

**Policy Brief**  
**Restoring the ‘Education Debt’:**  
**Equity Priorities for Children and Families**  
**in BIPOC and Immigrant Communities in Washington**

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## CONTEXT

The primary purpose of this brief was three-fold: (1) highlight Washington’s most pressing equity priorities that disproportionately affect students in Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color (BIPOC) and immigrant communities; (2) understand current political debates and most recent policy attempts to reduce racial disparities particularly in key areas of equity concerns; and (3) present critical priorities and actionable policy recommendations for dismantling systemic racism and advancing educational justice in Washington.

In Washington state, almost half (48%) of the K-12 student population are children of color (OSPI Report Card, 2019-2020) and the number of non-white children has been rising steadily in the past decade (KIDS Count Data Center, 2019). Yet BIPOC and immigrant communities as well as families in poverty persist to remain at the margins of educational policy agendas, budget priorities, and school reform initiatives. Over the past five years, Washington has seen the growth of teachers of color, an increase of 32% which outpaced the increase of new white teachers. Yet, to date, *only 12%* of teachers in Washington are educators of color compared to *48% of students of color* (State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, 2019).

Racial inequities in school funding, which have persisted over centuries, is the biggest and primary barrier to educational justice. A recent report indicated that nationwide, predominantly nonwhite school districts receive \$23 billion less than predominantly white districts despite serving the same number of students (EdBuild, 2019). Washington state is not an exception to this story. Even when poverty is taken into account, race persists to contribute to school funding disparities. For example, the average funding in WA for predominantly nonwhite school districts has 18% less funding on average (\$11,200 per student) than predominantly white school districts (\$19,422 per student) (EdBuild, 2019). Furthermore, recent school finance reforms have disproportionately benefited white students and more affluent districts, further exacerbating racial funding gaps in Washington (Knight & Plecki, 2021).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Decades of research on racial injustice in education have documented widening achievement gaps in standardized test scores and educational attainment between White and BIPOC or White and recent immigrant students. In fact, the term, “achievement gap,” has been identified as one of the most pressing education policy challenges that states currently face (National Governors’ Association, 2005). Ladson-Billings (2006), however, argues that our focus on the achievement gap is misplaced and instead calls for shifting our attention to the “education debt” or the cumulative costs of historical, economic, and sociopolitical injustices (e.g., school segregation, exclusion, political disenfranchisement, assimilation, violence) resulting in inequitable opportunities and schooling experiences among students in BIPOC and immigrant communities. This brief examines pressing equity priorities in Washington’s K-12 education system through the same lens and putting forward collective social responsibility to restore the ‘education debt’ and advance transformative possibilities in education particularly among students in low-income, immigrant, and BIPOC communities.

The concept of ‘education debt’ is closely related to life course theory as a framework for understanding both immediate and lifelong consequences, individual and intergenerational cycles of educational injustices underlying Washington’s K-12 education system. In short, inequities beget inequities. For centuries, children’s well-being can be predicted by their demographic characteristics, the color of their skin, their family’s income bracket, and their home language (Meek et al., 2020). Racial disparities in education and their lifelong consequences on children begin *before birth* and intensify during the early childhood years prior to formal schooling entry. For example, racial disparities in kindergarten readiness as manifestations of the ‘education debt’ consistently predict whether a student is more likely to meet math and reading proficiency by third grade (Washington Office of Superintendent and Public Instruction, 2020). Based on data from The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS) Whole-Child Assessment, only 1 in 3 (31-34%) Latinx, Native, and Pacific Islander children demonstrated readiness across all six areas of development (i.e., social-emotional, physical, cognitive, language, literacy, mathematics) compared to White children (58%). Furthermore, inequities in early childhood experiences, family support and home learning environment, out-of-school experiences, health and economic security are contributory to the accumulating ‘education debt’ (Rothstein & Wilder, 2005). Growing up in poverty is one of the greatest threats to healthy child development. More specifically, Black and Indigenous children still remain three times more likely than white children to live in poverty (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021).

Many children and families in non-dominant communities whose lives are shaped by intersecting inequalities (e.g., poverty, newcomer status, language barriers, racial oppression) bring valuable insights on institutionalized inequities underlying the Washington K-12 education system that calls for restorative transformation. This brief aims to understand and uncover the most critical dimensions of educational injustice affecting students of color and immigrant-origin students

thereby identifying the level and types of restorative investments and policy practices needed to reduce inequities particularly in the earlier grades. Inequities beget inequities, and earlier we are able to make systematic corrections, greater the value these investments would produce in advancing educational justice in later grades.

## KEY EQUITY PRIORITIES

This brief will focus on the following primary areas of urgent priorities that call for restorative investments and policy actions for reducing the ‘education debt’ and advancing racial justice in K-12 education:

- **Diversifying the teaching workforce** is one of the most critical steps to dismantling structural racism and educational disparities. With the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, governors and state legislatures recommended ensuring the equitable distribution of high quality teachers and school leaders by prioritizing funding to schools with the most significant achievement gaps (NCSL, 2015). Yet this legislative mandate is yet to be realized in Washington. In fact, teachers of color are exiting the teaching profession at a much higher rate than their White counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2018).
- **Highly Capable Cohort (HCC) and inequitable access to gifted education:** Currently Washington mandates identification of gifted kids in Kindergarten. For 2018-2019, over 70,000 students or 6.5% of the total public enrollment were served statewide by Highly Capable categorical funds. However, disproportionate access and enrollment in HCC programs has historically and contemporaneously contributed to widening racial disparities in education.
- **Ethnic studies** curriculum has been recently implemented for Grades 7 to 12 in Washington. While empirical evidence on the effectiveness of ethnic studies courses is limited, a recent study demonstrated large positive impacts of an ethnic studies curriculum on increased GPA, earned course credits, and increased attendance among high school students at the risk of dropping out (Dee & Penner, 2017). To ensure equitable teaching and learning in schools, ethnic studies curriculum must be implemented in a supportive, high fidelity context, and must accurately reflect the narratives that align with the identities, histories, philosophies, and culturally situated knowledge of communities of color and Indigenous communities.
- **Racial disparities in school disciplinary practices**--Harsh school discipline policies and practices continue to jeopardize learning experiences, well-being, and educational outcomes of children of color, and in particular, Black boys. The troubling expulsion rate

of young children from childcare in Washington State remains three times higher than for K-12 children, 7 to 10 per 1000 pre-k children, and Black boys being the most considerable population affected (Gillam, 2005). Despite its importance and enduring inequities, the momentum quickly shifted to ethnic studies.

For each of these equity priorities, the brief will discuss 1) current state investments that have been effective in reducing inequities for students in poverty and/or in BIPOC and immigrant communities, 2) previous mobilization efforts and restorative practices, if any, to center equity in school investment levels and priorities, and 3) policy recommendations for dismantling systemic racism and advancing educational justice in Washington.

## **METHOD OF INQUIRY**

The brief drew from multiple data sources that spanned from 2016-2021: 1) Washington state's legislative agendas and existing education policies and regulatory texts in K-12; 2) publicly available text data (e.g. hundreds of local and state education news, blogs, press releases, reports, and social media); and 3) five participant-observations of legislative, administrative, and community meetings that explicitly addressed racial equity in K-12. We conducted a document analysis and thematic coding of pressing concerns and debates as well as racial equity tools and reports. Then we identified convergence and gaps between current legislative efforts and the perspectives of BIPOC and immigrant families and communities, particularly in concentrated areas of poverty.

1. In order to understand most recent policy actions and directions, we began with a broad search of most recent legislative agendas and actions, policy updates, and annual reports from OSPI, Seattle Public Schools (SPS), and Washington Education Association (WEA). We read and coded for emergent themes across all 5 years' reports to the legislature and workgroups' meeting notes. To ensure a broad representation of diverse stakeholders, the brief also explored and identified themes from hundreds of local and state news, social media as well as reports from locally based community organizations, meetings, and panels. In addition we searched for organizations that strive for educational equity located within Washington state and read through their reports, briefs, and agendas.
2. Participant-observation was conducted in five meetings and panels involving senates, state administrators, school leaders, community partners, advocates, teachers, and students. Various meetings included the OSPI Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) meetings, student voice panel, as well as webinars and townhall with community partners and organizations committed to advancing educational equity. These meetings were conducted virtually via zoom in

real-time during the pandemic and were open to all registered participants. We then incorporated the key ideas, questions and concerns that arose from these meetings to further elaborate and support the emergent themes (or equity priorities) identified from text analyses of legislative reports and media. The brief also incorporated these perspectives, particularly those of students and families of color, to articulate the pressing nature of key equity priorities and further in identifying salient and feasible policy recommendations within the confines of our current systems.

3. For each equity priority, the brief also highlights peer states who have recently implemented similar policies. National data and reports further helped in determining the states that were worth studying in addressing these issues. The brief highlights policy alternatives and lessons learned from these peer states as a platform for presenting policy recommendations.

## **POLICY ALTERNATIVES: LEARNING FROM PEER STATES**

### **Teacher diversity:**

- **Connecticut** removed the financial barriers to entering the teaching profession by extending eligibility for the teacher mortgage assistance program to include teachers who graduated from a high school in an educational reform district or who graduated from a historically black college or Hispanic-serving institution. In 2018, the state passed a bill to ensure enrolling greater numbers of candidates of color. The goal is hiring a minimum of 250 minority teachers statewide each year. By 2021, 10% of the entire teacher workforce will be teachers from nondominant backgrounds. People of color graduate from college with significantly [more debt](#) than their white peers, and this can make the decision to enter a profession with a low to moderate compensation like teaching to be daunting.
- **Illinois:** In 2018, CCSSO (Council of Chief State School Officers) partnered with ten states, including Illinois, to engage in work to diversify the state's teacher pipeline and ensure that all teachers practice culturally responsive teaching. Illinois' team is composed of diverse stakeholders representing institutions of higher education, district and school-level leadership, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the Illinois General Assembly. The Illinois Grow Your Own Teacher Education Act was explicitly created to diversify the teacher workforce. The program was established in 2005, and recent amending legislation changed the administering entity from the Board of Higher Education to Grow Your Own Illinois. (Grow Your Own Illinois, based in Chicago, is a community-based program that functions as a partnership among school districts, teacher

preparation programs, and community organizations.) These partnerships help provide support to teacher candidates as they move through the teacher pipeline.

### **Gifted Education:**

- **Florida:** During the 2012-13 school year, however, the Orange County Public Schools began a shift to **universal screening**. It started in its high-poverty schools, where students had historically been underrepresented in gifted programs. That first year, the portion of students being identified as gifted grew 7% from the year before. The next year, it grew another 5.6%.
- **Minnesota** conducted **universal screening**, which results in a higher representation of underserved populations as eligible for gifted and talented services when compared to other traditional methods of identification for gifted programs (e.g., teacher identification). This is a research-based and defensible procedure to move toward best practices in identifying gifted and talented learners. Also, Jack Kent Cooke Foundation is dedicated to **ensuring high-performing; low-income students in MN have the support** necessary to develop their skills.

### **Ethnic Studies:**

- In 2017, **Oregon** passed House Bill 2845 requiring Ethnic Studies curriculum in grades K–12. It was **the first state in the nation** to do so. The bill passed almost fifty years after the founding of the country’s first Ethnic Studies department. The passage of an Ethnic Studies bill in a state that once banned African Americans and removed Indigenous peoples from their land requires further examination. In addition, the bill **mandates** that Ethnic Studies curriculum in Oregon’s schools includes “social minorities,” such as Jewish and LGBTQb populations which makes the bill even more remarkable. A coalition of seven local groups making up the Ethnic Studies Coalition—have made crucial gains this week, ensuring K-12 ethnic-studies curriculum is required for students, not only the whitest large city in the country, but for students in the entire state. Ethnic studies standards would be adopted by 2020, with implementation in schools set for 2021.
- **Vermont:** The **Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory Working Group** was created to review standards for student performance adopted by the State Board of Education and recommend to the State Board updates and additional standards to fully recognize the history, contributions and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups. A group tasked by the Legislature with recommending ways to make Vermont schools more inclusive has begun its work. Because curriculum is, by and large, determined at the

local level, state actors — including the panel — cannot dictate directly what Vermont schools must teach. But the State Board of Education does set academic standards that define what students should know. The group is due to submit recommendations for updating those standards by June 30, 2021. The group’s mandate extends beyond race and requires a consideration of other marginalized social groups.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON K-12 EDUCATION**

Thus the brief presents evidence-based, actionable, and systemic approaches to restoring the ‘education debt’ or the foregone schooling resources that we could have and should have been investing primarily in children from low-income, immigrant, and BIPOC communities.

- 1. Implement race-conscious policies to diversify the current K-12 teaching workforce. Prioritize the recruitment, retention, and promotion of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse educators.**
  - a. Research unequivocally demonstrates that students thrive when they see themselves in and can relate to their teachers. One study indicated that Black children were more likely to be placed in gifted education programs and 40% less likely to drop out of high school if they had a Black teacher. Assess and embed equity in teacher preparation, teacher recruitment, hiring practices, professional learning opportunities, and promotion procedures to diversify teachers (particularly in disciplines dominated by white men), counselors, and administrators on an ongoing basis.
  - b. Evidence suggests that systematic efforts to implement **standards and training for cultural responsiveness** help transform school culture and instructional practice towards creating more equitable and just schools. While many attest to the growing need for cultural competency training and current bill 5044 focuses on providing lists of training materials on cultural responsiveness, the question remains as to how the policy will support building the capacity of the teaching force. There needs to be an explicit guideline for how the recommended list of training will translate into **authentic, ongoing job-embedded professional learning at all levels**. Federal Way Public Schools, for example, engages teachers in an ongoing, sustained professional learning on racial equity, which created a culture of common vocabulary and protocols for discussing race and its impact on schooling and empowered teachers of color to grow and thrive in these settings.
  - c. Research shows that cultural competency standards and training **alone** do not fully address the needs of BIPOC students and dismantle racially unjust practices.

Additional steps could be taken to improve this bill. While provision of training is important, one of the most critical issues we are facing is **a lack of trust** among parents and communities. As policymakers consider dismantling structural racism in K-12 education, special attention should be paid to building trust between schools and BIPOC communities.

- d. Seek ways to **intentionally engage youth and families of color** for consultation and regarding decision-making in teacher recruitment and hire. **Expand preparation and licensure pathways** for teachers from diverse backgrounds with input from community partners. Meaningful impact of work related to racial equity happens by ensuring those who are at the table can identify with and relate to the experiences and priorities of those positioned furthest from educational justice.
- e. **Ensure targeted support for educators of color**, for example, would further lessen the workload and emotional burden of addressing structural racism on the frontlines. Teacher diversity may also benefit teachers of color, particularly those in their earliest years of teaching, who experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and fatigue. Racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse educators often bring community cultural wealth of insight, understanding, knowledge, and skills to form deeply meaningful connections with students and their families (Varghese). On a related note, **allocate targeted supports for college guidance and career counselors** in predominantly nonwhite schools and high poverty districts. This may involve reducing administrative burdens and expanding their time to focus on relational building and effectively connecting students with available resources.
- f. OSPI has been using the ESSA index which includes not only outcomes (e.g., achievement, graduation rate) but also growth data (e.g., English Learner Progress, 9th grades on track, advanced course taking), and setting a comprehensive threshold to identify student groups for targeted support. **Embed equity in monitoring and accountability systems** to better serve students and teachers of color. The system of equity monitoring measures (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019) may include **ongoing coaching and professional development on anti-racism teaching and culturally sustaining pedagogy, dismantling segregated or self-contained classrooms by funding stream that result in racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic segregation, continuous tracking racial and other forms of workforce compensation inequity.**

**2. Intentionally eliminate manifestations of structural racism in ensuring transparent access to resources, opportunities, and experiences for Highly Capable Cohorts pathways.**

- a. White students, for example, represent over 60% of students receiving highly capable services in Seattle Public Schools while Black students make up less than 2% of total enrollment. Racial tensions over Seattle’s gifted programs have run high for years yet institutional barriers within schools have kept Black, Latinx, and Native students from enrolling in advanced coursework.
- b. Washington came in third-worst states in representing Latinx students fairly in gifted and talented programs.
- c. Implement universal access to identification and testing.
- d. Prioritize transparency and explicit articulation of navigating the system for families in multiple languages.
- e. Partner with community organizations to hold webinars or open house sessions with parent panelists and breakout groups for sharing the wisdom and dismantling gatekeeping barriers for marginalized groups.

**Table 3: Percentages of Students Served in 2018–19 as Categorized by Race and Ethnicity**

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Statewide Student Enrollment</b>	<b>Highly Capable Student Enrollment</b>
<b>American Indian/Alaskan Native</b>	1.33%	0.46%
<b>Asian</b>	7.84%	17.25%
<b>Black/African American</b>	4.47%	1.77%
<b>Hispanic/Latino of any race(s)</b>	23.51%	10.02%
<b>Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</b>	1.12%	0.38%
<b>Not Provided</b>	0.01%	0.00%
<b>Two or More Races</b>	8.34%	8.72%
<b>White</b>	53.38%	61.39%

**Source:** Race and ethnicity enrollment demographics reported by districts for the 2018–19 school year and pulled from CEDARS as of August 22, 2019.

**Table 4: Percentages of Students Served in 2018–19 as Categorized by Special Program Group**

Special Program	Statewide Enrollment	Highly Capable Enrollment
English Language Learner	11.70%	1.10%
Free & Reduced Lunch	46.42%	19.28%
Section 504	4.42%	5.39%
Special Education	15.08%	2.90%

**Source:** Program enrollment demographics reported by districts for the 2018–19 school year and pulled from CEDARS as of August 22, 2019.

**3. Expand learning opportunities to improve current ethnic studies programs.**

- a. whether how this intersects with Time Immemorial (history, sovereignty, rights not culture), related to a significant movement of Native Education (Ann Marie) what training and supports look like in ethnic studies; invest in PD supports for the implementation
- b. Many students of color have shared that when they do get an opportunity to learn about their history, it centers around oppression. Assess the accurate and fair portrayals of ethnic groups histories, multifaceted contributions to society, and heritage.
- c. Creating listening sessions to center the experiences of ethnic studies directly from students of color and other marginalized voices.
- d. Appoint and engage families, elders, and community leaders to conduct equity audits of ethnic studies curriculum and learn from how they reshape the narrative.

**4. Continuously improve the quality and assess the impact of the racial discipline gap program.**

- a. State funding for harsh discipline: OSPI State funds have been made available to support school districts in identifying, implementing, and evaluating best practices to address racial discipline gaps (OSPI, 2021). Competitive state grant funds are still available for school districts during the 2021 fiscal year to create systems, policies, and practices to address racial discipline gaps. Grant activities focus on student discipline provisions in state law that apply to all school districts involving family and community engagement, disaggregated data use, best practices for behavior, policies and procedures, and staff training. OSPI and partner organizations have provided student discipline training materials and resources.

- b.** Consider enacting restorative justice programs in schools. This community-based approach to accountability, safety, and healing creates a webbed system of care and shifts the focus away from punishment, deficit framing, labeling, and blaming to 1) repairing the harm and 2) identifying assistance needed to collectively seek solutions and prevention. Evidence suggests that restorative justice may reduce future disciplinary incidents and bring healing and peacemaking to the community at multiple levels--classroom, grade, school, and program.
- 5. Movement-building strategies for restoring relational trust and building transformative collaborations with BIPOC and immigrant families:**
- a.** Widely used terms such as parent and community involvement have origins in White, middle-class normative practices (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007) and are limiting and marginalizing. Expand current notions away from school-based parent involvement toward co-designing, learning from, and centering the voices and experiences of racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse students, families, and communities (Park & Li, 2020) through relational building (Warren, Mapp, & the Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011), capacity building (Catone, Chung & Oh, 2011), and equitable partnerships (Ishimaru, 2020) for systems change.
  - b.** Public discourse and survey data anticipate a sharp decline in reenrollment particularly among Black and Asian students when schools fully reopen (Chao, 2021). Asian and Black families are most reluctant to send their kids back to school due to safety concerns and racially motivated violence in the wake of pandemic. Families and their children of color need to be assured of a school culture and classroom communities of emotional support, belonging, healing, and connection. Now is the time to listen to families, to learn and unlearn while engaging in deep critical inquiry about the intersectional and systemic nature of injustices targeting students of color and students in immigrant and Indigenous families.
  - c.** Restoring our schools and broken structures to serve justly our most vulnerable and marginalized students means first restoring broken relationships and reestablishing relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), a key component of school reform, which has eroded over time and particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Intentionally design spaces and processes to embed voices and wisdom within families and communities from the beginning to identify barriers, understand unintended consequences, and co-construct solutions for disrupting structural racism.

- d.** This can be done by creating ongoing spaces in diverse formats for counter storytelling. Make these spaces accessible and inviting for students and their families to share their experiential knowledge or metis (Scott, 1998)--culturally situated and locally grounded insights, skills, intuitive perception, philosophies, and wisdom. Serve as a foundation for restoring and reimagining schools as sites for cultural revitalization (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).
- e.** Listen and respond to the needs of BIPOC and immigrant communities with dignity. There is much to be learned from and partnering with faith-based institutions, and community organizations led by BIPOC leaders primarily serving immigrant children and families.
- f.** Inequitable educational opportunities and experiences is one of multiple intersecting inequalities experienced by BIPOC students and immigrant-origin students Engage and sustain cross-sectoral, cross-agency partnerships for collectively dismantling racial injustice across education, health, wealth, housing, and social services.

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