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## Racial disparities and our collective will

*Why we must confront racism and disparities – the second in a series  
by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly on equity, inclusion, and diversity*

Wisconsin's racial disparities [in assessment data are egregious](#), not to mention unconscionable. In disparities by race, [we are the worst state in the nation](#). And let me confront a common assumption upfront: these disparities cannot be explained away by poverty; after controlling for economic disadvantage, the gap persists. In fact, on average, Black students who are not economically disadvantaged score lower than white students who are.

This is the reality of the achievement gap in Wisconsin. It cannot continue this way; we are failing our students of color, and one factor in that failure is in the language we use to describe it. The word *achievement* places both the possibility of success and blame for failure on the child, and that is not where it belongs.

Instead, let's talk about the *opportunity gap* between students with ample opportunities for enrichment classes and co-curricular activities and those without. Let's talk about the gaps in literacy among and between the students who have access to high quality childcare and early childhood programming, versus those who do not. Or the access gap between students in classes with well-supported teachers and specialists with mentors and robust professional development available to them compared to those teachers in underfunded districts who must go without. Speaking of support, how about the gap between students with strong mental health care in their schools or communities, compared to those who struggle with challenges and do so without support. These are gaps our education system must address, and we cannot do it alone. We will need consistent and increased funding from the legislature, meaningful and intentional family engagement with our schools, and a greater understanding of and commitment to the need to meet the challenges of supporting youth mental health in Wisconsin.

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There are more gaps to tackle beyond these. There is the representation gap where our students of color do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum they study, or they only see that reflection in studies of trauma and struggle. There are hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin children who go through elementary, middle, and high school who learn in schools who never see a teacher who doesn't look like them, and there are hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin children who learn in schools where they never see a teacher who had their childhood experience. We must embrace that Black history, Indigenous history, the history of immigrants in our country are all part of *American* history. We need to honor that people of color continue to make immeasurable contributions to American society - and have since the foundation of our nation.

Related to the representation gap is an engagement gap, with too many of our classrooms structured to cater to learning styles that do not reflect the diversity of learners in those classrooms. This is where culturally relevant teaching, the original CRT, is essential to our instruction. Culturally relevant teaching reaches every student in the classroom not despite their identity, but through nurturing and supporting that cultural identity. And that brings us to another gap, the belonging gap, the distance between students who feel welcome, celebrated, and authentically included in the classroom community, and those who do not. This goes beyond race, ethnicity, color, or language, but includes ability, gender, gender identity, and sexuality as well.

When there is a gap in outcomes, a potentially less offensive way of saying achievement gap, it means we need to investigate the inputs that are creating those disparate results. We need to question what we are doing as an education system that results in these disparities, and what can we do to change those educator actions and, in turn, those student outcomes? I believe Dr. Clint Smith's writing applies here, too; the question is again whether we have the collective will to reckon with these disparities and the need for belonging in our classrooms. I believe we do, and we must.

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**NOTE:** This is the second in a three-part series of op-eds by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly. For the first part, [visit the DPI's website here](#). A headshot for publication of Dr. Underly is available [here on the DPI's website](#). This guest editorial is available online [here on the DPI's website](#).