Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments for
Young Children, Preschool to Grade 3

July 2021

Brief 4: Creating Anti-Racist Early Learning Environments

The following early childhood brief was created as companion document for the [Elements of High Quality Kindergarten](#), [Elements of High Quality Elementary Classrooms](#) and the [joint position statement on play as an instructional strategy](#). The brief contains a summary of this topic along with strategies and approaches that reflect high quality early childhood practices. Each brief is followed by a list of related resources and references that were used to develop the brief.

The full set of briefs can be found on the [Department's Early Learning webpage](#).

- ➢ **Brief 1:** **Collaboration with Community Based Partners**
- ➢ **Brief 2:** **Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**
- ➢ **Brief 3:** **Supporting Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways**
- ➢ **Brief 4:** **Creating Antiracist Environments for Young Children**
- ➢ **Brief 5:** **Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

While the topics of these briefs are relevant to all grades, Preschool to 12th Grade, they are written with a particular focus on our youngest students, Preschool to 3rd grade.

Creating Antiracist Environments for Young Children

Over the past year, many districts, schools, and classrooms have progressed in a journey to address racial equity in a more explicit way. In Commissioner Riley's report, [Our Way Forward](#), he states:

> *…. across virtually all metrics, large achievement gaps persist for our students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. A recent report – [#1 For Some](#) – highlights these disparities, many of which are stark.[1]*

While inequalities based on racial and ethnic differences are not a new phenomenon, the understanding of the systemic nature of these inequalities and the desire or willingness to actively address them may be new for some. There has been a rise in social awareness of how prevalent violence and harm are for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as well as Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), and that these types of experiences have been part of the lived experience of historically marginalized populations for generations.

Children and families are experiencing and exposed to all of this, which is important for schools to address with administrators, educators, students and families. Ignoring these events and experiences in schools is often alienating and unsettling, particularly for those who have been historically marginalized. Furthermore, antiracist conversations must take place with staff, students, and families in developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive ways. The Massachusetts School Administrators Association (MSAA) wrote:

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[1] The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership (2018). [#1 for Some: Opportunity and Achievement in Massachusetts](#).

….We will remain steadfast in the pursuit of justice and equity for all. We guarantee that we will diligently and tirelessly examine our actions and our programs to promote equity and justice for all. We also recognize this will not be easy, but then again, no real accomplishment is ever achieved with ease… ([Position Statement](), March 22, 2021[)]()

District and schools are encouraged to join MSAA in the pursuit of justice and equity for all.

[Dena Simmons, Ed.D.]() is the founder of LiberatED, a collective focused on developing school-based resources at the intersection of social and emotional learning (SEL), racial justice, and healing. Dr Simmons outlines five actions for teaching for an antiracist future, in a 2019 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) article titled "[How to be an Antiracist Teacher]()":

1. Engage in Vigilant Self-Awareness:

    Self-reflection creates the opportunity to disrupt white privilege when it is witnessed or enacted. Much of the focus (both content and values) in schools is Eurocentric which means that there needs to be a self-awareness about how to disrupt this and to increase the representation, voice, and materials that represent non-white narratives.

2. Acknowledge Racism and the Ideology of White Supremacy:

    Understanding the historical context of racism, structural racism, the social construct of race, and the ideology of white supremacy in the context of society as a whole and in schools, in particular, is the first step in eliminating these harmful constructs and moving towards solutions.

3. Study and Teach Representative History

    Regardless of the subject area, all educators need to better understand U.S. history in order to better understand how the education system today was built to perpetuate inequality. History needs to include true depictions of Black excellence and go beyond teaching only about slavery and the civil rights movement, which do not get to the truth about racial oppression, and instead serve to uplift whiteness.

4. Talk About Race with Students

    Many educators are weary of discussing race with their students, but when these conversations are stifled, the message received by students could be that there is something wrong with people from another race. Age-appropriate conversations about race can start by reading stories with diverse characters and asking students to take on the perspectives of characters in these stories and provide them opportunities to share their personal experiences.

5. When You See Racism, Do Something

    All students and families deserve to have their full humanity recognized and to live and learn as their full and true selves. Begin to reflect on and address disparities in how the academic resources, policies, admissions, hiring, grading, behavior management practices, etc. might be racist. Use data to look at which students are benefitting from policies and which are being disadvantaged. Are policies enacted equitable and with the intended purpose in mind, or are biases in play?

To be an antiracist educator, all who work with students must actively work to dismantle the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that create barriers and perpetuate race-based inequities for people of color and other historically marginalized groups. Students, school and district staff, and families and

communities must see and respect the full humanity and dignity of all people. The Resources section at the end of this document (Appendix A) lists a number of resources for school administrators and educators on talking with children about race, equity and social justice; creating antiracist environments; and professional development on these topics.

For any questions, more information, or to speak with a member of DESE's Early Learning team about this document or the work in your community, please email achievement@doe.mass.edu.

Appendix A: Resources on Creating Anti-Racist Environments for Young Children

Resources for talking to children about race, equity, and social justice
1. KQED Mindshift:
   - [Teaching 6-Year-Olds About Privilege and Power](#)
2. [Learning for Justice](#) (formally Teaching Tolerance):
   - [Humanizing Asian Americans in the Classroom Through Children's Literature](#)
   - [Toolkit for Talking About Racism and Police Violence with Students](#)
   - [Lesson Plan Search Tool](#) : social justice lessons for all age levels on many topics
3. Sesame Workshop and PBS Kids:
   - [Coming Together: Talking to Children About Race and Identity](#)
   - [Sesame Street in Communities – Racial Justice](#)
   - [PBS KIDS Talk About: Race & Racism](#)
   - [Never Too Young: Ages and Stages of Racial Understanding](#)
   - [Focusing on Young Learners | Tools for Anti-Racist Teaching](#)

Creating AntiRacist Environments
1. EdWeek: [Strategies for Embracing Anti-Racist Work in Our Classrooms](#)
2. Edutopia:
   - [Creating an Anti-Racist Classroom](#)
   - [Educate to Liberate: Build an Anti-Racist Classroom](#)
3. Indianapolis Public Schools: [Four Ways to Create an Anti-Racist Learning Environment](#)
4. Teach for America: [Shaping an Anti-Racist School Culture](#)
5. Equity Audit: VA Department of Education.

Professional Development for Educators
1. Learning for Justice: [Self-Guided Learning](#)
2. DESE in partnership with the [Equity Imperative](#):
   The following professional development was offered during the 2020-21 school year. To access any of these recorded sessions, email achievement@doe.mass.edu
   - Anti-Racism Terms and Perspectives
   - Anti-Racist Family Engagement
   - Anti-Racist Advocates
   - Anti-Racist Instruction and Curriculum
   - Equity Lens on School Discipline

Other resources:
1. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture:
   - [Talking About Race](#)
   - [Self-Care](#)
2. Wheaton College Massachusetts: [Becoming an Anti-Racist Educator](#)
3. Diagnostic Checklist for Culturally Responsive Teaching: [Equity-in-Education_Research-Brief_FINAL.pdf (ccresa.net)](#)
4. National Association for the Education of Young Children – [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement](#)

Appendix B: References On Creating Anti-Racist Environments for Young Children

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* **. San Francisco: Jossey Bass/Wiley & Sons.**

Posamentier, J. (2020). "Supporting Racial Equity with Culturally Responsive Teaching and SEL", Committee for Children blog, September 1, 2020.