

## Students Pay the Price for Institutional Racism



**Dr. Lenworth Gunther, Historian, Educator, Activist**  
Known as the “Godfather” to a generation of civil rights activists, Dr. Gunther started fighting for racial equality as a student at Columbia University and never stopped. As a history professor and 38-year NEA member, Gunther dedicated his life to lifting up the voices and contributions of people of color. Since retiring from the classroom, he continues to mentor educators and young activists, working with police officers and young people to foster positive community relations. He recently spoke with NEA about the impact of institutional racism on today’s students.

**Who’s making history today that excites you as an historian?**

Today's torch bearers are the young and old of all races who are marching in the streets against racial intolerance.

**People know racist hate speech when they hear it. Why is institutional racism trickier to recognize?**

People tend not to explore what’s beneath the surface of their everyday world. History is about the four-fifths of the iceberg people don’t see. Institutional racism ignores the four-fifths of the iceberg that’s underneath the water—but that’s what sinks the Titanic. There’s an unwillingness, on the part of some people, to believe that institutional racism is a reality.

**What’s your personal experience with institutional racism as a student?**

Even though I was the salutatorian at my junior high school, the guidance counselor didn’t want me to take the exam to get into Stuyvesant High School, one of the top schools in New York City. She told me to focus on vocational work because I was better at handicrafts—standard advice for Black students. My mother had to come to school and argue with the counselor so I could take the test. I graduated from high school with a 90 average; got 100 on every math regent in New York state; scored a 99 on the French regent, which was the highest mark in the history of the state; and was accepted into Columbia University. Yet my counselor couldn’t imagine an academic future for me. Policies are established by institutions but have to be carried out by people. That experience helped make me the man I am. I learned that I had to fight to be recognized.

**What are some of the ways institutional racism affects today’s students?**

It shows up in many different guises, each with its own far-reaching impact. . .



- The absence of minorities in core curricula and textbooks renders people of color invisible. They were active in all spheres of American life and many achieved despite the odds, but publishers often footnote minorities instead of making them integral to the subject. Take the contributions of slaves, which are often ignored. Most people don't know that Eli Whitney got the idea for the cotton gin from a device made and used by slaves in Savannah, Georgia.
- Test taking has cultural dynamics. Black students, for instance, often have strong verbal skills over literary skills. When I used student peer interaction and oral participation as testing techniques, some of my students scored higher on exams. The same is true for English Language Learners. What students can say eloquently in Spanish, they may not be able to write eloquently in English. If we presume they don't know the subject matter because they can't express themselves well on a written test, we miss tapping into their strengths. Also, many students are tested every day in the street. Just getting to school is a test; then when they get there, they're being tested all the time.
- A disproportionately high number of Black and Latino students are in special education classes. Some who have emotional and behavioral issues caused by anxiety or depression are assumed to have intellectual disabilities. There's a presumption they're slow and don't learn as well.
- Schools in urban areas where students of color form the majority of the population are still making do with limited funds, out-of-date textbooks, inadequate supplies, and less experienced teachers. Take a look at recent pictures of Detroit schools showing black mold, dead rodents, fecal matter, and toilet water leaking through the ceiling.

### **How can an organization like NEA advocate for racial justice in education?**

Local and state affiliates and the NEA national office can propose guidelines for schoolboards and state boards of education and advocate for racial justice in education with congressional committees and the U.S. Department of Education. They can also influence state departments of education and school districts to adopt more accurate and culturally inclusive textbooks, use culturally appropriate tests and alternate ways to determine mastery of subject matter, and provide pre- and in-service cultural competence training for educators.

### **What about educators who say, "I'm just one person—how can I make a difference"?**

Individual educators have a very important role to play. Ask yourself: "What are my personal experiences and observations? How does this subject affect me and my students? What have I done about it? Am I willing to speak out at school and at NEA meetings?" The process of change begins with individuals. And actions begin with personal awareness, compassion, undying empathy, and the willingness to stand alone, if necessary, in the pursuit of educational excellence and opportunity for all students.