

# Promoting Equity and Justice at the School and Community Level

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On an abnormally warm spring day in March 2019, about 30 local community members arrived on a bluff overlooking the Salish Sea in Langley, WA on the southern part of Whidbey Island. They were there to support about a dozen high school students who led a March for Our Lives rally on its one-year anniversary (after the school shooting in Parkland, FL on February 14, 2018, youth nationwide organized the largest single day of protest against gun violence in history<sup>1</sup>).

The youth who gathered in Langley for a peaceful protest were calling for their school and schools everywhere to be places safe from gun violence. They were met by a small handful of members of a paramilitary organization, the Washington Three Percent, wearing camouflage, carrying weapons, and waving Don't Tread on Me flags. Pickup trucks patrolled the area. The students and their supporters were shouted at from across the street continuously for over an hour. One community member was struck by how loud they were and that they actually drowned out the students' chant over the megaphone.

Militia members called out students by name, thus targeting them with intimidation tactics. One young pro-gun advocate came over to show them a handful of bullets. The community formed a circle and surrounded the youth. Together they chanted, sang, and rallied.

<sup>1</sup> March for Our Lives, "Mission and Story." <https://marchforourlives.com/mission-story/>. Accessed 12 Aug 2021.

When leaving, some students and community members were followed to their vehicles, heckled, and one student leader was tailed home for twenty minutes. A pickup truck with two men in it stopped by a small gathering of women who were talking, and brandished a weapon. This led to a police investigation. The whole experience was a wake-up call for many of the white liberals and people of color who participated.

While we work to create justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) in the environmental and sustainability education, outdoor education, and climate change education fields, white nationalists and paramilitary groups—people linked to those who mounted an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, have been quietly—or not so quietly—assuming leadership positions in political parties and undermining public education, in particular by attacking and infiltrating school boards across the country.<sup>2</sup> While these overtly and covertly hateful and racist efforts entrench white supremacy and patriarchy culture, they are enabled when there is a lack of awareness of the severity of the threat to inclusive democracy, safety, and equity. They are further enabled when JEDI efforts aren't embraced within schools, institutions, and in local communities. What follows is a reflection on three key elements that interact in an effort to address these issues in my local community on South Whidbey Island.

## Equity and Accountability at School Districts

Following the March for Our Lives rally, community members heard stories from students that it made it clear that the school administration did not understand the nature and severity of the threat of white nationalism. The youth militia leader and his father continued targeting, through false accusations posted on Facebook, specific high school students for their social justice efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Tyler Kingkade, Brandy Zadrozny and Ben Collins, "Critical race theory battle invades school boards — with help from conservative groups," NBC News, June 15, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/critical-race-theory-invades-school-boards-help-conservative-groups-n1270794>



Online threats from their followers ensued including, “Be very careful who you mess with. WE ARE EVERYWHERE.” and “Send her my way, I’ll show her what it means to be a true American and what happens when you try to spit on our rights.” The school administration failed to recognize that this online crowd sourcing of intimidation was by design and they failed to take action because the threats occurred outside of the school building. This further emboldened the militia family, who then encouraged their supporters to show up en masse at the students’ graduation ceremony.

In this same timeframe, several BIPOC community leaders were invited into listening sessions with students to assess the racial climate at the high school. At first, the students sat quietly and politely, so they were asked to write down what they wanted to share. Recognizing that this was an opportunity to be seen and heard, the students described a school culture of bullying and oppression that tolerated racism, homophobia, and sexism.

They learned of students using the N-word in front of teachers and not being confronted about it. They learned of teachers using the N-word. They learned that this was happening not just at the high school, but in all grade levels including at the elementary school. They learned that LGBTQIA+ students felt unsafe and were too afraid to meet in a support group on campus. They learned that sexual assaults were common and that victims felt stigmatized and re-traumatized by how the school officials handled the reporting. There was a sense that boys knew they could get away with it.

Before a plan could be made for sharing the students’ concerns with the school board, high school administrators got wind of the complaints. Rather than responding with a sense of responsibility to the students and a desire to make things right, the district informed the BIPOC leaders that they were no longer allowed in the classroom. Acting quickly, the BIPOC leaders wrote a letter to the superintendent calling the district into equity and accountability.

Through persistent efforts from community leaders to communicate, pressure, and educate district staff on the threat of white nationalism and paramilitary organizations in schools, the district ultimately took action. They informed all high school teachers and staff about the organized intimidation, they sent an all-community email that clarified the misinformation, and they put extra security measures in place to ensure a safe graduation ceremony.

The district also agreed to allow the BIPOC leaders to continue their listening sessions. The opportunity to be witnessed and believed by unrelated but caring adults in their community was a pivotal experience for the youth. Ultimately, they delivered powerful testimony to the school board, superintendent, and high school administration.

Unfortunately, the leadership of the BIPOC community members went unacknowledged and they were disrespected. Still, the events at the school were also a wake up call, and the seeds of community engagement and anti-oppression that were planted began to take root.

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## Anti-Racism Resources for Outdoor Families & Environmental Educators

Updated: Nov 2, 2021

### Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in the Outdoors

<https://www.findingnature.org/post/nature-must-be-accessible-to-all>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/rei-2018/five-ways-to-make-the-outdoors-more-inclusive/3019/>

<https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2020-08-10/want-more-people-of-color-in-the-outdoors-give-them-gear>

<https://www.outdoorresearch.com/blog/article/how-to-be-an-ally-in-the-outdoors>

<https://www.backpacker.com/news-and-events/these-organizations-are-promoting-equality-for-all-hikers>

<https://medium.com/an-injustice/why-black-people-dont-go-camping>

<https://thetrek.co/challenge-the-narrative/>

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/07/21/487787/the-nature-gap/>

<https://outdoorfamiliesonline.com/diversity-in-the-outdoors/>

<https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/making-outdoors-inclusive/>

<https://www.dec.ny.gov/education/120591.html>

<https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2020/july/nature-must-be-accessible-to-all/>

<https://www.joe.org/joe/2013december/a2.php>

<https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063557853>

<https://medium.com/@gracehannahanderson/outdoor-industry-we-dont-want-your-hashtags-we-want-action-eba12fc4dcff>

<https://medium.com/an-injustice/why-black-people-dont-go-camping-a564dd47e5a8>

<https://www.outsideonline.com/2416929/out-there-nobody-can-hear-you-scream>

<https://www.rei.com/blog/rei-news/how-to-support-organizations-working-toward-a-more-inclusive-outdoor-community>

<https://www.mic.com/p/mercy-shammahs-quest-to-decolonize-the-great-outdoors-30622826>

<https://www.audubon.org/news/its-time-build-truly-inclusive-outdoors>

<https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/greater-la/nature-race-laUSD-santa-monica/education-nature-race>

<https://www.kqed.org/news/11830597/nature-for-all-the-groups-bringing-inclusion-outdoors>

<https://www.findingnature.org/post/nature-privilege>

<https://jennybruso.com/unlikelyhikers/>

<https://outdoorafro.com/>

<https://latinooutdoors.org>

<https://www.diversifyoutdoors.com/>

<https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/>

<https://youthoutside.org>

<https://camberoutdoors.org/>

### Social & Environmental Justice Resources

<https://www.onepercentfortheplanet.org/stories/nonprofits-fighting-for-social-environmental-justice>

<https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/racism-killing-planet>

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/889qxx/its-time-for-environmental-studies-to-own-up-to-erasing-black-people](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/889qxx/its-time-for-environmental-studies-to-own-up-to-erasing-black-people)

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgx7xy/environmental-justice-climate-action-organizations-to-donate-time-and-money>

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## Promoting Equity and Justice at the School and Community Level

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### Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression in Community

In response to the police murder of George Floyd in 2020, a number of actions and public demonstrations emerged across the country, and many people in our community also took action.

Conversations on all manner of topics came up including the call to defund the police. Thanks to the groundwork laid by BIPOC community leaders, many local organizations and governments have engaged in anti-racism training, and local funders have since shifted their funding priorities accordingly. The City of Langley created a Dismantling Structural Racism advisory group (DSR-AG) which has been meeting regularly. Their vision is “Langley is an anti-racist City, functioning as an integral part of the just and equitable South Whidbey community.”<sup>3</sup>

That this vision statement of the DSR-AG situates Langley as part of the broader South Whidbey community that is just and equitable, is one of several key elements that helps to connect their work with an ecosystem of support. It aids in implementing the vision of becoming an anti-racist community, and adds another piece of the puzzle needed to create the culture shift needed to realize that vision. BIPOC leaders and other community organizers are an important part of this journey—they are driving this vision and doing the work of getting nonprofits, elected officials, and businesses involved, as well as individual community members.

### Student Voice and Youth Leadership

In September 2019, community members responded to a call from youth climate justice leaders who organized the Whidbey #ClimateStrike in solidarity with the global #ClimateStrike. Over 150 students and adults participated in a march and rally in Freeland, WA protesting Chase and Wells Fargo banks financing of extreme fossil fuel developments. These two banks are by far the two worst banks in the world for fueling the climate crisis<sup>4</sup>. Later that same day over 200 students and adults participated in another #ClimateStrike action in Coupeville, WA. Some people

<sup>3</sup> Dismantling Systemic Racism Advisory Group. The City of Langley website. [https://langleywa.org/government/citizen\\_boards/dismantling\\_systemic\\_racism\\_working\\_group.php](https://langleywa.org/government/citizen_boards/dismantling_systemic_racism_working_group.php). Accessed 04 Aug 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Banking on Climate Chaos Fossil Fuel Finance Report 2021. <https://www.ran.org/bankingonclimatechaos2021/>. Accessed 05 Aug 2021.

attended both. These actions kicked off over 30 weeks of weekly marches and protests, and the formation of a student-led organization, the United Student Leaders. The relationship between their adult mentor and the youth was an outgrowth of the joint community-student efforts to counter the militia in 2019. This alliance between activists, youth, and the community at large has been important, and could be a good model for other communities.

Among the many accomplishments of the United Student Leaders was a four-page sign-on letter to the South Whidbey School District calling for safety, equity, and a 21st century education. This sign-on letter garnered 343 signatures from students, educators, parents and caregivers, alumni, elected officials, and local organizations, and kicked off a campaign called Transforming Education. Through these efforts, and with the United Student Leaders’ support, the school district reviewed its policies on equity and dress code, initiated or revised teacher training programs on these topics, implemented single occupancy gender neutral bathrooms in all school buildings, approved new ethnic studies and environmental science classes, received student presentations on the dress code and gender pronouns, and put Black Lives Matter and PRIDE banners outside the high school. The youth leaders have also advocated for inclusion of LGBTQIA+ awareness in sex education, the teaching of climate science not as a debate, but as truth, and for climate change education to be incorporated into all classes throughout the K-12 programs.

These substantive changes and improvements to the school district occurred during the same timeframe as the Trump-fueled attacks on public education and the far-right strategy of attaching the term “critical race theory” to any equity in education efforts—including truth in history—stoking people’s fears and outright lying about the consequences of doing so. They also occurred while attacks on comprehensive sex education mounted following the passage of Senate Bill 5395 (SB 5395 led to Referendum 90 (R90) on the 2020 ballot, which was approved by voters<sup>5</sup>).

For additional background, R90 aims to “... create a uniform and quality sex education experience for all students. It promotes racial equity because schools that teach disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students are more likely to use abstinence-only education; and students of color are more burdened with societal stigmas and stereotypes against them and their sexual freedom. It positively reflects LGBTQ+ students in order to promote acceptance by their teachers and peers. R90 teaches about consent and appropriate behavior. Parents of students may opt out of this program so it is not mandatory.” “This program could be a huge leap forward for sexual literacy and education in Washington.”<sup>6</sup>

All of these dynamics were part of a flash point which occurred when anti-public education advocates, including the wife of a school board member, organized a “protest against indoctrination” the day before graduation in June 2021. When students at the high school learned of this, they immediately wanted to coun-

<sup>5</sup> Ballotpedia, “Washington Referendum 90, Sex Education in Public Schools Measure (2020).” [https://ballotpedia.org/Washington\\_Referendum\\_90\\_Sex\\_Education\\_in\\_Public\\_Schools\\_Measure\\_\(2020\)#cite\\_note-SoS-3](https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Referendum_90_Sex_Education_in_Public_Schools_Measure_(2020)#cite_note-SoS-3). Accessed 11 Aug 2021.

<sup>6</sup> The Guillemot Guide, “2020 Voters Guide,” Page 5. Unpublished manuscript.

ter-protest. United Student Leaders stepped up to coordinate the counter-protest at which 360 people marched and rallied. Consisting of 160 students from the school and over 200 local community members, it comprised the largest mass action on South Whidbey Island since the Women's March in 2017. In its wake, school board meetings and the local newspaper became public forums.

The attacks on public education throughout Washington State and beyond must be confronted. Our heretofore modest efforts to create safe, equitable, and inclusive centers of education must not only be defended, but bold youth-led and community-supported leadership must emerge and be supported. Our goal is not just to maintain education as we've seen it, but to redefine it to be relevant to the challenges of our time—the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and other forms of oppression, and the climate emergency.

All of the work to advance equity at the South Whidbey School District has also begun to shift what is possible. The new environmental science course promises career connected learning and authentic project-based learning opportunities. A new authentic learning experience program will feature outdoor and experiential learning, and has bolstered enrollment. The relationships built in our community are enabling new collaborations, broader and bolder thinking, and more engagement and commitment from the community in public education. A transformed public school system can make a significant difference in advancing not only climate change education, but also climate action. This is only possible when we dismantle internal biases about racism and white supremacy in institutions and in our communities, create safe and equitable spaces for students, and create an environment where the truth about our history, and the truth about the climate crisis, can be told. The extremists are attacking public education to have positions of community power. This will affect everyone, and then the entire Earth is on the line. We risk places becoming hostile to the creation of, or restoration of, a livable planet.

This election season in particular, I call on each and every one of you to pay attention to your local school board elections, learn about the candidates, and get out the vote for those that represent the community that you want to see. While it is important to show up for this election (and show up for all elections, as we should), we must show up for the deeper work of building community resistance and resilience. This work can only be done in trusting and authentic relationships with other people with whom you share affinity.



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## Resources *(continued from page 13)*

- <https://www.vogue.com/article/why-every-environmentalist-should-be-anti-racist>
- <https://www.fs.usda.gov/speeches/african-americans-forestry-broadening-circle-conservation>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/05/climate/racism-climate-change-reading-list.html>
- <https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/african-americans-nature-and-environmental-justice/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/07/environmental-movement-very-white-these-leaders-want-change-that/>
- <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/green-girl-leah-thomas-intersectional-environmentalism-the-people-interview/>
- <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/illinois/stories-in-illinois/race-environmental-movement/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/robert-bullard-how-environmental-racism-shapes-the-us>
- <https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2020/7/1/challenging-the-white-narrative>
- <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/07/21/487787/the-nature-gap/>
- Anti-Racism Resources for Environmental Educators**
- <https://www.eenc.org/news/9012116>
- <https://naaee.org/eeopro/resources/equity-resources>
- <https://youthoutside.org/racial-equity-in-outdoor-science-and-environmental-education-re-establishing-the-field-with-intention/>
- <https://www.edutopia.org/article/guide-equity-and-antiracism-educators>
- <https://blacklivesmatteratschool.com/2020/01/21/announcing-the-black-lives-matter-at-school-2020-curriculum-resource-guide/>
- [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching\\_now/2020/06/students\\_are\\_demanding\\_anti-racist\\_curriculum\\_and\\_instruction.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2020/06/students_are_demanding_anti-racist_curriculum_and_instruction.html)
- <https://www.eenorthcarolina.org/resources/justice-equity-diversity-and-inclusion>
- <https://www.thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race>
- <https://www.educolor.org/resources/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/a-call-to-action-for-white-educators-who-seek-to-be-anti-racist>
- [https://www.lawrencehallofscience.org/sites/default/files/EE\\_A\\_Field\\_at\\_Risk\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://www.lawrencehallofscience.org/sites/default/files/EE_A_Field_at_Risk_Policy_Brief.pdf)
- <http://beetlesproject.org/racial-equity-outdoor-science-environmental-education-re-establishing-field-intention>
- <https://www.racialequityinstitute.com/>
- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/18-D6-ZZA5rmgiapiokAFMte3isYK8dVqXswE8d16x1Q/edit?usp=sharing>
- Anti-Racism Resources for Individuals**
- <https://medium.com/wake-up-call/a-detailed-list-of-anti-racism-resources>
- <https://medium.com/equality-includes-you/what-white-people-can-do-for-racial-justice-f2d18b0e0234>
- <https://www.whiteallytoolkit.com/>
- <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/>
- [www.joincampaignzero.org](http://www.joincampaignzero.org)
- [www.dismantlingracism.org](http://www.dismantlingracism.org)