DEI Disaster Recovery in America's K–12 Schools and Higher Education Institutions

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January 2025 started with a pair of fires that devastated Altadena and the Pacific Palisades, two Los Angeles communities. Thirty-one people were killed and over 16,000 structures were destroyed, including schools (Bush, 2025). Several friends, colleagues, and former students of mine lost their homes, cars, and most of their personal possessions. It was indeed a catastrophic start to the new year in southern California, where I have now spent more than a decade of my life. Altadena is about 10 miles from my home; I could see and smell smoke in the air as the fires ravaged. In some ways, this experience was new to me, but in many others, it was eerily familiar.

I spent the first 22 years of my life in south Georgia, a place that frequently experiences violent hurricanes and tornadoes. I have seen entire communities almost instantly wiped out, but the January 2025 Los Angeles fires were different. I am accustomed to violent weather events wreaking havoc in a matter of minutes or hours, at longest—that is how it typically occurs in the southeast. However, wildfires in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades burned for more than three weeks. That part was unfamiliar to me. I began this chapter in this way for two reasons. First, because my experiences and observations in both contexts (south Georgia and southern California) shape my recognition of what is possible in the months and years after a disaster strikes. Second, the Los Angeles fires began just 13 days before the start of Donald Trump's second term. The chaos and devastation that ensued in education and elsewhere in our democracy because of the president's executive orders and other policy actions felt at times like a quick-moving hurricane or tornado, and at other times like a wildfire that would take a long time to fully contain.

In the next section, I summarize some local, state, and federal policymaking activities that distressed K–12 schools, colleges, and universities across the United States from 2021 on. Then, I offer 10 ways that educators

and policymakers, as well as taxpaying Americans, can help our nation recover from the fast-moving legislative obliteration of DEI initiatives in the years before and first few months after Trump's return to the White House. I conclude the chapter by forecasting a DEI rebuild that is stronger than what existed prior to what will ultimately be 8 full years of political devastation.

POLITICIZED ATTACKS ON DEI: FROM ISOLATED STORMS TO NATIONAL DISASTER

Harvard Education Press published *The Big Lie About Race in America's Schools* (Johnson & Harper, 2024). Royel Johnson, my University of Southern California faculty colleague, and I brought together scholars who study K–12 and postsecondary education to explain why books about America's racial past and present, LGBTQ+ people, and other DEI-related topics had been banned. We made sense of how conservative parent groups (e.g., Moms for Liberty), school board members, and lawmakers succeeded in hoodwinking the nation into believing that critical race theory was being taught in K–12 classrooms. Authors also described why and how curricula were whitewashed, spending on DEI-focused professional development activities for educators were outlawed, law-abiding DEI professionals were fired, culture centers and multicultural affairs offices were closed, and programs that ensure belongingness and academic success for diverse student populations were defunded between 2021 and 2024.

A map published in *Education Week* (Schwartz, 2021) shows how state-level policies unfolded in K–12 schools over those 4 years to the present moment; *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published and occasionally updates a similar map for state-level postsecondary policymaking (Chronicle Staff, 2025). Two things about these maps: (1) most of the state-level legislation that eliminated DEI activities occurred prior to the start of Trump's second presidency; and (2) these maps do not show local-level DEI activity bans enacted by K–12 school boards or trustees at single higher education institutions (Harper, 2024a).

In *The Big Lie About Race in America's Schools*, authors attribute these legislative activities to a complex cocktail of factors, including conservative lawmakers' racist rejections of the DEI surge that ensued after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd in 2020. I agree with this, but I also argued in the book that much of it was in response to "one very big lie," which I summarized as the following:

> Thousands, perhaps millions of too-woke educators in K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions are indoctrinating students with racist falsehoods about America, teaching homoerotic and otherwise inappropriately pornographic content in classrooms, exposing third graders to CRT, erasing the founding

> fathers and long-celebrated white American heroes from the curriculum, discarding Shakespeare and other classics in exchange for racially inflammatory texts, forcing kids to pick genders that misalign with who they feel they really are at the time, telling white students they all are racist oppressors, convincing students of color they are all inferior to whites and will be forever oppressed, discriminating against white applicants for everything (university admissions, professorships, presidencies and other high-level administrative jobs, etc.), wasting enormous sums of taxpayers' money on divisive programming, supporting hateful CDOs who aim to embarrass white people and fracture campus communities along racial lines, and grooming young people to hate America because it is so racist. (Harper, 2024b, pp. 40–41)

Despite there being so little evidence to confirm its universality, school board members, college trustees and regents, and conservative state legislators effectively propagated this big lie. Starting in January 2021, they repeatedly used it to justify the legislative teardown of DEI in individual institutions, districts, and states. Then, Donald Trump retook the White House in January 2025.

On his first day in office, the 47th U.S. President signed a stack of executive orders (EOs), one of which was titled, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling" (Exec. Order No. 14190, 2025). Another EO reversed 78 DEI-related EOs that his predecessor signed (Exec. Order No. 14148, 2025). That document asserted, "The injection of 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI) into our institutions has corrupted them by replacing hard work, merit, and equality with a divisive and dangerous preferential hierarchy" (p. 8237). Listed in Table 13.1 are 11 of the Biden-era EOs that Trump categorically reversed, each of which either explicitly focused on or had federal implications for educational institutions.

In addition to the one dumpster anti-DEI EO, Trump also signed another on his first day back in office titled, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" (Exec. Order No. 14151, 2025). While seemingly unrelated to education, this EO affected federal agencies that fund and otherwise support educational institutions. On the third day of his second presidency, Trump announced that all federal workers in DEI roles were being laid off, effective immediately (Harper, 2025a). One day after Trump's second inauguration, Pete Hegseth, the president's Defense Secretary nominee, promised in his Senate confirmation hearing that DEI would have no place in our nation's military (Harper, 2025b). These and other actions strongly signaled to K–12 school districts and postsecondary institutions that the Trump administration would endeavor to destroy DEI in every place that received federal funding. That signal became even stronger on Valentine's Day 2025.

Craig Trainor, then-acting assistant secretary for civil rights in the U.S. Department of Education, issued a "Dear Colleague" letter to every

Table 13.1. Education-Related Biden Executive Orders Rescinded in Trump Executive Order 14148

Biden EO Number	Executive Order Title
13985	Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government
13995	Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery
14020	Establishment of the White House Gender Policy Council
14021	Guaranteeing an Educational Environment Free From Discrimination on the Basis of Sex, Including Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity
14031	Advancing Equity, Justice, and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders
14045	White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics
14049	White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Native Americans and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities
14050	White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans
14075	Advancing Equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Individuals
14091	Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government
14124	White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity Through Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Source: Author-created

K–12 school and postsecondary institution in the country (Trainor, 2025). Without evidence, it alleged that DEI initiatives routinely and systemically discriminated against White and Asian students. Trainor gave educational leaders an ultimatum: Either eliminate so-called discriminatory DEI programs within 14 days or lose federal funding. By February 28, numerous educational institutions all over America had scrubbed DEI language from their websites, changed the names of programs and administrative positions, ended scholarships designated for underrepresented collegians (women, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, etc.), closed offices and centers, and fired DEI professionals (Dutton, 2025; Gretzinger et al., 2025; Knox & Weissman, 2025). Noteworthy is that "Dear Colleague" letters are not official policy documents, yet Trainor's compelled institutions to do all that I just described over a 2-week period.

In addition to anti-DEI executive orders that Trump signed between January and March 2025 and Trainor's now infamous Valentine, federally supported training grants for teachers were cut (Blake, 2025; Liptak & Closson, 2025). Also, most federal grants for research focused on racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequities in education and other sectors, along with topics pertaining to climate injustice and other DEI-related issues, were paused—many were permanently defunded (Barnes & Egwuonwu, 2025; Miller & Zimmer, 2025). The National Institutes of Health announced in April 2025 that it would no longer award grants to any institution that is unable to certify that it does not engage in "discriminatory equity ideology" or offer DEI initiatives that violate federal antidiscrimination policies (Stahl, 2025). "Awards that are not aligned with program goals or agency priorities have been terminated, including but not limited to those on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), environmental justice, and misinformation/disinformation" the NSF announced on its website (National Science Foundation, 2025). "Projects that have limited impact or rely on DEI frameworks or advocacy do not effectuate NSF priorities."

Several Trump executive orders have been contested and are still moving through the courts. The National Academy of Education, American Educational Research Association, National Education Association, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund are among the many organizations that filed suit against the Trump administration in 2025 for actions taken against DEI. Much of what the president unilaterally declared violates the Constitution and requires congressional approval, plaintiffs insisted.

Mostly in a one-at-a-time fashion, anti-DEI policies picked up increasingly strong winds across approximately two dozen individual states during Biden's 4 years in office. In some ways, it was reminiscent of a hard-to-contain wildfire spreading from one community to another. Trump's return to the presidency intensified the anti-DEI storm, resulting in rapid tornado-like destruction that swiftly affected educational institutions across all 50 states. Aftershocks will surely endure and the DEI climate crisis will produce additional legislative catastrophes until Trump vacates the White House in January 2029. But there are actions that educators and policymakers as well as taxpaying Americans can take to help our nation recover from 4 years of state-level DEI legislative attacks and the 4 additional years of Trump administration efforts to permanently destroy DEI.

ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL POST-DISASTER REBUILD

There usually is no rapid recovery from catastrophic flooding, wildfires, earthquakes, tornadoes, or hurricanes. It takes time. Unfortunately,

rebounding from what is likely to be an 8-year legislative movement to decimate DEI in education and elsewhere in our democracy will require enormous time, effort, and resources. Presented in this section are 10 actions that could lead to a successful and sustainable recovery.

1. *Communicate Grief and Human Toll*—Former U.S. Department of Education employees and other federal workers who were abruptly and unjustifiably terminated by the Trump administration are sharing the impact that it has had on their finances, health insurance, psychological and physiological wellness, and other personal circumstances (Cohen et al., 2025). In higher education, current and recently fired DEI professionals also are doing the same (Grim et al., 2025). Students, parents and families, teachers, staff, and educational leaders must tell stories of how the loss of programs, centers and offices, and valued members of their communities impacted them as citizens, as well as how their schools were affected. Hearing firsthand descriptions of their grief and experiences could help taxpayers, journalists, and policymakers more deeply understand the harm that is being endured. Perhaps knowing this would lead to compassion and restorative justice.
2. *Take Stock of the Damage*—Immediately following a catastrophic weather event, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Weather Service, and other state and federal government agencies start assessing the extent of the damage. In a highly coordinated fashion, they meticulously take stock of loss. This information helps them determine how much money and time will be needed to rebuild. Education researchers, practitioners, K–12 school and district leaders, college presidents, and governing board members must do the same. Attempting to rebuild DEI programs and services without fully accounting for all that was torn down would be a big, costly mistake.
3. *Create Multisector Collaborations*—Governors and mayors typically have to partner with FEMA and other federal government actors to recover from storms and climate disasters. State agencies, local businesses, nonprofit and volunteer organizations, churches, synagogues, and mosques also come together as partners. Similarly, schools, colleges and universities, employers, alumni chapters of historically Black sororities and fraternities, religious leaders and congregations, social justice and civil rights organizations (NAACP, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, Anti-Defamation League, and Southern Poverty Law Center, etc.), lawyers, progressive politicians, and others must unite to communicate the damage that

has been inflicted on people and on educational institutions, and to collaboratively pursue necessary recovery resources.

4. *Rebuild With Evidence*—In July 2024, I created the National DEI Defense Coalition to unite stakeholders across higher education and to use trustworthy evidence to attempt to save DEI from further politicized attacks. I knew that truths, data, and research on their own would not be enough, as DEI opponents have repeatedly conveyed their disregard for facts. Notwithstanding, the hundreds of scholars, practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and students whom I united via the Coalition saw it as our civic duty to equip the public with consciousness-raising resources as one way of preventing more Americans from being duped by misinformation and disinformation about DEI. Recovery efforts also must be based on data about the educational benefits of DEI, what works and is worth preserving, what previously failed to deliver and should be discarded, and which structures and systems require dismantling or extensive revision for the next iteration of DEI initiatives to produce even better results.
5. *Rebuild Equitably*—The human toll storytelling and damage stocktaking that I suggested in the first two recommendations will surely reveal that anti-DEI policymaking harmed lots of Americans—girls and women, boys and men, people of color, students with disabilities, Jews and Muslims, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income Americans, and immigrants, to name a few. One study showed how White Christian students also were disadvantaged when compositional diversity drastically declined on their campus (Park, 2013). Sadly, I predict that the anti-DEI movement will negatively affect all Americans within and beyond educational institutions. Therefore, I am not calling for a rank ordering of groups for recovery prioritization (or what is colloquially known as "Oppression Olympics"). COVID-19 was a tragedy that affected everyone. As I did in my testimony to Congress 4 months into the pandemic (Harper, 2020), I insist here that DEI recovery efforts must be customized to meet the specific needs of each population and context that experienced harm. Metaphorically, people whose homes survived the storm without damage do not need new houses, but they may need something else to support their recovery.
6. *Do Not Discard Existing Blueprints*—Over the past 30 years, Teachers College Press has published approximately 100 books in its Multicultural Education Series edited by the legendary James A. Banks. Individually and collectively, these texts offer practically useful guidance on ways to make classrooms inclusive, curriculum culturally responsive and sustaining, and outcomes equitable for students in K–12 schools and postsecondary institutions. Consulting books in this important, highly respected series would be a smart

place to start the DEI rebuild. Printed on those pages are decades of evidence-based insights that are absolutely worth preserving. Also, I recommend revisiting DEI plans that the Biden-Harris administration required the U.S. Department of Education and all other federal agencies to create (Balu et al., 2023). Those plans were based on analyses of data that revealed inequities that will undoubtedly still exist after Trump departs the White House. Hence, recommendations will very likely be as relevant in 2029 as they were 5 years prior.

7. *Strengthen and Innovate the Next Iteration of DEI*—Two things are simultaneously true about DEI activities in education: (1) research makes incontestably clear that they strengthen schools, colleges, and universities, and (2) they typically are not as great as they could be because they are almost always understaffed, underfunded, and underprioritized. The latter reality made them extraordinarily susceptible to politicized attacks and swift collapse between 2021 and Trump's return to the presidency. Future versions of DEI initiatives must be evidence-based, strategic, rigorous, appropriately staffed and funded, and permanently embedded into everything that educational institutions do. They also would benefit from innovation. What gets rebuilt should not be identical to what previously existed. Furthermore, before building the home back, it would be wise to fix cracks and structural problems in its foundation.
8. *Simultaneously Recover and Futureproof*—When this political moment ends, excitement will compel educators to rebuild as quickly as possible. Inequities will necessitate rapid response. Attention devoted to recovering from 8 years of legislative destruction must occur in tandem with strategies to ensure that what ensued between 2021 and 2029 never happens again. It would be a shame to quickly rebuild the house only for it to be blown away again when the next political storm blows. There will be future political storms.
9. *Elect DEI Appreciators to Governing Boards and Public Policy Roles*—There is no shortage of vocal DEI opponents on K–12 school boards, among college trustees and regents, or in city councils, state legislatures, Congress, and governorships. Progressives must elect leaders who will be loud, confident, and dependable defenders of DEI. We also need to run for offices ourselves and encourage similarly committed others in our families, communities, and networks to pursue policymaking roles. Above all, we must vote for candidates who are going to ensure swift and equitable recovery from the 8-year attack on DEI. Before election days, we should explicitly ask hopefuls to articulate exactly how they are going to fight for the restoration of DEI in education and elsewhere in our democracy.

10. *Take Seriously What Diverse Residents Say*—One major misstep occurs too often in weather-related disaster recovery; government actors begin rebuilding and reimagining neighborhoods without meaningfully engaging the people who once lived there and will return to those places. Consequently, some of what emerges is unresponsive to their needs and expectations; it tends to not reflect their cultural histories and interests. It would be a big mistake to rebuild anything in the name of DEI in educational institutions without first consulting with the students, educators, and families who make schools diverse. Their input must be taken seriously and reflected in new investments, initiatives, models, and spaces.

This list of 10 actions is neither extensive nor exhaustive. In fact, these are just some thoughts I have at this specific moment in time. Undoubtedly, I will put forth additional recommendations in the years ahead.

CONCLUSION

Massive amounts of debris from the anti-DEI legislative wreckage currently overwhelm the streets of our democracy, including the campuses on which our K–12 schools and postsecondary institutions are built. The damage is ongoing; thus, a full accounting of its impact has not yet occurred. Right now, it is hard to even determine what to clean up first—where or where the recovery will begin or how long it will take or how much it will cost or who will lead the efforts. But 30 years of books published in James A. Banks's Multicultural Education Series collectively confirm what I know to be true of our nation's educational institutions: diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness make them more excellent. I am therefore convinced that any assault on these fundamental values is unsustainable. As I have witnessed time and time again in south Georgia and am beginning to see in southern California, recovery is indeed possible. The stressful rebuilding process can eventually lead to a remarkable outcome that, in many ways, is better than what existed before the catastrophic storm.

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