DRIVER RESEARCH BRIEF: POLICY

A research brief to maximize the success of African American male students

About this brief

This research brief brings to life Kingmakers of Oakland's driver research through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding collaborative equity work nationally, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for African American/Black male youth.

The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for educators and community partners to use during professional learning and collaborative conversations. This research brief explores how schools, educators, and policymakers can work together to reimagine policy to best support Black male youth.

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Focus

Today, our nation is reckoning with its legacy of discriminatory policies and practices in the education system — to such an extent that the totality of American history is being debated. The prevalence of efforts to undermine or erase parts of U.S. history from education underscore the urgent need to preserve the truth, teach critical pedagogy, identify and address the ways in which this history has influenced modern school policymaking, and advance our education system beyond its anti-racist roots to build a more equitable future for all students. It is critical for educators, policymakers, and communities to repeatedly reflect on how to accelerate equity in their districts and schools and actively resolve the systemic injustices that still impact Black male students.

To effectively make progress towards equity for Black male students, the perspectives represented within our communities must be reflected in the way policy decisions are made. Too often, the voices of community members furthest from power — families of children of color, who may also be multilingual learners, have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), come from families with limited economic resources, or come from housing or food insecure families — are left unheard or not invited to engage in school and district policy development. [1] As a result, too many families are left without the services and resources they need. [2] While many state governments require consultation with communities in the budget development process, there remains a pressing need to center historically marginalized voices in the context of education policy.

United States History and Educational Policy Decisions

The modern conception of public education in America began in Massachusetts in 1642 when a law was first passed requiring parents to teach their children to read and write. [3] This right, however, was not extended to enslaved African peoples. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed an unsuccessful bill to provide free public education for all free children in Virginia for three years. Schooling beyond three years was available at the expense of each student's family. As a caveat, the high-performing

students who could not afford to continue their education had their schooling paid for by the district,[4] a practice Jefferson referred to as geniuses being "raked from the rubbish."[5] Years later, Jefferson wrote that "the mass of our citizens may be divided into two classes: the laboring and the learned." He supported the idea that students who received three years of education should work in agriculture or technical fields, while children who could afford to continue schooling should develop into societal leaders. [6] The 1779 bill and Jefferson's later writings established the foundation for a two-track, hierarchical education system in the United States that remains today, as evidenced by the number of high school students who are unprepared for post-secondary learning[7]. In 1851, the state of Massachusetts became the first state to pass a compulsory education law. One year later, Black children were barred from public schools as part of the California Fugitive State Law in 1852.[8]

American educational practice also slowed progress signaled with the nationwide abolishment of slavery by the 13th amendment in 1865.[9] In 1864, Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages, as they aimed to "kill the Indian to save the man." In 1870, the California School Law specifically provided funding for separate schools for Black and Native American children.[10] The law left out Chinese children entirely,[11] who would not be guaranteed a state-funded education until 1905. In 1872, the California Supreme Court upheld segregation as "separate, but equal" in Ward v. Flood, paving the way for national action in 1896, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that the state of Louisiana had the right to require "separate but equal" railroad cars for Blacks and Whites. Similarly, states soon began to pass laws requiring racial segregation in public schools.[12] Segregation continued until 1946, when the League of United Latin American Citizen (LULAC) lawyers challenged school segregation in California in Mendez v. Westminster, leading to the Anderson Bill of 1947, which repealed all California school codes mandating segregation. Next, in 1954, under Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, The Supreme Court unanimously agreed that segregated schools are "inherently unequal" and must be abolished.

Although progress has been made to remedy many of the exclusionary practices that inhibited the educational freedoms of Black children, the United States is still in the genesis of having an equitable policy structure. Student and community outcomes are reflective of this structural inequity. Extensive research has found that educators still perceive and treat Black children differently than their White counterparts.[13][14][15][16][17][18] For example, according to the Office for Civil Rights, as of 2017-18, though Black children accounted for only 15.1% of all students in the United States, they accounted for 34% of out-of-school suspensions, despite exhibiting comparable behavioral patterns as their white peers.[19] Furthermore, Black students today remain less likely to graduate college, [20] and Black college graduates are 1.5 times more likely to be unemployed than their White peers.[21] Literature shows that the disproportionate discipline, expulsion, and

> **In 1870, the California School Law specifically provided funding for separate schools for Black and Native American children.**

mistreatment of Black students is not happenstance; rather, it is a result of educators' beliefs, policies, and practices.[22] To end to this systemic legacy of racism, research suggests that schools and policy makers collaborate with communities of color to help educators understand the implications of racial bias and eradicate racially punitive school policies.[23] This brief outlines several promising policy strategies that schools and districts can co-create and adopt in partnership with their communities to support more equitable learning environments for Black male students:

Strategy 1: Engage students in policy making through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) refers to research projects where youth are positioned as principal investigators. Students identify research topics of importance in their lives and communities, conduct qualitative data collection at their schools or in their communities, analyze data with support from school staff, illuminate their findings, and recommend policy changes.[24] Grounded in critical pedagogy, students often engage in YPAR through a dedicated elective course, club, or extracurricular program. YPAR projects have shown promising outcomes to both increase student engagement and inform policy at school,[25] [26] district,[27] and community levels.[28] [29] [30] When schools and districts design and support similar programs, Black male students explore the issues most important to their learning and engage directly in the policymaking process.

Strategy 2: Implement federal, Title I Resource Allocation Formula (RAF)

Title I, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), provides financial assistance to districts and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low income families to supplement state funding.[31] Under Title I, districts have discretion to establish a per-pupil allocation amount for each school.[32] While many districts use a flat, per-pupil rate to allocate title I funds, this is not mandatory. Districts can revise current allocations to augment funds toward the highest-need schools based on their concentration of students from low-income backgrounds: "Under 34 C.F.R. 200.78(c), a local education agency (LEA) is not required to allocate the same per-pupil amount to each participating school. If an LEA allocates different per-pupil amounts to participating schools, the LEA must allocate a higher per-pupil amount to schools with higher poverty rates than it allocates to schools with lower poverty rates." Though districts must abide by several key provisions, a formula can be created that concentrates higher amounts of per-pupil funding towards the highest-need school sites in each district. These funds can be used to support an array of eligible activities under ESSA that are responsive to the district, context-specific needs of Black

boys, including supplement social and emotional learning (SEL), provide additional classroom or library staff, augment and improve nutrition services and access to meals, hire school counselors/ social workers, purchase technology and learning materials/supplies, improve access to transportation, or expand effective after school and summer programming.

Strategy 3: Leverage Weighted Student Formula (WSF) models

The Weighted Student Formula (WSF) model, a system where districts allocate funds to schools rather than staffing positions, using weights to provide supplemental funding for students who need additional support. This offers a transformative potential who have historically faced the most barriers to education. Specifically, district leaders can leverage this model to cultivate more community-responsive funding models focused on serving Black boys and their families.

In contrast, many states currently allocate funds to districts based on total student enrollment and demographic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, disability, housing, migrant status, or language development). When allocating funds to schools, districts use a 'staffing formula', which primarily relies upon total enrollment as a factor to determine the number of staff needed to meet class size and staff ratio requirements. This formula is designed to provide equality in staffing amounts relative to school size; it is not intended to differentiate based on population needs. In recent years, however, some school districts have created more equitable systems by replacing staffing formulas with weighted student formula (WSF) models.[33] Generally, WSF systems include a base weight (a dollar, per-pupil amount that all students receive) and student need weights (additional funding to students with additional needs). In a WSF system, districts allocate funds to schools based on the number of students as well as their unique needs, not on staffing or materials. District leaders can transform their systems and resolve systemic inequities by anchoring WSF systems in objective and measurable weights, or student characteristics, including the number of students with disabilities, eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL), and in foster care. Likewise, district leaders can provide increased funding to support students who have experienced significant disproportionality in special education. Similarly, they can design formulas to prioritize community-identified areas, including career and technical education, and provide for basic needs or programs to build student voice and agency.

Strategy 4: Collaborate across Boards of Education, districts, and schools

A focus on alignment and coherence is central to developing, implementing, and monitoring effective systemwide policy. When School Boards of Education, districts, schools, and support institutions (i.e., Departments of Education) work together to integrate and monitor equity-focused policies, the organization is more likely to make the transformational changes needed to positively impact Black boys. It is imperative for leaders and teams to make explicit connections between newly developed policies and existing related policies. It is also key to plan how the organization will move forward in the day-to-day implementation and monitoring of these policies.
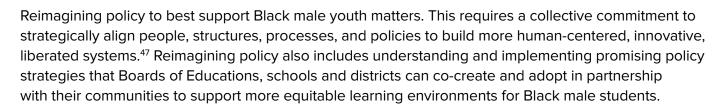
Alignment: The cornerstone of an aligned system includes a shared sense of success that is articulated at multiple levels: School Board of Education, district, and school.[34] Research has shown that collaborative visioning and goal setting, including Boards of Education, superintendents, students, staff, and the community, has a significant impact on student achievement.[35] In addition, community engagement in school district planning often results in decisions that better reflect local experiences and contexts. These community-informed decisions, in turn, can lead to better opportunities and outcomes for students.[36][37][38] Furthermore, when districts have an aligned set of goals, district leaders are more adequately prepared to allocate resources to support those goals explicitly, reflecting the interests and needs of community members in the process.[39][40]

Coherence: For school systems to sustain alignment practices, they must also build coherence: create structures to support collaboration, decision making, evaluation, and reinforce a shared vision of success at multiple levels of the system.[41][42][43] While there are various ways to foster coherence within a school system, all of them require regular, structured collaboration across departments and school sites.

Strategy 5: Evaluate, assess, and revise policies

A high-fidelity method to identify anti-Black policies (i.e., excessive punishment techniques) and replace them with restorative, healing centered engagement policies is to conduct regular Equity Audits of curriculum, policy, and practice at school sites, district offices, and the School Board.[44] The goal of an Equity Audit is to identify specific institutional practices and procedures that produce discriminatory outcomes and provide recommendations. Through capacity-building activities, professional learning, and a collaborative approach, Equity Audits prepare leaders to carry out critical changes with a deep understanding of root causes and equip education agencies with the data and tools to identify resource gaps and create more equitable, culturally responsive systems.[45][46]

Implications and Actions

Reimagining policy to best support Black male youth matters. This requires a collective commitment to strategically align people, structures, processes, and policies to build more human-centered, innovative, liberated systems.[47] Reimagining policy also includes understanding and implementing promising policy strategies that Boards of Educations, schools and districts can co-create and adopt in partnership with their communities to support more equitable learning environments for Black male students.

Actions for Educators
(teachers, support staff, administrators):

- Engage in efforts to create or refine YPAR programs that center Black male student voices (Strategy 1)
- Engage in listening techniques with Black boys to better understand their experiences and academic and social emotional needs (see Driver 3). Use this information to inform policy development and decision-making (Strategy 1)
- Implement policies with fidelity and consistently monitor and refine to meet the complex needs of Black students (Strategy 4; Strategy 6)
- Invest in Equity Audits to better understand the root causes of student outcomes and how to make the necessary changes to transform learning experiences for Black male students (Strategy 5)

Actions for Policy Makers (Boards of Education, Departments of Education, legislatures):

- Provide support for policy implementers: engage in structured feedback loops, and adjust policies based on outcomes and feedback (Strategy 1; Strategy 5)
- Review state funding sources and adjust funding allocation and policies to better align with equity versus equality (Strategy 2; Strategy 3)
- Eliminate anti-Black discipline policies (i.e., anti-Black discipline policies include policies that consistently demonstrate disparate outcomes for Black male students) and excessive punishment techniques; replace them with restorative, healing centered engagement policies (Strategy 5)

- Create and monitor policies that remove barriers for basic needs in schools (e.g., quality nutrition throughout the school day, sufficient school supplies, and public transportation vouchers) (Strategy 5)
- Include the voices of Black youth, adolescents, and families to create and evaluate policies (Strategy 1)

Questions

1. What is working well for Black male students? What is not working well and why (root cause)? How can policy be created or revised to better support these students?
2. What tools and practices are in place to evaluate the outcomes of school and district level policies?
3. In what ways are school, district, and state-level policies positively or negatively affecting the experiences and outcomes for Black male students?
4. What training is needed for policymakers (e.g., School Boards, district administrators) to learn and understand how to write policies in support of student and staff success?

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