

Affirmative action, Dr. King's dream, and the future of education for Black Americans

by Dr. Leslye Kornegay

As a Black woman leading in predominantly white institutions, I have experienced firsthand the profound impact of affirmative action and diversity initiatives—not just on my own journey but on the broader landscape of education for Black Americans. The recent rollback of these policies and executive orders aimed at dismantling diversity and inclusion has stirred a whirlwind of emotions within me — frustration, disappointment, and a renewed determination to advocate for equity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of a society where individuals are judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin has always been a guiding light for me.

In my book, *Leading to Change the World*, I share my own educational journey and the hurdles I had to overcome to access opportunities that were often not designed with me in mind. The dismantling of policies intended to level the playing field for marginalized communities leaves me questioning: Will education remain a viable path to equity for Black Americans, or are we witnessing a regression in civil rights and opportunities?

A Brief History of Affirmative Action in Education

Affirmative action in education was never about giving unfair advantages — it was about addressing the centuries of systemic inequality that left marginalized communities, particularly Black Americans, with limited access to quality education. These policies opened doors to institutions where our presence was historically denied, creating opportunities for generations of Black students to thrive academically and professionally. Yet, the narrative surrounding affirmative action has been twisted by critics who claim it fosters reverse discrimination and undermines meritocracy. But how can there be reverse discrimination against non-marginalized populations when the field has never been equitable for Black students in the first place?

The Impact of Policy Rollbacks

Make no mistake — rolling back affirmative action policies is not just a legislative move; it is a cultural shift that will have real-world consequences. We will likely see a decline in Black student enrollment in higher education institutions, particularly at elite schools. The support systems that once bolstered marginalized students, offering them not just access but a sense of belonging, will wane. When diversity initiatives are diminished, the risk is not just that Black students will face new barriers to education, but that educational institutions themselves will lose out on the richness of diverse perspectives. The progress of past decades — the steps we've taken toward creating more inclusive campuses — could very well unravel.

Dr. King's Dream: Progress and Setbacks

Dr. King's vision extended beyond education; it was about equity and equality in all spheres of life. And while we have made strides—my own leadership role being a testament to this progress — systemic barriers remain stubbornly intact. Schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods are still underfunded. Disparities in educational resources continue to widen the achievement gap. These are not just abstract statistics — they are lived realities for countless Black families. The removal of affirmative action could exacerbate these inequities, turning Dr. King's dream into a distant and dimming vision.

The Path Forward: Ensuring Equity in Education

Despite the setbacks, I am not without hope. If affirmative action is off the table, then we must create new paths to equity. This could mean developing targeted scholarships, mentorship programs, and partnerships with all institutions of higher learning — not just Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). We must also confront the root causes of inequality head-on. Socioeconomic disparities, biased standardized testing, and under-resourced schools are significant barriers to equity. True progress will require a multi-faceted approach, involving educators, policymakers, and community leaders who are genuinely committed to change.

Conclusion

The rollback of affirmative action policies feels like a blow—but it is not a knockout. Dr. King's dream is still within reach, but achieving it will require intentional, courageous action. We must double down on our commitment to justice and equality, ensuring that education continues to serve as a beacon of hope and opportunity for Black Americans — not just for my generation but for those who come after. This moment calls on us all to lean into the discomfort, to ask hard questions, and to refuse to settle for a world where equity is negotiable. If we hold onto that vision, together, we can continue paving the way toward a future where Dr. King's dream is not just a hopeful ideal but a lived reality. **TE**



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