



**CARES Student Research Institute:  
The Impact of BIPOC Curricular Exclusion on High School Students of  
Color in the Appleton Area School District**

*Understanding the lack of diversity in AASD's Curriculum and Teaching*

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**Researchers**

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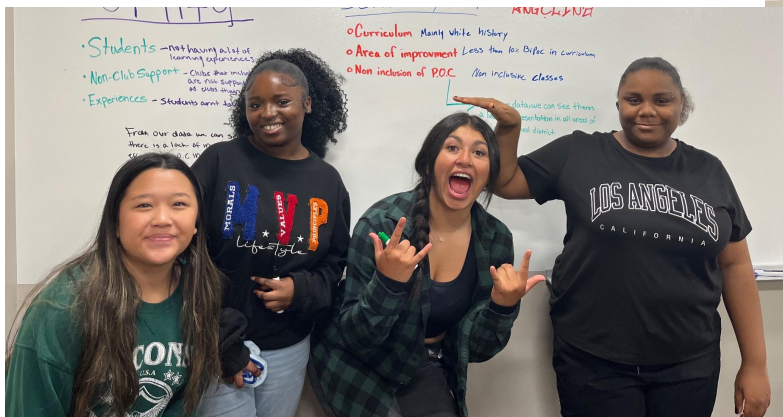
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Hi, we are team MAJHK (Morgan, Angelina, Jasmine, Heaven, and Kassidy), and we are a part of the CARES Student Research Institute. We conducted a research project on the topic of the Impact of BIPOC curricular exclusion on High School Students of Color to find out how much the curriculum in the AASD has impacted students of color. In this report, we will be sharing how we gathered data, where we got it, and what we received. In this research project, we worked with curriculum support specialists and a few of our peers to find connections to our topic. We conducted this research project in July 2023.

CARES Fox Cities is a non-profit organization located in Appleton, WI. CARES stands for Community-based Advocacy and Research for Equity in Schools. Our organization is a network of students, caregivers, educators, and community members who work together to understand and redress systemic inequities in our schools. A core component of CARES work, and evident in the work completed during this student research institute, is the idea that those individuals closest to issues or opportunities in our society should have a primary seat at the table to make changes. We engage in the work using Participatory Action Research projects which begin by forming a team, learning about a common issue or idea, and culminate by generating actionable solutions that impact our community. Projects are designed in partnership with those experiencing that inequity, elevating and validating their lived experiences. An additional integral function of the nonprofit is our partnership with the AASD leadership team, who has committed to funding and implementing the findings and recommendations that evolve from our research projects.

## BACKGROUND

### *What is a Critical Participatory Action Research Project?*

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) is a form of critical, collective inquiry that provides youth and adults with opportunities to identify concerns that impact their lives, gather and analyze data about these issues, and to take collective action to create more just communities (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2019; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2016). Described by Michelle Fine & Maria Torre (2019) as “research rooted in politics, power, participation, and a deep appreciation of knowledge, created in conditions of oppression and mobilized for social action,” CPAR projects are grounded in the teachings of popular education, democratic participation, and critical/feminist theories. Coming together around a common concern, CPAR researchers strive to name and explore the different ways in which positionality, context, and power impact their findings. There is a growing body of evidence that schools, community-based organizations, educators, and adolescents themselves are nurtured by and benefit from this form of inquiry.

### *What did we want to learn?*

Our guiding research question was: How does BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) curricular exclusion impact High School Students of Color?

This question was developed through our research team discussion and refined with an understanding that there is a lack of inclusion of curriculum specific to the histories and cultures of Black Americans, Indigenous Americans, and People of Color. To better understand this topic, we chose to complete some initial learning about the AASD curriculum, Black history and culture, and Critical Race Theory. A summary of our learnings from this literature review is below:

We spent time learning about the **AASD’s Curriculum** by examining the following documents: [AASD's overall curricular guide for decision making](#), [AASD's Statement on Discrimination](#), [ELA 9 Curriculum](#), [Algebra 1 Curriculum](#),

[Biology Curriculum](#), and the [U.S. History Curriculum](#).

Through the analysis of these documents, we learned that a primary goal of the AASD is to “Provide high-quality instructional programming that meets the diverse cultural backgrounds, educational needs, and individual aspirations of each student” (AASD Standards & Curriculum Mission Statement). This mission statement, combined with the clear anti-discrimination statement, is an affirmation that AASD strives to support students of color. While analyzing the different curricular documents, however, it is evident that this focus is lacking. While the U.S. History curriculum describes supporting students to “develop their skills in studying and writing about our nation’s history,” the guide refers to “American society.” Without explicitly naming the histories of people of color, it is questionable whether or not the curriculum holds up to the mission statement.

***Some articles that helped develop and support our understanding of how Black culture impacted our research question are:*** [History of Black Culture](#), [The Black Arts Movement](#), [The History of The Gullah People](#)

- “As with that burgeoning political movement, the Black Arts Movement emphasized self-determination for Black people, a separate cultural existence for Black people on their own terms, and the beauty and goodness of being Black.” (The Black Arts Movement, Poetry Foundation)
- “Some still did learn and teach others, despite the severe consequences they would face if they were caught.” (History of Black Culture, Study.com)

These articles gave us clarity on how Black culture has been through so many phases over the course of history. It also allowed us to realize the lack of knowledge on these topics that our researchers were not provided within their classroom settings. Throughout the course of our research, these articles allowed us to gain a better understanding of how art, music, and literature played—and continue to play—an impactful role in the liberation of Black people. We realized that it is easy to find ourselves in a never-ending loop learning about the same Black historical figures over and over again year after year. Doing this research

allowed us as researchers to take a step back and understand how the work we're focusing on will impact many years of students of color to come. The continued value of knowledge by the Gullah people, even when in many cases the consequences of being caught were death and dismemberment, gives purpose, passion, and perspective to the work we're doing here at CARES Student Research Institute.

***Some articles that helped develop and support our understanding of Critical Race Theory's impact on modern society and how it's changed over time are:***  
[Relevant Article on Critical Race Theory](#), [New York Times Article on Critical Race Theory](#), [A Lesson on Critical Race Theory](#)

The listed articles above provided insight on how the framework of Critical Race Theory has been politicized and scrutinized over time. It was important for us as a research team to have this information because we are questioning how a lack of diversity in the curriculum impacts students of color. We found that, like many new ideas, people cast their doubts and their own projections onto them before learning all of the facts. Racial inequality has been a pervasive problem across countless centuries and Critical Race Theory attempts to acknowledge some of the issues that stem from it. The attempts to ban it are crucial to our research because if scholars cannot learn about societal inequities in the classroom, an equally important question is *when* will they learn it? The removal of this fact in schooling is also the denial of the very amount of representation students of color have in the classroom curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY

### *How did we conduct our research?*

We began by choosing our topic, which is the impact of BIPOC curricular exclusion on High School Students of Color in the AASD. Then we wrote goals for our study. Our main goal was to better our school environment for generations of minorities moving forward. It was important to us to look at our own experiences and connect them to our community. We chose to interview our peers and curriculum support specialists in our district.

### *Who participated in our interviews?*

We interviewed 2 curriculum support specialists and 5 of our peers. We choose to interview curriculum support specialists because our topic guides us to look at curriculum exclusion and how it impacts students of color. We also choose to interview our peers to get an understanding of how the curriculum affected them as a student of color in the school district.

### *How did we consider access to the survey/interviews?*

When coming to our final decision on what method we would use to get our information. We offered virtual and in-person interviews for all participants and sent out consent and assent forms. We divided our group into teams who will interview the students and the teachers, then regrouped with our data.

### *What happened after the interviews?*

After interviewing our participants, we reviewed our questions and the answers given and lodged the data to make them into codes. We then categorized our codes into themes which lead us to our conclusions.

## RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

**Heaven Barnes:** I joined this institute because I was asked to join and help make a difference in the community. I wasn't sure what we would be doing but I wanted to try something new, so I joined, knowing I would be a part of a group research project. And this is important to me because it helped me speak my mind along with all of the others and learn new things that I didn't know before; not only that, but we get to help make a change in our community. I'm so proud of everyone in this entire group for sticking together and working to reach all of our goals and showing others that we can be a part of this world's solutions. Something else I wanted to share is our two groups studied to find out the problems of inequality in our school district. We've worked very hard to get here and we didn't just do it for ourselves; we did it for each other but we couldn't have done it without the help of the CARES Institute.

**Angelina Chang:** I joined this research institute because I was interested in what we were going to do and how it will make a difference. This topic is important to me because I believe no student of color should be excluded from anything in their school district, especially in their classrooms, where they should be taught about their culture or history and not taught about the same people. I am so proud of all my members as we have spent our time and energy researching to make a change in the AASD. I am proud of what we have accomplished together over the past 3 weeks and I am glad that we have worked so well with each other in meeting our goals. What I want to share from this work is all of the things we have found and how/why they should be changed.

**Kassidy Guerrero-Cendejas:** I joined this research institute because I wanted to broaden my social network and work ethic with others in the community and fight for the things I am passionate about with others who share the same interests. The topic my team chose is important to me because it's one of my top important social movements that I am passionate about and feel needs to change in the AASD. Moving forward, I would love to see the changes we are fighting for to be changed and hope for a better outcome for the generations of Black, Indigenous people of



color to have better experiences. I am genuinely very proud of a lot of the things that we have done in this program/community. But if I had to choose one thing I was proud of overall, it would have to be the hard work that our young minds put into this research. Something I would like to share about this program would be the experience I had.

**Morgan Hawthorne:** I joined the research institute because this is something I've always been really passionate about. Throughout high school, I've chosen to do projects on social justice and awareness, so this was the perfect opportunity for me. I want equality for everyone, and to be able to make a difference in the AASD means everything to me. I'm proud of all the work I got done with the rest of this group. Our product looks amazing and I hope this makes a change for every student to come. Seeing so many people who care about this topic as much as I do makes me very happy. I would like to share my experience with this type of work to encourage others to do the same.

## **FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH**

**The following themes emerged from the analysis of our interview notes:**

### **Lack of Community**

In our research, we found there was a lack of unity in both the student and teacher interviews. A lack of community means there is a lack of belonging within the schools and classrooms. It showed us that students don't have a lot of learning experiences specific to people of color or the histories of people of color. This demonstrates a lack of community because students feel isolated and lack connections. It's fair to say only a small percentage of students who are present in classrooms are actually represented in the curriculum they learn from. In fact, the teachers who were interviewed also reported not having experiences of their own learning in these ways. Another example of a lack of unity across the school is that clubs that focus on people of color are not supported as much as clubs that include non-people of color. In many classrooms, students aren't taught enough about their cultural history in class. From our data, we can see that there is a lack of inclusion that affects all Students of color in the AASD.

### **School System**

Another theme that emerged from our work touches on the school as a system in how the curriculum is developed and shared. The first finding in the curriculum was that it isn't relatable for all students and causes students to be less interested. It shows that teachers in the district lack representation of other cultures. An example of this is Appleton West High School, which has less than 10% of its teachers consistently teaching about black, indigenous, and people of color in their curriculum, according to an educator in the AASD. In the process of choosing classes, there aren't many to choose from which are diverse and inclusive. In the school year of 2022-2023, there were very few times when other cultures were represented across all schools in the Appleton Area School District. From our data, we can see there's a lack of representation in all areas of the AASD.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendations for Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning:**

Overall, there is a need to improve how diverse and inclusive the AASD High School Curriculum is. To work on this, we provide the following recommendations:

1. Create support and structure so that staff with high cultural competency (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinators, Cultural and Curriculum Support Specialists, Instructional Coaches, Principals, and Teachers) help all educators increase their cultural competency. This effort will should -
  - a. The addition of consistent use of BIPOC content into the curriculum (books, documentaries, historical documents, etc.)
  - b. The inclusion and consistent use of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive teaching practices
2. Teachers should bring topics that will interest students about their backgrounds into the curriculum
3. Give students opportunities to go out and learn more about diversity
  - a. Bring in people with different cultural experiences and backgrounds to have students learn more in-depth about their culture
  - b. Encourage students to learn more about their history
  - c. Allow students to voluntarily share their culture with their class.
4. Include content representation across all rings of culture
  - a. (list the rings) LGBTQIA+
  - b. Expand, deepen, and diversify the history and content taught specific to people of color in the curriculum.

If these recommendations are implemented, there will be more inclusion and acceptance. Everyone should be represented and feel welcome in the classroom, and a proven way to ensure this happens is to ensure that there are mirrors and windows for all students to see themselves and their culture represented while also learning about those different from them.

Create and run classes to learn about people of color (Elective language and culture courses, elective social studies courses, elective English Language Arts courses, elective art courses). An addition of courses focused on the stories and histories of

people of color will enable students to be more authentically connected to and motivated by their learning. Running elective courses focused on the ethnic-racial identities of our students will enrich our community and create unity across differences, as these courses are proven to increase empathy, understanding, and an overall sense of belonging.

Bring the curriculum to a team of parents of students of color to share feedback on the curriculum provided to students. To understand the impact of the current curriculum and curricular writing process, we recommend creating an advisory group made of parents of students of color who are tasked with sharing feedback with teachers and curriculum directors to increase the responsiveness of the AASD high school curriculum.

### **Recommendations for student clubs at secondary schools:**

Create more support for clubs that represent students of color.

- Activities directors should ensure that there is an active club for each ethnic-racial group in their student body.
- Staff should be paid to advise these clubs.

While clubs and student activities outside of the classroom were not a focus of our research project, all of the students who were interviewed brought up the lack of support as a factor that contributes to a sense of isolation for our students of color. Across all of the high schools, it is notable to our interviewees that these clubs have less structure and sense of purpose compared to other clubs. We believe a concerted effort in this area will increase their sense of community, purpose, and connection within their schools.

### **Recommendation for staffing:**

Hire and retain more teachers of color. While we do not have specific data to cite regarding the current number of teachers of color in AASD high schools, it is very clear that AASD lacks proportionate representation. Hiring and retaining teachers of color is a proven way to positively increase social-emotional and academic gains for all students. Our interviewees shared their wishes to have connections with teachers who look like them and who they can relate to.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research project has been a great learning opportunity for all of us as high school students. It has allowed us to share our school experiences, perspectives, and cultures and suggest recommendations for improvement. As a team, we worked together to reach our goal of connecting our experiences across our schools and increasing our understanding of the impacts of racism and discrimination. We focused on how the lack of representation in the AASD curriculum affects students of color.

This has been a great way to spend part of our summertime. Our group collaborated every morning for three weeks in a safe learning environment that encouraged us to show up as ourselves to envision what it would be like to become professional researchers. We learned that will contribute to addressing the inequitable school practices in our schools.

### *What questions do we have for continued research?*

How does AASD invest money and resources into diversity for the curriculum?

A. Is this current budget sufficient?

What barriers (both internally and externally) are preventing AASD from creating a more inclusive environment across all schools?

How would requiring cultural classes as electives improve cultural diversity and community engagement for students?

A. How can the AASD best implement a change in the curriculum?

B. Will this help students feel more connected to each other and create a better school environment?

## APPENDIX

### 1. [Link to interview questions](#)

## REFERENCES

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