



Policy Brief

SEL and Racial Equity

A non-exhaustive investigation of social-emotional learning policy and how it can contribute to evidence-based, in-school racial equity strategies.

Violence against Black lives affects all of us, and particularly affects young people of color. Education in the United States compounds the trauma: it's marked by racial inequity (Garcia & Ozturk, 2018), and some US education processes and practices may also harm young people of color (Zirkel, 2008). Social-emotional learning (SEL) can provide strategies that promote racial equity in education—though it won't be most effective on its own. Our brief considers evidence-based strategies to promote racial equity that work in tandem with SEL.

SEL is the process by which young people and adults build skills to understand and manage emotions, work toward positive goals, feel and demonstrate empathy for others, and establish and maintain positive relationships (CASEL, n.d.). SEL can be a part of implementing effective racial equity strategies in education. There is a risk, however, that SEL perpetuates inequity. It can be "color-blind," ignoring dynamics of power, race, oppression, privilege, and cultural differences, or it can be implemented as a way to control behavior, especially that of students of color (Duchesneau, 2020; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Ford, 2020). What strategies can ensure that SEL serves to promote rather than hinder racial equity?

In this review, we consider education-focused racial equity strategies that are evidence-based, with qualitative observational, quasi, or true experimental studies, and that might overlap with SEL. This is not meant to be a complete review of racial equity strategies in education. Our goal of identifying these evidence-based practices is to understand what has been most empirically effective in the field at this time, while acknowledging that more research and evaluation are needed. Further research and evaluation will also be needed to assess the role of SEL in supporting strategies for racial equity in education. In this brief, we identify the following policy areas to promote racial equity in K-12 education along with analysis of how SEL is implicated:

1. Promote Culturally Responsive Teaching
2. Implement Anti-Racist Education and Black Studies
3. Incorporate Trauma-Informed Approaches to Education
4. Reform School Safety and Discipline Practices
5. Diversify and Support the Educator Workforce

1. Promote Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching has been shown to be effective in promoting racial equity in education, though it's still in its nascency across the country (Kirsch, 2020). New York offers one example of addressing culturally responsive teaching at the state and local levels. In 2019, the state released its [Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#) to focus on equity in education and develop complementary best practices (Kirsch, 2020; New York State Department of Education, 2019). State legislation may look to promote culturally responsive teaching efforts by tasking a state agency to develop a framework and by providing funding and technical assistance for implementation. States might also look to include culturally responsive teaching in educator certification or preparation, such as in the federal [Teacher Diversity and Retention Act](#) (US HR4288).

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While culturally responsive teaching might go by other names, such as culturally relevant teaching (Morrison et al., 2008; Gay, 2000), we recognize that these terms can also indicate different things across the field. For the purposes of this brief, we'll use culturally responsive teaching as Geneva Gay describes it: culturally responsive teaching uses students' cultural knowledge, experience, and perspectives in instruction to increase relevance and efficacy of student learning (Gay, 2000). Such pedagogy validates and affirms cultural experiences inside and outside of the classroom with incorporation of varied instructional styles and multicultural information (Gay, 2000). Gay views culturally responsive teaching as synonymous with culturally relevant teaching, a term that Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings coined. Ladson-Billings describes culturally relevant teaching as "recognizing that students learn more than teachers can test, acknowledging that every child has their own culture and the right to access another one at school, and critical consciousness" (Kirsch, 2020). She asserts that culturally relevant teaching supports students in their academic, social, and political learning by incorporating culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Ladson-Billings' theoretical framework for culturally relevant teaching involves awareness of self and others in a sociocultural context and setting a foundation in the classroom that attends to positive cultural identity, development of critical awareness, and academic and overall

well-being (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research throughout the 1990s demonstrated that teaching centered around culture improved student successes, including achievement outside of academics, such as critical thinking and interpersonal skills (Gay, 2000). Based on Ladson-Billings' theory, a literature review examining empirical research to operationalize culturally relevant teaching found that culturally relevant teachers would draw on students' personal strengths and cultivate a positive experience with new material before moving on to more challenging content (Morrison et al., 2008).

Drawing on students' strengths has particular importance in racial equity considerations. Positive regard for one's racial identity protects against discrimination experienced in school and promotes academic success and well-being for Black students (Chavous et al., 2003). Culturally relevant teaching practices also include creating a safe and supportive environment by interrupting harmful student behavior (such as silencing and teasing), fostering support between peers, and providing students with activities to cultivate engagement and a sense of belonging (Morrison et al., 2008). Ladson-Billings also documented classroom instruction where culturally responsive teaching promoted academic achievement and built a positive classroom community in which students had a sense of belonging and their individuality was upheld (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Relating students' cultural experiences to the classroom appears to strengthen academic achievement and can enhance students' motivation to learn (Garcia & Ozturk, 2018).

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SEL and culturally responsive teaching overlap and can be mutually reinforcing. Both can contribute toward safe and supportive learning environments. Culturally responsive teaching does this, arguably, through the SEL competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills, by learning about and recognizing kids' distinct backgrounds. In turn, SEL builds a safe and supportive learning environment (Snyder et al., 2011) by using culturally responsive teaching and tuning SEL lessons toward student strengths—for instance, in a self-awareness and efficacy lesson.

2. Implement Anti-Racist Education and Black Studies

Anti-Racist Education

Within the past year, [Arizona](#), [Washington](#), and [Louisiana](#) introduced legislation around anti-racism education. This trend could grow following recent protests for racial justice (Kirsch, 2020). Anti-racist education benefits all students, particularly students of color, as such curricula promotes their well-being and academic achievement (Zirkel, 2008; Cheng & Soudack, 1994). Anti-racism content in curricula addresses the dynamics of power and equity and draws awareness to prejudice while promoting respect for and value of differences (Cheng & Soudack, 1994).

More broadly, social justice education focuses on students' social and political contexts, centering around developing a social awareness of inequities—which encompasses anti-racist efforts—and building a critical lens to dismantle inequities in our society (Hammond, n.d.). Social justice education can also promote equity across social identity groups, fostering a critical lens and encouraging social action (Carlisle et al., 2006). SEL is implicit in such education via social awareness and problem-solving, thus serving to promote anti-racist education.

Multiculturalism is distinct from anti-racism but can still be incorporated to promote anti-racist ends if it's characterized as prejudice reduction (Hammond, n.d.; Banks, 1993). James A. Banks' prejudice-reduction approach in multicultural education explicitly includes anti-racist curriculum, constructing knowledge through a cultural framework, curriculum from diverse authors, using pedagogy designed to increase equity between students, and supporting an empowering school culture for all students (Zirkel, 2008). Each of these five components benefits students of color as well as white students, showing positively correlated academic and intergroup relationship outcomes when implemented with consideration of race and power dynamics (Zirkel, 2008).

Anti-racism efforts can also prevent SEL from perpetuating racism and racial inequities and can instead promote the opposite. This is possible when anti-racism efforts critically examine and shape SEL theory and practices and address common pitfalls of SEL in service of racial equity (National Equity Project, n.d.). When implemented with an anti-racist and equity lens, SEL might also be part of helping develop skills to deconstruct racism, such as fostering self-awareness and social awareness alongside responsible decision-making. In this conversation, it's important to state that SEL is not simply providing young people with coping skills to navigate unjust systems (Kaler-Jones, 2020); instead, SEL offers fundamental skills leading to strategies that promote racial equity in education.



Black Studies

Multicultural education can encompass ethnic studies, which also includes Black studies. Ethnic studies center perspectives and information from marginalized experiences and scholarship (Grant, 2008; Sleeter, 2011). The otherwise heavy focus on Euro-American perspectives can lead to disengagement of many students, whereas the inclusion of ethnic studies, often in hand with culturally relevant pedagogy, promotes academic achievement for students of color (Sleeter, 2011; Ford & Harris, 2000; Wiggan, 2007; Chavous, 2003; Carter, 2008). For example, there's a significant positive effect on academic engagement, achievement, and attitude for students of color when they read literature by authors who share their ethnic backgrounds (Sleeter, 2011). In terms of social-emotional effects, ethnic studies across student groups of color can bolster self-efficacy and a sense of worth (Halagao, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006).

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Black studies should be implemented with care in hand with comprehensive, schoolwide efforts that work to undo racism. One issue with advancing ethnic studies, including Black studies, is that such advancement could reinforce otherness when distinguished from other studies (Duchesneau, 2020). Another issue is that diversity depicted in curriculum only has a marginal effect on student outcomes, but the effect strengthens when curriculum explicitly includes diversity along with addressing racism (Sleeter 2011; Bigler, 1999).

Black studies can engage Black students, thereby increasing self-efficacy, a sense of self-worth, and their academic progress. SEL complements Black studies as both contribute to self-awareness and social awareness. Inclusion of ethnic studies alongside culturally responsive methodologies is being introduced in legislation, such as in [Minnesota](#). Other states might look to follow suit by including Black studies and other ethnic studies in larger comprehensive efforts to promote positive learning environments and safe schools for all students.

3. Incorporate Trauma-Informed Approaches to Education

State legislatures are increasingly advancing policy around trauma-informed approaches to education. In the past year alone, Committee for Children tracked more than 100 bills related to trauma-informed practices. These bills range from supporting a trauma-informed educator workforce, such as in the federal [RISE from Trauma Act](#), to requiring treatment of trauma in teacher prep, such as in [Indiana](#), to incentivizing implementation of trauma-informed approaches to curriculum and professional development, such as in [Pennsylvania](#). Such legislation is timely in light of the inevitable trauma that young people have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic—especially young people in communities of color, which the pandemic has disproportionately affected. Indeed, advancing trauma supports can lead to advancing racial equity in education.

Racial trauma and historical trauma are two types of trauma that can affect young people of color. Racial trauma is the experience of perceived harm related to racial discrimination and prejudice. Historical trauma is experienced by communities and is based on trauma that has been passed down through generations. Both can impact well-being and have systemic implications on other measures like test scores and graduation rates (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017a).

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Trauma-informed practices in school settings seek to have an awareness of trauma along with a strengthening of protective factors and coping skills through individual or universal supports (Herrenkohl et al., 2019). One study evaluated a trauma-informed curriculum designed to teach emotion regulation, stress management, problem-solving, goal setting, and communication skills (notably all SEL skills) to ninth grade students in schools that served mostly low-income Latin American and African American families (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). The curriculum did not increase self-awareness or self-efficacy, but there were positive increases in students' empathy and problem-solving and stronger connections to educators (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). Trauma-informed programs that are culturally responsive even more positively impact the mental health of students who've experienced trauma (Herrenkohl et al., 2019).



Another important part of trauma-informed practices in schools is a focus on student-adult relationships. Young people who've experienced trauma greatly benefit from relationships with caring adults (Cole et al., 2005). Trauma-informed practices and programs can support teachers as they build confidence to teach coping skills and meet students' social-emotional needs (Shamblin et al., 2016).

SEL and trauma-informed practices strongly align. SEL is part of cultivating a safe and supportive learning environment, which allows space for students, especially students who have experienced trauma, to engage and learn (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017b). SEL, as a component of educational equity, also promotes critical protective factors that can help mitigate the negative effects of trauma (Reyes et al., 2012). SEL can explicitly address racial trauma and historical trauma to advance racial equity. Moreover, in acknowledging racialized contexts and power dynamics (National Equity Project, n.d.), SEL can avoid pitfalls that detract from racial equity.

4. Reform School Safety and Discipline Practices

Repeal Zero-Tolerance and Exclusionary Discipline Policies and Replace Them with Evidence-Based Supports

Exclusionary discipline is a response to student behavior that excludes students from the school or classroom. Zero-tolerance policies are often an automatic disciplinary response. Aside from their inefficacy in promoting school safety (Skiba, 2010), zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies have short- and long-term negative consequences for students' academic achievement, attainment, and well-being—especially for students of color, students with disabilities, and students in other marginalized groups (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Curran, 2016; Chu & Ready, 2018). While Black boys are the student group most affected by school suspension, Black girls are also disproportionately affected, often with harsher treatment by some measures (Crenshaw et al., 2015; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Given these significant and disproportionate effects, advocates for positive development of students' social, emotional, and academic learning must engage in reforming exclusionary discipline.

State and federal action alike have addressed exclusionary discipline. Federally, the Obama administration issued guidance

on school disciplinary policies that aimed to improve school climate, student achievement, and equity in discipline. The Trump administration rescinded that guidance in 2018. Trends suggested that while the Obama administration's guidance was in place, schools were becoming safer (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). At the state level, many states are adopting less-punitive approaches to discipline. One analysis found that, over the last seven years, there has been a trend to limit punitive approaches and encourage alternate strategies (Rafa, 2019). In 2018, Committee for Children published a [brief](#) on state legislative trends in exclusionary discipline reform, which further corroborated the analysis's findings. Committee for Children has tracked more than 100 bills related to reforming exclusionary discipline and advancing restorative practices at both the state and federal levels, such as the federal [Ending PUSHOUT Act of 2019](#).

As zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary methods of discipline get repealed, evidence-based alternatives are being implemented (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2019), including [trauma-informed practices](#), restorative practices, and SEL. But these alternatives can falter in advancing racial equity. While suspension may decrease in districts that implement exclusionary discipline reform, racial disparities in discipline still exist (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Restorative practices are designed to benefit all student groups but only marginally minimize disparate rates of suspension between Black and white students (Gregory et al., 2018).

Developing the social-emotional competencies of all students is another evidence-based alternative strategy that can foster positive relationship-building and conflict-management skills (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Colombi & Osher, 2015). One district that's attempting to include SEL and racial equity

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in school discipline is Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in Oakland, California. In 2012, OUSD began implementing schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS): restorative practices focused on restoring relationships and building community, trauma-informed supports, and policies that reduce exclusionary discipline. OUSD's PBIS also included a data-feedback system and an in-school elective for Black

male middle school and high school students that aimed to cultivate students' positive cultural identities, culturally relevant social-emotional skills, and academic skills (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). After these changes were implemented, overall exclusionary discipline declined, with the greatest decrease among the Black student group. And still, even in this district, racial disparity in discipline persists (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). To strengthen these practices in the hopes of further reducing racial disparity in discipline, OUSD has worked to align these efforts with equity-oriented SEL (Gregory & Ferguson, 2017); the results are yet to be determined.¹

Invest in Evidence-Based School Safety Practices

The presence of school resource officers (SROs) disproportionately affects Black students and implicates harsher use of exclusionary discipline (Quinton, 2020; Hall, 2020; Weisburst, 2019; Belsha, 2020). School police have been associated with increased use of discipline, particularly with Black and Hispanic students, and with decreases in graduation and college enrollment rates (Weisburst, 2019). What's more, SROs have not shown significant efficacy in making schools and students safer (Anderson, 2018; Stern & Petrosino, 2018). Students—especially Black students in comparison to their white counterparts—feel less safe with SRO presence, and would prefer more mental health providers, social workers, and nonwhite teachers in their schools (Anderson, 2018; Weixler et al., 2020; Belsha, 2020; Quinton, 2020). Removal of SROs has been correlated with reduced exclusionary discipline practices and arrests (Belsha, 2020; Toronto District School Board, 2019).

SROs have not shown significant efficacy in making schools and students safer.

State or federal legislation could be part of promoting an equitable and safe learning environment if it provided funding for alternative supports apart from SROs. Such supports could include school mental health providers, training for adults in meaningful and supportive adult-student relationships, and supports that fit into a tiered system. At the federal level, for example, the [George Floyd Justice in Policing Act](#) would provide standards for youth justice and school safety, including implementing a positive school climate, eliminating school-based arrests, using evidence-based alternatives like restorative practices, and using schoolwide PBIS (Hall, 2020).

1. A timeline of OUSD's SEL work can be found on [CASEL's website](#).

Such policy efforts have implications for SEL. SEL serves as a foundation for the tiered supports in which mental health professionals and school staff are often organized. Approaching SEL as promoting school safety, rather than merely as a disciplinary tool, functions as a primary prevention strategy, as SEL mitigates violence and harmful behaviors and fosters a sense of safety for students and staff (Smith & Sandhu, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Sprott, 2004; Heydenberk et al., 2006; Stanwood, 2004). Training adults to develop social-emotional skills will also help them support students and engage in meaningful and supportive adult-student relationships. Such relationships are a necessary component of positive classroom climates and student outcomes (Brackett et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)

5. Diversify and Support the Educator Workforce

Schools can promote racial equity by diversifying their educator workforce. However, the educator workforce is predominantly white. Eighty-four percent of educators are white in public elementary and secondary schools where white students make up only 51 percent of the public-school student population (US Department of Education, 2016).

On the federal level, an example of policy to address this is the [Teacher Diversity and Retention Act](#), which Committee for Children has supported. It promotes recruitment, training, and retention of diverse teaching candidates. It also strengthens and expands teacher-preparation programs to address equity-focused interventions such as restorative practices, culturally responsive teaching, and SEL competencies. The federal [Strength in Diversity Act of 2020](#) also has provisions that would allow grants to be used for expanding teacher diversity.

Workforce diversity coincides with myriad benefits for students of color. And diversifying the education workforce can happen across multiple levels, not just with teachers. At the principal level, Black principals increase the likelihood that newly hired teachers are Black; the presence of a Black principal can also diminish turnover of Black teachers (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019). Black students who had one Black teacher in their educational career were more likely to graduate high school and more likely enroll in college (Gershenson et al., 2018). Increasing access to more Black educators also reduces racial disproportionality in discipline (Wright, 2015). Some scholars pose that Black teachers benefit Black students through hidden curricula, which foster pride in racial identity and connection to community, which then leads to improved student academic engagement (Foster, 1993; Cheng & Soudek, 1994). In a qualitative study, teachers



perceived that their Black students' success stemmed from the connection to students' cultural and community norms, as well as from students having a deep understanding of the community in both current and historic social, economic, and political contexts (Foster, 1993). Additionally, not just sharing an ethnicity but also sharing cultural and social norms positively impacts academic achievement for ethnic-minority students (Foster, 1993). Access to school counselors that share the same race as their students, particularly for nonwhite students, also promotes high school graduation and college attendance rates (Mulhern, 2020). Finally, a meta-analysis of intergroup contact theory has shown that simple contact between racial and ethnic groups can reduce prejudices (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), something that all students and educators could benefit from with a diverse workforce.

SEL can contribute to workforce diversification by helping create supportive school environments—an important factor for teachers when choosing to stay in or leave the field (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). A positive school culture supports teacher retention (Reyes et al., 2012). Teachers of color are leaving the field at higher rates as compared to their white counterparts and have reported experiencing unwelcoming school cultures (Dixon et al., 2019). School leaders who want to promote the retention of teachers of color can address school culture as a point of focus and tap into teachers' desires to enhance students' SEL (Dixon et al., 2019).

Policy Recommendations

Based on the research we reviewed, we recommend these SEL-related policies to promote racial equity in K–12 education.

1. Promote culturally responsive teaching:
 - Develop a state framework and standards for culturally responsive teaching
 - Provide funding and technical assistance for culturally responsive teaching implementation
 - Include culturally responsive teaching in educator certification or preparation; for example, the federal [Teacher Diversity and Retention Act](#)
2. Implement anti-racist education and Black studies:
 - Curate high-quality curricula and systems to select from along with adequate funding for implementation
 - Develop and require periodic educator training in professional development and teacher preparation
3. Incorporate trauma-informed approaches to education:
 - Fund trauma-informed training for educators and school staff; for example, the federal [RISE from Trauma Act](#)
 - Require treatment of trauma in teacher preparation; for example, [Indiana HB1283](#)
 - Incentivize implementation of trauma-informed approaches to curriculum and professional development; for example, [Pennsylvania SB144](#)
4. Reform school safety and discipline practices:
 - Increase access to trauma-informed supports specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice
 - Incentivize interagency and cross-discipline partnerships
 - Repeal zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies and replace them with evidence-based alternatives, with adequate funding to do so
 - Direct school safety funding away from SROs and toward evidence-based safety measures such as increased investment in school mental health providers, creating a positive and supportive school climate, and student supports that fit into a tiered system
 - Fund educator professional development in restorative practices, responses to trauma, culturally responsive teaching, and SEL
5. Diversify and support the educator workforce:
 - Fund and implement recruitment, training, and retention of diverse teaching candidates, and cultivate a safe and supportive school climate

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