private system of education within our public schools. I hope we agree in word and action that we need to put an end to this trend. We can no longer ignore the persistent disparities in the corporation that have placed so many black and brown children at a disadvantage.

A commitment to racial equity is especially important if in fact the school corporation is to seriously address disparities in achievement, graduation rates, disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions, and opportunities. Only actions to dismantle structure of inequality will demonstrate the resolve to eliminate the unfortunate reality that one’s race/ethnicity, Socio-economic Status (SES), gender, sexuality, culture, or (dis)ability predict attainment or achievement. Equity will require a full commitment to consistent professional learning that is antiracist to address students’ needs. I believe any and all decisions should ensure the following:

- (a) children receive what they need to develop their full academic and social potential;
- (b) critical decisions include everyone’s voice in order to determine the equitable distribution of material and financial resources;
- (c) curricular materials give voice to histories and cultures that have been erased in order to affirm students’ many identities, gifts, and capacities for learning;
- (d) instructional practices that are *culturally responsive* in order to challenge students, foster curiosity, and prompt students to raise questioning about themselves and the world around them;
- (e) instructional practices that are *culturally sustaining* and stress the legitimacy and value of the varied linguistic (ELL) and literate practices (oral v. written) that children (and families) possess;
- (f) access to intellectually challenging work that creates a path from pre-school to advanced placement classes, magnet programs, and IB programs;
- (g) robust support systems exist in order to retain students and enable students to succeed;

- (h) repair of harm caused by past practices such as tracking, placement in magnet programs, and school choice
- (i) a safe, supportive climate that builds community among children, families, educators;
- (j) enrichment opportunities that enable all children to develop knowledge and skills necessary to thrive (e.g., tutoring, summer camps, test preparation)
- (k) development of consistent professional opportunities to confront implicit biases, cultural beliefs, and racial stereotypes that perpetuate low educational achievement and attainment; and
- (l) elimination of biased policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages at all levels that reinforce disparate opportunities and outcomes.

In moving forward, it will be important to ask ourselves the following questions:

- Is there a method for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the policy at regular intervals in order to provide feedback for assessment and planning?
- Is given policy informed by the decisions made by interrelated units (e.g., academics, equity) to support access and success for every student?
- Have benchmarks been identified to evaluate programs?

There is a great deal of work ahead of the corporation. After all, as of January 2021, 7 schools were out of compliance with the consent decree, 5 schools with failing grades are now in the Transformation Zone, students of color continue to underperform in eighteen “D” and “F” rated schools, and the Justice Department has stepped up efforts to hold the corporation accountable for addressing persistent disproportionality. Policy alone will not suffice to change structures and attitudes nor will compliance. Still, we need to begin.

Transforming persistent inequality will take a systems approach. Such an approach recognizes the interrelationship among a number of different factors within the organization. These factors exist as barriers to providing a quality education for all students as well as factors enabling students to flourish.

More specifically, these factors include the beliefs, values, skills, knowledge, and dispositions of administrators, coaches, teachers, principals, and staff; distribution of resources, choice of educational programs and curricular materials; a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion from hiring teachers and staff to those whom we award contracts; and the ways the corporation communicates with families.

It will important to include teachers and other adult staff in decision making. Soliciting ideas from students will also contribute to creating equitable and just classrooms in order to foster learning; developing classroom norms; encouraging students to express and respect their and others' feelings; and focusing on healing, a process that is at the heart of restorative justice. Restorative justice holds a vision of justice as a “mutual responsibility – as a quality of safety and trust that arises between community members who respect each other’s dignity, who share a sense of responsibility for the community’s welfare, and who clarify what to expect from each other so that all in the community can thrive” (Sharpe). The practice of restorative justice entails an ongoing process of making decisions about what is just and unjust; who is affected by an injustice; and how to best redress the injustices (i.e., case building and preparation).

Achieving equity is a process of changing systems, and this will take time given the long history of entrenched policies, practices, and customs that have contributed to disparities that have long persisted. We can no longer blame students and their families for the inequities we see, but take responsibility for imagining a system that opens up opportunities and requires us to be vigilant in our efforts to ensure all children can flourish.

