

## Opinion

# Connect youth to their cultural heritage to close the achievement gap

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Donna Grethen / Op-Art

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Every time a young person of color reaches academic success, it's an exception, not a standard. It cannot be said loudly enough: The educational opportunity gap between students of color and white students persists despite decades of investments and institutional effort.

Across the nation, public school systems have never been adequately or appropriately staffed, equipped, or resourced to successfully serve communities of color (black, Latinx, Native Americans, Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders).

Let's be honest, Washington state is not a top performer in our nation's education system. Yet, because of our thriving high-tech economy, we enjoy one of the most educated populations in the country. How do we achieve this? By importing engineers and other highly educated professionals from all over the world. Our local communities of color are being left behind.

Today we are being out-competed globally in our own hometown because of deficits in the educational system, poor support and the skyrocketing cost of living in King County. This makes achieving the same level of success for young people of color as their white counterparts a statistical miracle.

An exciting opportunity for change was created by the Legislature recently. Called the Puget Sound Taxpayer Accountability Account (PSTAA), this \$315 million pool of funding over 15 years is dedicated to educating vulnerable students, to improve educational outcomes in early learning, K-12 and postsecondary education.

What is remarkable about this funding is that it is directed to county councils, not school districts. This is a unique opportunity to invest public dollars for education outside of the principal educational system that has proved so stubborn in its inability to innovate and successfully address the needs of students of color. We cannot, however, expect equitable outcomes without equitable investments.

Fifteen nonprofits led by communities of color — convened by United Way of King County — are attempting to change the paradigm of the education system and are seeking the funding support of PSTAA. This network of organizations form a powerful cohort with a shared commitment to a framework that keeps the youth at the very core of the effort.

By rooting this work in generations of triumph and loss, storytelling and history, love and liberation, they are using cultural-identity development — a framework that weaves culture and academics — in shifting resiliency and grit into empowerment, innovation and change. And it's working. Data

get into employment, education and training and the training data collected by United Way shows these programs improving youth education for all students, white and of color, and outperforming mainstream after-school programs.

This framework’s powerful design shifts traditional grant-making by putting decisions in the hands of community of color-based organizations and empowering education advocates from the community who share the lived experience of the young people they serve.

The organizations in this cohort share a passionate commitment to racial equity: El Centro de la Raza, All Girl Everything Ultimate Frisbee, Community Passageways, Red Eagle Soaring, 4C Coalition, Filipino Community of Seattle, FEEST, Glover Empower Mentoring, Education with Purpose Foundation for Pacific Islanders, Falis Community Services, Para los Ninos de Highline, Asian Counseling and Referral Services, Open Doors for Multicultural Families, Power Voices and the Federal Way Youth Action Team. The group’s aim is to build a collaborative for resource distribution and a cross cultural knowledge hub that will guide system change and finally close the opportunity gap.

We ask the Metropolitan King County Council to invest 20% of PSTAA funding in cultural-identity development services for youth of color delivered by community of color-led nonprofits. In doing so, the County Council will be taking a bold step in transforming the “exceptional” outcome into the “standard” our community should expect and our young people deserve.

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