

AUSD's Equity and Anti-Racist Efforts: A Q&A with Chief Academic Officer Sara Stone

Since joining AUSD in August 2019, Chief Academic Officer Sara Stone has been sharply focused on issues of race, equity, and opportunity across our district. As one of the key members of the Strategic Planning team, she helped to craft a new direction for the district that would focus especially on supporting African American students and families. She has continued to focus on this work through both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement that has swept across the country this spring and summer. We asked her a series of questions about AUSD's equity and anti-racist work.

Q: We're witnessing a Black Lives Matter movement that many say rivals the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. What is the role of public education in this movement?

Over my 25 years as an equity-focused educator, I have come to understand that public education was designed to get the results that it gets. In other words, it was never intended to be a system that would create success for all.

Instead, the very design of our current system of public education perpetuates a culture of white supremacy, including its focus on perfectionism, defensiveness, quantity over quality, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, individualism, and a prioritization of "progress" and "objectivity."

What's happening now is a moment in time like none other in our lifetimes. If we work to abolish the systems of oppression that were created to get the outcomes we have, we can finally create a new type of public education where BIPOC students matter and thrive. It is not about "closing an achievement gap" that was created by our system, but actually demolishing this system and creating a new one that is anti-racist and where the characteristics of white supremacy are not driving our definitions of success.

That work requires the courage both to analyze the current system and reflect on our own conditioning and views. For instance, part of my own work as an educator has been realizing that in my quest to create conditions for our students to be successful, I too have sometimes focused on these characteristics and re-created systems of oppression. I now understand that eradicating racism in public education requires a commitment to becoming an abolitionist educator.

Q: You mention abolitionist educators and anti-racist teaching. What do those terms mean?

Being an abolitionist educator, according to Dr. Bettina Love, means that you truly believe that BIPOC matter. That they are worthy. She talks about the abolition of the systems of oppression that have created inequity. In order to do this, we must be actively anti-racist. As Ibram X. Kendi says, we need to look at our policies, practices, and systems. We need to decide what an anti-racist society would be and create it. The two ideas, “abolitionism” and “anti-racism” come together in first dismantling the old system and then creating a new system of education where all students are thriving.

This work and focus in AUSD isn’t new this year, by the way. In 2019-20, our Instructional Leaders Team studied Zaretta Hammond’s work on “Culturally Responsive Teaching.” And in our six day learning conference this June, educators heard from Mark Salinas at the National Equity Project, as well as Ms. Hammond herself, and had opportunities to study, reflect on, and discuss trauma-informed instruction and anti-racist teaching practices. We began building this work last year, and it is providing a solid foundation for further reflection and reform this year.

(You can find a summary of the learning conference, as well as links to the keynote speakers’ presentations, [here](#).)

Q: Families and staff may be interested in learning more about these ideas. Who are some writers and educators who have influenced you in learning about anti-racism teaching?

Dr. Bettina Love and Ibram X. Kendi certainly have influenced my thinking. I also draw upon the learning I have done in my work with the National Equity Project. As a young educator, I was able to work with this organization (then the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools or “BAYCES”) to understand how to lead for equity. In that time, I met Zaretta Hammond, who worked with them as a coach. Her work also has had a major impact on how I understand teaching for equity.

Hammond talks about how creating a “culturally responsive” learning environment depends on both understanding students’ culture and setting up classroom conditions to help build intellectual capacity (the increased power the brain creates to process

complex information more effectively). At its heart, this isn't about setting up the *physical* classroom but about developing trusting relationships between students and teachers so that students are able to have rigorous learning experiences that meet their needs.

I have also been greatly influenced by Margaret Wheatley's "Six Circle" model, which shows how educational operations, strategies, and structures interplay with culture, communication, and relationships to create our system. As we become abolitionist, anti-racist educators, we must look at this interplay and carefully create a new educational system that does not re-create a white supremacist system of oppression.

Lastly, I am a huge fan of John Powell's work on Targeted Universalism, which focuses on elevating the disparate experiences of marginalized populations as the first step to creating the world we urgently need.

Q: You're working with Christopher Chatmon, a co-founder of Kingmakers of Oakland, to examine our existing practices. What are the goals of the Kingmaker program?

[Kingmakers](#) describes its work as "rebuilding the systems, structures, conditions and culture of school so Black boys can thrive. These improvements, when sustained, allow educators to engage, encourage and empower the next generation of leaders and changemakers."

The organization will work with us to do an audit of all of our systems, policies, practices, and curriculum through an equity lens. They will do additional, focused work at Ruby Bridges Elementary School, Wood Middle School, Paden Elementary School, and Love Elementary School. This type of work will create a better public education system for our Black students. And this means that we all win. When our BIPOC students know that they matter in the educational system we have created a systems where all students thrive.

The partnership will help us, as the Kingmakers says, "heal the fish, while treating the waters of the toxic eco-system." That means we'll be able to create a supportive, loving, and healing space for our Black boys while at the same time doing what Dr. Love calls abolitionist teaching.

(You can see a documentary about Kingmakers [here](#).)

Q: We're introducing an Introduction to Ethnic Studies at our high schools this fall. What excites you about this curriculum?

I want to begin by saying that the Introduction to Ethnic Studies is a start to something that we will continue to grow. All of our students need to see themselves represented in our curriculum, in all courses and content, in all grade levels. As I stated above, we will be doing an equity audit of our curriculum. This means we may need to use different curriculum across our system as a result. The entire history of BIPOC need to be included in what we teach. If we aren't doing that, we need to begin to.

What I am excited about with the Intro to Ethnic studies is that it is the first stepping stone on this path. We know that students who see themselves reflected in curriculum feel empowered and worthy. In the first step to dismantling white supremacy, we need to have curriculum and courses that are not centered in the white narrative of the world. This is how we begin to abolish and recreate a new anti-racist education system. The fact that we now have a course in the Freshman year for our students to be able to see the world through a non- white supremecist narrative is very exciting and helps me to feel hope.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

When we look at our historically underserved communities, we know that we have had 400 years of oppressing our black community. In order to change this, we need to focus. This is why "Black Lives Matter" is essential. When we say this, we aren't saying other people do not matter. What we are saying is that the 400 years of purposeful oppression of the black community must not continue. We can change this. Right now. We must change this. In order to do this, we must focus on the students who have been the most underserved and oppressed.