

A school that values diversity could result in health benefits for students of color

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Students of color who attend schools with a culture that emphasizes the

value of diversity—specifically schools whose mission statements mention goals such as serving a diverse student body and appreciating diversity and cultural differences—show better cardiovascular health than peers whose schools do not express such values, according to a new collaborative study done by researchers at Northwestern and Stanford universities. This same pattern did not emerge among white students.

Using a diverse sample of eighth-graders who attended more than 100 different schools in the greater Chicago area, the researchers categorized schools as emphasizing [diversity](#) if they had mission statements that mentioned:

- the goals of respecting or valuing diversity
- serving a diverse student body, including racially or culturally diverse perspectives in the curriculum, offering bilingual instruction and helping students develop an awareness of other racial, ethnic or cultural groups
- meeting students' cultural needs or preparing students to live in a multicultural or global world

Cynthia Levine, lead author of the study, said some people might wonder whether schools whose mission statements emphasize the value of diversity are really different environments from schools whose mission statements do not, or is this just rhetoric.

"We used another sample of schools in Chicago to check this, and we showed that schools whose mission statements mention diversity are schools where students of color are more academically successful and less likely to be disciplined," said Levine, who conducted the research at Northwestern as a postdoctoral [student](#) and is now an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington.

"For students of color, these schools that emphasize diversity are

[different environments](#) in concrete ways," she added. "They may feel more supported and valued there, in a way that matters for their health.

"There's research showing that when schools and workplaces recognize and appreciate diversity, people of color are more engaged and successful. Our work suggests that similar environments also can be good for health."

There's research showing that people who report they have experienced [racial discrimination](#) have worse health, Levine said, adding that their work suggests that it's not only experiences of poor treatment that are linked to the health of people of color, but also potentially whether diversity is valued and explicitly recognized in their environments.

Levine and her co-authors looked at multiple biomarker outcomes—inflammation, insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome—that previous research has prospectively linked to the development of cardiovascular disease later on in life. Cardiovascular disease is a major cause of disability and death in the U.S., and there are racial disparities in its prevalence and mortality rates.

"In our work, it's not just that students of color are being discriminated against," Levine said. "In fact, we statistically control for students' self-reported experiences of discrimination."

Going forward, the researchers would like to understand more about what is happening in schools that emphasize diversity that makes them healthier environments for students of color. They have established that these are environments where students of color are more academically successful and disciplined less harshly.

Levine thinks that "these schools may also have more teachers of color, have the perspectives of people of color represented in the curriculum to

a greater degree, or have teachers who otherwise treat students of color in a more positive, supportive and inclusive manner."

"These findings are innovative in suggesting that a positive [school](#) climate around diversity can promote better [cardiovascular health](#) among students of color," said Greg Miller, senior author of the study, professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern and faculty fellow with the University's Institute for Policy Research. "They need to be replicated, of course, but if they are, there may be implications for mounting preventive interventions in the school context around diversity and inclusion and studying how such efforts affect children's lifestyle and physiology."

"Students of color show health advantages when they attend schools that emphasize the value of diversity" will be published next week in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

More information: Cynthia S. Levine et al., "Students of color show health advantages when they attend schools that emphasize the value of diversity," *PNAS* (2019).

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