

BUILDING CULTURALLY AFFIRMING SCHOOLS

A COMMUNITY ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

Compiled by Teach Plus Pennsylvania Policy Fellows



We see you.
We hear you.
You matter.

Image courtesy of We Need Diverse Books



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WHAT ARE CULTURALLY AFFIRMING SCHOOLS?

Culturally affirming schools are schools where all students – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity markers – are welcomed, affirmed, and empowered to be their full and authentic selves. The Pennsylvania State Board of Education defines culturally relevant and sustaining education as “education that ensures equity for all students and seeks to eliminate systemic institutional racial and cultural barriers that inhibit the success of all students in this Commonwealth – particularly those who have been historically underrepresented.”¹ In a culturally affirming school, every student consistently receives the message:

We see you. We hear you. You matter.

For the purposes of this toolkit, we have identified four keys to culturally affirming schools:

- Students of all backgrounds see themselves and their cultures reflected in **curriculum and instructional materials**.
- Students of all backgrounds have access to **educators who look like them**.
- Educators are trained to be trauma-informed and culturally relevant and sustaining, creating **equitable and affirming classroom environments** for all students.
- **School policies** promote welcoming, inclusive, and bias-free spaces for all students.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

The purpose of this toolkit is to give students, parents, and community members tools for co-creating and reimagining what culturally affirming spaces look like within your schools. At this moment, the rights of students and teachers, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, are under attack: lawmakers across the country and in Pennsylvania have proposed book bans, limits on teaching accurate history, and attacks on LGBT students. At a time of highly coordinated, often racially coded, public backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, your voice matters. It is critical that community members who support culturally affirming schools are empowered to mobilize and advocate for equitable policies and practices at the local level. We hope this toolkit provides you with tools, resources, and information to bring to your own communities and schools to build affirming school environments for all students.

This toolkit is organized around the four keys above. For each key, you will find resources to help you understand why this key matters, how your district is currently doing, and how you can advocate for change.

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KEY #1

INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The Need

All students, regardless of their background, deserve to see themselves and their cultures reflected in school curriculum and instructional materials. But currently, that is not the case for all students, particularly students of color and those from other marginalized backgrounds:

- Half of all children's book protagonists are white, with animals represented as protagonists more frequently than protagonists of color.²
- Legislators in Pennsylvania and across the country have proposed bills that would ban teaching of accurate racial history³ and prevent students from accessing books or instruction related to LGBT issues.⁴
- Most districts do not consider issues of diversity and representation when making decisions about curriculum adoption.

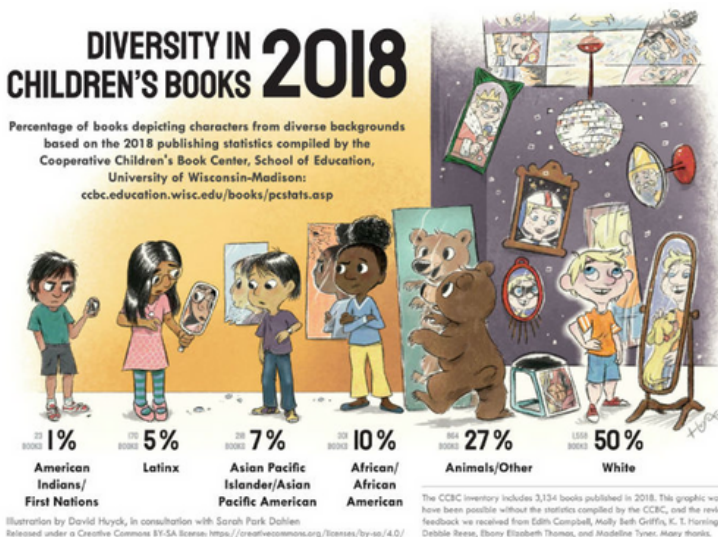


Image courtesy of David Huyck⁵

Evaluate Your District

[NYU Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards](#)

These resources were created by New York City parents, students, teachers and researchers. The curriculum scorecards were designed to help parents, students and teachers examine and offer improvements to the curriculum used by their respective school districts. With the English Language Arts and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) scorecards, you can evaluate curriculum on your own using rubrics and guiding questions, then use the results to advocate to district and school leaders for more culturally responsive curricular materials.⁶

[Reflection Guide for Culturally Responsive Curricula](#)

This resource from New America is designed to help educators and community members become better consumers of curricular resources. It is a more open-ended tool for evaluating curriculum.



Image courtesy of We Need Diverse Books

REPRESENTATION

STATEMENTS	Very Satisfied (2)	Satisfied (1)	Unclear (-1)	Not Satisfied (-2)	GROUP AVERAGE SCORE
1 The curriculum centers the origins of science, technology, engineering, arts and/or math within BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, people of color).					
2 The curriculum elevates mathematicians, artists, and/or scientists with historically marginalized identities (i.e. non-binary or trans people, women, people of color, people with disabilities, working class people, multilingual people) and their discoveries.					
3 The curriculum acknowledges and/or incorporates the expertise of diverse communities, their cultures, and their historical and/or contemporary experiences.					
4 The curriculum has photos/pictures, names, scenarios, and text that reflect the experiences and interests of students of color in your community.					
5 The curriculum elevates not just "scientists, artists, and mathematicians", but the everyday users of math, science, arts, technology, and engineering.					
6 The curriculum affirms the multiple forms of communication or language systems during mathematical and scientific argumentation rooted in historically marginalized cultures.					
TOTAL					
TOTAL REPRESENTATION SCORE					

Excerpt from the STEAM curriculum scorecard from NYU

Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard

Representation

Diversity of Characters Tally

	Girl/Woman	Boy/Man	Non Binary	Total
Middle Eastern				
Asian/ Pacific Islander				
Black/ African				
Latinx				
Native American				
White				
Racially Ambiguous				
Multiracial				
People with Disabilities				
Animals				

Total # of characters depicted : _____

Excerpt from the ELA curriculum scorecard from NYU

Take Action

Letter to District Leaders: Personalize this letter to send to district leaders (e.g., superintendent and school board members) asking them to prioritize culturally inclusive curriculum and books. This could also be developed into an online petition, a sign-on letter for parents to add their names to, or a speech to be used during the public comment portion of a school board meeting.

We Need Diverse Books: This website contains resources for students, parents, and teachers who want to see more diverse books in schools and homes. It contains suggested book lists, advocacy tools, and opportunities for funding.

KEY #2

DIVERSE EDUCATORS

The Need

All students in Pennsylvania deserve access to educators who look like them and share their backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Research has shown that educators of color benefit all students, but the effects for students of color can be truly life-changing: having access to teachers of color is associated with higher academic achievement, higher graduation and college enrollment rates, higher college graduation rates, and lower suspension rates.⁷

But in Pennsylvania, only 6% of teachers are people of color, compared to 36% of students. 50% of all public schools and 37% of all school districts employ zero teachers of color. Male teachers of color are particularly underrepresented: only 1.5% of Pennsylvania teacher workforce are men of color.⁸

And without action, the problem is likely to get worse, with large declines in enrollment of Black students in teacher preparation programs⁹ and lower retention rates for teachers of color compared to white teachers.¹⁰

Evaluate Your District

Find Local Teacher Diversity Data: Research for Action has compiled teacher diversity data for every school, district, and county in Pennsylvania over the past eight years. Download the most recent spreadsheet and find the current demographics of the teacher workforce in your local area.¹¹

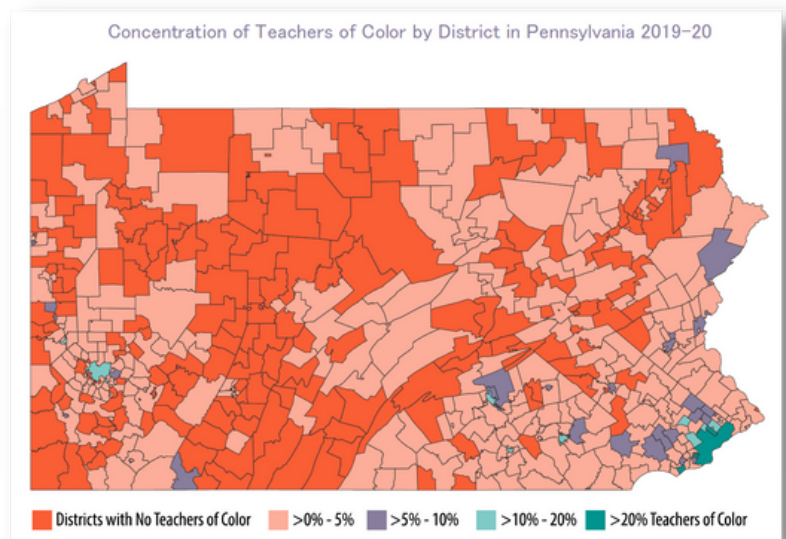
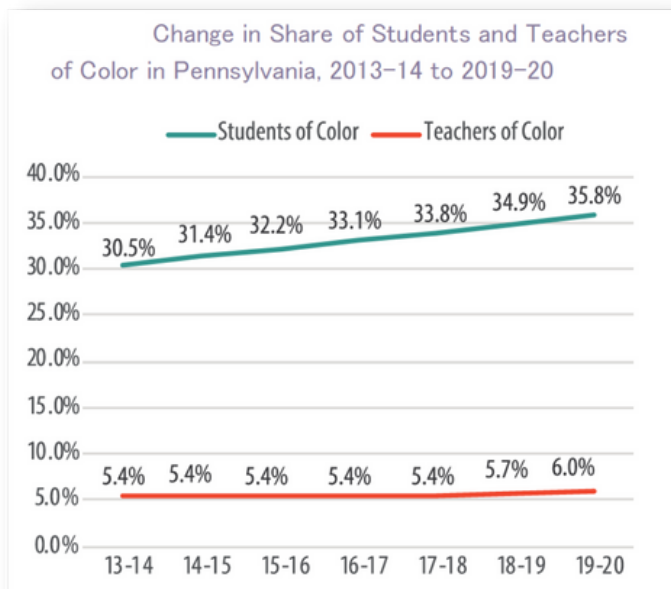


Image courtesy of Research for Action

Image courtesy of Research for Action



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Take Action

[Save the Educator Pipeline Email to Legislators:](#)

Use this easy email tool from Teach Plus to email your state legislators to ask them to make investments and pass bills such as SB 99 that would diversify the teacher workforce.

[Expanding & Diversifying the Teacher Pipeline](#)

[Social Media Toolkit:](#) Use this toolkit, made by Teach Plus policy fellows, to post on social media about the need for a diverse educator workforce, raise awareness, and engage your network in advocacy.

[Letter to District Leaders:](#) Personalize this letter to send to district leaders (e.g., superintendent and school board members) encouraging them to invest in a diverse teacher workforce. This could also be developed into an online petition, a sign-on letter for parents to add their names to, or a speech to be used during the public comment portion of a school board meeting.



TOP 5 REASONS TEACHERS OF COLOR ARE IMPORTANT



- 1 Students have **improved engagement, achievement, graduation rates and college attendance rates**
- 2 Teachers of color **are less likely to perceive the behavior of students of color as disruptive**
- 3 Having just 1 black teacher in 3rd, 4th or 5th grade **reduced low-income black boys' probability of dropping out of high school by 39%**
- 4 When students had teachers of the same race, they **"felt more cared for, were more interested in their schoolwork, and were more confident in their teachers' abilities to communicate with them."**
- 5 Greater diversity of teachers may **mitigate feelings of isolation, frustration and fatigue** that lead individual teachers of color to leave the profession.

A DIVERSE TEACHING STAFF IMPROVES OUTCOMES FOR ALL STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY STUDENTS OF COLOR

Image courtesy of Advancing Equity Coalition



**WE SEE YOU
WE HEAR YOU
YOU MATTER**

"Today I wore my Black History Month sweatshirt. I turned the corner to see a first grade student of color (there are few in my district) eyes wide open jumping up and down. We had on the same shirt." #representation matters - Lisa Phoenix Teach Plus PA Policy Fellow

KEY #3

EQUITABLE & AFFIRMING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

The Need

All students, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, deserve to learn in classrooms where their identities are affirmed, barriers to success are dismantled, and equitable opportunities are provided. Students who feel a sense of belonging at school have better academic & behavioral outcomes, attendance, graduation rates, and other life outcomes.¹² But students from marginalized groups, including students of color and LGBT students, are less likely to feel a sense of belonging in schools.^{13,14} Research has found that teachers have similar levels of racial bias as the general population, and that this bias correlates with differences in expectations, instruction, respect, and discipline for students of color, impacting achievement & engagement.¹⁵

Culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching practices have been found to facilitate brain processing, increase student motivation and engagement, cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, strengthen students' racial and ethnic identities, and promote a sense of safety and belonging.¹⁶ Pennsylvania has recently taken steps to require future educators be trained in culturally relevant and sustaining education, but most current educators have not received extensive training in creating equitable classroom environments.

Evaluate Your District

Psychological Sense of School Membership Survey: This survey is a widely recognized tool to measure students' sense of belonging in schools. This version of the survey, developed by Catalyst @ PennGSE, includes demographic questions that allow districts to determine racial and other disparities in sense of belonging, as well as open-ended questions that can help determine root causes. The tool is open source and can be used for free. Southeastern Pennsylvania districts can also join a **Catalyst Inquiry Community** to administer the survey and develop improvement plans to support a stronger sense of belonging for all students.

Pittsburgh RISE Rubric for Teacher Effectiveness, Strand 3G: This teacher evaluation rubric used by Pittsburgh Public Schools is an adaptation of the popular Danielson framework that adds a specific strand focused on teachers' ability to implement lessons equitably. While districts may not be able to easily add these indicators to formal teacher evaluations, the tool can be used for informal feedback and self-assessment, professional development and coaching, and development of a shared vocabulary.

1. I felt like a real part of [school name].
2. People notice when I am good at something.
3. Its hard for people like me to be accepted here.
4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. Most teachers at this school are interested in me.
6. Sometimes I don't feel as if I belong here.
7. There is at least one teacher or adult in this school that I can talk to if I have a problem.
8. People at this school are friendly to me.
9. Teachers here are not interested in people like me.
10. I am included in lots of activities at this school.
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12. I feel very different from most other students here.
13. I can really be myself at this school.
14. The teachers here respect me.
15. People here know I can do good work.
16. I wish I were in a different school.
17. I feel proud of belonging to [school name].
18. Other students here like me the way I am.

Response Options

1 - Never True

2 - Usually not true

3 - Sometimes true

4 - Often true

5 - Always true

Excerpt from the *Psychological Sense of School Membership*, courtesy of Catalyst @ Penn GSE

COMPONENT	UNSATISFACTORY	BASIC	PROFICIENT	DISTINGUISHED
<p>*3g: Implementing Lessons Equitably</p> <p>Elements: Acknowledging and Affirming Multiple Perspectives</p> <p>Enriching the Curriculum</p> <p>Fostering Efficacy and Advocacy</p> <p><i>Note: The language of this component is grounded in the belief that all students, regardless of race, culture or linguistic background are capable of achieving at high levels. We call out specifically the subgroups who have been historically underserved in our district.</i></p>	<p>The teacher rarely or never acknowledges or affirms the individual racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences and perspectives of students, specifically students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs).</p> <p>The teacher does not embed culturally relevant resources into the curriculum and presents students with a single, dominant perspective related to the topic of study. The teacher does not engage ELL students in the lesson.</p> <p>The teacher does not communicate or foster confidence in the ability of all students to achieve at high levels and/or fails to provide differentiated learning opportunities and supports to students.</p> <p>The teacher does not provide opportunities for students to communicate their behavioral and academic needs and/or the teacher responds inappropriately to student needs and requests.</p>	<p>The teacher occasionally acknowledges and affirms the individual racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences and perspectives of students, specifically students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs).</p> <p>The teacher makes limited attempts to embed culturally relevant resources into the curriculum and to engage all students (including ELLs) in multiple racial or cultural perspectives related to the topic of study.</p> <p>The teacher inconsistently communicates and fosters confidence in the ability of all students to achieve at high levels, but provides limited differentiated learning opportunities and supports to students.</p> <p>The teacher provides limited opportunities to identify and communicate their behavioral and academic needs and/or the teacher inconsistently responds to student needs and requests.</p>	<p>The teacher consistently acknowledges and affirms the individual racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences and perspectives of students, specifically students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs).</p> <p>The teacher regularly embeds a variety of culturally relevant resources into the curriculum and engages all students (including ELLs) in multiple racial or cultural perspectives related to the topic of study.</p> <p>The teacher demonstrates and fosters confidence in the ability of each student to achieve at high levels and actively supports their success through differentiated and/or tiered learning opportunities and supports.</p> <p>The teacher encourages students to identify and communicate their behavioral and academic needs and the teacher consistently responds to student needs and requests.</p>	<p>The teacher and students consistently acknowledge and affirm the individual racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences and perspectives within the class, specifically students of color and English Language Learners (ELLs).</p> <p>The teacher consistently embeds a variety of culturally relevant resources into the curriculum and engages all students (including ELLs) in multiple racial or cultural perspectives related to the topic of study. Students seek out multiple perspectives.</p> <p>The teacher and students demonstrate and foster a shared belief in the ability of all students to achieve at high levels and the classroom community actively supports one another's success, resulting in a differentiated learning process and support structure in the classroom.</p> <p>Students take on an active role in identifying and communicating their individual and collective needs (both behavioral and academic) and the teacher and students consistently respond to needs and requests of others.</p>

Excerpt from the *Pittsburgh RISE Rubric*, Courtesy of Pittsburgh Public Schools

Take Action

Letter to District Leaders: Personalize this letter to send to district leaders (e.g., superintendent and school board members) encouraging them to explicitly prioritize making classroom environments more equitable and affirming for all students, and to provide training for teachers to ensure they are culturally responsive and trauma-informed. This could also be developed into an online petition, a sign-on letter for parents to add their names to, or a speech to be used during the public comment portion of a school board meeting.

Resources for Teacher Professional Development

Culturally Responsive & Relevant Practices

Culturally responsive practices in schools and classrooms have been shown to be an effective means of addressing the achievement gap as well as the disproportionate representation of racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students in programs serving students with special needs. Pennsylvania is taking steps toward requiring that future educators be trained in culturally relevant and sustaining education, but current educators may lack training and districts may not currently emphasize these practices.

- **The Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies:** These draft competencies, developed by the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium, define what it means to be a culturally relevant and sustaining educator in Pennsylvania and serve as a framework for teacher reflection and development.
- **Culturally Responsive Teaching Guide:** This resource from New America seeks to answer the question: What does a culturally responsive school look like?

Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma-informed teaching considers the influence and impact of trauma—caused by factors including but not limited to racism, community violence, peer victimization, bullying and poverty—on students in classrooms. Trauma-informed teachers proactively and responsively take steps in their classroom to meet the needs of students impacted by traumatic stress and create a sense of safety and belonging. The emphasis is not on “fixing” students but on fixing systems and practices that do not serve all students well.

- **Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development:** This resource from the Wisconsin Department of Education offers professional development centered around trauma informed educational practices for teachers and information for parents.
- **Creating Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms:** This resource from NAEYC is helpful in thinking about what trauma may look like within a young child as well as tools for both teachers and parents.

General Equitable Practices

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) defines equity as “every student having access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, family background and/or family income.”

- **Equitable Practices Hub:** This resource from PDE contains resources for educators on topics such as academic equity, discipline equity, and family/community engagement.
- **PDE SAS Professional Developments:** Pennsylvania teachers can access free professional developments through PDE centered around equity and cultural proficiency, such as Equitable Education for All Students: Why Leadership Matters, Self-Awareness and Reflective Practices for Equitable Classrooms, Educators as Systems Change Agents.

KEY #4

EQUITABLE SCHOOL POLICIES

The Need

All students in Pennsylvania deserve to attend schools where they know they will be treated fairly, regardless of race, ethnicity, or disability. However, the reality in Pennsylvania is that there are broad racial and other disparities in school discipline and access to advanced coursework, among others, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline for marginalized students, especially students of color and students with disabilities.

For example, in Pennsylvania:

- Black students are three times more likely to be expelled than their White peers.
- Students with disabilities receive out-of-school suspension twice as often as those without them.
- Black male students receive out of out-of-school suspensions six times more often than all other students combined.
- Black female students are five times more likely to be arrested than their White peers.¹⁷

According to the Pennsylvania Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “these disparities are the result of different treatment, not different student behavior.” A different report from Education Trust focusing on access to advanced coursework found:

“Pennsylvania is at or near the bottom of all states for access to advanced coursework opportunities at every level (gifted and talented, eighth grade Algebra I, and AP) for both Black and Latino students. In fact, Pennsylvania is worst in the country when it comes to giving Black students access to gifted and talented programs and Latino students access to AP courses.”¹⁸

While some of these disparities are connected to state policies and inter-district disparities in funding, policies, and opportunities, many of these same disparities also appear at the district and school level, suggesting that current school and district policies are inequitable for students of color and other marginalized students.

“These disparities are the result of different treatment, not different student behavior.”

Evaluate Your District

[U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data](#)

Collection: Using this tool from the U.S. Department of Education, identify racial disparities in a variety of different school outcomes. To begin, search by your school or district name.

- **Identify racial disparities in school discipline:** Select the “Discipline, Restraints/Seclusion, Harassment/Bullying” section to see data on suspensions and expulsions broken down by race/ethnicity.
- **Identify racial disparities in access to advanced coursework:** Select the “College and Career Readiness” section to see data on enrollment in advanced courses and SAT/ACT broken down by race/ethnicity.
- **Identify racial disparities in access to other opportunities:** Select the “Pathways to College and Career Readiness” section to see data on preschool enrollment, gifted and talented enrollment, algebra I enrollment, and student retention broken down by race/ethnicity.



Advocate for

EQUITY

Take Action

[Letter to District Leaders:](#) Personalize this letter to send to district leaders (e.g., superintendent and school board members) encouraging them to adopt equitable school policies. This could also be developed into an online petition, a sign-on letter for parents to add their names to, or a speech to be used during the public comment portion of a school board meeting.

[Black Lives Matter at School:](#) This national organization advocates for racial equity in school policies, including ending zero tolerance, implementing restorative justice, hiring more Black teachers, mandating Black history and ethnic studies courses, and funding counselors rather than school police. They offer resources, including [curriculum](#) and a [starter kit](#) for launching a Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action at your school.

[Restorative Practices/Justice Resources](#)

Restorative practices, also sometimes referred to as restorative justice, are an approach to addressing student behavior and school discipline not from a punitive standpoint that reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline, but from a community-oriented and relationship-driven standpoint that focuses on building community, repairing harm, and teaching students productive ways to engage with others.

- **[Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh:](#)** The University of Pittsburgh Center on Race and Social Problems offers an extensive toolkit on alternatives to exclusionary practices, including restorative practices.
- **[International Institute for Restorative Practices:](#)** This Institute provides training and resources for schools and educators on implementing restorative practices.

ADDITIONAL TACTICS

GENERAL ADVOCACY TOOLS & TIPS

Have other issues you're concerned about in your school or community?

Want to go beyond the steps provided in this toolkit? Here are some additional ways you can make your voice heard:

- **Speak at a school board meeting:** All Pennsylvania boards of education are required by law to allow for public comment at public board meetings. Many boards require that you sign up in advance and limit your comments to two to three minutes. You are allowed to read from notes or speak from the heart!
- **Meet with your principal or superintendent:** As a student, parent, or community member, you are entitled to request a meeting with school and district leaders to express your concerns. Reach out by email to request a meeting, and follow up by phone and email if you don't receive a response. You can also come to the school or district office and request a meeting.
- **Write an op-ed or letter to the editor:** Most local newspapers have processes for accepting op-ed and letter to the editor submissions. Op-eds should be 600-800 words, while letters to the editor should be under 200. Need more guidance? Check out [How to Write a Letter to the Editor](#) (Education Voters PA) and [Op-Ed Development and Submission Guidelines](#) (Teach Plus).
- **Mobilize other students, parents, and/or community members:** There's strength in

numbers. Talk to like-minded friends, family, classmates, or neighbors and ask them to get involved. Organize a house party, letter-writing campaign, petition, or other group action.

- **Leverage social media:** Mobilize your network and the broader public online! Tweet at or tag your district leaders, use hashtags to get attention, and share data and stories to raise awareness about equity issues. Need more guidance? Check out [Social Media Advocacy Best Practices](#) (Teach Plus) and [Using Social Media](#) (Education Voters PA).
- **Hold a protest, rally, or press conference:** Raise public pressure and engage the media with a large public event! You'll want a team to support you with this.
- **Contact local legislators:** Write, email, call, tweet at, or schedule a meeting with your local legislators to let them know about your concerns in your district. You can find all their contact information at [Find Your Legislator](#). Need more guidance? Check out [How to Call Your Legislators](#) (Education Voters PA) and [Writing a Letter to your Legislators Tips Sheet](#) (Chicago Bar Foundation).

However you engage, remember that your voice is needed, your perspective is important, you have more power than you realize, and we can't give up.

*We see you. We hear you. You matter.
You make a difference.*

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. www.teachplus.org