



From Racist to Equitable: Rebuilding The Foundation of Wisconsin Schools

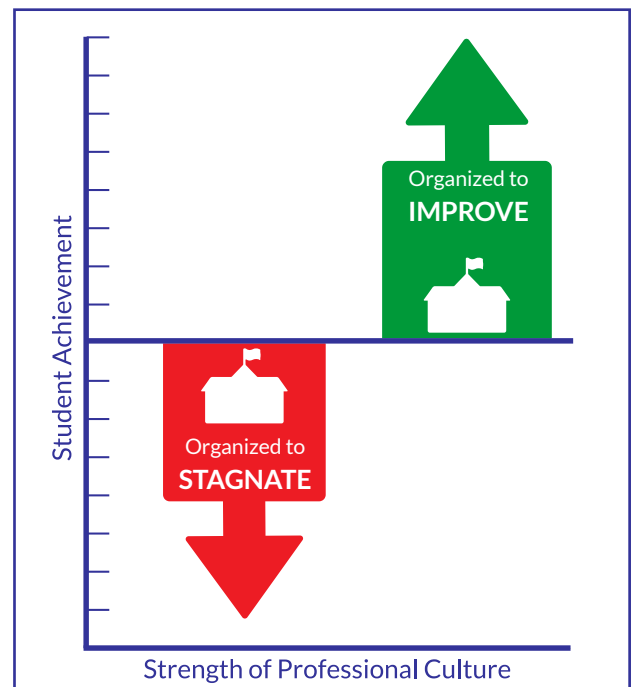
All students deserve quality learning opportunities. We already know that Wisconsin schools fall woefully short of providing our students with equitable opportunities (National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019), but a recent research report by the Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness Research Partnership (WEERP), [*Reorganizing the Professional Culture in Wisconsin Schools to Eliminate Racial Achievement Gaps*](#) (October 2020), laid bare the full extent to which Wisconsin schools fail students of color. The study followed 211 Wisconsin schools from 2015-16 to 2018-19 to determine how the professional culture in schools should be organized to reduce achievement gaps. In particular, it looked at the:

- Size of achievement gaps between Black, Latinx, and White students;
- Comparative differences in the strength of the professional culture between schools attended by Black, Latinx, and White students; and
- Potential for strengthening the professional culture in schools to reduce achievement gaps among Black, Latinx, and White students.

Background

Previous research (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010) refers to schools with a strong professional culture, with high teacher retention and educators who work effectively together, as schools “organized to improve.” Schools with a weak professional culture are referred to as “organized to stagnate.” Without doubt, students stand a much better chance to learn and grow academically when they attend a school that is organized to improve with a strong professional culture.

The WEERP report borrows from the ideas, methods, and terminology of this research and applies the ideas to Wisconsin schools. It looked at the potential impact organizing schools to improve, with a strong professional culture, can have on the achievement gaps between White, Black, and Latinx students.



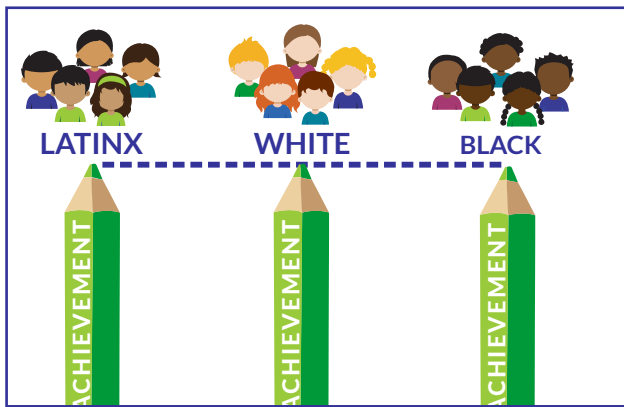
School culture and organization are key determinants of student achievement. A school will either improve or stagnate based on the strength of its professional culture.

The Achievement Gaps Are Worse Than You Think

Reorganizing the Professional Culture in Wisconsin Schools to Eliminate Racial Achievement Gaps found significant achievement gaps between White and Latinx students, and even bigger gaps between White and Black students. The gaps between White and Black students were, in fact, twice as big. Overall, 98% of school averages for White student achievement were better than a typical school's Black student achievement. Similarly, 86% of school averages for White student achievement were better than a typical school's Latinx student achievement. This is shocking. A school's success should never be defined by student characteristics, but demographic data were the strongest determinants of a school's success in the Wisconsin schools studied. Schools with the highest percentage of White students, the fewest economically disadvantaged students, and the fewest students with an IEP had the highest state achievement test scores. This suggests the Wisconsin school system is not adequately addressing racial inequities. The Wisconsin school system is not functioning as a social equalizer in the manner public school systems were originally intended to do.

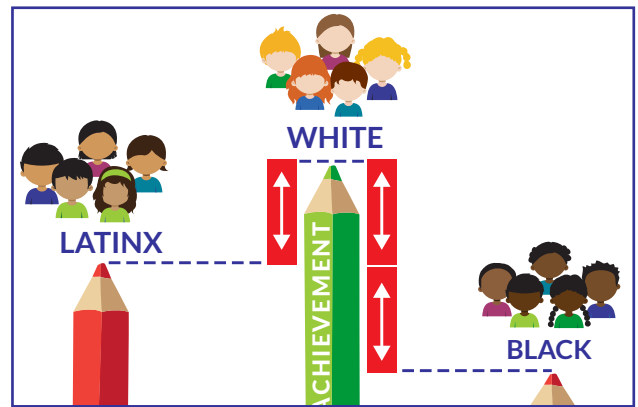
“Education, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”

—Horace Mann (Educator, first great American advocate of public education)



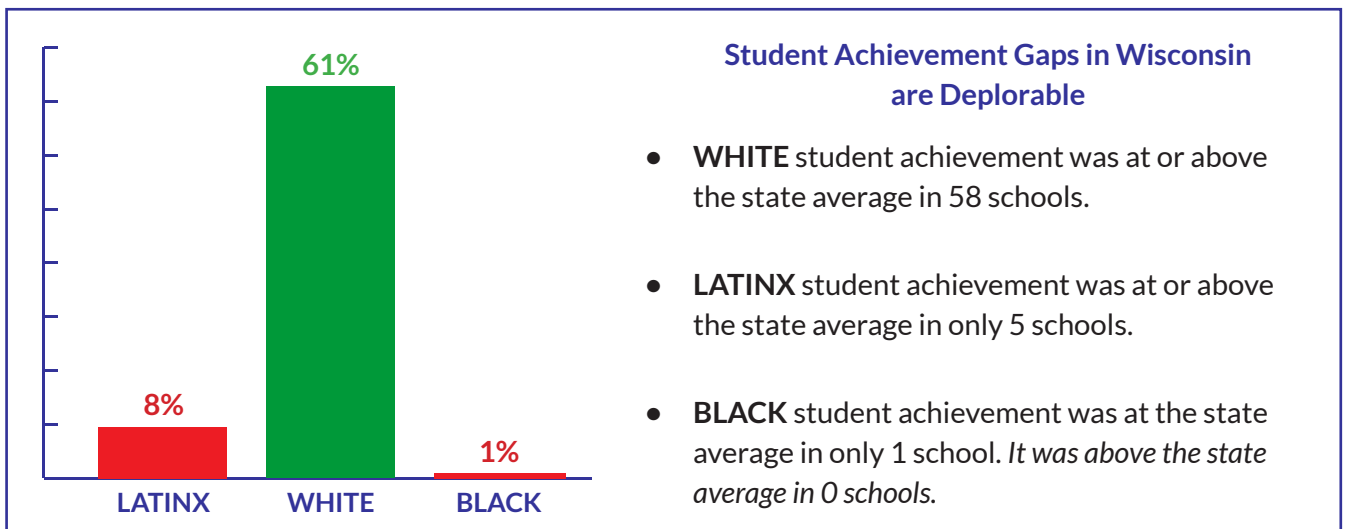
The Way Student Achievement Should Look

Schools should be organized to support the achievement of all students regardless of demographics.



How Student Achievement Looks in Wisconsin

The achievement gap between White and Latinx students is large. The gap between White and Black students is twice as large.



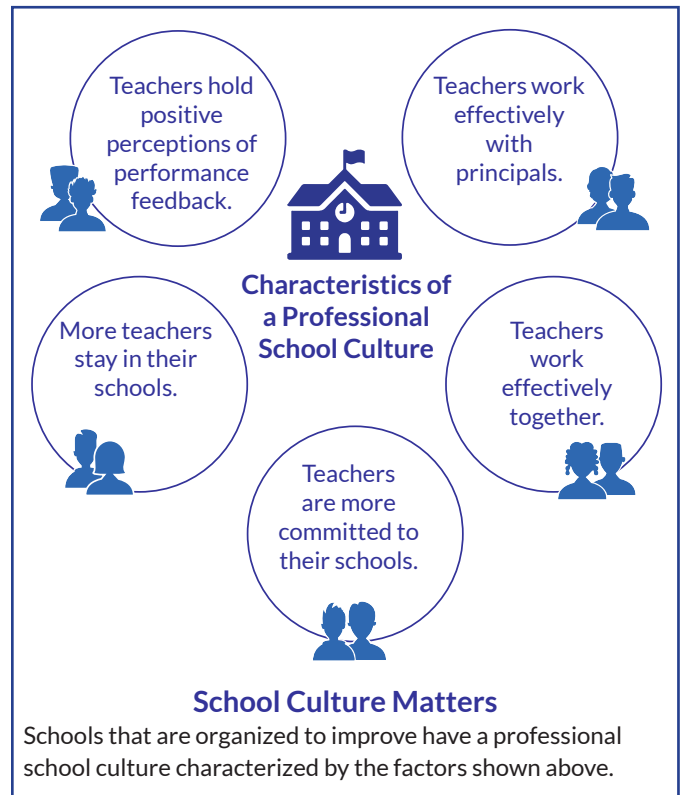
Student Achievement Gaps in Wisconsin are Deplorable

- **WHITE** student achievement was at or above the state average in 58 schools.
- **LATINX** student achievement was at or above the state average in only 5 schools.
- **BLACK** student achievement was at the state average in only 1 school. *It was above the state average in 0 schools.*

School Professional Culture is Inequitable

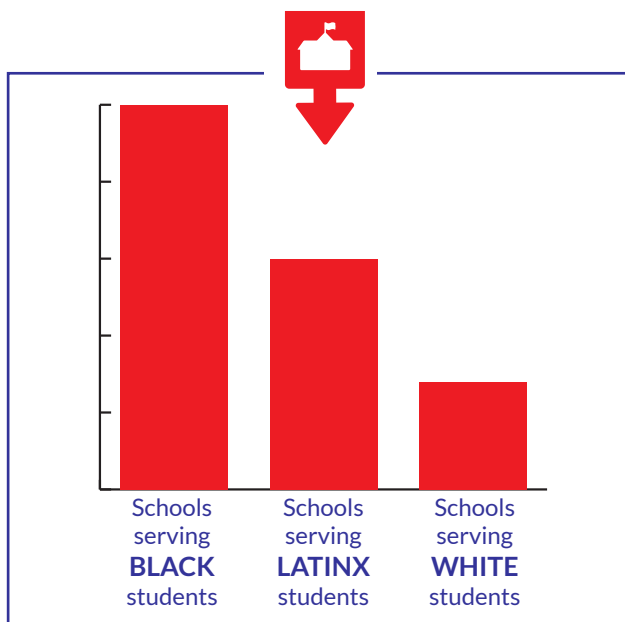
The strength of a school’s professional culture matters a great deal when it comes to student achievement. Schools that are organized to improve share common characteristics. Teachers feel their principal is a stronger leader and hold more positive perceptions of the performance feedback provided to them. Teachers engage in more collaboration with other teachers, are more committed to their school, and more likely to stay. In Wisconsin, many more schools that serve White students are organized to improve. Adding to the problem, White teachers in schools that serve primarily Black students are less committed to their school, less satisfied with their job, hold less trust with their principal, and view performance feedback provided to them less favorably.

Considering the vast majority of teachers in Wisconsin schools serving Black or Latinx students are White (Jones, 2019), it should not be surprising that we have few schools organized for the success of Black students. These findings suggest that the Wisconsin school system actually works against racial equity and thus represents a racist institution.



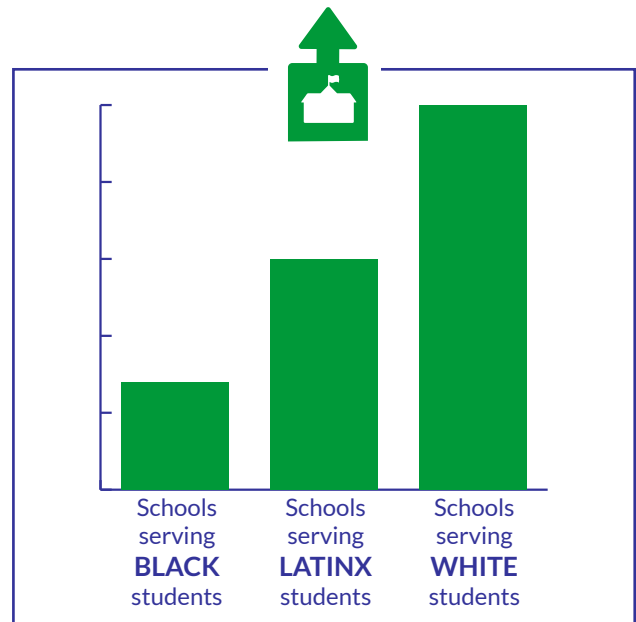
“Fewer than one in ten schools serving Black students, and one in five schools serving Latinx students, were organized to improve, with a strong professional culture.”

—Curtis Jones, WEERP Report



Organized to Stagnate

Wisconsin schools serving primarily Black and Latinx students are much more likely to be organized to stagnate with a WEAK professional culture.



Organized to Improve

Wisconsin schools serving primarily White students are much more likely to be organized to improve with a STRONG professional culture.

The Time for Action is NOW

The wide and persistent achievement gap between Black and White students in Wisconsin schools is the largest of any state, as indicated by the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress test results. Achievement gaps between Latinx and White students are also deplorable. The WEERP study clearly identifies the tools needed to fix our achievement gaps. Eliminating the conditions associated with schools organized to stagnate and increasing the conditions associated with schools organized to improve can make all the difference in the world. What are we waiting for?

The WEERP study shows that hardly any schools serving Black students were organized to improve, with a strong professional culture. However, schools serving Black students that were NOT organized to stagnate, with a weak professional culture, reduced the Black student achievement gap by approximately 20%. The finding that schools organized to improve reduced the Latinx achievement gap by over 50% suggests that organizing schools with a strong professional culture could have similarly-sized impact on Black student achievement. Regardless, taking immediate and deliberate steps to rebuild the foundation of Wisconsin schools serving Black and Latinx students has the potential to make a dramatic impact on student achievement gaps. Working to establish and maintain strong professional cultures in these schools will make Wisconsin education more equitable, reduce racial achievement gaps and, in doing so, make the Wisconsin education system a more anti-racist institution.



>50%

Organizing schools serving students of color to improve—by strengthening their professional cultures—could reduce the racial achievement gap by over 50%.