



# ADVANCING EQUITY IN EDUCATION



# Preface

## About America Succeeds

America Succeeds works to ensure public education systems prepare every student to succeed in the competitive global economy and contribute to their local community. Our mission is to improve educational opportunities, outcomes, and equity by harnessing the influence and acumen of the business community in accelerating systems change.

## Core Beliefs:

- **Education is a critical influence** on an individual child's success and our communities' overall health and vibrancy.
- **The most impactful changes in education** are occurring through policies adopted at the state level.
- **Business leaders have a unique and valuable perspective** to bring to education policy discussions. There are both economic and moral imperatives to fight for kids and strengthen our education system.
- **Lasting systems-change requires many stakeholders' active engagement** – policymakers, educators, parents, students, community members, and business leaders.
- **The long-term success of our economy**, our nation's competitive advantage, and our national security requires improving educational outcomes for all students.

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## America Succeeds

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## About This Report

For education advocates, a focus on equity is nothing new. In fact, it's safe to say *equity in education* has been the primary goal of education reform, policy change, advocacy – whatever you want to call it, advancing equitable educational opportunities for traditionally underserved populations is what the work is all about.

For business leaders, measuring the overall quality of schools based in part on whether they're producing equitable outcomes intuitively makes sense, and supporting schools to be better is a moral imperative. Yet often business leaders engage in education policy largely as an economic imperative. They recognize that we cannot have a strong, growing economy without a reliable pipeline of talented, well-prepared workers and leaders ready to succeed in a global setting. And that means the public education system must operate efficiently and effectively in order to produce ready-to-learn and ready-to-work graduates. Things like accountability, transparency, return on investment, competition, and putting the customer first – these are principles that resonate with leaders of complex, output-driven organizations and that they see as applicable to our public schools as well.

Over the past couple of years though, a convergence of issues – a pandemic that has laid bare the systemic inequities present in every sector of society and a racial justice movement that has put the realities of systemic racism front and center – has made a renewed and heightened focus on equity paramount.

Disparities in opportunity in our schools violate the basic assumption that public education is supposed to be the 'great equalizer,' starting every kid on a level playing field. Business understands what is lost when not everyone can participate. When entire sectors lack diversity, and when leadership positions and board rooms lack leaders of color, then companies lack the innovation, experience, perspectives, and know-how that enable them to be competitive and grow. Inequity costs all of us; it steals from the future.

This report is part of America Succeeds' effort to harness the energy and commitment of the business community to advancing equity and to demonstrate that fighting for a stronger economy, a more secure future, a more vibrant and innovative workforce, and a more equitable and just society are one and the same. We believe there's no better place to make an impact and extend opportunity than in our schools.



# Executive Summary

## Business Leaders Supporting Equity in Education

A modernized public education is crucial to fostering greater student achievement, building an educated workforce pipeline, and protecting our future economic vitality. The importance of having a skilled, ready-to-lead talent pool is apparent to business leaders, and they understand the linkages between K-12 education, postsecondary education, and the workforce. This talent pool, however, is far from reflecting the diversity of our student population, indicating that not all students are being prepared equally to succeed. The inequitable outcomes produced by our schools derive from barriers to opportunity found throughout the system itself. As we begin a long recovery, it is essential that we not only address the inequities amplified by the pandemic but also reimagine and restructure education systems to work better for all.

America Succeeds' Equity in Education initiative targets five specific policy pillars where system change is needed and can be impactful. The five pillars encompass a broad scope, from academics and student supports to human capital and funding. Our goal was to create a platform that could be easily understood and embraced to increase equity across the education system.

- **Recruiting and retaining educators of color** – Staffing schools with more teachers of color is a proven tool for closing the achievement gap for students of color, and all students benefit when their educators are more diverse.
- **Advancing equity in STEM** – Achieving equity in STEM creates greater opportunities for students of color to develop versatile skill sets and participate in the fastest growing, and often higher-paying, fields.
- **Strengthening equity through social-emotional learning** – By developing competencies that promote inclusiveness, empathy, and building cross-cultural relationships, SEL can set the tone for building a welcoming school environment where every student feels valued and supported.
- **Expanding equity in course access and options** – Empowering students and families with equitable educational options (such as gifted and talented programs, AP classes, and school choice), gives them the freedom to make the best decisions and the resources to pursue whatever opportunities they choose.
- **Achieving funding equity** – Ensuring all students receive their fair share of school funding is not only fundamental to achieving equity, but also targets substantial public investments where they are needed most and puts all students on a path toward opportunity.

By removing systemic barriers to opportunities for students of color, all students have a better chance to pursue and succeed in the pathways of their choice. And business leaders are an ideal partner to support this work through a shared vision of economic opportunity, vibrant innovations, and creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce. Only when all students, particularly those most underserved, have access to equal educational opportunities can this vision be realized - so let's get to work.

# Introduction to Equity

## Economic Impacts & Opportunities for Action

While equity has been a goal of education advocacy for more than three decades, 2020 brought things into sharper contrast. In every facet of society, from healthcare access to where people function in the economy to the ability to vote safely, the pandemic exposed just how far we have to go in creating a more equitable society.

We're only beginning to learn just how deep the painful impact is in education. A McKinsey study from July of this year found that nationally the average first- through sixth-grader was five months behind in math and four months behind in reading at the end of the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, NWEA (an assessment organization) reported that students in grades three through eight lost between three and six percentile points in reading and eight and twelve points in math.<sup>2</sup> And in both of those reports, students of color and low-income students showed significantly steeper declines. We see the same issue happening on state assessments: in North Carolina, the percentage of Black third-graders not proficient in math grew by nearly 25 percentage points, compared to 15 points for their white peers.<sup>3</sup> In Tennessee, there was a statewide drop in proficiency of five percentage points; however, students in Memphis and Nashville – districts serving the highest percentages of students of color – demonstrated proficiency losses of 11 and eight percentage points, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the pandemic, business has stepped up in a big way; Fortune 1000 companies committed \$200B to racial equity initiatives. Yet less than one percent (\$409M) of that investment targets education.<sup>5</sup>

This underinvestment is a mistake. A critical part of building a diverse talent and leadership pipeline is addressing systemic racism in the structure, policies, and practices of our education system. Companies are only as strong as the talent in their workforce. Our society is only as robust and vibrant as the creative minds and problem-solvers who build it. And yet, through the education system's leaky pipeline, we're losing a significant segment of our future potential. Think of the ideas, perspectives, experiences, and unique skill sets that are being minimized or completely lost.

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COMPANIES WON'T HAVE THE CHANCE TO **TRULY ACCESS**  
THE **BEST TALENT POOLS** UNLESS **EVERY CHILD** IS GIVEN AN  
**EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED.**”



CASEY CORTESE,  
CHARLES SCHWAB FOUNDATION

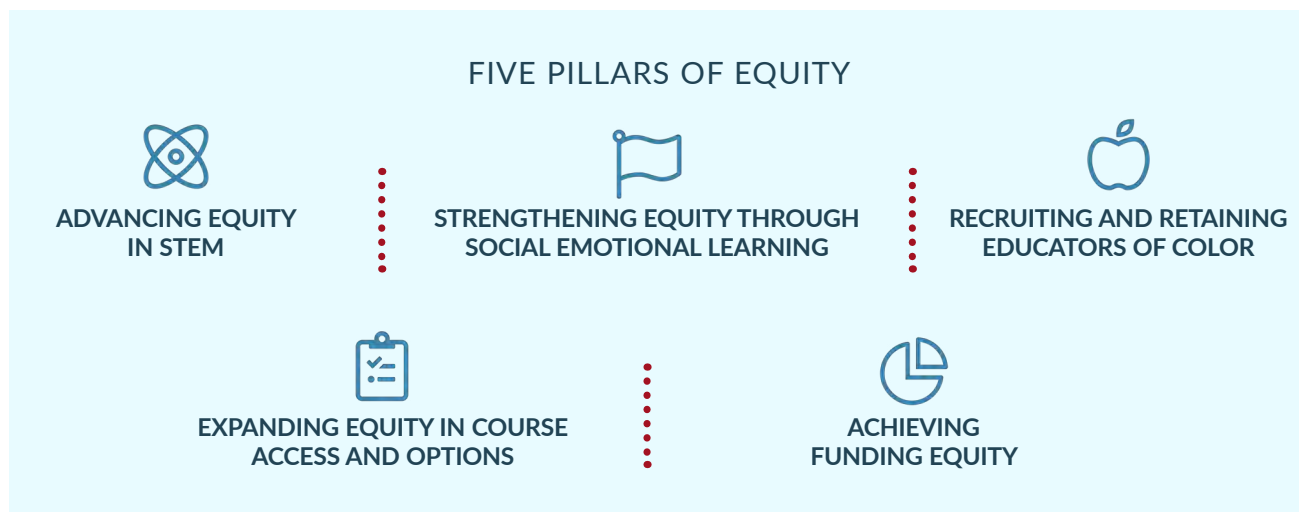


FOUNDATION

The cost is real. A recent Brookings Institute report examining the impacts of educational inequities explained, “the persistence of systemic disparities is costly, and eliminating them has the potential to produce large economic gains.” Closing gaps in wages, educational attainment, and other areas – eliminating systemic disparities – would produce an estimated \$5 trillion over the next five years.<sup>6</sup>

Eliminating barriers to equity in education is only part of that story. But it's hard to envision effective ways to address broader social barriers if our schools are not providing an equal footing to start. The United States cannot remain competitive or achieve its vision of equal opportunity while continuing to fall short in educating an ever-growing segment of students of color. There is an urgent need to keep these students from slipping through the cracks.

America Succeeds' Equity in Education platform pursues five systemic changes to ensure every student has equitable access to quality education and businesses have diverse talent and leadership pipelines for generations to come. These five pillars certainly do not encompass the breadth of inequity that exists throughout our education system; rather, they are concrete, impactful focus points that alleviate or significantly reduce demonstrable barriers to equity. They are:



Instead of generating novel approaches to these problems, our goal is to curate the best ideas in the field, amplify leading voices of color in the conversation, build consensus, and present actionable solutions to address these challenges. We tapped into our partnership network's depth of knowledge and experience to develop policy and practice recommendations for this report. Together, in partnership with business leaders, educators, policymakers, and others, we have an opportunity to advance equity in education and to help every child and community achieve future success.



# Recruiting and Retaining Educators of Color



## Current State of the Educator Workforce

Finding great teachers to fill classroom vacancies is a difficult and perennial struggle. Though the problems of teacher turnover and ‘teacher shortages’ are nuanced, recruiting and retention challenges are significant issues for many districts, particularly in specialized subjects, rural communities, and for schools serving large populations of low-income students. Unfortunately, there’s also another issue within this collective problem.

Data spanning decades reveals significant opportunity and academic achievement gaps between white and non-white students, and research continually identifies the lack of diversity in the educator workforce as a key component to these persistent gaps.<sup>7</sup> Currently, only 19 percent of teachers are individuals of color (and only seven percent identify as Black),<sup>8</sup> while 54 percent of the public school K-12 student population identifies as non-white.<sup>9</sup>

Since there are so few educators of color at the front of the classroom, students of color often miss out on having role models who look like them or share their experiences. Moreover, comprehensive data shows that having a more diverse educator workforce would improve student outcomes. An extensive body of research indicates that when teachers are reflective of the students they serve, students experience higher academic achievement, higher graduation rates, and a greater likelihood of attending college.<sup>10</sup>

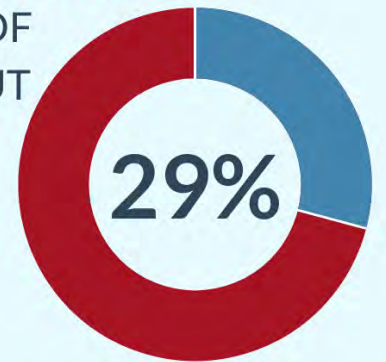
Central to addressing this issue is recognizing the widespread inequities in the education system as a whole, which produces trickle-down effects making recruiting and retaining teachers of color a barrier. Studies show that Black and Hispanic individuals face a disproportionate number of hurdles they must overcome when becoming an educator compared to their white counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

With only 28 percent of Black people and 20 percent of Hispanic people earning college degrees, the percentage ultimately enrolled in teacher preparation programs is significantly lower with a mere 4 percent of Black and Hispanic students pursuing college majors in education.<sup>12</sup> Non-traditional routes to teaching, such as Teach for America, have made great strides in diversifying their candidate pool but still only comprise around 15 percent of all new hires.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, state licensure exams present barrier-to-entry issues for candidates of color. The National Council on Teacher Quality states that “inadequate content preparation disproportionately affects test takers of color, with first-attempt pass rates averaging 43 percent compared with 58 percent for white test-takers.”<sup>14</sup>

Compounded with obstacles entering the teaching profession, one in five educators of color annually leave their school or the teaching profession entirely. There are several contributing factors, including low pay, working in challenging environments and in under-resourced schools, and burnout. Teachers moving schools and leaving the profession impacts all students, but turnover disproportionately impacts students of color and students experiencing poverty, and is negatively associated with student achievement.<sup>15</sup>

HAVING **AT LEAST ONE BLACK TEACHER** REDUCES A BLACK STUDENT'S LIKELIHOOD OF DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL BY UP TO

- JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY



## Implications for the Workforce

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IF BUSINESSES WANT TO HIRE A **WORKFORCE** THAT UNDERSTANDS THAT WE LIVE IN A **GLOBAL WORLD**, THAT KNOWS HOW TO INTERACT - **ACROSS CULTURES, ACROSS DIFFERENCES** - THEN WE HAVE TO CARE ABOUT HAVING **DIVERSE TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS.**”

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DR. CASSANDRA HERRING,  
BRANCH ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATOR DIVERSITY



The wealth gap between white workers and workers of color produces a significant drag on the economy. McKinsey & Company estimates that if the Black and Latino wealth gap were to close it would boost investments and consumption by adding \$2 trillion to \$3 trillion to the economy annually.<sup>16</sup> Recruiting and retaining more educators of color would provide a positive return on investment, fueled by greater economic growth as overall student outcomes improve, and the students in those classrooms graduate high school and head to college at higher rates.<sup>17</sup>

There are indirect benefits as well. As more students of color graduate high school and college - becoming more prepared to succeed in the global economy - our schools and companies will grow stronger. Studies show diverse teams bring varying perspectives, backgrounds, and competencies that create incredible transformations, producing 45 percent greater revenue from innovation than non-diverse teams.<sup>18</sup>

Simply put, we need teachers of color to enter and stay in the profession. Creating proactive recruiting strategies that encourage people of color to pursue teaching and providing support for them to stay in the educator workforce long-term is not only in the best interest of every school and student - it's an economic imperative.



## Best Practices

The current state of recruiting and retaining teachers of color may be a challenge, but there are promising programs and emerging practices leading the charge for a more equitable teacher workforce.

- The University of Houston College of Education intentionally works to elevate the quality of its program and remove barriers to success so they can prepare graduates who are reflective of the demographics they will serve. The program has formed strong partnerships with local school districts, established a “grow-your-own” pipeline with the largest school district in Texas, and provides financial assistance to remove barriers to attending college. Above all, they have a commitment to high quality and continuous improvement of their programs rooted in equity.<sup>19</sup>
- The Black Male Teachers College is a program to attract Black high school males to a teaching career. Nationally, Black males account for only two percent of the teaching workforce.<sup>20</sup> This program at Bowie State University (an HBCU) provides high school students with an opportunity to participate in workshops, programs, activities, and networking events related to pursuing a career in teaching. It focuses on strategies to help Black men succeed in the classroom, examines Black history and culture, and provides college preparation assistance.<sup>21</sup>
- The Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) is a system of comprehensive supports for teachers of color in their first year. The induction program provides mentorship opportunities with veteran teachers, coaching and feedback, seminars, and activities. Studies show that first-year teachers who receive this level of support are twice as likely to stay in the teaching profession than those who did not have early-career support.<sup>22</sup>

## Policy Considerations

The United States is progressively becoming more diverse. It's more crucial than ever to ensure levers are in place that encourage students of color to enter the teaching profession and provide them the supports and incentives needed to stay. The classrooms of tomorrow will greatly benefit from having access to diverse education leaders.

Change is needed at every level – state and federal education agencies, colleges of education, school districts, and communities – to develop long-term, sustainable strategies that will ensure students of color excel in college and transition to the classroom to inspire the next generation of students.

Policies to consider when advocating for increased diversity measures include:

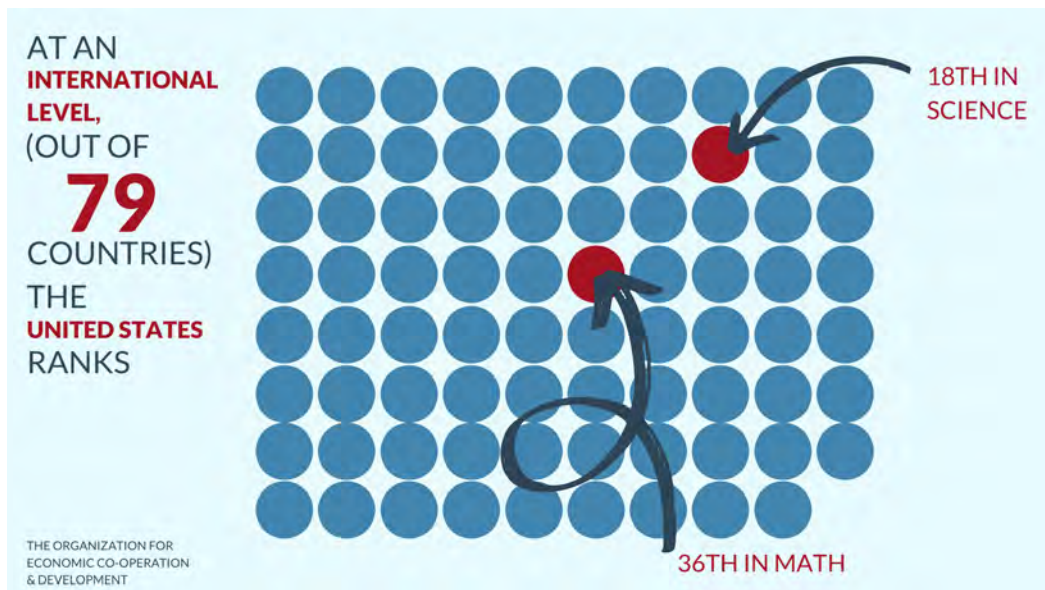
- Support the creation of state policies that back educator preparation programs to encourage qualified individuals to enter the teaching profession. This could include financial supports, such as grants or scholarships; targeted recruitment strategies; task force or advisory groups; and state-led goals for diversity to attract people of color to pursue an education degree.<sup>23</sup>
- Increase investments in educator preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
- Establish and prioritize goals for recruiting candidates of color into educator preparation programs.
- Increase data collection on many sources of diversity, equity, and inclusion to measure progress across the field.<sup>24</sup>
- Establish district-level policies and programs that support the success of educators of color, such as professional development programs, mentorship opportunities, and financial incentives, and demonstrate that the district cares about the success and advancement of its workforce.

# Advancing Equity in STEM



## Current State of STEM Education

Each year, innovation pushes the boundaries as technology advances at an unprecedented rate. The all-encompassing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field is woven into every sector of the economy and continues to expand its reach as our world becomes progressively tech-driven. With this rapid rate of innovation comes the need for a capable pipeline of workers with the competencies to match.



Today, STEM education provides a broad foundation of experiences and skills, teaching students to be innovators by navigating and solving complex problems, analyzing information, fostering creativity, and thinking critically. Access to STEM subjects in K-12 education puts students on a trajectory toward pursuing a STEM major and exploring similar careers.<sup>25</sup> However, significant discrepancies exist between the skills needed for workforce success and the level of preparation demonstrated by students, particularly for traditionally underserved students, raising serious equity implications for the entire sector.

Recent NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores show that only 41 percent of fourth-graders and 34 percent of eighth-graders scored proficient in math,<sup>26</sup> and only 36 percent of fourth-graders and 35 percent of eighth-graders scored proficient in science.<sup>27</sup> NAEP data also reveal a 28-point gap between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts, and a 38-point gap between Black and white students.<sup>28</sup> This alarming data underscores the stark disparities in foundational STEM subjects due to inequitable educational opportunities and resources.

Addressing these existing inequities is key to ensuring all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, have the opportunity to explore STEM subjects, gain subject-matter knowledge that can be applied across disciplines, and enter growing, in-demand STEM careers.

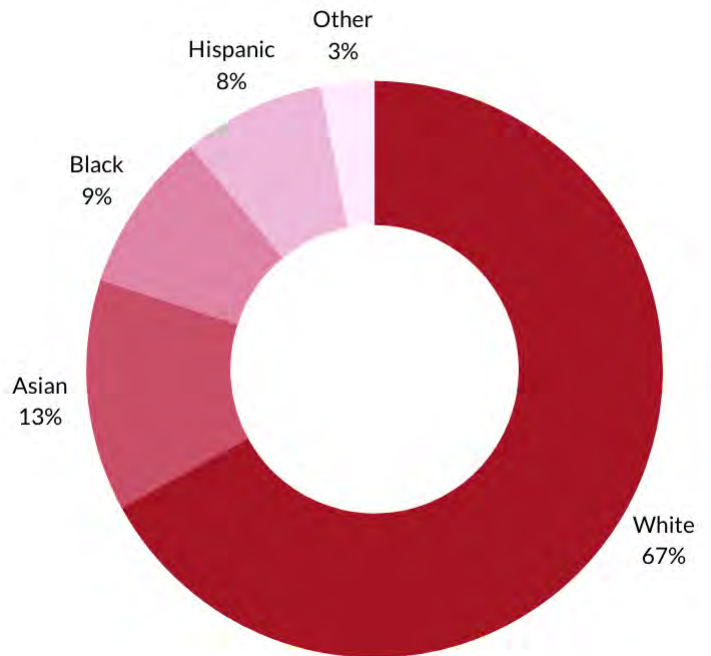
## Implications for the Workforce

STEM careers will continue to play a key role in the sustained economic growth and stability of our economy. With an annual growth rate of 18 percent, STEM careers make up some of the fastest growing segments of available jobs.<sup>29</sup> They are not only in demand: they are also at the high-end of the wage spectrum and provide a path toward economic mobility.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the United States is in an unfavorable position. Currently, there's an existing talent gap and not enough qualified people available to fill the current demand for STEM jobs.<sup>31</sup> Even more alarming is the gap between white and non-white people in STEM fields; Black and Hispanic workers are currently vastly underrepresented in STEM jobs. Only nine percent of the STEM workforce is Black and eight percent is Hispanic, compared to 67 percent of white workers in the STEM field.<sup>32</sup> Of the underrepresented population of workers in the field, unequal access to educational opportunities, discrimination in recruiting and hiring, and workplace bias are stated as the most likely reasons for the racial discrepancies.<sup>33</sup>

The 2020 census revealed that nearly 40 percent of all people in the United States identify as non-white, and this number is projected to grow each year.<sup>34</sup> Maintaining a workforce that the economy relies on for innovation and progress is not sustainable when only a fraction of the population is prepared and encouraged to pursue STEM pathways. The cost of inequity is enormous; experts believe that the technology industry in the United States could generate \$470-570 billion in new value if racial and gender diversity were fully represented.<sup>35</sup> Businesses must prioritize diversifying their STEM pipeline if they want to stay competitive in the global economy.

## STEM Workforce Racial and Ethnic Demographics



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BUSINESSES CAN HELP SCHOOLS BY SUPPORTING POLICIES TO **EXPAND COMPUTER SCIENCE EDUCATION** AND **FUNDING PROGRAMS** THAT WORK TO **DEVELOP TEACHERS.**”

.....

DR. KATIE HENDRICKSON,  
CODE.ORG



## Best Practices

Addressing inequities within the STEM field is a hot-button issue because of the need to fill current workforce gaps and ensure students are prepared to excel in their future jobs. A few examples of efforts around the country working to advance equity in STEM include:

- South Carolina was the first state to implement a computer science high school graduation requirement. The state developed it in response to its growing computer science sector and wanting to create further opportunities for growth in the industry.<sup>36</sup> Because the course is required for graduation, there are no disparities in access or participation for students of any racial or ethnic group.
- The Idaho STEM Action Center's mission is to advance innovative opportunities for educators, students, communities, and industry to build a competitive workforce and economy through STEM and computer science education. They identify equity disparities and provide opportunities for Idahoans to overcome barriers through educator professional development programs, project-based student competitions, grants for learning opportunities, and supporting industry-based partnerships. The organization is improving outcomes for Idaho communities by building an informed and educated coalition of people to solve the STEM job crisis in the state.<sup>37</sup>
- Intel launched its "Diversity in Technology" initiative with the goal of becoming the first tech company in the U.S. to reach full representation of racial minorities and women. They have invested in scholarship initiatives for Latinos, Native American coding programs, and school district STEM curriculums, among others, to make strides in preparing the next generation of STEM workers. It's a bold commitment that highlights the importance of the great things that can happen when public/private partnerships are used to address inequities in the workplace.<sup>38</sup>

## Policy Considerations

In order to close both academic achievement and workforce gaps, our education system must prioritize the creation of equitable pathways in which all students have opportunities to develop STEM skills and competencies that lead directly to careers. Existing inequities will continue to grow and hinder both students and the economy if they are not addressed.

Policy considerations include:

- Include science measures in state-level accountability systems to ensure students have gained a conceptual understanding of the subject.
- Develop detailed statewide STEM education plans with annual report cards that document student data, equity discrepancies, progress, and opportunities for STEM education.<sup>39</sup>
- Create STEM career pathways that bridge classes with work-based learning opportunities to support the successful navigation of learning and skill development for those interested in a STEM career.<sup>40</sup>
- Implement computer science as a core high school graduation requirement to ensure all students have access to a computer science course.<sup>41</sup>
- Invest in district-level professional development opportunities for STEM-subject educators focused on improving content knowledge and pedagogy.<sup>42</sup>
- Invest in STEM-related supports for underserved students through tutoring, activities, and programs.

# Strengthening Equity Through Social-Emotional Learning



## Current State of Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning, often referred to as SEL, has gained steam over the last several years as numerous studies have pointed to its short and long-term benefits for students. Research shows that having SEL programs in place is associated with an increase in student academic achievement, improved behavior, improved economic mobility, and improved life outcomes.<sup>43</sup> Skills such as communicating effectively, showing empathy, being adaptable, problem-solving, and teamwork enable students to develop the necessary skills for success in life and their careers.

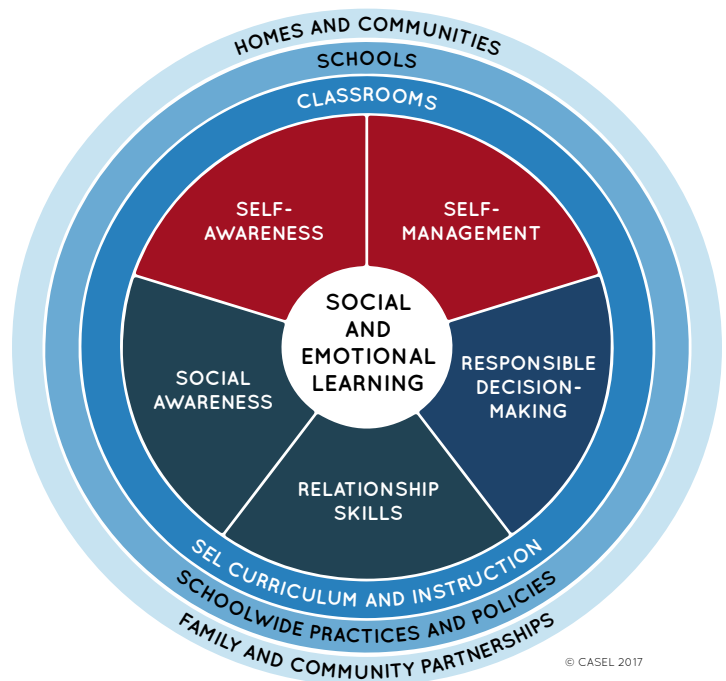
Thousands of schools across the country have integrated SEL programs into their curriculum. Presently, more than 20 states have developed and adopted K-12 SEL competencies and all 50 states have adopted Pre-K SEL competencies.

Support for SEL continues to grow; following the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down schools across the nation, addressing students' social-emotional needs is now a top priority for a majority of states.<sup>44</sup>

Addressing students' emotional and mental needs as they return to the classroom has been a significant challenge that districts and states must address if students are going to progress. The cumulative negative impact of the pandemic on student learning, including a widening of the achievement gap, mingled with the trauma, uncertainty, and anxiety many students have faced, has been particularly detrimental for students of color and those from low-income families.<sup>45</sup> Leveraging SEL supports can help these students overcome

the mental and emotional barriers to their recovery and academic success.

Fortunately, states are keyed into the fact that academic recovery is also dependent on student healing; the majority have pledged funding from The American Rescue Plan to address students' social-emotional and mental health needs. States are pledging to invest in social-emotional and mental health supports through a variety of approaches, hiring counselors and licensed mental health professionals, revamping or implementing SEL curriculum, and developing mental health screening tools.<sup>46</sup> Ensuring these supports are equitably implemented will be an extremely important step in helping underserved students overcome the barriers keeping them from achieving their best in school.



**20+ STATES**  
HAVE DEVELOPED AND ADOPTED  
**K-12 SEL COMPETENCIES** AND ALL  
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**PRE-K SEL COMPETENCIES**



- CASEL

## Implications for the Workforce

Development centered on a robust set of social-emotional learning competencies is essential for preparing students for the workforce and developing the next generation of leaders. The skills learned - such as empathy, resilience, and goal-setting - are crucial tools needed for students who will go on to lead our companies and communities.

Employers continually recognize capabilities like communication, self-management, collaboration, the ability to make ethical decisions, and empathy as the most sought-after skills in the workplace and foundational to the success of a workplace.<sup>47</sup> These in-demand skills, which can be learned through SEL programs, demonstrate the value SEL programs in schools can have in preparing students for their futures. Now, more than ever, students need to be equipped with all the tools necessary to succeed in the rapidly changing global economy.

Top companies are beginning to advocate for SEL in legislatures and in the classroom as the benefits to employment become more transparent.<sup>48</sup> Some are promoting SEL alongside workforce-readiness programs to support the school-to-workforce pipeline and coalitions of business, education, and legislative leaders are forming to ensure students are prepared to succeed.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, the pandemic has placed unprecedented burdens on students, and addressing students' social-emotional needs today will ultimately lead to improved academic success, particularly for at-risk students and underserved students.<sup>50</sup> With studies predicting the US economy could lose out on \$128 billion to \$188 billion due to learning loss from the COVID-19 pandemic as this cohort of students enters the workforce,<sup>51</sup> any action to alleviate that economic loss is beneficial.

## IN-DEMAND SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE:

- ✓ ADAPTABILITY
- ✓ RELIABILITY
- ✓ EMPATHY
- ✓ SELF-MANAGEMENT
- ✓ PROBLEM-SOLVING
- ✓ GOAL-SETTING

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PROVIDING HIGH-QUALITY **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**,  
AND **EQUITABLE ACCESS** TO THAT **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**,  
IS CRITICAL TO HELPING EVERY YOUNG PERSON  
**DEVELOP AND GROW."**

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

ANDREA LOVENHILL,  
COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN



## Best Practices

States, districts, and coalitions alike are all working tirelessly to ensure every student has access to the social-emotional supports they need to be successful in their life and career. As research and data continue to shine a light on the benefits SEL provides, having successful models of innovation and implementation that can be scaled will be beneficial to those looking for guidance. A few examples of those leading the way include:

- The Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) was launched by CASEL to scale SEL work and guide policy for successful implementation in schools around the country. CSI's State SEL and Workforce Initiative aims to embed SEL with workforce preparation across all states by finding ways to align practices through an equity lens, while elevating the skills students need to prepare for the workforce. CSI forms strategic partnerships with states and national collaborators with the goal of strengthening SEL to improve the talent pipeline.<sup>52</sup>
- The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has made student social-emotional well-being a top priority of its reopening and planning guidelines. Equity has been central to the state's adoption of six SEL standards and 17 benchmarks. State policies clearly define SEL standards and set grade-level guidelines for districts to follow.<sup>53</sup>
- Tulsa Public Schools has aligned its core values, commitments, and standards to align with SEL implementation and equity goals. The district has integrated school-level social and emotional learning and wellness initiatives, infused SEL into their strategic plan, and formed innovative partnerships with leading SEL organizations. Tulsa is also strategically using its federal relief dollars to provide professional development opportunities for educators and further embed SEL into their work.<sup>54</sup>

## Policy Considerations

An analysis of state education spending plans from federal The American Rescue Plan relief money allotted for education underscores the demand for addressing students' social-emotional and mental health needs, with 39 states prioritizing SEL and/or mental health supports.<sup>55</sup> The closure of schools and a shift to online learning at home have affected students in a variety of ways. Some have experienced lived trauma during the pandemic and some had their emotional and social growth process stunted as they were in isolation from their peers and the public.

It's too soon to understand the level of impact the pandemic has had on students, but we do know integrating social-emotional and mental health supports in schools are key levers that will help students recover from the hardships they faced and move forward as successful students. To truly be effective and reach students who need it the most, social-emotional supports must be centered on equity. Policy recommendations include:

- Increase the focus through teacher preparation programs on developing teachers who have the skills needed to create culturally affirming environments, build relationships with and understand their students, support students' academic success, and have an anti-racism geared mindset.<sup>56</sup>
- Integrate high-quality, research-based social-emotional learning practices into all aspects of teaching and learning throughout every grade level, accessible to every student.
- Provide comprehensive professional development opportunities and supports for educators and school staff on culturally responsive teaching, positive classroom management, and reducing bias.
- Reform school discipline policies that disproportionately affect students of color - such as zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies - and keep them out of the classroom.<sup>57</sup>

# Expanding Equity in Course Access and Options



## Current State of Course Access and Options

Ensuring all students have access to rigorous courses and empowering families to have the ability to make educational decisions based on the needs of their children are crucial pieces to addressing inequities in education. Too many students, particularly students of color, are tracked away from challenging coursework that will prepare them for postsecondary education. Likewise, most families are constrained to their neighborhood school, even if that school is underperforming or a poor fit for their child, and lack additional public options from which to choose.

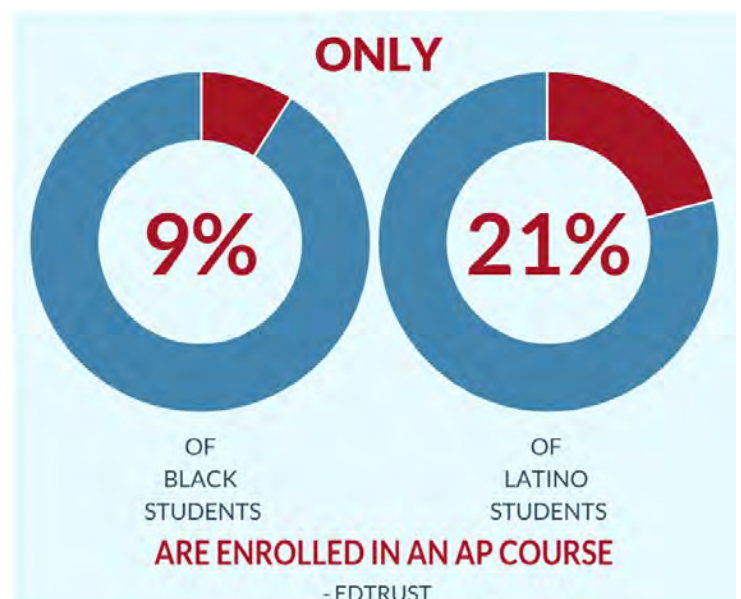
Advanced course access refers to the availability of AP and IB courses, dual enrollment opportunities, and gifted and talented programs. These courses allow students to engage in demanding classes and develop competencies beyond what is taught in the average high school-level class. More rigorous options are particularly important for keeping high-achieving students continually engaged with school. Research suggests students who take advanced and college-level courses are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and graduate with a degree.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, there are barriers to accessing advanced courses for large segments of students of color. Black and Latino students are at a severe disadvantage when accessing advanced courses, with only nine percent of Black students and 21 percent of Latinos enrolled in an AP course. Moreover, students of color are often subject to bias from school leadership who often overlook them when recommending students for advanced coursework.<sup>59</sup>

At the same time, families may find it equally challenging to access alternative or better schools. Each state has varying laws regarding open enrollment; a total of 33 states and the District of Columbia allow students to attend any school within their assigned district (intradistrict) and 44 states and the District of Columbia allow students to attend schools outside of their district (interdistrict). Open enrollment empowers families with options within the traditional public school system, making it more palatable from a political standpoint. Plus, as accountability for delivering a great education grows, families are able to choose the best schools for their children's needs.<sup>60</sup>

However, open enrollment typically allows students to enroll only when there are open seats in a desired school. Thus, the degree to which this really provides an option for families is dependent on demand for the limited open seats, capacity of buildings, and the ability to navigate application processes for different schools and districts.

Over the last three decades, public charter schools have expanded into 44 states and enrollment has grown to 3.3 million students.<sup>61</sup> Though in national education debates charter schools are framed in controversy, parent demand at the local level suggests that families like having charter options available to them. This could be because charter schools are generally serving families well; data from a nationwide long-term study reveals links



between high-quality charter school options and increased academic gains.<sup>62</sup> Further, charters serve diverse student populations with students of color making up 68.7 percent of all charter school enrollees and low-income students comprising 59.3 percent<sup>63</sup> and studies show that these students outperform their peers in traditional neighborhood schools.

Yet the option of attending a charter school is still out of reach for most students. Students of color and low-income students make up a majority of charter school enrollees, yet charter schools make up only 6.5 percent of the total number of public schools.<sup>64</sup> The vast majority of public school students are attending traditional district schools, where they're likely assigned to a neighborhood school. Even in cities with robust charter school sectors, waitlists at the best performing schools are high as demand outweighs supply. Other barriers, like complicated application and enrollment processes, unfair funding schemes where charter school students receive less funding than district students, and a lack of transparency about the options available so that parents can choose the best fit for their child must be handled.

## Implications for the Workforce

“

WE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE STRENGTHS OF ALL OUR STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO HAVE **FACED BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY**. IF WE **INVEST** IN THOSE STUDENTS AND THEIR STRENGTHS IN A **BROAD SET OF SKILLS**, WE CAN BE ASSURED FOR A GREATER CHANCE OF A THRIVING ECONOMY THAT VALUES **TODAY'S CURRENT STUDENTS FOR TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE.**”



NITHYA JOSEPH,  
AMERICA FORWARD



Having well-prepared students ready to succeed in college is an important component for the success of our economy. But, for this to occur, students need to be academically challenged in their courses in a high-quality learning environment that is supportive of their growth. Students who enter college ready to excel, without needing remediation, are more likely to persist and complete a degree. On the flipside, without access to rigorous courses and a quality school, many low-income students of color face difficulties entering and staying in college to completion. This creates a negative impact on wage earnings, which then has a negative impact on the overall economy.

Research reveals there's a hidden supply of high-achieving students who often hail from low-income, diverse backgrounds who don't apply to selective colleges and universities or demanding degree programs despite the fact that their more affluent white counterparts with the same grades do.<sup>65</sup> This mismatch between ability and opportunity starts in middle school and likely contributes to the inordinately low number of diverse students enrolled in STEM and other intensive college majors.<sup>66</sup> It also supports the McKinsey & Company study that finds a pattern of Black workers being disproportionately represented in low-income occupations and underrepresented in high-wage occupations.<sup>67</sup>

The bottom line is clear: low-income students of color don't have access to the same opportunities that put them on the pathway to success, and this creates a diluted, less diverse talent pool from which companies can draw and a corresponding drag on the growth potential of our economy.

## Best Practices

Expanding equity in course access and educational options is an ongoing effort. States around the country are moving at varying paces to remove barriers and expand opportunities for students – especially underserved students who have been excluded in the past. A few best practices include:

- North Carolina is a national leader in ensuring all students have access to academically rigorous math coursework regardless of background. Passed in 2018, *HB 986* requires all students who score high on end-of-year testing to be automatically enrolled in an advanced math class the following year. In 2019, the state expanded the policy to apply to coursework in more grade levels. These policies have placed over 10,000 students in advanced classes who were previously systematically denied access.<sup>68</sup>
- Florida requires districts to allow for both intradistrict and interdistrict open enrollment, enabling families to choose the school of their choice within their home district or in another neighboring district. Florida's policy also gives enrollment priorities to certain student groups, such as children in foster care.<sup>69</sup>
- Colorado's laws around charter schools make it a very charter-friendly state. It does not have a cap on public charter school growth, provides multiple authorizers for performance and monitoring, and provides autonomy and accountability to charter schools. The state also requires districts to share local levy dollars with charter schools, making Colorado one of the few states to attempt to fund charter school students fairly. The state has a robust charter ecosystem with more than 132,000 students enrolled across more than 250 schools.
- In Illinois, the State Board of Education offers grants to districts with at least one low-income school to fund AP program supports and recruitment efforts that specifically target underrepresented students. The grant money also covers course materials, textbooks, and tutoring to prepare students for an AP-level course. Importantly at least 20 percent of the funding must be allocated for professional development opportunities for teachers and staff.<sup>70</sup>

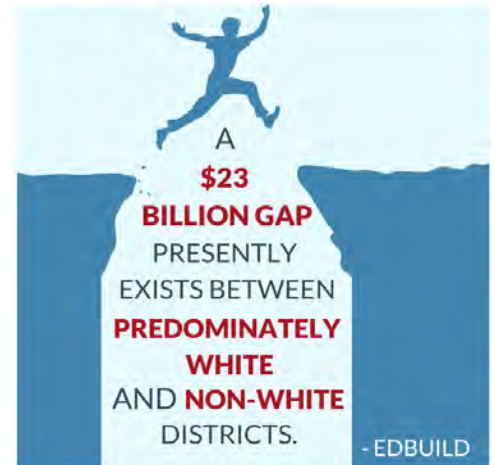
## Policy Considerations

Increasing access to public charter schools and advanced courses is an effective mechanism for increasing student achievement and college enrollment rates, and it is key to advancing equity in education. Policy considerations for cultivating successful educational options and access to advanced courses in states and schools include:

- Use of data to identify and address barriers that have historically kept students of color from enrolling in advanced courses.
- Support underrepresented students in preparing for and achieving success in their advanced courses, including investing in early childhood learning opportunities, the recruitment and development of qualified subject-matter teachers, and ongoing tutoring supports.
- Implement student-centered funding that follows the student, regardless of where they choose to attend school.<sup>71</sup>
- Incentivize districts to offer more advanced courses so that every eligible student has the opportunity to enroll in high-caliber classes.<sup>72</sup>
- Require districts to adopt open enrollment policies that ensure families are able to access the best schools for their children's needs, and include provisions for enrollment priorities, transportation, and allowing for full district funding to follow the student.
- Expand access for all students to existing high-quality, in-demand schools through enrollment preferences and lottery systems.<sup>73</sup>



# ONE TEN



## Best Practices

No school funding system is perfect and each presents its own distinctive priorities reflective of local context. Coupled with challenging political environments, getting funding right is an obstacle that few policymakers accomplish. However, there are standout examples of places moving in the right direction with equity at the center of their funding systems. These include:

- California is approaching school funding with the goal of building an equitable and excellent funding system. The state's Local Control Funding Formula plan shifts billions of dollars from districts serving high-needs students to provide all districts with the flexibility needed to spend based on local needs and priorities. Their success will be dependent on new and continued investments for capacity building across all levels, capitalizing on new resources, continuous improvement commitments, and community-based decision-making.<sup>79</sup>
- Boston Public Schools transitioned to a student-based allocation formula in 2011 that shifted 40 percent of their total budget toward student-based allocation. The district considers equity implications to determine additional weights for students who typically cost more to educate. These weights include English learners, students with disabilities, young students, and migrant students. Having a student-based formula allows the district to build on Every Student Succeeds Act's transparency requirements to use financial resources for schools based on the needs of their student population.<sup>80</sup>
- North Carolina adopted an equity-based funding policy to address the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides grants to schools to support children who have lost necessary services as a result of school closures. Eligible expenses include meals, tutoring, sanitation equipment, and workspace rentals to ensure all students have the necessary items for success. The policy also allocates funding to groups working to assist homeless students during the pandemic and created the Extra Credit Grant Program to provide assistance to families for school and childcare costs.<sup>81</sup>

## Policy Considerations

As states commit to addressing the dueling challenges of systemic racism in their education systems and the aftermath of a global pandemic, a new light on equity is bringing it to the center of school funding decisions. Revamping funding systems to better work for all students and their success is imperative as we move forward. Policies that advance more equitable funding systems include:

- Require transparent data on school expenditures and per-pupil spending to be readily accessible to the general public.
- Ensure funds meant for supporting low-income students can be targeted toward schools with higher concentrations of students in poverty, so that schools serving the most high-need students receive the greatest share of resources.
- Ensure revenue sources are as stable as possible and collected at the highest level in order to reduce reliance on local property taxes and improve equity across districts.
- Enact student-centered funding that follows the student wherever they choose to attend school.

# Final Thoughts

Advocating for greater equity in education enables businesses to not only meet the moral challenge of today, but to address perhaps the greatest and longest-standing economic challenge to our economy, the root of which is the fact that only a portion of our population is truly prepared to compete, succeed, and contribute. Imagine if we harnessed the potential of every student – what problems could we solve? What innovation could we stir, what entirely new fields could we create?

If we fail to address systemic barriers, we simply cannot solve for the lack of diverse talent in STEM fields, law, teaching, medicine, business, and so many other sectors and disciplines. The talent pool can only be as rich as the pipelines feeding it. Business has a chance to strengthen those pipelines and ensure they're fully drawing from the rich reservoirs of talent in our classrooms. By growing opportunities for students of color in STEM pathways; by recruiting and retaining more teachers of color; by ensuring that all students are able to take rigorous courses deserving of their abilities; by making student funding reflective of student need rather than where they live, the wealth of their parents, or the color of their skin; and by supporting students' with their social and emotional needs, our education system can produce more equitable outcomes for students.

Ultimately, the barriers to equity are created through policy and practice, and they can be eliminated in the same way. This report details some of the targeted changes we can make. America Succeeds is committed to engaging leaders and partners across the country in this effort.

**Join us in this effort at [www.AmericaSucceeds.org](http://www.AmericaSucceeds.org).**



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