

# **Achieving Educational Justice for Washington's Students of Color**

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**Draft Paper for the WEA**

**May 2021**

## INTRODUCTION

As South Asian students who have had the opportunity to engage in educational justice work in our local Seattle school community, we've observed the lack of opportunities that most non-dominant students, specifically those that are Black and Indigenous, have to influence the educational policies that affect them. That is why we were asked to engage the voices of students of color in the project "A Roadmap to Reducing Barriers to Educational Justice in Washington State" conducted by researchers from the University of Washington, Washington State University and community partners. We conducted interviews with students of color around Washington to better understand their experiences with racial justice and injustice in the education system, as well as understand what educational justice means to them so that their crucial perspectives will help shape a "roadmap" for reducing educational injustices in Washington state's P-12 education system.

Our report is framed by three key questions that aim to understand how students of color are oppressed by the education system, along with how they envision a future where education meets their needs and redresses the injustice they face:

1. [How do students of color define and understand educational justice?](#)
2. [What are barriers to educational justice for students of color?](#)
3. [How can we achieve<sup>1</sup> educational justice for students of color?](#)

As non-Black non-Indigenous students, we cannot and should not represent the voices of Black and Indigenous students, voices that should be driving educational justice work. More opportunities should be created to directly give these students power and voice, in addition to integrating the historical and existing work done by Black and Indigenous students and educators. Our research should not be the first or last opportunity to engage Black, Indigenous, students of color in educational justice work.

## METHODS

We conducted 11 interviews over Zoom with a total of 19 current and former high school students from across the state of Washington. We were connected to these students from our own involvement in educational equity work, teacher networks, and community organizations around Washington. The interviews took place from November to December of 2021 and asked students about their role within schools, what racial justice work looked like in their schools, their interactions with teachers and administrators, their school's response to the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, and what their ideal education looks like. We analyzed the data that we collected through our three key questions, as well as through our own experiences with racial justice work in Seattle Schools.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word achieve knowing that educational justice is something to continuously strive towards rather than a checklist.

Our primary criteria for finding students to interview, aside from them identifying as people of color (POC), was that students engaged in some form of racial justice work within their schools/communities. However, as opportunities to engage in racial justice work are absent in many districts, particularly in Eastern Washington and the Olympic Peninsula, we modified our criteria to include any POC identifying high school students that were willing to participate. We chose to interview high school students given the lack of opportunities to engage in racial justice work for middle and elementary age students, as well as the fact that our networks primarily consisted of high school students. This does not mean that younger students shouldn't be included in the conversation as they are both willing to engage and capable of engaging with racial justice work within education.

All of the students that we interviewed identified as POC and either attended or had attended public high schools in Washington. Eleven of the students were from Western Washington and eight were from Eastern Washington. Three of the students identified as Black, seven identified as Asian-American, six identified as non-White Latinx, one as Asian-American and White, one as Indigenous Hawaiian, one as Indigenous and Black, and one as Indigenous and Latinx. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, student privacy concerns, and the limited extent of our own student networks, there were limitations in accessing certain geographical areas of Washington such as districts on the Olympic Peninsula, Northwestern and Northeastern Washington, and tribal communities. Due to these limitations, we were unable to interview a majority of Black and Indigenous students, as we had originally intended. However, conducting interviews online allowed us to connect with students from across Washington state that we otherwise might not have been able to reach.

Students who did participate were compensated with a \$25 gift certificate. It was an intentional decision on our part to avoid exploiting students of color for their mental and emotional labor as much as possible in keeping with our project's central theme of educational justice.

Our findings are organized under our three key questions. Within each of these questions, we identified broad thematic areas, which are elaborated on in more specific "sub-themes" within barriers to educational justice and achieving educational justice. We wanted our report to stay as true to the experiences of the students we interviewed as possible, using the maximum number of quotes and paraphrased responses as we could. Unless otherwise prefaced, all single words or phrases in quotation marks indicate that we are quoting an interviewee. We also drew examples from our own experiences with racism and racial justice work as students of color in Seattle schools, and our analysis is informed by this perspective.

## **OUR THREE KEY QUESTIONS**

1. [How do students of color define and understand educational justice?](#)

2. [What are the barriers to educational justice for students of color?](#)
3. [How can we achieve educational justice for students of color?](#)

## **HOW DO STUDENTS OF COLOR DEFINE AND UNDERSTAND EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE?**

When we directly asked the students we interviewed to define educational justice or describe what justice in an educational setting looks like, it proved to be an insufficient metric of their true thoughts on the topic. This question resulted in less specific and more generic answers, such as “equal opportunity” and “equity” that weren’t representative of their previous responses that connected to educational justice. Instead of relying on their answer to the aforementioned question, we extrapolated data from other questions that we asked, particularly “what would ideal education look like and how can we get there?” We also found more comprehensive definitions of educational justice by looking at the answers students provided about their experiences with injustice within schools.

The ways that students identified educational justice fit into three themes: re-defining spaces of learning, holistic and student-centered learning, and co-creating education.

### **Re-defining spaces of learning**

1. Students of color recognize that their experiences in school are racialized because educational institutions are “embedded in white supremacy... and [are] upholding white supremacy values.” Designing schools for students of color means transforming them into “actively **anti-racist**”, **emancipatory**, **culturally responsive**, **pro-Black**, and **pro-Indigenous spaces of learning that are accountable to students of color and truly embody learning as a value**. This would involve schools moving away from the idea of education as “an [indoctrinating] institution... [to] just learning”-- to education that explicitly focuses on abolishing racism, builds community, values “different ways of learning” and knowing, and centers student voice. By virtue of such transformation, schools will be accountable to what their students want and need. As one student put it, “trying to abolish certain systems and abolish certain normalized racialized mindsets within [our] students,” is a more effective means of striving towards racial justice than continuous reform efforts dictated by administrators and district officials. For example, some schools in the Seattle Public Schools District have perpetuated racist tracked learning programs by trying to diversify these programs instead of abolishing them.

### **Holistic and student-centered learning**

2. Several students of color shared how they are unable to connect with a white-centric education, and because of this, end up “resenting... being in school” instead of engaging with and finding joy in what they are learning. A more just education is one where **students are able to be their whole selves, see themselves and their interests reflected in their school**

**community, and are nurtured in reaching their fullest potential.** As one student put it, “I think for me, educational justice... [is] giving me time to see me as I am, my identity, my culture, my background, and giving me the opportunity and the chance to grow and be great.” In addition to student-oriented curriculum like Ethnic Studies, this vision is only possible with educators who are committed to building authentic, trusting relationships with their students in order to amplify their brilliance, talents, and gifts.

### **Students co-create their education**

3. There is a fundamental discrepancy with the fact that education is purportedly about students, yet they are barely given voice or power in decisions that affect them and their education. In order to achieve educational justice, **students of color should be considered meaningful partners in co-creating their education “with” and alongside educators, administrators, community and family stakeholders.** “Anywhere in the world youth are being discussed or changes about our lives and our education are happening, we need to be in the room and we need to be part of the decisions,” as one student put it.

## **WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR?**

We identified three overarching barriers to educational justice that students of color face:

1. Students have inauthentic and insufficient opportunities to engage in decision-making processes and anti-racist work.
2. Racism and white supremacy are normalized and perpetuated in school climate and curriculum, as well as in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter Movement.
3. Educators are not accountable to their students of color in addressing racism.

### **Students of color have inauthentic and insufficient opportunities to engage in decision-making processes and anti-racist work.**

Our interviews demonstrated how schools are not conducive to voices of students of color. Most schools do not listen to students or amplify their voices, do not encourage them to take a stance against racism, and do not adequately support spaces for them to have a voice. Some students describe how much of their work is cyclical — students of color advocate for change without success, graduate, and then new students come in and repeat this process—and how it is unable to result in transformation. Essentially, most students of color are not being given **positions of power** to affect change within their schools.

1. *Inauthentic opportunities/engagement and tokenization results in student voice not being translated into meaningful action and students being harmed.* Students of color are not always given opportunities to contribute to so-called equity work within their schools. When

students *are* asked to contribute, such as by speaking on panels or joining school committees as in our experience, it often results in inaction or responses that students did not ask for. One student described a Race and Equity Team meeting they attended, “where they brought in students... [but] never asked for our opinion.” Some students know from experience that participating in their school’s equity work is often inconsequential, but this mentality can at times be pre-emptive to engaging in it. For example, one student explained why they didn’t follow their teacher’s suggestion of attending a school board meeting to discuss Ethnic Studies: “If I’m being honest, I feel like my voice wouldn’t matter to [the school board] because it’s just a student asking them... I feel like they have more important things to figure out.” Knowing that their involvement in so-called equity work does not create the impact they need for their safety and thriving at school creates “a bigger, negative effect [for students of color] than [educators] think it might,” said one student, in that it forces students of color to explain and display their trauma to no avail.

2. *Students of color feel burdened by anti-racist work as compared to white educators and students.* Some of the students of color that we interviewed described how white staff and students are able to exempt themselves from anti-racist work even though they have more institutional power than their POC counterparts. One student described the interaction between their white principal and a student of color who was involved in anti-racist work: “[The student] does a lot of that work for [the principal]. He does listen, but he basically passes a lot of the work to [the student] because he doesn’t know what to do. And the effort isn’t nearly as there in the action part.” By virtue of their identity, students of color feel “forced” to work for their own safety and self-preservation within racist schools, even though it actively harms them, for “issues that should have [already] been resolved” before they enter the school building.
3. *Opportunities to engage in anti-racist work often vary and are limited by geography.* There was a noticeable difference in how students from different geographical areas identified and described racism within their schools even within our small sample size. Many of the students we interviewed from Eastern Washington used more cautious vocabulary to describe their experiences, expressing wariness to use the terms “white” or “People of color.” Some said that racism wasn’t really a “problem” at their schools, even when describing overtly racist occurrences like the n-word being used by non-Black people, and systemic/institutional racism were also addressed to a lesser degree. These students expressed that they do not have many opportunities to engage in anti-racist work in their school. Although we intentionally sought out students who were engaged in anti-racist work, we found that in general, the students we interviewed from the greater Seattle area were more engaged with anti-racist work in their schools and communities (participating on advisory boards, creating coalitions in school, sitting on hiring boards) but were still unable to create the change that they wanted and needed. Therefore, they discussed systemic/institutional barriers and changes that would

go beyond the superficial efforts they had already seen and engaged with in their schools. These findings suggest that students in more populous, urban areas have more opportunities in so-called “equity work”, whereas students in more rural places, particularly in Eastern Washington, have virtually no opportunities to address injustice.

## **Racism and white supremacy are normalized and perpetuated in school climate and curriculum.**

### **A. Schools have a climate of normalized racism that is evident in disproportionate discipline, rampant microaggressions, overt racism, lack of accountability and empathy, and isolation of students of color.**

1. *Educators stereotyping of Black students and non-white Latinx students leads to disproportionate discipline and emotional/physical violence against them.* Some of the students we interviewed described incidents where they or their Black and non-white Latinx peers were targeted for their race with regards to discipline. One student described how they were continuously called into the principal's office “literally just because [they’re] Black.” Students who are multi-marginalized and hold identities such as being an English Language Learner, first and second-generation immigrant, or having a disability expressed how sharing multiple non-dominant identities compounds the likelihood/severity of their discipline. The student above also attributed their disproportionate discipline to “hav[ing] one parent who's an immigrant... [that] their teachers can't understand.” Educators turn to severe forms of discipline with these students, such as “[calling] the cops on a literal 14-year-old [Black male student]” or locking a Black elementary school student in an outdoor caged enclosure as reported by Anne Dornfeld at KUOW<sup>2</sup>. Current discipline and other policing policies push students of color out of learning spaces, both physically and emotionally. As one student said, these “severe handlings of students... [don’t allow] them to do things that bring them joy, bring them happiness and keep them out of the streets, keep them safe [and] allow them to learn things.”
2. *Schools being fundamentally rooted in white supremacy means that they do not have space for students and staff of color.* Some students of color that attend predominantly white high schools feel that they do not have a community or belong to their existing school community, for reasons such as: being targeted for doing anti-racist work that is “out of the norm and [that makes] people uncomfortable,” not receiving support from educators in building

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<sup>2</sup>Ann Dornfeld. “Locked in ‘the cage.’ Report finds disturbing discipline measures at Seattle school.” *KUOW*, 5 Dec 2020, <https://www.kuow.org/stories/locked-in-the-cage-report-finds-disturbing-discipline-measures-at-seattle-school>.

community among their POC peers, being “tokenized” in the classroom, and simply existing as a student of color in a white supremacist space. In both predominantly white schools and schools with a majority of students of color, the scarcity of teachers of color makes building community even harder for students of color. Some students of color notice the parallels between the injustices they experience in school and the mistreatment and isolation that their educators of color face by white educators, which oftentimes lead to educators of color being pushed out of the school. For example, one of the students we interviewed detailed how one of the few teachers that they felt supported by had left their school because “it was too hard to work with all those white racist people.”

## **B. Curriculum is not responsive to student experiences and contributes to their marginalization.**

1. *Curriculum is not centered around the experiences of students of color or student interests in general, which leads to disengagement and further marginalization.* School curriculum is currently structured in a way that promotes the notion that “Western and white culture is superior,” as one student put it. People of color are often absent or erased from curricular narratives; if and when they are mentioned, it is often in a one-dimensional, whitewashed, oppression-centric, or sanitized way, leaving students of color “constantly... having to explain [their] history to [their] teachers and to [their] peers,” which is particularly harmful to Black and Indigenous students given our history of anti-Black racism and colonization of Indigenous lands. As one student asked, “What message is [our current curriculum] sending to kids [of color]? [That] that's all you can be?”

Many students of color also feel that their curriculum does not engage their interests, does not “prepare [them] for the world that they are going to be responsible for,” and is not relevant to their lives. As one student put it, even though they “enjoy learning,” they “do not particularly enjoy receiving that knowledge from school,” a space that is purportedly dedicated to learning.

2. *Schools condition students of color into white, ableist<sup>3</sup> ways of learning, knowing, and being.* Schools value students based on their production, measured by rigid grading, performance

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<sup>3</sup> Talila Lewis, in community with Disabled Black and other people of color, developed the following working definition of ableism: “A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and ‘behave.’ You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism” (Talila Lewis. “January 2021 Working Definition of Ableism.” *Talila A. Lewis, 1 Jan. 2021*, <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog/january-2021-working-definition-of-ableism>).

standards, and standardized tests that don't accommodate different learning styles or consider or value how students may learn in spaces outside of school, such as in community and their home. Educators are forced to teach to inflexible educational standards instead of to the unique abilities, needs, and interests of their students, who subsequently are set up for failure when they are graded on material that they cannot engage with (see above, "*Curriculum is not centered...*"). A student that attended a STEM high school that switched from admitting students based on applications to a lottery-based admissions process described the treatment of the first lottery class—which included a higher percentage of low income Black and Brown Students—as resistant to meeting their needs. "The teachers weren't willing to learn how to teach us. They wanted to keep that high bar, those high expectations for us... I had a teacher tell me 'We are used to having students up here and all of our students from your class were down here.'" said the student. This is just one example of how Black and Brown students are burdened with conforming to white standards instead of their teachers teaching to and valuing how they learn.

3. *Students of color recognize that programs that track them into advanced and general learning, such as cohort models, reinforce racial superiority/inferiority narratives and produce worse outcomes for Black and brown students.* One student we interviewed who was in an advanced learning program described how advanced learning and general education students in their school "have grown up in two silos:" white and Asian middle-upper income students in advanced learning, and Black and brown students in general learning. As Azure Savage said in his book *You Failed Us: Students of color talk Seattle schools* (2019), this "structured segregation is set up to keep black and brown students from making up a large portion of advanced classes." Another student that we interviewed who had placed into an advanced cohort in Seattle Public Schools described how "that test [to place into the Highly Capable Cohort (HCC)] is mostly catered to high income white people" and how, as a low income student, they tested into HCC later in their education because they "didn't have as much access to educational opportunities as [their] upper-class white peers."

Not only is testing for advanced placement programs materially inaccessible to low-income, Black and brown students and families, but test content — and the program itself — is based on what is valued in the dominant white culture. "[Being in advanced learning] made it impossible to connect with my blackness because I was not in the right program to be black. I was forced to cling onto my whiteness and let go of my blackness as a means of survival in my classes, all at the age of six," writes Savage. Reform to make testing accessible and diversify programs such as HCC do not address the fundamental foundations of racism that tracked and advanced learning programs are built upon. The same student who placed into HCC described how "being one of the only Asian students and one of the only low income students... really added onto [their] marginalization and isolation within that space, because

[they] didn't feel represented in the curriculum or [by] anybody in the classroom or any of the faculty.

Additionally, at a school we attended with an HCC cohort, we observed a hierarchy between students created by the program that devalued students in general education. We remember peers outside of the program disparaging their own intelligence based on implicit messaging and de-valuation they had internalized; Savage remembers students in the honors program calling those in general education “loud, annoying and dumb.” This devaluation disproportionately affects Black students, who represent a higher proportion of the general education population and who are already devalued by our education system.

**C. White supremacy prevents schools from meeting the needs of students of color in the current moment, with the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic.**

1. *Many students of color feel that the Black Lives Matter movement was not addressed with urgency, empathy, and accountability.* Schools did not address the Black Lives Matter movement in a way that meaningfully acknowledged or supported their Black students, if they acknowledged it at all. One Black student expressed that their school “just want[ed]... to move forward when not everyone can move forward, when it's some people's lives every single day.” Acknowledgements that schools did provide were “very performative” and did not “respect” the movement or their Black students in that they didn't result in institutional change. We noticed that schools in our area largely failed to recognize the fundamental connection between how they police Black students through means such as dress code and discipline (see Educators stereotyping of...) and how Black people are policed in society, and did not meet student advocacy to remove police from schools with any action. Additionally, protests in 2020 re-emphasize the need for, yet current lack of, healing spaces for Black students in their schools, given the racialized trauma they endure both in and outside school systems.

Many students of color that we interviewed also felt that the end of the school year and the COVID-19 pandemic were used as excuses to delay addressing anti-Black racism; one student said that their school district's response conveyed the message that injustice would be addressed when “we're done with COVID.”

2. *Educators have been inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of students during the current moment.* Due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have had to take on additional responsibilities for their families, such as working. However, many educators have not been understanding and accommodating of these circumstances. As one student described, “I was working 12-hour shifts from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM... school first started at 7:50... That's one of the main reasons why I fell behind... School was just my

last priority right there at the moment.” Instead of checking in with this student to see how they could best support them, one teacher responded that the student’s “priority shouldn’t be to work, it should be to come to school.” Educators have been similarly inflexible to the need and self-assumed obligation of many of their students of color to protest, particularly in June of 2020. One student observed how fellow students “would go to protests and then they’d still be supposed to do homework. Like I just got tear-gassed, I can’t do homework.” Educators not recognizing student’s commitments to their families and communities, like working and protesting, feeds into a larger narrative of how schools do not value students in their full context.

Another aspect of students’ full contexts that they feel has not been adequately supported is their mental health and social-emotional needs. Students of color feel like their school’s response to strained mental health has largely been performative. As one student put it, “it’s honestly kind of surprising the way that they can sit there and tell us to stay healthy and happy and okay and then not ask how they can support that.” In fact, some students are still being asked to produce and “perform” the same amount they were expected to pre-pandemic. One student described this rigid culture, which existed even before the pandemic, as such: “we’re robots on a production line on the path to graduation so that we can go become cogs in the white supremacist system.” Even with an acknowledgment of how student needs have changed during the current moment, many educators are still not taking enough action to meet those modified needs.

3. *Students of color and other non-dominant students face amplified marginalization due to the COVID-19 pandemic.* Existing marginalizations that students of color and non-dominant students experience, such as a lack of belonging in community, disconnection from educators, and tokenization have only been exacerbated during the pandemic. “Students are trying to learn online in places where they don’t feel accepted to begin with,” said one student. Other students added that online settings and modified schedules have made it harder for them to have the time and space to build relationships with their educators and their peers, which can already be difficult for students of color. One student who attends a predominantly white institution explained why they didn’t want to turn on their camera in class: “I would rather not participate in nor make it known that I’m the only Black person [there].” In addition to the barriers students of color face on a regular basis, these amplifications have made it even harder for them to show up at school.

**Educators are not accountable to their students of color in addressing racism.**

Many students of color do not have an effective means of holding their educators and others accountable<sup>4</sup>, nor do they observe proactive anti-racist efforts by their educators. This sends the message to students of color that their educators do not feel a sense of accountability to them in addressing racism. Accountability is further stymied by educators' inaccessibility to students, families, and communities of color, the people who they should both be accountable to and be held accountable by.

1. *Students of color feel a lack of empathy and accountability in addressing racism from white staff and students.* Because they don't experience racism, "it's super easy for white teachers to ignore [racism]... it's also super easy for white privileged students to just deflect...and say, 'that's not a conversation for today.'" This lack of reflection, action, and conversation around racism often results in white people at school harming students of color. Even if they do not commit microaggressive or visibly racist acts, many white educators and students do not acknowledge their broader participation in white supremacy and how they benefit from it, nor do they feel accountable to use their privilege and power to dismantle white supremacy. As one student said, "when you don't talk about these issues, you pretend that they don't exist for us and there's no way for us to escape this because this is literally who we are... it's kind of erasing our identities, not even because you did anything, but mostly because you didn't do anything."

In addition to ignoring racism, some educators actively resist anti-racist work. For example, in our school district, multiple teachers harassed women of color leading anti-racist professional development and were not held accountable by their administrators. Furthermore, since there is a lack of transparency around racist incidents and behaviors involving white educators, students of color are consistently put in danger of being harmed by their schools.

2. *Students of color feel discouraged from holding educators accountable, and when they do, they are often ostracized, or their concerns are not addressed.* The power differential<sup>5</sup> that exists between educators and students discourages students of color from speaking up when staff are being racist. As one student recognized, "the teacher kind of holds our grades in their hands and we don't want to jeopardize that. So we avoid any altercations that may occur with [them]." When students do confront their educators or speak up against racism, they are sometimes ostracized by their educators. "Even though I had the grades and was good in

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<sup>4</sup> Accountability brings a sense of justice to those harmed, and therefore can look different to everyone. Accountability goes beyond repairing harm to generative action and is the responsibility of everyone in the community to themselves and to each other.

<sup>5</sup> Students do not have agency in their education and are not treated as if they themselves have knowledge and wisdom to teach. This creates a hierarchy of power between students and teachers, where students do not feel that they have the authority to question, correct, or collaborate with teachers.

class, I was no longer the teacher's pet or the favorite. I didn't get the awards at the end of the year because my organizing was out of the norm and it made people uncomfortable,” one student described. Some students of color are also met with defensiveness and “white guilt” when they confront their educators. “Instead of actively enforcing a change [to their behavior], it's like, they start crying,” one student said about their educators. As another student corroborated, this makes students feel like “we shouldn't have confronted [the educator],” and that “we just made [them] feel worse.” The fear of retribution and “white guilt” particularly affects Black women, since, as the same student said, “[Black] women are the ones who always do the labor. I can't imagine how scary it is [for them] to confront an authority figure.” The power differential that exists within classrooms is not conducive to building trusting relationships where students and educators can hold each other accountable.

3. *Educators have not created a reporting system for racism that produces justice for students of color.* Many students of color who experience racism do not find justice through their school's reporting and accountability system. Because of a lack of transparency between educators and students, many do not know how to report racist incidents, who to report them to, or what happens subsequent to their reporting. When students do report racist incidents to administrators, their experiences are often questioned and gaslit (“Was it really that bad?”) and they are repeatedly forced to “prove” that they have been traumatized. This harm is exacerbated when, as is often the case, the student's injustice is not redressed in a way that is impactful to them. One student characterized their counselor's response to anti-Black racism between them and other students, as “just a temporary fix” that, as another student said, doesn't actually “abolish certain normalized racialized mindsets within their students.” As such, many students are deterred from reporting these injustices, and share an unspoken understanding that “if you report [racism] you know nothing's going to happen,” as one student described. The same student elaborated on how it is particularly difficult to report educators who are “the ones in a position of power to make a difference... [but] actively work against that... [and are] committing the abuse that you would report to [someone in a position of power].” Furthermore, administrators are often unwilling to hold their own staff members accountable, as in our own experience, and work to protect teacher comfort and reputation over the safety of students. We have had personal experience with administrators being complicit in their staff's racism, such as being removed from racist classrooms instead of having our principal remove or address the racist teacher.

Students are not usually engaged in conversations around what accountability measures they need or would be impactful to them, nor are they informed of the accountability measures taken with others involved in the incident. Subsequently, some students feel obligated to seek their own justice, even creating and proposing new accountability systems for their schools. As one student described: “me and one of my friends actually took it upon ourselves to make

a racism reporting system... [however] what [we] designed was very different than what was actually implemented by the staff and administration.”

4. *Many educators do not have standards of anti-racism or have standards that do not feel meaningful or sufficient to students of color.* Most educators have not set up their school communities around actionable anti-racist standards that establish “some sort of accountability for [themselves] and... students.” Due to a lack of transparency, many students are unaware if/what anti-racist efforts are occurring in their district or school, as one student said: “I know they have meetings, but I don't know what about or if they ever touch base on [addressing racism] themselves,” and that “as far as I've asked... they've never really done anything.” As another student put it, “the people who are writing [anti-racist policy] aren't at the schools every single day,” so they can't ensure policy implementation that meaningfully impacts students of color.

Ultimately, most ongoing anti-racist work cannot meaningfully impact students of color, nor produce justice or be truly anti-racist, since it does not involve students. “[O]ur admin has their own set of ideas and values of what they think is progressive, and what they think is equitable and safe, and then everything else is just kind of thrown out,” one student described. “So when do we want to do value changes or when we want to propose something new to the admin, we have to fit it into their standards or it's just not going to happen.”

5. *Many students of color cannot relate to the overwhelmingly white educator workforce in Washington.* Students of color do not feel represented amongst their educators since they rarely, if ever, have a teacher that looks like them. “Literally my entire life in the public school system in Seattle [I] never had one BIPOC teacher,” one student said. This is a “struggle,” particularly for students that attend institutions where the student body is predominantly of color. It can be hard for students of color to form relationships with white educators in general, due to their lack of understanding of the lived experiences of students of color, but this becomes even more difficult when white educators racist are unconcerned with racial justice. As one student described, “it's really tricky to think about how we can build community with [white educators] because they've been the enemy for literally so long.”

Students of color often seek support and community from the few educators of color in their school. However, it is oftentimes these educators who get targeted, fired from, and pushed out of schools (refer to *School being fundamentally rooted in white supremacy means...*) even though they are providing crucial support for their students of color. For example, a new teacher of color at a school in our district described how students of color would seek them out as the sole supportive figure within their predominantly white high school on top of their standard duties as a teacher and their own emotional toll of being an educator of color in an overwhelmingly white teaching force. This teacher was targeted during budget cuts where

administrators did not give consideration to the unique role this teacher played within the school. The lack of educators of color within Washington Schools demonstrates that those who have power in hiring and firing decisions have not been “valuing that the experience of being BIPOC makes [teachers of color] experienced in ways that white staff will never be,” as another student put it.

## **HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR?**

Many of the students of color that we interviewed want to reimagine and transform their education system into one that embodies educational justice for them. “Education is about... constantly transforming and our educational system is not reflective of that idea,” as one student put it. Students recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings against anti-Black racism provide a unique opportunity for this transformational work. One student described this as moving away from the mindset of “very slow and progressive type [reform]... to [taking] advantage of this [current moment] completely, paradigm shifts, all of it.”

### **We identified five overarching ideas for striving towards educational justice for students of color:**

1. Treat students of color as meaningful partners in creating their education.
2. Design schools to be anti-racist learning communities.
3. Redefine educators to be anti-racist, culturally competent, accountable to students, and foster and participate in a learning/unlearning community.
4. Create curriculum that reflects, is relevant to, and responds to students’ needs, interests and their community context.
5. Implement a reporting system for incidents of racism in school that is respectful, validating, urgent, brings a sense of justice to victims, and therefore that students feel comfortable using.

The “solutions” for educational justice that we provide in this section are not a comprehensive and exhaustive list, and are not meant to be treated as a list to check off. Ideally, schools will embody the values outlined by these “solutions,” and as such, will be in partnership with students, families, educators, and community members of color in their district to reimagine and rebuild. Additionally, schools and districts should integrate in historic and ongoing educational justice work specifically from Black and Indigenous people. During this process, existing policies that restrict solutions from being implemented should also be reconsidered, such as current protocol that prevents schools from financially compensating students for their contribution to anti-racist work in schools (see *White educators take on the responsibility of doing anti-racist work...*).

Many of these “solutions” have direct corollaries to the barriers outlined in section two, as the students we interviewed dreamed beyond the bounds of our current education system while also staying rooted in the immediate and ongoing harms that need to cease and be redressed. However, some of the students we interviewed did not provide answers for all of the barriers they faced, nor should they be expected to. While we tried to stay true to the voices of the students we interviewed, these “solutions” are also informed by our own experiences in schools and with racial justice work and from what we have learned from other students of color.

## **Treat students of color as meaningful partners in creating their education**

1. *Students of color have power in affecting all decisions that affect them.* At all schools, “the anti-racist effort needs to be student driven,” one student put it. As another student said, “[students will] self advocate if you give them the tools to do so,” which includes giving students positions of power. The students we interviewed specifically identified places they want to have a voice as: hiring boards; school boards; budget, race and equity, and other committees; professional development; curricular development; and educational policy making groups such as the WEA. However, some students elaborated by saying they should be involved in all decisions that affect them because “when students are in the room,” one student said, “that makes the [space] more accountable to start off with.”
2. *White educators take on the responsibility of doing anti-racist work and do not burden students of color with it.* “I don't think it should be the responsibility of the students, especially the BIPOC students, to be the ones to fix the problems of the white [power] structure,” said one student. Students of color should lead the vision of anti-racist and racial justice work while white educators, district leaders, and students leverage their power and privilege to do the “heavy lifting” of changing white power structures without being at the “forefront.” When students of color *do* choose to “do this labor, I definitely feel like we should be compensated in some way,” the student above added on.. Financial compensation is one concrete way to alleviate the burden of anti-racist work.
3. *Treat community and family as meaningful partners in creating their child's education.* Students of color should be involved in designing what their education looks like along with their families and communities, since all of these groups know students’ needs, strengths, and interests best. One student suggested having community partners be involved in teaching curriculum that pertains to their community instead of educators without the “cultural competence... [or] experience” doing so. Another student echoed that they want to see “bigger community involvement [from] ... cultural center[s]... [and] community members in the school building” overall.

## Design schools to be anti-racist learning communities

1. *Build schools and classrooms to be trusting environments for mutual learning and unlearning.* In addition to having basic needs fulfilled, such as not “worrying about what you’re going to eat,” many students we interviewed expressed that safety, belonging, trust, and “feel[ing] comfortable” are foundational to their learning and their ability to self-advocate. Trust is critical in creating a school environment where students can engage in mutual learning: where they learn with, learn from, and teach each other and their educators. As one student put it “the more you understand each other, there’s... more room for empathy... and really being aware of each other’s lived experiences.” In trusting learning spaces, students and educators can hold themselves and each other accountable to anti-racism and unlearning, especially with those holding dominant identities examining their own complicity in oppressive systems. This would encourage white students and educators to go beyond “just looking... [to] say[ing] something... being vulnerable, using [their] white privilege,” and alleviating some of the burden from students of color to address racism. One student summarized an anti-racist learning community as such: “Me being able to be me amongst everyone else being themselves in a classroom where teachers are actually willing to learn.”
2. *Student value is not determined by grades or their proximity to whiteness or ableism,* Many students of color that we interviewed expressed how they want to be valued as their whole, authentic selves in schools. As one student put it, they want “**the chance to be seen as great and given the opportunity to create great things.** We have observed that standardized forms of student evaluation, like standardized testing and grading, prevents students from being valued in ways they want to be. We feel that there are better ways to value students, such as through critical self-reflection and relationship building. Students of color should not feel like, as one student put it, that “who they were before, who they came into the school [as is] worse” than who they become when they have to assimilate into whiteness at school.
3. *Eliminate tracked learning and advanced learning.* If we are to value every student for their full potential instead of their proximity to whiteness (and ableism), and give all students the supports, tools, and opportunities to achieve their fullest potential, tracked learning and advanced learning programs should be eliminated and replaced with a non-hierarchical system that meets all students’ needs, strengths, and interests (see *Create curriculum that reflects, is relevant to, and responds to students...*). “The chance to be seen as great” (as said above) cannot happen for every child under the current system.
4. *Schools create spaces for students of color to build their own communities and coalitions.* Instead of students of color feeling like combating racism “takes away” from other responsibilities like school work, as one student said, students of color should be given time

and space to build and be in community with other people of color. Many students of color, especially Black students and students of color in predominantly white institutions, want to have space where they can just be. At the students' discretion, these community spaces can also be the foundation for coalition building to address issues that affect them in school. One student said that "there needs to be a place for... affinity groups to actually use their voices in the school community... [and] it should be in the hands of administrators to create that space, and to make it an empowered role, not a passive one," Other students we interviewed expressed interest in connecting with students of color across districts, to "network and talk with other young activists," as one student put it. In addition to, or as part of, creating space for students of color, schools should facilitate partnerships with existing organizations outside of school that provide community and advocate for these students.

5. *Students are understood within their full context, including mental health, home life and marginalizations of identity, particularly with regards to discipline.* "I feel like once [educators] got to understand the background of how it was at home and everything, that's when they really got to know me, and that's when they just wanted the best for me," one student described when talking about their experiences with discipline in school. When students are understood in their full context, they can be supported in healing, growing, and addressing their needs instead of having their attachment to school severed. Implementing Restorative Justice practices in schools would help create a greater sense of accountability and justice for students of color. A student who attends a school that uses Restorative Justice described the process as being able to "change something so toxic into something positive and move forward." Restorative Practices can also be used to build community in schools and classrooms outside of a discipline context.

### **Redefine educators to be anti-racist, culturally competent, accountable to students, and to foster and participate in a learning/unlearning community**

1. *Educators build trusting relationships with their students to create and participate in a mutual learning space.* One of the students that we interviewed expressed how they want schools to "re-establish the relationship between student and teacher of [the teacher] not being an authoritative figure, but being [on the same level as students]. Educators should strive to reduce the power differential between themselves and students (see *Students of color feel discouraged from holding educators accountable*) in order to create mutual spaces of learning where they can be trusted and, as one student put it, can simultaneously "be role models, and... students as well." In mutual learning spaces when "adults... try to get to know the students and they try to respect them and learn about their lives... it's such a better community... [and one where] people are able to feel comfortable in a place where they learn," as one student put it.

Educators also build trust by being vulnerable with their students. One student shared how their first teacher of color gave a presentation on the first day of class on how their own experiences with racial trauma in schools inform both their current teaching practice and their interaction with students of color. The student described how this vulnerability was “so amazing. And [that it’s] an example of fostering student-teacher safe community space.” Another student shared how they had a positive experience with white cis-male educators, who did not share many of the lived experiences of their students of color, but had a “really good awareness of themselves and their surroundings” which they used to counteract the white lens of education. By critically thinking about their positionality, white educators better understand their power and how it affects students, as well as their “limitations” in fully addressing the needs of their students of color. It is crucial for “white teachers [to understand] that they have the ability to say racism [is] bad, it’s not going to hurt [them]... And it’s not inherently political as well,” one student added.

Ultimately, “It’s part of the teacher’s job to make sure that their students feel safe in the classroom... [and] to educate themselves and help their students,” as one student put it. Students should feel cared for and supported in school by educators that are “aware of what they’re saying and the impact of their words” and that teach students “to love themselves and grow and become more than what they think they are.”

2. *Educators open up all their spaces of learning, development, leadership, and decision-making to students.* In order for students to be meaningful partners in creating their education, educators must include them in re-creating all spaces that are currently educator-only (refer to *Students have power in affecting...*). As one student said, “if you’re going to have professional development, if you’re going to have training for teachers, let the students be part of that process... let them be responsible for the curriculum that [educators are] going to be learning from.” Some of the students that we interviewed mentioned how there are a handful of positions available to students that give them power, such as Associated Student Body (ASB) or district advisory boards, but that these positions are mostly occupied by white students, with no designated spaces for students of color. It is up to educators to create positions of power for their students of color.

Part of opening up educator spaces involves asking students what they need and how educators can show up for them. One student shared an example of this, where a teacher who they had built a trusting relationship with and who shared their ethnic background demonstrated their commitment to students by routinely asking ““What should I bring to the table? What should I go to this staff meeting on Friday with prepared?”” This “dialogue” shows how educators who have built a trust and accountability with their students of color can advocate for them even when there isn’t space for students to occupy themselves, or when students are not comfortable being in those spaces.

3. *Hire educators who are representative of students of color and their values.* Almost all of the students we interviewed want to see more educators of color hired and retained in their schools. Educators of color can better “understand, empathize and represent [students of color]”, be a “support system... [as] people that [students of color] can relate to,” and can even be “life changing” to students of color who finally see themselves represented. “To this day I still think how [having two Black educators in early childhood education] impacted my entire way of thinking and learning and understanding how I can succeed in life,” said one Black student that we interviewed. Being a person of color does not mean that educators are anti-racist or mean that they cannot harm students of color. As one student described: “I’m not saying that teachers of color are all anti-racist or not racist because the only Black teacher that I had was definitely one of the most colorist and racist teachers that I had in my entire educational career.” However, many students of color feel it is easier connecting with and “building community” with educators of color than with “white teachers who have been racist,” as one student put it. Further, “we need to fire those teachers and put in BIPOC teachers,” said the same student.

Administrators should not only work to hire more educators of color, but to transform their school into a place that is safe for those educators and focus on retaining them through budget cuts. Additionally, educators of color should be compensated for their emotional labor in disproportionately supporting students of color (see *Many students of color cannot relate to...*).

4. *Staff co-creates their own transparent standards of accountability.* “What the WEA can do is make a broader call for each individual teacher to sit down and write their own anti-racist guidelines for their classes,” said one student of color that we interviewed. These guidelines should be structured so that educators face repercussions when they do not meet these standards as determined by their students, who they are affecting everyday, rather than administrators, who are not in the classroom. Standards that are tailored to and co-created by students of color “in writing” in their classroom could provide a greater sense of justice for students of color than “district level” accountability policies that are unevenly implemented across schools and not accessible to students and their families.

Standards of accountability are another way that educators can build trust with their students and make a commitment to anti-racism. It is important that these standards and efforts are transparent, because, as another student asked, “why wouldn't you want your students to know that you stand in solidarity with their experiences?” For example, during Black Lives Matter at School Week 2020, we asked educators at our school to not only commit to the Pledge of Action for the week, but print and hang up their pledges so that students knew their commitment and could hold them accountable to it.

***Create curriculum that reflects, is relevant to, and responds to students' needs, interests and their community context.***

1. *Integrate mandatory P-12 Ethnic Studies into all subjects.* “BIPOC people have had rich culture and societies for so long and I just think that the curriculum and people who make the curriculum need to stop pretending that life started when white people entered the picture,” one student said. Almost all the students that we interviewed expressed how they want to see themselves “represented” in terms of curricular content and their learning styles. Beyond representation that empowers students of color and creates a sense of belonging, Ethnic Studies would allow all students to develop a critical anti-racist consciousness and practice of reflection, which is especially important for white students. “If you're a white student, you're not going to have any of the same experiences [as students of color]... So understanding those experiences is probably the first thing [white students] should be doing,” said one student; and that “the more you understand each other... [the] more room for [there is for] empathy,” said another.

In order for Ethnic Studies to be successful, it is imperative that schools and districts have infrastructure to support its implementation, such as funding, staffing, and equipping educators to teach through an Ethnic Studies framework. Existing and ongoing work from students and community members around Ethnic Studies (such as in the “Demands of the Washington NAACP Youth Council” for their schools) elaborates on what the students we interviewed expressed, and should also be consulted when developing plans for P-12 integrated Ethnic Studies. As one student summarized, “if you do [it] from a young age and put [Ethnic Studies] in our curriculum, and teach [students] about what's happened in the past, and how we can learn from that, that's where we can really start to grow.”

2. *Create curriculum that engages students and allows them to explore their interests.* Most of the students that we interviewed want their curriculum to be more student-centered, in that they want their unique interests engaged. As one student put it, they want curriculum to “open... kids [up]... [and] make... kids happy to learn.” Students of color also want curriculum that is more relevant to their lives, that “prepares... students for the world that they're going to be the leaders for,” as one student said. Although not an exhaustive list, the students we interviewed named various topics and frameworks of learning that they would like to see in their schools, including: Ethnic Studies; Indigenous Studies; Black Studies; gender studies; anti-racist health education, including comprehensive sex-ed, social emotional learning and mental health; financial literacy; and leadership development. These curricula can not be fully accomplished through singular grade-level requirements, and instead should be approached more continuously and comprehensively. Curriculum should also be designed in a way that accommodates different learning styles and abilities, or

“everybody learning [in] the way they can learn,” as one student put it. “Giving every child that unique support that they need to live a happy and healthy life is just kind of how I think about it... because education is the foundation for your life,” said another student.

When students of color have curriculum that addresses their needs, strengths, and interests, they are able to engage with their families and communities about it. One student that we interviewed who identifies as South-Asian was describing how their AP Human Geography “was kind of the first time [they] ever learned about something relating to [their] own culture... [and] that was the first time [they] could actually connect, talk, [and engage] with [their] parents” about school. Further, students, families, and communities of color should also be involved in developing curriculum (see *Students have power in affecting ... and Community and family are treated as meaningful partners...*).

***Implement a reporting system for incidents of racism in school that is respectful, validating, urgent, brings a sense of justice to those harmed, and therefore that students of color feel comfortable using***

1. *Make the ways to report racist incidents transparent and accessible to students and families of color, and so that they feel comfortable accessing them.* Since some of the students of color we interviewed do not feel comfortable reporting incidents to their administration or teachers, they would like to have trusted people outside of the situation to talk to and get support from. Having mediators or counselors dedicated to addressing trauma would validate students and provide them safety, “because of course racism harms you, it harms you in the long run,” said one student. Another student described how having a designated adult at their university gave them both comfort, confidentiality, and multiple pathways to address the situation (confronting an educator with the mediator, on their own, or solely having the mediator confront their educator), and another wanted students of color to be able to have space to empower each other in coalition to redress injustice (see *Schools create spaces for students of color...*)
2. *Address reported incidents with urgency.* Reported incidents should be “taken seriously” with the understanding that racism is systemic, violent, and that students of color do not need to prove that they have been harmed within racist institutions. “Teachers should also recognize that you don't need to have all the data in front of you, you don't have to have ‘facts’ because your experience is facts,” as one student put it.
3. *Allow those who have been harmed to have a voice in determining what accountability and justice looks like for them.* Practices such as Restorative Justice (see *Students are understood within their full context...*) provide an opportunity for students to have a voice

in accountability processes, as well as an opportunity for families and the community to be informed about and engaged with these processes as well.

## CONCLUSION

There was so much richness in this one, small opportunity we had to speak with the nineteen students we interviewed, and so much more to learn from students of color. Our research demonstrated how much the education system does not value or make space for students of color, something they recognize, resist, and dream beyond.

**Students of color that we interviewed recognize that** 1) They have inauthentic and insufficient opportunities to engage in decision-making processes and anti-racist work; 2) Racism and white supremacy are normalized and perpetuated in their school climate and curriculum, as well as in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter Movement; and 3) Their educators are not accountable to them in addressing racism. Students of color are actively harmed by existing in schools that are embedded in systemic racism and white supremacy, are not actively anti-racist, and do not promote educational justice for them.

Students of color envision an education that meets their needs and redresses the injustice they face. The spaces they learn in should be redefined as [anti-racist, emancipatory, culturally responsive, pro-Black, and pro-Indigenous learning communities](#). In these spaces, students will engage in [mutual learning and unlearning](#) with their educators that focuses on abolishing oppressive systems, practicing critical (self-)reflection, and relationship building, and where they hold themselves and each other accountable. Students should also be engaged in building spaces and curricula that value them holistically, that [reflect, are relevant to, and respond to their needs, interests and community context](#). **Ultimately, in all parts of education, educators should treat students as meaningful partners in co-creating education along with their families and communities.** In order to ensure this partnership, educators must give up power and [re-define themselves to be anti-racist, culturally competent, and accountable to students of color](#).

**It is imperative that educational justice work is led by, and ultimately accountable to, the students of color whom it is supposed to serve.** At our high school, student-driven anti-racist work felt more accountable, communal, and authentic than educator-led equity work. We were often invited into educator-led spaces instead of being given power to co-create these spaces, which felt tokenizing, did not result in lasting change, and therefore did not feel accountable to us. Through this project, the WEA has created a unique opportunity to hear how students of color want to transform the education system. Financial compensation alone does not make up for the labor of students of color or the harm that the education system has caused them if no changes are implemented. As such, **educational stakeholders like the WEA must examine where they have power to leverage in the education system and give that power up to students of color, working with them to strive towards educational justice.**

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