

Guest Editorial

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We are responsible for creating the change we need

A guest editorial by State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

We are currently experiencing and witnessing an important movement in our nation's history. The recent senseless killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and other Black men and women symbolized the tipping point. This movement is important because the outcry for change in our systems and institutions has been loud and persistent. I am heartened by the number of youth of all races and ethnicities coming together with one voice to acknowledge the plight of Black Americans, and the search for understanding and knowledge to appropriately respond in this moment.

The Department of Public Instruction stands with the students, families, educators, districts, schools, and other organizations to denounce racism, violence against Black people, discrimination, and exclusion of all forms. We also join hands with those demanding racial justice in all systems and institutions within our society.

Black lives matter. Our systems and institutions must change to reflect this truth. We are witnessing the urgency of seizing this moment and committing ourselves to creating a new system of education where a child's race is not a predictor of success or failure in our schools. This predictability inherent in our current system means the system must change — we must change.

Many know I grew up in the segregated and deeply divided south during the Civil Rights era, where wealth and power, born of privilege, ruled. I have experienced racism and have seen its negative effects firsthand. Racism, for me, is a personal reality, and a reality I have confronted throughout my life. I grieve for the families of our Black men and women who continue to experience racism and have to live with the trauma it creates.

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In my first State of Education Address, I called the gaps in achievement, access, and opportunity in Wisconsin's schools a crisis. And now, we are in an even greater crisis as COVID-19 and the persistent racial violence plaguing our nation have compounded the challenges Black and other communities of color were already facing.

The DPI recently released Education Forward, our guidance to districts and schools to ensure a safe and equitable return to school. As districts and schools plan, I urge you to closely examine your systems, programs, policies, and ways of engaging; intentionally seek to eliminate inequities, listen to the voices of Black and other marginalized communities, respond to their needs appropriately, and create inclusive learning experiences for all students. We are all responsible for creating the change we so critically need.

I commit to creating space to intentionally listen to our families and leaders of color from across the state in order to decide the most important and urgent place to start. We must create spaces where our students feel supported in standing up for what they believe in and all students are valued and appreciated for who they are and what they bring. It is important that staff in our schools acquire the confidence and skills necessary to deliver critical content and lead challenging conversations about race and racism in our country.

Similarly, we must diversify Wisconsin's educator workforce. 98% of our teachers in Wisconsin are White. We know having teachers of color benefits all students, not just students of color. I call upon our youth, especially our youth of color, who are demanding change and racial justice to become a teacher! Teachers are change agents. Teachers give hope. Teachers inspire. Teachers change lives.

I know the challenges we face are numerous but we can take action. It's time to shed the title of having the largest Black-White achievement gap in the country. Dr. King reminded us that, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." In the midst of our current reality, I have faith and hope for the new future we will collectively create.

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NOTE: This guest editorial is available electronically at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2020/we-are-responsible-creating-change-we-need>.