

# Humboldt County Black, Indigenous and People of Color Student Listening Sessions Report



**Report Author: Alannah Smith, Program Manager**

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Humboldt State University  
California Center for Rural Policy  
1 Harpst Street  
Arcata, CA 95521  
(707) 826-3400  
<http://www.humboldt.edu/ccrp>  
[ccrp@humboldt.edu](mailto:ccrp@humboldt.edu)

## BACKGROUND

In response to the police brutality against people of color, the ongoing racial injustices across the country, and the Racial Equity Statement released by the Northern Humboldt Union High School District in June of 2020, a series of listening campaigns and meetings for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students around Humboldt County were organized by students with support from administrators. BIPOC students, staff, families and community members were invited to these listening sessions to share their experiences with racism in the community and in school and to help inform changes to district and school level policies and practices.

The first district listening session was at Arcata High School in June of 2020 with a total of ten people present, then another in November of 2020 with around 80 people present. This sparked movements for other schools to hold listening sessions with McKinleyville High School holding their first session in August of 2020 with around 48 people present, and their second in November of 2020 with around 67 students present. Since then, similar conversations have been held at Eureka High School, Fortuna High School, and Academy of the Redwoods.

These listening sessions, along with two conversations with the HSU California Center for Rural Policy (CCRP), helped inform the information and recommendations outlined in this report. This report is owned by BIPOC student representatives from five different Humboldt County high schools and is intended to be a living document that can be shared with whoever they see fit. By putting it in written form, it allows students an easier way to communicate their experiences so they don't have to relive the trauma and continue to talk about their experiences with racism and microaggressions.

### Introduction from Local Youth

*For us, BIPOC youth, this past year has been filled with strides towards equity. We have been key voices in our campuses' equity team meetings, advocates for club opportunities, and have made our experiences heard. Although this work is very needed, there is a pattern of taxation. We are constantly having to reshare our traumas in order to amplify the seriousness of these issues; microaggressions, underrepresentation, and systemic racism. This report will allow for BIPOC students to no longer have to repeat and rehash their traumas in order to see progress made. These issues are subject to change as we launch into higher awareness and more equitable ways of teaching. We hope that schools in Humboldt will use this as a guide during their racial equity work. This work can be very hard, but we are laying out our story, our wants, our needs, and we need you to take this and use it for the change intended.*

## Humboldt County Demographics

To better understand why students decided to form these support networks and participate in these dialogues, it is helpful to review the demographics of the county which are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below. As reflected in the tables, Humboldt County is a predominantly white county and the demographics of the high schools reflect that as they are all Predominately White Institutions (PWI).

<b>Figure 1. Humboldt County High School Demographics</b>					
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Enrollment Characteristics (2019-2020)					
<b><u>Race/ Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>Arcata High</u></b>	<b><u>McKinleyville High</u></b>	<b><u>Fortuna High</u></b>	<b><u>Eureka High</u></b>	<b><u>Academy of the Redwoods</u></b>
<b>American Indian / Alaska Native</b>	3.1%	8.2%	3.7%	4.6%	3.4%
<b>Asian</b>	1.9%	1.6%	1.2%	12%	6%
<b>African American / Black</b>	0.9%	0.8%	0.1%	2.1%	1.6%
<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	14.7%	12.9%	27.1%	19%	17.6%
<b>Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander</b>	0.4%	0.6%	0.1%	2.4%	0%
<b>White</b>	69.5%	63.6%	61.1%	51.4%	59.3%
<b>Two or More Races</b>	9.5%	12.3%	6.5%	8.5%	12.1%

<b>Figure 2. Humboldt County Demographics</b>				
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates (2019)				
<b><u>Race/ Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>Arcata</u></b>	<b><u>McKinleyville</u></b>	<b><u>Fortuna</u></b>	<b><u>Eureka</u></b>
<b>American Indian / Alaska Native</b>	2.2%	5.8%	2.9%	2.2%

<b>Asian</b>	4.1%	2.7%	0.6%	6.6%
<b>African American / Black</b>	2.6%	0.3%	0.6%	2.0%
<b>Hispanic / Latino</b>	13.8%	8.5%	21.4%	13.8%
<b>Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander</b>	1.2%	0%	0.5%	0.1%
<b>White</b>	68.7%	84%	81.2%	69.8%
<b>Two or More Races</b>	7.7%	6.4%	6.9%	7.7%

**METHODS**

CCRP utilized a mixed methods approach for this project. Both primary and secondary data sources are included in the report.

Secondary Data

Secondary data refers to information that is already available to the public. For this report racial demographic data was reviewed from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics. Additionally, information on the student-led activism was collected through social media including Facebook, Instagram, and the Arcata High School Pepperbox student publication.

Primary Data

Primary data refers to information gathered directly from first-hand sources. Information was collected through the district listening sessions as well two Zoom conversations with local BIPOC youth and facilitated by CCRP staff.

**RESULTS**

Student Led Activism & Education

The first listening session was organized by Arcata High School students and hosted via Zoom in June of 2020 with a total of ten people present. The session was facilitated by a member of the Eureka NAACP, but most of the talking was done by BIPOC students in attendance. While it was organized for Arcata High School specifically, students from other local high schools were

also invited to attend and share their experiences. For the first session, most of the people in attendance were administrators or community members, but the following sessions saw a greater number of students in attendance.

As of June 2021, a total of seven listening sessions have been facilitated with students across the county: 2 at Arcata High School, 2 at McKinleyville High School, 1 at Eureka High School, 1 at Fortuna High School, and 1 at Academy of the Redwoods. For each of these sessions, all students of color were invited to attend and share their experiences with teachers and administrators, as well as some community members or parents. These sessions were intended to be a safe space for students to share their honest experiences with the school system as students of color. While each student and school had unique experiences to share, some of the common themes to emerge were as follows:

- Microaggressions and racism are a common experience for students of color, both in and outside of the classroom
- Students often feel that they have to take on a teaching role when it comes to discussions of race with their peers
- Most curriculum taught in the local schools is Eurocentric and not reflective of other cultures or races
- Students of color don't feel they have support from teachers and administrators when it comes to their cultural practices or activities

In addition to the listening sessions, BIPOC students have been participating in a number of activities related to racial equity and inclusion. One space where students from all schools come together is the All Humboldt BSU (AHBSU). The AHBSU is facilitated by students, but also supported by the Eureka Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Additionally, each school that participated in creating this report has different opportunities for students of color to engage in. This section highlights some of the clubs, unions, or groups and the activities or events they've organized over the past couple of years.

This section may not reflect all the BIPOC student groups in Humboldt, but includes those that were represented during the listening sessions and the All Humboldt BSU meetings that CCRP staff was invited to attend. Students shared that they often have to work hard to get these types of events or activities approved by their school administrators and would like for them to be more accessible to future generations of students.

#### [Arcata High School \(AHS\)](#)

- The Black Student Union (BSU) was first founded in 2018 by a senior at AHS with the goals of making an impact on the broader community, celebrating diversity, and promoting anti-racist behaviors. It serves as a safe space for all students that identify as Black or African American and their allies to talk about how they are being treated and

how they can make a difference in their schools. In addition to their regular union meetings, they hosted the first ever BSU assembly for all AHS students during Black history month from February 26-28, 2020. The assembly allowed students the opportunity to speak to their peers about many topics including the origins of Black History Month, fashion, culture, appropriation, microaggressions, and the prison industrial complex.

- The Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) club is another cultural group active on the AHS campus. They hold regular meetings throughout the year and have also produced a series of YouTube videos to acknowledge May as Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month. The purpose of the videos they created was to educate their peers and community members about the experiences of Asian Americans during the coronavirus-era, help to explain and debunk Asian stereotypes, and to explore some of the Asian cultures and traditions.
- The Native American Club is also working to educate their campus community. They facilitated a presentation in November of 2020 about Native culture and Tribal Government. Additionally, they created a banner for the AHS campus that highlights the Tribes and Reservations in Humboldt County and the North Coast, and have plans to create a mural reflecting Native lands in the future.

#### [McKinleyville High School \(MHS\)](#)

- The McKinleyville Black Student Union has been active for a couple of years now. During February of 2021, the BSU created a 3-week calendar of Black History Month resources that included articles and videos for people to read or watch and then answer questions related to racial equity and inclusion. The calendar was made available to students, staff and community members and some teachers even offered extra credit for participation.
- The McKinleyville High Native American Club is another active group on campus that meets weekly and participates in a number of activities and events celebrating Native American heritage. One example is participation in the Success in Both Worlds Conference, an annual event hosted by the Blue Lake Rancheria that celebrates Native culture through a variety of workshops and storytelling.

#### [Academy of the Redwoods](#)

- The Academy of the Redwoods has a multicultural club known as Minority Priority that organizes annual potlucks that encourage students of color to bring in food that represents their different cultures and make presentations on the significance of it.

### Fortuna High School

- Fortuna High also started a Black Student Union in 2019 to empower, teach, discuss, and explore racial equity for black students and allies. In addition to meeting monthly, they stay active on social media to provide education to the community during Black History Month, promote BSU events throughout the county, and promote racial equity on their campus.
- The MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) Club has been active on the Fortuna High campus for a number of years now as a group that celebrates LatinX culture. They recruit for MEChA Student Officers each year to help fundraise on campus and host events for LatinX students such as dances, movie nights, soccer tournaments and more.
- First Nations is a club on campus for Native American students. They meet regularly to help promote events that celebrate Native culture.

### Eureka High School

- Eureka High School also has a number of active clubs on campus including the Black Student Union, Native American Club, and Asian American/Pacific Islander Club. These three groups collaborated to lead a fundraiser and raise money for a mural on the Eureka High campus that depicts the lives of people of color in Humboldt County. The fundraising goal was met in May 2021 so painting of the mural by artists of color is expected to begin soon.

### Lived Experience of Humboldt County BIPOC Students

Through the district listening sessions described above and two additional conversations with CCRP staff, first-hand information was gathered on the experiences of BIPOC students in Humboldt County. The two conversations CCRP had with students were organized and facilitated by the All Humboldt Black Student Union, but representatives from other cultural groups were in attendance including the Asian American Pacific Islander Club, Native American Club, and Minority Priority. Students shared their personal stories of the microaggressions and racism they face in and outside of their classrooms and how it often distracts them from their education. In addition to sharing their lived experiences, they shared recommendations for how peers, teachers and administrators at each of the schools could help create and sustain an equitable, safe and inclusive learning environment.

### Microaggressions & Racism towards BIPOC Students

Students in all the sessions shared their frequent experiences with racism and microaggressions throughout their time in school in Humboldt County. A microaggression is defined as a



“comment or action that subtly and unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group” (Merriam Webster, 2021). The type of racism and microaggressions that students face varies, but some common experiences students have experienced from peers in school are being called racial slurs, hearing white peers use racist slurs, being questioned or mocked on certain stereotypes, having their hair touched without permission, seeing confederate flags around campus, and dealing with offensive comments related to their race or culture. When these types of behaviors come from their white peers, BIPOC students noted they don’t often feel they have support from teachers or administrators when it comes to disciplinary action. By ignoring the behaviors, it only encourages them to continue and BIPOC students are then nervous to even bring it to the attention of administrators.

Students of color have also experienced microaggressions from certain teachers and administrators as they’ve enforced the dress codes more, questioned student’s educational abilities and the classes or colleges they can attend, discriminated against cultural ceremonies or practices, and asked students of color to speak out on topics related to race even when they don’t volunteer to. The lack of support or discrimination against cultural practices or activities was highlighted frequently during the sessions. Some examples were students being denied time off to participate in cultural ceremonies, or students having to make multiple requests to organize events like the Black History assembly. Again, these are just some examples of the different forms of discrimination students reported, but it highlights some of the reasons why district-level policy change is needed. Students noted that racism is intertwined in everyday life so it’s not something that one can just avoid. Anti-racism is an action that requires individuals to take responsibility and do their part to minimize it.

### **Eurocentric Curriculum**

The students and families represented in the various sessions also have a strong desire for a non-Eurocentric curriculum to be a part of all classes as they see many of the current lessons and curriculum as inaccurate and disempowering to students of color. Students shared experiences of having to re-enact historical events in class that failed to show the non-white perspective of an event, one example being reenactment of the Gold Rush. Particular figures in history are often presented as “heroes”, though many cultures may not see them that way. Additionally, students shared how Indigenous people are often presented as extinct in history lessons, even though there are numerous tribes in the local area. Inaccurate information related to race was also present in lessons related to genetics. When non-white history is talked about in the classroom, teachers often look to students of color to speak up on their opinions in the matter, rather than educating themselves so they can teach the other students.

### **Reasons for Joining an On-Campus Multicultural Club**

Students shared various reasons for joining an on-campus multicultural club and how it has supported them in and outside of the classrooms. While some were asked directly to join and or

start a club, others heard about them through word of mouth or student-led events on campus and decided to join in order to socialize with peers that have similar lived experiences related to race or ethnicity. With all the schools in Humboldt County being predominantly white institutions, students see these clubs or unions as a safe space to be oneself and socialize, but to also help show support in numbers for BIPOC students and support younger classmates or new members. They have also helped some students come into their own racial identity. The conversations students have in these spaces have helped to build awareness of the frequency in which students are dealing with racism and microaggressions and have served as support groups for when other resources aren't available.

Often, students of color feel nervous to bring up or explore issues related to race in the classroom setting as many of their teachers don't know how to navigate these conversations appropriately. Rather than try to engage students in a productive conversation, many teachers try to shut down the conversation by moving on to another topic. When non-BIPOC students make derogatory or offensive remarks in the classroom, they are rarely addressed or receive any consequences. While some students have tried to push for these conversations to go further, they have been told by teachers to "calm down" or "calm their voice" so they don't feel comfortable speaking up any further. While the cultural clubs and unions do serve as a safe space to address these conversations and share their feelings, students would prefer for the adults in the school system to be held accountable and as they are ultimately the ones responsible for creating a safe learning environment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment**

Student representatives shared many thoughts on what a safe and nurturing learning environment looks like to them. A common theme that emerged from this question is that students just want to feel respected and be treated equally by their peers and teachers. They want to be in a learning environment where they don't have to feel hyper aware of their surroundings and feel like they have to hide their identity in order to avoid being subject to certain stereotypes. As previously noted, when racist remarks or microaggressions are expressed in the classroom, students stressed the importance of teachers needing to be the ones to speak out and address the comments or establish consequences, rather than just ignoring them and moving on. Students recognize that it may be an uncomfortable conversation for some teachers, but when comments aren't addressed in the classroom students feel like they aren't protected and have to take it upon themselves to educate their peers. Even though teachers may be well-intentioned and some are already recognized as great allies, they do not always realize that something is offensive so ongoing education and attentive listening for racial biases is key.

Teachers should also be open to offering more diverse or non-Eurocentric curriculum that focuses on other cultures and serves as a learning opportunity for everyone in the classroom. While some teachers have added more diverse materials into their curriculum, it often isn't until the more advanced courses when students are exposed to that opportunity.

Students also shared how important the role of administrators is in promoting a safe and inclusive learning environment. When students of color have tried to organize racial equity events and activities or take time off to participate in cultural ceremonies, they often have to have multiple conversations with administrators and in some cases, parents have to get involved. For the most part, students have gotten their time off or events approved, but they would like to have more accommodation and support from administrators.

### **Recommendations for Peers**

This question asked was- What are some ways non-BIPOC peers can help promote a safe and inclusive learning environment? The two common themes to emerge from this conversation were that peers can serve as advocates for students of color, and should be open to ongoing learning and conversations. The following recommendations highlight specifics to each of these themes:

- White peers should serve as allies by speaking up when something offensive or bigoted is said, whether a BIPOC person is around or not. This includes both in-person and on social media. Students noted that especially in the last year, students have continued to share social media messages related to racial equity and justice. While this is a positive step in the right direction, being a non-racist means more than just posting online and students of color would like their peers to be more comfortable with speaking out when something racist is said.
- White peers should also be open to learning and not automatically going into defense mode when a person of color tells them something they did or said was racist or offensive. Students shared there is frequent denial of racism and white fragility expressed by their peers, so they would like them to be more open to having these types of discussions and moving past the discomfort they may feel during conversations related to race.

### **Recommendations for Teachers & Administrators**

While support from their peers was important, students represented in these different conversations continued to emphasize the fact that it's ultimately up to the teachers and administrators to create and sustain a safe, equitable and inclusive learning environment. Some recommendations for how they can do that were highlighted in the other sections of this report, but the following list provides more specific actions the districts and schools can take.

1. Make regular microaggression, implicit bias, and white ally training mandatory for all teachers and school administrators.

2. Provide professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn about generational trauma and the impacts it has on children.
3. Hire more BIPOC staff so students have a trusted adult on campus that they can go to for support as white allies can't always relate.
4. Offer ethnic studies courses that all students eligible to enroll in.
5. Establish accessible systems for students to report their trauma confidentially, without fear of backlash and with no time limit.
6. Create legitimate policies for consequences for racist behaviors or actions towards students of color.
7. Continue to provide opportunities for BIPOC students to engage in decision-making such as the school administrative equity teams or a BIPOC Advisory Board.
8. Allow all students the opportunity to organize and participate in cultural activities without making them jump through so many hurdles to get approval.
9. Continue to collaborate with local agencies that promote racial equity and inclusion such as the NAACP, Two Feathers Native American Family Services, Indian Education Committee and more.

### **District Level Actions Related to Equity & Inclusion**

School districts within Humboldt County have already started to address some of these recommendations and student representatives are committed to making sure the districts are held accountable. In June 2020, The Northern Humboldt Union High School District (NHUHSD) released a Racial Equity Statement as well as an Anti-Racism and Discrimination Policy that acknowledges the racism and inequities people of color face nationwide, and makes a public commitment to start a journey of addressing the racism students' face in local schools. The NHUHSD committed to the following actions:

- Reviewing policies with a racial equity lens, and implementing changes to those policies that are inequitable; and
- Reviewing hiring practices with a racial equity lens, and making changes to the process to reduce the impacts of bias; and
- Reviewing student achievement and disciplinary data to identify gaps and develop solutions; and
- Review curriculum with a racial equity lens, to more accurately reflect the lived experience of those who are BIPOC; and
- Providing ongoing professional development for staff and students on implicit bias and Institutionalized racism; and most importantly,
- Engaging in a listening campaign with BIPOC students, staff, and families. What we hear

from you will help inform changes to policies and practices.

Eureka City Schools also released an Equity Statement in June 2020 acknowledging the white supremacy and racial injustices that exist, and making a public pledge to do everything they can to stop social injustice from happening in the local community and schools. Some actions they committed to taking are as follows:

- Create a position for a Student Board Member on the Eureka City School Board.
- Identify implicit biases and increase professional development for staff to better serve students
- Adopt new curriculum that is culturally sensitive to the BIPOC community
- Focus on bolstering their Restorative Practices and making sure disciplinary procedures are equitable and fair

The Fortuna Union High School Teachers Association (FUHSTA) also released a statement similar to the ones highlighted above committing to making racial equity a priority in all of their schools and involving students, teachers, and community members along the way.