



## Key Messages and Talking Points for School Psychologists: Advancing Social Justice

For school psychologists, social justice is both a process and a goal that requires action. School psychologists work to ensure the protection of the educational rights, opportunities, and well-being of all children, especially those whose voices have been muted, identities obscured, or needs ignored. Social justice requires promoting non-discriminatory practices and the empowerment of families and communities. School psychologists enact social justice through culturally-responsive professional practice and advocacy to create schools, communities, and systems that ensure equity and fairness for all children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

**Why it's important.** NASP is committed to advocating for the civil rights, well-being, educational and mental health needs of *all* students. This is accomplished by ensuring that all students are able to attend schools and live in communities that are safe, supportive, and free of bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence. NASP opposes efforts that seek to systematically discriminate against or segregate children or youth on the basis of actual or perceived characteristics, including race, ethnicity, color, religion, ancestry, age, national origin, immigration status, socioeconomic status, language, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, cognitive capabilities, social-emotional skills, developmental level, chronic illness, or any other personal identity or distinguishing characteristic. Unfortunately, systematic discriminatory policies and practices continue to exist. However, school psychologists can play a critical role in leading important conversations and actions necessary to achieve equity for all students.

**Your voice is critical to this advocacy.** The following talking points reflect NASP policy and best practice. They can be used for:

- Building an Understanding of Race and Privilege
- Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth
- Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Youth
- Addressing Disproportionality in Discipline and Ending the School to Prison Pipeline

**Select and adapt talking points to address your particular context.** Talking points are organized by each broad issue and may overlap. Depending on the context of your community, you may not need to engage in advocacy in all of these areas. Following the talking points are suggested specific 'asks' that you could make of your building principal, superintendent/school board, state/federal policy makers, and other audiences. Related NASP resources containing additional, more in-depth information are provided at the end of this document.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of social justice as adopted by the NASP Board of Directors, April, 2017

## Understanding Race and Privilege

**Key message: Racism and discrimination have severely negative mental health, academic and social consequences for students of color.**

- Discrimination based on race is associated with poorer school attendance, lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, and higher risk for suicide.
- Stereotypes often become self-fulfilling prophecies resulting in lower academic achievement and negative outcomes.
- Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be enrolled at a school that employs a law enforcement officer but not a school counselor or other mental health professional.
- Black students are four times as likely to be suspended than White students for similar behaviors
- Children of color experience greater chronic stress yet are significantly less likely to receive mental health care than their White peers

**Key message: Privilege and implicit bias often lead to educational inequity for students of color and students with disabilities.**

- Long-standing research findings have documented that students of color are disproportionately placed in special education and subsequently spend less time in the general education environment.
- Educational disparities are linked to minority/majority status and contribute to large-scale achievement gaps.
  - On average, Black students' test scores are roughly two grade levels lower than White students in the same district; Hispanic students are roughly 1.5 grade levels below their White peers
  - Students with disabilities have and continue to score lower than their non-disabled peers on state and national tests. Sixty-seven percent of students with disabilities graduate from high school compared to the national graduation rate of 84.6 percent.
- The effects of implicit bias are seen as early as the preschool years with Black students being suspended at much higher rates than White preschool students.
- Many students of color experience oppressions which are intensified when one accounts for how their race intersects with other identities they hold, such as socioeconomic status

**Key asks:**

- Develop policies to establish and maintain racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity among school personnel.
- Develop pedagogical curricula and approaches (e.g. culturally responsive teaching practices) to incorporate race and an understanding of privilege at the classroom, school, and district levels.

- Implement research-based programs that reduce racial achievement gaps.
- Implement research-based strategies that mitigate the effects of racism, prejudice, and discrimination and result in resilience and educational excellence (e.g. restorative practices).
- Promote ongoing evaluation of institutional policies that may unintentionally contribute to negative outcomes for certain groups of students
- Systematically evaluate student growth, grades, and test scores to ensure equity of educational access and achievement; implement interventions to address areas of disparity

## Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth

**Key message: LGBTQ+ youth experience significantly higher rates of harassment, bullying, and discrimination than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, which can lead to safety concerns and contribute to a host of negative academic and social-emotional outcomes.**

- Within schools, higher levels of victimization for LGBTQ+ youth are associated with poorer school attendance, lower grade point averages, fewer plans for postsecondary education, lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, greater substance abuse, and higher risk for suicide.
- When LGBTQ+ youth develop in positive school climates, which include various supports such as a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, comprehensive anti-bullying policies, and supportive educators, allies, and role models, they report greater physical and psychological safety and improved educational outcomes.
- Some LGBTQ+ youth experience family rejection, which may include abuse, exclusion, being forced to leave home, or efforts to change a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity, which is associated with higher risk for depression, self-injury, suicide and substance abuse.
- LGBTQ+ youth are highly affected by ever-changing shifts in social attitudes, public policies, and laws related to LGBTQ+ rights; especially youth living in communities that espouse more conservative religious, familial, and political values

**Key message: Efforts to exclude or discriminate against transgender and gender non-conforming youth are unnecessary and harmful.**

- Among LGBTQ+ students, transgender students face the highest levels of victimization and discrimination at school and are most likely to miss school or change schools because of safety concerns. Furthermore they are most likely to consider dropping out of school and encounter the highest rates of school discipline.
- Title IX of the Education Amendment Act of 1972 prohibits harassment of students on the basis of sex. Federal courts have affirmed that these discrimination protections apply to transgender youth and that schools have an obligation to affirm a student's gender identity and grant them access to programs and facilities on the basis of their affirmed gender identity, not their biological sex.

- Comprehensive anti-harassment policies that include protections for transgender and gender non-conforming students are helpful for all students because when one student feels unsafe, others question their own safety
- Dozens of courts over the last two decades have affirmed the full rights and identities of transgender people as well as their need for protection.

**Key message:** Conversion (or reparative) therapy is an unscientific, unproven and unethical practice that harms LGBTQ+ youth.

- Conversion therapy has been shown to worsen internalized homophobia, interrupt healthy identity development, increase depression, anxiety, self-hatred, and self-destructive behaviors, and create mistrust of mental health professionals.
- There is no valid or methodologically sound research that demonstrates sexual orientation change efforts are effective or beneficial to the person.
- Homosexuality is not a mental disorder, and thus, there is no need for a “cure.”
- Conversion therapy amplifies the shame and stigma that LGBTQ+ youth already experience.
- Parents may seek conversion therapy for children after witnessing the distress or mistreatment their child has experienced as a result of homo/transphobic commentary or action which can lead to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity. It is therefore necessary for school psychologists to inform parents of the dangers of conversion therapy and assist them in finding evidenced-based mental health supports.

**Key asks:**

- Develop and implement comprehensive anti-bullying, harassment, and discrimination policies that specifically protect individuals based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Provide ongoing professional learning opportunities to educate school personnel about LGBTQ+ issues, to know how to recognize and intervene when LGBTQ+ related harassment and bullying occur, and to develop skills and strategies to serve as supportive allies.
- Implement policies that allow for GSAs on school campuses which are mandated under the Equal Access Act
- Support efforts to create a supportive school environment, including developing inclusive curricula in which appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBTQ+ people, history, and events are included, and creating gender neutral spaces, safe zones, and the ability for them to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity.
- Any effort to redefine sex under Title IX as solely irrevocably male or female at birth should be opposed.
- Conversion therapy should be banned in all 50 states.

## Addressing Disproportionality in Discipline and Ending the School to Prison Pipeline

- Students of color, and students with disabilities, are disproportionately represented in exclusionary discipline consequences, such as suspension, expulsion and referral to law enforcement. Such discipline in turn is associated with student dropout and entry into the prison system.
  - During the 2015–16 school year, black students represented 15 percent of the total student enrollment, and 31 percent of students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested – a 16 percentage point disparity.
  - Students with disabilities (IDEA) represented 12 percent of the overall student enrollment and 28 percent of students referred to law enforcement or arrested.
- Out-of-classroom suspension, which has proven to be ineffective in achieving behavioral change or stronger educational outcomes, was given to 2.7 million K-12 students in the 2015-2016 school year. Over 120,000 students received expulsions.
  - Being suspended or expelled from school increases the likelihood of being arrested in that same month
- Zero tolerance policies are ineffective and have not been proven to reduce violence or promote learning, and negatively impact a disproportionately large number of minority students
- Positive approaches to discipline, including positive behavioral interventions and supports and restorative justice techniques, have been proven to address students' misbehavior effectively

### Key asks:

- Develop policies that seek to end the use of harmful and ineffective exclusionary discipline practices.
- Promote the implementation of effective and positive discipline practices (e.g., PBIS, restorative practices).
- Support policies that hold schools and districts accountable for addressing disproportionality in discipline (e.g., disaggregating discipline data by race/ethnicity and disability status).
- Create MOUs that clearly outline the appropriate role of SROs and other school based law enforcement and explicitly prohibit their involvement in discipline.