



The Student-Affirming Education Needed for Our Children and Our Nation's Future

Chris Dier, 2020 Louisiana Teacher of the Year and National Teacher of the Year Finalist;
Gerardo Munoz, 2021 Colorado Teacher of the Year;
Takeru Nagayoshi, 2020 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year and 2021 recipient of Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence;
Tracey Nance, 2020 and 2021 Georgia Teacher of the Year; and
Monica Washington, 2014 Texas Teacher of the Year.

Preface

Classrooms should always be places of discovery, of questioning, of gaining new perspectives. Students benefit the most when they learn about themselves and the world in a safe space with teachers who provide them with honest education and accurate history. As award-winning educators, we are aware that our accolades are tied to our ability to engage students in affirming learning environments. We know educators across this country share our belief that we need policies that support and encourage teachers who prioritize honest education. We wrote this report to share the positive effects that students experience when they have access to honest education. We hope our examination of the harm to students caused by educational gag orders helps others to see the urgency for policies that support our students as they grow into good citizens.

We wrote this report for parents, educators, and allies across the country who believe, as we do, that students benefit the most from classrooms in which their identities are valued and their perspectives are heard. But mostly, we wrote this for our students whose voices and brilliance helped us to become better educators and who deserve the very best education we can offer them.

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“Across the country, state departments of education declare that the mission of social studies is to prepare future citizens who can listen to all voices and make decisions for the common good. Many of these states, however, stifle hard histories and truth. They write diversity out of America's story and bury the stories of people of color.

The 2020 census is all the evidence you need that our nation is diverse now and growing more so. Non-white Americans represent the majority of Americans.

Our children deserve to learn the complex stories of the past so they can be responsible in the future.

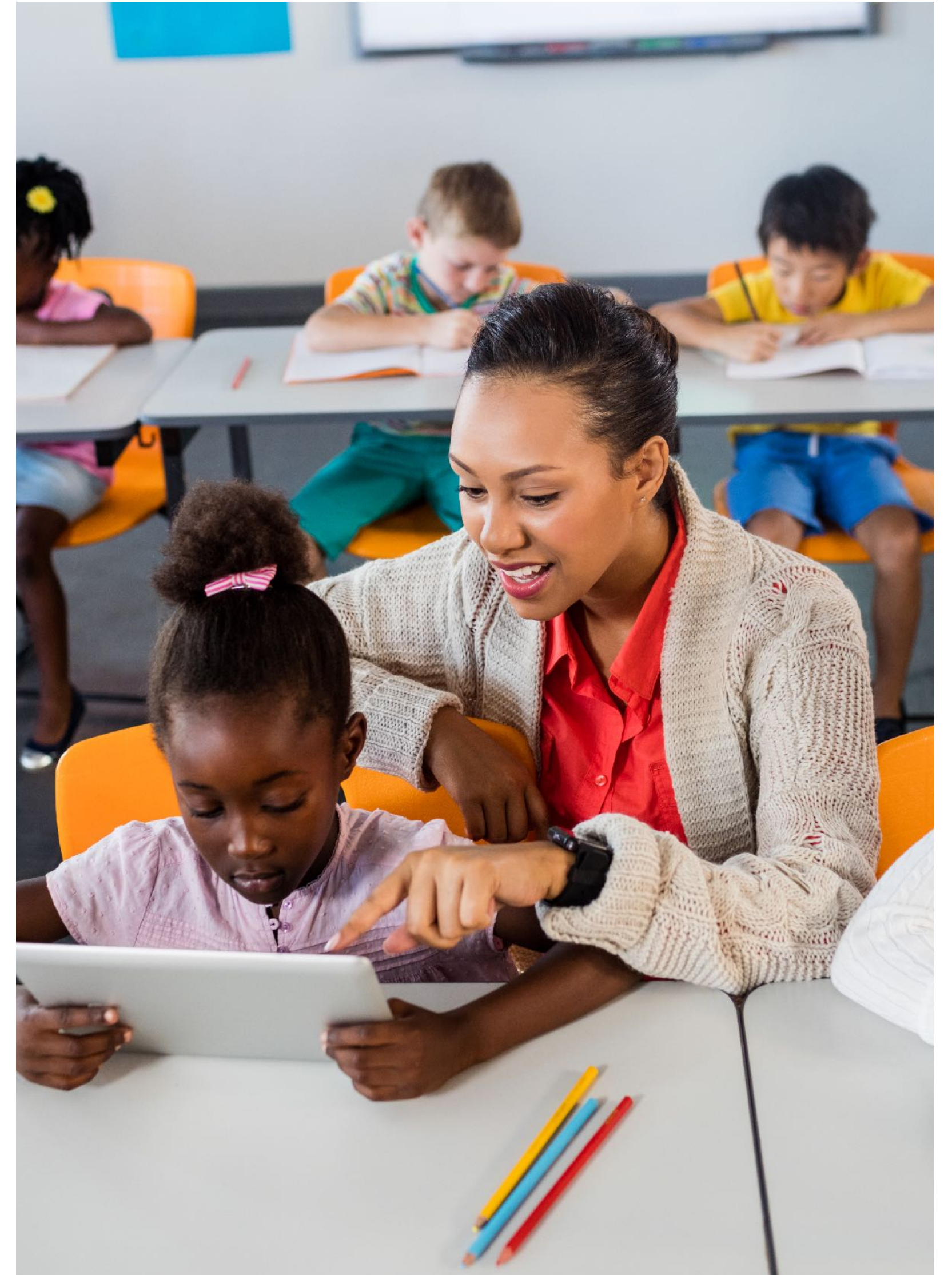
Students of every color deserve to learn about heroes and champions of every culture. They can't make informed decisions as citizens of our diverse democracy if they learn a sanitized, inaccurate version of history.

Children worldwide learn about the inequalities and injustices that make up America's complex history. When we keep that information from our children and censor the history they learn, we fail to prepare them as global citizens and competitors in a global economy.”

Erin McCarthy _____

2020 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year

What is Student-Affirming Education?



What is Student-Affirming Education?



“Children are the heart of public education and the very heartbeat of our future. In my classroom, students’ ideas, identities, and hopes are seen and valued. I want kids to see the many possibilities for their lives, and to learn how to live and work within a diverse community of people.”

Tracey Nance
2020 and 2021 Georgia Teacher of the Year

Parents and educators want children to be seen and valued when they enter their classroom each day. A student-affirming education creates a welcoming environment for all children regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, income, ability, family structure or other characteristic. Such an education sees each student as an individual with both great potential and a unique perspective that positively contributes to the classroom’s learning and community. A student-affirming education teaches honest history and respects students’ ability to think, problem-solve, and form their own opinions. In this kind of responsive classroom, students see their own as well as others’ backgrounds, experiences, and identities reflected in both history lessons and other curricular materials.

Award-winning educators from across the country agree with the research: affirming students’ identities, teaching them a full account of history, and helping them learn about other cultures and backgrounds improves students’ academic outcomes and career readiness.

Understanding the value of a student-affirming education and how educational content impacts children is critical to protecting our nation’s children and the education they deserve. When lawmakers create policies that ensure students have access to affirming learning environments, they create the conditions for meaningful learning experiences and growth.



“A culturally responsive classroom is one that invites all students to bring their whole self into the room. This means that their identities, families, customs, languages, and practices are ushered into a safe space for learning and sharing.”

Maryann Woods-Murphy
2010 New Jersey Teacher of the Year

“The growing diversity in our nation’s classrooms means that our students must see themselves - and honest narratives from history and current events - reflected in schools’ curriculum.

Students need opportunities to critically think about our past, and also how they can meaningfully contribute to a more just future for all Americans.”

Andrea Johnson

2020 Virginia Teacher of the Year



Why Our Nation Needs Student- Affirming Education for Our Children



Why Our Nation Needs Student-Affirming Education for Our Children

A student-affirming education is both culturally responsive and honest. Research shows that this type of teaching benefits all students, improving student attendance, grade point average, student test results and graduation rates. Student-affirming education – including real-world examples and project-based approaches – can also enhance career readiness skills, such as the ability to communicate, problem-solve, and work well with others. Research shows that teaching methods that connect to students' lives and interests and promote understanding of other cultures are associated with better academic outcomes.¹ Studies further demonstrate that culturally responsive education is associated with positive student behavior.²

One synthesis of research on culturally responsive education found positive academic impacts in multiple areas of students' class-work, including not only history/social studies and literature, but also math and science. Importantly, research on the impact of culturally relevant education points to several key outcomes that contribute to a child's academic success including increases in student motivation, student interest in content, student ability to engage in content area discussions, and student self-perception as capable students.³



“In my 9th grade classroom, culturally responsive education means exploring the ways our identities have been impacted and shaped by history, as well as how students themselves can impact and shape history. It’s reading texts by Black and Latinx authors and honoring students’ knowledge and lived experiences during our discussions.”

Sydney Chaffee
2017 National Teacher of the Year
2017 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year

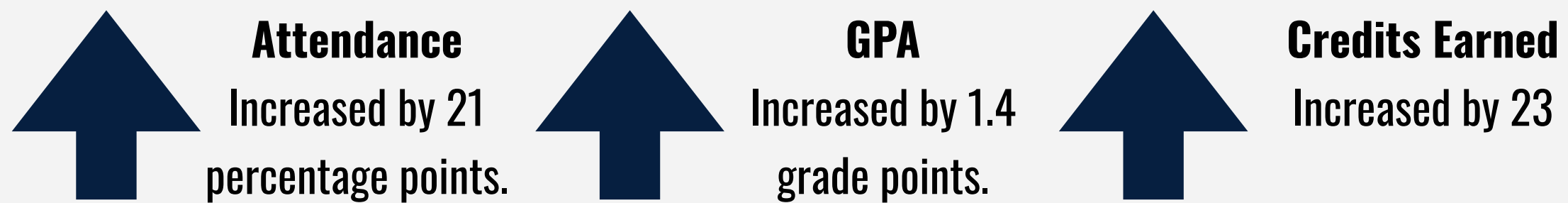
Developing students' knowledge about themselves and others includes being honest in the way educators teach history. Studies continue to show that teaching students a full and accurate history of American history is beneficial.⁴ For example, compared to students who did not participate, high school students in Tucson and San Francisco who completed ethnic studies courses had significantly higher state exam scores, graduation rates, attendance, grade-point averages, and more credits.⁵

While some politicians may fear that learning about racism and identity could be divisive, research shows allowing students to discuss race and racism in schools actually reduces prejudice among students of all ethnic-racial backgrounds.⁶

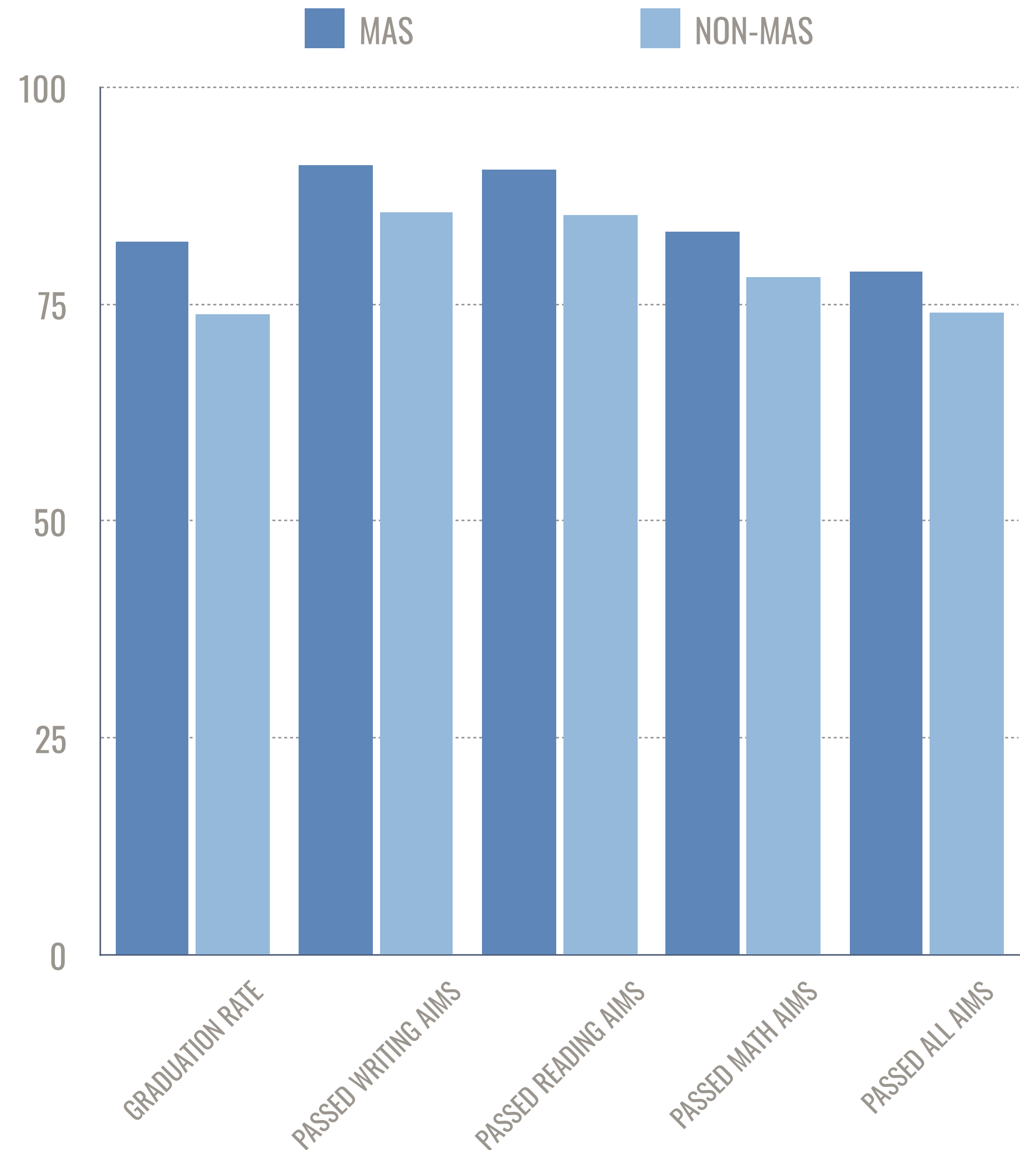


“As an English teacher, I have witnessed firsthand the profound effects of students seeing themselves - their lives, their backgrounds, their families, their histories - in the books that we use in school. When it happens, it is an important and beautiful moment for the student. It is a way for teachers, schools, communities, and our country to say to our children: ‘We see you. Your stories are important to us. You are important to us.’”

Dr. Marilyn Pryle
2020 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year



Dee, T.S., & Penner, E.K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127-166.



“Mexican American Studies” (MAS) students outperformed their non-MAS peers in terms of AIMS (Arizona’s standardized test) passing rates and graduation rates despite having prior academic performances that were significantly lower.

Cabrera, N.L., Milem, J.F., Jaquette, O., & Marx, R.W. (2014) Missing the (student achievement) forest for all the (political) trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American studies controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(6), 1084-1118



Student-Affirming Practices that Bolster Achievement Are Needed Now

Student-Affirming Practices that Bolster Achievement Are Needed Now



“Student-affirming education is a pedagogy of empathy, where we listen to and accept one another in service of our shared humanity, common purpose, and a respect and curiosity for the things that are different between us.

When a child leaves the classroom feeling affirmed, that is a power that cannot be taken away.”

Takeru Nagayoshi
2020 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year

When educators draw on students’ background knowledge and connect learning to students’ lives, the result is greater motivation and engagement,⁷ an outcome that American students desperately need. New student testing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that children, particularly students of color, have lost ground academically since early 2020⁸ and need greater engagement in school.

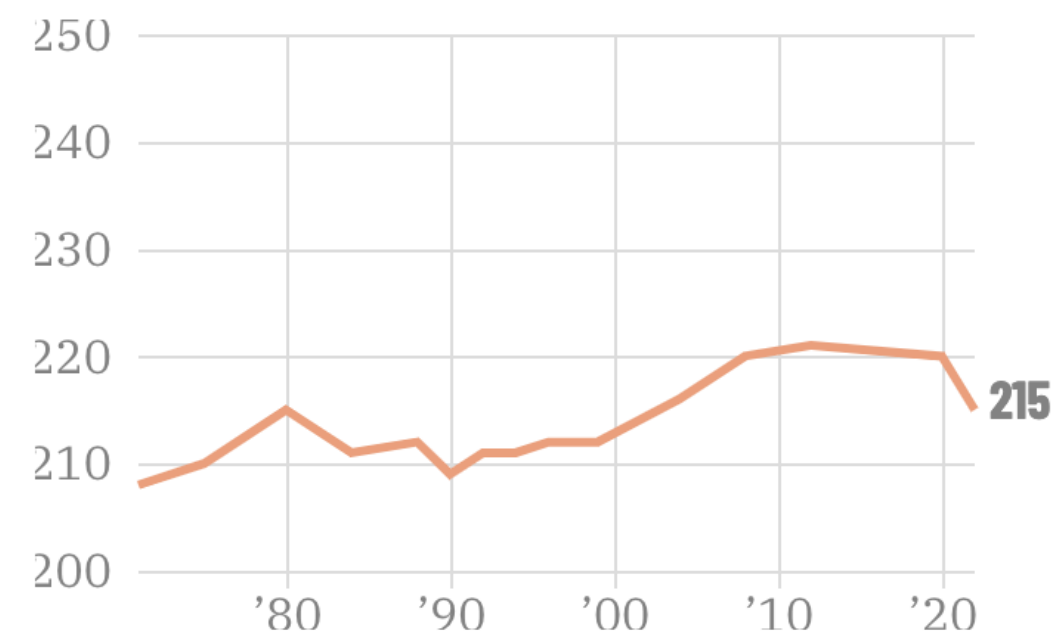
Confirming educator, researcher, and parent fears about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, data of the nation’s 9-year-olds show that school building closures negatively impacted learning for all students between 2020 and 2022

but especially widened the gap between the achievement of historically marginalized students and their White counterparts.⁹ While 9-year-old White students’ math scores fell 5 points, Black students’ scores dropped 13 points.¹⁰

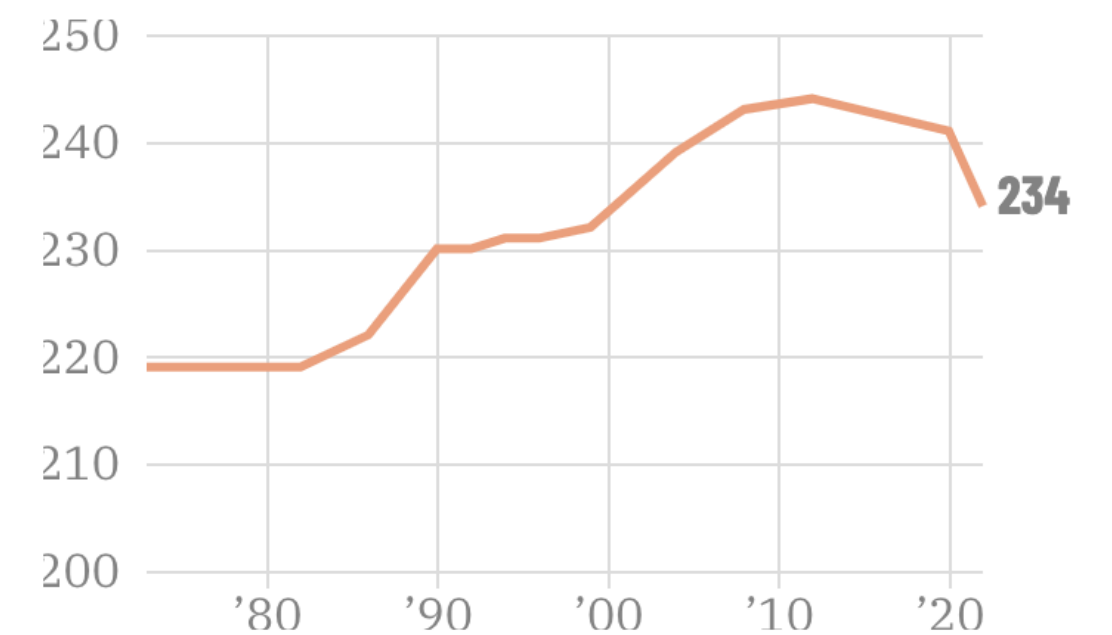
9-year-olds lose ground on national tests for math and reading

This year’s results mark the first drop in math scores since officials began administering this national test in the 1970s. Reading scores dropped for the first time in more than 30 years.

READING ASSESSMENT



MATH ASSESSMENT



Notes

NAEP administered two tests in 2004, one new format and one bridge format. Data reflects results for the new format.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Credit: Kae Petrin / Chalkbeat



“Everyday interactions have the potential to shape students’ sense of self and their academic abilities. Cultural responsiveness informs educational practice, leading to teaching techniques for eliciting, supporting, and expanding the intellectual capacity of all learners.”

Dr. Shakiyya Bland
Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow, Kansas

As discussed above, studies show that understanding students’ interests and connecting students to real-world experiences makes learning more meaningful, engaging, and impactful. Children need education policies that create fertile spaces for growth and support marginalized communities, not ignore them. A student-affirming education that meets students - wherever and wherever they are - promotes growth in all content areas.





“Our job as teachers is to help students live the lives they dream, both in the future and the present.”

Justin Minkel

2007 Arkansas Teacher of the Year



**A Student-Affirming
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Advance our Nation**

A Student-Affirming Education Provides Children with the College-and Career-Ready Skills Necessary to Advance our Nation

Schools play a vital role in preparing students to live, work, and excel in a society that is diverse and ever-changing. A student-affirming education strengthens community and understanding in the classroom and improves elementary and secondary academic outcomes, but it also supports a better future for all Americans by teaching students much needed skills. A recent global hiring report from Monster highlights what prospective employers want most but are currently lacking: employees equipped with a wide range of soft skills, including teamwork and collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.¹¹

Similarly, while colleges and universities have historically favored standardized test scores in admissions, a growing national trend shows the same soft skills becoming more and more important to admissions' decision-making process and college success.¹² A culturally responsive education cultivates the critical thinking skills that employers and post-secondary institutions look for by allowing students to wrestle with real-world problems and learn how to communicate their thoughts and ideas respectfully.¹³ A student-affirming education is good not only for individual students and classrooms, but for America as a whole.

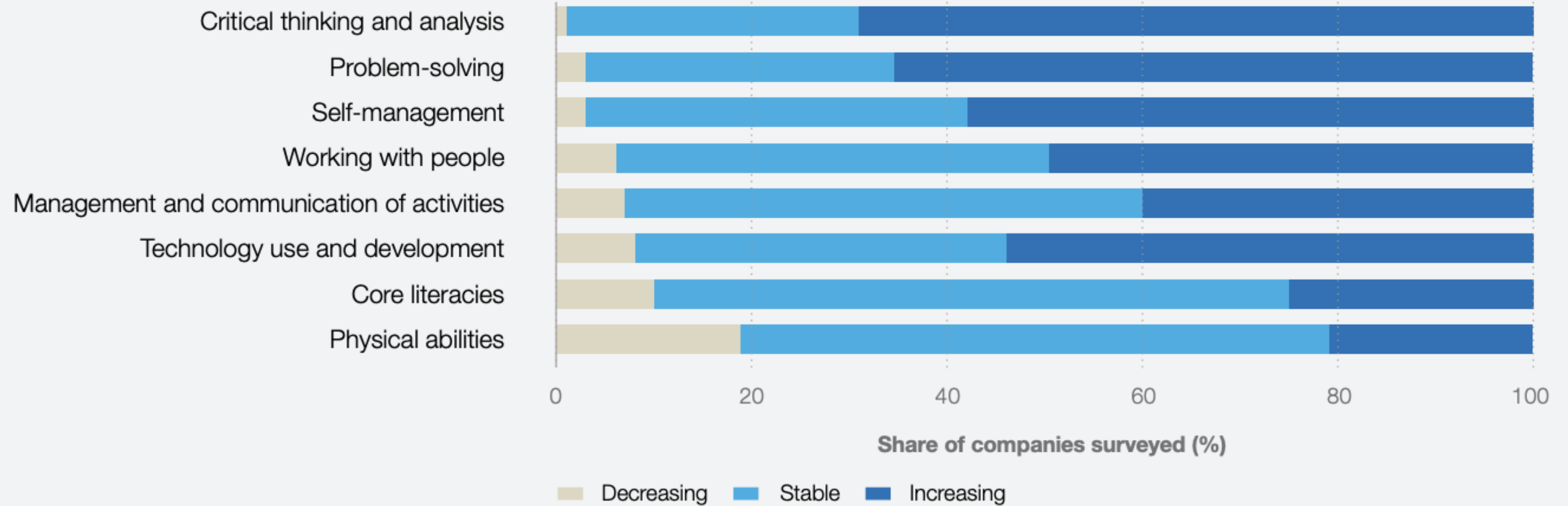


“Learning through multiple perspectives provides the essential opportunity for students to activate empathy. Without texts that help students wrestle with the problems our world faces ensures that a new generation will not have the skillset to create positive, monumental change.”

Elizabeth Raff
2022 Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year



Relative importance of different skill groups

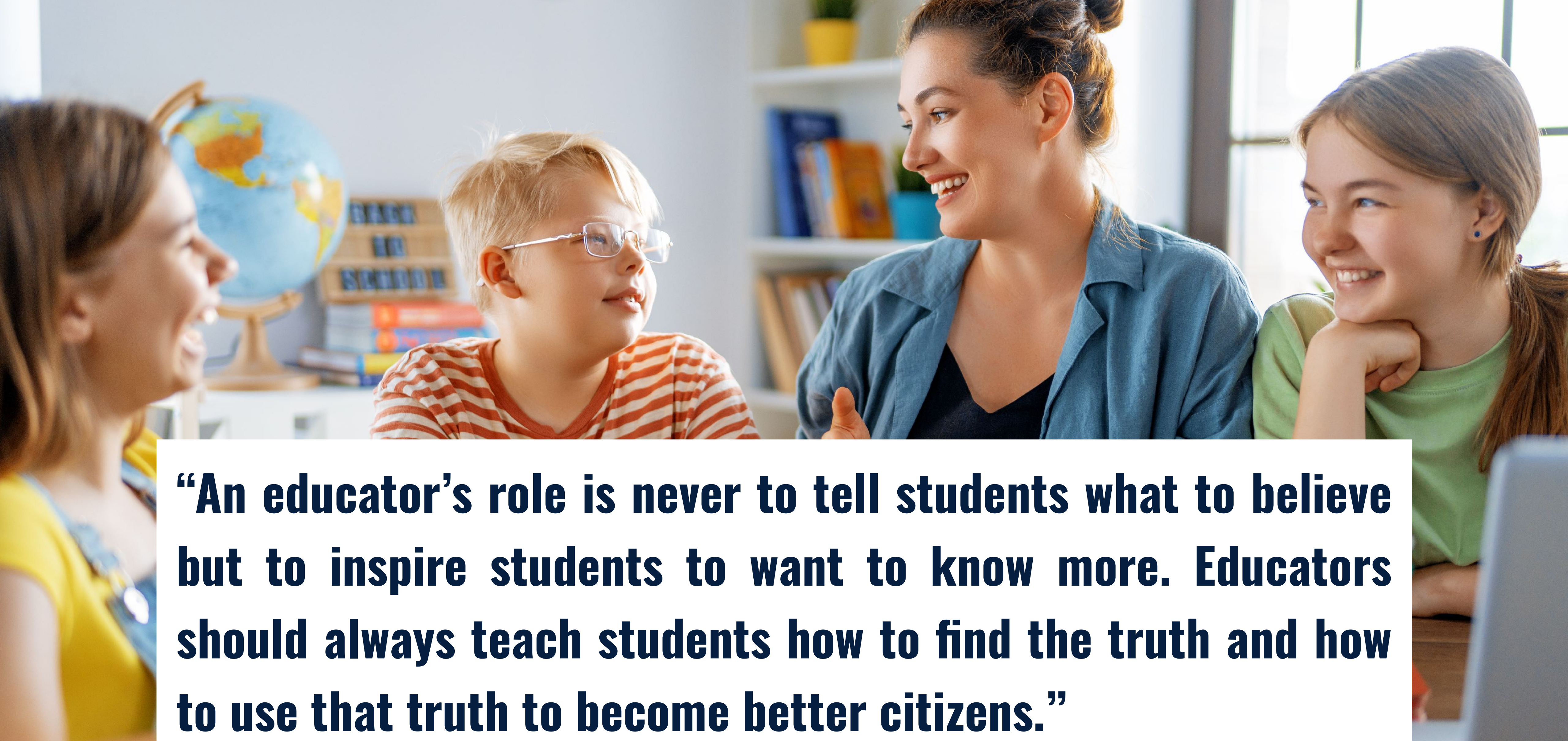


from "The Future of Jobs Report, 2020", World Economic Forum)



In AP Statistics we tackle the tough conversations. We analyze and compare data of birth rates and life expectancy. We discuss wealth inequality, access to education, and food deserts. We seek to understand decisions made by people around the world doing what they can to survive.

Kate McCann
2018-19 Albert Einstein Distinguished Educators Fellow
2017 Vermont Teacher of the Year



“An educator’s role is never to tell students what to believe but to inspire students to want to know more. Educators should always teach students how to find the truth and how to use that truth to become better citizens.”

Monica Washington
2014 Texas Teacher of the Year



Our Increasingly Diverse Student Population Makes Student-Affirming Educational Practices More Important than Ever

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As the United States becomes more diverse, that diversity is reflected in the students who sit in classrooms across the country. Between 2009 and 2021, students identifying as Hispanic increased from 22 to 28 percent. In 2021, White students represented 45 percent of the student population, Black students constituted 15 percent, and Asian students were 5 percent of K-12 enrollment. American Indian/Alaska Native students constituted nearly 1 percent at almost 500,000 students, and students identifying as Pacific Islander represented less than 1 percent with 180,000 students across the country.¹⁴ The student population of the United States is more diverse than ever.

In many respects, curricular materials have not kept up with the diversifying student population. Curricula and materials should always be designed considering the needs and identities of students. Curriculum tends to center the stories and history of White Americans while diverse stories are left out completely or reduced to only a few historical figures.¹⁵ To better serve every student, curricula and materials must give voice to the stories and segments of history not yet widely shared in our nation's schools as well. Material that is often omitted reflects the experiences of many students who are sitting in our classrooms.

History must be inclusive and accurate, and students need opportunities to read, reflect, and discuss what they learn. Therefore, curricula and materials should be designed to help teachers teach in an honest and accurate way. Even so, a 2022 review of children's literature and textbooks found that racial, ethnic, and gender disparities persist across these instructional texts.¹⁶



“The growing diversity of students across the nation directly reinforces the need for curriculum to adapt, delivering more diverse and equitable learning experiences. Therefore, we need to provide children with individualized opportunities that capitalize and affirm their distinct strengths. All students deserve to know their unique identity is recognized, valued, and a gift in our classrooms and beyond.”

Alexis Barney
2021 Wyoming Teacher of the Year

“The first book my students read in Contemporary Communications is **Tuesdays with Morrie**. This thoughtful, meditative book of a troubled young man reconnecting with his dying former professor leads to many meaningful conversations about life with my students. One such passage that is often raised is...

The problem, Mitch, is that we don't believe we are as much alike as we are. Whites and Blacks, Catholics and Protestants, men and women. If we saw each other as more alike, we might be very eager to join in one big human family in this world, and to care about that family the way we care about our own.

This idea reinforces everything I teach and how I teach it. It is shortsighted not to embrace this view of humanity. I want my students to celebrate what makes us unique and what makes us human.”

Jeff Baxter _____

2014 Kansas Teacher of the Year



Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop popularized the concept of "windows and mirrors" in a 1990 essay to illuminate the importance of a student-affirming, multicultural education. The author writes, "When there are enough books available that can act as both windows and mirrors for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and similarities, because together they are what make us all human."¹⁷ There is work to be done to increase representation of the American student population in instructional materials. That work begins with an examination of the education policies that outline what happens in America's classrooms.



"In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond reminds us that the brain is wired to make sense of stories in the world. To that end, I challenged my middle school band to develop a 'choose your own adventure' story that could be used by a composer to create a new work for middle school band. The result was 'A Journey in Time,' an interactive composition that invites audience members to decide the path of the story in a real-time performance!"

Chris Gleason
2022 NEA Foundation Horace Mann Award
for Teaching Excellence



A woman with brown hair and glasses, wearing a light pink t-shirt, is sitting in a classroom. She has her arms crossed and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the background, other students are seated at desks, and there are windows with blinds. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a daytime setting.

Many States and Districts Have Advanced Student-Affirming Education

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For at least twenty-seven years, school districts have understood the importance of acknowledging and affirming students' identities in the classroom. Gloria Ladson-Billings' seminal work in 1995 about culturally relevant pedagogy eventually led to the term "culturally responsive teaching," coined by Dr. Geneva Gay, who created a framework for schools to examine instructional practices. Ladson-Billings writes, "Cultural responsiveness in teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes."¹⁸

Using the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy and the framework of culturally responsive teaching as lenses, districts around the country examined their curriculum to ensure that classroom lessons and materials were structured to meet all students' needs.

Prior to 2020, student-affirming practices such as teaching inclusion and multicultural awareness were gaining significant momentum in schools. For example, in 2018 the New York State Education Department created a Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework¹⁹ to help schools support students and educators around four indicators: welcoming and affirming environment, high expectations and rigorous instruction, inclusive curriculum and assessment, and ongoing professional learning and support.

Greater social awareness and the nation's changing student demographics made the landscape ripe for pushback. In 2020, racial unrest caused by the murders of George Floyd and other unarmed Black people and the challenges created by the Covid-19 pandemic exposed significant disparities in learning amongst students. As many states and districts responded to these challenges by strengthening cultural understanding and inclusion, a tense political landscape created conditions where some choose to place politics over the wellbeing of children.



"I select specific historical and culturally diverse children's literature to create lessons which 'mirror' the student population. But just as important, I also help create 'windows' to help students learn about people unlike themselves, to grow empathy and respect for all people, no matter what they look like, where they come from, or which language they speak."

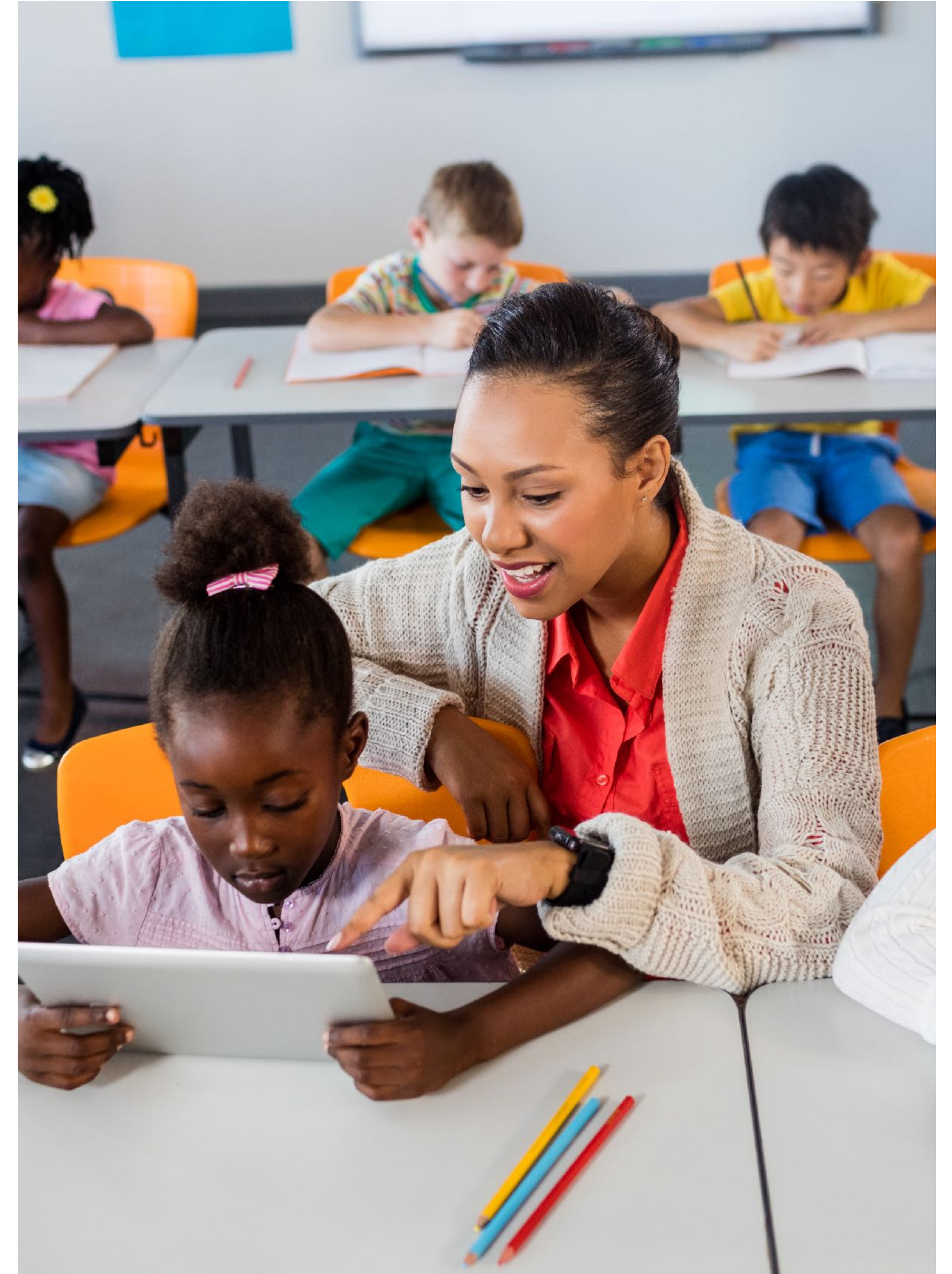
Gloria Pereyra Robertson
2017 Oregon Teacher of the Year

“As an elementary educator, it is very important to me that I create a classroom that leaves space for my students to question and learn. They are only seven, and I want them to always feel as though they can ask questions without judgment. Their questions are always honest and pure. If I took away their ability to speak about what is happening in society, I am hindering their ability to grow as critical thinkers. My goal is to always support them as they take educational risks and learn from each other.”

Michael Dunlea

2012 and 2021 Finalist New Jersey Teacher of the Year

Roadblocks to Establishing Student- Affirming Education: The Rise of Education Gag Orders



Roadblocks to Establishing Student-Affirming Education: The Rise of Education Gag Orders

Although many districts and states across the nation are striving to create classrooms that affirm all children, a number of politicians are actively seeking to exclude the voices and experiences of some students from our national narrative. In 2021, state legislation cropped up across the country seeking to silence stories of the historically marginalized and punish educators for creating environments for students to engage in honest discourse. These educational gag orders were proposed as cynical tactics calculated for political gain, ignoring the harm to our children, our communities, and our nation.

Since January 2021, 42 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching about race, gender or other “divisive concepts.”²⁰ Teaching on topics such as systemic racism, implicit bias, nonbinary pronouns, and race or sex stereotyping were prohibited in a number of bills and school district resolutions. Idaho enacted the first state law prohibiting the teaching of these concepts in April 2021,²¹ followed by 14 additional states between 2021 and 2022: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas.

In addition to state laws, some of those states and additional states – Alabama, Montana, Utah, Virginia and Ohio – have taken administrative actions (e.g., by State Boards of Education or State Attorneys General) that limit honest education, as well.²² Unfortunately, a number of districts across the country have debated and/or adopted gag-order and book ban policies as well. Book bans reduce representation of diverse identities and hinder students’ ability to learn from the perspectives of others.



“These gag orders don't just limit the creative liberty and curricular freedom of our local schools..., they punish us for doing things most Americans agree on.

In some parts of the country, teachers are unable to use texts by Martin Luther King Jr.; they are disciplined for coming out in the classroom; and some are fired for talking about race and racism.

These bills are written by partisan politicians to be vague. Their intent is to steer teachers away from important topics and to limit our children's access to information and learning.”

Takeru Nagayoshi
2020 Massachusetts Teacher of the Year

“When students can regard themselves in mirrors and discover what lies beyond the familiar through windows, they effectively make meaning of the world around them - the beauty, complexities, challenges, and possibilities. Book banning negatively impacts students’ access to the resources needed to see themselves clearly and to recognize and value the histories, perspectives, and experiences of people who are unlike them, thereby severely damaging our ability to sustain a just democracy where we all actively contribute to the well-being of all people.”²³

Afrika Afeni Mills

Author, *Open Windows, Open Minds: Developing Antiracist, Pro-Human Students*



Educators under Attack: The Impact of Education Gag Orders on the Educator Workforce

Educators under Attack: The Impact of Education Gag Orders on the Educator Workforce

Education gag orders prevent educators from ensuring students have access to information that helps them grow as thinkers and as contributing members of our communities and our nation. Students deserve educators who provide affirming spaces in which all students can safely read, discuss, and reflect on instructional content.

However, teachers who affirmed students' identities have been fired or faced other serious consequences. For example, in August 2022, Summer Boismier, an English teacher in Oklahoma, covered her classroom library shelves with paper to comply with the state's "divisive concepts" law. However, Boismier later resigned after the district put her on administrative leave for sharing with her students a QR code for digital access to banned books via the Brooklyn Public Library.²⁴ Matthew Hawn, a Tennessee teacher, was fired in 2021 after assigning his students Ta-nehisi Coates' essay, "The First White President" and playing a YouTube video of Kyla Jenee Lacey's poem "White Privilege."²⁵ Amy Donofrio, a white teacher at Robert E. Lee High School in Jacksonville, Florida was fired last year after displaying a Black Lives Matter banner in her classroom.²⁶ An art teacher in Texas was placed on administrative leave after approving a yearbook cover, designed by students, that contained relevant phrases during their senior year: "Love is love," "Black Lives Matter," and "I can't breathe."²⁷



"Education gag orders harm kids because it hinders them from seeing themselves reflected in the classroom. As a history teacher, it's crucial for me to highlight content that both affirms my students and introduces them to new perspectives.

Educational gag orders make kids feel unseen."

Chris Dier
2020 Louisiana Teacher of the Year
National Teacher of the Year Finalist

These are only a sampling of a very disturbing trend of anti-honest personnel actions against educators. Today, many teachers in states with these gag orders or districts with book removals are reluctant to create opportunities for students to learn from one another through open dialogue. These attacks on student-affirming educational practices not only make it nearly impossible for educators to provide the education they know students need, but they also push educators out of the profession and severely reduce the number of students aspiring to enter the field.



“As a teacher, I would like to be trusted to do the job for which I was hired. Trust that I am going to do what is best for students. At times class discussions may be difficult, but it is all done to help make students aware of the society in which they live and to help each child feel as though they can be an agent of change in their community.”

Megan McNeil Helberg

2020 Nebraska Teacher of the Year

Education Gag Orders and Other Anti-Honesty Policies Worsen Teacher Recruitment and Retention Challenges



Education Gag Orders and Other Anti-Honesty Policies Worsen Teacher Recruitment and Retention Challenges

Throughout the United States, worsening teacher recruitment and retention challenges significantly hurt our children’s education. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an estimated 300,000 educators and staff have vacated their profession since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (between February 2020 and May 2022), constituting a significant drop in the workforce.²⁸ More recent data (from August 2022, published in September 2022) from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, show that fifty-three percent of public schools reported being understaffed entering the 2022-23 school year. Of schools reporting being understaffed, special education teachers (65 percent) and transportation staff (59 percent) were the most understaffed positions.²⁹

This trend is only expected to continue with 55 percent of educators stating in 2022 they are more likely to leave or retire from education sooner than planned – almost double the number saying that in July 2020.³⁰ The challenges of teaching during COVID-19 coupled with the recent escalation of harmful policies are significantly impacting educator decisions to leave the classroom.



“Teachers want to feel valued at school and in society. We would love for someone to put teachers’ needs as a priority because teachers are putting the needs of the students first.”

Liz Russillo
2020 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year

Moreover, 62 percent of Black and 59 percent of Hispanic/Latino teachers stated they are more likely to leave the profession early, lessening the diversity of the already insufficiently diverse teacher workforce.³¹

These numbers were not available for AAPI educators, which speaks to the deep need for increased educator representation among this demographic. This increasing lack of diversity among educators, due to harmful policies, exacerbates existing equity concerns for all students, specifically those who benefit most from exposure to a teacher of their same race. According to a study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, “Black students who have at least one Black teacher in elementary school are 9 percentage points (13%) more likely to graduate high school and 6 percentage points (19%) more likely to enroll in college than their peers who are not assigned to a Black teacher.”³²

Education Gag Orders and Other Anti-Honesty Policies Worsen Teacher Recruitment and Retention Challenges



“As our county and schools grow more diverse, it is paramount that we continue to meet the needs of our students. They should all have the opportunity to have/see representation in their educators and the content being taught to them.”

Darion Cockrell
2021 Missouri Teacher of the Year

As a nation, we must support policies that uplift educator diversity with the goal of ensuring every student has the supportive educational environment that facilitates their best opportunity to succeed.

As challenges such as educational gag orders add more expectations to already overburdened educators, 67 percent of teachers reported that "burnout" is a very serious issue. According to 80 percent of educators, the further expansion of educator expectations, including teachers taking on additional work due to vacancies is a “serious” problem, which worsens burnout and creates more vacancies. 76 percent of teachers also reported that “lack of respect” from stakeholders, including gag orders which prevent educators from ensuring every child is supported, is also a “serious” issue.³³

The cumulative impact of these stressors is captured by a report from the RAND Corporation, which found that 78 percent of teachers reported experiencing job-related stress, almost twice the average (40%) of employed adults across the nation.³⁴



“Teachers want to be treated like the professionals they are - skilled and highly qualified individuals who support the growth and humanity of children.”

Mercedes Muñoz
2020 Oregon Teacher of the Year

In light of all of those concerns – and insufficient teacher compensation – according to an annual PDK poll, 62 percent of parents state that they would not want their child to pursue a career in teaching, an all-time high.³⁵ This is despite the fact that the same poll showed that “confidence in local public schools” is at a five-decade high (PDK, August 2022).³⁶ The public has confidence in their local public school, yet does not want to encourage their children to become educators, further exacerbating recruitment and retention challenges.



“I LOVE teaching. I feel my happiest when co-creating brave, learning spaces, alongside youth who center all the things they’re passionate about or pique their curiosities.

However, I became drained trying to uphold a system that I knew all along was never meant to serve me, never meant to serve Black youth, never meant to serve the children of immigrants, never meant to care for Pacific Islander youth, never meant to elevate young girls. The public school system was never meant for me as a student or as an educator.

The world literally asked us to turn our classrooms into digital learning spaces in less than 48 hours and we did! But when we asked for care and reciprocity and respect, we were denied.

And so, I had to leave education. I continue to navigate the grief, but I welcome safety, peace, and long life.”

Estella Owoimaha-Church

2017 Finalist, Global Teacher Prize

“I left the classroom because I wanted to impact a greater number of learners and teachers. I first humanize my staff, prompting them to take care of themselves. If my teachers are okay, then my children will be okay. I often walk in classes and tell teachers to go take a break so they can regroup, breathe, go to the restroom, etc. Great leaders lead by example.”

Anthony Swann _____

2021 Virginia Teacher of the Year





Positive Strides in Student-Affirming Legislation

Positive Strides in Student-Affirming Legislation

Although some states have passed legislation that inhibits honest education and contributes to teacher recruitment and retention challenges, in many places parents, educators, and local and state organizers have made great strides in opposing anti-honesty legislation with some states even adopting student-affirming legislation.³⁷

Legislation to censor honest education was proposed but has failed to reach enactment in many states, including Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.³⁸ Additionally, there were affirming policies in some states to protect LGBTQ+ students. Between 2019 and 2021, 11 of 20 non-repealed policies that address LGBTQ+ students across the country were affirming.³⁹

Advocating for honest education means speaking out about the harm that is done by “divisive concepts” bills, but it also means advocating for protections of students and educators belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.



“ As teachers, we provide role models for all of our students. We know and acknowledge that for all of our students but often fail to see the importance of LGBTQ role models and LGBTQ safe spaces in the school. The sooner we accept that as a problem for our students, the sooner we can fix it.”

Brett Bigham
2014 Oregon Teacher of the Year

Telling stories to explain the need for honesty in education is the most powerful tool parents, educators, and students have in combating harmful legislation.



“LGBTQ+ students have every right to exist exactly as they are, and no school, teacher, administration, or government has the right to dictate their reality, least of all because they’re fostering their religion or politics onto someone else. We must all speak out against the injustice against LGBTQ+ students, teachers, and their allies because it is our sacred duty, and because if we don’t, we’re bystanders at best and accomplices at worst.”

Willie Carver Jr.
2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year

Positive Strides in Student-Affirming Legislation



“In my EL Education School, students gather daily for an advisory class called Crew. Crew curriculum includes student-guided lessons on building inclusive community through team building and cultural awareness. For example, after crew teachers outlined lessons on LGBTQ+ identity, the schools Gay Straight Alliance club completed the lessons with readings and activities to deepen school wide awareness of timely LGBTQ+ issues.”

Dr. Megan Olivia Hall
2013 Minnesota Teacher of the Year

Governors in both Kansas⁴⁰ and Wisconsin⁴¹ successfully vetoed harmful educational legislation in 2022 and bills died in the House or Senate in both Wyoming and Indiana largely thanks to the voices of parents, educators, and community members.⁴² Indiana shocked the country in early 2022 when SB 167 and HB 1134, bills that included both “divisive concepts” and “curriculum transparency” failed to pass, though both were proposed by the controlling party in the state legislature. Senate Bill 167 died when a high school history teacher spurred dissent amongst lawmakers on whether or not teachers should be neutral when teaching Nazism.⁴³

Educators, students, and community members organized to flood the Capitol with their presence and stories, and even coordinated colors daily during a week of protest.⁴⁴



“I testified because I know we cannot breathe life into the American promise until we see ourselves clearly for who we’ve been. Our democracy cannot survive without truth-tellers willing to confront who we are in order to become who we hope to be.”

Matt Bockenfield
Indiana High School History Teacher

An encouraging number of states have passed bills that support and protect student-affirming policies. Following Arizona’s 2010 ban on ethnic studies courses that “denigrate American values” and which sought to end a successful Mexican-American studies program, several states passed bills that require multicultural coursework to be incorporated into the K-12 curriculum.⁴⁵

Positive Strides in Student-Affirming Legislation



“When we build authentic relationships, identify negative narratives and change them, provide tools to step into discomfort, and hold hope closely, we empower students to be changemakers.”

Leigh Ann Erickson
2019 Iowa Teacher of the Year Finalist

In response to the current national conversation in education, 19 states adopted laws requiring multicultural education between 2019 and 2021 (i.e., California, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin).⁴⁶ Furthermore, in 2021 California became the first state to make an ethnic studies course a graduation requirement for high school students,⁴⁷ and Louisiana’s state legislature updated its requirements to allow African American History to fulfill credit requirements.⁴⁸ Rather than limit the courses students can take, these policies ensure that students have the ability to expand their knowledge about the experiences and many contributions of Americans from all backgrounds.

Finally, New Hampshire’s recent local school board elections demonstrated that even in highly conservative areas, parents are tired of the culture war’s interference in public education. Out of 30 candidates who ran on “pro-public education” and “honest education” platforms in 2022, 29 won their local race.⁴⁹ Successes in stopping anti-honesty legislation and passing student-affirming laws remind us that ultimately, policy - whether deemed good or bad - starts in each locality. What community members, parents, and educators say matters, and according to new national polls discussed below, most Americans want children to have a student-affirming education.



“All students of color need to see themselves reflected in their curriculum through the school year - not just during a month of cultural celebrations. For Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, because we are lumped in with the larger Asian American communities, we are forgotten. Our histories in the U.S. are not discussed and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students are faced with a lack of inclusion and belonging on their campuses.”

Estella Owoimaha-Church
2017 Finalist, Global Teacher Prize

“Our nation’s growing diversity begs us to respond by developing expansive, widening content and curricula. Students are entering American classrooms with an increasingly wide range of cultural, racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Not only will developing honest, student-centered curriculum make them feel more comfortable; it will—perhaps more importantly—help them shape their identities as learners, discoverers, thinkers.

Seeing oneself reflected in curricula teaches the most important lesson: you can do and overcome anything. A muscular, rigorous curriculum dedicated to honesty and expansiveness also develops in our students the skills we need to preserve a civil, democratic society: the ability to respect dissenting views, the ability to articulate one’s position, the ability to question assumptions, the courage to revise one’s stance.

These skills do not find purchase in a classroom whose conversations and texts have been restricted by policy or practice. These skills depend on healthy intellectual tension, inviting students to struggle with complexity. They find fertile soil in content that is unflinching in facing the complexities of citizenship in a rapidly changing world.”

Lauren Merkley

2020 Utah Teacher of the Year

Parents and Educators Unite in Calling for Education that Affirms Every Student



Parents and Educators Unite in Calling for Education that Affirms Every Student

According to recent Ipsos polling data for ParentsTogether (September 2022), honest and inclusive education is overwhelmingly supported by parents and caregivers, regardless of their race, gender, or political party.⁵⁰ The polling data show that most Americans (86%) and most parents (87%) feel lessons about the history of racism prepare children to build a better future for everyone, as opposed to feeling that lessons about racism are harmful to children. In fact, parents – and the public – do not agree with some politicians' claims that anti-honest education efforts are led by parents.

Ipsos polling data reveal that strong majorities of Republican (70%) and Democratic (84%) parents feel that elected officials at the local, state, or national level and political groups are most responsible for disagreements over what's taught in public K-12 schools, not parents. Furthermore, most Americans (69%) and parents (68%) feel that these gag order laws are being driven by politicians to advance their careers.

According to the Ipsos poll, 82 percent of parents feel that teachers should be able to talk about race, gender, and sexual orientation at school, either to answer student questions about these topics or by having age-appropriate curriculum about these topics.⁵¹

The Ipsos findings are consistent with other major nationwide polling data surveying voter and parent opinion as well. For example, a Hart Research Associates poll on behalf of the American Library Association in March 2022 found that 7 in 10 Americans oppose efforts to remove books from public libraries, including a majority of Democrats (75%), independents (58%), and Republicans (70%);⁵² a CBS News poll from February 2022 found that 8 in 10 people do not believe books should be banned from schools for discussing race and criticizing US history;⁵³ and a September 2022 NEA survey found that 8 in 10 voters most trust the opinions of teachers on what should be taught in schools.⁵⁴

One Chalkbeat report, which examined over 20 recent polls, found that Americans broadly believe that schools should teach about the history of enslavement and racism and that books should not be banned for political reasons.⁵⁵ Together, the data show strong popular support for honest and inclusive education and opposition to educational gag orders and book bans.

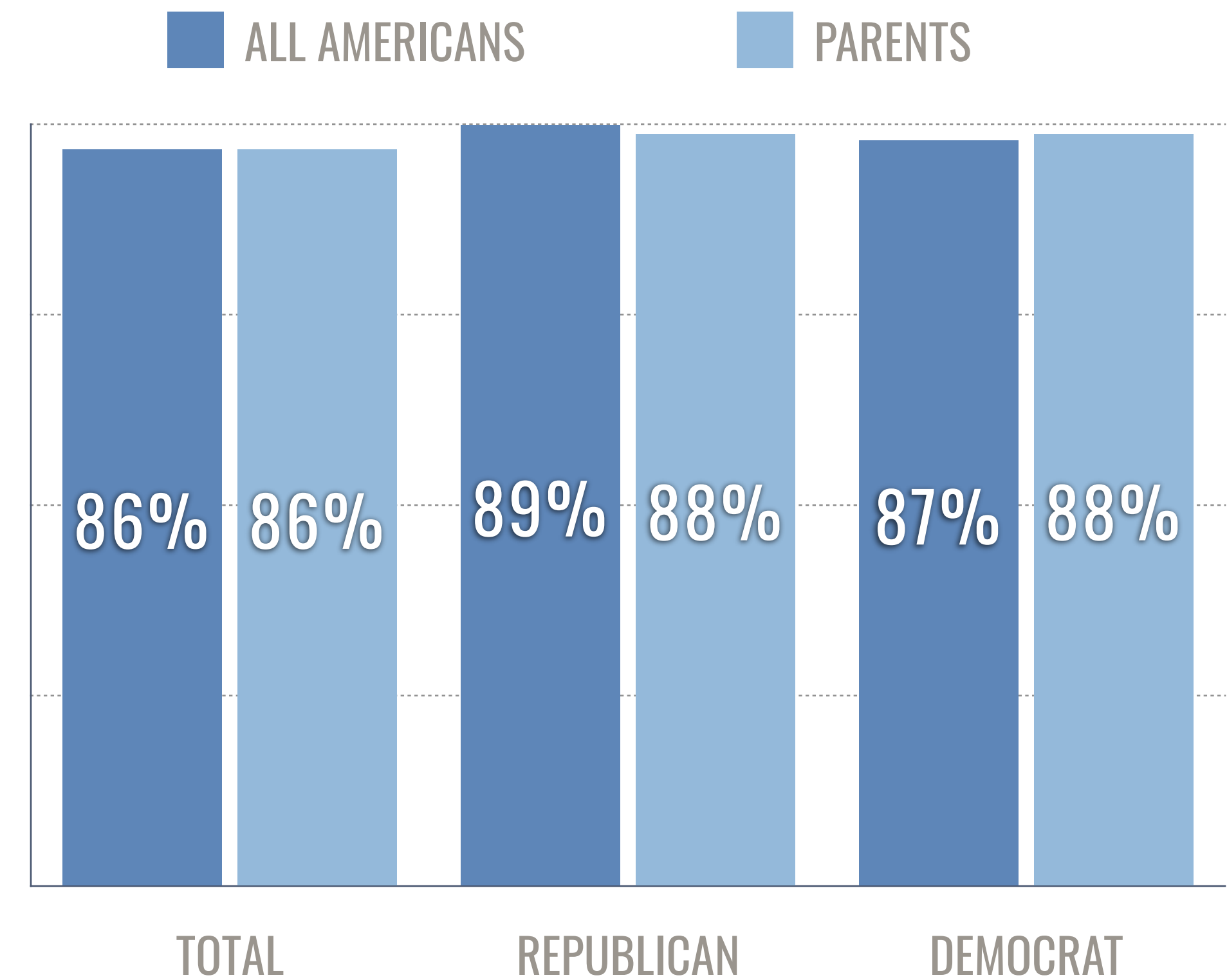
“People who say ‘I am not interested in politics,’ are often people so privileged that they can’t recognize how it affects every detail of our lives. My goal as an educator is to help my students understand the world around them, so that they understand we can’t afford to be uninterested. We can’t afford to stop using words that intimidate lawmakers. Even and especially in early childhood, silencing educators will circumvent the truth and lead us down a path of societal destruction.”

Tabatha Rosproy

2020 National Teacher of the Year
2020 Kansas Teacher of the Year

Supermajorities of Americans and parents agree, classrooms should be placings for learning, not political battlegrounds

Percent who strongly or somewhat agree with the following:
Classrooms should be places for learning, not political battlegrounds.



Source: Ipsos poll conducted on behalf of ParentsTogether among 1,301 U.S. adults and 443 parents fielded between August 19-22, 2022



**Student Voice Must be
Centered for a Student-
Affirming Education**

Student Voice Must be Centered for a Student-Affirming Education

Youth voice and leadership must be given greater support in policy discussions surrounding classroom curriculum. Students experiencing classrooms under educational gag orders and book bans have too frequently been excluded from conversations about their own present and future.



“Young people and their families know that schools should be a space of freedom and learning - learning about one another, learning about the democracy young people will inherit, and learning the truth about our past so we can build a brighter future together. Politicians’ bigotry has no place in the classroom, and stands in the way of the honest, quality public education all children deserve.”

Alex
Georgia Student and Organizer

Although some may say children are not positioned to have a voice in policy discussions, the truth is youth have never waited for adult permission to engage in the issues of the day, to raise their voices and use their influence and digital media engagement to speak truth to power. Students walked out in the hundreds prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark Supreme Court case,⁵⁶ and students went on strike in solidarity with educators in districts ranging from Washington⁵⁷ to Oklahoma.⁵⁸



“Students’ voices deserve to be at the forefront of the fight for a more inclusive education because we are the most affected demographic of these destructive policies. Our opinions are crucial to the development of accurate policy and relevant curriculums. There is a power in visibility and we have earned the right to see ourselves and our histories reflected in our curriculums. It is imperative that we use our voices to fight for our basic fundamental rights as students and never let those in power dictate what we have the right to learn about.”

Salwa
Tennessee Student and Organizer

Some school districts have demonstrated the innovative spirit, presence of mind, and commitment to inclusion and honest discourse by forming Student Voice and Leadership programming, as in Denver Public Schools, where students lead and create policy for educational issues that most impact their communities.⁵⁹ Students must be included in this space. They have the most to lose from educational gag orders and book bans in their schools.

Student Voice Must be Centered for a Student-Affirming Education

The important skills of collaboration, critical thinking, life skills and individual motivation are in danger if our children are denied the right to learn about the world around them in an honest way. In turn, students have much to contribute to a world that increasingly needs creative solutions to major local and global challenges. The reality is, youth voices transform spaces. They speak honestly, challenge each other's thinking, and are always ready to apply their learning to real-world challenges.

None of us can build a movement for robust, equitable, and honest education alone. Educators, parents, and students stand arm-in-arm demanding an education system where every child not only survives but thrives.



“We have a right to learn our history, and by taking that away we are merely agreeing with our nation's past wrongs.”

Addie
6th Grade Student, Georgia



“When we empower our young people to look to the horizons, they set bold goals for what our world can become.”

Gerardo Munoz
2021 Colorado Teacher of the Year

Conclusion

The author Arundhati Roy once wrote, “There is no such thing as the silent. Only the silenced, or the preferably unheard.”⁶⁰ The newest generation of students is more diverse than ever before in American history; they represent the fabric of histories and cultures that makes our nation who we are. Young people know they deserve more than censored education and underfunded schools. Public education is foundational to America’s future; our curriculum should reflect our aspirations for the nation we can become.

Research makes a strong case for education policies that encourage honest education. That future is not only possible but crucial. Voices for Honest Education values, celebrates, and amplifies student voice and leadership to support and develop curricula that are authentic, relevant, and affirming for students seeking a place and purpose in the world.



I firmly believe that how we model our priorities today determines whether our students grow up to scale the walls of the Capitol building or speak truth to power through poetry inside of it. We are the ones who must decide now.”

Jess Davis
2020 Minnesota Teacher of the Year

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