



Truth, Reconciliation and the Path Forward

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

After apartheid, the system of strict racial separation and white superiority fell in South Africa, uncertainty and violence continued. Some members of South Africa's previous government, army, police and other authorities had committed awful crimes against blacks, especially, but not limited to, those fighting for an end to apartheid. I watched what happened in South Africa carefully because my wife, Megan, is originally from Johannesburg and we visit her family there every few years.

In order to move forward, Nelson Mandela and his followers established commissions, which would hear the "confessions" of those who had committed atrocities, in return for their freedom from further prosecution. The result of these commissions was to put "on the record" stories of what actually had happened in the dark days of great violence.

Just as importantly, the commissions provided a cathartic tonic to the people of the nation, binding them in a true understanding of their history, both good and bad. While certainly there were and still are, South Africans who believe that there should have been much more severe punishment handed out to the former authorities, overall, the commissions served a noble purpose: No longer would South Africans treat other South Africans with such illegal and immoral violence.

Together with Mandela's skill in uniting blacks and whites, the country, while still suffering from the legacy of apartheid, became one as never before. In order for the system to work right, the accused faced their victims in courtroom-like environments that never would have happened in the days of apartheid.

The process caused many to examine their prior beliefs in a nationwide consciousness-raising. After the difficult "truth-telling", the accused, forgiven in the eyes of the law, but not forgotten, returned to society.

CABE Diversity Work

Over the last year, the CABE Board of Directors' *Ad Hoc* Committee on Diversity, under the leadership of Vice President for Government Relations (and new member of the State Board of Education) Don Harris and with the assistance of CABE Past President and Superintendent Search Consultant Mary Broderick, has wrestled with the issue of how best to meet its charge:

- A. Work to ensure that there is diversity (in particular, people of color) and sensitivity to diversity in all of CABE's work.
- B. Encourage boards of education, school and district leaders, as well as State Government to continue to consider the importance of diversity and multiculturalism in public education.

As part of its work, the Committee has discussed issues such as institutional racism, barriers to educational success faced by some students of color and the lack of diversity on boards of education. The latter is particularly concerning because studies show that almost half of our students are children representing diverse cultural groups. Research shows that when board members represent all segments of their communities, they are more likely to adopt policies more sensitive to all students' needs.

In partnership with UConn's Neag School of Education, Board Chairs were surveyed to help us determine the racial makeup of their Boards as a means of providing factual data to inform the Committee's decisions.

The Committee or its individual members have met with members of the NAACP, State Board of Education, Eastern Connecticut State University President Dr. Núñez and others. We will be presenting two new [So You Might Want to Be A School Board Member](#) workshops, aimed specifically at discussing how School Board Members are chosen, with the intent of encouraging more people of color to run for office.

Diversity in Connecticut

Why did I start this editorial with the story of the Truth and Reconciliation commissions in South Africa? Because what I have learned in the relatively short time the CABA Diversity Committee has met, is the importance of facing our own beliefs as we deal with issues of race in Connecticut and across the nation.

Over the last couple of years across the country, discussion of racial issues has been a hugely reported-on issue. This is contrary to an American tendency not to want to discuss these difficult issues. However, they are a critical part of how our society functions, that it has become more and more difficult to shy away from such issues.

Here in Connecticut, even as the "solutions" to our achievement gaps and desegregation have been the focus of considerable money and effort, many people put these issues aside. We do not "play up" the fact that we spent and continue to expend much money on magnet schools, Project Choice and other attempts to integrate our schools. Rarely is that work (much of it due to the [Sheff](#) decision) described as an attempt to honor the spirit of [Brown v Board of Educ.](#) and teach our students about the diverse world in which they will grow up.

For many of us, some of the concepts inherent in discussions of racial issues are very different from those with which we grew up. For example, "white privilege" is a perception (some would say "fact") which suggests that white people in our society have certain advantages as a result of their race. As the majority of people in our country are white and have been in positions of power throughout our history, society naturally provides whites with certain advantages that have to be "earned", if they are possessed at all, by people of color.

"Institutional racism" is expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. Like white privilege, there may not have been any intentional racism by individuals that has resulted in these situations. However, institutional racism is reflected in disparities regarding [criminal justice](#), [employment](#), [housing](#), [health care](#), [political power](#) and [education](#). Institutional racism may be unnoticed since it is not always explicit.

Whether or not you believe that there is white privilege or institutional racism, some of the most effective ways of understanding the needs of nearly half of our population is to look inward on these issues. This is usually best done with the help of others in discussion.

We urge all boards to discuss these issues. We believe that school boards are often the "convener of their communities" and hope you examine these issues. The Diversity Committee is dedicated to helping Boards even as their communities change.

Understanding the truth of what we believe and reconciling it to our own actions on these issues is not easy. However, the Diversity Committee will continue to encourage our boards to look inward and think about how best we can address these issues.