



A path toward racial equity

BY TANJI REED MARSHALL

K-12 education is that rare thing in the United States open to everyone. But, while states and districts have language around excellence for all, inequities persist, particularly along racial lines.

Test score outcomes continue to be disparate between races. Districts continue to face uneven funding with so-called urban districts receiving less than their so-called

suburban counterparts (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Students with diagnosed disabilities, those whose families are experiencing measures of economic distress, and those adding English to their language repertoire continue to experience school differently than their white, wealthier peers.

Such inequities were firmly in place and widely accepted before the COVID-19 pandemic, but once schools were forced to switch to

remote learning, these inequities exploded, taking center stage in conversations across the country. There seemed to be endless discussions about the digital divide, and people began to realize that school was the primary source of nutrition for many students. The pandemic turned the world and our schools upside down.

In the midst of dealing with the effects of the pandemic, we once again came face-to-face with

our ongoing challenge of being a country where justice and liberty are ideals that don't just live on a page. As many Americans got a first-row seat at policing gone awry, the country had to ask itself who we are versus who we purport to be.

Our nation began to fray at the seams as protests rocked cities across the country in challenge to ongoing racial strife. We had to make a decision. Would we allow the murder of yet another Black man at the hands of police finally make way for the types of reform needed to get to equal treatment under the law? Or would we once again feel the outrage only to revert to our places of comfort? Teachers were asked to help their students navigate the difficult waters while they themselves had to find space to address what might have seemed unthinkable.

Given all we've faced over the last year, the editors could have chosen many angles around which to focus a discussion about equity in this issue of *The Learning Professional*. We chose to center racial equity because, when other factors are held constant, race continues to be the leading cause of disparate educational and life outcomes that persist in our society.

Biased and racist perceptions continue to be a major driving factor in these disparities. One study on racial bias among teachers revealed teachers are as biased against Black students as society is against Black people in general (Starck et al., 2020). Such revelations are troubling because most teachers are likely to say they see and treat all students

the same and they hold high expectations for all their students. Unfortunately, evidence suggests this isn't the case.

In 2018, TNTP released *The Opportunity Myth*, which showed that 82% of teachers surveyed believed in the need for rigorous academic standards for all students, while only 44% of those same teachers believed the students they teach could do the work required by rigorous standards.

The TNTP study also revealed stark differences in access to grade-level assignments between students of color and their white peers: 4 in 10 classes where the majority of students were people of color did not have access to grade-level assignments, compared to 1 in 10 classes where a majority of students were white.

TNTP's most recent report, released in partnership with Zearn (2021), reveals that students of color, especially Black students, are more likely to receive remediation in math than their white counterparts — even where there is evidence the Black student mastered the content. These ongoing belief disparities rest at the core of why we feel the need to center actions to disrupt racial inequity.

Throughout this issue's Focus section, you will hear from scholars and practitioners whose work provides insight into how authentic action can make change in what too often seems like intractable racial inequities. They provide a way forward in thinking critically about where we have been, where we need to go, and how we might become a nation whose education system

embodies the ideals we hold dear, not just for those of privilege, but every student from every background.

With the recent passage of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, we stand on the precipice of possibility. We have the opportunity to put our money and actions where we have for so long put our mouths. It's past time to go beyond lip service and take authentic action to achieve educational equity.

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