

Reducing Racism in Schools: The Promise of Anti-Racist Policies

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Introduction

In 2020, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others led to a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement across the nation and around the globe. The revitalization of this movement has come with increased public demand for policy change, and specific calls for anti-racist policies in schools. As a result, many educational leaders are grappling with what this means for their respective contexts, and the extent to which their school or district's current policies measure up to public demand.

Educating and training teachers and administrators on how to enact culturally relevant and inclusive practices is one step towards eliminating racism in schools. Expressing a commitment to anti-racism through school policies, statements, guidelines, or codes takes these efforts a step further. Within the last decade, some schools and districts have penned their own anti-racist policies to detail the steps they are taking to disrupt racism within their locale. In this brief, I describe these policies and highlight recent initiatives aimed at eliminating racism in schools. As school and district leaders advance their own anti-racist policies and objectives, this policy brief provides guidance based on the practices of diverse districts in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Anti-Racist Policy in Schools

Anti-racist policies are usually documents drafted by a governing body and disseminated to staff, parents, and students in a particular district or school. Similar to a code of conduct, school handbook, or anti-bullying policy, the policy states the organization's commitment to anti-racism and lays out procedures that must be followed in order to uphold the organization's commitment to the cause of dismantling racism to create an inclusive, equity-oriented environment. Over the past decade, schools and districts, both nationally and internationally, have written and adopted policies to address racism, discrimination, and inequity in schools. U.S. districts often refer to these policies as equity policies, while in places such as the United Kingdom (U.K.), Australia, Ireland, and South Africa similar policies are usually entitled anti-racist policies. Despite the difference in name, they often share similar objectives and features. Anti-racist and equity policies typically start with a statement of assurance that the board or governing body has considered the importance of racial equity, followed by a renunciation of discriminatory behavior within their context. Next, the document includes a definition of racism. Then, these policies describe the steps taken by the governing body to ensure equity or anti-racism.

Components of Anti-Racist Policy: Areas to Address

For this brief I examined over 25 publicly available equity or anti-racist policies from several states in the U.S. and from schools in Australia, South Africa, Ireland and the U.K. I found that most policies address racism through the lenses of: (1) school environment, (2) incident reporting, (3) staffing, (4) data analysis, and (5) funding. After addressing these components, policies typically offer guidance or present action steps to support implementation. These include (1) providing a clear and accurate definition of racism for consumers of the policy (2) devising a plan for policy dissemination, (3) appointing an anti-racist committee or point person, (4) coupling equity/anti-racist policy with other school or district-wide policies, and (5) partnering with external organizations. Below I briefly describe each of these components.

School Environment: Creating an Anti-Racist/Equity-Oriented Culture and Climate

Most of the policies discuss the school environment at length. Generally, they describe ways in which school staff can create and maintain a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. One way policies describe achieving this goal is through representation of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds in curricula, texts, hallway displays, and digital media. They also state the importance of incorporating positive role models and discussing issues of race and diversity within classrooms and during school-wide events. Several anti-racist/equity policies advocate events focusing on diversity and empathy building, such as Friendship Week or Multicultural Week. Policies also describe building teachers' awareness of racism and bias as a means to shift culture and climate in the school. These policies require teachers to be mindful of cultural assumptions and bias, develop racial literacy, enact cultural responsiveness, and understand their own identity. In the Anti-Racist Policy of Bure Valley School in the U.K., the authors offer specific examples of how this can be done, asserting that students "should be confident to speak, hear or read in their home language in school" and have their names "accurately recorded and correctly pronounced" by teachers (p. 2).

Reporting: Developing a System for Reporting Racial Incidents

Most policies also detail reporting requirements. Authors of these policies aim to ensure a system is in place to deal with incidents of racism and discrimination. This component often lays out a specific procedure for responding to an incident including requiring a written report, timeline for resolution, documentation of resolution, and family notification. In addition to forms for reporting, many anti-racist/equity policies require a racism logbook or place for complaints to be recorded permanently. These policies also describe ways in which schools could support students who may be victims of a racist or discriminatory act. Some policies note that support for students involved in an incident should be ongoing and coupled with psychological or mental health services. Additionally, some policies encourage schools to help students feel empowered to report incidents and develop strategies for dealing with racial conflict.

Staffing: Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Diverse Staff with Equity/Anti-Racist Mindsets

Many of the policies emphasize the need to recruit and retain staff members dedicated to anti-racism, and committed to providing equity-based training for new and veteran educators. In their equity statement, The Princeton Public School District in New Jersey states, “The goal is to attract, develop, inspire, and retain a diverse workforce within a supportive environment” (<https://www.princetonk12.org/district/equity>). Several other schools and districts echo this sentiment within their policies by describing their efforts to diversify their staff, both in terms of demographics and beliefs. They attempt to fulfill this goal through recruitment of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and administrators. They articulate the importance of hiring staff that mirrors the student population. Some districts or schools call for staff hiring to follow equal opportunity hiring procedures and the use of equity-oriented criteria for selection. For teachers already employed, policies name professional development and new staff training as opportunities to provide new learning around racial consciousness and inclusivity.

Data Analysis: Employing an Equity Lens to Identify Disparities and Inform Decision-Making

Several policies aim to challenge racism through race conscious data collection and review. According to these policies, “effective” review of data means testing for differences across student demographic groups in access, performance, and discipline. The Portland Public School District in Oregon suggests using data to identify and modify assessments that lead to over or under-representation of minoritized groups. For example, some policies identify focus areas such special education identification and suspension for review given the history of over-representation of students from minoritized groups in special education and among suspensions. Some state the goal of increasing the number of minoritized students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Others call for a closer look at how selective admissions criteria for enrollment may lead to adverse effects and the ways in which admissions testing may disadvantage students of color. Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland states their plan to disaggregate data to “analyze trends, identify gaps, and develop racial equity priorities” (p. 4). To fulfill this objective of equity-oriented data analysis, some policies highlight the need for constant monitoring and reporting on progress towards goals.

Funding: Assessing and Allocating Funds for Equity Purposes

While undoubtedly important, funding is mentioned in only a few of the anti-racist/equity policies. Policymakers in Baltimore include the following line in their policy: “Ensure that purchasing/procurement practices provide access and economic opportunities within communities represented by students of color” (p. 4). This is one way that educational institutions can be mindful of their economic impact on the community. Schools may also decide to allot funds to ensure attainment of aforementioned objectives such as equitable hiring, staff training, and data analysis resources.

In sum, the policies reviewed tend to address five areas to enhance anti-racism and equity in their contexts. Creating equity-oriented objectives in the areas of school environment, incident reporting, staffing, data analysis, and funding is an important start. However, when drafting these documents, policymakers should include additional guidelines to support the implementation of anti-racist policies. Next, I describe some of the ways existing policies attempt to ensure attainment of policy objectives.

Components of Anti-Racist Policy: Process Elements to Support Implementation

Clearly and Accurately Define Racism

One way to create strong anti-racist policy is by providing a clear definition of racism to frame the policy. In addition to setting context for the policy, opening with a definition creates an opportunity to educate readers and norm on the school or district's understanding of racism. Such definitions vary across policies. Some of the international anti-racist policies begin by distinguishing between personal and institutional racism and offer clear definitions for each. For example, in the U.K. the Truro School's Anti-Racist policy relies on a definition from *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*, which states that institutional racism is "the collective failure of an organisation to ^{[[1]]}provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin." The policy continues: "when a child is subject to racist bullying or harassment, their behaviour and attainment are likely to be affected; if the behaviour is treated in isolation without taking into consideration the issues and effects of racism, this can be described as institutional racism. The racist element must be explicitly recognised and dealt with" (p. 2). This definition is provided before any other components of the policy are explained. Policymakers should consider how their context defines equity and racism before laying out a plan to address these issues. Consumers of anti-racist policy may be better equipped to follow subsequent guidelines if they have a foundational understanding of the problem and the purpose of the policy.

Policy Dissemination

The second way policymakers intend to make these policies come alive is through a plan for dissemination. Many policies are available online, on the school or district website. Other strategies for distribution include a physical copy in a designated location such as a school's main office and inclusion in student and staff handbooks. One district states that a summary of the policy will be included in students' yearly planners. Other ideas for dissemination include public displays in prominent areas of the school, placement in newsletters, and discussions during assemblies. Importantly, several anti-racist/equity policies name all parties that should review the policy, including staff, parents, students, contractors, service providers, and any other school visitors.

Appointing a Committee or Point-Person

The third way policymakers support implementation of these policies is by putting an individual or group in charge of monitoring the school's progress towards goals. In some cases this is the superintendent or another school leader; in other contexts, an equity committee is charged with this responsibility. For example, in Shaker Heights, Ohio there is an equity task force made up of 11 educators, nine community members, and two students. In general, the governing body or individual is required to report to the school board, make recommendations based on data, promote alignment between equity and other goals, present tools or resources, and ensure compliance with state and federal laws. Most policies describe the need for an annual report or review as part of their action plan.

Coupling Anti-Racist/Equity Policies with Other School Policies

A fourth way to promote accountability and adherence to anti-racist/equity policy is by associating it with other school policies, especially those that are well established. Most of the policies reviewed for this brief are linked to other policies focusing on topics such as: discipline, behavior, anti-bullying, school safety, the staff code of conduct, and the student code of conduct. Several anti-racist/equity policies identify their relationship to standards and curriculum and federal laws regarding race and discrimination. Attaching these policies to existing initiatives helps to integrate them into the organizational fabric of these educational institutions.

Partnering with External Organizations

Finally, to support implementation of anti-racist policy, schools and districts should seek guidance from organizations already committed to anti-racist work. Several policies name equity-based or anti-racist organizations with which they were affiliated. This is an important component because it lessens the burden on educational systems to deal with complex issues of race and equity on their own and presents the opportunity to rely on the expertise of government agencies, universities, community organizations, research organizations, and anti-racist non-profits. This can also facilitate and strengthen relationships between schools and communities.

A Promising Example

As mentioned above, many of the existing anti-racist and equity policies were drafted after 2010. Yet, recent events and the current sociopolitical climate signal the need to revisit and strengthen these policies. One district has done just this. In June 2020, the Indianapolis Public School District in Indiana, led by superintendent Aleesia Johnson, unanimously adopted a new Racial Equity Policy and publicly affirmed that Black lives matter in a resolution. Resolution No. 7861 and Board Policy 1619 – Racial Equity Mindset, Commitment, and Actions comes at a time when the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement is palpable. This district is demonstrating how to use policy, first, to take responsibility for systemic failure to adequately support Black and Brown students in the past, and, second, to plan for a better future.

With this new policy, the Indianapolis Public School District details specific action steps to increase racial equity. These include: partnership with the Racial Equity Institute (which helps organizations challenge systems of power and increase equity); restructuring, reducing, and auditing police presence and practices in schools; implementing a Supplier Diversity Policy with the aim of supporting local businesses (particularly those owned by women, people of color, and veterans); creating school-based equity teams for data analysis; increasing the recruitment and retention of Black staff; ensuring equitable enrollment across school types; shifting the budget to be more student centered and allocating funds to aid schools demonstrating the highest need; and considering how housing segregation impacts school choice and limiting boundaries to school access in the enrollment process.

We can all learn from this policy, with its high level of detail alongside the very public commitment by the board and superintendent. Not only does this new policy incorporate many of the aforementioned components such as commitment to reform in the areas of funding, data analysis, and school environment, the Indianapolis Public School (IPS) District has also developed strong plans to support its implementation. The district has partnered with the Racial Equity Institute to refine goals and train staff. IPS also signals the importance of considering other areas of anti-racist policy reform such as police presence in schools, and recognizing Juneteenth as a district holiday. It is also worthwhile to note that the IPS district acted swiftly by moving up the release of this new policy (initially set to be released later in the summer) to respond to recent acts of racism and injustice in the national news. Other districts around the country should follow IPS's lead.

Recommendations for Creating Anti-Racist Policies

The components of existing equity/anti-racist education policies described above provide a general understanding of what these policies should include: equity-oriented objectives for school climate, incident reporting, staffing, data analysis, and funding. The creators of these policies should also consider providing a clear definition of racism, laying out a plan regarding how to communicate the objectives of the policy to the broader community, specifying the individual(s) who will oversee policy implementation, identifying the connections between anti-racist policy and other school policies, and outlining how to leverage partnerships with external organizations committed to increasing equity.

In addition to these components, I share two additional suggestions for those drafting anti-racist policy. The first addresses the accessibility of anti-racist policy and associated tools or resources. The second deals with attention to the personal and interpersonal work that must be done to implement anti-racist policy. I describe each in further detail below.

Accessibility

Several schools and districts made their policies and equity tools easily accessible to staff and the public alike. Having materials and policies readily available increases the likelihood that

teachers and school leaders have access to and use resources. It also creates a more collegial environment as other schools and districts attempt to create their own anti-racist policies. For example, the Minneapolis Public School District in Minnesota shares an Equity and Diversity Impact Assessment tool on their website, and the Jefferson County Public School District in Louisville, Kentucky publicly shares their tools for equity analysis. Rather than reinventing tools, other districts may choose to cite and borrow from such existing assessments. The Shaker Heights, Ohio School District website provides a link to an equity resources page with suggested reading and links to equity-oriented organizations. While the Indianapolis Public Schools website has a link to their “Say Their Names” toolkit “to help foster productive conversations about race and civil disobedience” (<https://myips.org/get-involved/racial-equity/say-their-names-toolkit/>). Links to these sorts of additional resources, readings, and campaigns offer helpful guidance as schools and districts across the country, and beyond, attempt to strengthen their anti-racist efforts.

Attention to the Personal and Interpersonal Work of Anti-Racist Policy Implementation

Districts and schools seeking to advance anti-racism and equity can attend to the aforementioned components to create effective policy. However, they must also consider the deeply personal work that is required alongside anti-racist reform. Many of these policies ask school staff to interrogate their own biases, positions of power, and privilege. The extent to which these types of personal reflection are encouraged and occur contextualizes policy implementation. Based on a study done with schools in California, the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education identified characteristics of schools with a record of narrowing the impact of racism and inequity. The authors stress the need for equity-oriented school leaders to guide staff and high levels of trust among members of the school community. This report highlights the need to consider the ways in which school-level features and interactions matter for the implementation of anti-racist or equity policy. Thus, in addition to focusing on the components within anti-racist or equity policies, we must also consider the characteristics and dispositions associated with positive change and increased student performance at the school and district level.

Some districts have supported educators in engaging in the vital personal and interpersonal work necessary to advance anti-racism and equity. Pat Savage-Williams, president of Evanston Township Board of Education in Illinois, shares advice for fellow board members looking to challenge racial inequity. In her article posted on the school board website, she promotes many of the components described in this brief, such as being data informed, using school budgets to limit disparities, and developing external partnerships. Additionally, she suggests that board members be willing to undergo a personal journey of reflection and understanding to expand their knowledge of racial issues, and should “expect opposition” (<https://www.iasb.com/about-us/publications/journal/2018/march-april/ten-ways-school-boards-can-champion-racial-equity/>). This example underscores the work that must be done on an individual and interpersonal level to make these policies come alive.

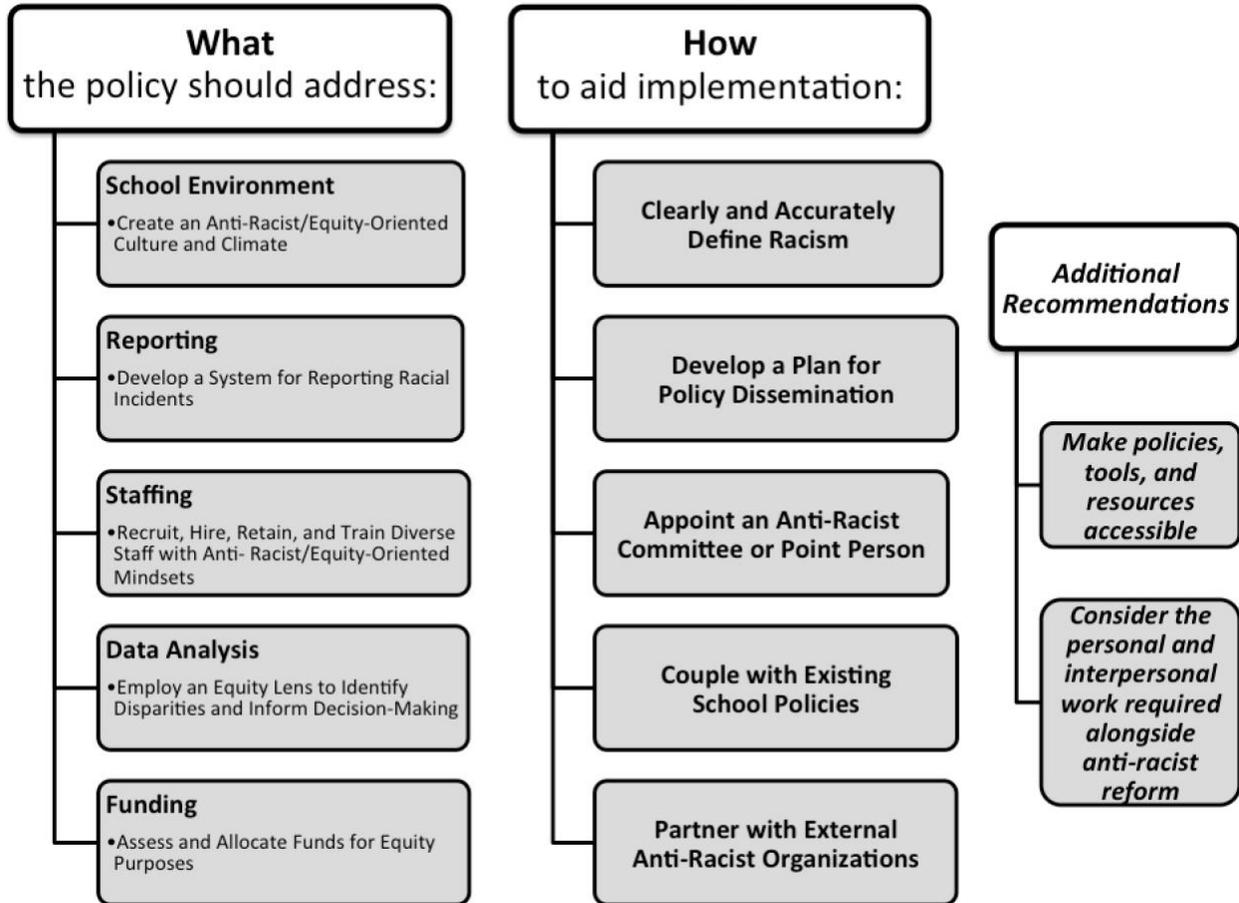
Conclusion

This policy described the topics addressed in anti-racist schooling policies and outlined the shifts educational leaders are making to strengthen and clarify not only their policies, but also their personal stance on racism and equity. Policymakers must consider how they define racism, the objectives of anti-racist policy, and how to make the policy actionable. After creating and revising anti-racist policies, policymakers must also consider the characteristics of the school community in which these documents will live. Following these steps can lead to policy changes that interrupt the status quo. As students and communities demand change, educational institutions must consider how they will respond and whether that response disrupts or facilitates systems of inequity.

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Appendix

Implementing Anti-Racist Policy in Schools



Policy Reference List

Policy Title	Location	Retrieved from:
Anti-Racism Policy for Belconnen High School	Australia	http://www.blch.act.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/424019/Anti-Racism_Policy.pdf
Silver Tree Steiner School Anti-Racism and Discrimination Policy	Australia	https://silvertreess.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/stss-anti-racism-and-discrimination-policy-2014-v3.pdf
Kinvarans Anti-Bullying/Anti-Racism Policy	Ireland	http://kinvarans.ie/assets/uploads/AntiBullying.pdf
Pridwin Preparatory School Anti-Racism Policy	South Africa	https://www.pridwin.co.za/uploads/Anti-Racism-Policy.pdf
Bure Valley School Anti-Racism Policy	United Kingdom	http://www.burevalleyschool.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Master-BVS-Anti-Racism-Policy-2016.pdf
St. Hugh's School Anti-Racism Policy	United Kingdom	https://www.st-hughs.lincs.sch.uk/assets/downloads/Anti-racism_Policy_Oct_17.pdf
Truro School Anti-Racism Policy	United Kingdom	https://www.truroschoo.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Anti-Racism-Policy-19-20.pdf
St. Joseph's R.C. Primary School Anti-Racism Policy	United Kingdom	http://www.st-josephs.durham.sch.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/171/2014/07/Anti-Racism-Policy.pdf
Sonoma Valley USD Board Policy Equity	Sonoma, California	https://www.sonomaschools.org/Page/3204

Hartford School District Anti-Racism Procedures	Hartford, Connecticut	https://www.vnews.com/Hartford-School-Board-enacting-anti-racism-policy-34961312
Waterbury Public Schools Equity Policy	Waterbury, Connecticut	https://www.waterbury.k12.ct.us/userfiles/4/my%20files/boe%202019/0523_equity%20policy%2008-22-19.pdf?id=559274
D65 Equity Policy	Evanston, Illinois	https://www.district65.net/Page/1517
Baltimore City Public Schools Equity Policy	Baltimore, Maryland	https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/bcpss/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=BLQTCN76BED4
Cambridge Public Schools Anti-Racism Statement and Initiatives	Cambridge, Massachusetts	https://www.cpsd.us/cms/One.aspx?portalId=3042869&pageId=69436314
Minneapolis Public Schools Equity and Diversity Policy 1304	Minneapolis, Minnesota	https://policy.mpls.k12.mn.us/uploads/policy_1304.pdf
St. Paul Public Schools Racial Equity Policy	St. Paul, Minnesota	https://www.spps.org/Page/5996
Princeton Public Schools Equity Statement and Policy 5755: Equity in Educational Programs and Services	Princeton, New Jersey	https://www.princetonk12.org/district/equity http://www3.princetonk12.org/board/board_policies/pupils/5755%20Equity%20in%20Educational%20ProgramsandServices.pdf
Cincinnati Public Schools- Board Policy 2255: Equity and Excellence in Education	Cincinnati, Ohio	https://www.cps-k12.org/sites/www.cps-k12.org/files/pdfs/boe-2255-Policy-Equity-and-Excellence-in-Education-5-10-2018.pdf
Shaker's Educational Equity Policy	Shaker Heights, Ohio	https://www.shaker.org/Equity.aspx

Portland Public Schools Racial Educational Equity Policy	Portland, Oregon	https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/4814/2.10.010-P.pdf https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/265/3-31-14-Five-Year-Equity-Plan-Narrative.pdf
Pennsylvania School Board Association's Equity Action Plan	Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania	https://www.psba.org/member-services/equity-services/tools-resources/equity-action-plan/
Albemarle County Public Schools Anti-Racism Policy	Charlottesville, Virginia	https://www.k12albemarle.org/our-division/anti-racism-policy/policy
Charlottesville City Schools Equity Policy	Charlottesville, Virginia	http://charlottesvilleschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Equity-Policy-and-Anti-Racism-Policy_November-7-2019-SB-Meeting_PROPOSED-FINAL.pdf
Federal Way Public Schools Race and Equity Policy: 0200	Federal Way, Washington	https://www.fwps.org/cms/lib/WA01919399/Centricity/Domain/819/0200-Adopted-022619.pdf
Seattle Public Schools Policy 0030	Seattle, Washington	https://www.seattleschools.org/district/district_quick_facts/initiatives/policy_0030
Shoreline School District Race and Equity Policy	Shoreline, Washington	https://www.shorelineschools.org/cms/lib/WA02217114/Centricity/Domain/1090/5b-Race%20and%20Equity%20PolicyREV.pdf
Tukwila School District Board Policy No. 0535: Race and Equity	Tukwila, Washington	https://go.boarddocs.com/wa/tukwila/Board.nsf/files/BJZUH27B865E/\$file/Policy%20No.%200535%20-%20Race%20and%20Equity.pdf