



## **Renewing the Promise: A Discussion Guide**

*Brown v. Board of Education*, the unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ruling that sought to end “separate but equal” schools, is one of the most significant legal decisions in our nation’s history. As noted in the introduction to the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) video “Renewing the Promise,” *Brown* signaled a turning point in the struggle for equal rights for all Americans – Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and others – who were systematically excluded from a quality mainstream public education.

Today, more than a half century later, the struggle for equity and equality continues. The challenge is no longer overt, state-imposed segregation, but what has resulted from the interpretation of *Brown* in the nation’s schools and communities. Shifts in housing patterns and the rise in school choice programs have resulted in racial isolation, continued inequality, and a perpetual achievement gap, especially in our urban centers. And those topics are rarely discussed openly today.

Talking honestly about these issues – especially those surrounding racial and economic equality and equity – is a daunting and continuous task. But the challenge is to go beyond the standard context of history and textbooks and keep the discussions – about race, about the issues that divide us as a nation – alive in your boardrooms, schools, and communities.

By providing the context of history and reflection, we hope that “Renewing the Promise” and this discussion guide give you and your board an opportunity to ask the hard questions, spur discussion, and find ways to improve education for the children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Working with your board**

Take some time at an upcoming meeting or board retreat to view the video. Provide your colleagues with a copy of this discussion guide in advance and ask them to review the materials before the meeting. Ask each member to plan a short summary (1 to 3 minutes) on how they personally have been influenced, affected, or had their lives changed by *Brown*. The summary should focus on one or more of these questions:

- What do you remember most about the years leading up to the *Brown* decision? Was it something that was discussed in your home? With teachers? With friends and peers?

- Do you think about the *Brown* decision as you are making decisions for your district?
- What do you think was the promise of *Brown*? Has that promise been achieved? Is *Brown* still relevant today?
- Do you believe that diversity is an essential ingredient of a high-quality education?
- What is your board doing to achieve diversity? Is it enough?
- Do you perceive academic gaps as purely the result of poverty? Are some opportunities being withheld or restricted based on seemingly neutral policies that nonetheless have a negative impact based on race and/or ethnicity?

After viewing the video, focus the discussion on what you need to do to improve student achievement among all racial and ethnic groups. What can board members do, both legally and politically, to ensure that this happens?

Here are some questions that can spur further discussion and possible policy development:

- What strides has your district made in the area of race and equity over the past decade?
- What challenges remain for your district regarding equity and race?
- What is the next progress step for your district?
- Do you equitably distribute district funds among your schools? If not, why not?
- What is the achievement gap in your district and how does that trace back to the residual questions from *Brown*?
- How can you intentionally create or maintain diversity in your schools when there is no longer a legal mandate to do so?
- What can you do to ensure that the inequities that led to *Brown* don't recur?
- What community groups can and should you reach out to with this video?
- Do you have policies that specifically address diversity issues?

All of these questions probably cannot be answered in a single meeting. But they should be part of an ongoing dialogue between the school board and administrators. And the dialogue extends to your building leaders, staff, students, and community as well.

### **Working with your staff**

Your district has leaders at all levels -- starting with the board and superintendent, and extending down to the central office staff, principals, teachers, and classified employees. And like you, these leaders have beliefs and experiences around issues of diversity and equity that impact how they perform their job responsibilities.

But how do you and your fellow board members get your leaders to share their thoughts in an open and honest manner? Using the video as a starting point, your first meeting should be an equal mix of gathering information and sharing opinions.

Here are some possible discussion points. Start with the superintendent and administrative team at the central office, then consider including the building level employees with your principals, teachers, and classified staff.

- Has the board's diversity policy been properly distributed to all employees?
- Do you consider diversity when hiring your staff?
- Are you being sensitive to multicultural and diversity concerns when you choose the curriculum that is taught?
- Does your inservice training incorporate diversity approaches that include relationship building across racial and ethnic staff groups, as well as direct professional development modules focused on equity and diversity?
- Are the vendors who come into your school buildings reflective of the diverse community? If not, why not?
- Do you have bilingual translators available for the various populations you serve?
- Are there opportunities for principals to talk with each other about the challenges they face?
- Do you have regular discussions about diversity challenges with your staff?
- Does your staff have the opportunity to meet with peers to discuss these issues?

### **Working with students**

As board members, "Renewing the Promise" provides an opportunity for you to meet and work with students in your district. Using the video as a starting point for discussion, you can speak to classes about your experiences related to *Brown* and make the history come alive for students. Keep in mind the age group of the students you are working with and tailor the discussion about race, diversity and equity accordingly. And also remember, when speaking individually, that you still represent the board as a collective body.

If racial tensions exist in your schools, work with your superintendent and building principals to form focus groups to discuss the source of those tensions and possible solutions. Some specific suggestions for study circles are provided in the discussion guide. Be prepared to contract with a trained facilitator who can help you through these rough spots.

A more effective way to work with students, albeit indirectly at times, is to facilitate change through policy. Discuss with your fellow board members what you can do through policy to pave the way for students to achieve. It might not be as personally rewarding, but policy ultimately can be a more effective means to achieve your goal.

### **Working with your community**

All students are entitled to equal learning opportunities. Education must, as one person said in the video, "move beyond moving bodies and make sure that the level of instruction, and then the level of the person delivering the instruction, is the same regardless of where a person lives and regardless of what school building that child enters."

In addition to the boardroom, classroom, and district staff, “Renewing the Promise” can be a starting point for discussions about race in your community as well. Those discussions need to be ongoing, rather than a one-time response to an incident that happened in your community or in one of your schools.

If you don’t have one already, take the opportunity that the *Brown* anniversary and this video presents to consider forming a diversity committee. These committees meet regularly to review policies and talk about new initiatives centering around race and equity issues. In communities where these issues are present but have not been discussed, a community-based panel can prove helpful.

Be prepared to listen, and don’t be surprised if your committee members vent. But talk, learn from each other, and consider ways to take action for the children who will be tomorrow’s leaders.

### **The discussion guide**

The enclosed materials are a compilation of reflections about the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Substantive articles written by Juan Williams, a senior correspondent for the National Public Radio and author of a biography of Thurgood Marshall and *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, for the National School Boards Association’s (NSBA) *American School Board Journal* (ASBJ), as well as a helpful listing of resources of supplemental readings and websites. CUBE also includes articles from the *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*’s special anniversary section on *Brown*, which includes classroom activities, resources and discussion questions.

On behalf of the Council of Urban Boards of Education’s Steering Committee, it is our hope that you will find this guide a valuable educational tool for you and your district.