

Student Voices 2020

**Students weigh in on racism,
equity, and social justice in
Sonoma County Schools**

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Introduction

In the fall of 2020, based on student requests and in partnership with Santa Rosa City Schools, Sonoma County Office of Education set out to hear from students of color to understand individual struggles and the larger picture of the minority experience in Sonoma County schools. We don't see this as a manual for solving racial inequities, but an opportunity for educators and the community at large to begin to understand new perspectives on our schools, paving the way for positive, inclusive changes to curriculum, classroom environments, and campus communities. By listening to our students, we can ensure that everyone has the support they need to be healthy, feel welcome, and find success in school.

This report seeks to further amplify student perspective by highlighting common problems and challenges individual students and specific groups faced, while also making note of proposed solutions. We discovered many shared trends across the groups, so we've organized our analysis by those trends, while also presenting unique observations found within each group's forum to accurately reflect the different lived experiences of racial inequity. Looking beyond this document, we're focused on how to bring these perspectives, insights, and solutions to life across the broader community. It's our feeling that limiting our impact by only considering campuses and classrooms is to sell the people of Sonoma County short — specifically those facing inequities across the community.

The student voices captured in this report, and the recommended solutions that follow, can be used to better understand the experiences students encounter on campuses and in classrooms across Sonoma County. Schools should take student voices seriously and take concrete steps to address their concerns so that all students feel safe and engaged. These students voices that follow are a strong call to action — we can't sit by and do nothing. Working with a diverse group composed of students and educators representing districts across the county has resulted in recommendations for districts to adopt and put into place, largely informed by the students who participated in the forums. Many districts are already engaged in this work and we applaud their efforts.

HONORING STUDENT VOICES

Students are experts on their experience of school. Listening to students and coming alongside them to enact change can be a powerful and effective way to make informed policy decisions that benefit all students.

Who We Are

The student voices that follow all participated in the Student Voices Series held in the Fall of 2020. These virtual panel discussions provided a platform for students from representative racial and ethnic groups to speak to their experiences at schools across the County. Their involvement didn't stop with the Forums; many students from each event continued to be involved in the larger leadership discussions, driving the direction of our work and keeping their perspective at the center of all activity. In this way, the project is truly a reflection of the student voices we're advocating for. By setting this example, Sonoma County Office of Education looks forward to ongoing conversations, projects, and an evolved environment in which student voices are given space to breathe, thrive, and grow.

The Student Voices Series would not have been possible without the support and leadership of Sonoma County Office of Education/Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools. The strength and success of the series are a reflection of all who were involved, including the moderators and organizers:

Santa Rosa City Schools District

Diann Kitamura, Santa Rosa City Schools Superintendent

Monique Luke, Vice Principal at Montgomery High School

Gabriel Albavera, Principal at Elsie Allen High School

Delmar Billy, Restorative Specialist

Elizabeth Billy, Native American Community Worker

Challenges



CULTURAL IGNORANCE

Many of our students spoke about the impacts of cultural ignorance. This can come in many forms — from language barriers to generalizations, to cultural misconceptions or an understanding of what may be offensive. This type of ignorance can result in kids being misunderstood, mislabeled, or treated like “the other” — limiting their identity, access to social groups, and confidence at school.

From curriculum to individual attitudes, our students highlighted ways in which our schools fail to recognize their cultures. For some, what's being taught in the classroom comes up short, for others,

stereotypes and biases warp teacher/student relationships. No matter the circumstance, cultural ignorance is an obstacle to students feeling welcome and comfortable in the classroom.



“One of my teachers... asked me in front of my class where I'm from, and then asked if there was chocolate in Africa... The teacher addressed Africa as a country, which really got me a little mad because there are over 55 countries and even different cultures in the continent. I think that when you try and relate with the culture of a student, it's a tricky concept because you have to know, what kind of position am I in? It was terrible, especially because I was the only black person in the class... I appreciate that when teachers talk to me about my culture, where I'm from, when they address it, I like it. But there really is a balance.”

BETH
Black Student Voices

“I come from a small school and from a young age you're put into categories for friends and who you're supposed to be. I was the only person of color on the volleyball team and in student government. Students categorize themselves, at a young age we're being set aside. I'm in AP English, but as an English language learner, I've always been set aside.”

JACKIE
Indigenous Student Voices



“Learning about history and Thanksgiving was upsetting. That was the only time I felt alienated. You don't want to participate. You don't feel represented. Textbooks were really outdated.”

SHAYLIE
Indigenous Student Voices

“A teacher mentioned that if I use my native religion to pray I could have a better grade. There's a big, big gap that needs to be closed and taught in which to gain cultural competence.”

REYNALDA
Indigenous Student Voices



“My freshman year I had a substitute. While we were learning about Asia... He looked at the map. And he pointed at China. And he was like, “Who can tell me about China.” And no one raised their hand. And he pointed at me and I was one of two Asian kids in the class. And he goes, “You seem like you know about China.” And I was like, that's just wrong on all levels because as one of the two Asian students, I shouldn't be expected to be able to teach about China. It's also not the country that I am from. And then on top of that, my dad's adopted so I don't know much about Korea either.”

AVA

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

“When I was in second grade, I was among one of the top students in English, and yet I was still given supplemental reading lessons. It wasn't to get even better. It was to get to the other kids' level... I asked them, 'why am I going through this, I already know how to do this'. They replied 'it's because your family's from a different country'. I don't think they did it out of malicious intent, but it was definitely a veil of ignorance they were looking through.”

TAYLOR

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices



“I feel like as a student having a teacher say your name the wrong way, it's one thing to mispronounce somebody's name because it has hard spelling, but after you say it a certain amount of times in a wrong way, it becomes a source of belittlement kind of like I'm not going to understand it after a certain amount of times after somebody tells you your name, you still can't get my name and it's in the middle of a whole entire school year.”

ESSENCE
Black Student Voices

Challenges

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES



LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES

Students expressed concerns about equitable access to learning opportunities and resources, as well as the apparent limitations of access to leadership roles or social groups based on how they are traditionally organized or advertised.

Privilege can take the form of generational experience and expertise. Students from households where the parents are comfortable navigating school institutions have a leg up in identifying and taking advantage of opportunities and resources.

It's incumbent on our schools and educators to make sure that all students have access to those opportunities and resources.

“Schools are prioritizing white history more than they are black history. And that's evident in the classes that are being taught. So I just think we should really implement ethnic studies, whether that be African American studies or Native American indigenous studies. We just need an ethnic studies period.”

LIYAH

Black Student Voices

“Include diverse learning materials. Create assignments that celebrate different cultures and religions.”

KASHAYA

Indigenous Student Voices





“It's important that teachers share resources with their students. There's a cultural difference in what people know about the paths they can take.”

MAR
Latinx Student Voices

“I remember one assignment and my cousin said, yeah, you know, everyone in the class got a book except us, and these two other girls got our books. So, some of them got two books and the teacher's response was, ‘I'm saving them for next year.’”

ZOYA
Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Challenges



LACK OF REPRESENTATION

Our students explored their experiences of not seeing adequate representation for people of color. It can be hard to have confidence and feel the support you need to excel in school when you're the only one in the class that looks like you — and, then, on top of that, you don't see anyone in leadership or on the school advertisements that look like you, either.



"I've felt insecure about being inside my skin, being the color that I am, being a dark skin young lady in a society that's never deemed my ethnicity nor identity as something important. In general, I feel like... As I've grown, I've had to kind of find that self confidence within myself to be more confident to display. I'm an African American female and I'm confident. I don't have to look like this person and that person because I am beautiful. One moment when I really felt I could relate to somebody in my school environment was when Ms. Luke joined our faculty."

A M E N A
Black Student Voices

"With English being my second language, sometimes I would, and still do, pronounce words "incorrectly" or pronounce them with an accent. Sometimes kids would laugh at how I said words like "error." I remember also having people point out that I said certain words in an accent made me uncomfortable. After hearing a Spanish speaking teacher talk to us about her own experiences with being made fun of for speaking a certain way, I felt like I was seen."

M A R
Latinx Student Voices



“Representation does matter, it does show in the classroom. It's important for students to look up and see teachers that look just like them. [If representation isn't possible] it's important that they [teachers] learn about our culture. They'll say "I don't see color," but it's important that they do see color. It's important that we learn the difference between equity and equality. It's important for teachers to educate themselves about their students.”

ANA

Latinx Student Voices

“I learned about some of the demographics of our leadership and I learned that like our leadership was... predominantly homogeneous white and it was one of those things where I realized I was like it clicked together. And I was like, maybe that's why I don't really like rallies maybe that's why all the leadership stuff always seems like it's for this one specific group of people and not for the other 50% of people on campus.”

MACKENZIE

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Challenges

LACK OF EMPATHY



LACK OF EMPATHY

Students often mentioned how important it is for classmates and teachers to have empathy — and they also brought up many instances of feeling marginalized due to a lack of empathy.



“Educators can make their classroom more welcoming before their lessons, especially lessons of English literature and history lessons about slavery and segregation. The teacher should pay attention to who's in their class and try to have some empathy on how it would feel if they were discussing those topics and they were of that race. Let's say a Black student, when they're teaching about slavery. They should think about how they, before they even teach the lesson to the kids, empathy goes a long way and if they can put themselves in the student's shoes that will make the classroom a lot more comfortable for those certain students.”

DEANDRE
Black Student Voices



“When I was a sophomore at Piner, my teacher had different ways of thinking about things than I did. [My friends and I were making] lighthearted jokes around each other and one asked “do you get a lot of money because of your Native American casino?” My teacher came up to me and I don't think she was trying to be rude or anything, but she's like, you know, it seems kinda outdated to me for you guys to be getting money. I didn't know what to say, so I asked what do you mean by that. The teacher said, well, everything happened so long ago, why are you guys still getting money right now. I was just so awestruck by the fact she asked that.”

YAKEZ

Indigenous Student Voices

“On the off chance the teacher did hear [a racial insult], it would usually lead to what I like to call the tolerance talk — which is where the teacher goes to the whole class and says, Ava experienced racism today. And now we're going to talk about it and we're inclusive and we want to make sure everyone feels heard. And I appreciate the sentiment. I appreciate them making it very clear that their classroom was meant to be inclusive. But I've noticed that it makes me more uncomfortable than the person who was being racist.”

AVA

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Challenges



POOR CURRICULUM

Many of our students feel their educational materials are severely lacking — in terms of accuracy or thoroughness, as well as cultural representation and sensitivity. But it goes beyond texts — students aren't getting an accurate, truthful account of current scholarship or counternarratives that establish a broader understanding and shared, expanded, reality.



“I think one way that we could really help students understand the impact that Black people have put in America, is by implementing the 1619 Project into classrooms. I really think that that is a vital source into showing kids, not kids, but into showing high schoolers how America was really built off of the backs of slaves because before personally, for me, before taking my JC history class I knew very minimally about slaves. I was in middle school and even in high school, slavery is not talked about as much as the Civil War... You don't really learn that slavery was one of the main causes of the Civil War... It really frustrates me.”

LIYAH
Black Student Voices

“In history class, we had three days of learning about islanders, and we watched clips from Moana. That was the most representation we got in class.”

KAILA
Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices



“People from any cultural background and social context can always have a mission. We're here to learn from each other. We can renew the values in which our system is made. We want educators to know more about us, to not be afraid to ask us about our cultures. There's a language that is lacking in the system, we can't talk to each other in a way that is open minded...[everyone] has a personal responsibility to educate themselves. Our educators can learn more and engage with our communities.”

REYNALDA
Indigenous Student Voices

“When I was in 5th grade a new student from Mexico came to my school and he didn't speak any English. I know Spanish so I started helping him in class. I would help him a lot with translating work that we did in the class because there wasn't really anyone to help him translate what we were doing. Similarly, now in high school, a friend of a friend speaks mostly Spanish yet is in classes that are in English and often had to ask other students for help her translate her work.”

MAR
Latinx Student Voices

Challenges

ISOLATION AND DIMINISHMENT



ISOLATION AND DIMINISHMENT

Whether it's due to overt racial bias or ignorance, students of color often experience feeling isolated, diminished, unseen. The isolation can lead to poor performance in schools, depression, and increased ignorance or even animosity among students.



“In February of 2020, the Model UN flew to DC for a conference. Out of 17 students, there were only 3 people of color — I was the only woman. It was a big deal for me, my family is undocumented. At the conference, I stood on the sidelines, thinking I didn't have anyone to talk to. I felt a little uncomfortable, speaking spanish on the phone with my mom. I'd look around and everyone would be looking at me differently. When I got back home, it was a good experience, but I was talking to my mom about feeling left out as the only latina. Most other latinx students don't want to participate in MUN because it's predominantly white. When I talk to my other classmates, they say they don't want to overstep and so they stay away.”

JIMENA
Latinx Student Voices

"I didn't grow up seeing a lot of people who look like me... it wasn't until I was older that I realized what racism was, what micro aggressions are. It was just so normalized. There's also a culture of self-deprecation... trying to fit in, you kind of make fun of yourself... it's not okay."

ZOYA

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices



"Any time we're in a topic of slavery, I just already know people are... not even looking at me, but I just feel the presence because I'm usually the only Black guy in the classroom. And so any time we're going through slavery or any books like Huckleberry Finn, that book, oh my goodness, it's so uncomfortable."

TEDDY

Black Student Voices

"Self-segregation is a real thing. We do it to protect our culture, a sense of safety, people won't be judging us. I was really glad when I got to my freshman year, it was a fresh start and I didn't have to be known as the english language learner. I felt encouraged to join clubs and sports. I see self-segregation at my school, mostly Spanish speakers, and I try to reach out and make those people feel welcome and comfortable."

JIMENA O.

Latinx Student Voices



"I have faced certain things with students, like, people pulling the corner of their eyes to be Asian or asking, "You're Asian so do you eat dogs?" Or, "You're asian, you're smart, can you help me with my homework?" ... These were my friends... these were, like, good kids. But, everyone was doing it. So, whenever I feel uncomfortable, I just feel like, maybe I'm just too sensitive so I just started playing along with it and eventually I just started tuning that stuff out and letting it slip, which is a shame...the teachers don't notice [some of the insults] because a lot of it is playground talk, you know, the teachers can't be there for everything.And, you're not going to go to the teachers, or at least I didn't, because you don't want to be that one kid that he gets super offended at a joke that some kid says on the slide... you want to be cool."

HY

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Challenges



OVERT RACISM

From blatantly bigoted insults to aggressively pushing racial stereotypes, our students said they've experienced a wide range of overt racism.



"I've been called a slave and told to pick cotton as joke and was told if you're not white, then you're not right, also as a 'joke.'"

LIYAH

Black Student Voices

"I always felt that I was falling behind. I was bullied a lot, things like 'why are you here if you don't speak English?'. [There's] a language barrier that we all have to overcome eventually. A lot of people don't realize that this [English] is a second language. It's a struggle in your younger years. I've worked hard to master both languages."

FABIAN

Latinx Student Voices

Ignorance breeds racism. For students in environments where cultural competency isn't taught, the lack of cultural context and understanding results in racist

behavior that has serious safety and well-being implications for its target.



“When I was little, I always had long hair and I was very proud of it. A lot of the kids at school did not get that that was something that [Native American] boys wore with pride. It was discouraging. I felt like I was being bullied for trying to honor who I was.”

JULIAN
Indigenous Student Voices

“In terms of like everything that's been happening with a pandemic, it's definitely gotten worse...When I was handing papers over to a girl who I've known for years, she immediately kind of flinched back and said, "Don't touch me. Get away from me." And then she whispered to her friend and said, "I feel sick already, I think I have Covid"...[Our class] had a trip planned to go to Chinatown and then despite everyone's remarks about how Asian students in my school have Covid, how they're scared, how the brutality against each other the Asians in the Bay Area are justified, they immediately jumped at going to Chinatown and they were so excited. So for them to be so hypocritical and say, "Oh, [you] carry the coronavirus" and all these racial slurs... to suddenly want to go to Chinatown, just because they want to skip out school, just felt really wrong.”

ELIZABETH
Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Unique Insights



BLACK VOICES INSIGHTS

The Black Student Forum was a wide-ranging conversation that explored deep wounds based on overt racism, as well as the systemic ignorance of the black experience in America due to outdated and inaccurate curriculum. One unique perspective the black student voices brought to the forums was the idea of the role schools play in fostering a shared sense of humanity between students, their teachers, and their peers.



“It’s important to stress the importance of educators making or helping more diverse kids feel more comfortable in their classroom environment. I believe in a sense they kind of bypass certain racial things that happen in the classroom because they’re uncomfortable with it. I believe that they should be teaching humanity to little kids instead of just teaching kids about slavery. Teach us about humanity. Teach us why it’s bad. Teach us why you guys shouldn’t treat this kid differently because of the color of his skin. Teach us this at young ages.”

ESSENCE

Black Student Voices

That humanity doesn’t just include racial differences — it includes the teacher-student hierarchy. A dialogue between students and teachers is restorative,

allowing the learning environment to become a back and forth, not just a one-way transmission.



“Our issues get swept underneath the rug. I feel like teachers with all kids should treat us students as if we're humans, we should all have human connections. Don't treat us as if there's a difference between a student and a teacher, because at the end of the day we're all still human beings. You can relate to me by showing me that you're human showing me that you care, having actual conversation, making eye contact with me, calling me by my first name, calling me by my last name. It's just the little small things, that people can do to just make their students feel more comfortable.”

AMENA
Black Student Voices

Insights & Takeaways

- Cultural competency is critical
- Focus on empathy
- Increase representation

Unique Insights



INDIGENOUS VOICES INSIGHTS

The Indigenous student forum discussed the impact of cultural incompetence, the failures of unbalanced curriculum, and the isolation that comes with minimal representation.

Indigenous students highlighted cultural competency as an area in the classroom that needs

to be addressed. From misrepresenting history to perpetuating stereotypes, it's clear that cultural ignorance excludes Indigenous students from the school community by failing to accurately represent their cultures, histories, and identities.



“I think teachers should go through some training to have a basic knowledge of the Native Americans that come from this area. Teachers should be able to give students options, we're young, still trying to figure out who we are.”

YAKEZ
Indigenous Student Voices



Representation and connection were common threads in stories of success and safety at school:

“A teacher mentioned to me that he was planning to teach about Native Americans and I thought, oh, you're thinking of me and my culture, you're seeing me as a whole individual and that made me feel seen. Just acknowledging that you're being seen and heard through a curriculum, it was nice to hear that.”

REYNALDA
Indigenous Student Voices

“My english teacher, he is a person of color, he makes sure to share people from different ethnicities. He's very supportive of us as students and individual people. He's just always there.”

KASHAYA
Indigenous Student Voices

Insights & Takeaways

- Expand and update curriculum
- Cultural competency is critical
- Increase representation

Unique Insights



LATINX VOICES INSIGHTS

The Latinx students who participated in our conversation spoke about language barriers, isolation, and the important role education plays in their ability to secure a positive, productive future.

The cultural barriers have left some of our Latinx students feeling mislabeled as strictly English language learners, limiting their identity and subsequent access to social groups, opportunities and resources.

Isolation, either finding themselves the only Latinx student or student of color in certain settings, or self-segregation, whereby Latinx students edit themselves through group and social participation — or lack thereof — was touched on by several of our Latinx students.



“Just being in AP or Honors classes and not seeing a lot of diversity can be kind of disheartening. I think there's a lot of students that are capable of taking these advanced classes but maybe are held back because of the lack of diversity. Sometimes in my history class we will have discussions about issues that POC face in the U.S. and it's all white people contributing to the conversations.”

M A R

Latinx Student Voices

“Teachers can be more culturally inclusive and welcoming by becoming emotionally invested in students. A teacher taking interest in you, you don't want to let them down. Every expectation is met, I developed my own pride in my academic performance. They saw something in me and believed in me. They expected me to do things they knew I could do.”

S A M

Latinx Student Voices



“Having Latinx teachers and/or teachers that speak your language and know the cultural differences or barriers that Latinx kids face, especially if they’re first generation (in my experience), is incredibly helpful. My Spanish teacher freshman and sophomore year really made me feel welcome in her class. Her classroom also just seemed to become a safe space for me and a lot of other Latinx students on campus. I felt a difference when I was in her class versus when I went to my Honors english class next period (which had mostly white students).”

MAR

Latinx Student Voices

Insights & Takeaways

- The power of connection
- Cultural competency is critical
- Increase representation

Unique Insights



ASIAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER VOICES INSIGHTS

The Asian-Pacific Islander (API) student forum spent a great deal of time unpacking one of the most damaging stereotypes for them: the myth of the model minority. This stereotype perpetuates the idea that all API students — as a monolith — excel in school and in their professions; that they're all good at math, that they don't have the same struggles as other people of color.



“Math is probably one of my weakest subjects... yet, for some reason it was always expected that I'd have the answers... It wasn't really me being like, "this is wrong that I'm being held up to the standard." It was more stress being like, "Okay, I have to figure this out. And then I have to live up to the standard and help everyone else out. So it was less of a this is wrong to be expected of me and more of a. How do I fit this kind of expectation that people have of me.”

AVA

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices



“Something that I think I've personally always struggled with is there's this expectation of kind of excellence — sometimes where even among like my own community. Sometimes I'm just like, guys, it's okay, it's like academics are important. And this is an expectation to do well. But then at the same time, if you do a certain thing or if you look a certain way, then you're automatically kind of counted out as like different.”

MACKENZIE

Asian & Pacific Islander Student Voices

Insights & Takeaways

- Avoid monolithic stereotypes
- Expand and update curriculum
- Increase representation

Other Insights

Tacit Approval From Teachers or Staff

One student, when discussing how a teacher kept mixing up the names of the only two black students in class, allowed the mixup to become a larger trope in which all the other students participated. The student observed: "once it gets to the students, it gets to more students, then it gets to other teachers and it pretty much just gets spread around the whole school, it doesn't just stay within that class."

Tacit approval of racist behavior can cause a chain reaction that can lead to systemic, schoolwide mistreatment and insensitivity.

Mental & Emotional Health

We generally understand that overt racism is traumatic — and that trauma affects a student's overall health. But it's also important to note that more subtle actions or policies—from lack of representation, to cultural ignorance or unbalanced curriculum—can also cause students to struggle emotionally.

"I think it's very bad for my mental health... because I'm going to school, having to deal with everyone at school, I'm also going home and relaxing and I'm doing my own research on things that I should be taught at school. On things that should be communicated to other people."

— Essence

Current Events Exacerbate Challenges

From controversies around the Black Lives Matter movement to racist remarks related to Covid, we heard from many students that current events outside the classroom can greatly complicate the work of equity and acceptance within our schools.

Solutions

What are we doing well in our schools? And how can we improve? We need to emphasize what's working, while also committing ourselves to take action and address what's not working in our classrooms and on our campuses.

No matter the specific issues our students encounter, from cultural incompetence to a lack of representation, we can engage in new practices and ways of thinking that bring real, immediate change. We're presented with a powerful opportunity to redefine our learning spaces, to reshape our cultural contours and ensure that everyone is accounted for, welcomed, and made to feel safe and ready for success.

Engage in a restorative manner with students to elevate their voices. Some tangible practices include:

- **Define your school's culture collaboratively**, working with educators, students, and families to establish a truly representative school identity.
- **School-Based Forums** — replicate the Student Voices Forums in your own school community.
- **Develop a Student Consulting Cohort** — a broad coalition of students, representing a wide range of experiences, equipped with training and cultural standards, can become a powerful collaborator for educators, improving the learning and school experience for all.
 - http://gse.hightechhigh.org/unboxed/issue15/student_consulting_disrupting_student-teacher_hierarchies/
 - <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-students-as-consultants-reframing-teacher-student-relationships/2016/08>
- **Shadow a Student** — see the school experience through your students' eyes, developing new insights and deeper empathy that can translate into revisions and adaptations that expand the availability of classroom success for more students.
 - <https://dschool.stanford.edu/shadow-a-student-k12>
- **Empathy Interviews** — like shadowing a student, empathy interviews give educators a greater understanding of what students are really experiencing at school and in the classroom.
 - <https://www.hightechhigh.org/teachercenter/change-packages/empathy-interviews/>

Solutions

Institute an Ethnic Studies Curriculum

"I think it should just be normalized to just include history about all different cultures, not just white culture because I know another thing, I know nothing about Mexican culture. I know nothing about Indian culture. I know nothing about anyone's culture, really, except for white culture."

— Essence

This is a cross-cultural problem; students know little about their fellow students' ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, which leads to breakdowns in understanding one another. And this gap in our education leads not only to ignorance but also to a bigger humanitarian problem.

"It's so important to have an ethnic studies department, we would be able to teach these upcoming alumni, our future, that a Black Lives Matter movement is not political. It's not something it's not even a discussion. It's just a fact. Black Lives Matter. Black lives do not matter at this moment in time, black lives have not mattered from 400 years back to now, point being Black lives still do not matter."

— Nicole

"In my history class last year we were studying WWII. World War II took place not only in Europe but in Asia as well, yet all I remember learning about was the events that took place in Europe because they're more emphasized I think. The "world" isn't just Europe." — Mar

To start the process of implementing an Ethnic Studies program:

- Access resources online through the State of California
- Contact districts who've implemented a program, such as Santa Rosa City Schools and Healdsburg Unified School District
- Engage your community in the process of adopting a curriculum
- Give marginalized groups a say in what's going to be taught

Solutions

Expand Counseling to Encompass A Broader Range of Experiences

"Until I went to college... I didn't understand why I was so aggressive coming to school every day, just mad, for no reason. Just simple microaggressions that were adding and building, and adding and building. Having a counselor that understood. Soon as I walked in, she said, 'Girl, what's wrong with you? Come sit down and talk to me.' Just that, I almost broke down crying."

— Nicole

Commit to building up a counseling infrastructure that addresses the deeper struggles of kids traumatized by systemic racism. Through professional learning, and investment in trauma-informed care, and representational hiring practices, school counseling can tackle implicit-bias and expand to be explicitly anti-racist.

Ensure that your school's counseling program is accessible to anyone who wants it and that your program addresses the deeper struggles of students traumatized by systemic racism:

- Anti-racist counseling
- Implicit-bias training
- Trauma-informed Care

Solutions

Commit to Enhanced Safety for All

"I feel now more than ever... just being in America. It's a scary thing to be a person of color."

— Essence

"Something that happens subconsciously is that we have a checklist of teachers. So when something happens, like something bad or some experience where the teacher just doesn't acknowledge you you kind of check that box for the teachers subconsciously, like, Oh, I can't talk to that teacher."

— Zoya

Some of our kids of color feel scared in America. Others feel compelled to find ways to protect themselves from educators because they don't trust them to be sensitive to racial bias. Our students spend a huge portion of their lives in our schools — we have an obligation to help them feel safe in their own skin.

Start with an examination of the policies and practices already in place in your school community. An audit can unearth what's helping everyone and what might be holding some students back, making them feel unsafe and unwelcome. Specifically, consider:

- Bullying policies
- Campus policing assessment, evaluate efficacy
- Student surveys
- Investment in restorative practices
- Community building
- Increase student input and buy-in

Solutions

Engage with Culturally Relevant Schooling

Students highlighted the need for schools to be more inclusive and culturally relevant. From fostering open, effective communication to expanded and updated curriculum, they offered their ideas on how schools can embrace and engage with students of color.

"It has to come from getting a lot more students involved in leading activities or creating their own groups. Groups where people can feel safe and learn about one another's culture without ever being in a disrespectful manner." — Julian

"The ability for schools to reach out to parents needs to improve. Make time for parents at different times in the day. Take the time to really understand the lifestyle of the parents and the family." — Yakez

"Don't frown upon a lack of English understanding. It's not that they don't want to learn. They don't know everything you're saying, they have to fill in the gaps for themselves. We're trying very hard to learn and move ahead. We need to be able to learn more about these cultures and communities that came before. We don't learn about the colonized, we learn about the colonizers. It's our history, it's important to us, we have a right to know about it." — Fabian

"It's important to always build a connection, to understand their background and history. Everybody needs that support." — Omar

"Faculty can make a change slowly by having class discussions about Privilege and Identity, in spaces where kids, teens and even adults can respect, support, and allow peers to make emotional and mentally challenging risks: Teachers can address defensive feelings, help us develop understandings of ourselves and others." — Amena

"Faculty can Have students evaluate their Identities by asking questions like, Which identities are most essential to you and the environment you live in? What do you like or gain from those/ certain identities? What do you wish people knew about a certain identity: Those questions open up the opportunity for us to understand all social groups have valuable qualities." — Amena

"Which identities are you more + less aware of and why? How do your different identities affect who you are, your experiences, and how you see the world: This shows everyone how some are / aren't at a systematic advantage and allows one to put themselves in somebody else's shoes without bias." — Amena

Solutions

Engage with Culturally Relevant Schooling

“Have students think about attitudes , behaviors, prejudices, stereotypes, and gender appropriate behaviors they've seen acted out towards people or races besides them : Making sure every student realizes everyone has been socialized to have changed views of each other : Making students and faculty more aware of bias that goes on due to personal and cultural experiences of oppression.”
— Amena

“PLEASE Teach kids Privilege does not mean somebody is a better person or a bad person. Privilege is all about Access. Minorities are more inclined to have societal disadvantages with things like Housing, Job Access, Medical help and much more. : By teaching kids what privilege is in a controlled environment It stops us from using shame and defensiveness to ignore topics that need to be discussed to form a better understanding and society in our future.” —Amena

To engage with culturally relevant learning, we recommend the following, including resources:

- Recruit a diverse teaching body that reflects student makeup
 - Assess recruitment policies to reflect diversity
- Sign the Sonoma County Equity in Education Initiative pledge, let your community know that you're committed to anti-racism in our community and equity for all in our classrooms

Solutions

Emphasize Holistic, Empathetic Professional Learning

Schools can support teachers and staff in developing the confidence, skills, and understanding to support students of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds.

This may be accomplished through developing curriculum and measurable standards, but it can't simply be another "thing" for staff to keep in mind.

And what about the broader community? Finding ways to extend the conversation to parents and the community at large could help the entire region learn and grow together.

"In the classroom, addressing and talking about problems is critical... how an educator addresses and talks about the racial problems in a classroom. Firstly, I think it's important to keep in mind that none of this is really political because racism has been present long before the Constitution, let alone public schools. So I think educators should firstly educate themselves... so that they themselves may clearly fathom that their black and brown students might have it much harder in the real world."

— Beth

Consider the following professional development for educators:

- Anti-racist Training
- Courageous Conversations
- Unconscious Bias Training
- Self-care

Summary

BIPOC students from learning communities across Sonoma County showed incredible courage by publicly sharing their classroom and campus experiences. The Forums can become a space for minority students to continue to share, continue to heal, and continue to grow — an ongoing record of the voices that for too long have gone unacknowledged and for whom education has routinely failed. It's incumbent on all educators, administrators, public officials, and community members to honor that bravery by taking steps to correct the inequities and injustices like those detailed in the Student Voices Forums.

We shouldn't start small, but should always remember that real change is a process. To that end, this report outlines actionable solutions to the inequities faced in our classrooms. From instituting Ethnic Studies programs to expanding curriculum to reflect the students of color in our classrooms, from teacher recruitment practices to additional professional development, we've proposed solutions that ensure all of our students can feel safe at school, and focus more of their energy on success in their education.



Sonoma County
Office of Education

**For more information about
the Student Voices Series,
visit www.SoCoVoices.org.**