Introduction

For educators, one of the core challenges today is eradicating chronic disparities and accumulative disadvantages that often appear unrelenting, are historical in nature, and are major obstacles for teaching and learning. A number of topics have been discussed to ameliorate academic disparities for low-income and racially diverse students. Topics related to school choice, charter schools, teacher preparation, parent engagement, early childhood education, and curricular and instructional approaches have all been extensively dissected and debated as ways to improve school outcomes for students of color.

What has not been as prevalent in the school reform discussion is the persistent impact of various toxic stressors that influence students’ opportunities to learn. Issues such as trauma, anxiety, abuse, neglect, discrimination, racism, and depression are typically not offered as explanations for why certain students do not thrive in school.

It’s time to change this discourse.

All Students Must Thrive is intended to inform educators about social and economic issues—trauma, death, violence, displacement, abuse, and racism—that have a profound impact on students’ social emotional well-being and their ability to learn in schools. Critical wellness in education is a concept that addresses the role of race, culture, trauma, mental health, social emotional* well-being, bias, identity, and adverse circumstances that inhibit students’ ability to be whole in the pursuit of education. And it does so without placing these issues within a deficit-laden framework that blames children, families, and communities for their circumstances. This book argues that the concept of critical wellness is vital to correcting school inequity. It also provides strategies for implementing a critical wellness framework in a class, a classroom, a school, or throughout a school district.

*The terms social and emotional and social emotional will be used interchangeably.
A Critical Wellness Framework

There is a need to profoundly change how educators understand the historical, structural, and political factors that create and sustain deep-seated inequities in schools and society. These inequities have a devastating effect on children and their capacity to learn. The literature on wellness has centered on approaches to optimum levels of health, social and emotional functioning, and cognitive well-being that help individuals grow and thrive. At the center of much of the literature on wellness is the integration of the body, mind, and spirit as a means of achieving peak development, as well as the appreciation that everything one does, thinks, feels, and believes has an impact on the state of one's overall health.

These core aspects of wellness are vital to living and learning, but they fail to take into account students’ identities and social and economic realities, which are equally vital to development. Frequently absent from the wellness literature is an acknowledgment that such issues as poverty, race, gender identity, and structural inequities act as impediments for many students in schools. To amend this shortfall, critical wellness in education brings together three theoretical frameworks that have relevance for equity in schools: wellness, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory.

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes wellness as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Wellness is also tied to the concept of seeking optimal health in the connection between mind, body, and spirit. As the WHO definition explicitly states, wellness is not the mere absence of disease. It is a proactive, preventive, and radical approach designed to achieve high levels of health and social and emotional functioning, which in turn can improve learning outcomes for our most vulnerable student populations. In the context of education, wellness also encompasses whole-child education and is closely related to the theory of “overlapping spheres.” The concept of whole-child education and the theory of overlapping spheres are heavily influential in the outcomes of all children, but have increased significance for youth who live in more challenging circumstances. Whole-child education works specifically to provide health, wellness, and academically and socially enriching resources and services to young people. All Students Must Thrive is concerned with this very issue: wellness for students to enable them to thrive socially, emotionally, culturally, and academically. But this
wellness model has limitations—it fails to address issues with access, equity, and oppression.

Critical pedagogy operates from a tradition that has sought to raise important questions about access, equity, and the humanization process for marginalized populations. Critical pedagogy seeks to humanize through a critical examination of structural inequities that have plagued low-income communities of color for centuries. The authors of *All Students Must Thrive* seek to radically imagine schools in a way that offers a critique of social, political, and economic structures that influence students’ lives in harmful ways. Thus an understanding of the effects of poverty and trauma is vital to improving educational outcomes because they explain much of what is witnessed in schools today.

Coupled with wellness and critical pedagogy, race is also important in understanding inequities in schools and classrooms. Within the field of education, critical race theory has become an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that seeks to disrupt race and racism in educational theory and practice. It enables scholars to ask, in unique ways, the important question of what racism has to do with inequities in education. Critical race theory also calls for an analysis of racism and its intersection with other forms of oppression, such as sexism, classism, homophobia, and nativism.

Together, these three theoretical models—wellness, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory—create the underpinnings of critical wellness. *All Students Must Thrive* was written from a standpoint that until educators develop knowledge, sensibilities, and strategies that are steeped in understanding students’ realities, school transformation will remain elusive. Moreover, the chapters in this book are intentional in that they don’t subscribe to simplistic understandings of real challenges students encounter daily in schools and society. Instead, we, the authors, highlight theoretical and practical considerations that should be contemplated in today’s educational context for racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students.

**Knowledge and Strategies for All Educators**

Although *All Students Must Thrive* has a strong theoretical grounding, the target audience is all K–12 educators whose work is directly concerned with marginalized populations, including teachers, teacher leaders,
administrators, instructional coaches, and professional developers. Even though each classroom and school is unique, the presented strategies are useful in all educational environments and situations. And because the book is solution oriented in its approach and focus, it will also appeal to professional learning practitioners and professional learning communities. In addition, professors and students at schools of education will find many of the real-world scenarios useful in developing a deeper understanding of the complex and enduring issues that influence the ability to effectively teach today’s student population.

**Straightforward Structure, Practical Features**

*All Students Must Thrive* consists of eight chapters written by experts in various areas of education. Each chapter offers a particular focus on ideology, theory, practice, or policy as a way to better support students of color, particularly in low-income schools. To start, chapter 1 sheds light on the importance of race and culture and how it influences teaching and learning. More pointedly, this chapter discusses why educators at all levels must develop racial awareness and cultural competence to understand the needs of today’s learners.

Chapter 2 examines trauma, how it affects students in schools, and how it has a direct influence on wellness. A growing body of research has identified complex trauma to be a major impediment to wellness for students. One of the goals of this chapter is to familiarize readers with the terminology and work related to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Chapter 3 introduces readers to the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of implicit bias and racial microaggressions in the classroom. This chapter outlines the current sociopolitical context of racial disparities in schools and offers a compelling rationale for engaging these precarious realities honestly and courageously.

In chapter 4, readers will learn how educators understand and implement culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLR) in the classroom. CLR brings to light the importance of delivering culturally authentic learning opportunities for diverse students and focuses on how altering a deficit mindset is needed in order to eliminate barriers to success for culturally and linguistically diverse students. In this chapter, readers will learn
how teachers interpret, analyze, and resolve tensions in practice by being able to identify and remedy oppressive and culturally biased instruction and policies.

Chapter 5 contributes to the broader discussion of critical wellness in education by examining the role of student identity in shaping classroom culture and experiences in the primary grades. Early childhood educators are often the first adults in institutional settings to influence young children. Although research has shown both short- and long-term benefits to be associated with high-quality early childhood education, less is known about preparing effective early childhood educators, especially in the areas of diversity and identity.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the challenges in creating college-going cultures. In so doing, it discusses ways to implement college and career readiness school-wide. This chapter lays out the sociocultural supports that impact academic success, as well as the role of care, high expectations, and culturally responsive pedagogy in preparing students for college and for a career.

In chapter 7, the focus is on how self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building, responsible decision-making, and self-efficacy relate to both the social alienation and social transformation of historically marginalized communities. In essence, this chapter examines the ways that social and emotional learning can challenge social alienation by teaching students about self, solidarity, and self-determination.

Finally, chapter 8 raises awareness of the growing number of students experiencing homelessness. This chapter seeks to equip readers with the knowledge and strategies necessary to ensure that all students—stably housed or not—have access to a high-quality learning experience.

To help practitioners render theory and research applicable in their classrooms or other educational settings, every chapter includes the following practical features:

- “Key Takeaways” to help the reader review and reference critical chapter points
- “Questions from the Field” to address the most common issues and queries from real-world educators
- “Recommended Resources” to help guide deeper study of chapter topics
• Real-world examples and vignettes that illustrate specific theories or strategies

In collaborating on this book, all of the authors worked from a simple supposition: educators will not maximize school outcomes for their most marginalized populations until they begin to better understand how the social emotional well-being of students profoundly influences learning. Collectively, we argue that responsively transforming schools requires an empathetic approach to teaching and learning that explicitly puts a focus on race, racism, trauma, mental health, and poverty. Moreover, this approach places a particular focus on how students of color are affected by these factors in their pursuit of education.

The needs of today’s student population are diverse and complex. When situating opportunities to learn at the nexus of race and socioeconomic status, schools play a pivotal role in either deepening these challenges or alleviating them. Although the focus on testing and accountability has eased up somewhat in the last several years, pressure to improve student outcomes remains. Along with this emphasis on accountability, however, has been an unprecedented increase in racial and ethnic diversity in the nation’s schools. In short, race still matters when discussing educational equity. Examining the intersection of race, trauma, poverty, and social emotional well-being is key to enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of students of color.