

## Working Toward Anti-Racist Education

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*“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” - Nelson Mandela*



Educators have a unique opportunity to interrupt the cycles of oppression, break down structural prejudice and shape progress in powerful ways. This can be done through increasing student awareness, of course, but also through modeling change within the classroom culture, the curriculum, the greater school community and education as an institution.

As an association, we take seriously our responsibility for enacting change and we recognize that the Waldorf movement, our teacher training institutions, and our schools must take deliberate actions to enact this mission. We, like most educators, know that we must do better. But how? Where do we begin?

## Addressing Racism in the Classroom

[Hedreich Nichols](#), educator and equity consultant, in her [Edutopia](#) article -- recommends an assortment of books to read, videos to watch, and anti-racist organizations to follow on social media. Her primary directive for teachers, however, is to visit [Teaching Tolerance at tolerance.org](#) to begin their anti-racist education journey. And, for the civic-minded, she recommends the [Racial Equity Resource Guide](#) from the [Kellogg Foundation](#), which encourages people to create a personal experience to engage in anti-racism.

[Pirette McKamey](#), Principle & Founder of Anti-Racist Teaching Committee at Mission High School, San Francisco, goes a step further in her article in [The Atlantic](#), [What Anti-racist Teachers Do Differently](#). For McKamey, it's about each teacher's belief in, and interaction with, their students of color that sets the groundwork for anti-racism in the classroom: "Anti-racist teachers take black students seriously. They create a curriculum with black students in mind, and they carefully read students' work to understand what they are expressing." "It requires educators to view the success of black students as central to the success of their own teaching."

Teachers likely need to step back and engage in self-examination before doing this work. [Dena Simmons](#) calls it, "engaging in vigilant self awareness." Simmons supports schools throughout the nation to build social and emotional learning, culturally responsive practices, and equity. Her article at [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development \(ASCD\)](#), [How to Be an Anti-Racist Educator](#) offers a path for teachers.

The first step, says Simmons, is cultivating a keen awareness of Eurocentric values and its content, which dominates U.S. school curriculum. Telling only this Europe-centered story in history, language arts and more, without also telling the current day and historic stories of black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), sends messages that students internalize.

The second step is to "acknowledge racism and the ideology of white supremacy." When an educator says, "I don't see color in my classroom," it is not a statement of tolerance, but a refusal to acknowledge a long and prevalent, embedded system of white privilege in education. As Simmons says, "Failing to acknowledge racism not only erases histories, cultures, and identities, but also ignores ongoing differential treatment based on race."

Finally, Simmons says, teachers must study and teach representative history in their classrooms. This includes making space in class to talk about race with their students and not shy away from these conversations, especially if the class community is witnessing racism.

[Jinnie Spiegler](#), the director of curriculum at the Anti-Defamation League, offers an online resource to walk teachers through a class conversation on racism. Her piece in [The New York Times](#), [First Encounters With Race and Racism: Teaching Ideas for Classroom Conversations](#) is a curated workshop teachers are welcome to use for starting their classroom conversations. Her race/relation team partnered with Youth Radio to ask teenagers across the country, "What is your earliest experience dealing with race?" The article outlines their answers to those questions, tells their

stories, and then gives teachers a series of questions to ask students to begin classroom discussion.

## **Addressing Systemic Racism in Education in the United States**

Educators need to acknowledge and understand education's long history as a privileged white institution. From the days when black children were denied an education to segregation to disparate funding and standardized testing, leaders in education must call out and take on the built-in systems of white culture and supremacy.

[Jeffrey Pierre](#), education writer at [National Public Radio](#), addresses the institutionalized racism embedded within our schools systems in his article, [4 Ways Racial Inequity Harms American Schoolchildren](#). He provides distressing statistics verifying that black students are more likely to be suspended (from K-12 and preschool) and arrested at school. During our current pandemic, [Pew Research Center](#) found [1 in 4 students do not have high speed internet](#) in the home, and, not surprisingly, this impacts families of color disproportionately.

Pierre also highlights our long history of white school districts receiving more funding on average than nonwhite districts. While this funding is often tied to a residential area's taxes or income, statistics still implicate race: "High-poverty districts serving mostly students of color receive about \$1,600 less per student than the national average, while districts that are predominately white and poor receive about \$130 less."

According to [The Southern Education Foundation](#), private institutions have a history of upholding segregation and inequality as well. In their article, [A History of Private Schools & Race in the American South](#), they highlight how public funding for private schools began in the South to circumvent desegregation and spread into a national movement fueling unprecedented private school expansion from 1950 to 1965.

There's another layer which retains white privilege in education -- standardized testing, which Ibram X. Kendi, prominent author of *How to Be an Antiracist*, takes issue with as a primary perpetrator of racist ideas and policies in education. BIPOC score lower on average than their white and asian peers, which then labels them as inferior and can be used to justify racism.

The [KQED Mindshift](#) article, [How Ibram X. Kendi's Definition of Antiracism Applies to Schools](#), quotes Kendi explaining, "We're fundamentally saying that the problem is the test takers, as opposed to the test. And we're completely ignoring things like the multibillion-dollar test prep industry...[and] the massive amount of disparities between schools in terms of resources. And that's why more and more educational scholars are talking about the opportunity gap instead of the achievement gap."

These same students who perform less well as test takers also make up another risk group. They are the students more likely to travel what is called the "School to Prison Pipeline" -- a phenomenon where some school districts employ discipline policies that push students, particularly students of color, out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system. According to the [American Civil](#)

[Liberties Union](#), this trend is exacerbated by poorly funded, overcrowded schools, zero tolerance discipline policies, police officers in schools and hallways and policies in the juvenile court system.

This year in the United States, an awakening to social injustice has placed a high value on enacting systemic change. The pandemic has brought income and healthcare inequalities to the forefront and reveals the change needed in economic and healthcare systems. Police brutality caught continually on film has brought demand for change of our law enforcement systems and policies. Arguably, education must be placed on this list of institutions in need of sweeping systemic change. Existing education policies, procedures and priorities uphold systemic racism. We, as educators, have the power to shape the future of society by enacting meaningful change and beginning to make those changes today.

Photo Credit: [The Waldorf School of Philadelphia](#)