Educational Leadership Contributes to Low Standardized Test Scores within the United States Public School System

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Abstract

Many students in the United States school system are still experiencing many hardships when attempting to get the education all American students deserve. Many of these hardships are due to factors that are out of their control, such as their race and gender. However, other factors, such as religion and financial status, which theoretically can be controlled, are not as simple as they seem. There is such a deep-rooted history of segregation in the United States that even if they can make specific changes to comply with societal standards, it is an uphill battle. Therefore, it will take many changes for students who are a part of groups still facing disparities as if they are not worthy of this education. These students often have minimal resources to help improve their situation when it comes to their education. This grim reality shows itself in particular when it comes to taking standardized tests, in which many of these minority groups score much lower than the dominant societal group. This paper will look at various literature that should be able to shed some light on this subject. Upon discovering some of the most pressing issues surrounding this topic, the intent is to recommend an action plan to ensure that all American students will get the resources they need to prosper in learning and life.

Keywords: Public school, education, teaching, leadership, policy, race, poverty

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Introduction

Problem Statement

      The issue examined is school leadership's impact on declining levels of student performance of standardized testing within the United States public school system. School leadership is essential to learning and teaching outcomes (Xhomara, 2018). Initially, public schools in the United States were responsible for teaching morals based on Protestant principles and subjects like reading and writing. However, today, public schools may not advocate for religion according to the United States Constitution (Blad, 2024). That is a significant change in the attitudes of leadership in public schools. With all of the advancements in public schools, there is a looming issue of low performance on standardized tests in K-12 public schools within the United States. Strict reliance on standardized testing scores currently penalizes low-performing schools, primarily affecting low-income students of color, as was the case with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, now superseded by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Cunningham, 2018).

Background

      Baltimore, Maryland, made national headlines when the Maryland State Department of Education released the 2022 test results of the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP); results revealed that only seven percent of students from 150 schools tested proficient in math, and 23 schools had none (Papst, 2023). Unfortunately, there are severe consequences of not understanding basic math; it is cumulative and needs a solid foundation to build upon; if students lack basic math skills, it is impossible to move on to higher mathematics without some refresher courses (Rose, 2020).

COVID-19 may be partly to blame for lower test scores; many students fall behind in their classes by missing school time (Broom, 2022). However, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, during the COVID-19 pandemic, test scores were similar to before the pandemic, yet they are still lower than in most other parts of the United States (Juhasz, 2022). Back in Baltimore, the proposed solution is to promote students to the next grade while continuing to study what they missed from the previous year (Pomrenze, 2021). This approach is reasonable and practical enough to help students review what they missed. Teaching and reteaching vulnerable, disenfranchised students as necessary will help them achieve academic and career preparedness, which may otherwise be unobtainable (Rose, 2020). In order to give these students and schools what they need to get ahead, possibly tutoring to make up for any learning gaps, these would require more funding, yet due to their low performance, they ultimately end up with less funding. It is a vicious cycle that some students and schools are ill-equipped to escape.

Literature Review

According to the current body of literature, this paper will explore and analyze various themes, perspectives, and theories to discover some of the reoccurring issues that students and schools face in the United States surrounding low standardized test scores in particular and poor performance in general. Globally, over 600 million children are below proficiency in math and reading, most of whom are in school, but proficiency is even less for those not (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2024). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in the United States as of 2022, only thirty-three percent of students in the fourth grade are proficient in reading (The Nations Report Card, 2022a), and thirty-six percent were proficient in math (The Nations Report Card, 2022b).

Before the public school system began in the United States, most areas often had no

schools, while many had tuition costs. Many children were out of school due to several factors, such as economics, race, gender, and geographic location (Kober & Rentner, 2020). European schools have directly influenced American schools. European schools began primarily for students from wealthy families, similar to schools in the United States. However, European schools were regulated nationally, while schools in the United States were regulated locally in the form of what is commonly known as school districts today (Goldin, 1999).

The earliest schools in the United States began in New England by white Protestants, beginning mainly with reading the Bible; white male Protestant students learned math and science through apprenticeships; white female Protestant students generally received early education at home but could not continue their education until much later, and disabled students were typically excluded altogether (Capriola, 2022). For about two hundred years, white Protestant Americans have had an enormous head start within the United States educational system dating back as early as the 1600s, as opposed to groups like African Americans who did not receive any semblance of formal education until the 1800s (Race Forward, 2015). Today, such practices are considered unethical, and the state has increasingly begun to play a critical role in the public school system of the United States (Galey, 2015). Education is essential for individual growth and national improvement; it also has deep roots in religion, even in the United States, where the state and church are historically separated (Goldin, 1999).

History shows that the original purpose of the United States school system began specifically to educate only certain groups of people. Many changes have occurred over the years, and now education in the United States is for everyone. That is a fact, yet specific types of schools and students still suffer in a discriminatory society and school system not designed with them in mind; without intervention, it will continue to permeate into the future, leaving ethical

and equitable education out of reach for many students from diverse groups living within the United States.

Pedagogy in the United States has European roots, yet pedagogy has undergone many changes throughout history. Historically, pedagogy "…is the art or science of teaching children" (Rajendra & Shah, 2021, p.8). Pedagogy etymological origin comes from the Greek word paidagogos, which refers to an enslaved person tasked with chaperoning young male students between home and school, instructing in such subjects as reading, and mentoring young men on proper social etiquette (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Paidagogos means "boy leader" (Penn Classical Studies Department, 2020); paidos means (male) child, and agogos means leader (Speer, 2023). In Greek culture, paidagogos were responsible for their children's safety, well-being, and education, and their role was much more significant than that of school teachers. Wealthy families trusted them with more responsibility and accountability regarding overseeing their children (Rajendra & Shah, 2021).

Pedagogy technically refers to children's education when referring to adult instruction; the correct term is andragogy (Knapke et al., 2024). However, today, pedagogy has a much broader interpretation; it can represent the physical place of education, the act of educating, or the education itself (Rajendra & Shah, 2021). The well-established historical record shows that formal education in the United States was exclusive to a few students who met a particular set of criteria. Schools primarily began in New England and predominantly admitted only wealthy white English-speaking Protestant males of able body and mind, excluding other groups of students based on perceived disabilities, gender, race, religion, and economic status. Unfortunately, many children did not meet these criteria, leaving many unable to attend school.

Though other students, namely white Irish Catholic immigrants, were able to attend these early schools, they had to conform to standards that went against their beliefs, values, and norms. All Protestant denominations of schools accepted the King James Bible as foundational to school pedagogy. However, that did not align with Catholic students, and it prohibited them from using their version of the Bible. Therefore, Catholic schools were created (Lockwood, 2002). There are also accounts of Native Americans who were permitted to attend New England Protestant schools as early as 1617 (Juneau et al., 2001). However, Native Americans, similar to Irish Catholic immigrants, had to conform to New England Protestant standards. Though there were some exceptions made to the rules, in general, there were not many, and when an exception occurred, it came with the expectation that students would be able to adjust to the set curriculum standards.

Race plays a significant role in education, with a law passed in 1830 explicitly prohibiting enslaved African Americans from reading (Goldin, 1999). In 1870, Jim Crow laws began to keep white people segregated from African Americans in particular, yet Latin, Asian, and Native American people were also segregated from white schools, often operating schools with significantly fewer resources than their white peers (Kober & Rentner, 2020). As time progressed, public schools in the United States continued to evolve. Still, American political actions have made many attempts to level the playing field for all American students. The United States became open to educating all American children, regardless of race, gender, ability, or how much money their family has.

The 1954 ruling of Brown versus the Board of Education declared that racial segregation would no longer be legal within the United States public school system (National Archives, 2016). The ruling was monumental to those denied an education due to their race. Even more,

gains were to be had by traditionally marginalized groups, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, when the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special needs students was introduced (ACT, 2023). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) changed later to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (U. S. Department of Education, 2024).

Despite these changes to education policy, disparities remain in education due to race, gender, income, disability, and other factors. President George Bush acknowledged that some children were still disadvantaged; therefore, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) appeared in 2001 (United States Department of Education, 2005). In 2010, Common Core Standards were introduced (Capriola, 2022). Then, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 superseded the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (Cunningham, 2018). President Barack Obama began the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), allowing more flexibility in setting standards for students' educational goals and outcomes in a continued effort to aid historically disadvantaged groups (Understood, 2019). These Acts are a step in the right direction, but it will take time to see optimal results. There still need to be more improvements in education for students within the United States from traditionally excluded groups, even though there have been many attempts to help address the nationwide issue of inequality regarding students' education and educational outcomes.

Many changes have occurred in the United States public school system as the federal government plays a critical role in educational policies (Galey, 2015). However, even after implementing many of these policies, American public schools have consistently been economically segregated. There are currently sizable differences between wealthy schools and

schools with fewer resources. The fact remains that the schools' and students' financial status influence schools' resources, students' education, and, consequentially, their financial future (Goldin, 1999). The United States public school system relies on local, state, and federal taxes to fund public schools. There are wide gaps in the money spent on students from state to state (Galston, 2014). A 2022 report shows that New York State spent $29,873 per student while Utah spent $9,552 (Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2024).

By today's standards, the United States public school system may have begun as an unethical institution with a culture often based on open and legal discrimination against race, gender, income, and disability that negatively impacted many distinct groups of people. Significant accomplishments have helped address the many issues surrounding the various groups of people once excluded from attending school. The United States public school system must continue working to ensure that no student is left behind and that students from traditionally ostracized groups get the education they need and deserve to succeed. Many descendants among these diverse groups experience negative interactions and outcomes.

Discrimination based on religion, race, class, gender identity, and ability or lack thereof still seems to segregate students and schools, even with all the political changes designed to help address these serious issues. According to Galey (2015), the national education policies for the United States public school system may have the best intentions for helping all students receive a good education, which sounds good in theory, but the actual practice is severely lacking. The national standards and strict adherence to a performance-based reward system are implicitly biased. Schools with a solid history of already having higher scores on standardized testing will continue to reap most of the rewards and resources. Schools that have historically been struggling with lower scores will continue to have to figure out something that will work to

create any positive change. Some schools and their students desperately need to change the low standardized test scores they have been facing year after year. Low achievement holds the least weight when funding students (Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2024).

Besides funding, those in educational leadership roles who want to create positive changes for students often have no support and face pushback from their leaders (Clarida, 2023). Though there are many conversations about improving schools, evidence shows that many are unwilling to disrupt the status quo (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2021). While many students often feel ignored and not acknowledged for their comments or contributions (Level et al., 2022). Some schools are more interested in receiving input from janitors and other support staff, yet there is still little interest in student feedback (Parker et al., 2020), though their voice is valuable. The staff has a vital role in schools, as do students. However, schools would be pointless without students and would not need staff. Interestingly, education is mostly speech (Hamburger, 2022), but the students' voices often go unheard (Level et al., 2022).

Children often have little to no opportunity to express themselves about their education, even though this is a child's right according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 14, which states that children are entitled to freedom of expression, particularly about their lives (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 1989). Article 14 came after the children's right to education, among other things, in the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2022). Instead, some students may feel they would get in trouble and face unwanted consequences if they speak up about specific issues that are of importance to them. An educational environment like this can intimidate students, causing them to shut down completely to avoid unwanted and unwarranted punishments. Some teachers believe that the student's voice

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is essential and even complimentary to educational leadership, though not all teachers agree with this point of view (Level et al., 2022).

During the 1980s, studies showed a need to incorporate minority students' cultures into the classroom (Ahn et al., 2014). Recently, neuroscience exposed many false ideas about how learning occurs, and some teachers still support these outdated beliefs and are less knowledgeable on the subject to know any better (Shi & Blau, 2020). These outdated beliefs pose issues within the United States public school system. Many students continue to be marginalized and are more vulnerable to the people responsible for teaching them, giving rise to a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) approach to teaching (Brown & Cooper, 2011). Some other approaches are inclusive pedagogy and intercultural pedagogy, as they both attempt to create respectful learning environments for all students (Shi & Blau, 2020). Educational leaders in the United States must be" creative and innovative" while being open to change as the situation warrants it (Yang, 2021).

A noticeable gap exists between American students of various backgrounds regarding educational achievement and how they score on standardized tests. The gap between white and black students' educational achievement is noticed as early as kindergarten and continues to get progressively worse as they progress to high school (Brown & Cooper, 2011). Brown and Cooper (2011) suggest that a possible solution to this issue is to adopt a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to acknowledge students' cultural differences and unique experiences, which in turn may be able to improve the educational outcomes of traditionally low-performing students. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) may apply to various cultures. Different cultural norms and values affect teaching and learning outcomes, and a lack of this awareness may thwart students' educational progress (Yang, 2021).

The concept of race and racism, along with other inequalities, has long been an issue in the United States and appears to remain so, which does tend to trickle down into the public school system, negatively affecting minority students' chance at a solid education, which is foundational to the rest of their lives. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) could be a promising game changer, particularly when combined with Critical Race Theory (CRT). Race, among other factors, affects people's perceptions of others and how they treat others, including every student in the United States public school system. Over 40 years ago, Critical Race Theory (CRT) began (Sawchuk, 2021) as an ongoing academic effort to examine the race experience in modern Western society. Recently, President Donald Trump banned public schools teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT) from federal funding (Cochran, 2025).

This effort to academically address racial issues started in the United States during the 1970s (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022). It continues to examine how race intertwines with other identities like gender and contributes to one's quality of life, including the quality of education that students receive in public school. People outside the larger society's dominant group may perceive themselves as an inherently disadvantaged minority. CRP and CRT could effectively reach some students with similar experiences by teaching in a way that may work better for students of diverse cultures toward achieving better performance and higher scores on standardized tests.

As unfortunate as it may be, racism, along with other inequalities, still exists in the United States and continues to affect various minority students in the public school system negatively. Minority educational leaders such as principals and teachers are not exempt from experiencing racism. Clarida (2023) introduces a case study of a male African American principal who seems to try his best to help all students succeed, yet as he tries to bring new ideas

to the teachers, they seem to disagree, concluding that he does not know how to do his job and is not qualified to perform his duties which he believes is due to his race. Nevertheless, the principal has a solid history of helping improve a school's overall test scores, though he faces resistance as he attempts to make changes.

Whether or not this is genuinely due to racism is unclear, as racism itself is not always so easy to prove or disprove. Undoubtedly, other factors may also exist and go unnoticed. One study shows that, in general, people are more likely to help those they have more similarities with versus those they have very little in common (Stürmer et al., 2006). However, the African American principal still finds he has little power or support to implement changes in his new position, regardless of the precise reasoning behind it. Further research into the issues regarding the possibility that racism negatively impacts minority public school leaders would involve more exposure to their cultural experiences and how it may impact students' overall performance on standardized tests. One recurring theme throughout the literature is discrimination in many forms, affecting groups differently at different times. Throughout history, some groups have been allowed to attend school while others were not.

Analysis

The Perspective of Race

White American Students

There are several advantages that white American Students have in the public school system in the United States. One significant advantage is that modern-day public schools are not too far removed from the long-standing history of their educational culture. The public school, in essence, has emerged from their traditions. Though there are many different distinct groups of white Americans, it was easier for them to assimilate in the past because they did not have to

deal with slavery, which is a substantial setback for any group of people to go through. Though every white American was not the same, their educational expectations were. Therefore, all white Americans should speak English and adhere to Protestant beliefs regardless of where they came from in Europe, what language they spoke, and what religion they were. Today, white American students have the second-to-lowest high school dropout rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) and the second-highest household income (Kochhar & Moslimani, 2023).

African American Students

For example, as history shows, African Americans were not able to participate in the United States public school system for quite a while, primarily because they were enslaved people by law. This experience would affect their ability to get professional or higher paying jobs even now, which in turn would keep African Americans from being able to support their children moving forward throughout for generations. This cycle has changed for the better, but many African American families still live significantly below the poverty line. This poverty is the case with the Baltimore public school district, where students are not only experiencing extremely low scores on standardized tests but also very low-income households, with more than 33 percent of children living below the poverty line (McQueen, 2023).

In the past, groups like the Quakers of Philadelphia wanted to do something to help African Americans escape this cycle of poverty by being under-educated and under-employed, so they started the first college for African Americans, which was initially called the Institute for Colored Youth, now known as the Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.). Quakers may have been the first group to use a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to fulfill a need in a community that was not theirs.

Developing this college for African Americans may have also inspired the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Only African Americans would attend these colleges in the past, but today, they are open to all Americans, just as any other college.

The way African Americans had to create a space for themselves in order to receive an education is somewhat similar to the experiences of Catholics. With the exception that for African Americans, it was their race that was the culprit as to why they were not allowed to attend school, while for Catholics, it was due to their religion. Both groups had to create educational institutions where they would be accepted. Even though both groups began by only accepting members of their group at the time of establishing these schools, today, these schools welcome students of all backgrounds, regardless of race or religion.

Hispanic American Students

According to the Pew Research Center, African Americans and Hispanic Americans are both among the highest groups of high school dropouts, with Hispanic Americans slightly higher than African Americans, white Americans' dropout rates are less than both groups, and Asian Americans are lowest (Krogstad, 2016). Hispanic American students have the second-highest dropout rate in the United States public school system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Hispanic American students are second to Native American students, who have the highest school dropout rate as recorded by race (Native Hope, 2023). Hispanic Americans must also contend with learning English as a second language (Ivey, 2011). The combination of poverty and inability to understand English can make it very complicated for young students to be able to navigate the landscape of the United States public school system. Though Hispanic Americans may be the largest group of people living below the poverty line and face language barriers, it is worth noting that despite facing these extraordinary challenges, their dropout rate is

on the decline (Krogstad, 2016). Hispanic American children make up the biggest group of children living below the poverty line at about 40 percent (Gennetian & Chen, 2024).

Asian American Students

Asian American students are in a unique position as stereotypes suggest they should automatically surpass academic expectations based on their race. However, if they do not perform well academically, they face the burden of adapting to the expectations set before them (Cheon et al., 2019). Asian Americans, like their Hispanic American peers, find that they also face challenges regarding language barriers in the United States public school system (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2022). Despite this, Asian Americans are still experiencing the lowest high school dropout rates compared to other groups (Krogstad, 2016). Asian Americans also have the highest income per household compared to other groups and the highest rate of college graduates, suggesting that education has some influence on their earning potential (Ricketts & Ana Hernández Kent, 2024).

Native American Students

Native Americans were not exempt, nor could they escape the discrimination many minority groups must endure. Native Americans had hostile relationships with early European settlers, affecting their education in present times. Before the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans had their own culture established, including how they taught themselves. Native Americans would teach each other by sharing information from adults to children through oral tradition and hands-on learning (Juneau et al., 2001). However, European settlers of various ethnic and religious backgrounds brought different cultures, impacting their education.

The French Society of Jesus, the Jesuits of the Roman Catholic Church, Spanish Franciscans, and English Protestants were different European settlers with their own culture and

educational ideas to the Native American people (Juneau et al., 2001). Between the 1800s and 1900s, it was mandatory that Native American children had to go to boarding school from age five to eighteen, sometimes for years, where they had to forget about their culture and learn a new one; any resistance would face harsh punishments. (Institute on Community Integration University of Minnesota, n.d.) Today, About 90 percent of Native American students attend public schools, with the remainder attending private schools, including boarding schools (Faircloth, 2020). With a high school graduation rate of 75 percent, Native American students have the lowest graduation rate of all American students, with a college graduation rate of about 9 percent (Native Hope, 2023).

The Perspective of Gender

It was not until the mid-1800s that female students could attend school with the central educational focus besides basic morals and literacy being domestic duties (Gale, 2024). Meanwhile, male students were learning math and science (Capriola, 2022). Today, there is a significant gap between the genders in educational performance and outcomes between males and females, which shows itself in skill and ambition. According to Lundberg (2020), this gap between male and female students and their goals goes beyond school performance and reveals a profound link to their gender identity. Cultural and societal expectations also connect to gender identities, influencing students' educational objectives and performance. Students' goals are often linked closely to their identity based on the premise that how students identify will dictate their expectations and what they want in life. Students inherit cultural and societal norms of being male or female (Lundberg, 2020), and teachers' engagement with students also influences their gender identity (Nduagbo, 2020). Therefore, gender-specific issues exist within schools (Bonfert

& Wadhwa, 2024), and gender discrimination remains a prevalent issue in schools worldwide (Woods, 2024).

Female Students

Women comprise two-thirds of illiterate adults worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2022b). Culture and society undervalue girls, which affects them as soon as they enter school and follows them during and even after college (Cimpian, 2018). Women across the globe are not represented enough in high-paying occupations and overwhelmingly appear in occupations that tend to pay much less (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020). Girls often hesitate to involve themselves in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Science (STEM) fields (Lundberg, 2020). In the United States, women have a higher likelihood of gender discrimination, including sexual abuse, living below the poverty line, and being unemployed or underemployed, all contributing to the economic disadvantage of being underpaid (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020). even though ten percent more women aged 25 to 34 have a bachelor's degree than men of the same age group, which is consistent among most races of people (Hurst, 2024).

Male Students

Boys are held to higher standards while being more harshly disciplined if they do not meet them (Nduagbo, 2020). In United States schools, boys also appear more often than girls to face peer pressure that pushes them to take more risks and not follow the rules, leading to poor performance and issues with discipline (Lundberg, 2020). However, despite these issues, boys still surpass girls in math, as reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment results for 2022 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). As of 2022, in the United States, men earn more than women in every industry, lead in higher-paying

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employment, and, as of 2023, represent 89.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020).

Transgender Students

In the United States, as of 2017, there were 150,000 teenagers between 13 and 17 years old consider themselves transgender (Movement Advancement Project, 2017). That averages out to 0.7%, and this age group is the largest compared to other age groups (Reilly, 2019). This number has doubled to about 300,000 teenagers ages 13-17 or 1.4% as of 2022 (Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2022). The Obama administration asserted that transgender students are a protected group according to Title IX's prohibition on sex discrimination (Movement Advancement Project, 2017).

However, as of 2020, there has been a rising political assault on the transgender community, especially younger people, including students (Movement Advancement Project, 2025), which some people feel is a danger to them (Seldin, 2023). The Trump administration revoked many of the protections for transgender people, which will also affect schools (Meltzer, 2025). Since 2025, over 500 anti-LGBTQ+ orders have been made that affect the transgender community (Data for Progress, 2025). The new policies affect five main areas of a transgender student's life in school, which include no longer recognizing gender identity, restricting access to bathrooms, not participating on preferred sports teams, outing students against their will, and no longer teaching gender ideologies (Mallory, 2025).

School is central to students (Kelley et al., 2022). Early in elementary school, teachers usually divide boys and girls into two distinct groups of students. This division perpetuates the idea that these are only two genders, though some people believe that school should be inclusive for all students, including transgender or nonbinary students (Nduagbo, 2020).

Discrimination for transgender students starts early, just as with other minorities. Schools may end up supporting stereotypes of specific groups intentionally or unintentionally, leading some to suggest that teachers must effectively check their biases to address discrimination (Cimpian, 2018). In the United States workplace, LGBTQ+ employees typically earn less than other workers (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020).

The Perspective of Ability

History and research show that the United States public school system has a sordid past, one that may have been overly concerned with Protestant evangelism, skin color, and gender indoctrination. Students with disabilities, like other groups, face discrimination. Minority groups are more likely to have a misdiagnosis of having special needs than other racial groups due to unfair assessments and policies, coupled with detrimental educational environments and more frequent punishment, which has lasting adverse effects on these students' outcomes (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Physically Disabled Students

American students with physical disabilities include various conditions. One of the biggest challenges that students with disabilities face is having limited access to or within the learning environment, making it more difficult for them to become successful in school (Texas A&M University, n.d.). For example, students who use wheelchairs may have difficulty getting to school if it is not wheelchair accessible. Other students may be blind and have difficulties navigating the school environment or missing much of the learning material if it is not in a Braille format. Deaf students may also miss information if they do not have teachers or interpreters who know sign language. These are just some examples of how physical disabilities can impair student education. Schools may be unable to accommodate physically disabled

students as there may not be enough resources to make upgrades that will allow them to participate fully.

Mentally Disabled Students

Mental disabilities are tricky in the sense that they are not always as easy to identify as physical disabilities. However, they can have a significant effect on students while they are in school (Texas A&M University, n.d.). Not unlike physical disabilities, there are many conditions that students with mental disabilities must deal with while in school. Some of the most common mental disabilities that students may experience are depression and anxiety, which make it difficult for these students to concentrate during class; they may even become agitated or impulsive (Texas A&M University, n.d.). Teachers may not understand the different mental health disabilities students may be experiencing in the classroom.

Learning Theories

"Learning theory is a collection of thoughts, ideas, systems in which how to practice the learning process between teacher and student and other elements related to learning activities" (Muhajirah, 2020, p. 38).

Behaviorism Learning Theory

Discrimination may seem to make sense from the perspective of the Behaviorism Learning Theory if all there is to go on is observable actions. For example, if women and girls are cooking and cleaning, the observation may be that they need to go to school to learn anything else. Alternatively, if one culture looks at another and observes that all the other culture does is live in small tent-like dwellings near the shore while fishing and swimming all day, they would not need more education. That is the issue with the Behaviorism Learning Theory: people are more than what one can see with the eye. Furthermore, some people are blind and unable to

observe anything from sight, so they would not be able to use this theory. It simply would be of no use to them. During the early 1900s, behaviorism became the foremost psychological theory. The primary types of behaviorism are methodological and radical. Each type has different explanations for the causes of people's behavior.

Methodological Behaviorism suggests that physical behavior observation requires scientific study and that the mind does not contribute toward understanding behavior (Cherry, 2025).

Radical Behaviorism suggests that one can understand behavior by examining someone's previous and current environments and the support within them, which can have a positive or negative effect on behavior (Cherry, 2025).

Cognitivism Learning Theory

Cognitivism Learning Theory examines how people think and solve problems as they gain new information and skills, assuming that people learn better when thinking things through instead of just memorizing information or repeating actions. This theory has helped people deal with issues like depression and anxiety through the use of several different methods. This theory is a tool for helping people overcome fears and negative assumptions about themselves and the world around them. Students and teachers may fear learning new things, being in new environments, and meeting new people. Their fears may not be the reality; they are the preconceived notions they have made up, giving way to unfair prejudice against something or someone they do not know.

With the cognitivist approach, students may learn that math is not so scary by implementing behavior experiments. Students can ease into math one step at a time and try different math skills until they feel more comfortable repeating the actions independently. This

technique is similar to learning how to swim; some people may have severe phobias and may not even try getting into a pool, let alone a lake. They may fear they can not do it, but if someone is willing and patient enough to ease them into the idea, they may be more willing to try and possibly succeed. Teachers need time to work with their students, especially when faced with challenges.

Cognitive Restructuring bases itself on cognitive theory as a way to deal with anxiety by a therapist asking questions while analyzing responses that can help restructure one's thoughts (Fritscher, 2024).

Cognitive Reframing is similar to cognitive restructuring, which one can do without a therapist by simply interrupting negative thoughts and reframing one's thoughts to a more positive outlook (Fritscher, 2024).

Exposure is the confrontation of one's fears or anxiety by gradually being exposed to them; using this method, people may become less afraid and better equipped to deal with their fears (Fritscher, 2024).

Behavioral Experiments allow people to investigate whether negative thoughts are true by exposing themselves to something they fear, allowing them to determine if their fears are valid (Fritscher, 2024).

Constructivism Learning Theory

Constructivism Learning Theory asserts that learners actively learn and construct knowledge (Cherry, 2022). This theory suggests that students should find a way to change information into knowledge that becomes their unique view (Muhajirah, 2020). Constructivist learning theory may be a way to reach students of different cultures by helping them see things from perspectives that they understand better. Teachers could use terminology that children can

better relate to or practice exercises that more effectively reach them. Many students have apprehension about learning math, but if they could use board games or video games, it may become more palatable for them. Sometimes, it is not the subject itself but rather the method by which exposure to the subject occurs.

Humanism Learning Theory

Humanism Learning Theory suggests that people are naturally good people and should be free to learn however they choose, as they have a boundless capacity for learning (Madsen & Wilson, 2012). This theory may be promising for students who may suffer from low self-esteem or do not know they are good enough or capable of doing great things. The central focus of humanism is that people are inherently good. If students learn to see themselves this way, they may increase their self-esteem and respect their peers more. This theory may be a good tool to help groups such as Native Americans, African Americans, and girls who may feel that they are not good enough to do certain things because of who they are. Disabled children would benefit greatly from this theory also as they face many challenges in life, and they may not feel so good about themselves because of their disabilities. However, if teachers were actively instilling in them, they may be able to achieve their dreams even if they have to do it differently.

All these theories may have a place in the United States public school system. Using these theories in combination with each other as the situations change from task to task, day by day, and year to year, there is an opportunity to reach all students. Teaching is a serious job, mainly when teaching younger students; their interaction from an early age can set the mood for the rest of their lives, whether positive or negative. All students should be welcome in their schools, even if they need special accommodations. Teachers also need the support of education leaders to assist them with the material they need to make all this happen for their students. It

may take more money, but many students will find their future uncertain without this investment. After centuries of letting students down for many reasons, it has long been time to give these students the resources and support they need to get ahead in their lives. When teachers have the resources they need, they will be more effective at preparing students for the world, whether going to college, getting a job, or starting a family.

Ethical Implications

The etymology of the word ethics comes from the Greek language, which initially meant one's habitat but has also come to mean one's habits (Bartneck et al., 2020). Three main consequences will continue to occur until some form of positive change happens. The first consequence of leaving this issue unchecked is that the students will continue to produce lackluster test results and barely be able to read, write, and perform basic math functions. That is the number one issue that needs immediate attention. The second consequence is that as students' test scores drop, violence continues to rise even though school enrollment is declining and more and more students are just not showing up (Meckler, 2022). The third consequence is that according to a poll of teachers by the National Education Association, over half of the respondents plan on leaving the education profession sooner rather than later, and almost all the respondents said burnout is a serious issue they are facing (Kamenetz, 2022). Teachers are not getting paid enough compared to other professionals with similar educational backgrounds, which is causing this career's demise (Partelow et al., 2018). There should be better pay for school leadership, and teachers should receive a more competitive wage, which could attract a more diverse workforce (Aurora Institute, 2024) and more funding for policies to diversify the occupation (National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 2025).

According to the Markula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, ethics deals with a set belief in standards that distinguish right from wrong (Valasquez et al., 2010). Ethics has three main fields of study: normative ethics, applied ethics, and metaethics (Bartneck et al., 2020; Britannica, n.d.; Dittmer, n.d.); normative ethics also has three main fields of study: virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism (Penn State University, n.d.). Ethics also describes what happens regarding ethics as it occurs in life; this is called descriptive ethics, which differs from normative ethics, which focuses on identifying and categorizing behavior predetermined as right or wrong (Bartneck et al., 2020). Some common explanations of ethics are as follows (Bartneck et al., 2020).

Descriptive Ethics explains the occurrence of ethics as observable actions rather than explaining what or how actions should occur.

Normative Ethics helps one determine appropriate behavior founded on different viewpoints of right from wrong.

Deontological Ethics focuses on right or wrong as a duty fulfilled by obeying the law.

Consequentialist Ethics focuses on results and states that what is right depends on whether there is a positive outcome.

Virtue Ethics focuses on character and suggests that right and wrong should be centered around one's traits instead of behavior.

Metaethics seeks to understand the thoughts and actions of ethics and morals.

Applied Ethics are the codes of conduct that apply to specific occupations, such as the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2014).

Ethical leadership emphasizes the ethical aspects of leadership (Páez Gabriunas, 2017), and ethical leaders commit to morals made apparent through their actions (Berges Puyo, 2022).

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Ethical leaders follow guidelines to promote ethical behavior based on Normative Ethics, which includes various theories and plays a significant role in Applied Ethics. Normative ethics consists of guidelines that aim to shape leaders' morals and behavior based on right and wrong and how to differentiate between them (Quintelier et al., 2010). However, normative ethics is just one step of the ethical leadership process. One must develop a personal understanding of ethics, establish ethical standards and allow feedback, set an example by following the rules, and move toward developing ethical principles that inspire others, follow up by dedicating oneself to guiding others to success, make changes that nurture ethical environments (Shakeel et al., 2019). The second step names feedback as an integral part of the ethical leadership process, and student feedback should also be a part of the process

Ethical leadership within the context of education needs to include the following elements, which are in no particular order: honesty, commitment, relationships that are built on trust, being a role model, and working to ensure that ethical behavior is a priority in school (Waheed et al., 2018). These elements are just the beginning of requirements to turn around the harsh reality that if nothing changes, many students in the United States will continue to perform extremely low on standardized tests. It is worth looking at how even minor adjustments may have the ability to reach many students who identify as any of these minority groups. Regardless of the past, many groups still suffer discrimination for reasons out of their control, and they should know that they can be successful in school.

Like many things in life, a one-size-fits leadership or learning style does not always exist that will ideally work for everyone. Therefore, more changes in education seem to be happening now than ever before. Education policy changes affect school leadership considerably, and students' futures are on the line. These changes come from many cultural and demographic shifts

in the United States, including but not limited to the accountability pressures of standardized testing (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2021). These are just some issues students and schools must contend with today. The potential negative impact of not implementing some positive change with school leadership is that student performance will likely continue to be below the expected standard. Unfortunately, the low-performing schools will continue to suffer, as such has been the status quo within the United States public school system for centuries.

Leadership is essential in teaching effectively, and competent educational leaders have values that lead to successful schools (Xhomara, 2018). Organizations such as schools must have leaders who use ethics as a part of their leadership plan, as it is now a requirement that principals and other school leaders exhibit ethical leadership in their positions at school (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Ethical behavior involves much more than just following the law or even a religious ideology; historically and currently, in the United States and elsewhere, law and religion are not always ethically sound (Santa Clara University, 2010). For example, the enslavement of African Americans and the exclusion of other certain groups from receiving any formal education were legal in the past. However, today, slavery is not legal, nor is it considered ethical.

Policy Recommendations

Ultimately, policy recommendations must empower school systems to transform into a future-oriented educational model (Aurora Institute, 2024). Looking further than the present position of schools and envisioning what they can achieve (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022). The main idea of educational leadership should be to ensure that students learn in the best environment possible while staying committed to making improvements for their benefit. Present and future educational leaders, as they begin working with all American students of every identity within the United States public school system as a

bare minimum requirement, need to have a basic understanding of their students' cultural values and norms while being supported by their colleagues. This practice is essential for those in leadership positions responsible for diverse schools. It is also worth noting that if schools mainly work with mostly homogenous groups of students, this recommended requirement may not be as important as it is in diverse areas. However, educational leadership should at least be aware that pedagogical practices should align with all students from all backgrounds rather than continue to work against them, ultimately hurting them in school, during tests, and in life.

The United States public school system needs to be prioritized even more now than in the past. Schools need more resources to upgrade buildings (Partelow et al., 2018), especially accommodating students with physical disabilities. Education leaders and teachers need more resources to better deal with today's many challenges (EdTrust, 2024). Issues such as a lack of knowledge concerning mental health challenges, language barriers, and cultural differences are going to take some form of resources to address these and other issues that the United States public school system is facing. Training teachers in the United States public school system must be ongoing, and the curriculum must be culturally relevant for every student (EdTrust, 2024), even though this may mean it may not be identical in every school district.

Evaluation should also occur within specific time intervals to determine what each school district needs for its students. Just as there are evaluations for students, overall, there needs to be some form of evaluation of the school system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2022a). Surveys can help state leaders gain ideas on serving schools better. School climate surveys gauge how parents and students think about their schools and innovative measures to develop a more favorable school environment (EdTrust, 2024).

Another policy that must take place immediately is free tutoring for all students. Many

American children of all backgrounds who attend public school sometimes need extra help, which teachers may not always be able to give. Teachers have many students in a class together, and it is not easy to sit with one student in class while many others are competing for help at the same time. While tutoring should be free and available for all students, even if they are doing well in class, students may voluntarily attend tutoring sessions. However, teachers should be able to identify students they think would benefit from tutoring, which must be made mandatory. Tutoring continues to help students strengthen their knowledge. For example, In Lawrence, Massachusetts, schools with tutoring went from very low performance to some of the top-performing schools in the state, and a study observed that tutoring improved standardized testing performance (Partelow et al., 2018).

Summary

Schools in the United States were initially responsible for instructing students academically and morally based on Protestant teachings. However, this instruction was only for a small group of students, a practice that prevented many people of different backgrounds from receiving an education. This practice was ethically sound in the past, but due to many changes over time, it is no longer, and all children of the United States are now required to attend school. On the surface, it would appear that this is a good thing, which in many ways it is. However, in other ways, it seems as if some things are missing. Mainly, the resources that many schools need seem to be grossly lacking, which is hurting students of these schools by impairing their learning and teacher's ability to teach them effectively. Besides the lack of resources, there seems to be a lack of ethics and morals; even with all the past and current research on the subject, there is a disconnect between the theory and practice of ethics.

There is a very noticeable gap among specific groups of students' educational

achievements from when students first begin school, which becomes even more noticeable as students enter high school. Race and racism are negatively impacting minority students. There is a need to address these issues if there is to be any improvement. There is also the fact that race and racism negatively affect black leadership in schools. School leadership affected by racism has more difficulty reaching the students they teach. Minority school leaders often face opposition from their peers, resulting in many restrictions that hinder their ability to promote positive changes for the school.

National mandates for predetermined competency markers also bring another restriction that disproportionately affects minority schools, including the leadership and the students. Failure to meet this competency in the form of standardized testing results in penalties for the school, negatively impacting students and leadership through the loss of resources, creating an even more profound schism. Students themselves may have valuable input for those willing to listen to them. However, it seems that when students have the opportunity to voice their concerns, no one takes them seriously, or what is worse is that the school's leadership may steal their ideas without giving them any credit (Level et al., 2022).

Culture plays a significant role in learning outcomes; understanding and navigating cultural norms may help school leadership reach marginalized students who perform poorly on standardized tests. Getting students to achieve higher test scores would require that they are actually learning in school and not just going to the next grade without having the knowledge and skills to succeed in the current grade. It would take significant time, energy, and money to help students with lower performance on standardized tests. However, it is not impossible and worth the investment. More and more students and teachers are leaving schools altogether due to their many challenges.

Schools should not be financially penalized for poor performance on standardized tests because it mainly hurts the most vulnerable and disenfranchised students, who require more resources, not less. Teachers are going to have to be more accountable for their performance outcomes. If a teacher has their entire class performing poorly on tests, they have some explaining to do. In most other occupations, if employees perform poorly, they most likely will be let go. With that point, teachers, in general, should be paid more as their work is not easy for them. Teachers need more money to compensate for all their responsibilities, but with more money, there also needs to be more accountability. Teachers and students need more resources to operate at the highest level (Aurora Institute, 2024). School policies on every level have a lasting effect on students' and their families' futures. State leadership must provide the resources necessary for educational leadership to amend students' performance (EdTrust, 2024). State leaders can and should advocate for positive change through a coordinated effort (Aurora Institute, 2024).

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