

Supporting the Needs of BIPOC Girls in Independent Schools: A Toolkit of Recommendations

National Coalition
of Girls' Schools
Virtual Conference
June 2021

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EnGenderED
Research Collaborative

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INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHORS AND THE STUDY



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Meet Charlotte E. Jacobs + Katie Clonan-Roy

We are scholars that have been working together since 2011 when we were in graduate school together, at the University of Pennsylvania. Our work has always centered BIPOC girls and aimed to understand their educational, developmental, and social experiences.

The EnGenderED Research Collaborative

In the summer of 2020, we launched the EnGenderED Research Collaborative: a space for research, program development, and practitioner training. We partner with scholars, practitioners, and activists to study how gender influences the daily lives of young people in schools and communities. You can learn more at engenderedresearch.com.

This study examined the experiences of BIPOC girls who attend elite, predominantly White, all-girls independent schools in the U.S.

Our study explored the challenges and supports that BIPOC girls experience in independent schools, and the strengths they develop as they navigate their institutions.

We use the acronym BIPOC, which refers to Black, Indigenous and People of Color. This acronym strives to be an inclusive, umbrella term, and it aims to specifically resist the erasure of Black and Indigenous peoples.

RESEARCH METHODS



Research Sample

This research focused on four, elite independent schools for girls: two in the Midwest and two on the East Coast. Lakeview School and Garden Grove Academy are in the Midwest and Meadowbrook Academy and Rolling Hills School are on the East Coast (the names of all people and places are pseudonyms).

These schools were selected because they are close to our home institutions, we have pre-existing relationships with administrators in these schools, and they allowed us to detect regional and contextual differences in girls' schooling experiences. These four schools have middle schools (MS) (grades 5-8) and upper schools (US) (grades 9-12).

Data Collection Methods

We visited each school site for two to three days between October 2019 and January 2020. During these visits, we facilitated focus groups with the following constituent groups: 1) middle school Girls of Color (predominantly in the 8th grade); 2) upper school Girls of Color (predominantly in the 12th grade); 3) parents and caregivers of color; 4) faculty members, and; 5) administrators. The table below describes our participant sample across the four schools.

Table 1

Participant sample across four independent schools

School Community Groups	MS Girls	US Girls	Parents/ Caregivers	Administrators	Faculty	Totals
# of Participants	31	36	13	30	56	166
Race / Ethnicity of Participants						
Black	16	19	5	4	4	48
Latinx	4	2	1	1	0	8
Asian	5	3	2	2	2	14
Middle Eastern	0	0	2	0	1	3
North African	0	1	0	0	0	1
Multiracial	6	9	0	1	2	18
Other	1	2	1	1	2	7
White	0	0	1	21	42	64

Data Analysis Methods

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by three graduate assistants. Transcripts of the focus groups were uploaded to Dedoose qualitative analysis software. The research team read through the transcripts multiple times, using pre-coding techniques to develop a codebook, including organizational, descriptive/substantive, and theoretical/analytic codes (Maxwell, 2005). As we coded, we paid special attention to the strengths of Girls of Color, the challenges they face at these institutions and support systems that are existing or need to be created for this population of students.

The Development of this Toolkit

As we analyzed our qualitative data, we found patterns in the inequities that BIPOC girls experience, across the four schools in our sample, and thus in the commendations that we were offering to these schools for creating more inclusive, anti-oppressive, and equitable environments for BIPOC girls.

Rooted in our research, this toolkit offers recommendations for educators at independent girls schools related to the following:

- Adopting an institutional stance of anti-racism and anti-oppression
- School environment
- Curriculum
- Recruitment and retention
- Affinity spaces and other supports for BIPOC girls



TOOLKIT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopting an Institutional Stance of Anti-Racism and Anti- Oppression



RECOMMENDATION #1: ADOPTING AN INSTITUTIONAL STANCE OF ANTI-RACISM & ANTI- OPPRESSION

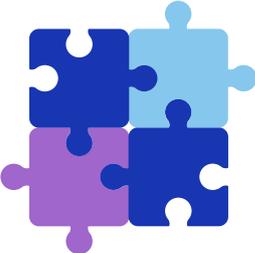
Require mandatory anti-racism and social justice-focused professional development for administrators, teachers, and staff.

What the Research Says

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- A strength of BIPOC girls is their critical consciousness-- their ability to understand how systems of power and privilege work within the U.S., and how their identity as BIPOC girls influence the experiences that they have in school and beyond. However, many White administrators, faculty members, and students have yet to develop the ability to enact anti-racist perspectives and practices, causing tension and discomfort in the classroom and in their schools for BIPOC girls when discussing racially charged subject matter or experiencing racial encounters.
 - Anti-racism training for administrators and teachers, and an anti-racist curriculum for students has the potential to transform uncomfortable and unproductive classroom conversations as well as microaggressions that occur inside and outside of the classroom space into critical conversations where BIPOC girls feel valued, seen, and respected, and to where the critical consciousness of white students can be developed.

Resources

Books & Articles:

- 
- Aguilar, E. (2020). *Coaching for Equity: Conversations That Change Practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
 - Au, W. (Ed.). (2009). *Rethinking multicultural education: Teaching for racial and cultural justice*. Rethinking Schools.
 - Gorski, P. C. (2017). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. Teachers College Press.
 - Kumashiro, K. K. (2000). Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education. *Review of Educational research*, 70(1), 25-53.

Websites & Podcasts:

- [Abolitionist Teacher Network Podcast](#) by Dr. Bettina Love
- [Third Space Podcast](#) by Jen Cort-- Jen Cort is an education consultant in the areas of equity, inclusion, diversity and justice.

RECOMMENDATION #2: ADOPTING AN INSTITUTIONAL STANCE OF ANTI-RACISM & ANTI- OPPRESSION

Develop anti-racist affinity spaces for White students, educators, and parents, guardians, and caregivers.

What the Research Says

- Establishing affinity groups for White allies to meet is vital. In these spaces, White allies can engage in unlearning internalized dominance, learning about their biases and racial identity development, and share ideas related to how they could support their BIPOC peers.
- We heard in faculty focus groups that when teachers attempt to have discussions in the classroom about White privilege, they often receive pushback from White parents/guardians and caregivers. Such pushback discourages teachers from promoting and discussing an anti-racist stance in different educational spaces. Engaging parents/guardians and caregivers in anti-racist education would not only support their own growth, but also would demystify what their children are learning in the classroom connected to an anti-racist curriculum. If parents/guardians and caregivers have more education and experience in having challenging conversations about race and anti-racism with their children at home, they might feel more open, comfortable and confident to become part of the learning experience with their children.
- We also envision that BIPOC and White parent/guardian and caregiver affinity groups could be a space where parents/guardians and caregivers can be educated about how to talk with their children about racial issues and support their racial identity development.

Resources

Books & Articles:

- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.
- Michael, A., & Bartoli, E. (2014). What White children need to know about race. *Independent School*, 73(4), 56-62.
- Michael, A., & Conger, M. C. (2009). Becoming an anti-racist white ally: How a white affinity group can help. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 6(1), 56-60.

Websites & Podcasts:

- [The Conscious Kid website](#)
- [Learning for Justice website](#)

TOOLKIT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

School Environment



RECOMMENDATION #1: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

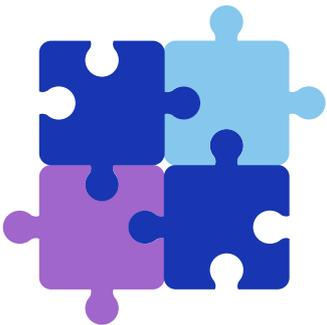
Foster a school environment where critical analyses of power dynamics and societal inequities are encouraged.

What the Research Says



- The BIPOC girls in our sample demonstrated sophistication in understanding and critiquing power dynamics and structural inequities in U.S. society. But, they reported that white community members often avoided such critical conversations regarding inequities, identity, or forms of oppression.
 - BIPOC girls at Garden Grove Academy expressed that such critical analyses of society and power only happened in the wake of racist events and was led by BIPOC girls; burdening them with processing a racist event and facilitating discourse to educate others.
- We recommend that educators create intentional opportunities to engage in critical analyses of race, class, gender, and other dimensions of inequity, in and out of the classroom, so that BIPOC girls are not burdened with leading these conversations. Both BIPOC and white students should be encouraged to think critically about how society is organized, in order to be civically engaged and successful college students.

Resources



- **Organizations:**
 - The following organizations have fantastic curricular and professional development materials to help foster such critical analyses in and out of the classroom in schools:
 - [Facing History & Ourselves](#)
 - [Learning for Justice](#)
 - [CARLE Institute](#)

RECOMMENDATION #2: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

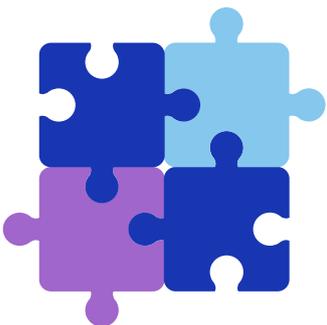
Provide BIPOC girls with the autonomy and support to determine if and when they want to speak about race and racism in classroom conversations.

What the Research Says



- Black girls in our sample shared that they often felt pressure to support their white classmates in learning about the Black experience in the U.S.
 - Black girls at Rolling Hills School reported that they were often called on to share their experiences when learning about Black history or celebrating Black History Month. One girl shared that teachers "overdid it" and singled her out to share for her white peer's benefit. She emphasized that she wanted to learn too. Another Black girl reported feeling like she had to be "the face of the race."
- BIPOC girls want to be students too, and their voices should not only become amplified when talking about topics related to Black history. BIPOC girls should be called on equitably in classes, across the disciplines.
- Finally, teachers should strive to facilitate conversations about race, racial identity, and racism, with all students in their classrooms.

Resources



- **Books:**
 - *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*: This book, by Beverly Daniel Tatum, provides unique insights into how damaging it can be when teachers expect BIPOC youth to teach their classmates about race and racism. This book, in general, provides helpful insights for educators regarding race, identity development, and academic engagement.
- **Organizations:**
 - *Essex & Oliver LLC*: This organization offers equity-focused professional development for educators that focuses specifically on supporting Girls of Color.

RECOMMENDATION #3: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

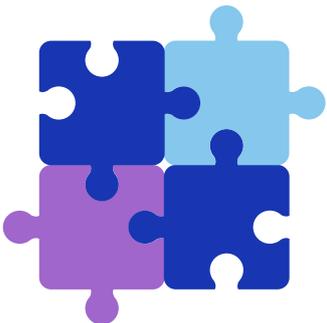
Support the resilience of Girls of Color by providing spaces for mediation to occur and accountability to be shared in the aftermath of identity-based harm.

What the Research Says



- Many BIPOC girls shared that they felt like their concerns, especially related to identity-based harm, were not validated or responded to accordingly by faculty and administrators.
 - One BIPOC girl in the middle school at Rolling Hills School reported talking to educators about the microaggressions her white peers perpetuated, and feeling frustrated when they responded to her by saying things like, “I can’t do something” or “I can’t perceive what you’re feeling right now.” These responses contributed to her mistrusting her teachers.
- We recommend that educators at independent schools position BIPOC girls as the experts of their own experiences, take their concerns seriously, and respond to events involving harm appropriately.
- Schools should develop mediation protocols, grounded in principles of restorative justice, and create spaces for guided mediation to occur between BIPOC girls and their peers or educators. This can support the development of BIPOC girls’ strengths of resilience and self-advocacy.

Resources



- **Books:**
 - The following texts offer insights into fostering restorative practices in schools in teaching, learning, and responding to harm.
 - *Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education Through Restorative Justice*, by Maisha T. Winn
 - *Restorative Justice in Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning Through the Disciplines*, edited by Maisha T. Winn & Lawrence T. Winn

RECOMMENDATION #4: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

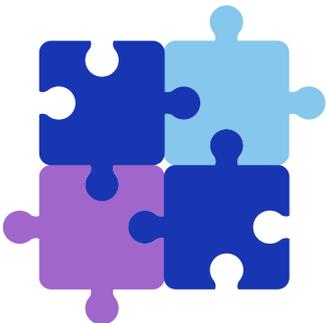
Create opportunities for student bonding and socializing at school.

What the Research Says



- Across the independent girls schools that participated in our study, we found that BIPOC girls from economically marginalized neighborhoods that are geographically removed from the school setting face barriers in socializing with their peers (often due to transportation issues).
- We recommend that girls schools host opportunities for student bonding and socializing at school, such as movie nights with transportation supports, which can remedy barriers related to socio-economic imbalances, geographic distance, and transportation disparities for BIPOC girls.

Resources



- **Books:**
 - The following texts offer insights into supporting girls' development and relationship building.
 - *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*, by Lisa Damour
 - *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection among Girls*, by Lyn Mikel Brown
 - *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators*, by Michael Nakkula & Eric Toshalis

RECOMMENDATION #5: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

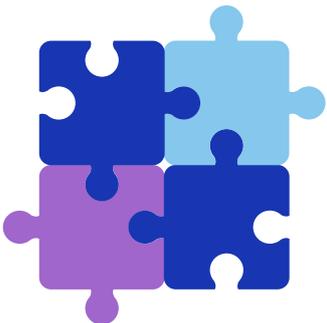
For girls schools that have coordinate relationships with boys schools, work with the coordinate school to improve the climate of the coordinate relationship and to foster equity in student relationships.

What the Research Says



- Only one school in our sample, Meadowbrook Academy, had a coordinate relationship with a nearby boys school. BIPOC girls at Meadowbrook reported having overwhelmingly negative and even traumatic experiences in their interactions with students from the coordinate boys school.
 - These experiences and relationships were marked by both overt and more subtle forms of racism, and educators explained that BIPOC girls have to put on "armor" and "brace themselves" for interactions with the coordinate school.
- Administrators at girls schools must collaborate with boys school administrators to shift the culture and climate of both institutions to be more equitable for BIPOC youth. They can implement anti-racism and restorative justice initiatives, to address harm that occurs between students at the two schools and to create more equitable school environments.
- Administrators can administer needs assessments or climate surveys to better understand and intervene upon coordinate school relationships, climate, and culture.

Resources



- **Organizations:**
 - **Learning for Justice:** This link will take you to Learning for Justice's school climate resources package page, which contains tools, protocols and practical advice for making your school more open and welcoming to all students.
 - **Lion's Story:** Lion's Story is an organization that focuses on nurturing racial literacy in individuals and communities. Partnering with Lion's Story can support schools in navigating racism in their communities.

TOOLKIT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum



RECOMMENDATION #1:

CURRICULUM

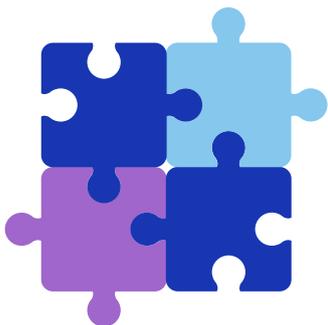
Develop anti-racist and anti-oppressive educational sessions for both educators and students to foster more equitable classroom experiences.

What the Research Says



- It is critical that independent girls schools take an anti-racist and anti-oppressive approach to educating their entire community about white supremacy and racism.
- **Student Education:**
 - Our data documents white students' lack of understanding of white supremacy. Thus, we recommend that schools provide education sessions that promote the racial identity development of white students and their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). To support all students in understanding oppression, critical conversations about race, identity, and social justice should be a regular part of the classroom curriculum.
- **Faculty education:**
 - Educators should receive professional development that equips them to facilitate productive discussions about privilege and oppression, amongst each other and with students. Such training should also support them in responding to racism in and beyond the classroom.
 - We also recommend that teachers work in teams to interrogate racism and bias in their curriculum, and to determine how their curriculum educates white students to grapple with white supremacy and privilege.

Resources



- **Organizations:**
 - **EnGenderED Research Collaborative:** Our research collaborative, EnGenderED, often works with schools to provide such anti-racist and anti-oppressive training sessions, and to build faculty members' capacity to analyze their curricula for bias and oppression.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

CURRICULUM

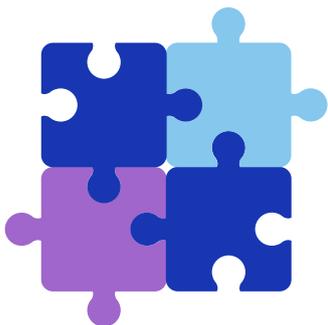
Develop and implement a rigorous, culturally and contextually relevant, and anti-racist and anti-oppressive curriculum, and train educators to enact critical pedagogies.

What the Research Says



- Many BIPOC educators, students, and caregivers agreed upon the importance of BIPOC representation and cultural responsiveness in the curriculum.
- However, many community members across the four schools emphasized the challenges that their school faces in implementing such equitable curriculum and instruction, such as lack of training in critical pedagogies.
- BIPOC girls reported experiencing a lack of representation of their identities, experiences, in the curriculum, and feeling burdened with planning assemblies or events that would offer such representation.
- We hold that academic excellence is achieved not only by instituting a rigorous curriculum, but one that is also culturally and contextually relevant, antiracist, and representative of the student body.

Resources



- The following resources support educators in developing critical, pedagogical styles, and reflecting upon their practice with an equity lens.
- **Books:**
 - [For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education](#), by Christopher Emdin
 - [Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice](#), by Geneva Gay
 - [Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap \(2nd edition\)](#), by Paul Gorski
 - [We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom](#), by Bettina Love
- **Organizations:**
 - [Equity Literacy Institute](#)

TOOLKIT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recruitment and Retention



RECOMMENDATION #1: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

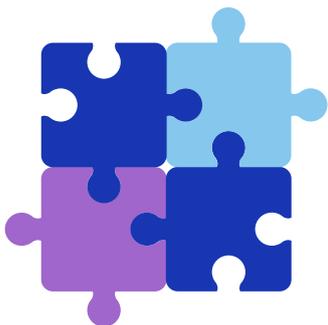
Engage in strategic recruitment initiatives for BIPOC students.

What the Research Says



- Across our focus groups, BIPOC girls spoke to the lack of diversity in their schools' student populations. BIPOC girls at Lakeview School reported that their school was “overwhelmingly White,” and that they felt “othered” and noticeably underrepresented in the classroom and on some sports teams.
- We recommend that independent girls schools continue ongoing recruitment and retention efforts focused on BIPOC students. Partnering with local academic enrichment programs or elementary schools in the surrounding public school districts could be a place to initiate such efforts.

Resources



- **Organizations:**
 - The following organizations are models for supporting students from historically marginalized communities in the transition to independent schools and beyond. We encourage schools to examine how these organizations support their students, and to consider partnering with similar organizations in their region.
 - [Prep for Prep](#)
 - [The Aspire Program at Hathaway Brown](#)
 - [A Better Chance](#)

RECOMMENDATION #2: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

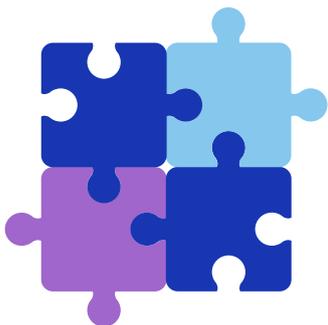
Engage in strategic recruitment initiatives for BIPOC faculty, staff, and administrators of color.

What the Research Says



- BIPOC girls across our sample expressed a desire for increased numbers of BIPOC faculty, staff, and administrators in their schools.
 - BIPOC girls at Lakeview School described how they feel comforted and supported by educators who share their racial/ ethnic identities; they expressed not having to “sugarcoat” their emotions, their ability to be “blunt” with their concerns, and not having to “act a certain way.”
- Additionally, it is important for both BIPOC and white students to see BIPOC adults in leadership positions.

Resources



- **Organizations:** The following organizations are teacher recruitment firms, which specialize in placing BIPOC educators in schools:
 - [Strategenius Consulting Firm](#)
 - [Nemnet Minority Recruitment](#)

RECOMMENDATION #3: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Engage in strategic retention initiatives for BIPOC faculty, staff, and administrators of color.

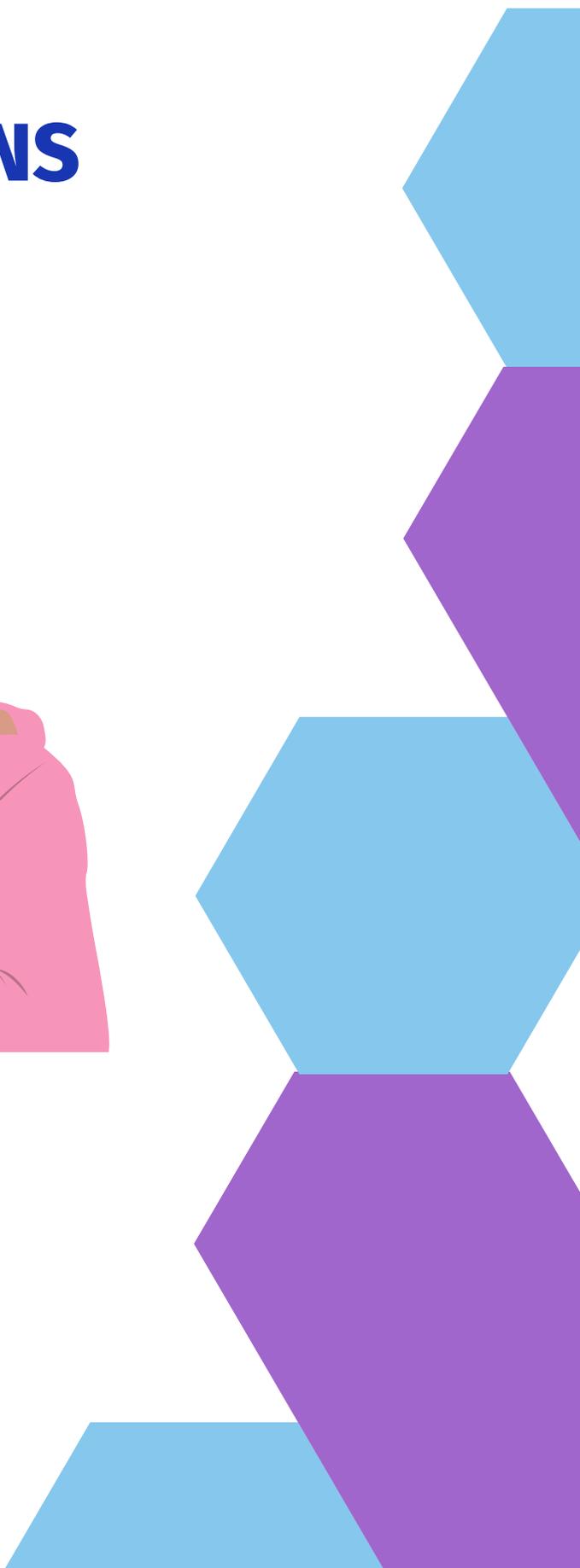
What the Research Says



- Across the focus groups, BIPOC faculty, staff, and administrators spoke to the challenges of working in environments with little BIPOC representation.
- We encourage schools to consider the following questions:
 - *What is it about our culture and environment that might attract and retain, and/ or deter and discourage, BIPOC employees?*
 - *How can white colleagues support BIPOC professionals, and foster an anti-racist and anti-oppressive working environment?*
- We found that BIPOC faculty and staff engage in an immense amount of labor in supporting and mentoring BIPOC students, which can be stressful and emotionally draining. These forms of labor should be formally acknowledged and compensated for by the institution.
- We recommend that schools also provide affinity spaces for BIPOC faculty, staff and administrators to support their sense of community and belonging within their professional environment. Additionally, BIPOC professionals (especially those who are early in their careers) can benefit from supportive mentors who are more senior BIPOC colleagues. It would be important that such mentors not hold evaluative roles (such as a dean or principal within the same division as their mentee), and that, again, mentors be compensated for their labor.

TOOLKIT OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Affinity Spaces and Other
Supports for BIPOC Girls



RECOMMENDATION #1:

AFFINITY SPACES AND OTHER SUPPORTS FOR BIPOC GIRLS

Provide affinity spaces for BIPOC girls, and listen to the critiques and recommendations that BIPOC girls offer.

What the Research Says



- Having spaces where BIPOC girls can talk through the challenges that they experience in their lives is highly recommended. Providing BIPOC girls spaces where they can communicate their frustrations, challenges, and thoughts about their identities and experiences in community with others could help them to process some of the challenges that they experience both inside and outside of school.
- BIPOC girls also shared how they appreciated opportunities for connecting with BIPOC girls across the school divisions: these types of affinity spaces allow younger girls to learn from and connect with older girls, and for older girls to be able to further develop their leadership skills through mentoring younger students.
- One of the outcomes of affinity spaces could be recommendations that BIPOC girls have for how their schools, teachers, and administrators can further support their needs. If such groups present recommendations for change to educators or the administration, we recommend that schools listen closely to these recommendations and take action on them.
- We also recommend that administrators visit these groups on identified days to listen to the recommendations from BIPOC girls, and in turn, administrators could later work with students, faculty members, and parents to develop action plans for change. Alternatively, administrators could also conduct a needs assessment, which would provide BIPOC girls in affinity groups as well as those who are not, with the opportunity to speak up about their needs and desires.

Resources

Helpful articles about the importance of affinity groups and tips for developing productive affinity spaces:

- Clonan-Roy, K., Gross, N., & Jacobs, C.E. (2020). The values of informal spaces in schools to counter the emotional silencing of youth of color. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.
- Chun, Cindy P., "Best practices of affinity groups in independent schools" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations*. 746.
- Parsons, J., & Ridley, K. (2012). *Identity, Affinity, Reality: Making the Case for Affinity Groups in Elementary School*. *Independent School*, 71(2), n2.



RECOMMENDATION #2: AFFINITY SPACES AND OTHER SUPPORTS FOR BIPOC GIRLS

Pair BIPOC girls with BIPOC faculty mentors who can offer guidance and support.

What the Research Says

- A recommendation that BIPOC girls in our focus groups suggested was pairing BIPOC girls with BIPOC faculty members with whom they could have regular, informal “check-ins.” BIPOC girls explained that during such “check-ins” with a BIPOC faculty mentor, they could discuss their experiences at their school, and work with their assigned faculty mentor to address concerns and challenges they are experiencing.
- BIPOC girls expressed that it would be important for faculty mentors to communicate with administrators about what they were observing in their mentees, so that administrators could address issues or problems that arise.
- While we appreciate that this suggestion comes directly from the BIPOC focus group participants, we also recognize the additional labor that BIPOC faculty members would be asked to take on if they chose to engage in such mentorship. If this was a program that was developed, BIPOC faculty members would need to be compensated for the additional work.



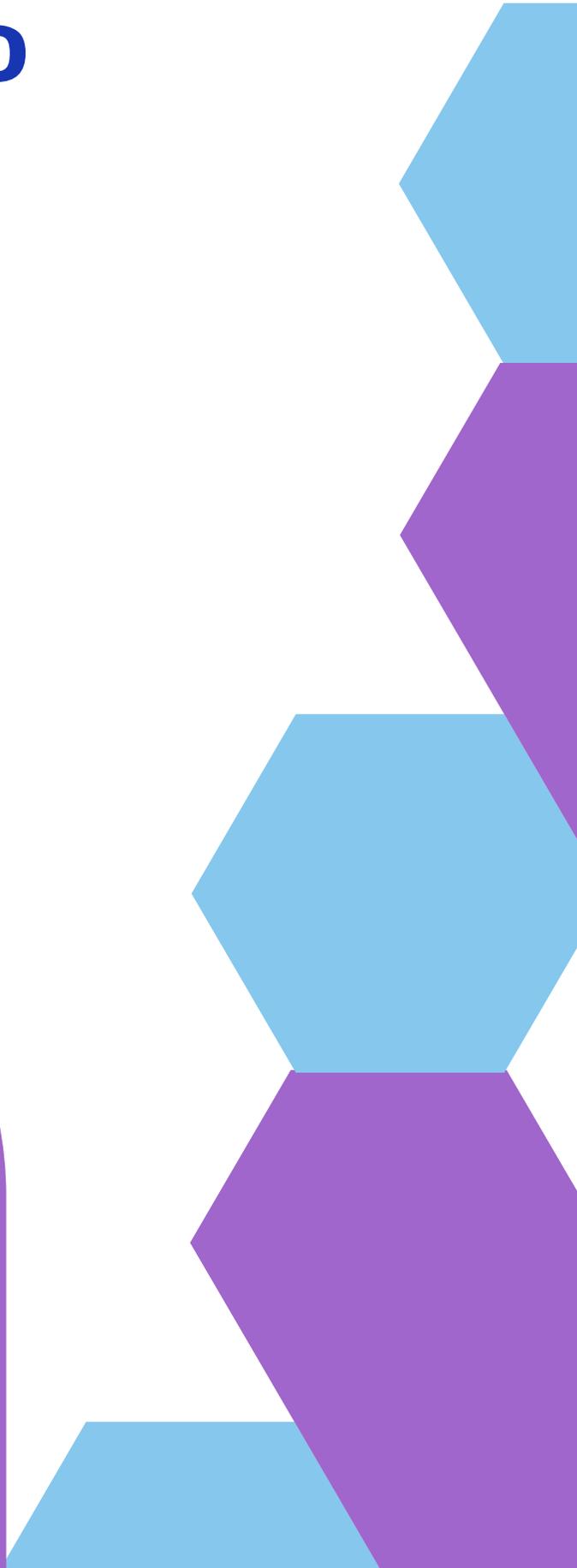
RECOMMENDATION #3: AFFINITY SPACES AND OTHER SUPPORTS FOR BIPOC GIRLS

Provide and support affinity spaces for BIPOC parents, guardians, and caregivers.

What the Research Says

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- We recommend that schools intentionally develop family engagement programming to provide BIPOC parents/guardians with affinity spaces of their own so that BIPOC parents/guardians and caregivers across the different divisions can connect and build community with one another.
 - Many administrators named the discomfort and sense of not feeling welcomed that many BIPOC parents/guardians and caregivers experience within independent schools. Creating racial/ethnic affinity groups for BIPOC parents/guardians and caregivers would create a stronger support network for BIPOC families and enable them to feel more confident navigating their school's policies, practices, and traditions.

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTACT INFORMATION



CONCLUSIONS

What we have learned

While BIPOC girls within our sample spoke to many positive aspects of their educational experiences, it is clear that many inequities remain, related to school environment, curriculum and instruction, recruitment and retention of BIPOC individuals, and supports for BIPOC communities. We hope that schools take up our recommendations as starting points for fostering equitable, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive environments.

Our next steps

Within the next year, we plan to expand this study nationally, to get a more diverse picture of the experiences of BIPOC students in independent girls schools.

CONTACT US

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