RACIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION
A PRELIMINARY VIEW FROM NEA STATE AFFILIATES
**NEA Officers**
Lily Eskelsen García, President
Becky Pringle, Vice President
Princess Moss, Secretary-Treasurer

**NEA Executive Committee**
Eric R. Brown
Christine Sampson-Clark
Shelly Moore Krajacic
Robert Rodriguez
George Sheridan
Hanna Vaandering

**NEA Executive Director**
Kim A. Anderson

**NEA Racial Justice Leads**

*Lead NEA Officer*
Becky Pringle

*Executive Committee Leads*
Eric Brown & George Sheridan

*Staff Leads*
Rocio Inclán, Senior Director for the Center for Social Justice
Harry Lawson, Director, Human & Civil Rights
Merwyn Scott, Director, Community Advocacy & Partnership Engagement
Contents

4 | CONFRONTING RACISM IN EDUCATION
5 | AT A GLANCE
6 | STATE AFFILIATE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT
7 | STATE AFFILIATE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT
9 | STATE AFFILIATE INTEGRATION AND CULTURE CHANGE
11 | STATE AFFILIATE PARTNERSHIPS
13 | STAND AND BE A WITNESS
14 | NEA TOOLS AND RESOURCES
16 | COVID-19 AND OUR COMMUNITIES
18 | NEA STATE AND LOCAL AFFILIATES LEADING THE WAY

About this preliminary report:

This annual report provides a graphic representation of the racial justice work that NEA and Affiliates accomplished from August 2019 to May 2020. It looks at member engagement; affiliate technical assistance and support; internal integration and culture change; and partnerships.

The goal of this annual report is to: highlight the work of NEA and its affiliates in promoting racial justice in their classrooms, schools, communities and states, to serve as a resource for members looking to learn, grow and engage on racial justice issues; and to help us analyze progress towards advancing racial justice in education.
GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS, COUPLED WITH NATION’S FORCED RECKONING ON RACE, PEELS BACK GLARING RACIAL INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION

This year, COVID-19 laid bare a truth with which educators are all too familiar: When a crisis strikes, students of color, Native American students, immigrants, their families and the LGBTQ community are hit hardest. The pandemic threw into stark relief the inequities and bias that have historically beset vulnerable students and communities.

To be sure, no community has been spared the ravages of COVID-19, regardless of income, status, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Equally true is that the virus has taken a far greater toll on individuals with fewer resources, individuals from forgotten communities.

Story after story has shone a light on employment, food and housing insecurity. We are witnessing the harsh consequences of limited access to health care, childcare, living space, technology and internet service, a particularly glaring fault line when schools, colleges and universities nationwide switched to virtual instruction. English language learners face the additional burden of navigating an online education landscape in a foreign language.

Just as the U.S. began to emerge from the home-bound quarantine caused by the coronavirus, Americans nationwide were shocked by the brutal murder of George Floyd. Sadly, we were not surprised. Rather, Floyd’s murder was a reminder of an understanding we reached at NEA a few years ago. It was that our work could not be successful until we faced and acknowledged the reality that racial and social justice was still a dream denied in the U.S.

These are some of the existing inequities worsened by the pandemic, and which the nation is being forced to acknowledge along with the ongoing pandemic of systemic racism:

• Lack of internet access is pushing disadvantaged students further behind.
• Shuttered schools and libraries have widened the homework gap for millions of students.
• Children are experiencing food insecurity, even with the heroic efforts of educators who transformed public schools into community food banks overnight.
• DACA students and DAC educators have had their futures upended. They are unable to renew their work and study authorizations, because federal immigration offices are closed.

• Chinese Americans, and other Asian Americans perceived as being from this community, are subjected to slurs, harassment and even physical assaults because of COVID-19’s origins.

Against this backdrop of disheartening stories, I am reminded of why our mission to provide all students with great schools that are free of bias and discrimination must be at the forefront of what we do and who we are.

As I look toward the future of our nation—the thousands upon thousands of acts of love and concern that educators perform for their students every day—I am filled with hope, courage and awe. As I look at the way people spilled into the streets to ensure that Black Lives Matter becomes more than a phrase, but becomes infused into our nation’s way of life, I am proud that NEA members voted five years ago to dedicate ourselves to the cause of advancing racial justice in education.

It has not been easy. Yet, we have not shrunk from the challenging work of looking at our own personal biases and, with that self-knowledge, engaging in the work of addressing the racial and social inequities in public education.

As I look forward to the day when schools reopen and we are reunited with our students and colleagues, I am filled with hope. It is an optimism grounded in my experience with countless educators who act every day on the belief that in order for public education to be the great equalizer, we must give all students a sense of belonging and the resources and opportunities to thrive.

My hope also comes from the knowledge that our association and the educators who guide it – even before COVID-19 – have always gone to extraordinary lengths to keep students well and safe; it’s in our DNA. The coronavirus tested us in ways we could not imagine, but we have been tested before. Our response this time, like every other time, was one of courage, compassion and ingenuity to create a sense of normalcy for our students, their families and our communities.

Our future is in good hands.

Lily Eskelsen García
NEA President
Members in **all 50 states** have been engaged in racial and social advocacy through NEAEducation.org.

22 states (59%) use the NEA Conference on Racial and Social Justice to support their racial justice and equity work.

37 states responded to NEA survey (to date) on engaging in racial justice/equity work.

16 states (43%) have assigned or hired someone to advance social and racial justice work.
“In what ways have you engaged your membership to build awareness, capacity and/or inspire action on racial justice and equity?”

### TOP 8 WAYS AFFILIATES HAVE ENGAGED MEMBERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Activity Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81%</td>
<td>Racial Justice/Equity training for members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81%</td>
<td>Identified and engaged members of color/leaders of color in race equity work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69%</td>
<td>Developing, supporting and training a network of local leaders on racial justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Targeted and intentional engagement with white members/leaders in race equity work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Developed and disseminated content on RJE/Equity principles – via conference programming, tool development, member education programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>Implicit Bias training for members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Developed/Engaged members in issue advocacy of some kind (legal advocacy, policy advocacy, developed an online petition or action drive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Engaged communities and/or students of color in race equity work of the Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“In what ways are you partnering with members, leaders and local affiliates to advance racial justice and equity?”

83% Working with local affiliates to continue educating and raising awareness of the effects of institutional and systemic racism

75% Racial Justice training for state leaders

73% Racial Justice training for local leaders

35% Leveraged the bargaining process to advance racially equitable, student-centered policy/initiatives (restorative practices, professional development, student supports)

50% Created and/or supported funding allocations for racial justice work, such as a grant program

50% Equity training for state leaders

55% Equity training for local leaders

65% Developing and/or leveraging state level partnerships to support the engagement of members, families/parents and communities in advancing a student-centered agenda on racial justice

40% Implicit Bias training for state leaders

55% Implicit Bias training for local leaders
"The pandemic has created an opportunity for TSTA, our locals and our members to work on the frontlines of the equity challenges that have been brought into focus by COVID-19. Communities of color are clearly more at risk on multiple levels in this crisis, and educators and education employees are stepping up across the board to try to mitigate and, eventually, begin to roll back the disparities."

– Texas State Teachers Association

"Not just looking at this as a reopening, but instead looking at this time as an opportunity to transform our schools to be better meet the needs of all students especially students of color and those students living in poverty. We are advocating for educators and key community partners to have a seat at the table as reopening is discussed. We are putting together a work group to examine and offer legislative, regulation, training/education, and bargaining remedies for school health and safety, curriculum and PD, teacher prep and recruitment, and other key areas."

– Maryland State Education Association
“In what ways have you attempted to integrate a racial justice framework throughout your affiliate during the past fiscal year?”

"Equity work is incredibly important and integral to our work as a state affiliate. We have permanently cemented equity work into everything we do in Colorado."
- Colorado Education Association

"We have found it is more important than ever to make sure our communications are expansive in reach and clear in message."
- Nebraska State Education Association
### Ways states are integrating a racial justice framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated and Ongoing Equity Training for Leadership</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated Budget to Racial Justice/Equity Work</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated and Ongoing Equity Training for Staff</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Changes (dedicated position to lead racial justice work)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring/Employment Practices</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Equity Impact Assessment(s)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"AEA took significant steps this fiscal year to begin a journey for the state affiliate. We have adopted strategic objectives focused on race and social justice. We have made deliberate statements to our members on BlackLivesMatters, DACA, equality and calling out racism in our state."

- Arizona Education Association

"There is a need for our own organization to hold a mirror to itself and examine our past complicity in the system racism and consider ways in which we need to change in order to truly support and uphold anti-racist practices."

- Education Minnesota
“What partners and partnerships have you initiated or is the affiliate involved in that are explicitly focused on racial justice/equity?”

- Racial Justice/Equity Focused Organizations: 73%
- State Education Advocacy Groups: 59%
- Organizations Serving Specific Racial Identity groups: 57%
- Parent/Family Organizations: 46%
- State Governmental Agencies: 43%
- School Board(s): 43%
- Faith-Based Organizations: 35%
- Joint Labor-Management Organizations: 24%
- Local Governmental Agencies: 16%
“Many of us across Santa Clara are concerned about the attacks on public education—but we weren't coordinating. The CAPE grant has helped provide us with a space to bring different constituencies together. Now we have parents, educators, district leaders, and community organizations working together to fight for the schools our students deserve.”
– Evergreen Teachers Association President and Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) Silicon Valley Co-Founder Brian Wheatley

“The NEA CAPE Grants have allowed Rainier Educators of Color Network to do what our members have asked us do in addressing the needs of our educators of color and community. We are building relationships with members, students, parents and our community through listening sessions, providing professional development, and ongoing mentor training.”
– Renton Education Support Professionals President and Rainier Educators of Color Network Co-Founder Janie White
STAND AND BE A WITNESS

When it comes to education justice, educators are tired of hearing the same tired excuses and misguided explanations.

"Wait for the economy to get back on track," they tell us.

"We share your concern, but now is not the time to press your demands," they say.

"By pushing and being so outspoken and confrontational, you're going to alienate the very people you need to succeed," they caution.

"Once things get back to normal, people will be more willing to make the changes you want," they advise.

Asking students to do without for another month, another semester, another year while adults minimize, ignore or outright dismiss unacceptable conditions is simply unjust.

We cannot—we will not—put off for one second creating schools that serve the needs of students who because of their race, ethnicity, skin color, sexual orientation, immigration status or language have been ignored and subjected to educational neglect. The time for blue ribbon committees, reports, studies, convenings, and proposals is over. Now is the time to address the systemic inequities that beset our most vulnerable students.

I'm reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s reply to white moderates who urged him to postpone any direct action. In his 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King wrote, “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’"

To those who would have us wait for a more opportune time, I challenge their unwillingness to demand change now. Dr. King understood this fundamental truth: “the time is always right to do what is right.”

We know what works and what doesn't. We know that schools, like any societal system and institution, are resistant to change. We know that students of color, and the communities where they live, are disproportionately affected when there is a public crisis or an economic downturn. COVID-19 made that harsh reality painfully clear along with the fact that educators and schools play a central role in students’ lives.

The vulnerability of people of color became even more apparent when the vicious, videotaped killing of George Floyd placed him among the ranks of Black people who have been murdered by police. Floyd's death, and the anger and sorrow that poured onto the streets, have made it impossible for this nation to continue to ignore racial and social justice.

Just as educators didn't need a pandemic to know that far too many Black, Latino, and Native students lack internet service, reliable access to healthy food, computers at home. We also know that these students and their families face daily disparities that can block a true shot at the American Dream or mean they don't get home safely after an encounter with police.

We must strive every day to make our schools and classrooms into spaces where all our students feel valued, feel safe, and can see themselves, their culture and their contributions accurately portrayed in the books, curriculum, lesson plans and learning resources that we use.

So, to those who advise us to be patient while the nation regains its footing, we say our advocacy for education justice began long before COVID-19. It began long before George Floyd was strangled to death by a police officer who casually kept his hand in his pocket as if he was searching for change rather than using his knee to end a man's life.

The need for strong, persistent and determined action to stop the cuts to education and social services that some elected leaders are proposing as way to pay for COVID-related costs is greater than ever. The changes we seek in our nation begin with maintaining the strength of our public schools.

If people outside public education learned anything about educators during the pandemic—when the world witnessed us change how we deliver education and meet student needs on a dime—it’s that we will go to extraordinary lengths to do what is best for our students.

As we look toward the future, and our responsibility to ensure our students are prepared to participate in the struggle for change, and build a future that works for all, we know now—more than ever—that we cannot wait. Dr. King is right. Now is not the time to give in to “the paralyzing chains of conformity.” Now is the time to stand up for racial, social, and education justice.

Becky Pringle
NEA Vice President
## NEA Tools and Resources

### Top 12 tools and resources affiliates use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Tool/Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Racial Justice Training(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>NEAEdJustice.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Center for Great Public Schools Grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Conference on Racial and Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Human and Civil Rights Professional Development (Cultural Competence, Diversity, Social Justice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Racial Justice in Education Resource Guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Implicit Bias Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Restorative Justice Practices/Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43%</td>
<td>EdCommunities Racial Justice in Education Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38%</td>
<td>Bargaining for the Common Good Resources/Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>CAPE Grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>CAPE (Community Advocacy and Partnership Engagement) Community Outreach and Engagement Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over 40,000 new people joined the NEA Ed Justice community in the last year, growing the reach of the NEA Center for Social Justice by a third.

In addition to accessing timely resources and engagement opportunities:

Over 20,000 individuals in took action via an issue pledge.

Of those 20,000, 30% have also taken an additional action, including:

> Hundreds of live patch through calls
> Over 2,000 digital actions
> Over 2,000 legislative advocacy actions
The systemic inequities that are laid bare by COVID-19 increase the stressors on our students, our families and the most vulnerable in our communities. As we organize together for a better tomorrow, we are sharing ways that educators and allies are addressing the challenges and keeping us connected and caring for each other.
COVID-19 AND OUR COMMUNITIES
NEA STATE AND LOCAL AFFILIATES LEADING THE WAY
If you had to pick 10 states in which the leading educator-led organization was tackling racial and social justice in all facets of its operations, Nebraska in all likelihood wouldn’t come to mind.

Nebraska, after all, is 82 percent white. Ninety-four percent of its public school teachers are white. But it is also home to four federally recognized Native American tribes. Hispanics account for more than 11 percent of the state’s residents, and African Americans, 5 percent.

In the state’s public schools, Hispanics, blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans and other non-whites account for 33 percent of the students. In the 2018-19 school year, more than 62,000 Hispanics were enrolled in K-12 schools, an increase of 13 percent from 2014-15.

The numbers tell only part of the story though. In Schuyler, for example, situated in the southeast corner of the state, 72 percent of the town’s residents are Latino. Lexington, located along U.S. Route 30 and the Union Pacific Railroad, has a population that is 62 percent Latino. Forty-eight percent of South Sioux City’s 13,000 residents are Hispanic.

“I think people would be very surprised at the diversity in our state,” said Jenni Benson, who was a special education teacher in Lincoln and is now president of the Nebraska State Education Association. “In the high school my kids graduated from, there are probably 50 to 60 languages spoken there now.” Lincoln, prior to the Trump administration, was a “huge” refugee resettlement destination, she said.

This dramatic growth has been accompanied at times by high profile incidents that have surfaced racial tension.

In early June, in a meeting in Omaha with African American pastors and community leaders to discuss the fatal shooting of a black man by a white bar owner during the George Floyd protests, Gov. Pete Ricketts used the phrase “The problem I have with you people.”

U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse was roundly condemned in May for a high school graduation speech in which he blamed “the thugs in China” for the coronavirus pandemic, joked about students’ fitness and ridiculed psychologists.

In February, a group of white fans at a Fremont High School girls’ basketball game directed racist remarks at a visiting team with several African American players. One student struck another after the game.

That same month, Native American parents spoke out after their children were subjected to racial taunts during a high school basketball tournament in Enid. The student section of one school targeted the players’ Native American heritage.

“The (NSEA) members felt that we really needed a social justice lens on everything we were doing.”

– Madde Fennell
Benson, who started organizing multicultural training in the Lincoln school district 15 years ago, knows the challenges and tensions that accompany the growth of various cultures and racial groups into homogeneous cities and towns. As NSEA president, she asks herself time and again, “How do we work within our association and within our education system to help communities and to help our members to embrace diversity and to look within themselves?”

The place to start, she and her leadership team reasoned, was NSEA’s strategic plan, the document that drives the association’s budget, policies, hiring, training, professional and leadership development, conferences, governance, committees and political and legislative advocacy.

“As an association, we really didn’t start this work until we looked at our strategic plan five years ago,” she said. The plan was developed with feedback from focus groups and months long, structured listening tours with various member constituencies and members in locals and districts across the state. The plan, which was last updated in 1993, was adopted by the association’s board of directors and delegate assembly in 2018. The board of directors and staff worked for a year afterward developing the tactics to accomplish the strategic goals.

Maddie Fennell, a teacher and former NSEA board member, said, “Jenni and I were both committed to the strategic planning process, to what members said they wanted to be the pillars of our association. And social justice was the one that came out early and loud.

“They (NSEA) members felt that we really needed a social justice lens on everything we were doing. We have serious social and racial justice issues in the state, and we knew we had to take that on,” said Fennell, who has been NSEA’s executive director since 2017.

Benson and Fennell pointed out NSEA leaders, members and staff have been methodical in reframing the association’s operational focus. “What’s even more interesting,” said Fennell, “is that we have done it in a deeply red and deeply conservative state.”

At the end of the process, said Benson, “We were very, very happy that our members really embraced a culture of social justice with opportunities for all students.”

Tellingly, the first goal of the plan reads: “NSEA will advance a culture of social justice by improving educational opportunities for ALL students and building respect for the worth, dignity and equality of every individual in our diverse society.”

“It was intentional to put it first, because that goal infuses the others,” said Benson.
across the street from the state Capitol in Omaha, NSEA represents 28,000 public school teachers, higher education faculty and other education professionals. Like other NEA state affiliates that have undertaken racial justice as a priority, it has partnered with outside experts, organizations and NEA to reshape its culture through a process that is often challenging and in which change is hard won.

“You have to make people a little uncomfortable, and our members have been doing a good job of making us uncomfortable and calling us to task. But rather than seeing it as ‘Let’s hunker down and defend,’ we’ve been more of ‘Let’s listen and do better,’” said Fennell.

Benson views the focus as a long-term organizational commitment that is not contingent upon any leader or group of leaders, but rather integrated throughout the organization’s operational structures and budget. “NSEA’s racial and social justice work is a journey we are committed to continuing with the support of our leaders and members across Nebraska.”

Benson likewise acknowledged the importance of patience and clear goals developed through listening to members and engaging leaders.

“I had one retiring board member who stood up at our board training and said, ‘You know, I was very opposed to this diversity stuff. But I have made such a journey in myself, that I am so happy the association is taking this on,’ ” recalled Benson. “It was perfect. To hear him say that and know that that is happening in increments across the state in people’s minds was very good for me and for the board.”

But what of the teacher who feels that with all the other classroom demands and mandates, she doesn’t have the time to learn and integrate a social justice framework?

“It’s about helping them understand that social and racial justice is not another layer,” said Fennell. “It’s a lens to see your kids better and hopefully address them and their needs better. because you’re approaching them from a different point of view.”

NJEA PUTS EMPHASIS ON CREATING ANTI-RACIST STRUCTURE

“Failure is not an option.” That’s how longtime special education teacher Marie Blistan describes the racial and social justice focus the New Jersey Education Association has been introducing into every corner of its organization.

Blistan, in her second term as NJEA president, made the remark after returning from a protest in honor of George Floyd, the African American man from Minneapolis whose death at the hands of police has sparked a global uprising against police brutality and racism.

“We are influencing children, all of us,” said Blistan, her voice rising. After a prolonged sigh, she continued, “What we’ve seen happen to Trayvon Martin and so many others is unacceptable. Kids look up to adults.”

New Jersey’s school system is the tenth
largest in the United States, serving 1.37 million students. While 84 percent of its teacher workforce is white, 57 percent of the state’s public school students are African American, Hispanic, Asian American and Native American -- despite research showing students of color in grades K-5 taught by at least one teacher of color have increased test scores and graduation rates.

The proportion of students of color in the public school system has been growing in large part due to Hispanics. Hispanics went from 14 percent of school population in 1998 to more than a quarter of it in 2016.

NJEA and its 203,000 members have long been respected as a powerhouse in the state’s capitol and at the bargaining table. It can mobilize member-driven political pressure efficiently, and elected officials and school administrators know to take it seriously.

Its clout notwithstanding, NJEA recognizes it has to improve how it’s perceived by its members of color.

Eric Jones, a teacher for 22 years, put a fine point on his distrust. “Social justice sounds good. It looks great on paper, but where is the money? Where’s the put your money where your mouth is?

“It’s easy to yell social justice in a room full of white people. But members of color weren’t coming out, so we need to go find them, engage with them, find out what we’re doing wrong,” said Jones, an African American.

NJEA Executive Director Steve Swetsky agrees with Jones. Swetsky, a teacher for 20 years, a former local affiliate president, a UniServ representative and former assistant executive director, admits he and other local white male leaders, working with primarily white staff, have benefited from NJEA’s traditional organizational structure to advance through the organization and gain power, either in leadership roles or in professional staff positions.

“Within our associate staff, who are predominantly people of color, there is always an undercurrent of ‘There’s no room for me.’ ‘I’m stuck in a low-paid job.’ ‘Other people get positions that I’m qualified for, but I don’t get a look.’ ‘I don’t get opportunities to learn new skills,’ ” said Swetsky.

Swetsky called it NJEA’s “version of institutional racism.”

A barrier to the structural change Blistan and Swetsky have committed NJEA to is the organization’s reputation as a successful and high performing. In other words, why fix what isn’t broken?

Three key events served as catalysts for change. The first was two U.S. Supreme Court decisions (Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association in 2015 and Janus v. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in 2018) that forced public worker unions to focus more on organizing and retaining members. The second was the election in 2017 of Blistan as NJEA president; Blistan, NJEA’s vice president and secretary-treasurer

“We know that it will take the combined efforts of all NJEA members who are committed to anti-racism to make our union the force for racial justice that it should be.

- NJEA Leadership

-
ran a campaign centered on racial, social and economic justice. The third event was three two-and-half day workshops titled Undoing Racism. Blistan, Swetsky, NJEA management, local leaders, NJEA member consultants, professional and associate staff have participated in one or more of the intensive trainings.

It was NJEA’s first Summer Fellows program five years ago, said Swetsky, in which NJEA leadership decided to try a new strategy and hire members directly through the NJEA website to organize other members. “It was unlike anything NJEA had ever done before, because there were no gatekeepers. We let the members run the program. We got a lot of pushback. We heard from local presidents and from staff. ‘How come you didn’t get our permission?’ ‘You don’t know these people.’”

The program was rated highly by the fellows and the members with whom they had interactions. Most revealing to Swetsky, though, was who the 300 fellows were. “It was the most diverse group of members that I had ever seen.”

Next came formally engaging the professional staff union through the Joint Labor Management Committee to move forward on the racial equity work. The 12-18 month “journey” is being facilitated by NEA.

“One of the things that is very clear is that our staff doesn’t look like our members to the same degree that NJEA members don’t look like the kids they work with,” said Ed Stevens, president of the NJEA professional staff union, United Staff Association.

A white male, Stevens said, “There is no way members of color are going to feel welcome getting involved in a union that doesn’t look like them. We’ve had hiring policies on paper for a long time, but the commitment to following them hasn’t been there.”

That lack of commitment has not gone unnoticed by NJEA members of color, said Stevens. “I’ve had members tell me that when they thought about applying for a staff job, other people of color would say to them, ‘Why did you apply there? They don’t hire black people or Hispanics.’”

Swetsky agrees that NJEA has to do a better job of making members of color feel welcome. “We have to be consistent, thoughtful and intentional in hiring staff and our next group of managers, who right now are predominantly white. We have to look beyond the traditional leadership model. Members of colors are leaders in their churches, they are community organizers, leaders in their communities. They’ve just never had the opportunity to do it in their union.”

Eric Jones has put his leadership and organizing skills to work on behalf of NJEA. Hired by Swetsky 14 months ago, Jones formed the NJEA Members of Color network. “The weekend before I was officially on board with NJEA, I was connecting with local presidents of color. I started at NJEA on April 1, and the first Members of Color event was April 4.”

Jones scoured member lists and used a texting program to hold events in each of New Jersey’s 21 counties.
“Honestly, I was never a fan of NJEA,” said Jones. “But if I am going to come here, I have a mission and that is to help transition the organization to a point where we all feel we are a part of the process, the rules, the organizing, all of it.”

The NJEA Members of Color network is showing signs of gaining traction. The group's private Facebook page has 1,739 members, has had members run for leadership positions and is contributing to the perception that NJEA is making a genuine effort to be more inclusive and reflective of all its members.

Javier Fresse, a Paterson teacher of 22 years and a member of the Members of Color network, said he was heartened when he saw Spanish-language literature at the NJEA delegate assembly. “Now we must make sure we are fully integrated within NJEA leadership roles.”

Another teacher, Petal Robertson, president of the Montclair Education Association, was one of the first people Jones invited to a Members of Color event. “Prior to Eric’s push, I was content to be a president in Montclair, in my town, in my section of the bubble and let that suffice in terms of my role in NJEA. Now I see NJEA as a place of opportunity, an organization that has a space for me and others who look like me.”

In the wake of the George Floyd murder, NJEA felt the need to take even more steps to create an anti-racist environment within the organization. In a message to all 200,000 members, the NJEA leadership said: “But we know that much, much more is needed. And we know that it will take the combined efforts of all NJEA members who are committed to anti-racism to make our union the force for racial justice that it should be. That is why we are inviting all NJEA members who are committed to this work to join a dedicated anti-racist network that will provide both a forum and resources for advancing this work.

“We are calling this the NJEA REAL movement. REAL stands for racial equity, affirmation and literacy. It is open to members of all races, colors and creeds. The only requirement for admission is a commitment to advancing racial justice in our schools, in our union, and our society at large by acknowledging and working to break down the racist systems and structures that stand in the way of true justice for all.”

OREGON EDUCATION ASSOCIATION LEANS INTO EQUITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

“We are fighting against a long history of racism and oppression. Now is the time to become actively anti-racist.”

Those forceful words are prominently featured at the top of the Oregon Education Association’s website. The OEA statement reads in part: As a predominantly white organization, it’s critical that OEA’s white members, staff, and leaders lean into uncomfortable conversations and situations and truly challenge themselves to embody true and meaningful allyship. We will continue to evaluate how our organization can use our power and our privilege to combat the
systemic racism that continues to claim Black and Brown lives.

OEA's Commitment to Equity page states: OEA is in the midst of an intentional journey to address equity and racial justice, with an eye toward transformative reflection, systems change, culturally responsive growth and inclusion, authentic community partner coalition-building and social activism.

OEA’s commitment, according to John Larson, high school English teacher and OEA president, is reflected in the organization’s strategic planning, budgeting, community partnerships, training for staff and members, and in every facet of decision making.

Oregon has more than 358,000 students K-12 student public schools.

The most recent enrollment data reveal that whites comprise 62 percent of students, down from 68 percent in the 2010-11 school year. Hispanic students, meanwhile, experienced the largest growth. They increased from 20 percent to 25 percent of all students during the same span. Hispanics now account for more than 138,000 of the students in public schools.

Conversely, less than 10 percent of Oregon teachers are educators of color. OEA staff and membership also reflect this imbalance.

OEA’s unabashed anti-racist stance would have been unlikely five years ago.

Back then, if an OEA member raised a complaint about what they thought was a racist school policy or a microagression at the hands of a school administrator, “We would say, ‘You’re absolutely right, it is, but it’s not a violation of the contract, so there’s nothing we can do for you.’” said Larson.

Over time and as a consequence of intentional discussions, said Larson, “We started operating from the premise that we shall never, ever say ‘no’ to any of our members. It may not be a grievance. It may not be an unfair labor practice, but there’s always something we can do.”

OEA’s full embrace of racial justice and equity can be traced back to a vote in 2015 by the NEA Representative Assembly. NEA delegates at that meeting adopted New Business Item B, which formally acknowledged institutional racism and committed the association “to bring to light and demand change to policies, programs, and practices that condone or ignore unequal treatment and hinder student success.”

Larson was vice president of OEA then. He recalled conversations with then-OEA President Hanna Vaandering. “We started thinking about what it would be to start interrupting systemic and institutional racism in Oregon.”

Soon thereafter, OEA funded requests from members who wanted to convene “Institutional Racism Town Halls” with local high school students. The events were so well received that OEA hosted similar events in various communities throughout the state.

The gatherings broke new ground but felt scattershot and limited, recalled Larson.
"It wasn't anything that was part of our systems and part of how we were wanting to really interrupt racism in our schools."

Larson elevated the issue once he was elected president, going so far as to include it in every agenda. But he soon saw his efforts fall flat. "Why? It dawned on me that I had no idea how to interrupt systemic racism or institutional racism. I realized we were focusing on tactics and not on strategy."

So Larson went outside the organization. He partnered with the Portland, Oregon-based Center for Equity and Inclusion. In addition, he reached out to NEA for assistance in training OEA’s board of directors.

Ashlee Agtuca serves as a co-lead facilitator on OEA’s equity team, along with the OEA’s general counsel. Also on the 17-member team, which meets monthly, is Larson, and various professional staff and associate staff.

Agtuca, an administrative assistant at OEA for almost two years, has been “instrumental” in moving the organization’s equity work, said Larson.

“I’m intensely passionate about getting the staff involved in this,” said Agtuca. “If you start with them, the people who carry out the association’s work every single day, then it’s easier to push out to educators and ultimately students.”

Agtuca and Larson admit the work is challenging and requires patience and a sustained commitment. OEA’s goal is to make every organizational decision – from staff recruitment and hiring, and budgeting and professional development, to community partnerships and team and committee structures – through an equity lens. The organization recently finalized what it calls an equity filter to do just that.

“Our job as equity facilitators isn't to change somebody’s mind but to show them a different view," said Agtuca. The process can be frustrating to people who want to see change quickly. Pushback from staff, while not common, can be pointed.

After an all-day training in February, Agtuca was approached by a workmate who did not see the value in the training. The person “didn't believe we had any issues with equity at our place of work and didn't understand why we would bring it up,” recounted Agtuca. “I wasn't raised to think of people as different,” said the staff member to Agtuca.

Larson had a similar experience last year with a local leader. The leader was upset that a Black member who had gone to an OEA training “was making all these demands and complaining about not feeling welcome.”

“I get where he's coming from,” said Larson. “Two years ago I might have had the exact same reaction. The difference is I've had the opportunity to go through a personal journey through the training that he hasn’t.”

Larson said he also encounters resistance from some rank and file OEA members. “When we start using the words white supremacy, our members go, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! We're not a white supremacist organization. What are you talking about?”
But Larson is not dissuaded. Instead, he’s convinced the work must continue.

“Our feeling is because we represent 90 percent of educators in Oregon, if we can get our own house in order, if all of our policies and decision-making has an equity lens to it, then that will become part of the education system’s mainstream culture, and students will benefit, especially those who have limited access to opportunity and whose voice is often not heard.”

A member-driven initiative that has shown promise, said Larson, is called Equity Sparks. The retreats enable OEA members of color and “equity champions” to spend time with colleagues building community, strengthening skills, exploring equity hot topics, and networking. The initiative has grown from 30 members from when it began two years ago to almost 200 today.

“I’ve never seen so many young educators, no less educators of color, who are so energized. They show up to budget hearings, they show up to board meetings, they show up to advocate for equity,” said Larson. “We have members who are much more engaged in wanting to join the work of the union because they feel they have a voice.”

But OEA, like countless organizations, has had to reimagine its work and adjust on the fly because of the unprecedented challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic.

And yet, the public health crisis has opened new doors because of OEA’s equity focus. “When the pandemic happened, we were able to call together community groups to start talking about what the response should be, how should we be helping families, what are families experiencing, and what can we do as a union to mitigate the negative affects on the families they serve?”

As a result of those conversations, OEA distributed $100,000 from its member-funded foundation to help families pay for food, utilities and rent.

The pandemic highlighted systemic inequities experienced by students and families that have long gone unaddressed. OEA, seeing an opportunity in the shutdown, is using its equity lens to advocate for “better than normal” schools when students return. “Four years ago, we would have strictly been focused on labor issues,” said Larson. “Because of our equity lens, we’ve been able to push a narrative with the state department of education that addresses distance learning policies, return to work policies and what that means for students, and how we make sure that families are supported.”

ALANA: CONNECTING AND EMPOWERING EDUCATORS OF COLOR ACROSS MASSACHUSETTS

For many educators of color, it’s not unusual to be one of just a handful of non-white educators in their school, if not the only one. When this also means navigating a sea of slights, stereotypes, microaggressions and implicit or explicit biases, it can be a very frustrating and isolating experience – and one that
Influences some educators of color to leave the field entirely.

In Massachusetts, a network called African-American, Latino, Asian and Native American educators (ALANA) is working to address this dynamic by connecting educators of color for discussions, peer support, mentoring and networking. ALANA also engages in grassroots organizing and mobilization that focuses on issues such as diversity in hiring, culturally relevant curriculum and racial justice in education.

“I am the only educator who identifies as a person of color in my school district,” says Bajan-American Sarah McLaughlin, whose mother is from Barbados. “In the lunchroom, in staff meetings, in meetings with the principal, you start learning things like code-switching. Without knowing it, you just sort of adapt to this environment with all these white people.”

“Whether it’s a blatant racial comment or a racial microaggression, it can sometimes feel unsafe,” she adds, “where you don’t know where to speak up or what to say…. You shouldn’t have to code-switch. We all need to be in a safe environment, where we can be ourselves and don’t have to always explain ourselves to everybody.”

ALANA provides just that safe space, says McLaughlin, especially for educators of color who feel like they are alone or isolated in their school or district.

For Jason Montrose, a special education instructor and co-teacher of English at Brookline High School, he says it was bias and microaggressions that negatively influenced his evaluation from a department head that was a catalyst in influencing him to get more involved with diversity issues, and with his union.

“When working with my kids, I put my heart on my sleeve,” said Montrose. “I am the first black person to ever teach in the Brookline special ed dept. I don’t code-switch. Culturally, I like to sing, I like to have fun, I’m loud, I’m boisterous. I like to make learning as accessible as possible. And for me to do that I have to be myself.”

“She said I wasn’t really a teacher,” he added. “She said I was more like a coach, more like a cheerleader. She couldn’t appreciate my different background and how I taught and connected with kids.”

Montrose says he didn’t say anything at the time, because he was still in his first three years at the school and didn’t have the relative job security of “professional status.” He also says he didn’t want to be “that angry person of color.” So he held it in and took the negative evaluation. “But I couldn’t sleep. I was anxious all the time.”

When the position of Diversity Chair opened up on the Brookline Educators Union (BEU) executive board, and the union president encouraged him to join the board, he leapt at the opportunity. He also became co-chair of ALANA at his school.

In early June 2020, facing a multi-million dollar budget deficit, the Brookline School District sent layoff notices to more than 350 educators, including many people of color. Montrose says ALANA has been a critical support network for impacted educators.

“You are always worried about having to be perfect to be accepted by your

And it is extremely important that our union acknowledges the need for racial justice.
- Sarah McLaughlin
white counterparts. Or you have to be a certain way for them to accept you,” says Montrose. “ALANA is a safe place. It’s a place where we don’t have to code-switch and we can just be there to support each other. If someone needs to vent, we listen. If someone has to just talk and cry for 15 minutes, we just let them talk or cry for 15 minutes.”

McLaughlin was first invited to get involved with ALANA in December 2019. She was eager to become active and soon set a goal to reach out to all of the Massachusetts Teacher Association presidents in her area and ask if they would be willing to reach out to other educators of color. “A lot of them were very interested,” she said. “So I started reaching out, to bring us together and find out what our needs are – for ourselves and for our students, so we are all feeling protected, even if in different buildings or districts.”

After the COVID-19 pandemic began and schools closed, McLaughlin’s in-person ALANA outreach paused, but she continued communicating via phone, email and video conference.

“At ALANA, we want our voices to be the leadership that we need as educators of color,” says McLaughlin. “And it is extremely important that our union acknowledges the need for racial justice. But you have to name it first. Once you say it and name the inequities, that is the beginning. Then you start healing it.”

The coronavirus pandemic, including its disproportionate impact on communities of color, and the nationwide protests against police violence against Blacks following the death of George Floyd, “shone a new spotlight on black and brown communities,” says Montrose, including the urgent need for racial justice in education. “It’s a very stressful time,” he adds, “but there’s also a lot of hope.”

He underscores that is time for well-intentioned white allies to go beyond being not racist and to become actively anti-racist -- and follow the lead of organizations led by people of color, such as ALANA. “It’s more than being an ally. I really want someone who going go out and do the hard work with me.”

McLaughlin is similarly hopeful. “ALANA is still at the beginning stages, but it’s exciting,” she says. “I’m feeling much more empowered. If I need to reach out to some people of color, I know where they are are. If I need to find them to talk about something I’m going through, I know how to reach them.”
educators with 10 or more years of teaching experience.

“Asian-American educators are one of the smaller groups of educators as it is,” said program director Yan Yii, who is also president of the Canton Teachers Association. “We are often like islands in our districts because we are so few and far between.”

According to statistics from the Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for the 2019-2020 school year, 7.1 percent of students were Asian, while just over 1 percent of educators were Asian.

“I’ve been teaching for 13 years,” said Yii. “In that time, I’ve had at most one other Asian person in my building. If you never see an Asian teacher, you may not realize being a teacher is even something you can be.” The program began as an idea within the NEA Asian & Pacific Islander Caucus (APIC), where they were brainstorming ways for educators to mentor other educators, as well as how they could help Asian-American educators feel less isolated in their schools. They applied for and received an NEA Community Advocacy & Partnerships Engagement (CAPE) grant and started the program in September 2019. Small cohorts comprised of one person from each tier -- an aspiring educator, an early career educator and a veteran educator -- began meeting in-person and online. The cohorts included educators of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent, with student educators from Nepal, India, China, Vietnam and more.

“It’s really been amazing to bring all of them together,” said Yii, noting that it’s important “just to have a safe space where you are connecting with people like you.”

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded and incidents of bias, harassment and violence against Asian-Americans rose sharply this spring, the program became even more important as a peer support network for participants. One topic they discussed was the Asian-American “model minority” myth and how quickly that idea evaporates in the face of rising anti-Asian bigotry. “What the whole situation has shown us, with the model minority myth,” said Yii, “is that this acceptance is conditional.” While the pandemic posed problems for in-person meetings, Yii says the switch to all virtual meetings had a silver lining of helping some college students and educators with young children to participate in more meetings because they did not have to travel.

Moving forward, Yii says the program wants to expand its outreach to additional colleges (all aspiring educators in the first year were from UMass Lowell) and have aspiring educators go into high schools and talk about why they want to become an educator.

“What has come out of it has been pretty amazing,” Yii says. In addition to peer support and networking, the program now has “all of these different resources, lesson plans, and reading lists that we can be using in the classroom to talk about identity, and Asian identity in particular.”

Program participants also discussed Black Lives Matter and how being active and involved with their union helps support racial justice in education. “Where we really pushed the partnership was talking about
DENVER COALITION ORGANIZES TO DECOLONIZE SCHOOLS, EMPOWER STUDENTS AND FAMILIES OF COLOR

Our Voice, Our Schools (OVOS) is a coalition of parents, students, and educators in Denver, Colo., that are working to organize, educate and mobilize their communities to fight for the public education their students deserve.

“OVOS was initiated because of a pattern inside of Denver Public Schools (DPS), specifically, but also a pattern inside of public education in general of pushing out black educators,” said OVOS Co-founder and Co-director Soul Ashemu.

Soul points to a situation at Manual High School — which he calls “one of the most historic black high schools west of the Mississippi” — that ultimately resulted in the resignation of the school’s African-American Principal, Nick Dawkins.

Manual historically served as a “touchstone for community, and for black, brown and indigenous education excellence” in Denver, says Soul, noting that seven of the school’s Black graduates went on to be U.S. mayors. Soul’s father graduated from Manual and his four children have all attended Denver public schools.

Although Dawkins resigned, OVOS says it was under pressure from white administrators. Dawkins was the Manual principal when the school accused Weld High School, located in a rural area of the state, of bringing a Confederate flag to one of the school’s football games and yelling racial slurs.

“[Dawkins] stood up to another school in rural Colorado that came in here. Their name was the Rebels and they had Confederate flags,” said Soul. “They were engaging in this dark and miscreant behavior with the almost all black football team of Manual. The principal spoke out and he was then effectively pushed out.”

“It was a very ugly, very contentious experience for our community,” says Soul, noting that the school was also facing a “painful decline” in school enrollment, shrinking down to around 300 students from about 1,100 just 15 years earlier.

He called the departure of the principal the last straw in a “pattern of disregard for what our community wants inside their education system.” He says it also sparked the formation of OVOS, which he describes as a “coalition of black, brown, indigenous and working-class white parents who wanted to take back control of the education of our children.”

Working in partnership with the Colorado Education Association (CEA) and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), OVOS engages in transformational...
organizing, rather than transactional mobilizing — around issues that matter most to our community.

Cassandra Craft, a product of Denver Public Schools herself, says she got involved with OVOS because she was raising a black son.

“I learned from pre-school, all the way through barely getting him graduated and him not fitting those risk factors,” she says, “that the school-to-prison pipeline is a true thing, especially for black males. I realized that I wasn’t the only mother dealing with this.”

Now an OVOS co-director, Craft works with Soul and co-director Xochitl Gaytan to educate, organize and mobilize parents, youth and educators of color in Denver around racial and social justice in education.

Soul underscores that many of the struggles OVOS is waging now for equity in education have deep-rooted historical origins, in Denver, and around the country. Shortly after the landmark 1954 “Brown vs. Board of Education” Supreme Court decision, in which justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional, leading to school desegregation initiatives around the country, many white families fled urban school districts and moved to the suburbs. Along with a lot of money that supported urban schools. “It’s not that desegregation failed or integration failed,” says Soul. “It’s that there were never enough resources placed inside the exercise for it to really succeed.”

The Bailey Report, produced by former school board member Sharon Bailey and released in 2016, highlighted the cultural racism experienced by Black teachers and students in Denver Public Schools.

According to a September 2019 report by the Denver Post, which compiled data on racial demographics of students in metro-area schools for the 2018-2019 school year, “more than half the city’s schools are as segregated as they were in the late 1960s,” nearly 25 years after Denver was allowed to stop court-ordered busing intended to desegregate its schools.

“What communities need now are the same things that they needed from day one, or that any education system needs,” says Soul. “You can call it resources. You can call it...
investments. You can call it any number of things. But what it boils down to is that urban schools are heavily under-resourced. And until that changes, you are going to continue to have limited success and outcomes.”

Some DPS leaders have publicly acknowledged the school district’s history of institutionalized racism, but parents and leaders of the OVOS coalition and DCTA say much work remains to be done to hold school leaders accountable for failed reform efforts and to decolonize the city’s public education system.

Still, in addition to its broader advocacy, OVOS has already tallied a number of concrete victories.

In just four years, OVOS has flipped a corrupt, for-profit, education reform-minded school board to one that is focused on equity and racial justice. In early June the newly elected school board unanimously voted to end their contract with the Denver Police Department. “We need counselors in our schools, not cops,” Craft said.

OVOS has also been instrumental in saving predominantly black schools from closing and in supporting the opening of the first ever Loving Community School, with an agenda focused on education justice.

OVOS continues to partner with the CEA and DCTA union members in Colorado to create a shared vision for the schools our students deserve. They’re fighting for systemic, structural, and cultural changes needed to establish real anti-racist school districts.

“You have to organize,” says Soul. “Organizing is the first step to empowerment. It will look different depending on which community that you’re in. The next step is re-education. Once you know better, you do better. And then from there, it has to be about agitating and advocacy...
National Education Association
1201 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

www.nea.org
www.neaedjustice.org