

Building Inclusive Schools for Multiply-Marginalized Students

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Executive Summary

Federal, state, and local policies often seek to dismantle one form of oppression but fail to reach the students who need them the most.^{1,2,3} For instance, policies targeting racism do not take into account students of color who face discrimination due to their gender identity or disability.^{4,5} The United States educational system systematically privileges the experiences and ideologies of white, non-disabled, cisgender, and heterosexual students over learners who face multiple forms of discrimination.^{6,7,8,9} Policymakers with good intentions can inadvertently reinforce white supremacy when they do not attend to interacting forms of oppression in schools that influence students' experiences at the intersections of ability, race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁰ However, school reforms that embed a [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) approach could improve the school experiences of students who identify with multiply-marginalized identities.¹¹ As a fast-moving, reactionary, international movement against the study of [race, gender, and sexuality](#) in classrooms has grown in the last five years,^{12,13} there is an urgent need for inclusive school reforms that attend to the strengths and needs of multiply-marginalized students.

In this brief, we describe how educational policy and school structures can oppress and exclude multiply-marginalized students from educational opportunities and experiences, leading to inequitable academic outcomes. We then recommend leveraging [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) as a tool to disrupt systems of oppression in schools that negatively impact students with multiply-marginalized identities.¹¹ The strategies we propose in this brief include: (1) adopting and implementing laws and policies, (2) embedding UDL approaches to facilities, curriculum and instruction, and resources, (3) improving support for and among educators, (4) providing affinity groups for students and staff, and (5) incorporating student and community voice in policy, facilities design, curricular, and other targeted resources. We acknowledge that this list may be incomplete, and local policymakers and practitioners should use their agency to create additional innovative solutions to meet the needs of students with complex and fluid identities. Finally, we outline recommendations for policy, research, and practice that leverage the strengths of students and communities, attend to the diverse needs of students, and affirm multiply-marginalized students.

Recommendations for Policy and Research

- Advocating for a universal design approach to policy generation and implementation.
- Continuously updating policies with input from the students and the communities affected to ensure they serve their goals (e.g., preventing discrimination, bullying).
- Adopting nuanced guidance and training to translate federal and state laws into educators' and school leaders' practice.
- Conducting research that addresses how educational policies, programs, and practices differentially affect students holding multiply-marginalized identities.
- Increasing dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to produce truly evidence-based policies.

Recommendations for Practice

- Learning about and leveraging federal, state, and local laws and policies to reform the systems that systematically exclude multiply-marginalized students.
- Prioritizing multiply-marginalized family, community, and student voices in instructional decision-making.
- Collecting and monitoring data across and within student subgroups.
- Implementing sustained, comprehensive diversity training for educators that utilizes an intersectional approach.
- Using learning materials that illuminate the life experiences of individuals at the intersection of disability, race, gender, and sexuality.

Key Terms and Acronyms

- Gender identity: an individual's internal sense of gender, whether that be a man, woman, neither, or both. Gender identity may (cisgender) or may not (transgender) align with an individual's assigned sex at birth.
- Gender expression: how people present and perform their gender through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, or other perceived characteristics.
- Gender binary: an assumption that there are only two genders, man or woman, that denies the gender continuum.
- Sexuality: an individual's enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to members of the same and/or different gender.
- Able-bodied: a descriptor given to people who physically move through the world without needing supports or accommodations, such as a wheelchair or a white mobility cane.
- Ableism: "a network of beliefs, processes and practices" that characterizes an able-body as being the norm, which marginalizes individuals with disabilities."¹⁴
- Neurotypical: a descriptor given to people who process information and whose brains function in a given culture's "expected" way.
- Cisgenderism: a cultural ideology that normalizes cisgender identities and expressions and marginalizes individuals whose gender identity or expression does not align with their assigned sex at birth.
- Heterosexism: a cultural ideology that normalizes heterosexual behaviors, identities, and relationships and marginalizes nonheterosexual behaviors, identities, and relationships.
- LGBTQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender-expansive identities
- Multiply-marginalized: when a person holds two or more historically oppressed identities
- Intersectionality: a phenomenon where two or more systems of discrimination interact
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL): a learning strategy that uses the cognitive sciences to create flexible learning spaces that account for students' multiple abilities, identities, and needs.
- [*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*](#) (IDEA): a federal law mandating that all students with disabilities have access to a free public education.¹⁵ Originally passed in 1975 under the name [*Education for All Handicapped Children Act*](#).¹⁶
- IEP: individualized educational program, a legal document that outlines the specialized services and instruction for public school students who receive special education services

Introduction

U.S. federal policymakers have enacted many K-12 educational reforms aimed at improving the educational opportunities of students with historically marginalized identities. These reforms include those targeting the needs of students with disabilities, students of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender expansive (LGBTQ+) students. However, reforms often do not account for the fact that students' identities are multi-faceted and may change across time and contexts. Students holding two or more historically marginalized identities may experience compounding forms of oppression, referred to as multiply-marginalized (e.g., students of color with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students of color, or LGBTQ+ students of color with disabilities). Efforts to reform inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes for students based on ability, race, gender, and sexuality predominantly occur in isolation from one another. In other words, reforms often do not take into account how students with multiply-marginalized identities experience intersecting and compounding forms of oppression in schools.^{4,17,18} Focusing on single aspects of students' identities rather than the multiplicative, fluid, and context-dependent nature of identities can compound the systemic inequities that students face in schools.

Disability rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ rights movements have advocated for government reforms that acknowledge discrimination in schools on the basis of ability, race, gender, and sexuality. These advocates made significant progress in federal legislation, such as [the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution](#),¹⁹ the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#),¹⁵ [Title VII of the Civil Rights Act](#),²⁰ and [Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972](#)²¹ that sought to remove barriers to education based on ability, race, and sex, respectively. Additionally, policy reform has occurred through federal court cases, such as [Honig v. Doe](#),²² [Brown v. Board of Education](#),²³ and [Bostock v. Clayton County](#),²⁴ that have similarly been used to advance nondiscrimination reforms based on ability, race, and sexuality. Yet, in designing and implementing such top-down reforms, policymakers developed legislation focusing on dismantling one form of oppression at a time rather than considering how multiple forms of oppression - such as ableism, racism, cisgenderism, and heterosexism - shape students' school experiences. For instance, the policies, programs, and resources directed at reforming ability-based inequities have been detached from the policies, programs, and resources aimed at reforming gender-based inequities. Educational reforms that do not attend to the multiple forms of oppression in schools can result in perpetuating educational inequities. While this brief focuses on the school experiences of students with three marginalized social statuses - students with disabilities, students of color, and LGBTQ+ students, the authors acknowledge there are many other systems of oppression at work in the U.S. education system that need to be considered.

In this brief, we describe how educational policy and school structures can oppress and exclude multiply-marginalized students from educational opportunities and experiences, leading to inequitable academic outcomes. We then recommend leveraging [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) as a tool to disrupt systems of oppression in schools that negatively impact students with multiply-marginalized identities.¹¹ UDL is a framework emerging from cognitive sciences intended to create inclusive learning spaces for all students by providing inclusive approaches to engagement, representation, action, and expression. The strategies we propose in this brief include: (1) adopting and implementing laws and policies, (2) embedding UDL approaches to facilities, curriculum and instruction, and resources, (3) improving support for and among educators, (4) providing affinity groups for students and staff, and (5) incorporating

student and community voice in policy, facilities design, curricular, and other targeted resources. We acknowledge that this list may be incomplete, and local policymakers and practitioners should use their agency to create additional innovative solutions to meet the needs of students with complex and fluid identities. Finally, we outline recommendations for policy, research, and practice that leverage the strengths of students and communities, attend to the diverse needs of students, and affirm multiply-marginalized students.

Case for Urgent Action

A fast-moving, reactionary, international movement against the study of [race](#), [gender](#), and [sexuality](#) in classrooms has grown in the last five years.^{12,13} Bills that ban critical race theory (CRT) and LGBTQ+-inclusive educational practices disproportionately harm not only students of color and LGBTQ+ students, but also students with disabilities.^{25,26} Both types of bills and policies uphold white supremacy, or the ideology that elevates the contributions and norms established by the dominant, white, heterosexual, cisgender, and non-disabled members of society.^{27,28,29} Anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ+ bills erase the experiences of people of color and LGBTQ+ people from education and obstruct access to necessary, vital sources of information that affirm students who already face systemic marginalization.²⁹ But an inclusive approach to learning depends on an accurate, broader narrative of our history and on the open exchange of ideas.^{30,31} Efforts to dismantle and replace white supremacist systems with more equitable education systems should be interconnected, just as the roots of the multiple, intersecting forms of oppression are connected to white supremacist ideologies. Educational reform strategies focused on singular aspects of students' identities can be an important first step, but ultimately threaten to further marginalize the most oppressed students in the U.S. education system.

Target Problem and Significance

Historical Exclusion of Multiply-Marginalized Students in U.S. K-12 Education

From its inception, the U.S. educational system was built to affirm a social hierarchy that recognized and institutionalized white racial superiority. Early American colonial political, economic, and religious values shaped restrictive conceptualizations of ability, race, gender, and sexuality still embedded in the current system. Educational systems continue to affirm the power and control of white,^{7,32} able-bodied,^{5,8} cisgender,^{6,9,33} and heterosexual Americans by privileging such identities and social statuses. These inherited educational structures have not only repressed and excluded students of color, but also students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students.^{5,29,34,35}

As an example of how students who hold multiply-marginalized identities have been systematically excluded from U.S. schools, scholars have documented disproportionate discipline for students with disabilities, students of color, and LGBTQ+ students.^{36,37} Again, the majority of this research has focused on individual aspects of students' identities. Students with disabilities are at greater risk of receiving exclusionary discipline actions because behavior norms, such as sitting in a chair quietly reading, are based upon a system that preferences the behavior of able-bodied and neurotypical students.^{38,39,40} Even when student behavior aligns with their documented disability, it can be interpreted as purposely disruptive by a mainstream classroom teacher.³⁹ In other words, students with disabilities can act in accordance with their disability label and be punished for it. Similarly, LGBTQ+ students experience disciplinary consequences for their gender expression when it does not conform to gender-binary norms of dress or when they fight back against their aggressor to protect themselves from bullying.^{41,42,43} The disproportionate discipline and exclusion of students of color who receive disciplinary

consequences when they behave in a similar manner as white students has been well-established.^{44,45,46,47}

Multiply-marginalized students can face multiplicative risks with respect to school exclusion due to overlapping systems of oppression. For example, in an experimental study, Fish suggests educators interpret white boys' disruptive behavior as indicating exceptional academic ability while interpreting Black boys' disruptive behavior as indicative of academic challenges.⁴⁸ In a separate study, Fish illustrates the role of systemic white supremacy in the process of student sorting through special education labeling.⁴⁵ She demonstrates that the rate of Black, Latinx, and Native American students identified as needing special education increases as the proportion of white students in the school increases. This study illustrates how systemic racism creates the conditions for racial disproportionality in special education to thrive in schools. Individual aspects of students' multiple identities also play a role in studies examining intersection of gender, sexuality, and race. For instance, Black LGBTQ+ students report odds of suspension that are 2.5 times higher than their white, cisgender, heterosexual peers.^{1,43,49} Black, queer, male students with feminine gender expressions may face rejection and harassment from both white LGBTQ+ students and Black, straight students.^{50,51}

Discipline policies, such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) and restorative justice, meant to fight discrimination, may end up preserving the privileges and values held by white, non-disabled, heterosexual, and/or cisgender people.⁵² For example, school districts often implement SWPBIS and restorative justice to reduce suspension rates, but several studies that evaluate school districts using these programs have shown that white students benefit the most while Black students are still suspended at disproportionate rates.^{53,54} Access to resources or accommodations generally requires that students or families advocate on an individual basis, which undermines a systemic approach to reform.⁵⁵ This reliance on student and family advocacy also inherently preferences the students from families with the economic, political, and social power to advocate within the education system. Again, the end result of this systemic bias towards already privileged students creates a multi-tiered system of accommodations for students with the same marginalized status.

Amplifying Multiply-Marginalized Voices and Experiences in K-12 Education

While policies targeting one form of systemic oppression can address identity-based inequities, students holding multiply-marginalized identities bring unique experiences, skills, and knowledge to the school community that is not recognized by these policies. For instance, students with disabilities may be more likely to identify as queer or nonbinary because they already have experience pushing back against gender norms linked to other aspects of their identity.⁵⁶ Further, autistic students, who may also be more likely to identify as queer, trans, or with another gender-expansive identity,^{57,58} and LGBTQ+ students of color may be especially adept at navigating online spaces to build community and access resources.^{58,59}

Toward an Intersectional Approach to Educational Policies

Educational policies set expectations and goals related to student outcomes, forming the circumstances of local school districts' response options to implement the policy into practice.⁶⁰ Since educational policies often focus on one social identity, decision-makers in local school districts might not consider how to implement policies in an intersectional manner that would attend to the strengths and needs of multiply-marginalized students. When policy language is specific, labeling students may reduce the complexity of social identities into binary categories

(e.g., ability vs. disability, male vs. female, white vs. students of color, transgender vs. cisgender, queer vs. straight) instead of acknowledging the spectrum of ability, race, gender, and sexuality, and the interaction between these identities. While policymakers intend to create relatively stable governmental directives, social identities connected to ability, race, gender, and sexuality are also highly context-specific and can change across time, geography, and subcultures.² Understanding how multiple forms of oppression emerge in policy design and implementation provides insight into how policies could be used as one of many levers to disrupt oppression and affirm students with multiply-marginalized identities.

Frameworks to Uncover the Root Cause of the Problem

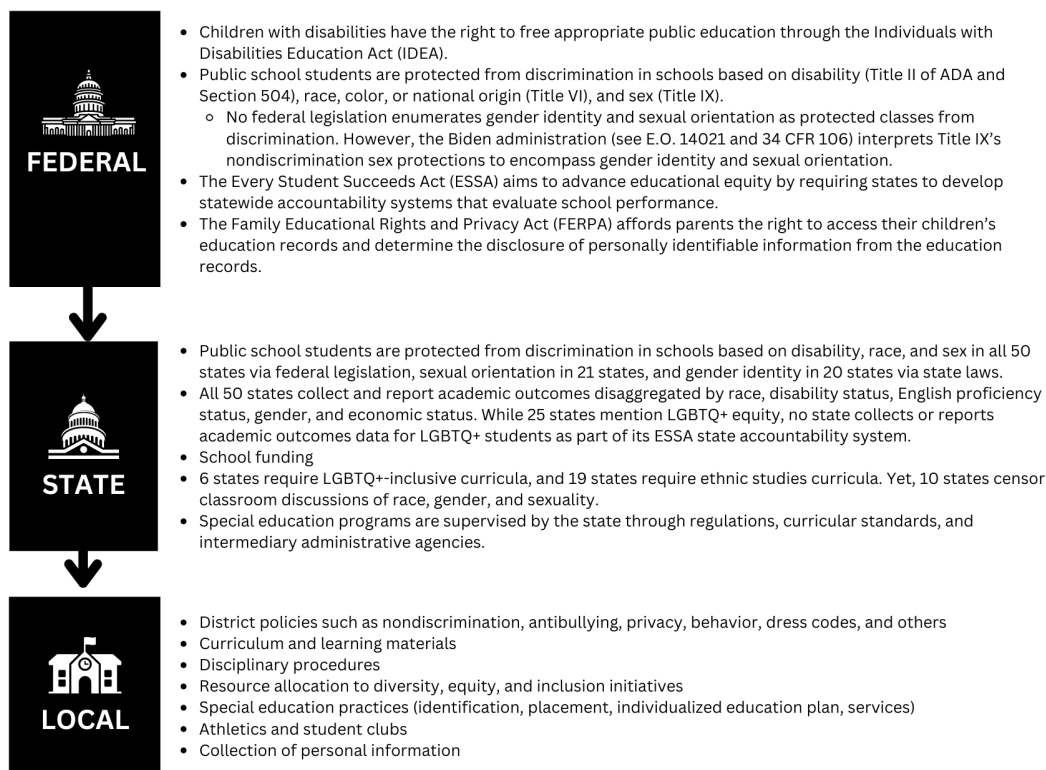
In this section, we describe three main frameworks useful for understanding how schools both perpetuate and dismantle educational inequities for students with multiply-marginalized identities: intersectionality theory, policy levers in top-down reforms, and structuration theory.

Intersectionality

Students with multiply-marginalized identities face compounding forms of oppression in schools. Intersectional theory, at its core, states that an individual has multiple identities and those identities interact simultaneously to shape an individual's life.^{18,61} Crenshaw initially illustrated how structural racial and gender inequity compounds to simultaneously exacerbate inequalities for Black women while also barring Black women from the nondiscrimination legal accountability mechanisms that could provide relief.⁶¹ Al-Faham et al.,⁶² in referencing Crenshaw,⁶³ pointed out “how laws and policies designed without adequately accounting for intersectionality situated populations may produce undesirable outcomes” (p. 249). Scholars across disciplines have used intersectionality theory to demonstrate how ability, race, gender, sexuality, language, and other identities or social statuses interact to create systemic inequities affecting people's life opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.^{17,64}

Figure 1.

U.S. Educational Policies: Examples of Policies Shaping Student Experiences at the Intersection of Disability, Race, Gender, and Sexuality



Policy Levers in Top-Down Reforms

Understanding the complicated nature of top-down policy reforms provides insight into why students with multiply-marginalized identities have not been afforded relief through policies intended to address structural inequity based on ability, race, gender, and sexuality. The goal of top-down educational reforms is often standardization to ensure equal educational opportunity for all children.^{65,66} However, the role of different governmental policymakers who influence educational reforms in the U.S. complicates the education system. At each level of governmental systems (federal, state, local), three branches (executive, legislative, judicial) with unequal influence exert power. Because the [10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution](#) established the states' power to determine educational policy,⁶⁷ the U.S. Federal Government has historically had weak influence to dictate what schooling entails.^{65,68,69} Prior to the 1960s, the federal government primarily exerted influence through funding and regulatory guidance. However, the federal government has played an increasingly influential role in reforming the education of historically marginalized groups (e.g., students with disabilities, students of color, and LGBTQ+ students; see Figure 1).⁶⁹

Implementation Gaps. Despite the proliferation of centralized, federal nondiscrimination and special education policies, especially in the last 20 years, policy implementation efforts remain dispersed and poorly connected. Across levels of government, many of these efforts focus on one aspect of students' identities.^{69,70} While top-down policies from the federal government can lay the foundation for local policymakers and practitioners to

build upon, the lack of central control in the U.S. K-12 education system makes it difficult to effectively implement policies.⁶⁸ Top-down reforms often fail to account for, nor do they bolster, local organizational capacity to implement centralized policies.^{65,68} Local educational agencies vary in their capacity to effectively implement federal mandates due to differences in tax-base, funding from the state and federal government, student enrollment, location, educator experience, and access to educator training.⁶⁵

Deficit-Based Policies. Additionally, policymakers writing nondiscrimination and special education policies - and the practitioners who interpret them - often have deficit views of learners with historically marginalized identities.⁷¹ For example, policymakers developed the [*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)*](#) and Title 1 of the [*Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\) of 1965*](#) to reorganize federal spending on special education and public education in high poverty areas, respectively.^{15,72} But these top-down policies focused mostly on addressing systemic disadvantages without leveraging students' cultural strengths that the policies were meant to serve.^{73,74} In contrast, policymakers and practitioners with a strengths-based approach understand culture to be a dynamic, complex phenomenon in which students can use their own histories with the social practices around them to learn, find enjoyment, overcome challenges, and connect with other people.^{75,76} However, capturing these nuances of cultural strengths in policies, which provides standardized instructions to address discriminatory processes, programs, and practices, can be a challenge.

Structuration Theory

While educational policies can shape the structure of schooling by establishing expectations, individuals also have agency to both reproduce and disrupt social norms. Structuration theory describes the duality of the structures that both dictate social norms and emerge from social interactions.^{77,78,79} In education, practitioners must comply with state and federal policies, but they can also use policies to drive or reduce educational inequity. For instance, a local school district's nondiscrimination policy may state that the district protects students from discrimination based on several marginalized social statuses, but gender identity and sexual orientation are not always explicitly named in local nondiscrimination policy protections.²⁹ However, educators can still disrupt discrimination based on gender identity even though it has not been explicitly named as a protected class in the policy. Additionally, educators may have access to the same code of conduct and yet interpret the same disruptive behavior differently depending upon students' ability, race, and gender status, resulting in discriminatory discipline actions for LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and students of color. In the U.S. legal system, the burden of proving discrimination remains difficult.^{80,81,82,83,84,85} Discrimination based on multiply-marginalized identities has not always been visible in judges' interpretations of nondiscrimination laws. As Crenshaw points out, discriminatory practices affecting individuals with multiply-marginalized identities may look different than established cases of discrimination based on people who hold only one marginalized identity and multiple privileged identities.⁶³ This makes it even more difficult to establish systemic discrimination even in cases where there is extensive proof.

Research Insights & Recommendations

As we have described in this brief, the foundation for systemic discrimination is deeply entrenched in the United States' colonial history. As such, resolving the structural inequity at the heart of our education system will take a multitude of strategies. In the following section, we present several potential strategies, supported by research, for leveraging the strengths and

addressing the needs of students with multiply-marginalized identities. These strategies include (1) adopting and implementing laws and policies, (2) embedding UDL approaches to facilities, curriculum and instruction, and resources, (3) improving support for and among educators, (4) providing affinity groups for students and staff, and (5) incorporating student and community voice in policy, facilities design, curricular, and other targeted resources. We acknowledge that none of these strategies alone or even their combined implementation can carry the weight of completely disrupting and replacing entire systems built on white supremacist values and norms.

Strategy for Future Policy

Strategy #1: Adopting and Implementing Protective Laws and Policies

Laws and policies serve as an important tool in local reform as they govern the day-to-day operations of school districts.⁸⁶ Local school district policies detail expectations, rights, and accountability processes that align with state and federal legislation. Policies intended to protect students from discrimination and bullying based on their identity must be broad enough to be inclusive but specific enough to provide guidance to practitioners.⁸⁷ Because identities are socially-constructed, perceptions of identity categories differ across time, socio-political contexts, geography, and subcultures.² As such, policies must regularly be reviewed and updated to reflect local student populations and needs. Protective policies, such as nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies, aim to protect students with historically marginalized identities from unfair and unjust treatment. For instance, students are legally protected from discrimination in schools based on race, color, and national origin ([Title VII of Civil Rights Act](#)),²⁰ sex ([Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972](#)),²¹ and disability ([Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#) and [IDEA](#)).^{15,88} While the Biden Administration's policies recommend LGBTQ+ students should be protected from discrimination under Title IX ([Exec. Order No. 14021](#) and [34 CFR pt. 106](#)),^{89,90} this policy has yet to be supported in federal legislation. As a result, protective state laws and policies for LGBTQ+ students vary. Additionally, protective federal, state, and local policies can provide mechanisms for accountability. For example, IDEA provides an accountability mechanism through due process, which allows parents and families to file a complaint if they disagree with the implementation of their child's individualized education program (IEP). While imperfect, adopting specific legislation and policies that name protected classes of marginalized students and accountability mechanisms can provide one path for recourse when egregious acts of discrimination and harassment occur.

Strategy #2: Embedding Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Approaches to Facilities, Curriculum and Instruction, and Resources

UDL is a framework that promises to make learning more accessible for all students.^{91,92} Often cited in the special education literature, UDL is not only about instruction but also altering the learning environment to be both accessible and affirming to students of multiple abilities, identities, and social statuses. UDL is beneficial for students because it considers their complex identities and abilities. Research indicates that UDL-based classrooms increase learning outcomes for both students with and without disabilities.^{93,94} Scholars have applied UDL to address systemic educational inequities facing students in rural communities,⁹⁵ students of color, students from low-income families, and LGBTQ+ students.⁷⁰ We apply a similar approach to addressing educational inequity for students who hold multiply-marginalized identities. In the

proceeding sections, we discuss UDL as it relates to facilities, curriculum and instruction, and resources.

Facilities. Universal design of facilities anchors access and affirming features in physical school spaces. Access includes direct access to facilities, such as ensuring nonbinary students and students with disabilities have access to all-gender, handicap-accessible bathrooms and locker room facilities in multiple areas of the building, or ensuring that aisles between classroom desks are wide enough so that wheelchair users can maneuver. In addition, universal design approaches would create affirming features that are representative of diverse students, including the unique needs of students holding multiply-marginalized identities. For example, classrooms should include posters that represent children with diverse and intersecting identity groups, flexible seating options, and affinity groups for students with multiply-marginalized identities. Both access and affirming features have been found to increase students' sense of belonging and inclusion.⁹⁶

Curriculum and Instruction. UDL reduces barriers to learning by increasing students' equitable access to appropriate learning resources and pedagogy. Historically, individuals with disabilities, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals have been absent in U.S. curricula and overlooked in instructional practices. Recent anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and policies exacerbate this inequity.²⁹ Rather than privileging norms associated with white, able-bodied, cisgender, straight people, a UDL curriculum equitably represents diverse populations, topics, and viewpoints in the curriculum. A UDL curriculum may also include resources allowing educators to adopt differentiated lesson components that account for different ability levels. A UDL instruction would also entail (1) access to instruction directed to different ability levels (2) engaging students in learning activities that are responsive to students' culture, abilities, and interests and (3) providing students with multiple avenues to express their learning.

School Support Resources and Services. UDL resources and services would include addressing the support libraries, mental health services, family engagement, and community organizations provided to schools. Libraries provide students with reading materials that reflect the diversity of people and life experiences in the world, which can empower and affirm students with multiply-marginalized identities. Representative literature of multiply-marginalized students' identities and guided access to online resources could be especially important for students who may not encounter community or social support that affirms all aspects of their identity. Other in-school resources could include additional allocation for targeted, intersectional mental health services, or access to necessary basic needs items, such as hygienic products or clean, gender-neutral, and sensory-friendly clothes. A UDL approach to family and community engagement leverages the strengths of families and community organizations as sites of knowledge and collaborators in building affirming school environments.^{97,98,99} For instance, schools could have access to crisis consulting with community organizations with nuanced support for students with disabilities who are also students of color, trans, and/or queer. Further, local community organizations that serve youth with disabilities, youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth with multiply-marginalized identities can offer support through drop-in centers, peer groups, youth advocacy, social activities and events, and referrals to supportive services. When schools and families contribute their expertise, share the responsibility for reform, build capacity together, and engage in the political process, they can build schools responsive to students'

diverse strengths, abilities, and needs.^{98,99} Collaborations between schools and community organizations can increase multiply-marginalized students' access to a more integrated, robust system of support and contribute to deeper, sustained reform in schools.¹⁰⁰

Strategy #3: Improving Support for and among Educators

Despite their prominent role in shaping students' school experiences, many educators report feeling unprepared to support students with disabilities,^{101,102} students of color,^{103,104,105} and LGBTQ+ students.⁸⁷ Reports of feeling unprepared can be linked to the lack of teacher preparation instruction on issues of ability,¹⁰⁶ race,^{107,108,109} and gender and sexuality in the university classroom.^{110,111,112} Teacher preparation programs often fail to acknowledge the systems of power and oppression in K-12 schools that shape the school experiences of students with marginalized identities.^{113,114,115} Educational scholars have recommended educators engage in ongoing professional learning opportunities that explore how schools uplift and marginalize students across social identities.^{116,117} Educators can also learn how to develop the knowledge, tools, and skills to build inclusive classrooms in such programming. Several studies find that sustained, intensive diversity and inclusion professional development can shift educators' beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and practices surrounding student diversity and inclusion.^{87,118,119} Like curriculum and instruction targeting K-12 students, equity training for educators should not take a one-size-fits-all approach, but a UDL approach that encompasses the perspectives of educators with diverse experiences, identities, and skills to incorporating inclusive strategies. Diversity and inclusion training should include core elements of effective professional development, including collective participation of community members, active learning opportunities, sustained duration, coherence across organizational entities (e.g., policies and professional learning communities), and content learning.¹²⁰ Finally, diversity and inclusion professional learning can be coupled with other sustained reform efforts (e.g., protective policies, universal design) to create long-lasting organizational change.^{120,121,122}

Strategy #4: Providing Affinity Groups for Students and Staff

While our recommendations have focused on inclusive systemic reforms, multiply-marginalized students and staff can also benefit from identity-based peer communities. Affinity groups provide space for students to connect with and receive support from peers who share similar identities. For instance, scholars have documented numerous benefits of Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) for LGBTQ+ youth including: (1) more inclusive school climates, (2) youth empowerment, (3) increased sense of belonging, (4) reduced mental health concerns, and (5) lower rates of truancy.¹²³ Affinity groups can also have a positive effect on students of color. Black Student Unions (BSUs) and Latine Student Unions (LSUs) have been shown to be affirming spaces for students of color and provide increased opportunities for advocacy.^{124,125} However, like diversity and inclusion training for educators, researchers have exposed the shortcomings of affinity groups. For instance, white and cisgender, heterosexual students benefit more from GSAs than students of color and LGBTQ+ students,¹²⁶ which indicates that GSAs do not meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students of color.¹²⁷ In addition, the literature on affinity groups for students with disabilities remains scarce. The prevailing deficit perspectives may reinforce the idea that students with disabilities are incapable of reflecting on their ability status and/or undeserving of affinity groups.¹²⁸ Rather than developing affinity spaces for students with disabilities, schools often partner with Best Buddies and Special Olympics, programs that provide a degree of separation from other students and reify the

privileged status of able-bodied students in extracurricular activities. To move toward true equity, affinity groups must acknowledge and provide space to explore how other social identities interact with the shared identity to shape individuals' life experiences.

Strategy #5: Incorporating Student and Community Voice in Policy, Facilities Design, Curricular, and Other Targeted Resources

Scholars and activists alike have advocated for the use of student and community voices in school reform due to them historically being absent from decision-making conversations.^{129,130,131} In recent years, research studies have illustrated how student voice can serve as a lever to shift educational practices and policies.^{132,133,134,135} Student voice has been found to be integral in motivating anti-racist policy change in schools.¹³³ Gonzalez and colleagues recommend elevating the voices of students with disabilities in school reform discourse despite their historical exclusion.¹³² Similarly, queer and trans studies scholars have highlighted the need to center LGBTQ+ students' voices when developing policies, programs, and practices.^{9, 87,99,136,137,138} Further, Nachman et al. describe the importance of recognizing, centering, and listening to students with multiply-marginalized identities, in their case LGBTQ+ students with autism, in order to prevent further marginalization that can come from only attending to one aspect of students' identities and needs.¹³⁹ However, deficit conceptions of youth and the local school's politics influence how student and community voices are integrated into school decision making.^{140,141,142} By repositioning youth and community members as experts, their voice can have a positive effect on educational reform.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy and Research

1. We propose a universal design approach to policy generation and implementation.

A universal design approach to policy would ensure equitable access to the policymaking process and leverage the strengths of students and communities. Individuals who are directly affected by a policy (e.g., students) have often been absent from policymaking.¹⁴³ Although policy design can involve information about students' needs, when student voice is not present to contextualize that information, the result can lead to ineffective policy. For instance, the authors suggest using the process of participatory justice, which centers the voices and concerns of students and communities most directly impacted by educational policy reform.^{144,145,146} Students and communities must be present at each step of the policymaking process, from design to implementation, to create educational policies that listen to and affirm multiply-marginalized students.

2. Develop procedures for consistently updating policies and implementation strategies using community feedback.

Policies serve as an important tool in reform efforts. The challenge in writing policies that will address multiple forms of systemic oppression is that policies need to be broad enough to be inclusive but specific enough to provide guidance.⁸⁷ Because of the fluid and shifting nature of identity development, policies also need to be continuously updated

with input from the communities affected to ensure they are serving their goals (e.g., preventing discrimination and bullying).

Interventions that provide more specific guidance to enact policies can be a useful tool in addressing educational inequity. For example, interventions have been implemented to address racial disproportionality in special education and school discipline such as the use of culturally-relevant, school-wide intervention models (e.g., SWPBIS/ multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)) or explicit monitoring strategies mandated by law.^{3,85,147} Yet, we caution leaders about adopting interventions that focus solely on one aspect of students' identities (e.g., ability, race, gender, or sexuality) because they do not acknowledge the intersecting identities of students. This failure to recognize students' intersecting identities can result in the denial of students' humanity and the worsening of systemic inequities.

3. Nuanced guidance and training that translates legal mandates into leadership and teaching practices for school leaders and educators.

One of the key problems we identified with top-down educational reform in the U.S. is that federal and state policies are often interpreted and implemented differently at the local level.^{148,149} Local school district administrators interpret and make sense of federal and state policies based on guidance from state agencies, professional associations, and legal counsel.^{138,150,151,152,153} Federal and state educational agencies can produce nuanced policy guidance that translates laws into practice, considering variation in local capacity to effectively implement centralized policies due to differences in tax-base, funding from the state and federal government, student enrollment and population, location, and educator training and experience.

4. Research that addresses how educational policies, programs, and practices differentially affect students holding multiply-marginalized identities.

Expanding the literature base that complicates students' identity development within schools and describes the experiences of students with multiply-marginalized identities would provide a more nuanced and accurate portrait of the everyday lives of multiply-marginalized students. This could include critical quantitative scholars conducting subgroup analyses at the intersections of ability, race, gender, and sexuality, or conducting narrative research to reframe deficit perspectives on multiply-marginalized students.

5. Increase dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The research to practice gap is still persistent despite both working towards educational change. Educational research, including the theoretical underpinnings of empirical studies, is often not written in a way that directly translates to practice. To make matters worse, academic journals are not accessible to practitioners. Even if these barriers were addressed, however, practitioners are still often focused on day-to-day operations without built-in time to reflect on their practice. Engagement between researchers and

practitioners, such as through forum spaces or research-practice partnerships, can minimize this gap.

We also suggest that policymakers use both quantitative and qualitative research to inform policy development. Quantitative research illuminates the magnitude of student inequities and qualitative research contextualizes students' lived experiences with educational inequity. The use of both quantitative and qualitative research provides a greater amount of practical information about translating academic research into the reality of schools in diverse contexts.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Leverage federal, state, and local policies to affirm multiply-marginalized students.

It is essential that practitioners, particularly education leaders and school lawyers, stay up to date on current law and policy around students' civil rights. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund, and Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund all have resources on their websites discussing current education litigation. However, it is not enough to simply know current law and policy circulating nationally or within the state. It is also important to explore ways to leverage the law and policy to affirm multiply-marginalized students as both may afford opportunities to enact justice in school buildings.

2. Center family, community, and student voice in decision-making.

Families, community members, and students are experts on their own experiences. As such, these community members should be included and centered in decision-making conversations. While the need for systemic reform has been well-established in the academic literature, community input has been underutilized in reform efforts. Creating equitable school conditions requires acknowledging the lived realities of students and community members.

3. Collect and monitor data across and within student subgroups.

The [*Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)*](#) requires school districts to collect and monitor the academic and disciplinary outcomes of students by race, disability status, English proficiency status, gender, and economic status.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, many school districts collect school climate data. For continuous improvement purposes, school districts should expand their efforts to monitor students' academic, disciplinary, and school climate outcomes across gender and sexuality identities and for students who hold multiply-marginalized identities. We encourage schools to review student academic, disciplinary, and school climate data across (e.g., ability status, race, gender, and sexuality) and within (e.g., students with disabilities by racial identity) subgroups. This approach could further illuminate the various strengths and needs of students with multiply-marginalized identities as well as identity areas for additional inquiry.

4. Diversity and inclusion training for educators that utilizes an intersectional approach.

Educators remain one of the most influential factors in shaping students' school experiences. When educators receive professional development on diversity and inclusion, facilitators often focus on a single identity category (e.g., ability, race, gender or sexuality). We suggest diversity and inclusion professional development use a UDL framework. Structured UDL professional development increases educator capacity to implement UDL in their daily practice.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, UDL provides a malleable framework that works across the intersections of ability, race, gender, and sexuality. Diversity and inclusion professional development should also integrate effective features of professional development into the training such as sustained, ongoing opportunities for educators to engage and reflect on their practice.¹²⁰ Educators cannot meet the needs of multiply-marginalized students without understanding how to differentiate instruction to create inclusive learning environments.

5. Learning materials that illuminate the life experiences of individuals at the intersection of ability, race, gender, and/or sexuality.

Educators can enhance student learning by providing learning materials and opportunities for students to explore life experiences and trajectories of individuals with intersecting identities. We suggest diversifying classroom libraries to include portraits of people across intersections as well as engaging in reflective essays for self-exploration. This can enable students to see their value and humanity by acknowledging their whole selves.

Conclusion

In sum, this policy brief illustrates how contemporary educational policy is not designed to affirm, protect, and serve multiply-marginalized students, specifically at the intersection of ability, race, gender, and sexuality. The authors use intersectionality theory and organizational theory to illuminate how schools maintain and disrupt educational inequities for multiply-marginalized students. Intersectionality theory demonstrates how a person's identities (i.e., ability, race, gender, and/or sexuality) intersect to shape their life experiences. Organizational theory describes how top-down policy strategies used to address educational inequities do not attend to multiply-marginalized students' needs. The structure-agency discussion among organizational theorists reveals the power of practitioners to either affirm or challenge the structure of schooling that has historically excluded students with multiply-marginalized identities. We then present several strategies that could take a step towards comprehensive, systemic reforms that address the strengths and needs of multiply-marginalized students. We end by offering recommendations for policy, research, and practice in the hope that schools can become safe and inclusive spaces for multiply-marginalized students. To create truly inclusive education spaces, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must attend to students' whole being and resist the tendency to perceive students as their most visible identity.

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