

Policy Recommendations –

Each year, OEO recommends ways for policymakers to reduce opportunity gaps, foster greater family and school collaboration and shared decision-making, and improve outcomes for every student. Families, schools, and community organizations drive our work and the recommendations. This year, those relationships have strengthened our commitments to not only equity and inclusion, but also to anti-racist and anti-ableist¹ action.

Framework Guiding Our Recommendations

As a team, we recommit to taking an active stance against prejudice and discrimination. It will require us to be learners: to deepen our understanding of the racist and ableist ideas that have shaped our current institutions and policies. It will require us to be listeners: to learn from those who experience racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. It will require us to be agents of change: to use the privilege and power we have to advance more just and equitable processes and systems.² It will also mean taking the time to build and deepen relationships with others seeking to transform our public schools into more inclusive and welcoming communities. We are excited to be partners in this work.

In the words of Ann Ishimaru, Professor at the University of Washington’s College of Education:

We want to move from educational equity being something we do *to* or *for* people to something we do *with* people . . . The process of educational equity is just as important as the inputs and outputs.³

What does this commitment mean for OEO? We will use co-design, guided by the principle of “Nothing About Us, Without Us”⁴ in each stage of our work – from identifying issues and strategies to assessing success.

Broad Policy Recommendations to the Legislature

We invite our state’s policy and education leaders to be partners in our framework as they continue their important work toward racial equity and social justice. We recommend the following strategies for reaffirming these values and commitments to co-design and learning in our education system:⁵

- **Articulate a vision that all leaders in our public education system will be lifelong learners to deepen their understanding of systemic oppression.** To realize this vision,

¹ See, for example, a definition and discussion of ableism in the Allyship Lesson from the *One Out of Five Project*, available at: <https://live-oeo-wa.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/Lesson-5-Allyship-PowerPoint-w-Notes.pdf>.

² See, for example, organizer and activist Kayla Reed’s elucidation of what it means to be an ally: “ALLY: always center the impacted; listen & learn from those who live in the oppression; leverage your privilege; yield the floor.” <https://twitter.com/ikaylareed/status/742243143030972416?lang=en>

³ <https://education.uw.edu/news/aera-highlight-engaging-families-drivers-educational-equity> (emphasis added).

⁴ See, for example, Ivanova Smith’s short video explaining the *Nothing About Us Without Us* principle in the disability community, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvJDSkmPivw> (part of a series: *Conversations with Ivanova*).

⁵ OEO’s *Quick-Start Guide for Listening Sessions and Co-Design*, <https://live-oeo-wa.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/QuickGuideforListeningandCoDesign.2018.07.02.pdf>

the legislature should invest in a long-range plan to design and implement a continuing education program for adult learners that builds on the materials developed for the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum, OEO's *One Out of Five Project* (focused on disability history and pride), government-to-government training, tribal consultation models, and the soon-to-be developed ethnic studies curriculum. This effort should include a set of incentives to encourage all state policymakers, decision-makers, districts, school board directors, superintendents, principals, and other education leaders to participate in this program.

- **Ensure, through specific provisions in legislation, that all future education-focused workgroups, advisory boards, and task forces include students, families, and community members at the table *and* allocate sufficient resources for community-based co-design processes.** To achieve this goal, workgroups will need to bring their planning and decisions into community spaces where youth, families, and community members already are. They will also have to receive and prioritize resources for language and disability access.

Specific Policy Recommendations to the Legislature Focused on Inclusive Schools and Supports for Incarcerated Parents

In addition to these overarching recommendations, we recommend two specific policy actions for the legislature's consideration:

Recommendation #1: Invest in Building Community-Wide Capacity for Supporting Inclusive Schools

OEO urges the state to invest in a train-the-trainers program focused on families becoming local resources for diversity, equity, and inclusion in their schools and communities. OEO would lead this training model by designing with and for families, students, and communities.

Last fall, OEO launched the disability history and pride-focused *One Out of Five Project* which centered student storytelling to shift attitudes about disability and identity. As we have taken those resources to schools, community groups, universities, and workplaces, we have been asked for more videos and resources for adults to talk about disability with children and their surrounding communities. Families, students, and educators want to nurture inclusive school climates. Adults understand that they are critical in modeling for children what a better Washington can look like—where everyone lives and grows together in community.

This spring, the state re-worked the special education funding formula and invested an additional \$25,000,000 dollars over the next two years to support professional development for inclusive teaching practices. That investment is important but teachers cannot make communities more welcoming without help. Creating truly inclusive schools requires the commitment and capacity of the entire school community—families, students, and neighbors, not just educators. To dismantle stereotypes and assumptions about disability, we need to have community-wide and intentional conversations about disability, ableism, and other forms of discrimination.

OEO proposes an extension of its *One Out of Five Project* by launching a co-designed train-the-trainers program specifically for families. Student voice will drive the materials for adult learners and families will become on-the-ground resources for fostering inclusive schools and communities. The training program will expand from disability to materials and lessons about other important diversity and equity issues, such as race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, and Native identity.⁶

The legislature would have to invest resources in this kind of effort to ensure that materials are responsive, accessible, and begin with family, student, and community voice. OEO is committed to providing language and disability access. By leveraging its existing partnerships and forging new ones, OEO would co-design and offer a culturally responsive, accessible training with materials in English and Spanish for all of our state's nine ESD regions over the next six years. Through this project, we would model what it means to have our state's innovations led by communities, families, and students most marginalized by discrimination and inequities.

Recommendation #2: Reinvigorate the Former Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee and Place Youth and Families' Voices at the Center of the Work

Every year we emphasize the importance of strong school and family partnerships to support student learning. However, what if a parent or other family member is incarcerated and wants to remain involved in their student's life? That is the question we asked ourselves as we had opportunities to hear from families experiencing these barriers and seeking continuity for themselves and their children.

According to the *Governor's 2016 Executive Order, 16-05, Building Safe and Strong Communities Through Successful Reentry*, approximately 50% of the 17,000 adults in Washington State prisons are parents.⁷ Notably this number accounts only for those parents in state prisons and not those in federal prisons or local jails. While Washington has one of the lowest incarceration

⁶ The idea for the *One Out of Five Project* was inspired by the advocacy of students with disabilities who persuaded the state legislature to declare October "Disability Awareness Month" in our public schools. Accordingly, the project focused on disability history, identity, and the disability rights movement. We know from our day-to-day work with families, students, community organizations, and educators that they seek different kinds of conversations about race, ethnicity, mental health, and other critical issues. There are efforts across the state to respond to these needs. For example, please read about the work of parent leaders in the Kent School District who identified fostering positive racial and cultural identities as priorities for their family engagement curriculum: *Families in the Driver's Seat: Parent-Driven Lessons and Guidelines for Collective Engagement*, University of Washington (2015), accessed at: <https://education.uw.edu/sites/default/files/programs/epsc/ParentCurriculum-FINAL-Print.pdf>.

⁷ https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/exe_order/eo_16-05.pdf. These numbers may not capture the full picture. This estimate of 50% of the population being parents is lower than the numbers cited in a 2010 update report from the Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee. That report referred to a 2006 survey concluding that "15,000 of the 18,000 offenders in confinement in Washington State Department of Corrections facilities are parents . . . and those confined offender parents have approximately 29,000 dependent children." *Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee Annual Report*, January 2010, accessed at: https://app.leg.wa.gov/ReportsToTheLegislature/Home/GetPDF?fileName=Children%20and%20Families%20of%20Incarcerated%20Parents%202009_499fc72e-e0e8-4021-b6da-a27bb0f5e063.pdf.

rates in the United States, we must continue to address the problem of mass incarceration, racial disparities, and structural racism, and their impacts on children and families.

A parent's incarceration is a traumatic experience that can have cascading effects on a family's well-being, financial situation, housing, and community supports, continuing well after the incarceration has ended. Children with incarcerated family members experience challenges with mental health, academic progress, and school engagement, as well as significant stigma.⁸ Some studies have shown that even when organizations discuss or advocate for greater supports for individuals affected by incarceration, they can unintentionally increase negative assumptions about families and children navigating these experiences. However, no child or parent should be invisible.⁹

Robust school-family partnerships under these circumstances require resources and coordination among several different state and local agencies. They also depend on trust from communities. Organizations such as the Black Prisoners Caucus, Village of Hope, and Fabian's Fund provide bridges between incarcerated families and the communities they will rejoin. No one can do this work alone.

More than ten years ago, Washington State began to address these obstacles by creating the Children and Families of Incarcerated Parents Advisory Group. That important work was cut in 2010 as part of the economic downturn.¹⁰ Not only should the legislature invest in recreating this advisory group, but it should also provide more resources for existing efforts, such as parent-teacher conferences and information-sharing.

Currently, the state has a program to facilitate incarcerated parents' participation in parent-teacher conferences.¹¹ Each year, the Department of Corrections coordinates with local school districts to connect parents via video call with these opportunities. Parents have been using these tools, participating in an average of 41 parent-teacher conferences each year, over the past 3 school years.¹² Families are hungry for more opportunities to collaborate with schools outside these opportunities which exist twice a year.

Family members in prisons also want greater access to information about what is happening in schools today. They want to understand everything from learning standards to graduation requirements, social-emotional learning programs to course selection. Working with the Department of Corrections (DOC), Secretary of State (SOS), State Board of Education, and OSPI, OEO was able to stock prison libraries with copies of current learning standards. Community-based organizations and state agencies will collaborate and keep these resources updated and accessible, but they will need time and other supports to know if they are helpful to incarcerated parents.

⁸ See, for example: *Children of Incarcerated Parents, a Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities*, The Anne E. Casey Foundation, April 18, 2016, accessed at: <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence/>.

⁹ Conway, J. & Jones, E., *Seven Out of Ten? Not Even Close. A Review of Research on the Likelihood of Children with Incarcerated Parents Becoming Justice-Involved*, accessed at: https://www.ccsu.edu/imrp/Publicatons/Files/CIP_Seven_Out_of_Ten_Not_Even_Close.pdf.

¹⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=72.09.495>.

¹¹ <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/conferences.htm>.

¹² <https://www.doc.wa.gov/family/conferences.htm>.

As OEO learned this year from families, community organizations, and state agencies, the state has a good foundation from which to address these gaps for family engagement, but it requires more resources. OEO recommends that the legislature:

- Reinvigorate the interagency workgroup on children and families of incarcerated parents, with sufficient funding to support a sustainable co-design model with youth, families, and communities most affected by incarceration;
- Ensure that all state policy and decision-makers involved in that workgroup are provided with opportunities to deepen their knowledge of racial bias in the criminal justice system and public schools;
- Seek the voices of youth with currently or formerly incarcerated parents and let their insights guide policymaking.¹³

Oftentimes, citing statistics about mass incarceration and racial disparities can further exacerbate the stereotypes and disparities we seek to reduce.¹⁴ We invite you, instead, to listen to those individuals directly impacted by criminal justice policies, as well as their children and communities, and take next steps from that place of responsiveness.¹⁵ We are growing in this work, too.

¹³ The *Echoes of Incarceration* profiles are one place to start: <http://www.echoesofincarceration.org/Watch.html>

¹⁴ See, for example, Hetey, R. & Eberhardt, J., *The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves: Racial Disparities and the Persistence of Inequality in the Criminal Justice System*, 2018, explaining their findings that “informing White Americans of racially disproportionate incarceration may paradoxically bolster support for the very policies that perpetuate those disparities.” Accessed at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721418763931>.

¹⁵ See, for example, Ghandnoosh, Nazgol, *Racial Perceptions, Race and Punishment: Racial Perceptions of Crime and Support for Punitive Policies*, 2014, The Sentencing Project, accessed at: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/race-and-punishment-racial-perceptions-of-crime-and-support-for-punitive-policies/>; and Coates, T., *The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, October 2015, The Atlantic, accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>.