



Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California

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Educating toward a multiracial democracy means centering the needs, experiences, and identities of each and every young person; addressing issues of racial and social justice; encouraging respectful, equitable, and informed participation; and supporting engagement and problem-solving within and across diverse communities. Schools and other youth-serving institutions that promote education for a multiracial democracy are places where young people build supportive communities, figure out who they are in relation to peers from diverse backgrounds, and collectively contribute to a better society for all.

The Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy framework is a set of best practices designed to make these goals a reality. The framework comprises three overlapping priorities: building caring and restorative relationships, integrating lived civics into school curricula, and fostering youth voice.

FOR A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy: Summary.](#)

What Role Can Principals Play?

In the summer of 2022 we conducted interviews with a dozen California high school principals about the role of public education in preparing young people to participate in a diverse democracy. Many reported that they embrace this purpose. Yet, of late, the broader political climate has made this goal both more important and more challenging. Consider the words of a principal who leads a large high school in central California.

The ground shifted beneath their feet over a year and a half, and there were significant political events, social events that occurred. The murder of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and on and on. The rise of Black Lives Matter and the protests, responses to the protest, the blue line flag, the 2020 election and January 6. All these things happened while kids were in spaces that were not with us. And so, where they would have come to school and had some conversations about those things in a space where they knew there was a really diverse set of beliefs and experiences around them, and they would have been careful about it, typically. Our kids are pretty careful about those things when they're able to have those conversations. [But instead] they had them around their dinner table. Or not. They may have had them around a Discord

server, or they heard dad or mom rant and rave about that one perspective that they have—their family’s perspective. And then the media has shifted underneath [their] feet. So if they were home and they were watching CNN or MSNBC or Fox News, as opposed to five years ago, everybody took a stand and retreated to a corner. So our kids came back to school with this very narrow perspective. It was something that we hadn’t necessarily seen in the past. We didn’t have kids running around with political statements on their hats or shirts necessarily, but I do think that they struggled a little bit to have empathy for groups that they didn’t necessarily understand. That came out in a lot of different ways, but it was really complex to actually wrap your head around.¹

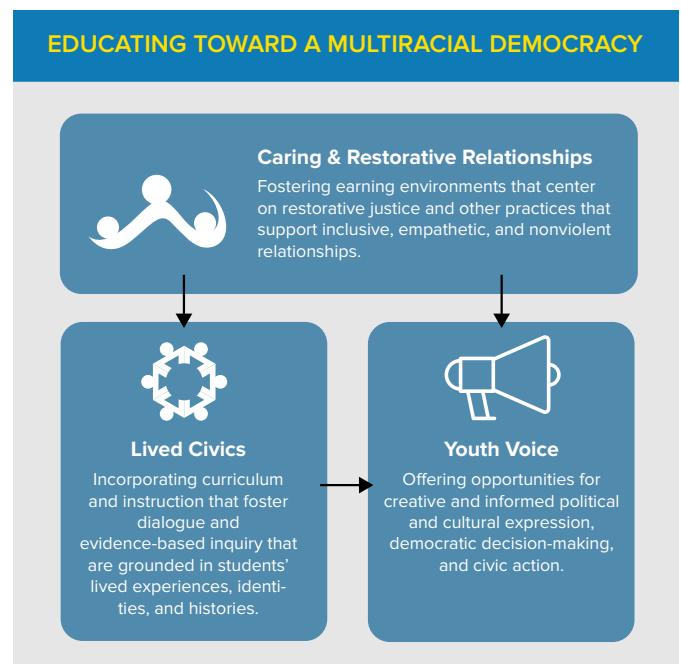
The principals we interviewed supported the Educating toward a Multiracial Democracy framework because it resonated with their educational philosophy. They described the framework as “important,” “key,” “aligned with who I am as an educator,” “a thematic umbrella,” and “an affirmation for the work that we are engaged in and that we want to do.”

Caring and Restorative Relationships

Several principals spoke about their school’s efforts to promote caring and restorative relationships.

Restorative [justice], if students are open to it, is very powerful, and it does keep students in school.

Caring and restorative relationships—that’s our number three goal in our school site plan. We’ve been involving restorative practices for the last couple of years. We bring together the person that’s caused harm and the person that’s been a recipient [of] harm and work through a restorative conversation. It helps them to move past the harm, to restore the relationship and to change the behavior that caused that harm.



But principals also noted that the current social and political environment has made this work extremely difficult.

In some circles [it has become common to say] “Ef your feelings. People are too sensitive, they’ve got to get over it.” I’ve seen that now repeatedly. “It doesn’t matter what you think. I’m going to tell you what I think. Screw you.” [I worry about] the impact of a fourteen-year-old or fifteen-year-old hearing that at home, then they are in school and they drop a racial slur. I’ve told families my first priority is the safety of the victim. So if I can’t get two kids back onto this campus together, and repair it to a point where they can coexist, then I got to go with the victim, because he’s not the one who posted the racist message. If I can get us to a space where I can repair it, I would love to, but I can’t guarantee you. And I know that that’s hard. It’s tough, because today everybody wants to point at restorative justice. A big component of that is restoration of relationships or community or repair. But I’m just saying the repair’s not always possible. And ironically, many of the families who will hold it up and

1 Direct quotes have been edited slightly for clarity purposes.

not want us to suspend or move with discipline when their child's the victim, they have no appetite for repair. And so I think it's the hardest thing that we do right now, with the restorative justice movement, is trying to repair, or our inability to repair. And the criticism that we receive as, "You're not supporting your Muslim community, your Jewish community, your African American community, your LGBTQ or whatever, because you let that kid come back at some point, and they should not be able to go to college, they should not have a career or a future, and they should be banished." Because that is the emotional response. And that's the space where people in our community get with kids who are making some of these very public mistakes.

Lived Civics

None of the principals we interviewed spoke in depth about what we describe as lived civics, yet some did place an emphasis on civic education in their schools.

We've [led professional development] training to [expand] opportunities for student voice, whether it's Socratic seminars, philosophical chairs, [or] debate [that calls for students to] take positions in [a] point-counterpoint [framework]. So kids really address issues. We've been involved in civic projects for the last couple of years to give kids an opportunity to get involved in [community] issues. We do mock elections and get them involved in voter registration, not only on campus for those that are eighteen. But we preregister students at sixteen. We do a whole piece on what it means to vote and why, and how your voice can be heard. We host the election here as well. We offer a part of our campus to the elections board. Students serve as poll workers. So we really try to get them involved civically.

Many principals stated that they want to integrate students' identities, histories, and lived experiences into the curriculum. Yet certain challenges had made this difficult. One challenge that several principals named is the need to recruit and support more teachers of color. "Right now our biggest challenge [is that the] majority of our staff teaching students of color are white. I could count on my hand the people of color we have."

Another challenge, particularly in politically contested and more conservative communities, lies in political attacks on efforts to teach about issues of race and racism. A principal in a politically contested district noted, "[There is] a value [in] valuing the fact that we are diverse, valuing that we have kids from different backgrounds and upbringings." He had, however, found it hard to enact this value.

We had [a] massive amount of conflict in our school district. We had an angry mob that would come to every school board meeting and raise hell. Like-minded folks who would come in, and they had their orchestrated talking points, usually reacting to things that weren't actually happening. They were convinced. It was through the talking points that they received from whatever social media feeds that they get. Their message was one of three things: anti-CRT (which, again, isn't being taught); anti-masking and being opposed to any requirement to wear [a] mask; and anti-vaccination—responding to something that wasn't happening, the requirement to have all students vaccinated. They would come after two of the board members by name and talk about how their days are limited and they're going to get [them] thrown out. And in some cases, it was even more threatening than that. Teachers have been nervous all along that anything to do with race, anything to do with ethnicity, anything to do with constitutional issues could be used against [them] in some

way, shape, or form. In our preservice meetings at the beginning, one of the social studies teachers just raised her hand and said, “Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. I’m afraid to teach, basically.”

Similarly, another principal we spoke with had encountered extraordinary backlash in her community. She described her school as the “whipping child of various news outlets” and stated that she and other educators had been attacked without provocation or concern.

Well, I know they’re going to have a hell of a fight when they introduce the ethnic studies class in the most conservative areas of California. It is an issue already. But boy, it’s going to hit the fan when that actually goes into practice. When these groups of parents who disagree with this stuff, when their freshman has to come into ninth grade and take this course, boy, are they going to have issues. . . . It’s going to be a doozy.

Youth Voice

The principals we interviewed were most enthusiastic about their efforts to promote youth voice.

The student voice piece has finally arrived—thank goodness! Students are voicing how they feel, what they need. We’re not quite there with them yet. I really want to teach that leadership advocacy [and] community engagement piece to these students, so that they can go to a board meeting or go to a city council meeting and present, or go to the different nonprofits and participate in promoting something they’re passionate about. Making a difference, seeing the change, doing it in a respectful way. We don’t need to disrupt, nor do we need to become violent or disrespectful. We can be heard. There’s spaces and ways to do that. So, that’s exciting to me.

One principal described a group that was working to encourage student participation in school governance.

We have a group called Student Voice that [draws students] randomly [from] all over campus. [We] pull cross sections [of students] together and [ask] what are [the] topics you want to talk about? On top of that, we did this training in Sacramento for student board members. For years, I had always seen them just kind of sit there [at board meetings]. [Now] they are very, very involved. Their voice really matters. And they have their own Student Voice group that doesn’t include us, where they go and get [ideas] from [other] kids.

Another principal related that a growing number of students were exercising their voice about matters that impacted their lives at school.

[We have a] Student House of Representatives [that includes] students from each second period classroom. [Teachers] draw a name out of a hat of the ones who want to do it. We have about eighty to a hundred kids who come in every six weeks and have a conversation with the administration. And we’ll bring in whoever it is that they have concerns about. If they have issues about maintenance and the cleanliness of the facilities, we’ll have our lead maintenance guy there. If they have questions about security, we’ll have our police officer there, or our supervision staff. If they have questions about cafeteria food, which they always do, we’ll have our food and nutrition services there. [The purpose is for the students] to dialogue and get to know and develop relationships with those leaders. [One] challenge [with] the House of Reps meetings is [how to] distribute the attention around the room. You’ve got one

or two kids who want to dominate. And we have some ground rules to try to prevent that. [A second] challenge [is] having the conversation be broader and a little bit more meaningful or deeper. It just takes time. Students want to know that they're heard, and the way that they know that they're heard is they bring something up and then they see something done about it. And that's a big thing. So, even if it's as small as posting the cafeteria menus on posters around and having a QR code for feedback. A QR code—that came out of that meeting, that's a big deal. [Or] we took mirrors out of boys' bathrooms years ago because they were always etched and damaged. And [at the meeting] they asked to have [the] mirrors back. I said, "Look, we can try them in one restroom and see if things can be taken care of." And we did. And they were appreciative. They saw it, and they were like, "Thank you for the mirrors." And that thing is like, "Oh, wow, we say something and something happened."

Questions to Consider

1. What important steps can principals take to advance the goals of a multiracial democracy?
2. How can principals work in coalition with others (such as teachers, families, district leaders, youth organizers, community members, etc.) to advance this agenda?
3. How can principals learn from youth organizing groups about ways to educate toward a multiracial democracy? For more ideas, you can explore a related brief, [How Youth Organizing Groups Educate Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California](#) [insert link].
4. What are the unique challenges and barriers that principals face in trying to advance this agenda?
5. What support do principals need to do this work more powerfully?
6. What are the implications of educating toward a multiracial democracy for the recruitment and development of educators and other school leaders?

FOR THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California, including references.](#)

For an online version of this Brief for Principals click [HERE](#)

