

BLOG

How school and district leaders can address systemic racism with their communities

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TOPIC

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Racism is entrenched in American history and embedded in today's social, economic, and political systems. The deaths of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and Breonna Taylor have ignited demands for racial justice and prompted deeper reflections on white privilege across the nation. Schools—as institutions that typically reflect the social structures of the communities that they serve—are not exempt from these nationwide demands.

Many perceive racism as being *individual* racism—the conscious prejudice, hate, or bias against people based on race—and therefore underestimate the continued strength and prevalence of racism in the everyday lives of people of color. What should be at the forefront of school and district leaders' dialogues about racism is **systemic racism**, synonymous with structural racism and defined by The Aspen Institute as:

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other social norms that, while not practiced consciously, reinforce and perpetuate racial group inequality. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time.

Systemic and institutional racism are also interchanged, but school and district leaders should note that *institutional* racism focuses on unfair practices or policies within and between institutions—such as discipline policies in schools—that disproportionately impact people of color. Systemic racism includes institutional racism but takes it further by examining the historical, cultural, and social factors in the unequal power, access, opportunities, treatment, and outcomes between white and racial minority groups.

In schools today, systemic racism is seen through self-segregated school communities from decades of failed Brown v. Board of Education integration initiatives, the persistence of the school-to-prison pipeline for Black youth, and the **significant barriers** such as standardized test scores that keep Black students from enrolling in college in rates comparable to their white peers.

Support underrepresented students on the path to postsecondary education with these 14 practices.

GET THE PRACTICES

Schools Aren't Immune to Systemic Racism

Here's How to Start Addressing It

Understanding the many levels of racism is complex, and many school and district leaders are lost on how they should begin to engage their greater school communities to address systemic racism. Below are EAB's answers to five questions school and district leaders have been asking amidst the current national dialogue on systemic racism.

1. How do I even begin to have the conversation in my community?
2. How do I address racial injustice when there are bound to be members of the community who will be defensive?
3. My community doesn't have a lot of racial diversity – should I still address racial injustice when we have already long committed to improving equity and inclusion?
4. Some community members are demanding that we defund or dismantle our school police forces – how can I be sure that's the right decision to make for my school/district?
5. How should students be involved in conversations about racial injustice?



How do I even begin to have the conversation in my community?

Start by calling systemic injustice, discrimination, and denial of opportunity against people of color based on their race by its name—*racism*. Discussing equity—even racial equity—is not a new subject for many school and district leaders and their communities, but striving for equity and inclusion is not interchangeable with acknowledging systemic racism. According to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's [Racial Equity Resource Guide](#), "we cannot defeat (or at least contain) racism unless we name it for what it is...by naming and framing racism we can take the 'mask' off coded

Send a community-wide email explicitly naming systemic racism as an existing and ongoing challenge within the community and across the country. +

School and district leaders should not be afraid to name the word racism in public communications. [Bernards Township School District](#) hesitated to mention “racism” directly in email communication to parents. Instead, district leaders referred parents to resources for how to address “frightening news” related to Black Lives Matter protests with their children. After backlash from some parents, the superintendent had to follow up with an email acknowledging the word “racism,” stating that the district would examine whether it was doing enough to educate students about racism and social justice.

Hold community forums or fireside chats for students, parents, and community members to not only discuss instances of racial injustice in the community, but also brainstorm ways for the district to begin addressing the issue. +

These community-wide conversations are a great way to listen with empathy, learn about systemic racism within the context of the community, and gather ideas on how to improve racial equity in the school or district directly from a group of community stakeholders. [Edmonds School District](#) held a 60-minute virtual community forum to discuss race and equity. Using Padlet, the district asked community members to share resources, trainings, and articles for learning about how to address racism.

Publicly announce action that addresses systemic racism within the school or district. +

School and district leaders should publicly share any new initiatives specifically designed to address racism with their school communities. These initiatives may come in the form of a task force to collect and review instances of racial injustice, professional development for educators about how to identify and discuss systemic racism with students, or new racial equity policies.

[Scottsdale Unified School District](#) announced an initiative to develop an action plan to increase awareness, respect, and celebration of the district’s diversity. The initiative will be led by a committee consisting of the Assistant Superintendent, concerned citizens, students, administrators, and teachers to discuss how the district can better focus on racial equity and inclusion.

Consider seeking guidance from higher education partners that may have research centers devoted to understanding and solving systemic racism. +

Leverage partnerships with colleges and/or universities or reach out to state universities with existing racial equity programming that can advise school and district leaders on systemic racism. [Hillard City Schools](#) is forming a Diversity and Justice Task Force that will seek guidance from The Ohio State University’s College of Education and Human Ecology, which has long offered programming and research on racial equity and social justice.



How do I address racial injustice when there are bound to be members of the community who will be defensive?

Because racism is an emotionally taxing topic to discuss, there may be members of the community who feel targeted, defensive, shamed, or angered with public conversations about it.

Remind the community that systemic racism is the target of current nationwide protests – and schools and districts are not immune. +

Systemic racism has long been embedded in our nation’s culture and social norms and requires a unified community to combat.

In a letter to staff and families about the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, Superintendent Larry Linthacum directly states that the “[Jefferson City School District](#) is not immune to the systemic racism that has led to such events in cities and towns like our own.” Superintendent Linthacum has resolved to connect with parents, students, staff, and community members of color to listen to their experiences with systemic racism to better determine how the district can improve.

Openly acknowledge the discomfort involved with discussing racism. +

Talking about race is a process and may require a degree of vulnerability. Even though it may necessitate difficult soul-searching and reassessment of one’s own perceptions and biases, remaining silent will only allow racial injustices in the community and across the nation to fester.

Superintendent Donald Fennoy II, the first Black superintendent of [Palm Beach County Public School District](#), spoke candidly and emotionally to his school board about how racism has affected his life, stating that despite his position, power, and privilege, “I do operate in this world as a scared human being.” He challenged the community to be courageous and put their children in a position to do better about combatting racism than them.

Lead by example and encourage the community to listen and learn about racism with empathy. +

In an open letter to the [Fresno Unified School District](#) community, Superintendent Robert Nelson urged the community to *listen* more than speak. He also encouraged the community to join the district in actively educating themselves on anti-racism and using their “privilege (whatever privilege that may be) to serve and advocate on behalf

of others.”



My community doesn't have a lot of racial diversity—should I still address racial injustice when we have already long committed to improving equity and inclusion?

Racial injustice is not only a conversation for racially diverse schools and communities. The current national conversation on racism is a moment in history where communities of all races are working together to ensure racial justice, raise awareness on police brutality, and reflect on the role of institutions and individuals on combating systemic racism.

For school and district leaders of predominantly white communities, this is also an opportunity to reflect on the role of K-12 classrooms in educating students about systemic racism, especially as alumni and current students demand education about white privilege.

Eanes Independent School District leaders recently received a letter from their community imploring Eanes to better prepare students to be anti-racist—especially since the district, currently 70.7% white students in a predominantly white community, was founded after *Brown v. Board of Education* to resist integration. In response, Superintendent Tom Leonard stated, “The only way to transform a nation is to transform each community—each person—one at a time... We need to share a collective responsibility in finding a solution for our nation to really change and become a place where what occurred in Minneapolis will never occur again.”



Some community members are demanding that we defund or dismantle our school police forces—how can I be sure that's the right decision for my school/district?

School and district leaders should consider how their police department partnerships or School Resource Officer (SRO) programs may reinforce systemic racism in their communities. Despite beginning as mentors and educators to students on school safety, SROs have increasingly served as [school disciplinarians](#) with the ability to issue citations, suspensions, and in some schools and districts, make official arrests similar to local police that may disproportionately impact students of color.

According to [U.S. Department of Education](#) data, in 2015-16, “about 31% of students arrested on public school grounds or after a school official reported them to police were Black... Black students made up 15% of the public school population that year.” A [recent survey](#) of students in New Orleans also found that “just 40% of Black students say they feel safer in the presence of police, versus 69% of white students.”

To determine if defunding SRO programs or dismantling police department partnerships is the best decision for the community, school and district leaders should:

[Review school police under a racial equity lens and not rely on national trends to make the decision.](#) +

School and district leaders should consider the following questions during the decision process:

- Does the current number of violent incidents suggest that students would not be safe without police presence?
- Would funding for school police/SROs better serve students if invested elsewhere?
- Is there reason to believe that school police/SROs may be disproportionately disciplining students of color and/or students with disabilities?

If the answer to any of the above questions is “yes,” school and district leaders may wish to investigate and reconsider their school police forces.

[Take into account the broader community context and listen to community input.](#) +

Fort Worth Independent School District resolved to review the role of school police forces in their schools. They related the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks to the fatal police shooting of a Black woman in their Fort Worth community in October 2019.

Minneapolis Public Schools cut ties with their city's police department after gathering student input on the decision—students voted overwhelmingly for the district to end the long-standing partnership.

Read a deeper dive on school policing and School Resource Officer programs.

[LEARN MORE](#)



How should students be involved in conversations about racial injustice?

Students want to be involved in this conversation about racial injustice. Across the country, students are urging their schools and districts to take action against racial injustice or provide better education on historical and modern systemic racism.

School and district leaders can engage their students on racism and how it might present in their daily lives *before* students form their perspectives from potentially inaccurate information on social media.

Hold a fireside chat exclusive to students and hear their thoughts, concerns, and comments about racial injustice in the community. +

Professor Shaun Harper at the University of Southern California advises school leaders to hold a session for students of color first, creating a space for these students to share their experiences with each other, and then hold a session for the wider student population to discuss racial injustice. With students being bombarded with many different messages and COVID-19 still a lingering threat, schools can provide a safe space for students to connect, learn about, and reflect on racism and white privilege.

Many districts have already ended the school year, but in a district outside of Flint, Michigan, students of a former teacher still reached out independently to discuss their feelings about the current Black Lives Matter movement because they needed a safe space to discuss views they may not share with their parents. School and district leaders can still organize optional fireside chats to not only structure a space for these students to process what they may be seeing in the media, but also listen and learn about racial injustice issues that arise during the summer and take deeper action when schools reopen in the fall.

Take this time to educate students on what they may be hearing and seeing in the media. +

Ensure teachers are equipped to have conversations with students about racism this fall, are able to address comments that may be offensive to students of color, and can act on confessions students may have about instances of discrimination against them.

Start with publicly available resources on racism for educators to use for lessons and conversations in the short-term. Los Angeles Unified School District posted a collection of resources for teachers to talk about race with children and address trauma. The New York Times shared teaching resources for educators to discuss the George Floyd protests through the lens of systemic racism while also emphasizing media literacy.

Several organizations such as PBS, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Anti-Defamation League, D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Pulitzer Center have also released resources, videos, and lessons on the death of George Floyd, the history of slavery, police violence, Black Lives Matter protests, media literacy, and white privilege.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified teacher workloads, stress levels, and risk of compassion fatigue. Improve teacher well-being with these self-care strategies and formalized peer connections.

GET THE STRATEGIES

Hold your students accountable for fostering a racially equitable community as you would your teams. +

First, share what that vision looks like, and second, tell students they have the power to combat racial injustice through their actions and words. Encourage students to contribute to the vision of racially equitable schools and task them with helping advance school and district initiatives. For example, student organizers at Brooklyn Friends Schools worked with BFS staff to co-create a call-to-action event for young people and school communities across the country—the virtual event registered 2,500 people nationwide.

Students will need more mental health support than ever when schools reopen this fall. Listen to EAB experts' advice on the critical steps to prepare for the impending mental health surge.

PREPARE YOUR TEAM

While navigating the nationwide demands for racial justice can be challenging for K-12 institutions, this is a historical moment where school and district leaders can begin to undo generations of systemic racism.

School and district leaders can pave the way for their communities to speak up about systemic racism by calling attention to the issue, discussing collective community action to combat systemic racism, and engaging students at the center of racial justice initiatives.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Resource Center

EAB has curated our most impactful DEI resources to help college and university leaders cultivate diversity, foster inclusion, promote equity, and fight for justice for their students, faculty, staff, and communities.

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