



“Just listen...”

As the movement for racial justice and Black lives has continued to evolve over the course of this summer, student voices have occupied a central place in our nation’s conversation. Students have utilized platforms such as the “Black at...” Instagram pages to expose, question, and challenge longstanding racist norms and practices in their school communities. Many of the posts courageously share personal racial pain and trauma.

Amidst the many voices are clear prescriptions for change. Across the Instagram pages, these changes share common themes and calls for action. This month’s Pollyanna Position Paper attempts to distill some of the learning from these voices. We posed a single question to students across our network:

If you could give your Head of School one piece of advice to make your school antiracist, what would it be?

Not surprisingly, students had trouble limiting their answers to only one piece of advice. (And this will be reflected in many of the quotes below.) Still, their answers broke down into clearly discernible segments for creating more racially just schools:

- **Listening and Learning**
- **Actions: Reforming Training, Curriculum, Hiring, and Discipline**
- **Intentionally Shifting School Culture: Holding Up a Mirror to a School’s Mission and Values**

The student respondents also make clear that these three segments are not a “step by step” plan to be done sequentially. Rather, each piece of this work should happen simultaneously so as to reinforce the whole, thus illustrating one of the most difficult aspects of this work: There are many efforts to manage, so schools must view antiracism holistically. Instead of viewing antiracism as one school program existing alongside other school programs, antiracism should be held as a core value and effort that is infused seamlessly into every part of a school community. Students seem to understand, and are able to give voice to, the all-encompassing nature of this work perhaps more than the adults in their communities. As is often true with students, there is no shortage of courage, “big picture thinking,” or appetite for change.

Students are clearly ready to lead these efforts. Will the adults have the courage to follow?

“We have been telling you exactly how to make the school antiracist.” **Listening and Learning**

Many responses highlighted the necessary foundation of listening and learning. However, students no longer carry the expectation of simply “being heard.” Rather, they expect that the adults in their communities will demonstrate full understanding of and be able to engage in deep dialogue about their concerns and ideas. It is not enough to conduct forums or panels without clearly identifying what has been learned and planning clear follow up.

- **“Listen to the students who speak up. At times it feels hopeless talking to you about how to fix our school’s lack of awareness and diversity. For example, we’ve been urging you to diversify the student body, faculty, and administration. Our school is filled with ignorance, it’s time you listen, educate yourself, and take action.”**
- **“Listen to the concerns of students of color in our community, take what they say to heart and work to provide them with the resources they need to prosper in a school environment.”**

- **“Just listen to what BIPOC students, parents, teachers, faculty, and staff are saying. It’s that simple. For quite some time now, we have been telling you exactly how to make the school antiracist (via statements, forums, meetings, demands, conferences, etc.) but you have not listened to us. Listen to what we have demanded and actually follow through on it.”**
- **“LISTEN TO BIPOC PEOPLE’S DEMANDS AND STOP DEFLECTING.”**

Students are able to perceive when adults engage in “performative listening.” Instead of symbolic gestures, they desire accountability and responsibility from the adults in their lives, especially in their schools. For students, if listening fails to motivate response and action, it is as if listening and learning never actually occurred.

“I expected better of my school...” **Actions: Reforming Training, Curriculum, Hiring and Discipline**

Students urgently called for reform in four core areas of school practices: faculty training, curriculum, hiring practices, and student discipline policies. While these were not the only areas identified by students, the responses suggest that clear action to bring about more equitable practices in these areas would create positive outcomes for students and affirm a sense that school leaders have listened and learned authentically.

Students hope to see diversity training and curricular reform become mandatory and embedded in the lives of their schools, rather than singular events that lack appropriate follow up:

- **“Mandatory Diversity training for faculty and students, a racial injustice class available to students from sixth grade onwards, actually catering to your minority students instead of just having them to make your school seem diverse, halal and kosher items in the dining hall, cultural sensitivity education, and revisions to the curriculum that actually teach real events and**

culture of minorities and POC in America and globally, a large role in minority organizations and movements such as Black Lives Matter, and encourage and educate students to be sensitive and uplift minorities and be actively antiracist, more black, brown, and LGBT administration. Stop preaching diversity while at the same time dismissing and drowning out the voices of students of color. I expected better of my school and I am deeply disappointed and have lost so much respect for the school.”

- **“Have more mandatory conversations about race starting with the youngest grades. While we do have conversations pertaining to race, they are based on interest and are not mandatory.”**

- “Diversify the curriculum. In the History and English departments, stories of marginalized groups aren’t taught to the extent that they should be, and the authors of English books are almost all white. There aren’t AAPI or Latinx authors having their literature taught, and there’s only a small number of Black authors. In the Science department, more could be done to both show how people have falsified science to discriminate against POC (like eugenics, for example) and even in the math department, more antiracist teaching should happen considering that most mathematical principles were not created by white people.”

Students also stressed the importance of hiring more diverse faculty and staff, pointing to the importance of shared narratives and lived experiences existing within a school space. More training for white teachers is important, but does not replace the importance of the racial composition of a school’s adult community reflecting the racial population of the student population:

- “More BLACK and BROWN faculty and staff! Revisions to the curriculum regarding the history of POC need to be made. Just saying that you have a ‘diverse student body’ and then doing nothing to cater to their needs and just showing it off is unacceptable, as has the school’s role been in the current black lives matter movement. We need black teachers sharing black stories, period. There needs to be mandatory diversity workshops for faculty and students, along with racial injustice class starting in at least sixth grade. Please stop preaching diversity while actively drowning the voices of your students of color.”
- “Having more teachers of colors. Not just security guards or janitorial staff, who are still appreciated, but active teachers in the classroom. And also having it be the work of white students as well to pull their weight in being actively antiracist, and not having it always fall on students to be color to do all the work in educating when they too need to be students...”
- “Hire BIPOC and queer teachers. Host small conversations with students by grade and other identity markers. Rigorously train teachers so that they start to understand when and how to intervene in a class discussion that might go awry. Listen to BIPOC students and commit to an action plan.”

Finally, many students advocated for reform to their school’s discipline policies, which they often view as being enforced inequitably and with bias against Students of Color. When a school’s response to disciplinary infractions gives preference to one group over another, trust is broken between students and school leaders, particularly for Students of Color. In this survey, students made a clear call for transparency and accountability in disciplinary processes:

- “Starting from an early age, hold aggressors accountable in a real way for their actions (microaggressions, slurs, etc.) and being transparent with that accountability.”
- “Establish a clear system of reporting racist incidents and microaggressions.”
- “When a student reports a problem about racism, do not ignore.”
- “Give equal punishment, there have been several incidences where POC and white girls have been treated very differently. For example, several white students have openly said the n word and been actively racist but have received no punishment, while POC have been accused of or done things that don’t deserve punishment and been suspended.”

For school leaders, reading that students want them to reform diversity training, curriculum, hiring, and discipline practices simultaneously may feel overwhelming and potentially “too much” for their community to take on at once. However, with regard to racial justice, students would likely respond that they are not asking for several small changes. They are, in fact, advocating for overall cultural and paradigmatic shifts in their school communities. They want the lens of antiracism applied to every school policy and action; large and small, symbolic and direct.

“Stronger and smarter...”

Intentionally Shifting School Culture: Holding Up a Mirror to a School’s Mission and Values

Even if they have not committed their school’s mission statement to memory, students know how their schools put forward their values and virtues. The survey showed that students view antiracism as a means of aligning a school’s stated values with its actual practices, as if they were holding up a mirror to the mission and values of the school.

- “Our school mission might be to bring about the world that ought to be and yet at the rate private schools are admitting students, we’re preparing to see the world run by rich white old men all over again. Is it really progress if we’re only focusing on the top 1% achieving academic excellence?”
- “educate the students. educate the teachers. educate the faculty. educate the staff. educate the parents. educate yourselves. teach us about historic POC, spread awareness and teach us about black history month and days celebrating POC. we can’t be antiracist if we don’t know what racism means, or who black people are.”

- “Your silence is compliance. There will be no improvement, no justice, in our communities for people of color until you recognize our suffering and make an effort to help. In the end we are all human beings and deserve to feel safe, respected, and welcomed.”
- “To enforce the way that diversity is represented in the middle school community. We have to learn young so we can realize early on that diversity and racism is a struggle in many places. not just schools. If we enforce, inform, and educate the things that we learn and say to each other, we can have a better community that will be stronger and smarter when it comes to racism and diversity.”

Informally, all educators know that students are amazingly adept at pointing out hypocrisy and inconsistency among the adults in their lives. Their advice around antiracism is consistent with this: They expect that the adults will live up to values they proclaim to follow.

Conclusion: The Adults Need to Lead

Listening to students should be more than a performative exercise. If left fully in their hands, schools would be much different, more equitable, more just places. However, it is the adults who possess the power, resources, and influence to make these changes a reality. Recognizing this, one student respondent put the onus back on the adults:

- “And with all due respect, why do you feel it is the students’ job to find a way to make the school antiracist? I know you like hearing a students’ perspective, but it is also important to have the adults figure out a way, and not to always rely on the students to fix the problems of the administration. I’m a bit confused why the adults aren’t taking an initiative but the students always have to.”

Students possess a clear vision of the antiracist school communities they wish to create. They are waiting for their elders to provide the support, resources, and reforms. They are waiting for all of the adults to feel a sense of urgency and commitment to change. They are waiting for leadership.



POLLYANNA
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