2021 Spotlight on Sonoma County Schools

Building Equitable Schools
Helping Our Diverse School Community Thrive and Grow
We are living in an ever-changing community that is part of a constantly evolving world. As County Superintendent, I believe that we, as educators, are called on to grow, adjust, and be responsive to the needs of the students we serve.

Wildfires, floods, pandemics, social movements, and a shifting economy have changed the fabric of our community. They have stressed our mental health and resiliency. At the same time, our students are more diverse than ever before, and we are tasked with preparing them for a world that is radically different from the one that existed just 10 years ago.

During the summer of 2020, as civil unrest rippled across the country, students of color reached out to local educational leaders and asked for a chance for their voices to be heard. When we really began listening, we were saddened by what we heard: Instances of overt and more subtle racism were far too common in our schools, and this had serious consequences.

Students felt less engaged in their education, less motivated to do well. This can be seen in our county’s statistics: Many groups of students of color are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, or chronically absent than their white counterparts. They graduate and go to college at lower rates. These numbers, and the students’ own voices, serve as a powerful call to action to do better.

Schools can and should consider student voices when they develop policies that impact those students. I commend our local educators for rising to the occasion to listen to our students when they asked to be heard, and to consider change when they asked for it.

One thing we are acting on at the Sonoma County Office of Education is teacher diversity. While Latinx students make up 46 percent of our student body, only 8 percent of teachers represent this group. We know that students are more engaged and do better when they see leaders in the school system who look like them and understand their background. This is why my office has launched a teacher diversity full scholarship program to help encourage and expand the opportunities for diverse teaching candidates. Turn to the back page of this publication to learn more about this initiative.

Meanwhile, many local schools are committed to having hard yet civil conversations about how best to serve all their students.

Whether you are a parent, a student, an educator, or a community member, I invite you to read about the work being done in Sonoma County to make our schools more equitable and ensure brighter futures for all our children regardless of their economic background, skin color, or sexual orientation.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Herrington, Ph.D.
Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools
Diverse Students, Inequitable Outcomes

Sonoma County Students Percentages by Race/Ethnicity 2019-20

- **3.1%** Asian
- **1.6%** Black/African American
- **46.6%** Hispanic/Latino
- **41.5%** White
- **.9%** American Indian
- **.8%** Filipino
- **.4%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- **.7%** None Reported
- **4.5%** Two or More Races

Percentages of Total Sonoma County Student* and Teacher* Populations by Race/Ethnicity

- **46.6%** Hispanic/Latino
- **41.5%** White
- **4.3%** Asian / Pacific Islander
- **4.6%** Native American
- **7.8%** African American

Students of color in Sonoma County see far fewer teachers who look like them than white students.

Student Outcome Rates by Race/Ethnicity 2018-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
<th>College-Going Rate</th>
<th>Suspension Rate</th>
<th>Chronic Absenteeism Rate</th>
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<tr>
<td>County Average</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>69.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
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<td>62.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Reported</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teacher data is from most recent year available, 2018-19.
*Student data is from 2019-20.

These numbers, and the students’ own voices, serve as a powerful call to action to do better.
Students candidly shared their experiences within our local schools, relating times that they felt alienated or treated differently because of their race/ethnicity, how that impacted their learning, and their ideas for how teachers and school administrators could help them feel a greater sense of belonging. While each student experience was unique, the forums surfaced some common problems that many students and specific groups faced, while also making note of proposed solutions. Following are some of the experiences that were shared.

While students shared a diverse set of experiences, many common themes emerged. Following are some of the most common challenges that students shared during the forums.

**Curriculum**
Many students did not see themselves or their cultures well represented in their classes and instruction.
“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

Stereotypes/Cultural Ignorance
Many students spoke about feeling stereotyped or misunderstood. This can result in kids being misunderstood, mislabeled, or treated like “the other” — limiting their identity, access to social groups, and confidence at school.

“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

Overt Racism
Many students talked about being treated unfairly by their teachers or bullied/mistreated by their peers because of their race, ethnicity, or cultural background.

“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

Lack of Representation
Minority students often feel isolated, alone, and wish there were teachers or school leaders who looked like them.

“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.”

— Amena, Black 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.”

— Hy, a participant in the Asian American/Pacific Islander Student Voices Forum.
Finding Common Ground Through Books

Books and stories can provide a powerful way for people to connect across their differences and find common ground.

Created by local educators and librarians, The Conversations in Common reading project was launched during the 2020-21 school year to provide resources for having age-appropriate, respectful, productive conversations around racism and inequality. The goal, according to Matthew Morgan, superintendent and principal of the Harmony Union School District, “is to navigate this charged field with integrity and compassion in a supportive classroom environment.”

Developed during last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests, a team representing multiple school districts wanted to engage students and parents in issues of equity, diversity, and belonging.

Three age-appropriate books were chosen: Dreamers by Yuyi Morales and Red: A Crayon’s Story, by Michael Hall for grades TK-5/6, and This Book Is Anti-Racist by Tiffany Jewell for grades 6-12. Teachers used a common text, a common discussion format, and common timing. More than 40 teachers and librarians around the county participated.

Salmon Creek Charter School fourth grade teacher Erica Ferguson connected Dreamers to her students’ study of butterfly migration. “Butterflies are a running theme across some pages. That was one of the ways we were able to start our discussion: What is it about this family’s movement from Mexico to America that mirrors the butterfly’s movement? Well, they’re going from one place they may know really well to a place they don’t know and have never been so they have to guess.”

Tanya Turneaure teaches seventh and eighth grade humanities also at Salmon Creek School in Occidental, and has led her class through several chapters of This Book is Anti-Racist. They used the book as a way to talk about identity and privilege, she said.

“The kids created an imaginary box on paper, a social construct,” said Turneaure. “And then they placed themselves based on various characteristics inside the box or outside the box. Are you a native English speaker or is English a second or third language? Are you male or are you female? Are you a citizen or not a citizen? Are you white or a person of color? Some kids are very aware of privilege already, and some of the kids reflected that they had never thought about it this way. They wrote very profound reflections.”

Ferguson feels it’s important for people to try and understand one another more. This can start in the classroom, she says. “We don’t want to make these topics taboo anymore. Our goal is to teach courageous conversations and engage the kids in guiding it. It feels really good in the wake of all the scary, unprecedented uncertainty of the past year to be doing something positive right now.”
Ethnic Studies Offers Increased Engagement and Critical Thinking

Following the protests and civil unrest that occurred last summer, many educators recognized an opportunity to integrate curriculum and discussion that is inclusive of the contributions of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

In March, after five years of revisions, the California Board of Education approved historic ethnic studies guidance for high schools. While its use is not mandated, this blueprint curriculum is intended to help school districts develop courses that are academically rigorous and aligned with state standards. These courses are also intended to offer students more culturally diverse and engaging curriculum that requires active application of knowledge and skills, so that students can develop excellent critical thinking skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Hundreds of California high schools have opted to offer these courses and many other local schools are developing courses.

Santa Rosa City Schools is one local school district that has been working since 2015 on ways to incorporate ethnic studies in English and history classes. “We’ve developed four ethnic studies courses that stick with the basic tenets of the state’s guidance and are applicable to our community,” said Elizabeth Evans, SRCS’ former director of Teaching and Learning. The SRCS class of 2025 will be the first class to have taken an ethnic studies course as a graduation requirement.

Ethnic studies can empower and engage students in their education by making it feel more relevant to their lives. According to Evans, research shows that students who participate in ethnic studies have higher graduation rates and their grade point averages go up significantly. “Attendance is better and students feel more engaged,” said Evans. “It’s not just good for our BIPOC students, it’s good for all students. If we don’t know the historic contributions of our diverse community members then we’re missing out on a really important part of our understanding of California.”

SRCS student board representative and recent graduate Omar Lopez was instrumental in providing a student perspective to the ethnic studies. “For a lot of students from ethnic backgrounds it allows them to see themselves in history,” said Lopez. “It allows students to have a personal connection and it’s something you pay more attention to.”

“We offer four ethnic studies courses right now and one of those courses is an elective middle school course,” said Evans. “Ideally we’d love to have ethnic studies K-12. We think of ethnic studies as a discrete class but we also think of ethnic studies as a lens to view all curriculum. For example, we have a class that’s called Statistics for Social Justice that was piloted this school year at Elsie Allen High School. It brings the lens of ethnic studies to look at statistical problems of a neighborhood or a community.”

Lopez feels ethnic studies offer a positive opportunity for all students. “It allows students to hear different perspectives,” he said. “It increases their knowledge of history and English and literature to see all kinds of things they might not otherwise see.”

“**If we don’t know the historic contributions of our diverse community members then we’re missing out on a really important part of our understanding of California.**”

Examples of ethnic studies classrooms in another California school district.
“Somebody that finally looks like me.”

— A local high school student of color describing how she felt when a teacher of the same minority group came to her school. “I felt included...I felt like I could relate to somebody.”

According to the California Department of Education, teachers of color boost the academic performance, graduation rates, and aspirations to attend college of students of color. Yet in Sonoma County, many students never see a teacher who looks like them.

“I want to help bilingual families since I know what it’s like to translate my own parent-teacher meetings and I didn’t want another student to deal with that. I always said my life goal would be to make a positive impact on a child’s life.

Special education has made me see that every little triumph is a celebration and I know I am making positive progress towards my life goal.”

— Ada Medina-Tellez
NCSOE graduate and local special education teacher

SCOE is committed to growing a diverse teacher workforce to best serve all our students. We are offering full credential scholarships to diverse teacher candidates who already have their bachelor’s degrees, through the North Coast School of Education (NCSOE).

Learn more about how you can make a difference in students’ lives.

Apply at ncsoe.org