

“NAVIGATING THROUGH THE TURMOIL IN K-12 EDUCATION”

(A NABSE* Position Paper)

INTRODUCTION

As the 2023-24 academic year gets underway, educators throughout the U.S. are returning to public schools in a nation divided by issues and isms. Beleaguered and weary from the tumult and upheaval that characterized their collective experiences last school year, the culture wars have intensified with no end in sight. From faux-outrage over CRT, book banning and rejection of the College Board’s AP African American history course and demonizing LGBTQ youth, 2022-23 was an exceptional year! Disruptions of school board meetings in several districts occurred with a universal theme of discontent, disrespect and ‘dog whistle’ propaganda. These orchestrated events were designed to undermine traditional practices and procedures, particularly those that benefit Black and other learners of color. A school shooting in Nashville resulting in student and staff fatalities, and a Virginia teacher shot by her six-year-old student, temporarily shifted the focus away from the culture wars to spotlight safety issues as legitimate education concerns. The proliferation of guns in some communities continues to underscore the traumatic environments in which some students may live, but qualifies schools today as potentially unsafe places in which to teach or to learn. The mass exodus of teachers leaving the profession is not only an exclamation point, with hundreds of vacant positions in some districts. but an alarming crisis occurring in public education across the country. Adding further complexity was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on June 29, 2023 that outlawed affirmative action in higher education, producing ripple effects that will reverberate throughout K-12 education, business and industry across the nation.

Meanwhile, in state capitals, conservative majority legislators have continued to enact restrictive measures that limit and/or distort the teaching of relevant content about the history and culture of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), thwart diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, divert tax dollars to fund vouchers for private and parochial schools, empower educators to carry weapons in schools with little or no mandated training, and denounce LGBTQ realities as they generally hold public education hostage. Proponents of a so-called “Parents Bill of Rights” agitate for the firing of superintendents. Fast-growing “Moms for Liberty” groups are

promoting the recall of school board members, as well as banning selected books in school libraries. Some of the messaging reflects allegiance to a regressive agenda designed to turn back the hands of time. Most of the school districts impacted by these aggressive initiatives serve BIPOC.

BACKGROUND

Until now, NABSE has not weighed in on the culture wars underway in K-12 education, or responded to the blatantly anti-Black initiatives operating in states where conservative governors and legislatures predominate. The NABSE membership is comprised of superintendents, school board members, district administrators, curriculum directors, principals, counselors, teachers, professors, consultants, who are primarily African American educators and educators of African descent. With members who have been both victims and/or victors in pursuit of their own education, NABSE is an organization with history and expertise in education matters impacting people of African descent. There is no better time than now for NABSE to shed light that may illuminate pathways forward through the minefields of disequilibrium impacting public education in general, and BIPOC in particular. **Therefore, NABSE is stepping forward to serve as both a mirror and a lens; to offer reflection and insight.**

PAST IS PROLOGUE

Isabel Wilkerson, author of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents (2020)* encourages all to “look at history as the instruction manual for what to do.” If, and when, we do take a look at the history of African Americans in the U.S., what do we see?

- 248 years of slavery (1619 – 1865)
- 99 years of Jim Crow laws (1865-1964)
- 86 years of lynching (1882 – 1986)
- 14 years of fighting for civil rights (1954-1968)
- 400+ years of oppression (1619-2019+) and counting

Now, seemingly without warning, the ghosts of the 1930s, 40s and 50s have re-emerged, and Black anything and everything has become a target.

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Indeed, the spirits of racist governors past have been reincarnated in Texas, Florida and Virginia, but also alive and well in Iowa, Ohio, Wisconsin and

Arkansas. When did regression to bygone eras begin? Collectively, how did educators fail to recognize it festering just beneath the surface of our routine existence? As a profession that boasts untold numbers of highly educated people, why are we flat-footed and dumbfounded, without a clue or a plan to salvage and protect the very foundation of public education, let alone democracy?

Pulitzer-Prize winning author, Wesley Lowery, describes when and how the U.S. became so polarized along racial lines in **American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress (2023)**. He cites the devastating backlash to the election of Barack Obama as the primary factor, as millions of white Americans succumbed to their worst fears about being driven to extinction by immigration, interracial marriage, or “white replacement” theory. In painstaking detail Lowery recites the retrenchment efforts mounted throughout the eight-year Obama presidency, and their bold escalation in the Trump era. More recently, Hilary Rodham Clinton, former First Lady, Senator, Secretary of State, and presidential candidate, suggests that the “weaponization of loneliness” among single white males is the culprit. **(The Atlantic-August 7, 2023)**

Just what does it mean to be educated? What does it mean to teach when there are: **a)** bans on diversity, equity and inclusion, **b)** handcuffs on curricula, and **c)** conspiracy theorists poised to pounce on any opportunity to promote false claims about “critical race theory”? **d)** Or promote revisionist African American history? **e)** Or when legislation is weaponized to restrict, curtail or limit access and opportunity for some, while advantaging others?

Taken together, one may ask: “How is NABSE reacting and responding to the current plight of U.S. public education?” Following so closely after the ravages that the COVID 19 pandemic imposed, the timing and ferocity of the culture wars has been confounding and disconcerting. Stunned and caught off guard a bit, **NABSE is fully cognizant as unequivocally we now reject and denounce all efforts to minimize, distort or erase the essence, excellence and exemplary contributions of Black people.**

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REINFORCING THE FOUNDATION

Given the multiple realities in which all educators currently find themselves, NABSE affiliates and members have responded in a manner that actually reflects what Mary-Frances Winters describes in **Black Fatigue: How**

Racism Erodes the Mind, Body and Spirit (2020). BIPOC are weary of the culture wars that zap mental and physical energy. However, they must also be mindful of and responsive to policies, programs and/or legislation that impacts their lives, livelihoods and the learners they serve negatively. They can ill afford to be passive, but must proceed with affirmative activism in several arenas.

In some respects, NABSE was prescient about the current state of affairs in public education two years ago. Having published two companion documents, namely the ***Declaration of Education Imperatives for the 21st Century (2020)*** and the ***NABSE G*P*S* (Glidepaths*Potentialities*Solutions) [2021]***, the organization had articulated its forward-leaning aspirations, as well as a set of plans to achieve them in the height of the COVID 19 pandemic. The comprehensive “glidepaths,” or action plans delineated in the ***NABSE G*P*S (2021)*** were visionary. Provided as initiatives to be undertaken immediately and in the near future, the “action plan template” features outreach to federal, state, and/or local government, as an essential component. Partnering with other organizations and seeking allies is part of the template. NABSE now acknowledges its ironic foreshadowing of current circumstances, complete with strategies to address them. Indeed, a GPS!

While NABSE’s affiliate leaders have been slow to appoint two affiliate legislative chairpersons to work directly with its Legislative Priorities Committee on advocacy and persistence activities, the urgency of now is at hand. ***Advocacy*** work targets legislative matters at the state-level, while ***persistence*** endeavors focus at the local level. Since education is a function of each *state*, advocacy initiatives require monitoring K-12 education legislation--proposed and/or enacted--at the state level. By contrast, persistence initiatives deal with local issues relative to school districts or city/county government. Both state and local issues involve myriad details that can be challenging to understand, but are not only critical to staying fully

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abreast, but crucial to survival as professionals. In the current climate of social conservatism and fiscal retrenchment, knowing and understanding state government and legislative processes is not optional for public educators; it is required.

REIMAGINED GOALS

Using the **NABSE G*P*S** as our guide, affiliates must now plan to enter the legislative battle grounds in state capitals, prepared proactively to defend our turf—public education. We must renovate our affiliates with new committees on legislation, public policy and social action. NABSE must reimagine our goals and objectives to assure that we **strategize, organize** and **mobilize** effectively as we proceed headlong into the future. NABSE leaders, members and affiliates must commit to attain three goals ASAP:

*Goal One: **NABSE must address systems, not symptoms***

*Goal Two: **NABSE must build coalitions of allies***

*Goal Three: **NABSE must elevate student voices***

Goal One: Address systems, not symptoms

Systems abound in all areas of human existence. In and of themselves systems are a good thing because they are organized frameworks, or a set of principles and/or procedures that prescribe how something is done. In other words, systems provide order to the ways in which tasks are completed. Nevertheless, when systems are utilized to achieve outcomes that advantage some while disenfranchising others, the result is disorder and confusion. The disenfranchised are victimized while the advantaged reap the benefits. Confusion is a desirable outcome for the advantaged because it buys time for them to solidify their benefits in ways that cannot easily be undone. By contrast, confusion confounds the disadvantaged as they struggle to understand what has happened, let alone comprehend the impact(s). At best, the disadvantaged can identify the obvious—the symptoms of a system operating against them. Whether blatant strategies like voter suppression, or subtle acts like gerrymandering voting district boundaries are employed, such “symptoms” are the first fruits of **legislative** systems functioning with inequitable efficiency!

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Clearly, U.S. public education has been compromised most recently by a confluence of economic, legislative and cultural systems targeted to undermine and undo any benefits that BIPOC might gain from a quality education. Black educators and educators of African descent are victimized, in part, because, heretofore, our ignorance of legislative processes has hampered us and hindered us from reacting otherwise. A new day is at hand!

Yes! Voter suppression, gerrymandering, elimination of polling places, restrictions on voting days and hours, limitations on when, where and how college students may vote are all symptoms of legislative and political system manipulations gone awry. Nevertheless, revered NABSE scholar-in-residence Dr. Asa G. Hilliard III taught NABSE members for several decades not to fear systems. In fact, he encouraged us to master systems. Why? His first example of our ability to do so was the obvious acknowledgement that attainment of our own education as professionals was evidence that we could overcome systems that were not designed for us to succeed.

During his many “standing room only” lectures at NABSE conferences past, he assured us that we should continue defeating systems that were not designed for our success. He encouraged us to choose our system; master it, and use it to our advantage. The soft-spoken genius that he was, Asa provided examples of how that might be done. He reminded us that Thurgood Marshall utilized the legal system to win the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision. His mastery of the legal system led to his appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Dr. Hilliard admired the athleticism of Michael Jordan that enabled him not only to master the professional sports system, but also to defy the laws of physics by flying through the air to dunk the basketball. Further, Asa concluded that Rev. Jesse Jackson’s run for the U.S. presidency in 1984 and 1988 revolutionized the U. S. political system. Had he lived to see it, surely Asa would have proclaimed with great joy that Barack Obama not only utilized the political system, and mastered it, but used it to his advantage and ours, as the 44th U. S. President.

Asa admonished us to use the system because “that’s what you’re least expected to do.” We must recognize that systems were designed “to close you in, lock you out, and shut you up”. He warned us to respect the system,

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but be mindful of dead ends, trap doors and muzzles; moreover, persist regardless. Why? In the final analysis, systems have the potential to fail. That is the time when activism must optimize the opportunity. No matter the symptoms, we must confront whatever systems are impacting us negatively with strategic activism coordinated by NABSE in every state. Like it or not, economics is the key to progress. Politics are the rules—or the system—that determines when, where and how *economic* progress will occur. Individually and collectively, we either learn the rules that govern the system,

master them, or lose the future. NABSE must conquer systems, not symptoms, in the spirit of Asa Hilliard.

Consequently, to attain goal one, NABSE leaders, members and affiliates must first trace visible symptoms back to the *legislative, political and economic systems* from which they derive. Then, we can tackle understanding each system, master it, and use it to advantage our mission. NABSE educators must become experts in school finance and state-mandated funding formulas for K-12 education. We must learn who the legislative leaders are that chair committees that set budget priorities for education in each state. We must monitor legislative activity when it is occurring; after the fact is too late! While politics may be a dirty business, we cannot be too afraid, too moral, or too principled to soil our hands. If not, our fate as a people is sealed. The future of Black children is predetermined; and the impact of formal education is moot.

Goal Two: Build coalitions of allies

The good news is that *NABSE* does not have to advocate alone! To attain goal two, NABSE must actively identify and partner with organizations, politicians, lobbyists, stakeholders, community groups, etc. who are aligned with the scope of our mission and vision. Allies are critical to the work of NABSE and its affiliates, who have been charged to **advocate** for equity on behalf of learners and educators of African descent. BIPOC are the most adversely impacted by state government initiatives. NABSE must also actively **persist** in mounting initiatives pertinent to local school communities.

Merriam-Webster defines an **ally** as “one that is associated with another as a helper: a person or group that provides assistance and support in an

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ongoing effort, activity, or struggle.” In the context of NABSE, “allies” are referenced in the “Action Plan Template” section of the **NABSE G*P*S* (Glidepaths*Potentialities*Solutions)-2021**. In 2021 NABSE affiliates were charged to identify and address one or more of the “Education Imperatives” described in the **G*P*S**. The template serves as a guide to spark thinking about who in each affiliate’s circle of influence is best positioned to support what the affiliate is doing to advocate on behalf of all learners, but learners of African descent in particular. The template further uses this framework to promote implementation of the beliefs and policies outlined in the Education Imperatives.

Each NABSE affiliate is unique in the sense that areas of focus may differ from the first five imperatives recommended for initial implementation. It is important to note that the **NABSE G*P*S*** is a “conceptual pathfinder” but also a fluid document with flexibility in implementation. The current educational landscape and its impact on learners and educators of African descent will dictate “the what.” If an affiliate has already begun to address the priority imperatives listed, it may find urgency in another area. There may be overlap in the template, as “allies” and “partners” could be one and the same.

Strategize: A course of action should be designed that is specific to each affiliate! Some key questions for affiliates to grapple with as they seek to cultivate allies relate to compatibility: What does (or should) allyship look like in action in a particular location? What are desirable interactions? What have affiliates already done of mutual interest to other organizations that can be shared? There is no point in “reinventing the wheel” if what has been done by some NABSE affiliates is a workable model for others. By all means, success should be shared and replicated throughout the organization! Every affiliate can serve as a model for all to see!

What systems must be navigated in order to successfully address legislative activities that, by design, adversely impact learners and educators of African descent? Since each state is different and will have a variety of advocacy organizations, NABSE affiliates should identify and partner with those whose

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work is in alignment with their membership’s goals and plans, as well as **NABSE G*P*S*** Action Plans.

As NABSE looks to the remainder of 2023 and beyond, its legislative priorities are equally as important as those that were a primary focus coming out of the COVID-19 era. Many affiliates may be familiar with **persistence** work that involves partnering with local allies such as the mayor’s office, city council, professional sports teams/players, specific departments in area colleges/universities, unions, and other groups. On the other hand, most NABSE affiliates are less familiar with the **advocacy** work that should be undertaken as well. Partnering with state-level allies such as state education agencies, professional educator organizations, legislative Black caucuses,

state Boards of Education, school funding advocacy groups, and many non-profit organizations that serve as watchdogs on behalf of education and government is totally appropriate.

Comprised of duly elected individuals representing specific geographical areas of each state, the Legislative Black Caucus could serve as a starting point to support NABSE affiliates. These groups can provide a blueprint, or specific direction on how best to advocate effectively for learners and educators of African descent in the state legislature. From providing testimony, community organizing, and lobbying to raise public awareness, elected officials can be invaluable resources regarding legislative processes, priorities and procedures. By the same token, NABSE educators can enlighten legislators about the impact of current, pending or proposed legislation that may negatively affect the provision of free and appropriate public education for **all** learners.

NABSE affiliates must educate themselves about how to navigate state legislative websites in order to track state House/Senate bills. Doing so is consistent with goal one above: addressing systems. Some nonprofits in each state provide legislative tracking systems. **LegiScan** is a bill tracker that serves all 50 states and promotes the ability to bring people to the process. Affiliates can focus on the state where they are located, as well as track similar bills in all states. The tracking system provides details about the most recent legislation, popular bills, sponsors, committee members, etc.

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Individual NABSE members who serve as school board members, elected officials, or in other leadership capacities within school communities (such as board/committee/commission members) can play a vital role in supporting the mission and vision of school districts. These individuals can provide a clarion voice in support of legislative priorities.

Organize in ways that tap into the strengths of affiliate members!

As NABSE builds coalitions of allies to effectively advocate and persist in this critical work, its members should be constantly energized and reminded that we leave an inheritance (knowledge/education) and a legacy (our children) to those who come after us. NABSE calls for all affiliates to stand and be counted as present. The words of Attorney Benjamin Crump (called by some “Black America’s Attorney General”) upon receiving the 2023 NAACP Social Justice Award, should resonate with every NABSE member and affiliate. We

are “...an unapologetic defender of Black life, Black liberty and Black humanity....We must advocate for our children and our culture in the classroom. We will not let elected officials exterminate our history, our literature, or our culture....not in Florida or in any of the other 50 states.” Education is freedom; freedom invites opportunity. Now is the opportunity for NABSE affiliates and our coalition of allies to **mobilize** as never before on behalf of all learners, but learners and educators of African descent in particular!

Goal Three: Elevate student voices

Students are the primary stakeholders and most important individuals in education systems. Yet, how often do we consistently solicit and utilize their input and feedback, or allow them to lead and inspire adults about their education and futures? Student voice is invaluable and necessary for schools and society to prosper and thrive.

Elevating student voices is quite different from gathering student input and feedback; this may seem obvious but worth addressing. Finding multiple ways to gather varied student perspectives representative of all students, apply what was learned, and allow students to speak for themselves is vital. It is also crucial that communication be two-way. Open communication enables and empowers students not only to “step up” when asked, but also

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to know that education systems and other supportive organizations welcome their input, feedback and leadership, even without being invited.

Here are examples of how current NABSE members are elevating student voice in their school communities:

- A superintendent partnered with the student version of the school district’s Superintendent Advisory Council (SAC) to access student voice and leadership. The student SAC helped draft the district’s education equity policy, gave input regarding the feasibility of armed vs. unarmed security at the high school level, and provided feedback about the school calendar for middle school and high school. When the superintendent was

approached to share thoughts about fair funding for schools amid state budget negotiations, student representatives from the Council were extended an invitation to participate. The student SAC representatives learned from their principal that funding would be the topic of the press conference to which they had been invited; they crafted their responses accordingly. Together with the facts presented during the press conference, the voices of students and their superintendent were heard regarding a topic that was important to them, their community, and public education in their state.

- A former principal ensured that students from her school would participate in [Youth & Government®](#), a national YMCA program, because of the legislative, advocacy, and governance opportunities the program provides. She knew that students would develop invaluable life skills such as written and verbal communication, problem solving, empathy, considering conflicting facts and opinions, and leadership. Recently, when speaking to a current and former participant of the program, their one-time principal ascertained relevant feedback about the impact of the Youth & Government experience. Both students had entered the program as 6th graders, but are now enrolled in high school and college, respectively. They shared many benefits of the program including the following: “Breaks you out of your shell.” “Teaches you how to be curious.” “Pushes your

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critical thinking, and develops your research and understanding of current and needed legislative topics.”

NABSE affiliates have elevated student voice in various ways, including training students as a part of their Youth Leadership Academy, and collaborating with colleges and universities to capture student voice. Another example occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. As school districts across the nation pivoted and created plans, it was urgent for the affiliate to learn students’ perspectives on the impact of COVID-19, and

how best to address their needs. In partnership with another organization, the affiliate arranged for education leaders and supporters to hear a student panel discuss their learning and emotional needs necessary for them to thrive during a pandemic. Based on lessons learned from the panel, and other student input opportunities, an affiliate is currently working on creating a Student Commission to ensure that student voice is an on-going part of NABSE affiliate work and actions.

No doubt, there are numerous examples of student voices being elevated in state and local forums where their input is having an impact. NABSE needs to chronicle and showcase these exemplary leaders as models to be emulated. Clearly, the extent to which black and other students of color are active participants in activities and events that elevate their voices is not only critical to their future, but to the future of public education in general. The call to action for this goal is that student voices be consistently elevated, and opportunities to do so be increased exponentially. NABSE educators—teachers, administrators and parent leaders—should take up this mantle with all deliberate speed.

CONCLUSION

As we tackle legislative systems in our state capitals, we must not be daunted by the enormity of the task or the intransigence of deeply rooted challenges. Insensitive government leaders may cling to the advantages inherent within their power rather than acknowledge the inequities their myopia perpetuates. What they derive from their advantages is not too high

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a price to pay for inflicting disparities, disadvantages and collateral damage upon the governed. Nevertheless, overcoming insurmountable odds has always been the connective tissue within the DNA of black people, linking our bloodlines across generations, continents, cultures and adversities.

We must mount proactive offenses, not cower in the corner of uncertainty and insecurity. We must move boldly for ourselves and our progeny for whom we are modeling what activism looks like, sounds like, acts like in the face of adversity, long odds and diminishing returns. Together with our scholars and

experts in African American history and anthropology, the factual truth can be laser-focused to counter, refute and dismiss all attempts to marginalize or relegate BIPOC to irrelevance or obscurity.

Ultimately, let us not pretend that we do not have time or resources to achieve three goals: address systems, build coalitions, elevate student voices! They are battle plans to protect our profession and those we serve. Advocacy without activism is noise. Noise falling upon deaf ears in state capitals is the same as silence. Silence is consent! Activism is not passive; it is vocal, visible, virtual and viable! Public education cannot continue to be the whipping boy for bigoted bullies to badger *ad infinitum*. As the mayhem in public education continues on our watch, NABSE and BIPOC educators must resist and persist. MLK and Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Height and Daisy Bates, the Greensboro 4, the Little Rock 9, and the Freedom Riders did more with so much less than we have. What they accomplished with carbon paper and mimeograph machines, "snail mail" and party lines, public transportation and word-of-mouth, boycotts and marches is history. Imagine what they would have achieved with Google and Facebook, Instagram, X, Threads, cell phones, YouTube, Tik Tok and Zoom? Now imagine what you can do with all of the resources available to you. Onward and upward, NABSE! Now, right now!

***National Alliance of Black School Educators
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