

# School obsessed with DEI?

Here's why  
parents  
should call  
for a focus  
on reading.

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# Education Consumers Foundation

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Our schools are unwittingly creating America's inequities and divisions. Faulty reading instruction and social promotion, not racism, are leaving children of all races behind—educationally and economically. Proven solutions are available but unpopular with teachers. With ECF's tools, parents can challenge school leaders to focus on reading, not DEI.

*Reading is indispensable to educational success, but only a third of children are learning to read well. This failure of our educational system has lifelong socioeconomic consequences.*

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According to the 2019 [Nation's Report Card](#), only 18% of Black and 23% of Hispanic students read proficiently by grade 4. Economically disadvantaged students are about the same level: 21%. Overall, only 35% of all 4<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient readers.

Even relatively advantaged students do not perform all that well. Less than half of White fourth graders (45%) reach proficiency and only 55% of Asian students do so. Asians are the top performing racial group.

These numbers represent a serious problem. Reading is indispensable to educational success. Only a third of children are learning to read well. This failure of our educational system has lifelong socioeconomic consequences.

Schooling shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” after grade three. Children who are unable to read at a proficient level by fourth grade are limited for the rest of their lives—especially in their educational pursuits. One effect is that only 26% of high school graduates are fully prepared for college.

It is plain to see that schools have a major problem with reading instruction, and it's one that they have [struggled](#) with for decades.

There is another facet of the reading problem, however, one with which many schools today are obsessed. Reading outcomes are low for virtually all groups but there is a consistent gap between White and minority students. It's called the reading gap, and it's at the root of a larger “achievement gap” --the problem that gets most of the attention.

Instead of thinking about these disparate white-minority outcomes as one more result of ineffective reading instruction, many education leaders have concluded that they are evidence of racial discrimination and a sign that their school or district needs DEI, i.e., diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

We believe that they are wrong. Check your school's reading outcomes [here](#).

[ECF has a Different View of the Racial Achievement Gap](#)

At ECF, we believe that the [gap](#) between White and minority students originates with the entry-level differences in school readiness [normally found](#)

between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students—the very gap that public schooling was [founded](#) to overcome.

In our view, this gap persists because improperly trained teachers lack the pedagogical tools to overcome them. Teachers equipped with effective teaching practices would not only close the reading gap, they would effectively reduce or eliminate the perception that poor black and brown students are less talented and victims of racism.

Our view is supported by data showing the [concentration](#) of poverty in high minority schools, and it agrees with Reardon's [widely-cited finding](#) that the white-minority achievement gap is mostly a product of socioeconomic segregation (which includes school quality issues), not racial discrimination.

In sum, we see the achievement gap as the result of economically created school readiness differences exacerbated by the [faulty and unscientific teaching practices](#) in which most classroom educators are trained. The practices typically taught by teacher preparation programs have proven to be effective with less than half of all students and wholly inadequate to the needs of the subgroups that are not well prepared at school entry. Many of these conventional approaches to reading are legacies of teaching models that were [found to be ineffective](#) in the 1960's and 1970's-- the War on Poverty era.

With better teaching practices, the achievement gap will begin to close, and the now-evident socioeconomic differences that are their result will begin to disappear. Charter [schools](#) in New York City are already demonstrating the reality of these aspirations.

### Why we Discount Racism

We discount the racism because all *economically disadvantaged* students (White, Black, and Brown) are, on average, one to three years behind their peers in school readiness at school [entry](#). Unless they experience exceptionally effective early instruction, they tend to stay one to three years behind.

If white students are affected the same way as minority children, the problem is not racial discrimination. The problem is that the entry-level deficits of all poor children are allowed to linger for lack of appropriately intensive instruction. In short, they start behind, stay behind, and predictably accumulate an achievement deficit.

Why, then, do so many observers invoke racial discrimination in accounting for the achievement gap? First, there is the history of *de jure* and *de facto* racism in public schooling. It still exists in some measure but is vanishingly small relative to the socioeconomic disparities for which it is said to account.

Second, there is a certain rhetorical utility to blaming racism: If the disparities are the result of ineffective schooling, then educators are responsible for the necessary reforms. If, however, the problem is systemic racism, educational leaders can pass it along to DEI specialists and blame them if educational disparities don't go away.

There is a third and especially influential reason: On its face, the achievement gap appears to be the result of racial discrimination. The reason is that a substantially greater percentage of Black and Hispanic students are classified as [living in poverty](#) or [extreme poverty](#). Sixty-five percent of Black students and sixty-three percent of Hispanics are so classified versus 25% of Whites.

Given their numerical clustering in the educationally at-risk population, it is easy to assume that the Black and Brown students are victims of discrimination.

### Catching up by Grade 3

Given that schooling shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” after grade 3, it is vitally important for students to be proficient readers by this point in their school careers. Given also that the benchmark for proficient reading increases as students advance from one grade to the next, reaching the proficient level by grade 3 is a significant challenge for disadvantaged students.

Students who enter school far below the average starting point not only have to gain the knowledge and skills required for advancement to the next grade, they have to overcome their entry-level knowledge and skill deficits.

In order to acquire all of that content by third grade, economically disadvantaged children (of all races) need [instruction](#) that enables them to progress at an accelerated rate. Otherwise, they start behind and stay behind.

The good news is that several versions of such instruction exist. The bad news is that until [recently](#), most widely used reading instruction [materials](#) focused primarily on delivering one year of achievement growth per year. The

result has been that few disadvantaged students catch up, and the lack of sufficiently effective instruction is the reason.

The catch-up-growth needed by economically disadvantaged students has traditionally been viewed as a special programs issue. The result: economically disadvantaged students—Black, White, and Hispanic—have been left behind at an ever-growing social and economic [cost](#).

### Why DEI won't help

At ECF, we believe that the achievement gap can be closed because weak reading instruction is the primary barrier and demonstrably effective instruction is available but little used.

The notion that the gap is the result of racism and amenable to remediation by diversity, equity, and inclusion policies (DEI) is fallacious and a distraction from the real problem. Instead of viewing racial minorities as victims of racial discrimination, [ECF sees poor Black and Hispanic children primarily as victims](#) of schooling that allows childhood disadvantage to snowball into an educationally crippled lifetime.

This is not to say that schoolhouse racism or that historic racism is nonexistent or irrelevant to their educational trajectory. Rather, it is to say that DEI and similar programs aimed at eradicating schoolhouse racism are focused on the wrong problem and constitute a substantial misallocation of time, effort, and resources by schools.

A reallocation of those organizational energies to use of [proven](#) reading instruction would not only benefit struggling readers of all races, it would reduce the perception that schools are places of racial discrimination.

### If more Effective Instruction is Available, why isn't it used?

For reasons unrelated to DEI and to the movement to advance social justice, teachers have for decades been trained in reading instruction that [neglects](#) to teach “decoding skills.” These often-improvisational practices have been successful with roughly half of non-disadvantaged White and Asian students but have proven to be woefully less effective with [disadvantaged](#) students of all races.

They fail because economically disadvantaged children need [instruction](#) that produces an accelerated rate of achievement growth—a rate that is

significantly greater than [conventional reading instruction](#) is intended to produce.

In contrast, Direct Instruction (DI), a [curriculum](#) developed for preschoolers in the 1960s, [accelerates reading outcomes](#) by design. Known since the 1970s but not widely taught to teachers, DI and [similar approaches](#) are available and supported by extensive evidence. None are widely used, however, primarily because they are at odds with the [educational philosophy](#) favored by teacher educators.

[Success Academies](#) are an example of a charter school network that routinely shows what can be accomplished when schools use instruction like [Success for All](#) to accelerate learning. They send to college the same poor and minority inner-city students that the NYC public schools send back to their neighborhoods.

Bottom Line: Far better educational outcomes are possible but they will require schools to hire or retrain teachers to deliver [instruction that will accelerate learning](#) for disadvantaged children of all races, not focus on DEI.

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Dear Reader: Why we need your donation

We show that DEI both distracts from schooling's central aims and from the educational success of the students it purports to help. We urge parents and taxpayers who are involved with DEI obsessed schools to challenge their [local leadership](#): **Are their DEI policies serving the best interests of all students—especially the minorities that DEI purports to help?**

To the education community, ECF's consumer-centric view of DEI is not a welcome perspective. It not only suggests that DEI wastes time and money by targeting the wrong problem, it diverts attention from the real problem—teaching that is informed by conventional pedagogical doctrines.

Public education is an industry comprised not only of public schools but numerous related institutions, agencies, organizations, and regulatory bodies. All are stakeholders in the industry's economic successes and failures. ECF stands outside of that industry.

In contrast to the industry's economic interests, ECF's mission is to improve the educational success of children through empowering the parties who pay for and make use of the schools. ECF is founded on the belief that the public schools are the public's schools and should be accountable to the public.

In order to ensure that we abstain from conflicts of interest, ECF avoids even the [fence-straddling](#) that often characterizes the activities and pronouncements of independent education policy and research organizations. Since 1995, we have successfully maintained an exclusive commitment to consumers.

For reasons of our financial and mission-related differences, WE NEED YOUR HELP in order to maintain our unique independence. Please do visit our [support](#) page and make a donation.

We are a consumer "David" grappling with an industry "Goliath" and we need all the help we can get.

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