

# South Bend Tribune

---

**OPINION** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

## **Viewpoint: A call to action to make education more equitable in South Bend schools**

**Stuart Greene** South Bend Tribune

Published 5:00 p.m. ET March 8, 2021

I recently attended a virtual community conversation about the state of South Bend schools. The conversation centered on the district's failure to educate students of color equitably. I am reaching out to readers to ask for collective action to support the education of our children. The board cannot do it alone. We need to know that equity matters and the constructive steps the board can take to make education more equitable.

The South Bend Community School Corp. made a promise of racial equity in response to the 1980 consent decree resulting from the federal government's lawsuit against the corporation for "engaging in acts of discrimination." According to the lawsuit, the result of these discriminatory acts was to create a segregated system of education for black and white students that defied the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Despite the promise to provide educational opportunity to Black students in 1980, a report commissioned by the SBCSC Board of Trustees in 2010 concluded that the corporation had failed to distribute resources equitably to schools populated by a majority of Black and brown students. The authors concluded that structural racism was the root cause of the problems they identified. The problems remain as a result of what a writer in *Edutopia* describes as "biases ... so attached to the fabric of our world that they seemingly go unnoticed by many people."

Our collective aim — the board, administration, the public — should be to disrupt and transform structures that have for decades disenfranchised students of color. Our community can follow the National School Board Association's commitment to equity, what the NSBA defines as "the intentional allocation of resources, instruction, and opportunities according to need, requiring that discriminatory practices, prejudices, and beliefs be identified and eradicated." The public must say this loud and clear and move the board and

the SBCSC's administration to embrace this idea.

Racial equity is an antiracist project. To be antiracist will mean removing structures that have harmed students of color and other marginalized groups and listening to the voices of the people who have been silenced. Schools have been designed to disenfranchise people with the least, and it's time to hold ourselves as a board and administration accountable to being equitable and antiracist; to stop the unequal treatment of people who have been treated unfairly; and to develop accountability measures pinpointing needed areas of growth.

Indeed, we need as a school corporation to be vigilant about centering the experiences of the kids who have not thrived in a system that works against their interests. To be antiracist means reimagining the purpose of school as a space that centers our students' stories, affirms their genius, and nurtures who they are and aspire to be.

A commitment to racial equity could not be more important — not just “equal” treatment, opportunities and resources — at a time when it is clear that decisions at all levels have limited the life paths of students of color. The distinction between equity and equality is significant. After all, if we're talking about school funding, advocating for equality would mean ensuring that all schools have the same amount of resources per pupil. Advocating for equity would mean recognizing that some schools will actually need more resources (e.g., funding, experienced teachers, relevant curriculum, robust systems of care).

I'd like to suggest that as a community we all need to take responsibility, and be accountable, for holding every student to high expectations. This will mean changing the culture of our schools and accepting that all children have the capacity to thrive. This also means removing all barriers to excellence. While we have outstanding programs in the corporation, it is a fact that students of color make up such a small percentage of students in our highest-achieving primary, middle and high schools, in our engineering magnet and arts programs or in our international baccalaureate programs. It's hard to ignore the trend during the past 20 years toward creating a private system of education within our public schools.

How each of us responds to this call for collective action will depend on the beliefs and values of groups and individuals within different spheres of influence. At the very least, any school-community-city compact must use a racial equity lens to make its recommendations to address ways to support SBCSC students and families.