There's a Big Difference Between Segregation and Safe Spaces

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Racial affinity groups have come under attack for many of the same reasons some states have banned critical race theory in K-12 schools. No matter the beliefs a person has, most people can agree that racism is wrong. The problem comes when people cannot agree upon what is considered racism. Racial affinity groups have been labeled a form of racism. Parent groups such as No Left Turn in Education and Moms for Liberty are against racial affinity groups and believe they are divisive.

The moment that staff or students are asking for racial affinity groups or are thankful they exist, says that the environment has some issues that the district is trying to rectify. Unfortunately, some people condemn racial affinity groups and do not understand the benefit of how they help all people feel accepted and comfortable in the school setting.

Kelsey Blackwell writes the following in her article, "Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People"

> Even if white people can't access an embodied understanding of why PoC spaces are needed, they can still cultivate genuine compassion for our experience of needing them, and they can trust our voices enough to support these spaces. If the presence of spaces for people of color engenders discomfort, insecurity, or anger, I hope those emotions will be seen as an opportunity to look deeper within oneself to ask why.

Staff and students of color being able to heal in the safety of people who identify as they do is not a threat to white people. If white people have fear about this, maybe the fear is rooted in not knowing what is happening. People of color aren't gathering scheming up some plot against white people. They are simply trying to learn how to better navigate within the world.

Instead of checking their resistance and analyzing it, they play the "I have a Black friend card." As a Black woman, I have often found white people playing this card when they are grasping for a counterpoint to push back when their views are questioned. This has also played out publicly in Indianapolis. When former library CEO Jackie Nytes was asked to resign for her failure to take meaningful action against racism claims, instead of considering her actions, she sent an email to see if it were possible for a letter to be drafted to show Black people support her so therefore any counter-views from Black staff could be ignored.

How does this show up for racial affinity groups in schools? White people against racial affinity groups will find at least one person of color who does not think they are needed. Even though there are people of color who are against it doesn't mean racial affinity groups aren't serving a benefit for the people who participate. Also, racial affinity groups do not have to exclude white people. Many schools that have them offer a group for white staff and students.

It should be noted that affinity groups do not have to be race based. Some schools have affinity groups for other purposes such as having one for members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I believe part of the reasons these groups have been given a bad name is due to

poor implementation. They should always be optional, but the option should be there. Students who are struggling might find refuge and connections with others to allow them to be seen, heard, and accepted.

I have had the opportunity to participate but declined on most occasions except the time when I led a racial affinity group. One school year, I was asked to lead a Black affinity group for staff. Over half of the group wanted to quit during the school year. The group allowed people to safely share issues they were having, and we worked on solutions. Not one member quit during the school year. All Black staff did not participate but they had no problem with colleagues who did. Staff not quitting mid-year is a win especially when those staff members have strong relationships with students and are strong in their area of expertise.

Any school leader who is considering implementing them should do research to have a solid understanding of what they are, so they are ready to combat people who come with claims that are not the truth.