



**BLACK EDUCATION  
RESEARCH COLLECTIVE**  
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

**ATLANTA METRO REPORT | January 2022**

# **BLACK EDUCATION IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 & SYSTEMIC RACISM**

## **A Framework for Atlanta's Future**

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### **This report is available on the BERC website at:**

<https://www.blackeducationresearch.org/covidstudy>

The **Black Education Research Collective (BERC)** is a collaborative of scholars committed to improving the nature and quality of Black education through culturally sensitive research and evaluation, research-practice partnerships, and policy analysis.

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# Executive Summary

This policy report offers findings and recommendations based on data from a study conducted by the Black Education Research Collective (BERC) designed to learn about the impact of COVID-19 and systemic racism on Black education, from the perspective of Black students, parents, teachers, education leaders and community members. The study was designed to address the following research questions: (1) What is the impact of COVID-19 on the education of Black children and youth in the United States? (2) How should educators and community leaders respond to calls for change and action?

Findings from the initial study are based on data collected from a national online survey and focus groups conducted with participants in five target metro areas: Atlanta, GA, Washington, DC, Boston, MA, Detroit, MI, Las Vegas, NV, and New York, NY. This report focuses on the data collected from our 32 Atlanta-based participants, as well as the connections between these findings and the historical and current context in Atlanta. Participants' roles included grandparents, K-12 education professionals and school or district employees, community members and higher education researchers. The majority of Atlanta participants identified as women over the age of 56 with a college degree.

As in the national study, findings from Atlanta call attention to the systemic racial trauma inflicted on Black communities throughout history and the role of institutions, including schools and school systems. Participants' perspectives suggest that schools do not have the ability to meet students' needs post-pandemic. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that COVID-19 and the increased visibility of racial violence have laid bare the unwillingness of schools to serve Black communities and provide the social, emotional and academic support they deserve.

## Summary of Findings

Study findings offer insight into the experiences and perspectives of participants living and working in Atlanta, and specifically how they see the impact of COVID-19 and systemic racism on Black education.

1. COVID-19 and systemic racism in the form of white supremacy and racial violence has had a disproportionate and traumatic impact on Black students, families, and communities.
2. Increased racial trauma and mental health issues will have major implications for teaching and learning post-COVID.
3. Schools are ill-equipped to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of Black students.
4. Failed responses to COVID-19, police brutality, and the insurrection at The Capitol have further reduced trust in schools and public institutions.
5. Education leaders and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels must be held accountable for ensuring schools and districts meet the educational needs of Black students.

## Summary of Recommendations

Our study team compiled the following recommendations in order to emphasize the importance of building trust and addressing the concerns of the Black community in order to support student learning. The recommendations directly reflect our participants' responses.

1. Protect and defend the rights of Black students to receive an appropriate and equitable education in a safe, welcoming, and affirming learning environment.
2. Invest in counseling, psychological, and mental health services and supports to address racial trauma and its impact on Black students and educators post-COVID.
3. Provide professional development to teachers and school leaders on how to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of Black students grounded in trusting relationships with parents, families and communities.
4. Modernize curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to support the affirmative development of the academic ability of all learners and prepare students for participation in civic life by teaching the truth.
5. Invest in the preparation, cultivation, and mentoring of culturally relevant educators who are called to education as a profession and endorsed by the Black families they serve.
6. Restore community trust by engaging Black students, families, educators, researchers, and leaders as experts and equal partners in educational equity and community capacity building work.

## Future Research

Our findings emphasize our participants' deep understanding of how systemic racism and the pandemic have affected the Black community in Atlanta. These expressions of long-endured trauma and inequality in relation to Black education point to a need for an increased focus on racism in our school systems. A solid base of data and recommendations that are concerned specifically with investigating systemic racism and improving experiences for Black students is necessary for implementing policies and practices that will move us toward equity and justice.

An overview of the national study can be found on page 24 of this report.

To access the full report and learn more about BERC, please visit our website at: [blackedresearch.org](https://blackedresearch.org).

# Introduction

## “The City too Busy to Hate”

Community decay under the guise of urban development and renewal played a major role in the ways that Atlantans understood space and place. In 1968, the Atlanta community relations commissions reported that a shortage of adequate low-income housing and segregated housing patterns in most communities posed major problems. At this time, residential segregation in Atlanta was found to be the third highest in the nation – 93.6% in 1960. By 1965, Atlanta’s established black residential areas contained 22% of the city’s land area and 43.5% of the city population (Hein, 1972). In 1969, education gaps were more prevalent and widespread. This phenomena produced a perfect storm, whereby the housing crisis and (mis)education in public schools struck simultaneously. This was the case so much so that the National Commission on Civil Disorders (known as the Kerner Commission) reported in 1969 that the economic and educational gap between the Black and White population in Atlanta increased. The average White Atlantan was a high school graduate and the average Negro Atlantan had not completed the eighth grade. Although the city had supposedly integrated its schools, de facto segregation in housing made continued school integration more difficult; simultaneously, segregation and emerging methods of resegregation remained the reality (Hein, 1972).

Black churches along with volunteer associations, social clubs and professional groups began to engage the political sector by creating Black political awareness and raising the consciousness of Black citizens in the city. As a result, Negro enrollment went from 45% of the total student enrollment in 1958 to 62% in 1969 because Negro-enrollment increased more than 20,000 while white student enrollment decreased approximately 11,000. However, the problem of overcrowding and re-segregation remained unsolved (Hein, 1972). “In 1969, the Board of Education was criticized for being unresponsive and arrogant; and it was claimed that there was no such thing as equality of opportunity in education for most Negroes”, thus as a result there was a long history of educational neglect in urban and rural ghettos (Hein, 1972, p. 220). As educational neglect continued to emerge as a common theme toward the end of the 1960s, vestiges of misplaced ideologies and equality juxtaposed against a will for educational success, healthy community relations and adequate housing, and set the stage for more battles of civil rights, once again with Black children’s education as collateral damage.

In 1973, the first elected Black mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, named Atlanta “the city too busy to hate” and this mantra has cemented the city’s identity in



American history through its commitment to civil rights and community development. Steeped in Southern tapestry draped in vestiges of de jure and de facto segregation, Atlanta's rich history of civil rights brings to bear the tension that resides in a city's past while bringing forth the challenges of the future. While industry in Atlanta is booming with music, film, television and entrepreneurship, particularly among Black persons, underneath the veneers of success lie a major challenge within the political and educational sector. This study conducted by the Black Education Research Collective (BERC) revealed the ways in which pervasive racism not only does detrimental harm to students in school systems, but also has an adverse effect on Black stakeholders such as teachers, parents and faith leaders.

According to the Georgia Department of Education, there are about 250,000 Black students in the metro Atlanta area, which reaches as far south as Clayton county. DeKalb and Gwinnett county each consist of over 55,000 Black students. As of May 2021, Atlanta Public schools recorded a total Black student enrollment of 36, 641 students, while Fulton County schools held at 38, 245 Black students. The metro Atlanta school district consists of Atlanta, Clayton County, Cobb County, DeKalb County, Fulton County, Douglas County, Gwinnett County, and Rockdale County.

## **A Modern Political Shift**

Intrinsically linked to this school demographic data and statistics is the role these metro Atlanta communities played in recent political elections. In November of 2020, Georgia turned blue for the first time in over 30 years. The metro Atlanta area voted in record numbers with special attention to counties such as DeKalb, Clayton, Gwinnett, and Fulton, made up of majority Black residents. With two U.S. Senate seats up for grabs, a run off took place in January 2021 where Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock, Pastor of the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and Jon Ossoff, the youngest and the first Jewish member of the Senate from Georgia were both victorious. Although groundbreaking, this election was overshadowed by the insurrection in the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Just one day removed from the January 5<sup>th</sup> victory in Georgia, racism and white supremacy emerged yet again under the guise of love for the country.

This caveat of political departure is essential for the Atlanta findings presented in this study. As the Georgia election took place and the emerging political landscape shifted, with it came a sense of hopefulness with respect to progressive economic, educational and social reforms within the state. While these hopeful gains ought to provide a glimmer of beloved community for Atlanta, this study reveals that racism, the pandemic and political gymnastics over responses to police brutality and COVID-19 led to students and families suffering at an alarming rate as they attempted to make meaning of a city that is seemingly too busy to care, let alone hate.



# Study Methods and Data

This study was designed to pursue the following research questions: (1) What is the impact of COVID-19 on the education of Black children and youth in the United States? (2) How should educators and community leaders respond to calls for change and action?

Our research team began the data collection in January 2021 with an online survey administered to self-identified Black people across the nation who held some connection to Black education. Our team defined Black education according to definitions put forth by Lee (2005), who conceptualized it as the “systematic efforts to teach Black children” and “the quality of education the African American community has historically organized itself around while considering issues of cultural responsibility and community political empowerment” (p. 46). The survey questions focused on the participants’ perspectives of the impact of both the pandemic and recent racial violence on their lives, communities, and Black education. Of the 440 total national survey participants, 32 identified the Atlanta metro area as the area where they work and/or live. This group was composed of parents, grandparents, K-12 education professionals and school or district employees (including classroom teachers, school counselors or nurses and school support staff), community members and higher education researchers. Many of these participants also shared that they were members of the faith community in Atlanta, with a number of them holding titles such as reverend and pastor. While students were included in the national survey, the Atlanta participant group did not include students. All of the participants were over the age of 25, with over 60% reporting their age as 56+. The majority of the group self-identified as female and held at least one post-secondary degree.

During the survey, participants were asked if they would like to opt-in to a virtual focus group, conducted via Zoom. We held four focus groups for the Atlanta group, with a total of twelve participants. The focus groups were designed to delve deeper into the ideas participants shared on the survey. We asked about participants’ thoughts on the meaning of Blackness and Black education, their experiences with COVID-19 and adapting to a new way of life during the pandemic, their reactions to the increase in visibility of systemic racism and violence, and their hopes and visions for the future of their community and Black education. Each focus group was recorded and

Figure 1: Participant Ethnic and Cultural Identity



transcribed before our team of researchers engaged in a process of coding and analyzing in order to identify important patterns and themes, which were then organized into the findings we will detail below. See Appendix A, Table 1 which details additional demographic information about our Atlanta-based study participants.

## Findings

The study findings in our initial report demonstrated that our participants' perspectives and experiences in relation to COVID-19 and systemic racism were largely similar. Overall, our participants expressed that they felt Black families and communities have been disproportionately impacted over the last year, and they indicated that this impact will lead to important implications for education post-COVID. Below, we discuss how the data gathered from our Atlanta participants reflects these initial findings.

### **COVID-19 and systemic racism in the form of white supremacy and racial violence have had a disproportionate and traumatic impact on Black students, families, and communities.**

The effect of what some refer to as the dual pandemic - the onslaught of both COVID-19 and systemic racism - was experienced intensely by our participants, who shared that they felt a strong impact personally and believed that the Black community in particular experienced even more trauma than other groups throughout the U.S. In Atlanta, this disproportionate impact seemed to manifest itself in all areas of life. 100% of our survey participants from the Atlanta metro area agreed that Black people in the U.S. are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic in terms of employment, health, device and internet access and finances. Issues of mental health brought on by the pandemic were a major component of this group's experiences. The survey data clearly demonstrated that our Atlanta-based participants were most impacted socially and spiritually by the pandemic. About 84% said that time spent with family and friends was quite or extremely impacted and about 89% said time spent doing extracurricular activities was quite or extremely impacted. As this group included several members of the faith community, we found it telling that 71% said the inability to attend worship services was quite or extremely impactful for them. Our participants elaborated on this effect even further during the focus groups. Speaking of her own experience, one minister told us:

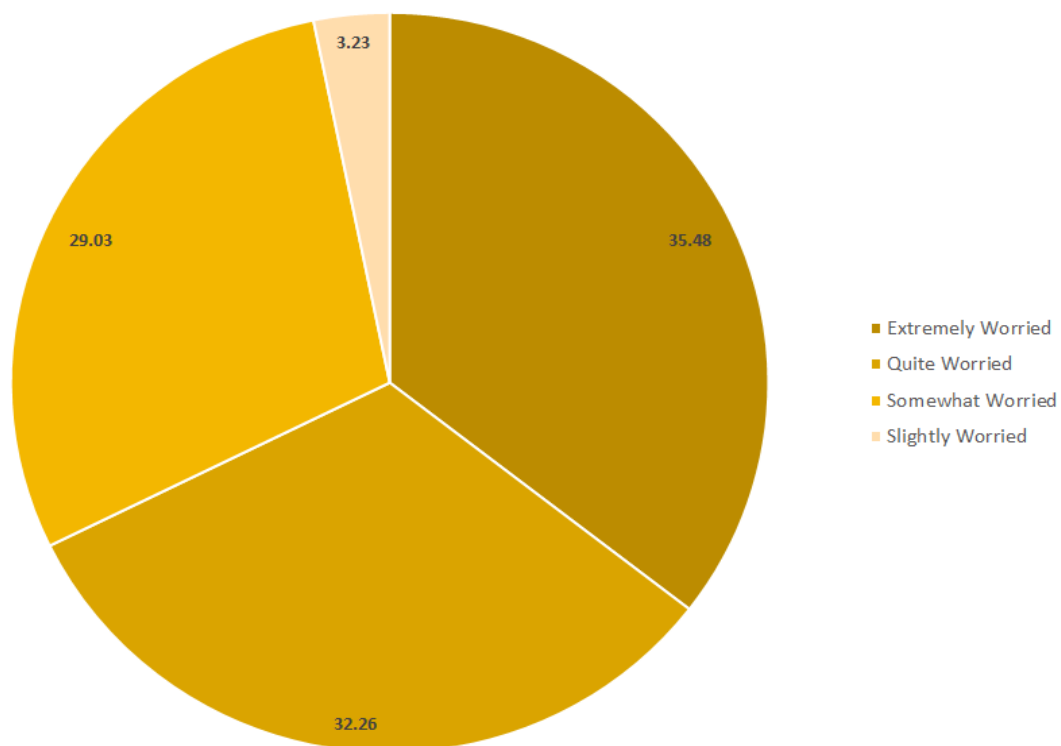
*While it was very painful for members of the congregation to not be able to have us come and pray at their bedsides, or be there when they've passed, or be with them when their family members were passing, it was painful for me. I started therapy because I had to navigate who I was as a pastor, not being able to pastor.*

Another pastor summarized the effect of the COVID-19 restrictions by saying:

*It's just been so much that has been lost in the Black community. All of the traditions, the sitting up, you coming by, you dropping stuff off at people's houses... the "Baby, it's always going to be alright, baby." All of that is lost, and so it's been a challenging - a big season for everyone.*

The sense of loss and the lack of social interaction clearly wore on our participants and their families - especially those steeped in the traditions of the faith community - and illustrates how traumatic events endured by our country seem to have an even greater effect on our Black communities.

Figure 2: Impact of White Supremacy on Worries About Personal Safety



As noted, while COVID-19 had a devastating impact on our participants, the negative effect of systemic racism and racial violence over the past year was quite clear in our data as well. As shown in *Figure 2*, about 97% of our participants were at least somewhat worried for their own safety or the safety of loved ones due to the increased visibility of white supremacy, although 55% noted that they were not at all surprised by these events. The recent developments with Trump supporters, including the insurrection at the U.S. capitol, had at least a slight impact on 93.5% of people surveyed, with 45% describing this impact as extreme.

## Increased racial trauma and mental health issues will have major implications for teaching and learning post-COVID.

As we discussed above, our participants shared that the areas of their lives that were most impacted were the ability to socialize and mental health, which appear to be strongly linked. When asked how much their mental health and wellness was impacted by the pandemic, 50% of the respondents answered “quite impacted” and 50% said “extremely impacted.” About 29.5% said they experienced anxiety and/or depression due to the COVID pandemic. Our participants did not stop there, however. They made

important connections

between this impact and what it means for Black education. They

discussed what this will mean for the future, indicating that there will be a lasting effect that could be detrimental to Black students’ learning if action is not

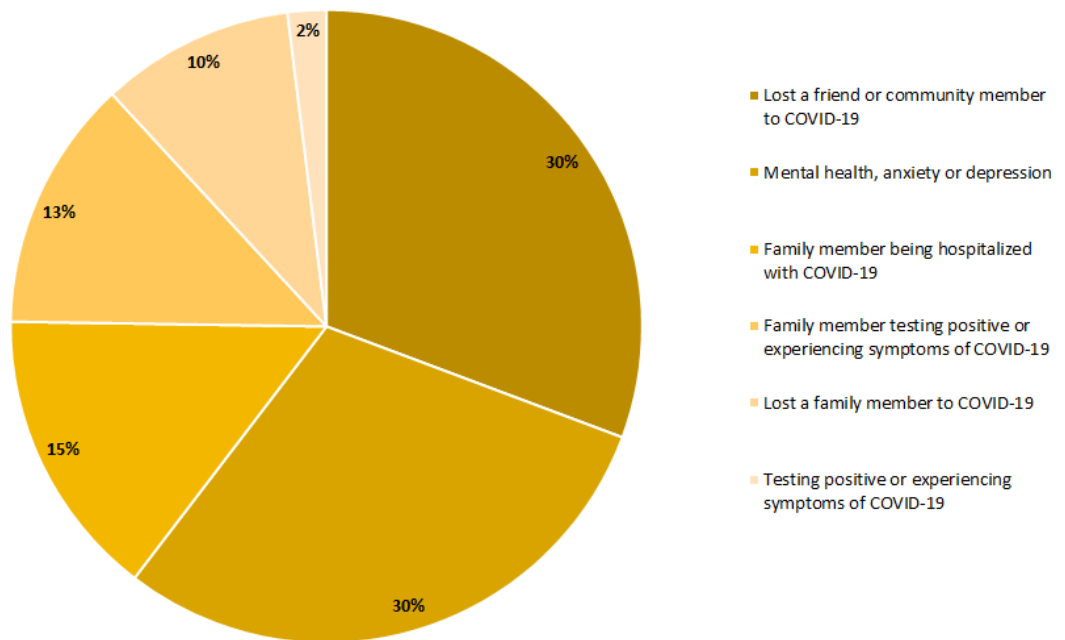
taken now to ensure that Black students’ post-COVID schooling is effective and meets students’ needs. A special education teacher in one of our focus groups stated:

*I think the first and foremost thing that we should be doing is asking children how they feel about it, because they're experiencing it just as we are, obviously from a different perspective. But we can be so quick to get ready and preach... instead of just generally asking, "How does this make you feel? Are you okay? Is everything okay?"*

This participant pointed out quite poignantly that an attempt to simply return to teaching the way it was done before the pandemic is not going to be sufficient. Students, like adults, need their trauma to be acknowledged and addressed before they can be expected to perform. Asking students to meet high academic expectations without considering how COVID-19 has affected their lives will only increase any existing problems with teaching and learning.

As we noted, the recent acts of racial violence have had just as much of an impact as the coronavirus pandemic. Our participants shared that they had concerns about navigating post-COVID

Figure 3: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Health



life as Black people. One school support employee spoke to this idea on our survey, in response to a question about their hopes for future change and the Biden-Harris administration. They wrote:

*My hope for the black community is that we can live and not die. Just have a chance, an equal opportunity to make it. To live the American Dream. To love God, to go to school, to work, to provide for our families, to love our families and others. To be healthy and happy.*



This idea - that Black people deserve to live, thrive, and enjoy the same freedoms as other groups - was echoed by a number of participants. It was clear from their responses that they are worried that things may not actually improve for Black people and communities post-pandemic. Speaking of the epidemic of racial violence and how they foresee it impacting a return back to in-person school and work, one of the reverends we spoke with stated:

*You're already having to gear up and embrace yourself for what will come, that you have to know whether it's a boardroom or whether it's a classroom, whether it's sitting or even if it's being able to anticipate microaggressions, that you might find yourself having to deal with from a Zoom call.*

The idea that the events of the past year may actually lead to more difficulty for Black people, and particularly students, points to a sobering reality. Our policymakers and educators will need to focus on addressing issues of racial trauma and mental health in order to allow for effective teaching and learning.

## **Schools are ill-equipped to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of Black students.**

Our third finding builds on our second finding because our participants not only shared their concerns about what the impact of the past year means for learning - they also considered what our schools will need to do to address these new issues. Our participants' perspectives shed light on the fact that our school system has not demonstrated that it will be able to meet these needs. On our survey, we asked whether participants felt that education conditions for Black students in our country are staying the same, getting better, or getting worse, and about 71% believe that the conditions are getting worse. Our discussions during the focus groups led to further insight about this belief. Our participants emphasized that issues of inequity for Black students have always existed, by design, and that popular pedagogies and practices perpetuate these inequalities. For example, one participant who was both a minister and parent told us:

*We don't give them really any skills to think, for critical thinking or otherwise. They learn the same thing about Black history that they've been learning from kindergarten. They learn the same math in high school that they learned at eighth grade. They're not setting them up for anything. It's just to say that they went.*

Speaking of the tendency to uphold the white supremacy inherent in our schools rather than working toward an equitable system, another pastor and founder of a nonprofit organization stated:

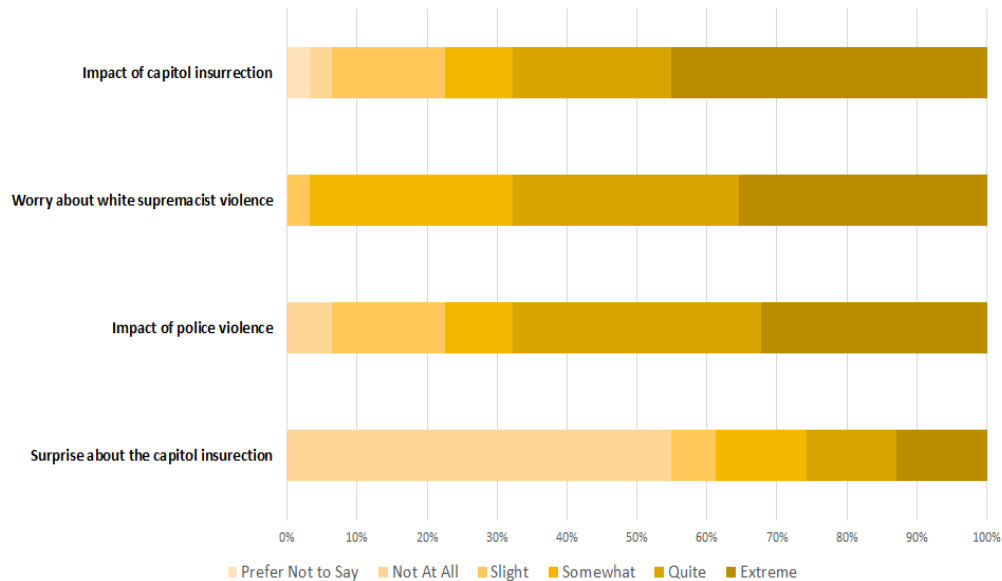
*We also learned a lot about equity and who really cares and who really doesn't - kind of reminds me of the New York Times podcast, Dear White People... where you see that play out where they really only care about their kids, but they use your kids as an excuse to get more for what they really want for their kids. And it just kind of magnified itself during this COVID time.*

Our participants' perspectives provided clear evidence that our school system has never been in service of Black students and that they want to see a greater focus on equal access, dismantling inequities, culturally relevant curriculum, Black history, students' needs, addressing trauma, and hiring and retention of Black teachers and school or district leaders. Put simply, as the reverend and parent we mentioned above stated, "let our kids be free."

## **Failed responses to COVID-19, police brutality, and the insurrection at The Capitol have further reduced trust in schools and public institutions.**

Our fourth finding reveals participants' commitments to naming the factors and problems that lie at the root of the oppression of their students. Our national survey revealed that over 70% of the participants believed that much of the impact of COVID-19 and racism on community trust was prevalent as they considered governmental response to the attack on the Capitol, the response to the governmental election and the response to anti-Black violence and uprisings. Atlanta educators expressed their lack of confidence in the government to care for them as educators and their

Figure 4: Impact of White Supremacy and Racial Violence



students, as well as thoughts of not being valued or seen as important. One third grade teacher shared:

*We're not considered frontline workers, but the work that we do puts us at high risk of exposure and with past histories as it relates to experiments on individuals, human subjects. You know what I'm talking about. The Tuskegee situation is still... Although it happened decades ago, it's still fresh on individuals' minds. People are still reluctant to get vaccinated when that time comes. In fact, today I drove to Mississippi just to get my COVID shot. I'm going to err on the side of caution and go with the science at this point until I hear differently.*

One second grade teacher submitted:

*We were not given a choice as to whether or not we want to remain virtual... When we got to a certain point, it was like, 'You are coming into the building, we don't care what kind of health issues you have going on. We don't care what kind of financial struggle.' People have children and the kids were not in school, but you were asking educators to go back to school. So what happens with our children when they're left at home with nobody to help them and to support them, those things were not taken into consideration.*

A preschool special education teacher offered the following commentary:

*Not to mention, between my homeroom and my partner's homeroom, we've had about five or six kids who have had COVID. So, we don't know what these families are doing. We don't know what the parents are doing, but yet, and still we're forced into their household. And let's not even talk about how our pay was docked. We were furloughed during this pandemic. So with everything happening in the world, nothing has changed in education. Teachers, we're still in the same boat. We're still, I say, the bottom feeders.*

As participants considered their experience with the election and hope for life after a Trump presidency and white supremacist actions such as the attack on the Capitol and anti-Black rhetoric, Atlanta educators shared mixed thoughts about the government's ability to reset itself and the impact that the new administration would have. One computer technology teacher submitted:

*It took all of us, but the majority of all African-Americans to flip the state of Georgia blue, to go to vote for president, Joseph Biden. So in that regard that was a reminder that we do have power, we can change things. So yes, overcomer, resilient, strong, smart, beautiful, all the above. That's what Black means to me.*

Similarly, one fourth grade educator offered:

*It's just been so volatile. Politics have been so volatile. And it's just been so disappointing right now but I'm very happy with the new President and Vice President. But I think that there's still so much racial divide and so much anger and hurt and hostility and racism. It's just going to be an uphill battle.*

Their sentiments reveal their lack of faith in governmental agencies and their players to do what's right in an effort to reform systems that strain, oppress, and marginalize Black and brown families.

These feelings extend toward anti-Black violence. Community trust was breached even further as educators considered the history of anti-Black violence that was present long before Trump's presidency. The constant reminders of Black life as disposable shows up not only in media but in the ways that neighborhoods are being gentrified and the natives are being erased. One third grade teacher shared commentary on erasure and submitted:

*As far as the community that we serve daily, I think a lot of them experienced a lot of challenges before the pandemic. In the area that we serve, we were watching gentrification happen slowly but surely. Some of the families in apartments that we serve were beginning to have their rent raised and the families had to move out because they were renovating. Our homes were being transferred between owners and people were given notices to move. So there was a challenge occurring before the pandemic. But the momentum of the pandemic really just impacted people greatly, much more greater than we could have ever expected, from homelessness to having to be transitional between homes, limits on food and things like that.*

As these educators considered the geographical violence of gentrification, they also shared thoughts about the anti-Black violence that continues to haunt them as they attempt to educate Black children. One second grade educator submitted, "I can't watch the video tapes of people...Black people being murdered, because they are Black. Because you see your life. It's just too much." A third grade teacher echoed those sentiments and shared:

*I'm with you on that. I don't watch them anymore either. I think it was Walter Scott for me. It was just like, okay, we are now at the gratuitous level. A fourth grade educator sealed the deal by offering, "especially now, with my kids, I am, you know, you don't need to watch another Black person being gunned down for you to know that it happens. It has a PTSD effect on us.*



While these issues of distrust permeate the study, there are constant pockets of hope that educators share as they balance out the oppression they experience in their communities with the hopeful spirit of the people in Atlanta. One computer technology teacher shared, “you know I’ve seen so many youth being so passionate now to get a chance to change things and I feel very, very hopeful for the youth- I love the fight that I see, so I’m supporting their efforts.” A second grade teacher harkened us to go back in time and remember our history. This teacher said boldly:

*Look at our history, it's quite unique because we were brought to this country as enslaved people. And we are now to the point where we know that there's nothing that we can't accomplish because we had a Black man in the White House. Now we have Black woman in the White House. We've sent a Black man to the moon and all these wonderful things that we have been able to accomplish as people. And I guess as a Black person, that gives a great level of pride to know the obstacles that we've overcome. And yes we're in turbulent times. We've gone through tough times before and we've overcome, and I have no doubt that we will overcome what we're going through now.*

A third grade teacher reminded us, “In spite of those experiences of dealing with white supremacy, we still rise to the top.”

## **Education leaders and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels must be held accountable for ensuring schools and districts meet the educational needs of Black students.**

As Atlanta educators shared their perspectives on the state of Black education amidst COVID-19, their commentary is not divorced from the hopeful futures they see for students in their communities and the role that school leaders, policy makers and stakeholders play to ensure these ambitious and hopeful dreams are realized. While the state of education and COVID-19 raises a certain level of uncertainty and ambiguity, one ideal is ever present for Black educators: students must have



expansive curriculums and learning opportunities that can propel their thinking, their sense of pride, cultural awareness and wonder. Similarly, those charged with the task of educating Black students must have a commitment to them that goes beyond the classroom, and further encapsulates the precept of educating the whole child.

What's more, Atlanta educators seized the moment to offer perspective on the needs of Black students. They shared that in order to chart a pathway toward a hopeful future, looking back and remembering the places, experiences and moments that preceded them can have a powerful impact. One educator shared about her experience as a kid and how the parental and teacher networks she witnessed made a lasting impression on how she saw the world and her education. A second grade teacher shared,

*She's been traveling everywhere. She was friends with somebody whose mother was a medical doctor and had a townhouse in Mexico. You see what I'm saying? That's missing for a lot of children in Black schools. If I could do anything, I would just try to expose them to more, let them have more experience and the teachers would have more interest in educating. I don't think white teachers in some Black communities give the children what they need.*

Another participant spoke to the commitment that educators must have in order to teach Black students. This third grade teacher told us:

*I would just say real briefly, we need a space that's free from the consultants and free from all of the folks that are basically trying to try out different methodologies, not for the sake of what's best for the kids, but for the sake of seeing, "can I sell this whole kit of stuff so that I can make some money so that I can go from district-to-district to make a lot of money." So what's best for the kids? What's the best experience for our children? And this may be controversial to say, I know, it's Columbia, but free from Teach For America. Free from people who are only in teaching to get their loans paid, for a three to four year period.*

A preschool special educator called us to harken back to the essence of Black education and community care. She shared the following note:

*The perfect school for Black children is a school where people actually care about the kids, and a school that's free from the limiting expectations of what Black and brown children can be. And so if there's a teacher there that doesn't see that child as being able to live out whatever it is that they express, they got to go. If there's a principal that sees it as gen pop, they got to go. Every child that walks in that building is gifted.*

Sankofa means to go back and get. This study of the Atlanta focus group reveals a deep commitment to what was and the possibilities of what could be. An appreciation for the legacy that has been woven throughout the historical record of the city flows through the veins of these educators. Their teaching, being and advocating for students is the spirit of Atlanta and their approach to education is rooted in social protest. While their expectations may seem high and even unattainable, this case shares the interconnected and complex relationship these educators have with school leaders, policy makers and stakeholders. These educators see experience and expansive curriculum as currency that opens students up to a world of wonder and instills a sense of civic engagement. Therefore, ensuring students' basic needs are being met, access to tools such as wifi and devices along with a critical eye towards the stress and traumas student experience is of the highest priorities for these educators. These priorities are not to be proxies for academic success

but to be seen as part and parcel of these expansive curriculums and areas of accountability for leaders involved in the decision-making process. This critical attention to these priorities serves also as learning opportunities for leaders as they begin now to reckon with making the odds even and shifting school culture in Atlanta for Black students.

## Recommendations

In our national report, we drew recommendations directly from the participant data from our national survey and focus groups. We asked participants about the policies they would like to see prioritized, their ideas for changes in policy, and their hopes and visions for the future. We put forth these recommendations to assist us in moving toward building trust between educational systems and Black communities, which we believe will be imperative for supporting student safety, learning, and success. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Protect and defend the rights of Black students to receive an appropriate and equitable education in a safe, welcoming, and affirming learning environment.
2. Invest in counseling, psychological, and mental health services and supports to address racial trauma and its impact on Black students and educators post-COVID.
3. Provide professional development to teachers and school leaders on how to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of Black students grounded in trusting relationships with parents, families and communities.
4. Modernize curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to support the affirmative development of the academic ability of all learners and prepare students for participation in civic life by teaching the truth.
5. Invest in the preparation, cultivation, and mentoring of culturally relevant educators who are called to education as a profession and endorsed by the Black families they serve.
6. Restore community trust by engaging Black students, families, educators, researchers, and leaders as experts and equal partners in educational equity and community capacity building work.

In alignment with the recommendations from the general report, we offer these recommendations for the Atlanta public education community, which are drawn from the Atlanta participants' responses to the survey and focus group questions. Their perspectives and input revealed that in order to promote equity and reform, stakeholders, educators and policy makers must have commitments to (1) to discovering and discerning their capacity to lead schools and communities, (2) shifting the margins to the center and (3) crafting policies with their neighbor in mind (Alridge, 2008; Horsford, 2011; Siddle Walker, 2009).

There are two recommendations we offer here for Atlanta school districts that are working to implement practices of care, equity, and culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive school leadership is a framework that calls educational leaders to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways, while also addressing school leaders' ability to understand, address, and even advocate for community based-issues (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The first recommendation is to create a C3 Council, which is a coalition of school leaders, teachers, students, parents and community members dedicated to ensuring that schools are tending to the concerns and needs of the community. C3 stands for Community Coordinating Committee. C3 would be a place to discuss community partnerships across stakeholders and assist to eradicate homelessness and food insecurity; understand and discuss critically school policies locally and district wide that disenfranchise and otherwise harm Black and brown families; draft critical policy briefs and analysis (Horsford et al., 2019); and discuss responses and solutions to challenges that are identified within the community by the council. This would be a place where all members bring their expertise to the space with the sole intention of creating stronger community trust and harnessing energies of those most affected by deficient policies (Khalifa et al., 2016) that reinforce models of deficit, marginalization and inferiority. C3 would be an arm that helps to shape policies that directly affect children and their families in a school community.

The second recommendation we offer here for Atlanta school districts working to implement practices of care, culturally responsive school leadership, and equity is to create an online resource center with listings of local academic, social and community-oriented organizations committed to meeting the various needs of students and families. The online resource center would be a space where community co-creators such as students, parents, teachers, local stakeholders and community leaders would work as a unit to provide resources for those in the community in need of practical job training, economic empowerment, housing resources, night school and life skill training. The online resource center and C3 may sound similar, and at the core they have similar components. However, the online resource center departs from C3 in its end goals. C3 is the policy



arm of the culturally responsive school leadership within a school and district. The online resource is the community activism arm of the culturally responsive school leadership frame. It would seek as its end to help create an informed citizenry and transform spaces into democratic communities (Furman & Shields, 2005). While these two implementation programs and initiatives may be aspirational, they seek to create school contexts that are culturally responsive and meet the needs of the students and families they serve.

## Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that Black people in Atlanta have long had their finger on the pulse of systemic racism's impact on their communities, both historically and over the past year. They have endured segregation, housing crises, unequal education, racial violence and now a pandemic, all while fighting to live the dream that America falsely promised to all. While our participants were not surprised by the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 or the increased visibility of racial violence, they were nevertheless concerned for their safety and the future of their communities. They understand that this represents a long-standing pattern of disproportionate impact on Black communities, and they are now calling for more attention to the inequality and mistreatment of our people. These findings have implications for educators, researchers, policymakers, and all elected officials. We will need to change how we look at education moving forward, and specifically how we address mental health and racial trauma, if we hope to create a future where our children are truly free.

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# Appendix A

**Table 1: Survey Participants in Atlanta Metro Area**

Table 1. Survey Participants in Atlanta Metro Area (n=32)	
	Percentage
Self Identify as Black	100
Relationship to Education	
K-12 Professional	22.9
Parent	8.6
Higher Education	8.6
Community Member	29
Grandparent	22.9
Student	0
Policymaker	0
Other	8.6
Type of School	
Traditional Public School	66
Charter School	17
Private School	17
Parochial School	0
Homeschool	0
Other	0
Age	
14-18 years	0
19-24 years	0
25-34 years	12.5
35-44 years	12.5
45-55 years	12.5
56-70 years	28
70 and above	34
Education	
Some High School	0
High School	3
GED	0
Some College	12.5
Bachelor's Degree	34
Master's Degree	31
Doctorate Degree	16
Trade School	0
Prefer Not to Say	3
Gender	
Female	28
Male	4
Genderfluid/Non-Binary	0

## Appendix B

**Table 2: Focus Group Participants in Atlanta Metro by Stakeholder Type**

	Atlanta Metro Area	National Total
Students (Grades 9-12)	0	14
Parents	0	17
Teachers	6	28
School Leaders	0	12
Community Leaders	6	11
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>82</b>

\*19 focus groups

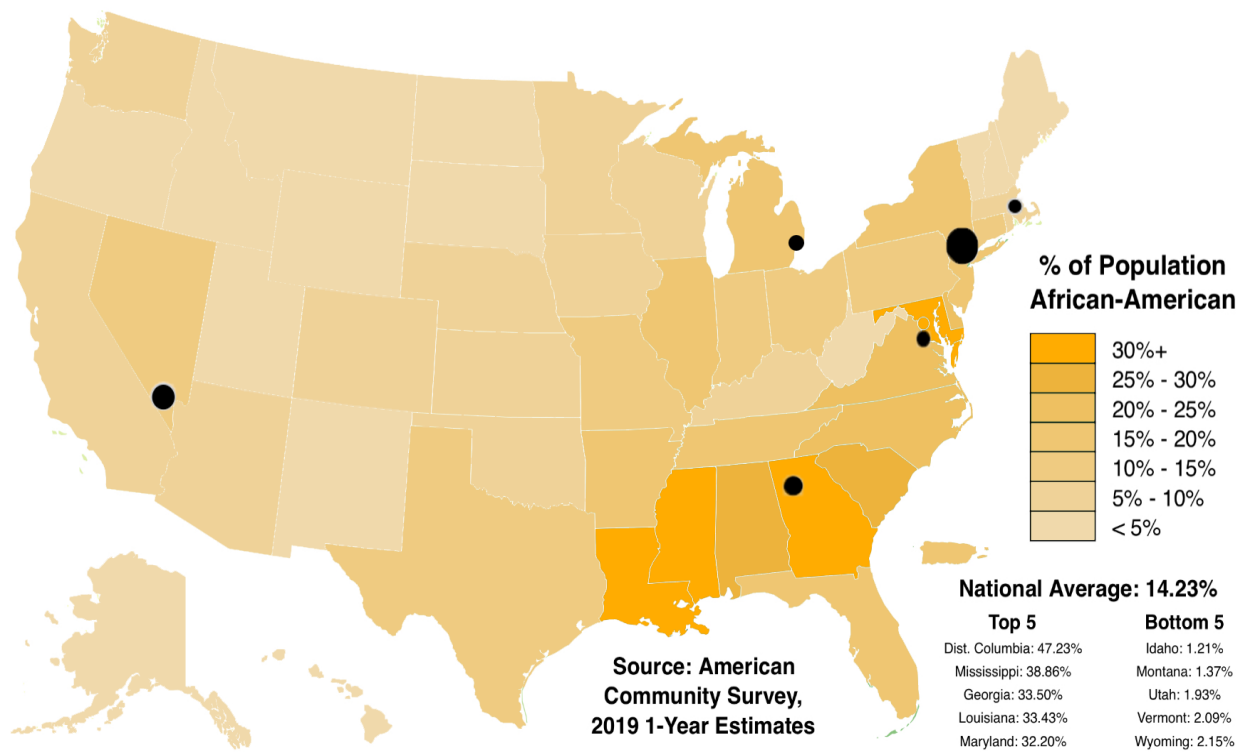
\*82 total participants



# Full Project Overview

This report was based on data drawn from a national study conducted by the Black Education Research Collective (BERC), *Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism: Toward a Theory of Change* (Horsford et al., 2021), revealing how the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism impacted Black education from the perspectives of Black parents, teachers, students, education and community leaders. Two questions guided the study: (1) What is the impact of COVID-19 on the education of Black children and youth in the United States? (2) How should educators and community leaders respond to calls for change and action?

Culturally sensitive research approaches informed survey and interview protocol development, data collection, analysis and reporting (Tillman, 2020). Data were collected between January-May 2021 using a national online survey (n=440) and 19 virtual focus group interviews involving 82 participants across six metropolitan areas: Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; Detroit, MI; Las Vegas, NV; New York, NY; and Washington, DC. Survey and focus group participants included high school students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders. Participants ranged from 14 to more than 70 years of age and identified as Black. The majority of survey respondents were women (81%), had college degrees (83%), and were between the ages of 35-55 (55%). Nearly one-third were parents (31%) and another third were educators (34%).



Findings revealed significant consensus across participant experiences and views on how COVID-19 and systemic racism have disproportionately impacted Black families and communities over the past year and the implications for education post-pandemic. Findings underscored the historical and systemic nature of trauma in Black communities as a result of racism in U.S. institutions, including schools and school systems. Participants expressed concern over the fact that schools are ill-equipped to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of their children and that COVID-19 and increasing racial violence have revealed further their lack of capacity or willingness to meet the educational needs of Black students or expectations of Black parents. Amid lack of trust in public schools and institutions, participants offered recommendations to leaders and policymakers at all levels to modernize curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher preparation and to create safe and welcoming learning environments so that schools are more equitable and just.

The full report and metro reports focused on the metro areas can be found at:  
<https://www.tc.columbia.edu/black-education-research-collective/research/>



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