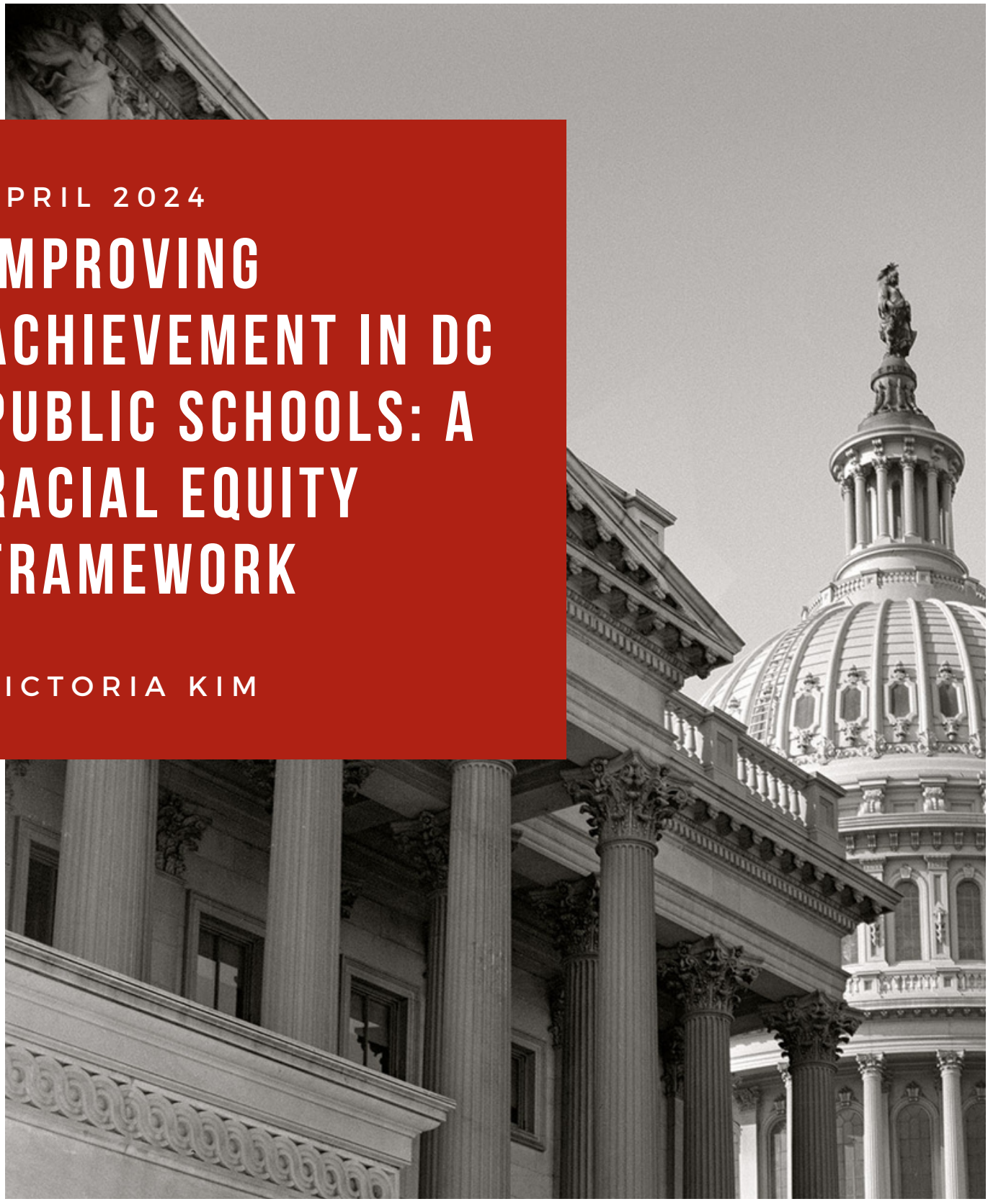

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IMPROVING ACHIEVEMENT IN DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

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Improving Achievement in DC Public Schools: A Racial Equity Framework

An Applied Policy Project

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With guidance from Annie Rorem and Gerard Robinson

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There are not enough words in any language to convey how thankful I am for everyone in my life. This could not have been done without you all.

DISCLAIMER

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

HONOR CODE

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

INTRODUCTION

Within the educational landscape of Washington, DC, a crucial issue demands attention— gaps in proficiency rates on statewide assessments, particularly for Black and Hispanic/Latino students in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). The magnitude of the issue is also cause for concern with the largest inequities being that only 11% of Black students and 19% of Hispanic/Latino students score proficient on math exams, compared to the 75% proficiency rate for white students. In partnership with the DC Mayor's Office of Racial Equity, this project aims to dissect and explore the different mechanisms of the racial achievement gap and walk through potential solutions that are focused on equity and justice for DC students and families. Focusing on internal and external factors, the following alternatives present themselves as three strong, viable pathways— engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy and education, school desegregation and integration, and community schools. Typically, these educational issues are rarely addressed by non-education groups, but this document serves as an analysis of the issue through a unique perspective, one that is situated outside of a typical education space, encouraging discussion from a governmental body committed to racial equity.

LANGUAGE CAVEAT

The "racial achievement gap" is often used to refer to the inequities in academic performance and outcomes between different racial or ethnic groups, particularly between students of color and white students. The use of this phrase can be problematic for several reasons including a deficit frame and potential for stereotyping (Sparks, 2020). The language implies that certain racial groups are underachieving or behind in educational outcomes, which implicitly and explicitly reinforces the racial hierarchy that exists— emphasizing white intellectual superiority and Black intellectual inferiority (Love, 2004). It also may suggest that differences in academic performance can be solely attributed to race, rather than recognizing the many factors that contribute to these inequities. The phrase is used throughout this report because it has become established and widely recognized as a term in academia and follows the language of the existing scholarly literature.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report gives context to the racial achievement gap in Washington, DC and potential options that the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity can pursue in order to promote equitable outcomes for Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

DC Public Schools has the largest racial achievement gap in the nation, specifically with math and English proficiency rates in the 3rd to 8th grades. Research has long supported that these inequities can lead to lower graduation rates, decreased life-long earnings, and higher justice system involvement, among many others. Given that students' academic achievement is a significant predictor of future outcomes, it is important that this challenge is addressed as these gaps only widen over time.

I suggest three pathways that address various aspects of educational equity—culturally responsive education, school desegregation and integration, and community schooling. The multidimensional focus ensures that strategies can target different aspects of structural inequities. The specific alternatives are as follows:

1. **Development of a culturally responsive framework to guide best practices in the classroom**
2. **Include a dissimilarity index on DC's first racial equity dashboard**
3. **Identify schools that would most benefit from an expansion of the DC Connected Schools program**

These options were evaluated based on their ability to promote equitable access to resources, address historical barriers, cost, and effectiveness.

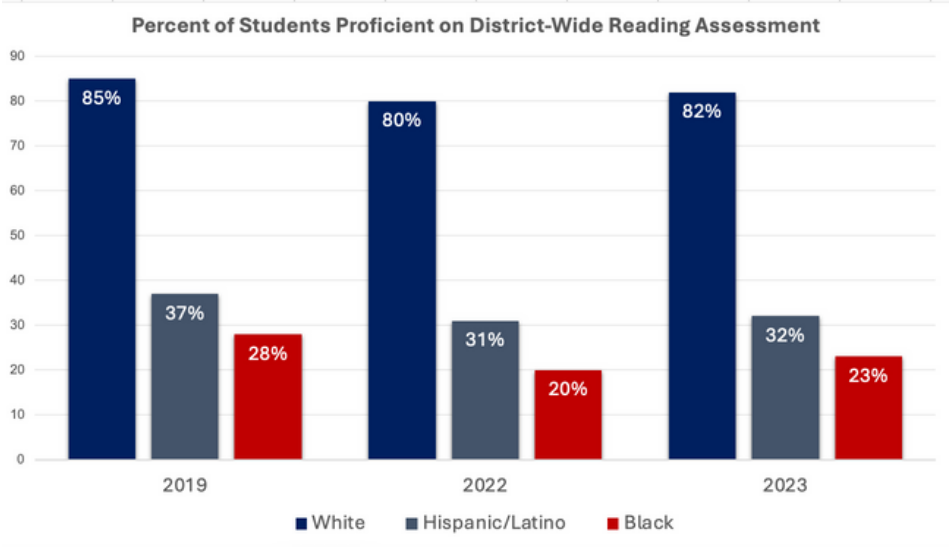
Based on the existing literature and the following analysis, I recommend that the Office of Racial Equity pursue a culturally responsive framework to promote equity within classrooms.

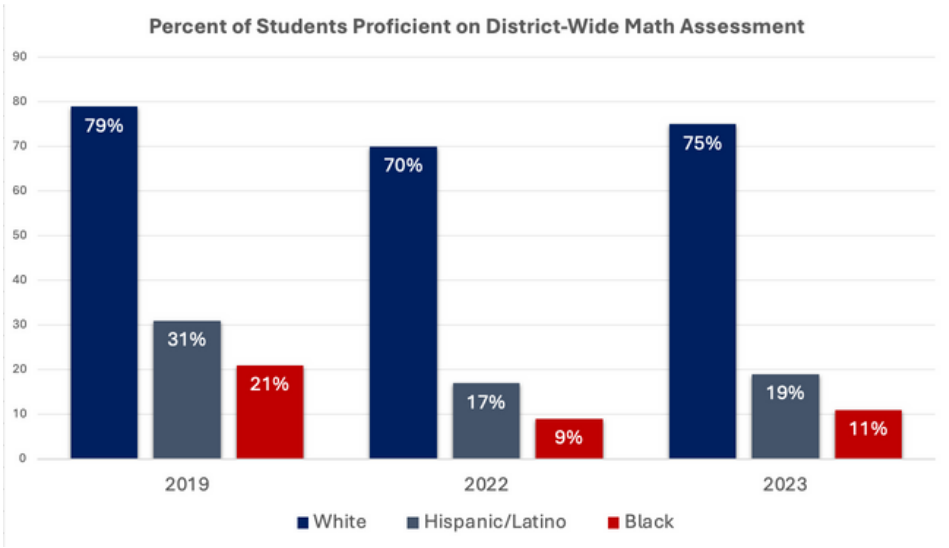
This recommendation allows for enough flexibility so that teachers and school personnel are able to adapt curriculum and meet diverse student needs, while working within the cost constraints to improve students of color's academic outcomes and promote racial equity.

OUTLINING THE PROBLEM

Despite improvements in test scores, too few Black and Hispanic/Latino students in DC Public Schools are attaining math and English proficiency in the 3rd to 8th grades. With achievement gaps as large as 63 percentage points, these differences are the widest in the nation and must be addressed to ensure equitable education for all students (2022-23 Statewide Assessment Results and Resources, n.d.).

Figures 1 and 2 DCPS Proficiency on District-Wide Assessments





Source: 2022-23 Statewide Assessment Results and Resources. (n.d.). Retrieved from Office of the State Superintendent of Education website: https://osse.dc.gov/assessmentresults2023

CLIENT OVERVIEW

The presented problem is important to the DC Mayor's Office of Racial Equity (ORE) because it directly aligns with their mission and guiding principles, quoted below:

ORE Mission

ORE works in collaboration with District leadership and agencies to apply a racial equity lens across government operations.

ORE Vision

We envision a District of Columbia where everyone can thrive with a sense of agency and where race will no longer predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources.

The widening achievement gap between Black and Hispanic/Latino students and white students highlights persistent and growing inequities in educational outcomes that directly affect the city's educational landscape. It also acknowledges the historical backdrop of racial inequities specific to the D.C. education system, recognizing that both students of color and residents in the District have dealt with systemic disadvantages for far too long. Additionally, the problem is framed so it fits within the current vision of the Office of Racial Equity in promoting racial equity, which they defined below, and it is closely related to their commitment to addressing systemic racism. This context is tied to the Office's vision of a future where race will no longer predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources ("Districtwide 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan," 2024).

ORE's Definition of Racial Equity

ORE defines racial equity as both a process and an outcome.

As a process, we apply a racial equity lens when the individuals who have been most impacted by structural racial inequity are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the policies and practices that impact their lives.

As an outcome, we achieve racial equity when race will no longer predict opportunities, outcomes, or the distribution of resources for District residents— particularly for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color."

Source: Districtwide 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan. (2024). In Office of Racial Equity. Retrieved from https://ore.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ore/page_content/attachments/ORE-REAP-020124.pdf

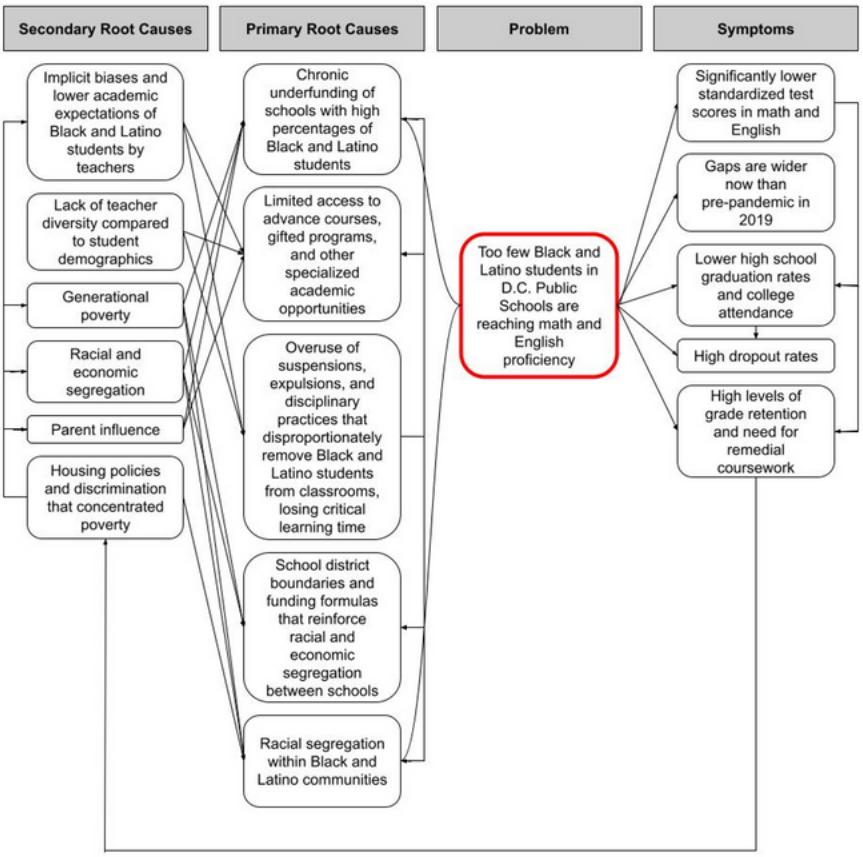
The Office of Racial Equity is also engaged in a partnership with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education to pilot racial equity tools, complete a departmental assessment of racial equity, and develop a racial equity action plan. They also work together on the Interagency Committee on Racial Equity as well as being one of the Racial Equity Pilot Cohorts (Current Work and Initiatives, n.d.). Part of their relationship involves developing a racial equity dashboard with education indicators like the levels of 3rd-grade math and reading proficiency, five-year high school graduation rate, and 9th-grade retention. The Office of Racial Equity has a direct stake in this policy problem and has the ability to provide consultation and guidance to promote racial equity within DCPS and across policy sectors.

BACKGROUND

The achievement gap is the difference in educational achievement between groups of students, particularly those of different races or socioeconomic statuses. It is important that the problem is addressed as soon as possible as the gaps only widen over time, having a lasting impact on students, schools, and communities. These disparities can broadly be explained by the fact that populations of color disproportionally experience the negative effects of social inequalities that influence educational outcomes (Lynch & Oakford, 2014).

While the problem is that too few Black and Hispanic/Latino students are reaching math and English proficiency, there are many primary and secondary root causes that contribute to the issue as noted in Figure 3. Implicit biases held by educators and administrators can shape their perceptions and expectations of students based on their race and ethnicity. Garcia and Weiss (2015) find that there is a visible gap between parents' and teachers' assessment of Black children. Black and white parents equally rate their children's persistence, approaches to learning, and social interactions, but when teachers do the evaluating, Black students are noted as having distinct disadvantages. These biases that Black and Latino students are inherently underperforming and capable of less achievement have been linked directly to excessive discipline practices like overuse of suspensions and expulsions as well as lower teacher expectations and limited access to advanced coursework and other academic opportunities (Rosen, 2016; Smith, 2015).

Figure 3 Root Cause Analysis



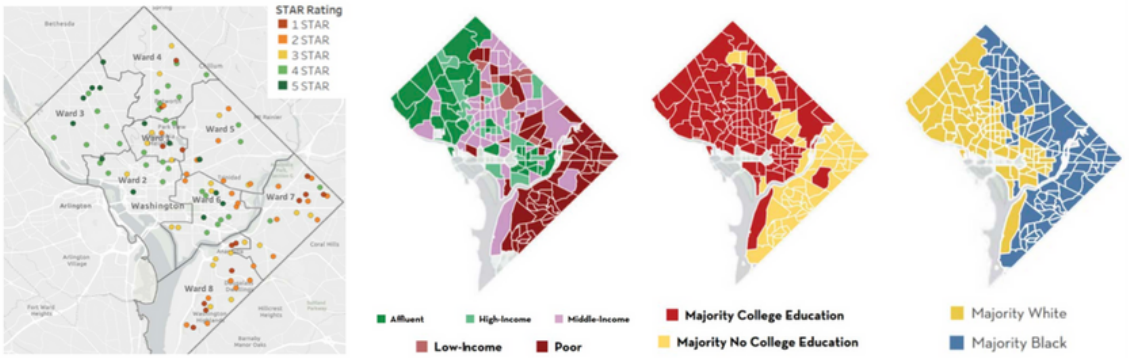
When the teaching staff lacks diversity and does not reflect student demographics, it can result in a lack of cultural competence and understanding among educators. This can lead to severe under-identification of high potential in Black and Latino students, which can further limit access to advanced courses and gifted programs. Figlio (2017) also finds that minority students often perform better on standardized tests, have improved attendance, and are suspended less frequently when they have at least one same-race teacher. Strong relationships and mentor figures for minority students are essential in promoting student motivation and academic engagement, but without them, Black and Latino students are often disproportionately subjected to disciplinary measures (EdTrust & MDRC, 2021). While these mechanisms are focused on the internal school factors, there are many external factors that also contribute to the widening achievement gaps as well.

Because homes are typically the largest financial asset, segregated markets significantly reduce the accumulated wealth of Black Americans. This, in combination with the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, helps explain why the Black-white wealth gap is so much larger than the Black-white income gap

(Fontenot et al., 2018). Typically, white families with higher levels of income have access to more affluent neighborhoods and higher-performing public schools. The average Black and Latino student's school district has less local revenue than the average white student's (Bramhall, 2021). Residential segregation also means that Black Americans are more likely to be steered towards high-poverty neighborhoods; even middle-class Black families are more likely to live in concentrated poverty and send their children to high-poverty schools than low-income white families (Quick & Kahlenberg, 2019; Startz, 2020).

Within the context of DC and DC Public Schools, Figure 4 shows how social factors compound for students attending schools with the lowest rating. The School Transparency and Reporting (STAR) Framework evaluates multiple areas of school performance, including academic achievement and growth, school environment, English language proficiency, and graduation rate (SY2018-19 STAR Ratings, 2019). Students who attend schools with a one to two STAR rating also live in areas where a majority of residents are Black, low-income or poor, and do not have a college education. Some students can use school choice policies to get around residential segregation and its effects, but the inability of most students to attend schools beyond their neighborhood is an issue. Low-income students who are given the chance to attend socioeconomically integrated schools are shown to achieve at much higher levels than if they attended a high-poverty school (Quick & Kahlenberg, 2019).

Figure 4 SY 2018-19 DC Public School STAR Ratings Locations and 2013-17 Subsequent Demographics by Income Level, Degree Attainment, and Race



Source: Chandler, J., & Phillips, J. (2020). Racial, Education & Income Segregation in the District of Columbia. DC Office of Planning. and SY2018-19 STAR Ratings: Bringing Accountability, Demonstrating Improvement in DC Public Schools. (2019). DC Public Schools.

Another challenge with the racial achievement gap is how intertwined these secondary and primary root causes are. Some scholars argue that its complexity makes it a cross-sector problem that requires coordination across different organizations (Community Schools, 2019; Vey & Morales, 2022). Factors like implicit biases, diversity gaps, and socioeconomic disparities suggest an integrated solution that addresses both the internal dynamics of educational institutions and the broader societal factors at play. The need for schools to serve as more than just academic institutions becomes clear, emphasizing the value of engaging with the broader community. Such an approach involves building connections between educators, families, and local leaders, creating a network of support that reaches out beyond the classroom. In a personal interview with a high-ranking official within one of the District's leading public charter school networks, she noted how important it is to connect schools to additional supports like the Department of Health and Department of Transportation to provide students resources from different levels and areas of their lives (personal communication, 16 October 2023).

These secondary and primary root causes contribute to the issue of too few Black and Hispanic/Latino students reaching math and English proficiency rates in DC Public Schools. While the secondary root causes fuel the primary issues, they are related and all interact in unique ways, creating a system that disproportionately limits the achievement of students of color. In DC, Black residents have the city's highest poverty rate, at over 21% while the poverty rate for white residents is drastically lower, barely over 5% (DC Racial Equity Profile, n.d.). With the existence of this problem, there are additional negative effects like lower high school graduation rates, high school dropout rates, and low college attendance and persistence. The nature of this problem is inherently cyclical and the symptoms that are a result of the problem then go back to uphold and exacerbate the fundamental root causes, making it incredibly difficult for students to succeed.

CONSEQUENCES

The existence of the racial achievement gap in education has concerning consequences, both for individual students in terms of their socioeconomic mobility and for society as a whole. Students of color can also experience stereotype threat, which is defined by the American Psychological Association as “an individual’s expectation that negative stereotypes about their member group will adversely influence others’ judgments of their performance” (“APA Dictionary of Psychology,” n.d., Definition 1). They face increased levels of social anxiety when faced with they are constantly reminded about the stereotypes associated with their respective ethnic or racial group. Much of the research around this idea focuses on test scores, but Appel and Kronberger (2012) even find that it goes beyond that- stereotype threat impairs students of color’s ability to even build academic skills in the first place. Beyond individual negative impacts, research has shown that students with lower academic achievement are more likely to drop out of school, have worse health outcomes, and have higher rates of incarceration (Auguste et al., 2009; Lynch & Oakford, 2014). These factors also mean that the racial achievement gap contributes to reduced access to higher education and limited economic opportunities in adulthood which further exacerbates cycles of poverty and widens the wealth gap between racial groups (Shores et al., 2020).

There are also significant economic consequences to the racial achievement gap. Lynch and Oakford (2014) find that if the United States were able to minimize these differences, the economy would be 5.8% larger in 2050, an increase of about $2.3 trillion. The average cumulative increase in gross domestic product from 2014 to 2050 would be an average of $551 billion per year, or $20.4 trillion total. The authors note that these estimates also understate the potential financial impact because they assume that educational improvements would only benefit Black and Latino children, do not consider social benefits, and do not calculate potential positive effects on children born in the future. An additional way of framing this issue is that the United States is wasting billions of dollars per year by not taking steps to improve achievement for students of color.

EXISTING EVIDENCE

Educational success plays a crucial role in shaping students' future opportunities in life. Students who perform better at school are more likely to gain higher salaries, become active citizens, experience higher life satisfaction, and avoid high-risk and criminal behaviors during adulthood (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011; Carmo Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Lynch & Oakford, 2014). The three following alternatives show promise in potentially remediating this issue with strong evidence to back their success. In the context of this review, causal studies that employ models like randomized control trials will be considered as the highest quality, most rigorous evidence. The strength of each study's findings will be assessed compared to this standard.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

Geneva Gay (2013), the most cited author for Culturally Responsive Teaching, defines it as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014), another prominent scholar, discusses culturally relevant pedagogy as empowering students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It is important to note that teaching affects competence and practice while pedagogy affects attitude and disposition. Dietrichson et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis and found nine unique studies that found a statistically significant average effect size of 0.19 when trying to determine the student impacts of a content shift towards culturally responsive education. The evidence is overall high-quality— a mix of three quasi-experimental studies and six randomized control trials. Table 1, provides an overview of the studies included in determining the efficacy of culturally responsive education.

Within mathematics education, Moses and Cobb (2001) address the need to promote literacy among Black youth as a civil rights issue, noting that there is power in learning math, and it is an essential part of gaining agency. Several scholars suggest that culturally relevant teaching improves academic and cultural competence in math and science (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Moses &

Table 1 Overview of the Culturally Relevant Education Studies Cited

Study	Participants	Research Design	Main Findings
Christianakis, 2011	27 5th grade students located in the East San Francisco Bay, CA attending an economically diverse school that is predominantly Black.	Ethnographic methods, specifically participant observation.	The use of rap in the classroom can enhance students' writing skills by allowing them to create language hybrids.
King & Pringle, 2018	Students enrolled in a community-based informal STEM program housed on the campus of a community center in the southeastern region of the US.	Qualitative study that used narrative inquiry from sources like individual interviews, student reflection journals, samples of student work, and researcher memos.	Black girls became agentic in continuing their engagement in STEM activities and perceived race to have the greatest influence on their formal STEM learning experiences.
Lopez, 2016	Three schools in a predominantly Latino urban school district in southern Arizona.	Hierarchical linear modeling and teacher and student questionnaires.	Integrating CRT showed statistically significant increases in student reading scores and higher reading outcomes.
Martell, 2013	74 students in a history class in an urban high school outside of Boston, MA. 49 were students of color.	Embedded mixed methods design and qualitative analysis from interview, journal, artifact, and open-response survey data.	Teacher's attempt to use culturally relevant pedagogy had a positive impact on students of color, particularly with content engagement and motivation.

Cobb, 2001). This could be because science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) teaching practices that integrate minoritized students' cultural capital increase participation which can increase confidence and motivation in these subjects (King & Pringle, 2018; Ortiz et al., 2020). These findings come from studies with similar compositions of Black and white students as well as those who receive free and reduced lunch in DC Public Schools (DCPS at a Glance: Enrollment, 2019; D.C. Hunger Solutions, 2020). This is valuable because it indicates that there is specific applicability to the DCPS context and that these interventions may produce similar results for the student population. However, they may not be as applicable to DC Public Schools as

King and Pringle (2018) focus primarily on young Black girls and the Ortiz et al. (2020) study involves college-aged students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and predominantly white institutions. It is also important to note that the findings from these qualitative analyses do not determine any formal causality outside of the personal experiences of the study participants. Despite some potential for promising results, culturally responsive education implementation in STEM curricula remains relatively low and sporadic (Brown et al., 2018).

Within social studies and English language arts education, scholars note that the key to success is ensuring that students feel like they have a voice and are empowered enough to dissect the struggles within their own lives to better understand the material (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Carmo Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023; Hill, 2012). At an economically and racially diverse urban high school outside of Boston, like the ones in DC Public Schools, Martell (2013) studied the curriculum he created based on multiple interpretations of the past that catered directly to his students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Overall, the study found that facilitating students' cultural competence particularly benefitted students of color, with 81.7% saying that they agreed or strongly agreed that they could recall more historical information than other classes (Martell, 2013). Another tactic that scholars have found success with is utilizing hip-hop and rap to encourage the discussion of social issues and classroom literacy (Christianakis, 2011; Stovall, 2006). The researchers found that these additions to the curriculum resulted in significant increases in student engagement in lessons, willingness to express intellectual creativity, and motivation to complete assignments.

An important caveat here is that these studies employed qualitative analysis and ethnographic accounts, a non-causal research methodology, so it is difficult to draw direct conclusions from the researchers' findings. In terms of student achievement, Lopez (2016) found that Arizona teachers who successfully implemented CRT saw a statistically significant increase in test scores of 1.70 standard deviations at the end of the year. These are strong findings with a rigorous linear modeling methodology that show positive and significant results for students even when controlling for prior achievement. While there is an abundance of literature surrounding benefits for Black and Hispanic/Latino students, there is a significant lack of understanding of how culturally relevant practices would affect racially diverse classrooms, much like those across DCPS. There has been professional development offered for culturally responsive education, but nothing was formalized across the

District. These studies also fail to meaningfully account for the effects of culturally relevant practices on students' historical and contemporary understandings of the world.

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION

The process of drawing and redrawing school attendance boundaries is also known as school rezoning. School boards conduct rezoning to address issues like racial and economic segregation, rapid student growth, school closure, and over- or under-enrollment (Siegel-Hawley et al. 2016). It can be used to intentionally alter school composition by reassigning students to enhance diversity and redistribute resources more equitably across schools and districts. Table 2 provides an overview of the studies included in determining the efficacy of school desegregation and integration.

Bergman (2018) studied a lottery-based desegregation program in California's Ravenswood City School District that allows minority students to transfer to school districts that serve higher-income, predominately white families. He found that students who won the lottery saw statistically significant increases in their English scores by 0.20 standard deviations, their science scores by 0.15 standard deviations, and their history scores by 0.28 standard deviations. The lottery-based research design helps achieve random assignment since comparison groups will be similar, which strengthens the internal validity of the study and makes it easier to establish causality. Compared to DCPS, 99% of Ravenswood City district students identify as students of color, and over 90% receive free and reduced lunch so the student demographics are somewhat misaligned (Eger, n.d.). However, this should not take away from the validity of highly impactful student gains through desegregation efforts.

Using a secondary data analysis of Black SAT test takers from 1998 to 2001, scholars found that the racial achievement gap in K-12 education closed more quickly during the peak of school desegregation than at any other time in history and that a change from complete segregation to complete integration in a district could reduce as much as one-quarter of the current SAT score disparity (Card & Rothstein, 2006). In addition, Johnson (2015) conducted a national study of over 4,000 students born between 1945 and 1968 during court-ordered desegregation that confirms similar findings and expands on longer-term effects. Using a post-desegregation event study with controls for characteristics like parental education, parental income, and mother's marital status at birth, Johnson (2015) finds that on average, each additional year that

Table 2 Overview of the School Desegregation and Integration Studies Cited

Study	Participants	Research Design	Main Findings
Bergman, 2018	2,410 minority students, majority Black or Latino, originating from the Ravenswood City School District, CA.	Lottery-based assignment.	Students who received an offer had statistically significant increases in test scores and college enrollment.
Card & Rothstein, 2006	SAT records for around one-third of Black test-takers in the 1998-2001 high school graduation classes.	Aggregate research and secondary data analysis using an enrollment-weighted average of the residual SAT scores for Black and white students.	Holding constant family background and other factors, a shift from a fully segregated to a completely integrated school closes about one-quarter of the raw racial gap in SAT scores.
Johnson, 2015	Individuals born between 1945 and 1968 who grew up in school districts that were subject to court-ordered desegregation.	Secondary data analysis that uses post-desegregation event study and non-parametric event-study models.	School desegregation and accompanied increases in school quality resulted in significant improvements in adult socioeconomic and health outcomes for African Americans.
Malwene & Ball, 2020	Students subject to school rezoning in Wisconsin suburban communities during 2006-07 and 2017-18.	Mixed methods study using quantitative analysis of segregation using the dissimilarity index and discipline data.	Spatial othering continued to funnel students from racially and minoritized backgrounds into the school, due to the concentration of low-income housing.
Siegel-Hawley et al., 2016	Elementary school students enrolled in a Richmond Public School, VA in 2013.	Explanatory sequential mixed methods.	Increases in racial segregation when decision-making processes minimize broad public participation and focus only on privileged groups.

a Black student was exposed to education in a desegregated school increased the probability of graduating by 1.8 percentage points. The study also found significant future impacts on justice involvement, with a likelihood of incarceration decreasing by 14.7%, and Black adult health, noting that a five-year exposure to a desegregated school is equivalent to being seven years younger (Johnson, 2015). Other scholars note additional positive benefits to school desegregation such as more positive social and emotional outcomes, increases in annual earnings and wages, and reductions in anxiety (Bergman, 2018).

Drawing on some potential limitations of school desegregation, scholars argue that structural racism within school discipline still led to students of color being "othered" within rezoned schools and being overrepresented in school arrests (Bergman, 2018; Mawene & Bal, 2020). Siegel-Hawley et al. (2016) also find, using a semi-rigorous design method, that redrawing elementary school attendance boundaries in Richmond, Virginia was associated with increases in racial segregation and the leadership privileged white voices in a city school system that is less than 10% white. Effective change cannot come from just redistributing students, it must be inclusive and sustained in a way that interrupts the status quo that exacerbates racial and economic segregation (Mawene & Bal, 2020). Within the literature, there are few studies that consider other unintended consequences or negative effects of desegregation like the impact on teachers and school funding, aspects of education that play a significant role in student success.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLING

The Coalition for Community Schools' Logic Model outlines key characteristics of wraparound services with five guiding principles— foster strong partnerships share accountability for results, set high expectations for all, build on the community's strengths, and embrace diversity (PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS, 2021). School systems describe wraparound services as a process of planning and coordinating school, community, and home resources in order to improve the academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students who are at risk (Hill, 2020). Bryant et al. (2023) note that the underlying philosophy of these services is to provide students with a system of care where a collaborative network of resources is identified and designed based on the needs of students. This can come in the form of case management, counseling, and crisis care. Table 3 provides an overview of the studies included in determining the efficacy of community schooling. The

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At a national level, there has been increased focus on creating community schools where students, their families, and neighborhood residents are connected to resources and supports (Hill, 2020). In a meta-analysis by Maier et al. (2017), they find that the evidence base on community schools justifies their usage as a school improvement strategy and that they can help close achievement gaps for students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. Interestingly, both Hernández-Gantes and Fletcher (2022) and Winmore (2019) conducted community school studies with nearly identical compositions of Black students and low-income students in Orlando, Florida, and a Midwestern state. They found similar results, over 20 percentage point increases in graduation rates and general increases in student well-being. This provides a strong case for the success of community schools across the US anecdotally, but the lack of rigor in the research methodology makes it difficult to establish causality or extrapolate those findings to the context of Washington, DC.

Another promising example is the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) which shows what can be achieved by combining strong schools with effective community support. HCZ addresses challenges through "cradle-to-career services" centered on education, including parent workshops, full-day preschool, health clinics, college admission support, and youth violence prevention (Our History and Zone Map, n.d.). HCZ uses lottery-based assignments to determine enrollment, meaning that there is random assignment in determining treatment and control groups. This makes it easier to establish causality with researchers even crediting HCZ with eliminating gaps in outcomes between

Table 3 Overview of the Community Schools Studies Cited

Study	Participants	Research Design	Main Findings
Dobbie & Fryer, 2011	Students from the 2004 and 2005 elementary school lotteries and the 2005 to 2006 middle school lotteries.	Lottery-based assignment.	The effects of attending an HCZ middle school are enough to close the racial achievement gap in math and for elementary school students, math and ELA.
Hernández-Gantes & Fletcher, 2022	700 students enrolled in a school located in an urban area within a Midwestern state. 98% of students were African-American and 100% were low income.	Case study design and qualitative analysis through interviews and observations.	In-school supports for students and supports for families in the community are associated with general increases in well-being and student satisfaction.
Maier et al., 2017	143 research studies focused on community schools as a comprehensive strategy.	Research meta-analysis.	Well-implemented community schools lead to improvement in school and student outcomes and contribute to meeting the educational needs of at-risk students.
Winmore, 2019	Students enrolled in Community Partnership Schools in Florida.	Unknown, self-reported.	Community Partnership Schools have shown increases in graduation rates and large reductions in suspensions and disciplinary referrals.

students of color and White students in both English and math (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). There have been many efforts to replicate the success of HCZ in other areas, including in Washington, DC. More recently, DCPS launched the Connected Schools Model in 2019 where 16 schools across the city partner with the community to “provide an integrated approach to academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community

engagement in order to ensure all students, regardless of background or neighborhood, can thrive in school and in life" (Mike, 2019, p. 3). Within the next year, DCPS hopes to see increases in the number of services and programs available, the number of students and families accessing those resources, and the number of positive relationships built within the community. There is little available data on the performance of these schools given that they were piloted recently.

In the literature, there are a couple of prominent limitations. Many studies failed to discuss how to identify what aspects of the community are the most important and there was little rigorous evidence on the success of wraparound services in schools that were predominantly Black and low-income. Lastly, much of this research does not consider the specific needs of students and communities and how greatly they differ, making the research hard to extrapolate to other areas.

CLOSING

After the discussion of the structural and social mechanisms of the racial achievement gap and three potential solutions, it is clear that this is an issue that warrants attention and resources. The differences in achievement have deep implications for students' future success, translating to curriculum engagement, higher education attainment, and justice system involvement.

The most significant takeaway is that addressing educational disparities in DC Public Schools requires a comprehensive strategy rooted in historical context, cross-sector solutions, and community engagement. A solution that fails to balance these ideas will not fully target the multi-faceted issue of the racial achievement gap and might not be enough to generate significant improvements for students.

CRITERIA

EQUITY

Svara and Brunet (2004) developed a working definition of social equity as "promot[ing] equal distribution, compensatory redistribution, and efforts to correct past discrimination, depending on the nature of the problem being addressed" (p. 101). Based on the Urban Institute's The State of Equity Measurement Report, equity will be treated as a multi-faceted criterion given that it cannot be reduced to a single construct. There are various inequities across groups at each point within a causal chain and it is important that this criterion take those differences into account (Martín & Lewis, 2019).

In this report, equity is evaluated in two different ways: access discrimination and addressing historical legacies. The first is understood as intentional differences in services with the goal of redressing inequity and the second is the extent to which each alternative aims to address past instances of structural racism as a method of justice (Martín & Lewis, 2019). Within this context, equity in access will be measured as the ability of each alternative to not only specifically target students of color within DCPS, but also redistribute resources to those students who have been denied access and opportunity in the past. Equity in history will be measured as the ability of each alternative to address past historical inequities in the systems and structures that exist within the District. An ideal policy option would ultimately allocate resources to students who would benefit most while also working to address long-standing historical barriers to promote justice.

COST

Alternatives will also be assessed on the monetary resources that will be allocated within each alternative to support the development and implementation stages. It is particularly important to consider cost given that DC is facing a deficit within its 2025 fiscal year budget and that Mayor Bowser has told lawmakers and policy experts to prioritize core services rather than new spending initiatives (Brice-Saddler & Flynn, 2024). Cost is measured as the number of dollars associated with the take-up and roll out of each option by DCPS in partnership with the Office of Racial Equity and the work that they

produce. They include financial aspects like professional development, student transportation, and support service expansion. An ideal policy option would minimize the cost burden for the Office of Racial Equity, DCPS, and the District as a whole.

EFFECTIVENESS

This report is centered around the racial achievement gap so policy options will be evaluated on their ability to not only make progress on closing those gaps but also improve test scores for all students. While there are significant differences in proficiency rates for specific demographic groups, it is also alarming that all students are not performing at the appropriate grade level. The effectiveness of each alternative is measured by increases in test scores for students of color in DC or other areas that implemented similar programs. Additionally, this criterion also investigates other potential effects that could boost student test scores, like student response and engagement in curriculum, that could also impact effectiveness. An ideal policy would improve achievement for all students, but specifically those who identify as Black or Hispanic/Latino, and work to grow their intrinsic motivation.

ALTERNATIVES AND EVALUATION

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE FRAMEWORK

This alternative would have the Office of Racial Equity develop a culturally responsive framework rooted in racial equity that would guide the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in curriculum development and implementation in classrooms. DCPS has created an Essential Practices Observation Rubric that outlines what ideal teaching looks like in their classrooms. The five Essential Practices are that teachers cultivate a responsive learning community; challenge students with rigorous content; lead a well-planned, purposeful learning experience; maximize student ownership of learning; and respond to evidence of student learning ("The DCPS Essential Practices: Grades 1-12," n.d.).

Within DCPS's most recent 2018 Equity Framework and their 2023-2028 five-year strategic plan, there is explicit mention of culturally responsive teaching as a method of integrating equity in practice and that one of their goals is to provide safe, supportive, and culturally affirming learning spaces ("Equity Framework," 2018; "Five-Year Strategic Plan: A Capital Commitment," 2023). There has not yet been any guidance on how to conceptualize or operationalize how to do that. This alternative is helpful because it ensures that teachers and other school personnel have the same core understanding of culturally responsive teaching while still retaining enough autonomy to deliver curriculum and other programming in a way that is tailored to meet the needs of specific students. Ideally with this alternative, DCPS would implement a culturally responsive curriculum that is informed by the framework that the Office of Racial Equity creates.

CRITERION 1A. EQUITY - ACCESS

DCPS adopted the Common Core State Standards in July of 2010 and leadership partnered with teachers to develop a curriculum that aligned with student needs. The curriculum includes high-quality materials that teachers can use based on their own students' needs, and many teachers adapt lessons or bring in additional materials that connect more deeply to their students' own lived experiences ("Transformational Learning: Curriculum at DCPS," 2017). Given that including a framework for culturally responsive education

would be relatively standardized across the city, it does not specifically target students who would benefit the most. This focuses more on equality rather than equity. However, a RAND Corporation study conducted in 2016 found that nearly all teachers in the Common Core states are using materials that they developed or selected themselves (Kaufman et al., 2016). This means that DCPS teachers and other school personnel can decide which students get access to culturally responsive education and which do not. If teachers do decide to opt in, they can promote equity by integrating different aspects of social identities or lived experiences within the curriculum based on their students' demographics. If they decide to opt-out, students will not receive access to the materials. This alternative ranks **medium** in equitable access.

CRITERION 1B. EQUITY - HISTORY

At its core, culturally responsive education acknowledges historical forms of oppression specifically within instructional materials and assessments, teacher expectations and practices, and administrative policies. It makes intentional efforts to address how education systems have centered white norms while devaluing students' experiences (Johnston et al., 2017). By acknowledging a classroom's diversity and discussing a wide range of culturally relevant curriculum and history, students of color are able to see themselves in what they learn and can become more motivated to succeed and perform better in class which was previously mentioned in the existing evidence. This alternative is an intentional pushback on the Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism that has existed throughout history and made its way through the curriculum that is now considered standardized. It disrupts what society considers "essential knowledge" and challenges the way educators deliver content to an increasingly diverse student body. It is important to note that while this alternative does tackle historical inequities on a smaller scale within schools, it does not target broad-scale structural inequities that address large barriers to success for students. This alternative ranks **medium-high** in addressing historical inequities.

CRITERION 2. COST

There are two costs that will be evaluated within this alternative— one of the initial school personnel professional development and the other around hiring short-term staff to ensure that the teachers have support and guidance from a curriculum specialist and rollout is occurring as intended. DCPS partnered with SupportED which provided much of the culturally responsive professional development programming that was offered to school personnel

in the Winter and Spring of 2021. If they offered SupportED's Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies and Tools program to all teachers, it would cost $250 per teacher or a total of $1.15 million. In order to support districts that may not have experience with culturally responsive education, some areas like Loudon County Public Schools have begun to create Offices of Culturally Responsive Instruction to provide resources and information to school personnel ("Office of Culturally Responsive Instruction," n.d.). To replicate this across DCPS, it would be helpful to hire eight culturally responsive specialists who would be able to provide nuanced guidance tailored to specific student needs in each Ward. The average salary of an instructional specialist in Washington, DC ranges from $64,700 to $78,400 so this would cost the District anywhere from $517,600 to $627,200 ("Instructional Specialist Salary in Washington, DC," n.d.). The cost of this alternative ranks **low** in relation to the other options presented.

CRITERION 3. EFFECTIVENESS

In 2019, Baltimore City Schools implemented a culturally responsive education framework called BMore Me. In its trial period, it only covered three weeks in the sixth, eighth, and ninth grades but has received so much positive feedback from parents and students since then, that the school district is trying to work to expand it to a year-long program for the sixth grade onwards ("BMore Me: A Case Study," n.d.). A 2021 survey of 271 students who had received the curriculum found that 75% felt more empowered to be engaged in their community, 87% felt that they had the opportunity to share their thoughts with their peers and teachers, and 73% had agreed they learned things that will help them succeed later in life ("Students and Teachers Believe in the BMoreMe Curriculum," 2023). These findings could be particularly applicable to DCPS given that both districts have similar student demographics, meaning that results could be relatively similar. An additional study that was conducted across the United States with an equal number of White, Latino, African American, and Asian students found a significant relationship between culturally responsive education and greater interest in school, increased feelings of belonging, and improved test scores (Byrd, 2016). However, school leaders' understanding and conceptualizations of culturally responsive pedagogy seem to influence the teachers' expectations for curriculum and instruction. This then translated into differential applications of instructional practices, even though all teachers received the same professional development and training courses (Elmore et al., 2023). This alternative ranks **medium-high** in effectiveness.

DISSIMILARITY INDEX

This alternative would have the Office of Racial Equity develop a dissimilarity index, which is a measure of racial segregation in public schools to include as a racial equity indicator. Dissimilarity indexes describe the percentage of the population that would need to change schools to match the city's proportions of racial demographics ("Racial Segregation in DC Public Schools," 2023). The measure ranges from 0% indicating total integration to 100% indicating total segregation. Earlier this month, Mayor Muriel Bowser released the first city-wide Racial Equity Action Plan that "serves as a roadmap outlining actions, over a three-year period, the District government will take to close racial equity gaps and measure progress toward a more racially equitable DC" ("Districtwide 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan," 2024, p. 3).

As part of that goal, the Office of Racial Equity is currently partnering with the MITRE Corporation on the development of an actionable, outcome-oriented measurement and data strategy to enable the conception of DC's first racial equity dashboard (Current Work and Initiatives, n.d.). They plan to use the final product to track progress towards a more racially equitable DC and first-release indicators for education include elementary math and reading proficiency, higher education enrollment rates, high school graduation rates, and early childhood education subsidies and provider quality. Even though the Racial Equity Action Plan mentions investigating topics like redlining and segregation, there is currently no measure of school segregation. In alignment with Goal 2.1.3 of the Plan, Mayor Bowser wants the Office of Racial Equity to not only track these indicators but also identify opportunities for intervention ("Districtwide 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan," 2024).

This alternative aligns well with that goal, given that areas with high dissimilarity indexes could be potential opportunities to promote racial equity. It is also especially timely given that the 2023 Boundary and Student Assignment Study is currently being conducted and this index could draw attention to areas that are highly segregated. This could lead to a more equitable redrawing of attendance boundaries to allow students to attend different schools with increased resource availability. Ideally with this alternative, DCPS attendance boundaries would be redrawn as informed by the dissimilarity index created by the Office of Racial Equity.

CRITERION 1A. EQUITY - ACCESS

Reorganizing attendance boundaries can be a helpful strategy to promote equity in access to educational opportunities. By making adjustments to attendance zones, school districts aim to achieve a more balanced distribution of resources and reduce inequities across the District (Bramhall, 2021). This method of integration can help to reduce disparities in access to well-maintained facilities, highly qualified teachers, challenging coursework, and funding ("Why Boundaries Matter: A Study of Five Separate and Unequal Long Island School Districts," 2009). However, in a personal communication with two DCPS employees, they noted that the only way for school districts and attendance boundaries to be fully integrated would be to draw the limits vertically through the city. This would be highly efficient for students and families and typically, small-scale attendance boundary redrawing occurs on the margins of each boundary (Monarrez & Chien, 2021). Given the scope, only a small number of students and households would be able to receive greater access to resources since it would be unlikely that DCPS would be willing to redistrict entirely. The affected families may then face additional challenges that come with redistricting like increased transportation costs and less diverse school staff exposure (Potter et al., 2021). This alternative ranks **medium-low** in equitable access.

CRITERION 1B. EQUITY - HISTORY

A research brief published by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education found that based on 2023 dissimilarity indexes, segregation is highest amongst Black and white students followed by Hispanic/Latino and white students. For Black students, the average dissimilarity percentage across all grades is 76%, with the measure increasing from 72% in pre-Kindergarten to 79% in high school. This means that 76% of Black or white students across DCPS would need to change schools in order to achieve the citywide proportions. For Hispanic/Latino students, the average dissimilarity percentage is 62%, increasing from 54% in pre-Kindergarten to 67% in high school. Even though the numbers are lower, it is still considered high segregation ("Racial Segregation in DC Public Schools," 2023). These inequities have been built on decades of formally and informally mandated segregation within Washington, DC. Examples include white parents pulling their children out of neighborhood public schools, racial applications of zoning laws, and the expansion of charter schools. Historical patterns of residential segregation often led to schools with vastly different demographics and resources

(Higgins, 2022). Adjusting attendance boundaries as informed by a racial dissimilarity index can help mitigate the historical legacies of those issues by redistributing resources, improving diversity, and ensuring that students are able to receive a quality education regardless of where they live. This alternative is a deeply structural way of promoting equity by targeting the long-standing mechanisms that have served as barriers to student achievement. This alternative ranks **high** in addressing historical inequities.

CRITERION 2. COST

When the last DCPS student boundary study was conducted in 2013, the Advisory Committee on Student Assignment put forward a set of updated new boundaries for the then 99 existing DCPS schools. The main goals of that study were to strengthen neighborhood foundations and better align school programs to meet community needs and ended up assigning around 3,200 students, or 14% of the student body, to a different school zone entirely ("Student Assignment and School Boundary Recommendations Summary of SY15-16 Implementation Plan," 2014). The costs that they incurred with these changes came from the transportation subsidies that they had to provide to students and families to reduce the monetary burdens of transportation to and from school. DCPS estimated that based on data from the 2013-2014 school year, over 2,500 elementary school parents and guardians would qualify for fare-free trips to accompany their children to their zoned school. The final implementation plan outlined that DCPS would spend around $570,000 per year to cover those costs and also spend between $1.7 million to $2.5 million to ensure that high schoolers have access to free trips on the Metro, regardless of where they lived ("Implementation Plan Final," 2014). However, it was unclear in the report if the costs for high schoolers' transportation had increased due to the new boundaries. For the new boundaries in 2024, costs would generally increase given that student enrollment has grown and more schools exist within DCPS currently. The cost of this alternative ranks **high** in relation to the other options presented.

CRITERION 3. EFFECTIVENESS

In 2020, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) approved the Comprehensive District Design to address issues related to the academics, equity, and financial sustainability of the district. Components of the attendance boundary rezoning were intentionally chosen to eliminate historically inequitable policies that targeted students of color and students from low-income neighborhoods

(Whitler, 2022). MPS's Senior Accountability, Research, and Equity Officer said that through this process, they expect to reduce the number of racially and economically segregated schools by over 50% (Potter & Burris, 2020). In 2015, the school year before DCPS implemented their attendance boundary changes, only 34% of 3rd through 8th grade Black students and 47% of Hispanic and Latino students scored high enough on the ELA assessment to meet expectations compared to 92% of white students. On the 3rd to 8th grade math assessment, only 12% of Black students and 22% of Hispanic and Latino students scored high enough to meet expectations compared to 69% of white students ("2014-15 Results and Resources," n.d.). This is important because this score cutoff is what DCPS uses to determine if students are on track for college and career readiness. The year after the boundaries were enacted, overall state assessment results increased, particularly in the Wards that shifted attendance zones the most ("Elementary School Attendance Zone Change Area," 2014; "Middle School Attendance Zone Change Area," 2014). In Ward 1, there was a 2.7% increase in students who scored high enough to meet expectations on the ELA assessment and a 3.4% increase in math, the second-highest increase in the district. Ward 4 saw an increase in ELA scores of 4.8%, the second-highest increase, and an increase of 3.1% in math. Ward 5 saw increases of 2.7% in both subjects and Ward 6 had increases of 4.3% in ELA and 2.7% in math ("2016-17 Results and Resources," n.d.). While shifts in attendance boundaries may not have been the sole cause of increases, it does show promising results where they occurred most frequently. This alternative ranks **medium-high** in effectiveness.

EXPANSION OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLING

This alternative would have the Office of Racial Equity conduct an equity assessment for DCPS to identify which schools would benefit most from an expansion of the DC Connected Schools program. Launched in 2019, the Connected Schools model was created in order to accelerate the outcomes for all students and is now expanded to 16 different elementary, middle, and high schools. They work to not only support students' academic achievement, but also their families' well-being through providing access to resources around employment, health, housing, and others ("DCPS Connected Schools," n.d.). One of Mayor Bowser's explicit goals in the 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan was to expand the model to other schools within the next three to five years ("Districtwide 2024 Racial Equity Action Plan," 2024). The Office of Racial Equity would work to identify where and what kinds of student and family

needs are not being met to provide guidance on potential areas of expansion. Ideally with this alternative, it would be easier to identify which schools to expand to next in order to best promote equity and justice, as it is unclear how schools are selected for expansion.

CRITERION 1A. EQUITY - ACCESS

For students that are enrolled in community schools, they receive highly equitable access to support systems and resources. In each school, there is a Connected Schools Manager who is a full-time, school-based employee that drives the implementation of the program. There are also strong student support systems like school-based teams that ensure students are getting whole child support and maximizing the partnerships that they have available. Much of the resources offered within Connected Schools come from place-based services including fresh food markets, employment assistance, and mental health supports ("Our Model," n.d.). In the 2022-2023 school year, there were over 215 community partnerships located within these schools, yet less than 5% of the total student population was served ("DCPS Connected Schools," n.d.). Many schools would benefit from this type of model but given the small-scale nature of the program within the broader scope of DCPS, a majority of students lack access even though this alternative does a significant amount for the students it does serve. This alternative ranks **medium-low** in equitable access.

CRITERION 1B. EQUITY - HISTORY

By addressing the non-academic needs of students, community schooling aims to mitigate the after-effects of historical disparities that negatively affect their well-being. They also work to ensure that there is equitable distribution in areas like school funding, the kinds of facilities that are available to students, and racial segregation in areas that have been most deeply impacted (Daniel, n.d.). An example includes schools offering easy access to health services within schools because of a historical lack of nearby high-quality or affordable hospitals or pediatricians. While this does address the past to some degree, it does not work to deconstruct how those systems existed to begin with. Much of what is done in community schooling programs focuses on how services can best be tailored to students to meet their needs currently. This means that this alternative does not rectify historical inequities or target existing structures that uphold racism as much as other options do. While it does work against the negative effects of some

historical inequities, its vision is more focused on the present rather than addressing the past. This alternative ranks **medium** in addressing historical inequities.

CRITERION 2. COST

In the year the Connected Schools initiative was launched, $1.6 million had been invested in eight different elementary, middle, and high schools across Wards 1, 5, 7, and 8 ("FY2020 Budget Update," 2019). The following year, the program expanded to include two additional schools and DCPS made an additional investment of $2.1 million ("FY21 Budget Oversight Hearing Questions," 2020). At the time, each additional school that Connected Schools expanded to cost around $1.05 million. Those costs have increased slightly since then as Connected Schools received a Full-Service Community School grant of $2.5 million from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2023 to expand to Kimball Elementary and Malcolm X Elementary, both located in Ward 8 ("DCPS Connected Schools – Feeder Pattern Capacity Building," 2023). They consistently apply to receive the grant each year to expand to an additional two schools for the same amount, meaning that each additional school expansion costs around $1.25 million ("FSCS Grant Awards," n.d.). The cost of this alternative ranks **medium** in relation to the other options presented.

CRITERION 3. EFFECTIVENESS

Communities in Schools is a national community schooling model that works to connect students to community-based resources across 25 states and DC ("About Us," 2019). Within DC, they have worked with over 4,000 students and found that 90% of students had improved behavior, 79% had improved academics, and 100% of them had graduated ("Our Impact," n.d.). Created in 2010, the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods is a federal place-based initiative that strives to turn neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into areas where all children have access to quality schools and community support systems (Promise Neighborhoods, n.d.). Grants were awarded to 17 cities, one of which was Washington, DC. The DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative serves the Kenilworth-Parkside community located in the northeast corner of Ward 7, where 98% of the residents are African American and 40% live below the poverty level ("DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative," 2012). Implementation was highly successful, and the community saw a 29 percentage point increase in students entering kindergarten with age-

appropriate functioning, a 21 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism in elementary school, and a 23.1 percentage point increase in parents who discussed the importance of college and career options with their child (Who We Are, 2013). Unfortunately, since these results are self-reported, the long-term impacts are unknown. There was no published information or peer-reviewed studies about the effectiveness of DCPS's Connected Schools. This alternative ranks **medium** in effectiveness.

Figure 5 Outcomes Matrix

		Criteria			
		Equity – Access	**Equity – History**	**Cost**	**Effectiveness**
Alternatives	**Culturally Responsive Framework**	Medium, promotes equity when teachers or school personnel opt-in	Medium-high, directly challenges notions of white centrality but on a smaller scale	Low, in relation to other alternatives	Medium-high, specifically with motivation and engagement in learning but self-reported
	Dissimilarity Index	Medium-low, improves access for small numbers of students	High, intentional focus on adjusting long-standing structural barriers	High, in relation to other alternatives	Medium-high, for a smaller number of students but potential for negative effects
	DC Connected Schools Expansion	Medium-low, incredible access for students who have access, but scale is small	Medium, provides resources to remedy the effects of historical inequities, but does not target structures	Medium, in relation to other alternatives	Medium, test score increases but self-reported

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the evaluation above, I recommend that the Office of Racial Equity develop a culturally responsive framework rooted in racial equity for the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. This alternative performs decently well against the equity criterion as it addresses historical inequities that directly impact students of color and the content that they learn every day.

While it does not inherently target underserved students, the flexibility of a framework allows for curriculum to be tailored to specific student needs which also promotes equity in its own way. Evidence from Baltimore and general scholarly literature also shows that a culturally responsive curriculum is effective at increasing student engagement, belonging, motivation, and academic performance, specifically for students of color. Lastly, since DC is facing a tighter budget next year, offering a suggestion that is low in cost is extremely important. The development of a culturally responsive framework in schools itself costs very little, but DCPS can take additional steps in the training and professional development of teachers as the finances allow.

By centering cultural responsiveness and challenging what is considered "essential knowledge," this option ensures that DC's diverse student body can see themselves reflected in their learning. Something that the Office of Racial Equity did want to leverage was the partnerships that they have across the city, particularly with groups that are not situated in traditional education spaces. This is one of the biggest drawbacks of the recommendation because much of its impact is housed within DCPS. Understanding this, the other two did leverage more District-wide partnerships, but they were both incredibly expensive and used money that the city may not have in the future.

This option promotes equity for students in an inexpensive way but lacks the immediate potential for cross-sector partnerships. While it may perform well across the three key criteria, it is important to discuss the other tradeoffs amongst the criteria compared to the other alternatives.

A culturally responsive framework may have less potential for directly impacting resource allocation compared to what structural options arise with the creation of a dissimilarity index. Attendance boundary changes can more

immediately give students access to high-quality facilities, teachers, and coursework while implementing this framework would take time to pilot and fully see results. However, without intentional integration efforts, like equitable curriculum content, for example, desegregation can impact students negatively and make them feel racially othered. Desegregation is also relatively expensive given the smaller number of students it reaches and there are both costs and logistical challenges to large-scale redistricting that this recommendation avoids while still being able to reach a broad audience of students. Similarly, even though expanding Connected Schools would also provide an influx of resources, it would only be for one or two additional schools given the budget constraints. The tradeoff here is targeted, intensive services for some or a broader cultural shift for many. Each option has its merits, but I ultimately recommend the creation of a standardized culturally responsive curriculum that the Office of Racial Equity can ensure promotes equity and will create an inclusive learning environment for all students across the District.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing culturally responsive education from a standardized framework requires careful planning and coordination across schools, teachers, faculty, communities, and other stakeholders. The Office of Racial Equity's role in implementation is to connect all the required expertise and resources using their partnerships across the city, the power they hold, and their institutional knowledge to promote racial equity within DC.

STAKEHOLDERS

The main stakeholder groups are the Office of Racial Equity, DCPS, and the community. The Office of Racial Equity will create the culturally responsive framework and provide overall project guidance and oversight to ensure that implementation occurs with an equity focus in mind.

Within DCPS are a number of separate entities like the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, their central office, teachers, and students. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education will play a crucial role in applying the framework to the existing curriculum and ensuring that existing resources and materials are aligned. The central office will also play an important part in hiring instructional specialists, keeping track of data from pre- and post-implementation assessments, and coordinating professional development. Teachers are another relevant group that will be directly involved in ground-level implementation within their classrooms. Lastly, students will provide much of the data on what strategies are successful and which need to be adjusted when it comes to implementation. Their voices will be one of the most critical resources throughout this process.

PLAN FOR THE OFFICE OF RACIAL EQUITY

The Office of Racial Equity should utilize their partnership with the Deputy Mayor for Education and identify what gaps exist within DCPS and for which students in order to identify what areas need the most attention. They will first need to examine existing research, identifying the goals of culturally responsive education and how it can be applicable in the context of DC. Next, it is important to inform future steps based on examples of strong and weaker

programs, supported by high-quality evidence, to learn what should be avoided and prioritized. To gain a better understating of the process, they should connect with other racial equity offices and discuss what they went through and the deliverables that they produced for their own districts.

The Office of Racial Equity should first begin with defining and unpacking key vocabulary and concepts, consulting with stakeholders, and providing examples of best practices within DCPS. From there, they can create the actual framework integrating cultural knowledge, diverse narratives, social justice, and guidance on best practices to promote racial equity.

PLAN FOR DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This plan for DCPS implementation is modeled closely after the New York State Education Department's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Implementation Roadmap, which has seen particular success since its creation in 2018. The roadmap was developed by a committee made up of teachers, educators, and community partners across New York to assist other education groups to do the same thing ("CR-SE Implementation Roadmap (K-12)," n.d.).

Forward progress will come in three distinct stages- raising awareness and support, building capacity, and full implementation. Within the first stage, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education would establish a task force with representatives from key stakeholder groups to inform this entire process. DCPS would then publish the framework to allow for DC resident input, particularly from parents, students, and school personnel. Schools should conduct assessments before implementation of the framework that measures outcomes like test scores, student engagement, perceptions of equity, and any other indicators of note by Ward or any other high-level designation.

The second stage involves providing professional development to school personnel to build capacity. DCPS could connect with Baltimore City Public Schools and share strategies and recommendations for best practices. Within the existing curriculum, schools and teachers should identify potential areas where it would be easiest to slowly integrate culturally responsive education.

The last step in this process starts with a group of pilot schools across different

grade bands and Wards. Teachers would use the curriculum for three weeks, much like the BMore Me program, while schools would hire instructional specialists to gather feedback to refine the approach for full implementation. Once this occurs, DCPS would expand district-wide, conducting assessments to identify bright spots and weak points, particularly looking at schools that were in the pilot cohort as they were exposed to the curriculum for longer. This option would require DCPS and the Office of Racial Equity to continue to revisit the framework and revise it if necessary, informed by input and feedback from stakeholders.

ADDRESSING ROADBLOCKS

Some stakeholders may incorrectly argue that a culturally responsive curriculum includes notions of Critical Race Theory. The only similarity between the two is a discussion of race and racism, but Critical Race Theory was developed in the late 1970s following the Civil Rights Movement as a response to the notion that society and institutions were colorblind (Legal Defense Fund, 2022). Outside of that, it is an academic framework that is taught at the graduate and postgraduate levels, particularly in law schools and departments of ethnic studies. A strategy to address this challenge if it arises would be to provide information on Critical Race Theory in comparison to the framework and highlight the differences between the two. Another suggestion would be to host an open comment period where District residents could ask questions and give comments to the Office of Racial Equity and DCPS about what the curriculum involves and to make that information public.

Another challenge that might arise is constituents claiming that the curriculum change benefits students of color at the expense of white students. Again, research supports that teaching diversity brings broad benefits to all students as exposing them to different cultural and social groups promotes empathy, engagement in school, academic achievement, and higher graduation rates (Jeffries, 2022; National Education Association & Law Firm Antiracism Alliance, 2022). With this roadblock, the Office of Racial Equity could provide a list of high-quality research along with the framework that underscores this exact point. Every student, regardless of race or ethnicity, benefits from an equity-promoting curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The gaps in academic performance between Black and Hispanic/Latino students and white students are a source of concern given the lifelong implications of a widening racial achievement gap. The Office of Racial Equity has a unique role to play in this issue given that this multifaceted challenge demands a comprehensive, equity-centered approach from District leadership. Developing a culturally responsive framework is an essential component in working towards the Office of Racial Equity's vision of a DC where race is no longer a predicting factor of opportunity or the distribution of resources. This recommendation allows for flexibility to meet specific student needs while also challenging structural inequities within the classroom. It has the potential to boost student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and academic outcomes.

Again, it is important to note that the differences in achievement cannot and should not be attributed to race. Many of the causes of this problem are because of the prevalence of systemic barriers like a lack of opportunity within communities of color, inequities in advanced coursework, and other non-academic factors that advantage white and higher-income students. Every student, regardless of their race, deserves to be seen and given the opportunity to succeed.

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