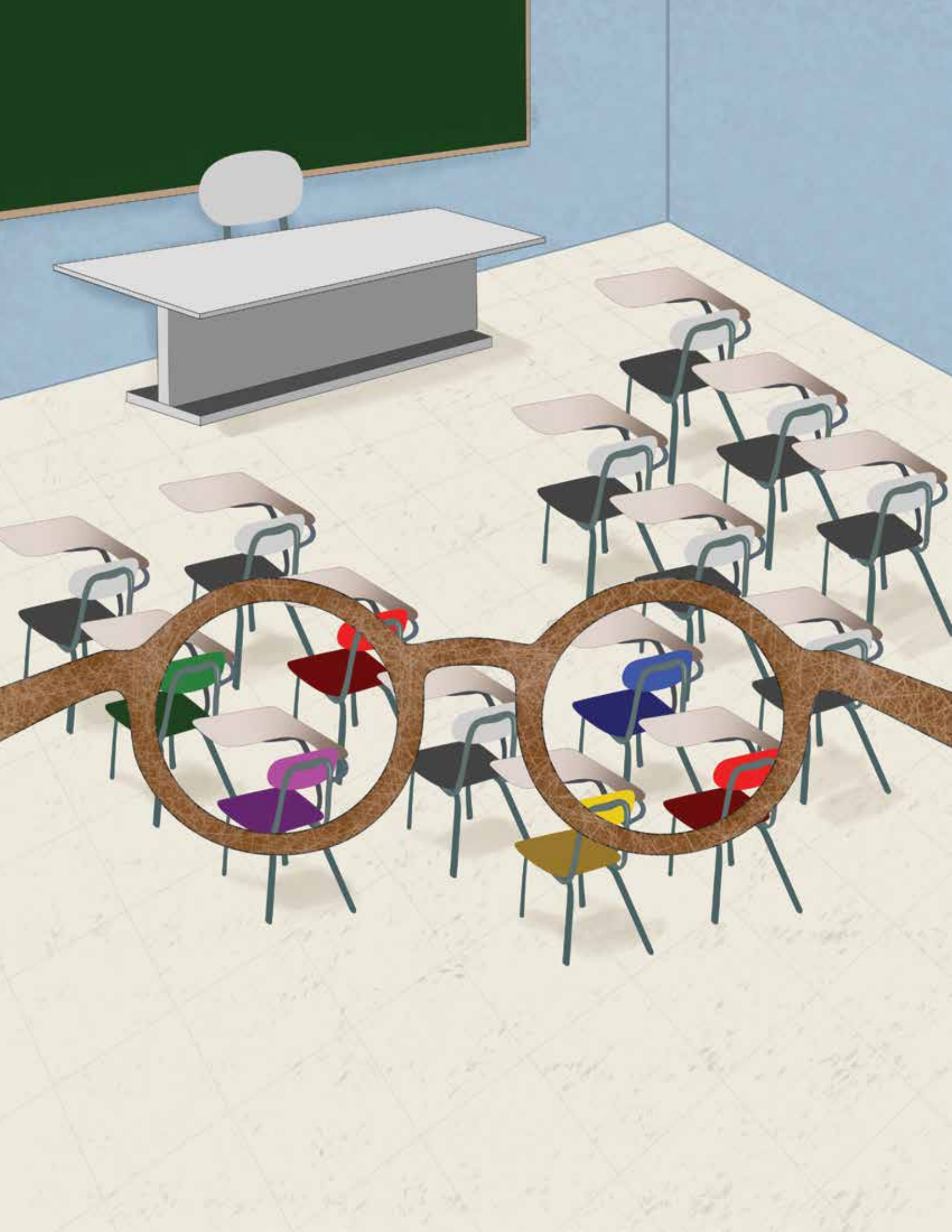


# The Register

THE MAGAZINE FOR ONTARIO'S PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS & VICE-PRINCIPALS

## The Upcycled School

Reshaping education with passports and passion projects





FROM

**A**wareness

TO

**Action**

Disrupting racism/anti-Black racism as  
education leaders

By Dr. Andrew Campbell and Kaschka Watson

Illustration by LynSow Creative

As education leaders, we have grappled with our lived experiences of racism/anti-Black racism in our sector. We know that the fight against racism/anti-Black racism is a continuous one and we cannot stand by and keep silent while Black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC) and other racialized groups stand alone at the forefront of this fight for equity and social justice. Many of us may shy away from engaging in courageous conversations about racism/anti-Black racism and other forms of discrimination because we might not have experienced them or may fail to see the disparities because of our privilege.

It is time for all of us, education leaders and citizens alike, to take action that will disrupt and eradicate racism/anti-Black racism in our education systems. If we have forgotten the impact of decades of racism that have plagued our systems and society, the worldwide protests over race and policing resulting from the 2020 deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery have revitalized the trauma and pain and re-focused our attention to racial violence that knows no bounds in dehumanizing Black people and reinforcing the systemic barriers that exist.



The time for settling with just being aware of racism/anti-Black racism has long passed. The time for awakening the need for change and taking intentional and deliberate actions to address racism/anti-Black racism is now. We will not join the ranks of those who have neglected change and are constantly asking our BIPOC students and their communities to wait for change. They have waited long enough, and if education leaders are to move away from simply settling with being aware of racial disparities, they must act to identify, disrupt and remove systemic barriers in education. This can be accomplished by

- understanding self as a leader
- engaging in courageous conversations
- fostering an inclusive culture and climate
- creating and remediating policies and practices with an equity lens and
- practicing advocacy leadership.

### Understanding Self as a Leader

Principals are charged with leading teachers, students and staff through equitable practices. However, before we can truly lead equitably, we must first understand self as a leader. We have to know who we are by being self-aware of our own biases and prejudices. Understanding self means that we are in tune with ourselves and are able to undergo self-examination of our privilege and power as leaders. We are aware of our unconscious biases that might impede us from making equitable decisions (Deloitte, 2012). Principals can better understand who they are as leaders if they are authentic in the process of self-reflection. The work towards dismantling racism/anti-Black racism in schools is a persistent challenge for leaders who lack authenticity.

Some education leaders engage in performances. They put on a show by leveraging opportunities like global protests against racism/anti-Black racism by organizing seminars and workshops to meet school compliance. They want to say, “I did the work,” but in reality they have just checked yet another box. There is no follow-up, no growth and

no change. Once the dust settles, it is back to regularly scheduled programming. They are back to square one because they have not yet unpacked who they are as leaders.

We are challenging our principals, vice-principals and education leaders to engage in critical self-reflection to fully understand themselves and the philosophy of their pedagogical practices (Campbell & Watson, in press). We strongly believe that “who we are, impacts how we lead” (DR. ABC). If leaders don’t know who they are, they will not know what it means to disrupt and what actions must be taken to disrupt racism/anti-Black racism in their schools

### Engaging in Courageous Conversations

Leaders who want to disrupt must be prepared and equipped to engage in courageous conversations. Participating in such conversations means not being afraid to speak up and speak out; it’s being upfront about whiteness and white supremacy and acknowledging the many ways leaders pathologize (Shields et al., 2005) our BIPOC students through deficit thinking. Leaders cannot say that they are invested and committed in identifying and removing systemic racism barriers for BIPOC students if they are unwilling to speak against racism and injustice when they see it.

Engaging in courageous conversations ignites the need for change, which requires being bold and brave in calling out issues of inequities and using privilege to lift the voices of BIPOC students and their communities who are faced with racial injustices. White education and community members alike must speak out and demand change on the interpersonal and institutional levels. The fight for justice will not be won by Black and Indigenous communities alone (Brady, 2020).

We know that the road to disrupting racism/anti-Black racism in our schools is a meandering trajectory filled with obstacles that might cause many of us to detour from the path. Therefore, we want to leave leaders with

eight good practices for engaging in courageous conversations.

1. **Share your story**
2. **Come prepared to learn**
3. **Come prepared to unlearn**
4. **Check your biases**
5. **Stay engaged**
6. **Speak your truth**
7. **Experience discomfort**
8. **Move to action**

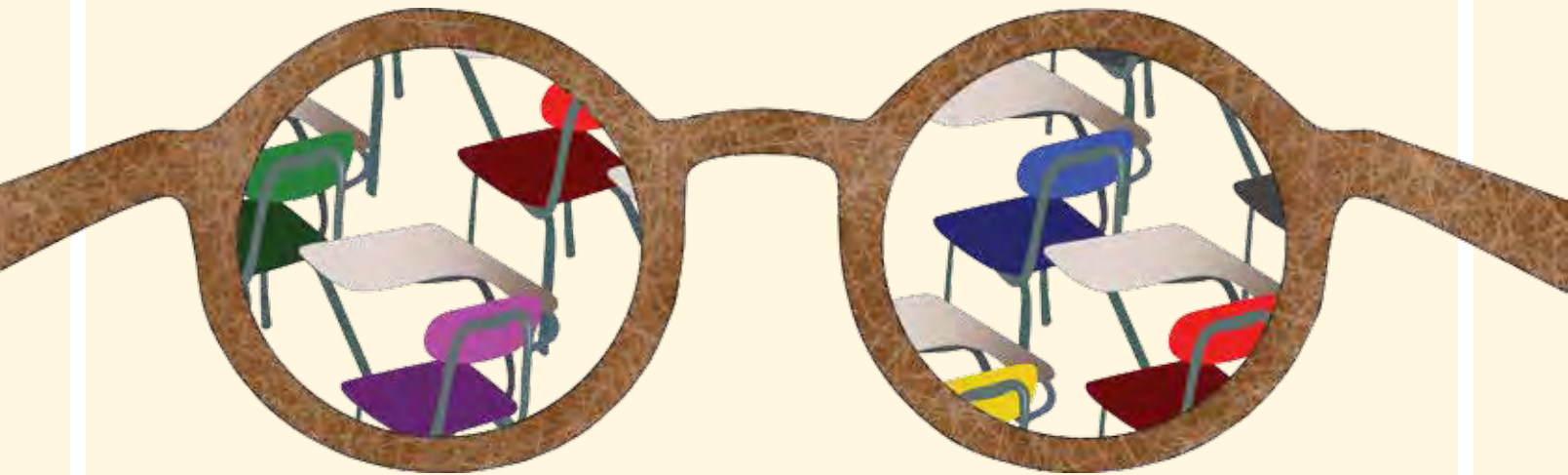
(Campbell, 2019).

### Fostering an Inclusive School Culture and Climate

Our schools must be a space and place where all our students want to be and have a sense of belonging. “Too many of our students are made to feel like they are strangers in schools as if they are interrupting something” (DR. ABC). Leaders must ensure that our students feel like the classroom is theirs. We play a critical role in influencing, creating and sustaining an inclusive school culture and climate. This is why our actions matter – how we act to achieve such an environment. We have to respond to all of our students’ diverse needs and disrupt existing racism/anti-Black racism barriers that disenfranchise BIPOC students from achieving their fullest potential. Leaders thrive in fostering inclusive school culture and climate by changing and disrupting content, practices, structures and strategies within their schools to tackle racial inequities and systemic barriers that put BIPOC students at a disadvantage of being successful.

Educators shape their school culture and climate by engaging in inclusive practices that rise above the challenges of inequities and the status quo that often perpetuate racism and systemic racism in education. They foster inclusive school cultures and climates by being transformative. They consistently act to change their teachers’ and staffs’ attitudes in how they view BIPOC students and the role they play toward eradicating racism/anti-Black racism in our education system. Leaders who are transformative form a “com-

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the need for *change*



and taking *intentional and deliberate*  
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munity of practice” for equity and social justice in their schools (Szpara, 2017), assessing the culture and climate and addressing the systemic barriers that create opportunities that foster diversity, inclusion and equity for all students. By changing their mindset, leaders can examine how they see their BIPOC students and use an equity lens to create and remediate policies and practices that impact their BIPOC students’ experiences.

#### **Creating and Remediating Policies and Practices with an Equity Lens**

Yet another term, “equity lens,” has taken root in the system, but do we understand the responsibility of looking at things through

an equity lens? Equity lenses are not rose-coloured glasses; they are not fashionable and in style. Rather, an equity lens is meant to disrupt our settled and satisfied ideas. Applying an equity lens illuminates the inequities we fail to see or consciously ignore. As leaders we must be honest about change and what is needed.

To effect positive change in their students and eradicate racism/anti-Black racism in their schools, leaders must be vigilant when it comes to the creation of policies. Many of the policies and practices in our schools today do not cater to the needs, nor provide equitable opportunities, for our BIPOC students. They are moulded in one clear-cut design that caters

to students from the dominant group in our society. Not only have we heard BIPOC students sharing that they do not see themselves and/or experiences reflected in the curriculum of particular programs, but we have seen and experienced this curriculum gap ourselves at various stages of our experiences in the United States and across North America. A lack of diversity and inclusion of differences and cultures have been absent from the majority of our school curriculum policies, which have constantly been embedded with colonial ways of knowing and being.

BIPOC students have been disproportionately impacted in education due to the streaming of K-12 students into courses and

programs. This streaming prevents them from actually progressing academically. These policies and practices taint BIPOC students long-term, because of the barriers that are attached to them. It is evident that even when BIPOC students manage to pursue postsecondary education, they are underprepared compared to their counterparts who were not streamed, which leads to large scale dropout rates of BIPOC students.

Education leaders must be purposeful in their role and use their power and privilege to create and remediate policies and practices rooted in systemic racism and act to make them more equitable and inclusive of all students. Schools and other education institutions must insist on having diverse representation at decision-making tables and on committees that construct policies and best practices. Having diverse representation matters, and will ensure

that all students' needs and opportunities for success are exhausted before policies and practices are enforced in our education processes.

### Practicing Advocacy Leadership

Addressing racism/anti-Black racism as education leaders is complex, regardless of whether an equity framework or a human rights framework is employed (Dua & Bhanji, 2017). However, in times like these when our systems are being tested during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide access and equitable solutions to students, particularly our BIPOC students who are further being marginalized due to systemic racism, education leaders should engage in advocacy leadership.

Leaders cannot stand by and allow the work of equity, diversity and inclusion in our schools, policies and actions to take a backseat (Green, 2020). They should practice

advocacy leadership, which is needed to fight the persistency of racism/anti-Black racism in our education systems. The disruption of racism will require us to speak out against racial disparities impacting our BIPOC students from being successful. Leaders are better positioned to influence equitable changes in schools and advocate for social justice for all students.

Advocacy leadership calls upon leaders to be less silent and static in their actions and be the voices of their BIPOC students and their communities in taking concrete steps to call out for change in inequities. Practicing advocacy leadership means not being afraid to use their influence to lead actions that drive systemic changes. We see leaders who practice advocacy leadership as being bold and willing to challenge the status quo, knowing that their push for equity for BIPOC students



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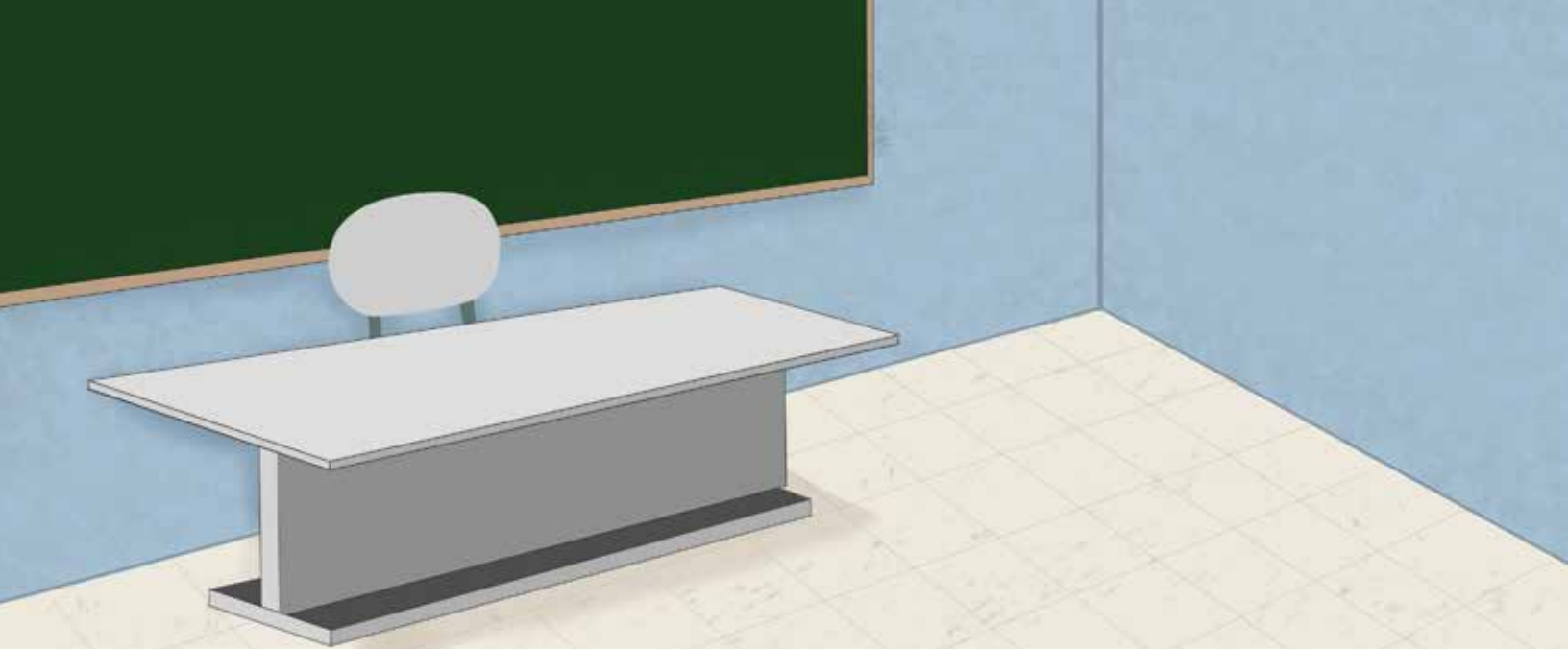
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may make others feel uncomfortable. They do not second guess or deviate from that push for change because they know it is the right thing to do.

Recognizing and understanding that the issues of racism/anti-Black racism have constantly marginalized BIPOC students may

cause leaders to become unpopular or put them in the spotlight. Still, they accept that because their actions are attached to achieving equity for all students. Advocacy leadership requires empowering BIPOC students toward eradicating racism/anti-Black racism in education and providing students with the opportunity

to contribute to the disruption of racism/anti-Black racism in their everyday lives.

### Conclusion

The fight against racism/anti-Black racism is one that we must all recognize and do our part to join with our BIPOC brothers and sisters to



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take concrete actions to help identify, mitigate and remove systemic racism in our education systems. No longer can we shy away from having those hard conversations that make us feel uncomfortable. Our practices must be bold if we are to champion change that will lead to equity for all students regardless of their diverse backgrounds. We are not powerless in our actions; our power and privilege as leaders provide us with the platform to engage in courageous conversations and create an inclusive school culture and climate for our BIPOC students to thrive academically.

Disruption leads to change, and by disrupting the status quo that often perpetuates systemic racism in education, we are paving the landscape for reform that will foster diversity of thought, inclusion and equity for all our students. The time is now to embrace change towards social justice for all. ▲

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