

Making It Matter

A Systems Approach to Advancing Equity and Excellence for Students

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

Introduction

When California released its most recent Smarter Balanced standardized test results in October 2022, the picture was not pretty: only 47% of students met state standards in English language arts, while a mere 33% performed at standard in math. Declines in test scores were widespread across all student groups. More troubling, disparities among racial and ethnic groups and English learners, which had existed prior to the pandemic, had widened, adding new evidence that the pandemic had impacted certain student groups more acutely than others. In light of these outcomes, the stakes are incredibly high in California to provide access to a high-quality education in a safe environment for all students. Reverting to business as usual will not work because the system was not working for historically neglected populations—students with disabilities, students from low-income households, foster youth, homeless youth, undocumented students, indigenous students, Black and Brown students, and students who identify as LGBTQ—prior to the pandemic.

As districts across the state resumed full-time instruction and began the task of pandemic recovery, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened three times in 2021–22 to continue and deepen their ongoing exploration of local strategies for meeting students' academic, social and emotional, and mental health needs. Of particular concern in these gatherings was the need to address systemic contributors to the persistent inequities in both educational opportunities and outcomes that the pandemic had accentuated.

This brief summarizes key takeaways from discussions among meeting participants exploring ways in which school systems center equity in their work. Importantly, the districts sharing their work and strategies in these meetings vary significantly in the human capital and other resources available to them, and each is at a different place in its

equity journey. Nevertheless, the core takeaway was clear: centering equity begins with an explicit and visible commitment on the part of district leaders. But words alone are not enough. Participants in these meetings stressed that this commitment must become systemic action and must be *integrated* into all aspects of a district's work. This was both the message and the goal of the district leaders participating in these Collaborative convenings.

Below we discuss four recurring themes that emerged from these discussions.

Theme One: System Leaders' Explicit and Visible Commitment to Equity Is Essential

Building an environment of educational excellence where all students feel they belong and can thrive physically, socially, emotionally, and academically requires a systemwide commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This commitment begins with system leaders—starting with the school board, extending to the district office, down to site leadership, and into the classroom. All have an obligation to provide California students, who bring

a wide range of assets and abilities to their classrooms, with access to opportunities for success. However, there are serious challenges to districts' commitments to DEI, so it is all the more essential that system leaders' commitment to advancing equity is explicit and visible.

One way to highlight this commitment, for both the public and school personnel, is through board policy that recognizes that deep institutional discrimination and bias exist, and that codifies equity as a foundational district priority. Several participating district had such a visible board policy.

In December 2021, the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Board of Education voted 4 to 1 to adopt an Excellence and Equity policy that highlights historical and ongoing disparities in student opportunities and outcomes and commits the district to do better for its students.¹ The policy explicitly states that “equity in LBUSD means that we center the needs of our Black, Indigenous, People of Color [BIPOC] and students with disabilities within our efforts to deliver an excellent educational experience to all students.” The board chose to prioritize these specific student groups because of

This brief draws on insights shared at three 2021–22 meetings of the California Collaborative on District Reform hosted by the following school districts:

- **Garden Grove Unified School District, November 2021:** Meeting participants explored the challenges the district leaders, school administrators, and teachers face in meeting students' social, emotional, and mental health needs in transformative and equitable ways. For more information, please visit <https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting45>.
- **Long Beach Unified School District, March 2022:** Meeting participants broadened and deepened a focus on equity through an examination of the recently adopted Excellence and Equity Board Policy in Long Beach. For more information, please visit <https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting46>.
- **Burbank Unified School District, June 2022:** Meeting participants continued to explore district approaches to advancing equity by considering ways in which curricular materials and hate speech on school campuses shape the experience of learning environments for disenfranchised students. For more information, please visit <https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting47>.



historical patterns of harm and exclusion in LBUSD; they did so knowing that they would have to answer hard questions to justify their decision.

LBUSD's explicit commitment to equity is made more specific and concrete through 11 initiatives—including areas like Student Voice and Participation and Curriculum and Professional Development—in which the district will pursue a coordinated equity agenda. Decisions within these initiatives include targeting additional resources to specific groups of students, prioritizing students with disabilities when creating the master schedules, examining accelerated pathways in the district with low percentages of Black students enrolled, auditing textbooks for culturally relevant content, and providing professional development opportunities to staff that center on equity.

“There is no fear by any member of the board to recognize and address the challenges of our most vulnerable students.... It is the hardest time to be in education, but it is the best time for hands-on change to the structural inequities that have challenged the education system.”

*— School Board Member,
Long Beach Unified School District*

Providing Cover to District and School Staff Through a Commitment to Equity at the Board Level

An explicit commitment to equity at the school board level can provide cover for the leaders implementing equity-centered policies at all levels of the system. For example, San José Unified School District (SJUSD) had a board-adopted district equity policy in place that had been adopted more than a decade

ago. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for the board to revisit the policy and review with the stakeholders how resources would be allocated to serve the needs of all students, particularly the highest needs students. Superintendent Nancy Albarrán shared, “It was remarkable that the board was very clear that this was going to be done. It was such a volatile time and the work is hard. It makes the job easier when there is not division at the highest level.”

Smaller than LBUSD and SJUSD, Burbank Unified School District (BUSD) is another district in which commitment to equity by its leaders across the system is evident through the prioritization of historically underserved student populations in its policies and practices. According to Superintendent Matt Hill, the community’s historical backdrop of being a “sundown town” and ongoing disparities in student experiences make the district’s recently adopted anti-racist statement critical in the work to advance equity.² Teacher leaders in the district shared that the commitment to equity from the board and district leadership helps teachers feel supported to continue advancing equity at the classroom level even when they receive pushback from parents and other colleagues.

“This all starts with the Board and the superintendent because they have our backs. That gives us the strength to be brave too. I know that if I stick my neck out for our cause, they have my back. Centering equity is a lot of work, but when you know the leadership has personal conviction and is passionate about making this happen, that is so empowering to every member of the team.”

*— Teacher,
Burbank Unified School District*

It is important to recognize LBUSD, SJUSD, and BUSD are at different points in their equity journey. District leaders in LBUSD emphasized that the adoption of the Excellence and Equity Policy is a significant next step in a decades-long journey in the district to ensure excellence and equity for its students and that it is only one step of many in the work that has yet to be finished. District leaders in BUSD stressed that the adoption of their anti-racist statement is just the beginning of a long equity journey ahead. Indeed, no matter where a district is on its path toward advancing equity, that path seems to have begun with leaders across the system prioritizing the needs of their historically underserved populations.

Theme Two: Efforts to Center Equity Must Focus on the Whole Child

Meeting participants discussed another common thread in systems that center equity: a focus on whole-child needs and development. Research shows that academic success is inseparable from physical, mental, social, emotional, and cognitive health.³ As such, the necessary conditions to support learning and development in schools must be in place for students to thrive. This was evident in the role that schools and districts played in feeding and immunizing students and their families during the pandemic, prioritizing student safety and well-being in the face of a public health crisis.⁴

Addressing Whole-Child Needs Using a Systemic, Multi-Tiered Approach

A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) can advance equity by giving all students in the system access to a quality education in an inclusive and

healthy environment and by providing the right supports for their individual success. District leaders from Sanger Unified School District, Santa Clara Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, and Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) shared that they are striving toward greater integration between the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of MTSS to support the whole child from an assets-based framework.

During one Collaborative meeting, students from GGUSD described the physical, economic, and mental toll the pandemic took on them and their families, and noted how the return to in-person learning served to highlight persistent student needs.

“My father is the only one working in our family. My mom is the one who stays to take care of us. I would find her crying because she couldn’t help my little sister with homework or my brother because he couldn’t reach out to his teacher. It was very difficult.”

– Student,
Garden Grove Unified School District

“COVID as an Asian American was very degrading. That did take a toll on me and my family, especially because it’s like when we go outside, the fear of having people judge you or make comments about you when you go out, because of COVID.”

– Student,
Garden Grove Unified School District



"I share a room with both my other siblings; there's three of us in one room. I remember just sitting in the room, my brother in one corner, my sister on her bed and me on my bed, and I remember just dreading it all because not only was I hearing my class, I was seeing theirs as well. It became a nightmare for me."

— Student,

Garden Grove Unified School District

Leaders in GGUSD recognized that this reality existed for many of its students both before and after pandemic-related transitions to distance learning. In response, GGUSD takes a multifaceted approach within an MTSS framework to provide students with the whole-child supports needed to develop the academic and personal skills necessary for success in college and in their careers. To provide these supports, the district is in the 5th year of an 8-year plan to address the full range of student needs by building a comprehensive system of care comprising mental health specialists, certified social workers, and interns who are available to all schools across the district to address students' noncognitive needs.

Addressing Whole-Child Needs by Creating a Safe Space for Students

In order for students to learn and thrive, schools must be places where students feel physically, emotionally, and mentally safe and supported. This is especially important for students who face challenges of marginalization, deprivation, and violence outside of school. In stark contrast to what we know are necessary conditions for effective learning, the Southern Poverty Law Center released a report in 2019, "Hate at School," spotlighting the

increasing incidents of hate and bias in school environments.⁵ Participants in the Collaborative meetings explored the intentional efforts district and school leaders can make to create safe spaces in which all students can succeed.

In BUSD, these efforts involve addressing hate speech, which can inflict trauma on students and threaten to undermine an environment in which all members of the school community feel welcome and safe. Burbank educators, students, and parents all emphasized that students must have opportunities to thrive without feeling that they will be bullied or subjected to racist attacks. Student panelists in BUSD shared the importance of feeling heard and validated when incidents of racism and hate speech occur on campus. Students commented that there have been too many instances of teachers ignoring the hate speech they hear in the classrooms and in the hallways, making already-vulnerable students feel invisible and worthless and damaging their mental health. One student shared, "I don't expect my administrators and teachers to solve racism with one conversation, but I do expect them to acknowledge that it happened."

Feeling safe is critical to students' development as human beings and to learning, and so it is vital for schools to create spaces where students feel safe and for school and district leaders to address hate speech and racist violence directly and clearly. Students in Burbank have played leadership roles in framing and advancing important conversations in this area by planning schoolwide assemblies to educate peers and teachers about hate speech, specifically use of the n-word. The district has also created guidelines on language use to invite discussions around student identity and agency and to create a safe space for learning and community building.

“Creating safe spaces isn’t just about creating a lack of negative experiences but an abundance of positive spaces and experiences. It’s not always the negative things, but the lack of positive things. Saying you’re not taking up space, but that you’re beautiful.”

*— Student,
Burbank Unified School District*

Addressing Whole-Child Needs by Elevating Student Voice

Soliciting and encouraging student voice is another critical aspect of addressing whole-child needs and development. Although formal channels for student participation in school decision making have long existed through opportunities like student government and superintendents’ councils, these groups tend to attract students who thrive in school settings. In contrast, the voices of our most vulnerable and underserved students are rarely included in policy design or practice. When this is the case, even well-intentioned efforts to support students can be ineffective or even counter-productive.

For example, young students or non-native English speakers may worry that they are unable to clearly articulate their needs. Undocumented students may not feel that they can safely speak up to ask for help without drawing attention to themselves and their families’ undocumented status. Educators can help to overcome the concerns over isolation and embarrassment by including a wide swath of students in making decisions that directly affect them. One way that districts can do this is by conducting empathy interviews with a broad sample of students to understand how students are experiencing school policies and how they might be improved.

“Commitment to equity starts with honoring student voice.”

*— Ed Manansala, Superintendent,
El Dorado County Office of Education*

While challenging in the context of staff and teacher shortages, finding ways to intentionally prioritize whole-child development is an essential part of the work to center and advance equity, especially to the extent that it begins to actually shift power to students. One tool district and school leaders can use to more effectively elevate student voice, build engagement, and promote equity is the Student Voice Continuum developed by Californians for Justice (see graphic on p. 7)⁶

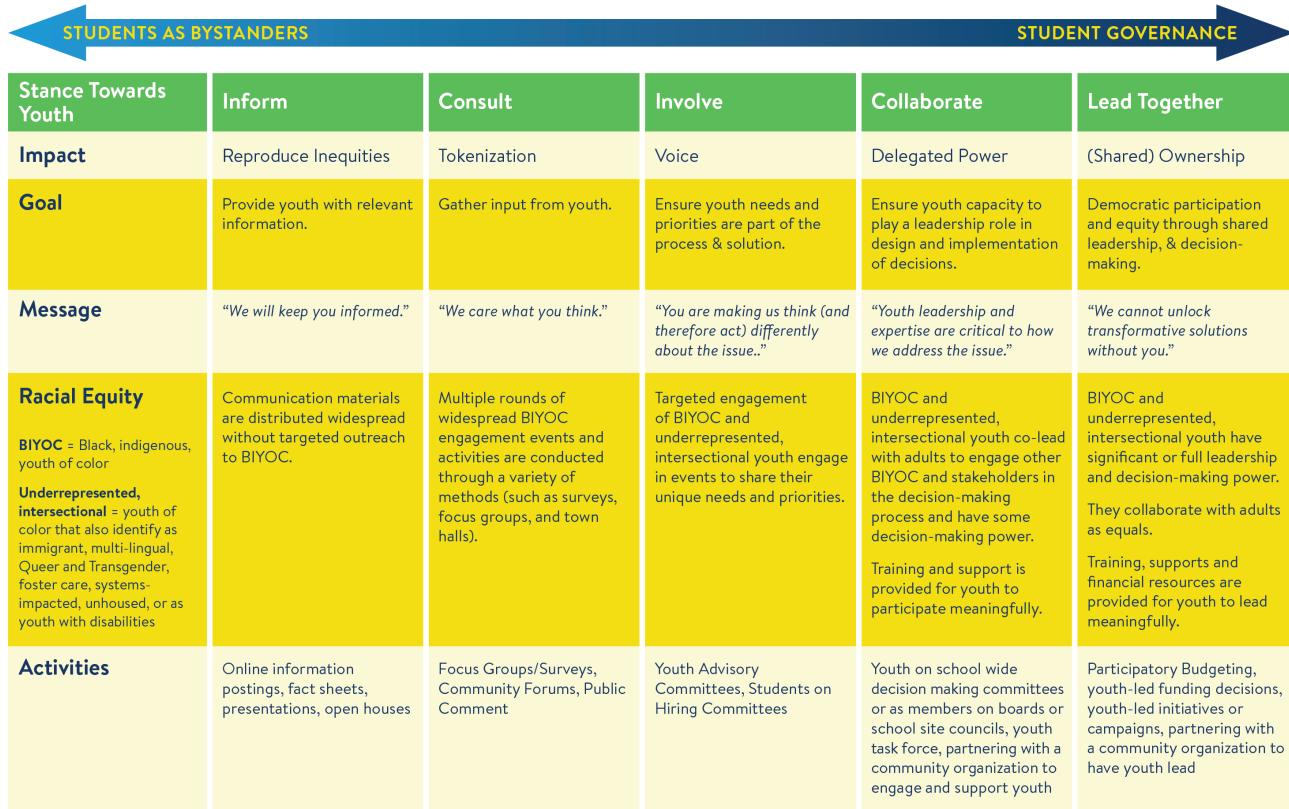
Jill Baker, superintendent of LBUSD, shared, “If we’re really committed to the continuum of student voice, it is about shifting power....I have applied it in my work by attempting to get the highest needs, young people closest to those in power who are making decisions.” In an effort to bring student voices to the table and elevate student perspectives that have historically been ignored, Los Angeles Unified School District initiated a student leadership round table with three primary goals: (a) connect students who have the greatest needs with people who have the power to advocate for them; (b) provide students with a mentor to model with them how they can advocate for themselves; and (c) provide them with the skills to advocate for other students.

In GGUSD, where more than 50% of students are Hispanic/Latino and more than 75% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, addressing whole-child needs by elevating student voice also involves empowering students to empower their communities. The district launched a Latinos Unidos program to provide a unique system of supports to their Hispanic/Latino students.⁷ This program is designed to support and empower



Student Voice Continuum

STUDENT POWER



Adapted from:
Youth Voice adaptation of "Spectrum of Community Engagement" by Rosa González of Facilitating Power, in collaboration with Movement Strategy Center and the Building Healthy Communities Initiative.
 Toshalis, Eric & Michael Nakkula. 2012. *Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice: The Students at the Center Series*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. <http://www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice>.



students to achieve success and provides tutoring, mentorship, college preparation, opportunities for community service and leadership development, and access to cultural events so that students can embrace and honor their rich heritage.

Theme Three: Efforts to Enhance Equity Must Reach the Instructional Core

District efforts to center equity also connect to the instructional core by addressing the content-related interactions of teachers and students. Researchers

argue that any work that is done in schools must be strongly linked back to the work of teaching and learning.⁸ This body of research suggests that producing meaningful student learning experiences is a function of interactions among teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge; the use of educational materials; and students' understanding, experiences, and engagement in the learning process. Therefore, it stands to reason that district attention to disrupting disparities in student opportunities and outcomes must fundamentally get to the heart of teaching and learning. Instructional equity necessarily entails attention to curricular materials and educator professional development.

Bringing Equity to the Classroom Level by Examining Curricular Materials

Examining curricular materials is another lever districts can use to ensure all students have access to high-level learning while creating an inclusive and safe learning space for students. To crystallize its priorities, starting in 2021 LBUSD used an appreciative inquiry approach to get feedback from its stakeholders about goals for the curriculum and student experiences with existing instructional materials. Through district-administered surveys, students expressed a desire to explore more points of view from individuals with different backgrounds, including those with different gender identities. According to survey results, parents emphasized the importance of building cultural identity, lifting up different perspectives, and affirming multiple identity groups.

In 2021, LBUSD also began conducting an equity audit of its existing curricular materials. The audit revealed the need for attention in areas such as social justice orientation and representation. The district realizes the heavy lift involved to explicitly examine the educational value of curricular materials to advance equity and create a safe learning environment for students. In the words of one district leader, "This is going to take years!" The district is considering the next steps to build the internal capacity of its central office staff and teachers and applying its new learnings to textbook adoption, the unit revision process, the course writing process, and the provision of teacher guidance in core and supplemental instructional materials selection.

One critical consideration in examining curricular materials is students' experiences with those materials. In BUSD, the examination of novels required for English language arts classes began when a student pointed to the use of the n-word in

some of the texts the students had been assigned. Burbank students argued that the language use and narrow set of experiences reflected in these texts can cause trauma and harm to students.

One student shared, "To read these novels, you have to know what Black people have experienced to fully understand. Schools don't teach the effects of lynching on the Black community in the 1950s and 60s, how that affects black people to this day, and how the lynching of Black people continues to this day. [You] can't understand it if you don't know the history behind it."

The resulting debate has garnered national attention, particularly with respect to incorporating such novels as *The Cay*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the district's required reading lists. Some members of the community opposed the removal of such books from the required curriculum, arguing that doing so would be removing Black stories from student learning experiences. However, Burbank students noted that these stories did not represent Black voices or Black people's own interpretation of their experiences. Rather, they are stories about Black people told in the voices of White authors. Based on the traumatic experience of some students with these texts, Superintendent Matt Hill removed the novels from the list of required texts in the districts and explained his decision in a letter to the community, stating, "We can and we should do better.... For me, this comes down to a human rights issue."⁹

"My kids read more books about animals than they did about people of color. That's the way it was 20 years ago, and that's still the case today. That's just not OK."

*— District Leader,
Burbank Unified School District*

Although mitigating potential trauma in learning environments is one powerful motivation for reconsidering the readings used in classroom instruction, so too is expanding the set of perspectives to which students are exposed. Through the inclusion of authors from underserved communities and subject matters that feature the experiences and stories of people from underserved communities, more students have the opportunity to see their lives incorporated into their education, thereby honoring their backgrounds and potentially improving their engagement in school. Just as important, a range of authors exposes all learners to new realities and insights that can improve their understanding of and preparation to live in the world around them.

District leaders acknowledged that even with the importance of evaluating curricular materials through a lens of excellence and equity, the need to balance various stakeholder values and perspectives presents a serious challenge. Nevertheless, district leadership committed to equity will continue to create the space to listen to student experience and have conversations about the educational purposes and appropriateness of texts.

Bringing Equity to the Classroom Level by Building Teacher and Principal Content and Pedagogical Knowledge

Any policy or initiative enacted in a district must fit through the classroom door. To connect district commitments to teaching and learning, teachers need to have the skills, support, and buy-in to embed new ideas into their daily classroom practice. Professional development focused on supporting DEI can serve as a foundational step in this journey so that all teachers develop shared knowledge, language, skills, and experiences that can enable a thriving teaching and learning environment.

In LBUSD, this starts with clarifying systemwide expectations for educators. The district has allocated resources to go through a process of centering equity in the domains and dimensions of the district's performance standards to crystallize the district's expectations of their educators. For example, the district's Leadership Domains Rubric, which articulates performance expectations for school leaders, highlights text describing equity-centered behavior in each of the seven domains.¹⁰

"A lot of work with our principals has focused on getting principals to make this equity work their own, not just 'something that the district is doing with us [the principals]'. It's not just 'Why do we center Black students and students with disabilities?' We want to hear their reasons for why they are taking on the work. Who are you leading for? Who might be left out by the leadership decision that you're making? What are the unintended consequences of that?"

*— District Leader,
Long Beach Unified School District*

Burbank USD wanted to begin the process of delivering DEI-focused professional development to teachers and staff to ensure a common language and approach throughout the district because according to one district administrator, "Every teacher and staff member has a different baseline because they all came from different places and lived experiences." However, the smaller student population in BUSD means a smaller number of central office administrators to shape its own equity-focused professional development curriculum. As a result, the district began working with an external organization to deliver teacher

training. District administrators admitted that it was challenging to deliver professional development at a time when teachers were burnt out from the demands placed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic; nevertheless, the district was committed to taking steps toward advancing equity.

Bringing Equity to the Classroom Level by Hiring a Workforce Committed to Advancing Equity

District leaders from SJUSD and GGUSD shared that as important as it is to advance equity by building teachers' pedagogical knowledge, it is equally important to focus on who gets hired into the district in the first place. Given teacher turnover rates, there will always be new teacher hires who did not participate in DEI-focused professional development. Leaders from these districts discussed their approach to hiring new teachers who are equity-minded and committed to the fact that all students are capable of achieving success and in hiring teachers who reflect the students' ethnicities and lived experiences. One superintendent stated that because most administrators are former teachers who have advanced to new stages in their careers, this attention to recruitment and hiring also has implications for building a DEI-focused commitment and capacity at the administrative and district levels, stating, "If you have a diverse teaching staff, you're going to have a diverse administrative staff, and you're going to have a diverse central office staff."

Theme Four: Advancing Equity Districtwide Requires Systemic Coherence

Districts across the state offer a wide range of supports and services to support students' academic, social and emotional, behavioral, and

mental health needs. With billions of federal and state COVID-relief dollars infused into school districts, these offerings have expanded to include transitional kindergarten, free meals, extended learning opportunities, and investments in approaches like community schools to support a wide range of student needs. Any one of these well-intentioned programs has the potential to address disparities in student opportunity if approached with deliberate attention to matters of equity, but collectively, they can result in overwhelmed education leaders and fragmented approaches to improvement.¹¹

In order for these individual programs to make a difference for historically underserved students, education leaders must design and implement them to align with one another and to explicitly connect to a broader commitment to equity. Coherence across the system and across initiatives begins with strong leadership. District leaders can help integrate these seemingly discrete programs and practices coherently by setting clear expectations and communicating linkages between programs and how they can be used to advance equity and excellent student outcomes. For example, the 11 initiatives that fall within the broader Excellence and Equity Policy spell out the concrete goals and steps through which the district aims to embed its values in the daily practices of adults throughout the system. Actions in each of these areas throughout the system provide evidence of how a commitment to equity is coming to life—implementing approaches to crystallize district priorities, engaging and empowering students, examining data, developing and supporting school leaders and classroom teachers to lead for equity, selecting instructional materials that reflect and elevate student experiences and understanding, and examining the inequities in the district's accelerated pathways.



“Equity is the strategy to get all the students to excellence. We must keep questioning ourselves and keeping in mind who is helped and who is harmed and using the data to answer those questions.”

*— District Leader,
Long Beach Unified School District*

Equity is not an isolated initiative in a pool of disparate initiatives the district implements in LBUSD. Rather, the district is designing a coherent and aligned approach with equity at the center. It then aligns its equity-focused policies, programs, and practices and continues to educate its teachers and leaders about how the different components in the system link to equity and to each other.

Conclusion

At a time when state funding in California is becoming increasingly fragmented through a proliferation of targeted programs, it is all the more important to pay deliberate attention to centering equity within a coherent system of academic, social and emotional, and mental health supports to help students thrive. Over the course of three meetings, members and guests of the California Collaborative on District Reform discussed various strategies and approaches to systematically centering equity and came away with four key conclusions.

First, centering equity begins with the explicit and visible commitment on the part of district leaders. For several of the Collaborative districts, this was in the form of an equity policy or an anti-racist statement. Educators shared that they appreciated the cover that an official district policy offered them in the classroom; however, commitment alone is not sufficient to integrate equity throughout all aspects of a district's work. A second common thread in systems that center equity is a focus on whole-child needs and development by creating a safe space for students, elevating student voice, and using a systemic, multi-tiered approach to meet student needs. Third, district efforts to center equity must connect to the instructional core because the only way to disrupt disparities in student opportunities and outcomes is to get to the heart of teaching and learning. This can take place by examining curricular materials to ensure equitable access to high-level learning, building educator content and pedagogical knowledge, and hiring a workforce committed to advancing equity.

Finally, only by finding ways to intentionally and coherently attend to and integrate these areas of focus can districts promote excellent outcomes for all their students.

ENDNOTES

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