NASP Supports Access to an Affirming School Environment and Uncensored Public Education

Bethesda, MD—The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) asserts that all students have the right to a safe and affirming educational environment. This includes the freedom to express identities, the availability of robust mental and behavioral health services and social–emotional learning (SEL) programming, and access to a well-rounded, uncensored public education curriculum that includes positive representation of minoritized populations and inclusive sexuality education. While equality focuses on ensuring that all individuals receive the same treatment, access to resources, and legal protections, equity in our schools requires meeting the unique needs of each student (based on demographic characteristics, cultural background, identities, or ecological contexts) to support achievement of similar outcomes. Equity requires culturally responsive practices, centering the perspectives of marginalized groups, and the meaningful representation of marginalized identities and family structures in educational materials, such as books, media, and curricula.

NASP strongly condemns current efforts to significantly restrict, and in some cases outright prohibit, both discussion of and formal curricula on critical topics including: systemic racism, equity, cultural responsiveness, diversity, social–emotional learning, sexual orientation, and gender identity. NASP firmly believes that a comprehensive, well-rounded, and inclusive education affirms and validates the diversity of cultural and individual differences, fosters resilience, and facilitates well-being and positive academic and mental health outcomes within safe, affirming, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. Positive educational and social outcomes for all children and youth are possible only in a society—and schools within it—that guarantees equitable treatment to all people, regardless of race, class, culture, language, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, citizenship, ability, and other dimensions of difference.

Schools have long explored complicated, and at times controversial, topics in developmentally appropriate ways. Understanding the perspective of others is foundational to the learning process. Building this skill in the school setting is not intended to replace or undermine parents’ role in their children’s learning and development. Rather it seeks to equip students with the information and ability to understand and thoughtfully examine the facts that shape the world. It is imperative that we empower teachers to provide an honest and accurate assessment of history, establish learning environments that facilitate critical thinking and respectful dialogue about these issues, and help students understand diverse perspectives and embrace identities of their peers. Censorship has no place in our education system.

Decades of research indicate that engaging in open dialogue about differences both increases compassion and dispels stereotypes, one of many effective ways to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Integrated educational settings where nondiscrimination is practiced are associated with positive educational, social, and cognitive outcomes for all students—both majority and minoritized group members—as well as long-term educational, economic, and civic outcomes. Inclusion and positive representation of LGBTQ+ persons in classroom instruction and respecting and acknowledging students’ gender identity or sexual orientation prevents suicide and other devastating outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. There is no credible evidence that having honest and
affirming conversations about all identities of youth will predispose youth to adopt an identity or orientation other than their own.

On the contrary, obscuring or denying someone their identity causes significant harm. As outlined in NASP’s position statement on *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*:

Prejudice and discrimination are negatively associated with the physical well-being, mental health, and adaptive functioning of individuals from nondominant racial/ethnic groups, religious communities, sexual orientations, cultural groups, immigrants, and other intergroup contexts. Discrimination has harmful effects whether experienced directly, online, or vicariously, and across the lifespan. (NASP, 2019, p. 2).

Discrimination has also been associated with increased risk for suicide, most notably amongst Black and LGBTQ+ youth.

Developmentally appropriate discussions about topics such as privilege, bias, and systemic and structural racism in our nation’s schools foster critical thinking skills and provide a framework to understand how existing systems, structures, and policies can cause inequitable outcomes. Students who do not learn about these topics in a school setting may seek out information elsewhere, potentially accessing misinformation and missing out on adult facilitated conversation about these complex issues. Professional development for teachers and educators on privilege, racism, bias, and systemic racism is essential, but not because individual educators or students are consciously racist. Rather, this type of professional development provides them with the necessary tools to advance equity in their schools and classrooms, ensure that all students see themselves in the curriculum, and identify and remedy the impact their individual biases may have on their students.

Unfortunately, these critically necessary topics have become far too politicized and are being weaponized in states and local school districts across the country. Even the consideration of policies to censor ideas or deny individual civil rights creates a climate of surveillance and punishment for educators, which is resulting in a chilling effect on classroom instruction out of fear of potential repercussions. These policies are especially harmful to educators from minoritized backgrounds, as their own identities and experiences are invalidated and put under a critical microscope, and their motives as educators are called into question. These laws and policies are creating a hostile and invalidating school environment for students and educators. In some cases, laws are used to define identities (such as defining sex as immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth, or by defining gender as only male or only female), thereby erasing identities that do not align with these definitions.

Ultimately, for equality to exist in our schools, all students must be able to exist as their full selves without having to hide any aspect of their identity. Students from minoritized backgrounds or varying family structures have an equal right to be affirmed and feel a sense of belonging in their school environment.

Equally important is ensuring the availability of comprehensive social–emotional learning programming and school-based mental and behavioral health services. There is a mental health crisis among children and youth, which has been exacerbated by the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, as well as by the deluge of harmful policy that is creating invalidating, hostile, and harmful school environments for many students. Proposed policies that aim to remove social–emotional learning or limit access to school-employed mental health providers (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers) without explicit parental consent will worsen this crisis and further harm our students. Parent engagement is critical to student success, and school mental health professionals do not provide therapeutic services to students without
NASP Supports Access to an Affirming School Environment and Uncensored Public Education

NASP Supports Access to an Affirming School Environment and Uncensored Public Education

For Immediate Release from the National Association of School Psychologists

www.nasponline.org

NASP RESOURCES

Comprehensive and Inclusive Sexuality Education [Position Statement], https://www.nasponline.org/x57367.xml

The Importance of Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Schools: Dispelling Myths About Critical Race Theory [Handout], http://www.nasponline.org/x37551.xml

Safe and Supportive Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth [Position Statement], https://www.nasponline.org/x26826.xml


EXTERNAL RESOURCES


###

parental consent. However, it is crucial that school-employed mental health providers be available to speak with students to provide immediate support when issues arise during the day or a crisis occurs.

NASP is committed to advancing policy and practice that ensure all students have access to needed social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health supports. This includes protecting the right to a safe, supportive, affirming, and inclusive school environment where all students and educators are empowered to be their authentic selves. An unequivocal cornerstone of this commitment is ensuring the ability of students and educators to engage in critical dialogue necessary to dismantle systemic racism, combat prejudice and discrimination, and advance equity.

REFERENCE