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# Opinion: A call for more cultural competence in our schools

Jeffrey L. Forte

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A school bus in Connecticut in October. Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

Connecticut recently became the first state in the nation to require that Black and Latino studies be offered in our public high schools. The goal, according to the state Board of Education, is to provide all students with a better understanding of the contributions that African American, Black, Puerto Rican and Latino people have made to the United States.

The new courses must be contained in high school curricula as of the fall of 2022.

However, it is with profound irony that in the same week of the decision to highlight contributions of minorities through our educational system, a report issued by an independent third party highlights how Connecticut public schools are drastically failing to serve the educational needs of minority students. It is not because of a lack of classes on the contributions of minorities.

The report, issued by the Alliance for Excellent Education, is pretty damning as it shows how Connecticut is not properly serving our minority students. While

state Education Department officials likely will disagree with the findings contained in the report, it nonetheless is consistent with what many special education attorneys and child advocate colleagues in the state already know — and have known for quite some time.

Interestingly, the alliance report says that Connecticut seemingly is taking advantage of a new accountability system, thereby leaving some minority students underserved. Accountability is a focus of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA.

ESSA is the law that replaced No Child Left Behind and was meant to evaluate schools based on more than just a test score. States themselves were asked to come up with ways to measure student success and assign school ratings.

No matter how you fairly look at it, there are major disparities between education provided white students compared to the education provided Hispanic or Black students here in Connecticut. Compare the education offered by, say, West Hartford schools versus Hartford schools. Trumbull schools versus Bridgeport schools. New London schools versus Waterford schools.

Of course, some will note the differences in funding with urban schools typically spending less per student than those in the suburbs. That should again highlight the need for the state to explore new methods of funding our schools. Reliance on municipal property taxes is no longer fair.

In a school year riddled with COVID-19, the disparity between the education provided white students and the education provided minority students is even more profound. Connecticut only identified nine schools in the entire state that called for additional support for minority students. That certainly is at odds with the alliance report.

Now more than ever, it is abundantly and statistically clear what we have known for a very long time. Black and Latino students are about four times as likely to attend low-rated schools than white students here in the Nutmeg State. Even for those not directly involved in education in Connecticut, that data should be empirically obvious.

Remarkably, Connecticut's Education Department only identified 4 percent of our schools needing additional comprehensive support. Clearly, we must do better. We must demand more from our state Board of Education.

The bottom line is that this recently published alliance report requires us to take a better look at ourselves and call on our elected legislators, state and local, to reevaluate how we define accountability under ESSA.

We must ensure that our state's minority students have just as much educational opportunity as everyone else. We must do better. Now is the time.

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