

Race, Equity, and COVID-19: Navigating Crises and Building for the Future

Meeting 42 Executive Summary

The December 2020 meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform marked the group's second convening since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the disruption of in-person learning in districts across the state. The meeting, again held in a virtual format, provided a forum for continuing our collective examination of how best to serve students during a pandemic. It also created space to address the persistent and widening disparities among students, families, and communities with respect to health and safety, financial security, and access to high-quality learning environments and experiences. Each meeting session explicitly took up challenges facing school systems through the lens of equity. Over the course of two days, participants considered both immediate responses to the circumstances created by COVID-19 and longer-term efforts to transform our school systems to better prepare youth—especially the most vulnerable members of our school communities—for academic and life success. Discussions across the meeting highlighted complexities introduced by the pandemic and traditional practices that can stand in the way of equitable opportunities and outcomes. However, these conversations also emphasized the power of student and parent voice to help district leaders understand student challenges, craft solutions, and leverage community assets as part of the path forward.

Listening to Students: The Impact of COVID-19 and Race on Their Schooling

The meeting began by anchoring the group's discussion in the perspectives and lived experiences of current students. A "fishbowl" discussion among six high school students revealed ways in which individual and structural racism have shaped their personal and academic experiences. Students also described their struggles with managing stress and sustaining motivation through the COVID-19 pandemic. Too often, their stories suggested, teachers have continued to demand high levels of performance without exhibiting sufficient empathy and support for the personal obligations and pressures that students must navigate. The absence of caring student-adult relationships was a common theme in their experiences, highlighting a missed opportunity to promote student engagement, well-being, and academic success. Although these challenges have become especially pronounced during the pandemic, they will require continued attention even after in-person schooling resumes; students emphasized that these struggles predated the pandemic and are likely to continue when it ends.

Meeting participants responded to the students' insights with the suggestion that student well-being is a precondition to any kind of academic success, and therefore should be the highest priority as schools continue to engage in distance learning. Participants also advocated for stronger supports that can help teachers develop the kinds of relationships

that students need. Most consistently, however, students and other participants emphasized that student perspectives are essential to district and school decision-making processes. Although some efforts exist in many districts for some educators to listen to some students, truly addressing student needs may require a more thorough and authentic commitment to elevating student voice and using it to shape district priorities and actions.

Balancing Competing Needs and Promoting Equity: Challenges and Perspectives on Schooling During the Pandemic

Three related sets of priorities shape the decisions that districts and their communities make as they respond to the pandemic:

1. Keeping adults and students safe and healthy
2. Ensuring quality learning opportunities
3. Ensuring economic well-being

In the second session of the meeting, participants turned their attention to the complex challenges district face with respect to these priorities, all of which require educators to address the outsized impacts in low-income communities and communities of color.

A panel of community organizers began the session by discussing some of the pressures experienced by parents and community members during the pandemic, many of which mirrored observations from students earlier in the day. First, the stress of maintaining financial stability, preserving health and safety, providing childcare, securing technological devices and internet access, and navigating online learning platforms have combined to make the pandemic an overwhelming experience for parents—especially parents of families of color and those living in low-income communities. Compounding these challenges, many parents receive implicit and explicit messages from school systems that they are not welcomed or valued as positive contributors to their children’s education. Echoing a theme from the student panel, parents often feel that educators reach out to express concern about students logging in and completing academic work, but not about students’ and families’ well-being.

The community organizers and other meeting participants highlighted the importance of engaging parents as partners in improving education. Educators may need to find ways to develop and demonstrate respect for parents and engage in two-way communication to inform and empower parents as assets in their children’s education. In doing so, meeting participants emphasized, districts will need to begin their efforts with the parents and communities that are most marginalized in the public school system lest their engagement efforts merely reinforce the access and influence that more privileged parents have historically enjoyed.

Even when districts recognize the importance of student and parent voices, district leaders must navigate a long list of challenges and concerns to appropriately address the three priorities listed above. Adults in school systems have been stretched to the limits of their mental and emotional capacity, making it difficult to reshape and expand the services and supports that educators can provide. Teachers face the same threats to health and safety as

the students and families they serve, and many have childcare obligations of their own. New demands of teaching in an online environment only compound the stress. Districts need to find sustainable approaches to meeting student needs, which in turn requires approaches through which adults can practice self-care and find the space for reflection and strategic planning.

Exploring District Strategies to Promote Equity Now and For the Future

Participants next shifted to an exploration of emerging district strategies to address equity-related issues. The third session of the meeting featured small group conversations that explored problems of practice in three areas. First, student grades during the pandemic have exposed inequitable grading practices, creating both the need for urgent action to avert course failures and the opportunity to address a longstanding threat to equity. Second, emerging strategies for elevating student voice highlight the promise of empowering students to take charge of their educational experience and advocate for justice in schooling. Third, efforts to embrace culturally relevant curricula sometimes invite conflict and disagreement within school communities, but these efforts can create opportunities for all students to see their own history and experience reflected in their learning process.

In the small groups and a panel discussion that followed, several themes about district practices emerged. First, the lack of clear guidance and demand for immediate action during the pandemic has resulted in wide variation in district practice—variation that creates disparities in student opportunity. Also, while many districts have acted with symbolic action to prioritize equity, such efforts may amount to little more than “virtue signaling” if those actions do not lead to changes in practice and culture or align with other district priorities and initiatives.

If districts are to make meaningful progress in service of equity, improvement may require dismantling existing traditions and structures. The voices of students, parents, and other community members have not historically been reflected in district decision-making, and people in positions of power may need to rethink and reshape the values, cultures, and practices of the systems in which they operate. As district leaders seek to elevate stakeholder voices, it is important to seek the perspectives of those who have not had opportunities to participate using traditional vehicles for communication and participation. To that end, an explicit and public commitment to equity can help guide decisions. Similarly, developing consensus around the “why” behind any district action can help to establish a pathway to improvement and a benchmark against which to compare outcomes.

How Do We Know If We’re Improving? Collecting Evidence of Progress Toward Educational Equity

A critical question emerges as districts take concrete steps to address disparities in public schools: To what extent are the strategies they employ actually leading to improved experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for targeted students? A partnership between Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS) and City Year provides one example of how strategic approaches to measurement can contribute to an overall process of

continuous improvement. A PERTS tool called Copilot Elevate uses 5- to 10-minute surveys to collect student perspectives at the classroom level about positive learning conditions such as affirming cultural identity, student voice, and teacher caring. These data, available in real time, provide rapid feedback to a network of schools employing new strategies to enhance student belonging, resilience, and engaged learning in the middle grades—outcomes that are particularly important during the pandemic and distance learning. In doing so, the network does not merely set directions for schools and teachers to implement; it seeks to create the conditions for schools to make meaning of new ideas and how they apply in their local contexts. At a time when all educators are seeking to learn rapidly in a vacuum of absolute answers, effective measurement plays an instrumental role in the ongoing process of reflection and improvement.

The meeting concluded with a set of small groups in which participants explored considerations for measurement that can inform equity strategies. Some of the groups examined traditional measures of progress like student outcomes, but pushed to expand district attention beyond test scores and graduation data to include leading indicators that can inform real-time intervention and support. Other small groups considered outcomes in the domains of exposure to opportunities and resources and system capacity, recognizing that inequities exist just as deeply in the conditions in which school systems operate as in each student’s individual learning process.

Closing the final session with observations that permeated the entire meeting, participants advocated for incorporating the perspectives of students into approaches to measurement in order to increase the quality, impact, and meaningfulness of all district work. Seeking student opinions is an important first step; incorporating students into instrument design and data interpretation can be even more powerful. In a summary statement that captured sentiments from meeting participants across the two-day convening, one participant shared this final reflection before the meeting ended: “Students are our secret weapon to combat (fill in the blank).”

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic requires that the Collaborative remain flexible in adapting to the evolving conditions of California schools and the needs identified by Collaborative members. The Collaborative will convene next in March 2021 to continue addressing matters of equity in the context of ongoing district responses to the pandemic.

Meeting 42 Summary
Race, Equity, and COVID-19:
Navigating Crises and Building for the Future

December 2–3, 2020

Prepared by Joel Knudson, American Institutes for Research¹

***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In December 2020, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened for the second time since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the disruption of in-person learning in districts across the state. In the time that had elapsed since the group’s previous meeting in June 2020, the movement for racial justice has grown more powerful, just as the pandemic has revealed continuing and widening disparities among students, families, and communities with respect to health and safety, financial security, and access to high-quality learning environments and experiences. The meeting therefore presented an opportunity to continue our collective exploration into how to best serve students during a pandemic, this time with an explicit and targeted focus on matters of race and equity. Through two days of dialogue, meeting participants considered needs and strategies for serving the most vulnerable students in our school systems, both in the context of an extended crisis and in longer-term efforts to transform our school systems to better prepare youth for academic and life success.

Listening to Students: The Impact of Race and COVID-19 on Their Schooling

Previous Collaborative meetings and input from Collaborative members during the planning process for this meeting have underscored the importance of grounding equity-focused efforts in the experiences and perspectives of students. As the intended beneficiaries of schooling, young people can offer powerful insights about ways in which schools are meeting their needs, shortcomings that stand in the way of progress—especially as they relate to race and equity—and ideas for improvement. The meeting therefore began by anchoring the group’s discussion in the voices of current students.

¹ Thanks to Mary Louise Baez, Marina Castro, Linda Choi, Candice Handjojo, and Candace Hester for managing technical aspects of the meeting, taking careful notes, and synthesizing key takeaways from small group conversations to make this summary possible.

Exploring Student Perspectives

The meeting began with a “fishbowl” discussion among six high school students of color served by four different school districts. The students shared insights from their own experiences, and also drew on initial findings from an action research project in which they interviewed peers about promising practices during remote and distance learning and about the influence of race on their social and academic journeys. These observations, supplemented by reactions from other meeting participants, highlighted some key areas for attention in pursuing more equitable and anti-racist school systems.

The Role of Racism in School and in Life

The students began by describing ways in which racism has been manifest in their own and their peers’ school and overall life experiences. Some of these stories involved interactions with schoolmates at a young age—for example, when other children called attention to differences in appearance, often using those differences to lob insults or exclude the students from social interactions. The panelists also described the centrality of the white experience in curriculum and in their formal education more broadly, noting that they did not see themselves nor their history reflected in the lessons they learned. Interactions with teachers and other educators also revealed differences in expectations for students of color. One student, for example, described a situation where her brother was expelled from school after retaliating against a transgression from a white student; the white student went unpunished. Reflecting on this story, the panelist recalled learning that students receive different treatment based on their skin color. From that point forward, she explained, “I feel like the teachers pretty much tolerated me” rather than valuing or promoting her self-worth or academic success.

Challenges Introduced and Exacerbated by COVID-19

Observations during the panel and subsequent small group discussions also highlighted student struggles during COVID-19. Prominent among these was a combination of high stress and low motivation, with little relief or support from school. For many students, pressure to maintain high levels of academic performance and to actively participate in hours of Zoom calls is one of a host of challenges they face—for example, attending to family needs, employment obligations, and other concerns related to safety and health. Nevertheless, student panelists described low levels of empathy and support from their teachers. One student reported, “Teachers will say, ‘I care,’ but then they prioritize grades, so then our perception of ‘I care’ is ‘I have to do well in school.’” Another student pleaded, “You have to understand, we are human beings. We’re not robots, and I feel like the school system is treating us like robots.” Although some panelists acknowledged that schools have made some outlets available to support students’ overall well-being—for example, access to school counselors or to Zoom calls that shared strategies for promoting mental health—they did not perceive those supports to be helpful or welcoming.

Although the pandemic has introduced stress around safety and health, student comments revealed that one of the biggest deficits for them and their peers has been a lack of caring relationship with adults in their schools. One student panelist described a passionate teacher who actively sought to build connections with students and from whom she had

learned more than in any other class—despite the teacher assigning no homework—but this example was the exception rather than the norm. Another panelist responded to this story by saying, “I don’t have a teacher like that, and it affects me. I just hear them say, ‘I’m here for you,’ and then they don’t say anything else.” A third student shared a similar perspective and extended it to the full set of peers that he had interviewed as part of the broader action research project: “Not one of my interviewees said that they had a teacher or staff that they could go to.” At a time when students are struggling the most, comments from the panelists suggested that schools are failing to foster the relationships that can promote student engagement, well-being, and academic success.

Although the challenges that the panelists described have become especially pronounced during the pandemic, students also emphasized that these struggles predated COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning. Feelings of marginalization due to race, challenges with stress and motivation, and the absence of caring relationships with teachers have long been part of many students’ experience with schooling. Although these challenges have attracted increased attention in the context of unusually trying circumstances, they highlight underlying shortcomings that are likely to continue even after the pandemic ends.

Efforts to Promote Strong Adult–Student Relationships

Considering these student experiences, meeting participants emphasized some key shifts that need to happen to prioritize relationships with students. In small groups, participants suggested that student well-being should be the highest priority as schools continue to engage in distance learning, not a luxury to incorporate after academic issues have been addressed. Drawing a contrast between the classroom learning objectives identified as part of Bloom’s taxonomy² and the basic human needs laid out in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs,³ one participant argued, “You’ve got to Maslow before you can Bloom.” Another participant observed, however, that relationships have not received the same level of attention as decisions related to physical safety and personal protective equipment (PPE). In district- and state-level discussions, she argued, “Somehow that one-to-one relationship was just not seen as important as some of the other policy conversations about PPE.”

To better emphasize and support the development of strong adult–student relationships, meeting participants argued for stronger systems of support for teachers. District leaders play an important role in the way they model healthy interactions and establish standards for teacher behavior. “Far too often, teachers are doing exactly what’s trickling down from their leadership,” one participant observed. At the same time, teachers are navigating their own struggles to adapt to modes of learning while providing for their own health and safety. Districts can play a valuable role by creating spaces for adult learning—with particular attention to sharing lessons from educators who have achieved some success in an online or hybrid environment. As another meeting participant suggested, “There needs

² Originally published in 1956, Bloom’s taxonomy identified six levels of cognitive learning—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Although, the taxonomy has since been revised and elaborated, educators continue to use it to establish aims for classroom activities.

³ Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, first published in 1943, named five human needs, the lowest of which must be satisfied before individuals can attend to the next need in the hierarchy. These include physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization.

to be some organized system which enables districts to talk about how that one teacher is succeeding, why they're succeeding, and what other teachers need to be doing." The complexities of balancing a variety of competing priorities—including the role that teachers play in the process—would reemerge in a later discussion.

Incorporating Student Voice Into District Decisions

During the panel and in comments throughout the meeting, students and other participants emphasized the need to understand and incorporate student experiences into district and school decision-making processes. One student implored the group to "notice that students are experts in their own stories." Meeting participants acknowledged that some mechanisms for listening to students—for example, superintendent councils through which system leaders routinely speak with a group of identified student leaders, or mentoring relationships between district leaders and students—already exist. Although these learning opportunities are a step in the right direction, they may not adequately expose educators throughout the system to student perspectives or incorporate those perspectives into actual decisions. Other participants noted that listening is a necessary but insufficient step. One observed, "Rarely do we go back to the students to say, 'This is what we heard. This is what we can do.' Rarely do we engage them in the actual development of any remedies or strategies." If school systems are to address the concerns raised by the student panelists, it may require a more thorough and authentic commitment to elevating student voice and using it to shape district priorities and actions.

Balancing Competing Needs and Promoting Equity: Challenges and Perspectives on Schooling During the Pandemic

The second session of the meeting turned attention to the complexities of the challenges that districts face in serving student needs and advancing equity during a pandemic.

Three Sets of Priorities

As districts and their communities continue to navigate the full range of complications introduced by COVID-19, they seek to address three related sets of priorities:

1. Keeping adults and students safe and healthy as a pandemic threatens people's lives
2. Ensuring quality learning opportunities despite disruptions to the traditional learning environment
3. Ensuring economic well-being despite threats to employment and to the funding needed to sustain families and school systems alike

For all three of these priorities, there are outsized impacts in low-income communities and communities of color. Thus, even as the personal and academic challenges that students revealed in the fishbowl conversation call for better opportunities and supports, the scope of issues that districts must address is greater than ever.

Perspectives of Community Organizers

A panel of community organizers—all women of color who work to mobilize parents in historically underserved communities—drew attention to the pressures experienced by parents and community members. Many of their reflections mirrored the perspectives voiced by students earlier in the day.

Stresses and Challenges During the Pandemic

Panelists first emphasized the tremendous amount of stress families are experiencing at this time. Financial pressures to maintain (or find) employment, combined with fear of a deadly pandemic, have made it incredibly difficult for families to thrive. This is especially true among low-income families and families of color, which are overrepresented among essential workers and among the ranks of COVID-19 infections and deaths. The added expectations to provide childcare and equip children to participate in online schooling merely add to these challenges. Access to technological devices and broadband internet connections have perhaps been the most widely publicized barriers to participation—and areas in which many districts have been able to address community needs—but the digital divide also extends to the ability of parents to navigate software and the range of learning platforms through which schools deliver instruction.

Educator Assumptions About Parents

As parents do their best to navigate the full range of obstacles that COVID-19 has presented, panelists described ways in which educator assumptions about parents pose additional obstacles. Parents consistently receive implicit and explicit messages from teachers and administrators that they are to blame for their children’s academic struggles. They experience interactions that exhibit a lack of respect for their value as people and their contributions to their students’ education. Too often, the panelists noted, educators see parents as barriers rather than assets in the process of promoting student success. Calling attention to the cognitive dissonance that this mindset creates, one panelist asserted, “We can’t love the kids and hate the parents that produce them.” To make parents feel welcomed and valued as participants in the education process, multiple panelists argued, educators need to examine their biases and question the assumptions that drive their interactions with parents.

Well-Intentioned but Misguided Efforts to Connect With Parents

District attention to parent perspectives has increased in many communities, especially as transitions to distance learning have required ongoing communication about changing conditions and support from parents for students to engage in learning. Nevertheless, vehicles for parent input are often dominated by those individuals and communities that already have privilege and social capital. In the context of the pandemic in particular, many districts have intensified their targeted outreach to families about student participation. However, echoing observations from students earlier in the day, the community organizers indicated that these communication efforts most frequently take the form of seeking assurance that students log in and complete academic work, not inquiring about individuals’ well-being. Moreover, the panelists noted that efforts to empower parents

often engender resistance from within the system, especially from administrators expressing reservations about giving parents too much power.

As with the observations from student panelists, the community organizers emphasized that the struggles parents have experienced are longstanding issues. Although the pandemic has brought new attention to the challenges, they will not be resolved merely by returning to in-person schooling.

Effective Partnership With Parents

Remarks from the community organizers and reactions from other meeting participants highlighted the need for districts to listen to, understand, and work with parents—both during COVID-19 and in their work overall. These observations echoed many of the insights from earlier in the meeting about priorities and opportunities for better serving students in schools.

Comments during the meeting suggested that educators need to develop respect for and relationships with parents and to recognize parents as partners in their children's education. According to one participant, "Districts need to see our families as human beings." Another individual expressed a similar sentiment, drawing an explicit connection to underserved community members: The task for districts is "viewing our most marginalized parents as human beings and starting there." In doing so, educators can seek to identify and capitalize on the assets that parents bring to the table rather than focus on deficits; parents' love for their children is perhaps most powerful among these, and represents a good place to start. A shift in mindset and culture that values parents in the education space is a critical precondition for a meaningful partnership. As a meeting participant explained, "Parents, they don't need fixing. We do need to hear from them, and we really need to treat them as equitable partners in this venture of educating children."

In service of stronger relationships with parents, participants recommended that district leaders create vehicles for two-way communication. Although districts have historically created vehicles for communication and feedback through meetings at school sites, the timing and location of, and languages spoken at, these events can prevent many parents from meaningful participation. One bright spot of the pandemic has been an expanded realization of the opportunities available through virtual meetings. Vehicles like parent universities represent another tool for educating and empowering parents to actively participate in their children's education. Community partnerships can also help to broker relationships between families and schools; one community organizer described her organization's use of local primary language radio stations to help deliver and enhance district messaging efforts.

Although observations about parental engagement apply to all interactions between districts and parents, meeting participants emphasized the need to put equity at the center of communication and relationship building. Historically, the parents who have had the most access and influence in districts are those who are already empowered. Parents with privilege have the social capital and resources to shape district decisions in ways that perpetuate their power and privilege. If districts are to effectively meet parent (and

student) needs in new ways, communication and empowerment efforts must begin with those parents who and communities that are most marginalized in the public school system.

Complexities of District Decision-Making

Despite a recognition among meeting participants of the importance of student and parent voice and the need to balance the three competing priorities above—safety, learning, and economic well-being—district leaders seeking to improve district practice in these ways must navigate a host of challenges and concerns. A central office administrator and union leader from one district shared developments from their community to illustrate some of the challenges that districts face in balancing these competing priorities.

Recognizing the disparities that have been created and exacerbated since March 2020, this district's leaders and school personnel have taken several concrete steps to prioritize equity during the pandemic. Educators have expanded their efforts to listen to staff, students, and parents; the insights of these members of the school community led the district to develop a public eight-point commitment to educational justice. The district applied its equity-focused efforts to instruction and student learning by creating lesson banks for use in distance learning; these lessons were developed by teachers who had received training specifically related to social justice. The district also revisited the job responsibilities of various staff positions so that district employees could perform individual outreach with students, enabling those staff to identify, contact, and engage students to ensure their participation in distance learning.

Despite these positive steps, obstacles created by the dynamics of the pandemic and the mental and emotional capacity of adults make progress difficult. Teachers confront the same health and safety concerns as the families they serve—many with childcare obligations of their own as their children stay home during the day. On top of these personal stresses, they have also had to adapt to an entirely new mode of teaching, which has introduced new demands to an already taxing job. The resulting burnout for many teachers is compounded by demoralization in the face of narratives during the pandemic that teachers do not care about students.

The very real concerns articulated by the student and community organizer panelists indicated that students and families need more attention and strong relationships, but representatives from the district also cautioned that any approach to meeting student needs must be sustainable. Teachers and administrators who are unable to manage their own needs and practice self-care cannot effectively serve others, and widespread burnout threatens districts' ability to attract and retain educators. Moreover, the kind of reflection and strategic planning needed for districts to address the full set of priorities in front of them are difficult to implement when daily crises abound. "We don't have a lot of time to reflect on what's going to happen because we are being tossed about. ... We're still trying to figure out what we're going to be doing in a few weeks."

Partnerships as a Vehicle for Navigating Complexity

The many pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic do not lend themselves to easy solutions. Observations throughout the first two meeting sessions, however, emphasized the critical role that partnerships between school districts and other individuals and organizations in their communities can play as part of the path forward. Students are essential to identifying and addressing their most pressing needs. Parents and community organizations can be assets in informing and supporting the work of school districts. And the very difficult obstacles facing district leaders and their employee unions call for the kind of collaborative and innovative thinking that only happens when people work together. Partnerships represent a mechanism through which members of school communities can make sense of and overcome crises together. As one district leader reflected, “I can’t imagine navigating this work not being in partnership.”

Exploring District Strategies to Promote Equity Now and For the Future

Having explored the needs, challenges, and complexities of advancing equity in the context of COVID-19, meeting participants turned to the actual strategies that districts are employing to address equity-related issues.

Problems of Practice in Three Domains

Participants broke into small groups to examine approaches and insights related to three problems of practice: examining grading practices, elevating student voice, and pursuing culturally relevant curricula. In each group, district leaders shared emerging approaches within their contexts to ground a broader conversation among group members.

Examining Grading Practices

One of the immediate threats to equity that has emerged in response to COVID-19 relates to student grading. As districts continued distance learning in the 2020–21 school year, the number of D’s and F’s appearing on student report cards in many school systems has increased substantially, particularly for low-income students and students of color. This problem first emerged in spring 2020, but districts across the state elected to suspend letter grades or make other accommodations to protect students from the repercussions of a dramatic change to their learning environment.⁴ Now that most districts have returned to standard grading practices in 2020–21, the resulting grading disparities—often stemming in part from the same challenges of access and opportunity that existed in the spring—could threaten students’ ability to complete required coursework and position themselves to take advantage of a full range of postsecondary opportunities.

Leaders from two districts shared some of their emerging strategies to address the grading dilemma. Several interventions focus on students themselves, with supports like individual virtual tutoring for struggling students. Other approaches seek to build educator understanding of and capacity to address grading inequities. Examples include professional

⁴ A brief released by the Collaborative in April 2020, *Grading Policy in the Time of COVID-19: Considerations and Implications for Equity*, explored a variety of approaches to grading during the pandemic through an equity lens: <https://cacollaborative.org/publication/grading>.

development on grading, principal-hosted chats designed to share grading resources, and the creation of a teacher working group to develop resources for teachers. A teacher in one district, for example, showed an example from her own gradebook to a group of peers and illustrated the impact on students' grades when she awarded zero points for an assignment that was not completed on time, followed by the impact when a student received 50 points for turning in late work. In doing so, the teacher demonstrated how a small change in individual grading practice can help students avoid failing grades that might otherwise derail their academic progress.

Conversation within the small group emphasized several areas for attention as districts confront grading challenges. Participants advocated for engaging teachers and administrators in understanding and addressing the issue. Current grading practices are leading to expanding gaps between historically underserved students and their more advantaged peers; helping teachers to see this problem themselves can help build energy around contributing to a solution. To that end, some participants suggested that districts begin developing solutions with a set of early adopters who recognize the problem and are excited about pursuing new approaches. If educators are to pursue and embrace changes to the ways in which they assign grades, it is also important to articulate the goal in doing so. What is it that grades are intended to accomplish, and are practices during the pandemic achieving that goal?

The small group participants also called on state leadership to help districts align their approaches with one another and to coordinate with the state's systems of higher education. Although colleges and universities widely adopted accommodations in spring 2020 for students whose transcripts did not incorporate traditional grades, there has not yet been a general commitment to do the same in 2020–21. Thus, there are concerns about equity across districts when grading approaches could affect students' eligibility and competitiveness for college admission. With state guidance, a more consistent approach across the state could alleviate these concerns, relieve pressure within school communities, and reduce threats to student opportunity.

Crucially, the group's conversation emphasized that grading challenges during the pandemic are a visible manifestation of a deeper issue. Traditional grading practices have created barriers to progress for years. The personal nature of grading decisions even in normal times, especially at the secondary level, often leads to highly variable practices across teachers even within the same school. Overemphasis on homework can disadvantage students who lack the time, space, or resources to study outside of a school setting. Indeed, disparities in student grades often fall along the predictable lines of race, class, and language background—even when student performance on other assessments demonstrates that students have achieved content mastery.⁵ In discussing their responses

⁵ A previous Collaborative meeting held in Garden Grove Unified School District explored that district's journey in recognizing and addressing problematic grading practices at the secondary level. For a brief summary of their approach, see "Elevating Teacher Voice in District Policy Through the Garden Grove Consult Process: Secondary Grading Practice" on pages 36–37 of *You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers: The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development*: <https://cacollaborative.org/publication/youll-never-be-better-your-teachers-garden-grove-approach-human-capital-development>

to immediate concerns about student grades during the pandemic, therefore, the district leaders who presented to the group also saw the situation as an opportunity to address some of the long-term underlying issues with traditional grading practices that can disproportionately limit students' opportunities for academic progress.

Elevating Student Voice

Student observations during the panel discussion that opened the meeting suggested that schools and school systems turn to students too infrequently to understand their needs and to engage them in the problem-solving process. In a second small group conversation, participants learned about emerging strategies to elevate student voice, and discussed principles for engaging students more powerfully in their schooling experience.

One district has developed what it calls "equity councils" in each of its high schools. The councils are designed to provide a vehicle for students to advocate for themselves and their peers, especially with respect to equity issues. The goal is not merely listening to students, but "inspiring activism and social justice work in our communities." As one district representative explained, "The goal was to provide students a space to self-identify issues and concerns ... at their school or in their local community, and then come up with solutions." In a video about the equity councils, student participants described the impact of their ongoing experience. One council member explained, "Being a person of color, you're told—not explicitly, but indirectly—that you're supposed to make peace with mediocrity ... but then I met teachers who showed me that I was capable, and they empowered me, and they gave me a platform to speak and made me want to create change." Another student talked about ways in which her equity council participation helped her overcome an initial reticence to share her perspective: "With the district listening to it, it's more comfortable for me to speak about what I want to say."

Another district has developed an approach to student empowerment called *Latinos Unidos*. As with the equity councils, this club has a presence at each of the district's high schools; since its inception, it has expanded to include all intermediate schools and has begun outreach to elementary schools. The particular focus on Latino youth grew from a realization within the district that despite representing the majority of the district's student population, the proficiency and A-G completion rates of Latino students were unacceptably low—a gap that district leaders attributed in part to low expectations from adults on school campuses and from internalized low expectations among students. The focus of the group is to develop student leaders who can combat negative stereotypes and assumptions in schools.

Small group discussion about the equity councils and similar strategies in other districts highlighted areas for attention in student engagement efforts. First, listening to students as part of a commitment to equity involves hearing voices that have not historically been part of the discussion. Therefore, empowering students calls for outreach beyond "the usual suspects"—for example, the students who already volunteer for opportunities like student government. Amplifying underrepresented voices should shape efforts within schools, but it could also involve turning to recent graduates who have more proximity to the student experience.

Group members also argued that progress requires more than new structures; it also calls for cultural change in which educators see student voice as essential to their work. Engaging with students is not merely a strategy for promoting participation in class. It is an essential component of a more powerful approach to schooling. According to one meeting participant, education systems need to evolve to the point where educators believe that success “is so critically dependent on [students’] perspectives that we aren’t going to address these longstanding inequities without them.”

Finally, meeting participants considered how best to define success in efforts to elevate student voice. The creation of programs or expanded student participation can offer meaningful evidence of progress, but these are means to a broader end. Ultimately, the purpose of engaging students is to design a learning experience that best addresses their needs and priorities. According to one small group member, the goal is making “all of your secondary school students feel like you’ve designed this for their success.”

Pursuing Culturally Relevant Curriculum

A third challenge echoed another theme voiced during the student panel: Students of color often navigate learning experiences that do not reflect their history or lived reality. History, literature, and other subjects feature the voices and perspectives of European descendants, often painting people of color as passive actors in their own narratives or excluding them entirely. Students often react to this realization by disengaging from their formal schooling experiences or distrusting the education systems that provide them.

The final breakout group considered some emerging strategies for creating more culturally inclusive and responsive learning experiences for students. One targeted approach involved revisiting a district’s required reading list in response to student and parent complaints that several of the district’s mandated novels did harm by “cast[ing] Black people in negative, hopeless, and secondary roles.” In a similar vein, another district planned to perform equity audits of its entire curriculum and was also working to infuse explicit attention to equity into professional development and other trainings.

Several areas for consideration emerged from the small group’s discussion of district approaches to curriculum. As in the grading group, this group’s participants argued that it is important to articulate the “why” for developing recommended and required reading lists in districts. Often, these lists exist primarily as a matter of tradition; students read the “classics” because they have long been part of the school experience. If stakeholders can come to a shared understanding of the purpose these readings are intended to serve, it becomes easier to evaluate whether existing reading lists are meeting those goals.

Navigating curriculum shifts also requires attention to the change management process. District leaders need to balance rapid responses to urgent issues—especially when those issues reflect the pain of students and community members—with the need to engage a broad range of stakeholders. More inclusive processes can help to develop shared understanding about issues, articulation of priorities, and commitment to new directions. Consensus can be time-consuming and difficult to achieve, however. In cases where district leaders believe that more immediate action is required, communicating about the demand

for change, and not just publicizing the change itself, can help to counteract negative perceptions of top-down decision-making. District leaders can also leverage the insights and support of teachers who are already engaged in the work. Teachers who have already begun incorporating new novels into their instruction, for example, can share promising practices with colleagues and help to demonstrate the advantages of new reading materials.

Participants in this small group also recommended that district leaders work to align expectations regarding curriculum to their strategies for professional learning, instructional supervision, and other systems designed to shape students' instructional experiences. Efforts are likely to be more successful when teachers experience consistency across the various messages and supports they receive around instruction and student learning.

One challenge that can stand in the way of alignment is a misplaced argument about academic freedom. Teachers who are reluctant to depart from novels they know well and have taught for years, for example, may claim that their academic freedom is under attack. It is important to unpack these assertions carefully. The concept of academic freedom comes from higher education; its application to K-12 education, where a common set of standards define expectations for all students, is quite different. Moreover, teachers who operated from previous required reading lists were not practicing academic freedom. Rather, often they were adhering to a previous set of district requirements. Providing equitable opportunities for students relies on educators and their partners to design a shared set of education experiences around clearly identified system goals.

Finally, participants in this breakout group acknowledged that messaging inevitably gets oversimplified, especially when it relates to controversial topics and changes from traditional practice. When navigating change, it is important for district leaders to share the rationale behind their decisions widely and transparently. Doing so is unlikely to magically produce consensus around a decision, but it can help to dispel rumors and foster a shared understanding about a school system's commitments and priorities.

Reflections on Emerging District Practices

After the breakout groups, a panel of equity-focused Collaborative members yielded several observations about emerging strategies across the state.

Meaningful Progress May Require Dismantling Existing Traditions and Structures

Echoing some of the observations from the second session of the meeting, panelists underscored that the work facing district leaders is incredibly complex. They further suggested that meaningful progress is likely to require dismantling existing traditions and structures. Conversations throughout the meeting emphasized that student, community, and broader stakeholder voice plays an essential role in understanding needs and leveraging collective expertise in service of those needs. Nevertheless, these voices have not historically been reflected in district decision-making; traditional structures and power dynamics often stand in the way of meaningful engagement. If students, parents, and others

are to be active partners, it will require educators—especially those in positions of power—to rethink and reshape the values, cultures, and practices of school systems.

An Explicit Commitment to Equity Can Help Guide Decisions

Across district practices, district leaders illustrated ways in which an overall district commitment to equity can help to guide decisions. Policies that articulate a system commitment to equity can help coalesce support—or at least minimize resistance. One district, for example, established criteria for prioritizing student access to in-person learning opportunities when they become available: students from low-income families, English learners, foster youth, students with individualized education programs, and children of essential workers would all receive priority in the system. Because the district had demonstrated a lasting public commitment to equity before the pandemic even began, district leaders reported, they were able to finalize this system with no community push-back.

In the context of the pandemic, a commitment to equity often extends beyond traditional academic interventions and supports. If a district prioritizes the needs of historically underserved students, that may call for new kinds of supports when the circumstances of schooling change. For example, one district leader provided an example of combatting chronic absenteeism during distance learning through the development of attendance and engagement toolkits for district staff, cross-departmental collaboration to conduct home visits, and coordination with county and housing authority agencies in the area. If a district's north star is opportunity and access for all students, the system may be better prepared to pivot in service of that goal.

Although a full range of student needs require attention, participants emphasized that attention to academic rigor is paramount for students to achieve success. Encouraging student participation is necessary but insufficient. Efforts to address learning deficits will need to emphasize high-quality learning over remediation or special education referrals, which too often relegate struggling students to inferior learning environments rather than address their needs through a combination of high expectations and responsive supports.

Wide Variation Poses a Threat to Equity

During the pandemic, educators and families throughout California and across the country have adapted rapidly to provide the best educational experiences they can under trying circumstances. Without a clear roadmap for doing so and with few mechanisms for coordinated responses, the result has been widespread variation, which threatens to widen disparities in opportunities and outcomes among students. Affluent families have been able to mobilize tutors and learning pods, providing additional layers of support to their children that are not available to less affluent families. Similarly, school opening decisions often vary significantly between urban and suburban schools, and between public and private schools. This too creates vastly different learning experiences for different groups of students. California leaders have been reluctant to establish clear directions in a state that has committed to the principle of local control, but some participants argued that state

leadership can help create the conditions for consistency that can combat the growing disparities.

Symbolic Action May Not Represent Real Change

As districts seek to address glaring equity problems, questions emerge about the degree to which their responses represent actual change. Because of the complexity of the challenges they face, districts continue to wrestle with crises on multiple fronts, which makes it difficult to align equity-focused efforts. For example, increased awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity has led to new trainings in many districts, but the connection between those adult learning opportunities and professional development around academic content or virtual instruction may be unclear or nonexistent.

Similarly, attention to equity can entail deep structural changes, but just as often it can amount to mere virtue signaling. Designating directors of equity and inclusion within the central office, for example, may represent a symbolic district commitment to equity. Often, however, these individuals may lack decision-making authority or teams reporting to them. If equity and inclusion are not embedded into the work of key decision-makers, they are unlikely to have an impact. With respect to curriculum, well-intentioned efforts to instill cultural responsiveness may actually increase bias and lower rigor when done haphazardly. For example, if a teacher merely incorporates a reference to basketball or hip hop without a deeper understanding of curriculum design, she or he may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes without creating opportunities for deeper learning and understanding. These observations suggest that to meaningfully influence a district's work, equity-related actions must be thoughtful, aligned, and embedded as part of a long-term commitment to educational justice.

Progress Requires Attention to Alignment

Progress toward equity requires alignment and coordination at all levels of the school system. Within districts, this likely involves coordination across departments and integration with a variety of system structures and functions. However, districts operate in a broader system of county offices of education and overall state guidelines for education which, to be effective, also requires that county offices be aligned with one another as well as with the state. Meeting participants mentioned cases like grading where a lack of clear direction from the state or county offices has contributed to disparities across districts. For any local commitment to equity to take hold, coordination with the guidance offered by the state and county offices, their accountability mechanisms, and the support they can offer districts can help to reinforce efforts towards equity.

How Do We Know If We're Improving? Collecting Evidence of Progress Toward Educational Equity

As districts pursue efforts to enhance equity in public schools, they face a critical question: To what extent are the strategies they employ actually leading to improved experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for targeted students? The fourth and final session of the meeting considered sources of evidence that might provide useful information about progress.

An Example of Measurement in Service of Continuous Improvement

A partnership between Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS) and City Year illustrates how thoughtful approaches to measurement can support a process of continuous improvement in service of student well-being and equity. Representatives from both organizations joined the group to describe their work and the lessons that have emerged.

A body of research supports one of the key takeaways from the student panel that opened the meeting: Positive student-adult relationships can improve student engagement and motivation. To help support progress in this area, a tool developed by PERTS called Copilot Elevate enables educators to measure learning conditions that include affirming cultural identity, meaningful work, classroom belonging, student voice, feedback for growth, and teacher caring. The tool uses 5- to 10-minute surveys to collect data from the end user in the education system, the student. Furthermore, the data enable educators to examine the unit of change most relevant during distance learning, the classroom. And by making data available in real time, the tool lends itself to continuous improvement by enabling teachers and other educators to track changes as they implement new approaches to classroom instruction and student interaction.

In its pandemic response, City Year has worked with a network of schools to enhance student belonging, resilience, and engaged learning in the middle grades. The nonprofit organization operates across the country, focusing on youth development and whole child development with young people who are interested in service. Responses to COVID-19 and heightened attention to systemic racism have elevated the need to create a supportive and nurturing experience for students in schools, with a recognition that students' learning environments profoundly affect their ability to engage with academic content. The equity angle of this focus is especially important because of findings from research that students of color and from other marginalized backgrounds are less likely to have engaging learning experiences—those characterized by trusting and caring relationships, a sense of belonging, and affirmations of their own value.

To help schools better serve students, the City Year network has focused its attention on priorities that have risen to the surface with its partners during the pandemic: fostering engagement, instilling a sense of belonging, and promoting resilience. To that end, City Year developed change packages that can be implemented in a variety of environments to “enable supportive relationships and school actions that attend to a student sense of safety, physical and emotional well-being, and participation in school.” Example strategies include onboarding students into a new context during their return to school and establishing frequent one-to-one contact and connections between students and adults.

Evidence of progress is critical to the City Year process because of its goals for network members. Although the organization has been careful to draw on an evidence base of recommended practices, it does not merely wish to provide direction for schools and teachers to implement. Rather, the goal is for schools to make meaning of new ideas and how they apply to their own context—especially given the wide variety of learning contexts that COVID-19 has created. City Year's partnership with PERTS has been instrumental to

this process, as the Copilot Elevate tool has provided real-time and ongoing evidence about progress that enables educators to learn from and adapt their interactions with students. This orientation to using data can be especially valuable during the pandemic. As the City Year representative explained, “The environment that we’re in right now is incredibly ripe for using continuous improvement because no one has the absolute right answer for how to ... do education well in this world.”

The PERTS and City Year representative shared five lessons that have emerged from their work during the pandemic:

1. Framing improvement needs to look different in the COVID-19 context than during normal times. Because so much is unknown in schools right now, leaders need to be attentive to how people respond to and accept new ideas.
2. Everything takes more time. Adults and students alike continue to feel overwhelmed, which affects the pace of change.
3. If the approaches that City Year promotes are on target, it will show up in measures of student engagement—and presumably in student persistence and performance.
4. Despite the disruptions to schooling and increased burdens on all members of school networks and communities, schools still value connections and networks with other schools. “We’re finding more than ever [that] our schools want to talk to each other and want environments for that,” the individual from City Year noted.
5. Although the primary focus of the work they described has been on student engagement, their work needs to be attentive to both student and adult needs.

Considerations for Measurement to Inform Equity Strategies

Following the City Year and PERTS presentation, meeting participants broke into small groups to explore considerations for measurement to inform equity strategies. If districts are to make meaningful progress in addressing the kinds of gaps in opportunities and experiences that student panelists and other meeting participants shared, they need evidence of where those gaps exist. In groups designed to align with some of the key equity indicators identified in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s report *Monitoring Educational Equity*, participants explored possible indicators to reveal disparities among students.

Indicators of Student Outcomes

Traditionally, measurement in schools has centered on student outcomes, especially trailing indicators like achievement on standardized tests. Some small group members considered academic outcomes that might yield meaningful information about student experiences and school effectiveness. These participants advocated for an emphasis on leading indicators that can help educators intervene with students in a timely manner. These may include measures of content mastery, but the conversation also incorporated observations from earlier in the meeting about engagement and relationships being important preconditions for academic progress. Group members therefore suggested that attention to attendance, relationships, engagement, and aspects of social and emotional

learning might be important if educators are to ensure that all students remain on track in school.

Indicators of Exposure to Opportunities and Resources

Other indicators relate to disparities in exposure to opportunities and resources, like access to quality curriculum, courses, and teaching. To reveal disparities in this domain, small groups recommended that educators perform transcript audits, monitor participation in extended learning opportunities, and examine access to college and career opportunities to monitor the extent to which students in different schools and from different backgrounds have quality options for rigorous, meaningful learning that addresses their individual needs. Reflecting comments throughout the meeting about the importance of student and parent voice, some group members also suggested that impressions about the curriculum from youth and parents may be useful in a process of ongoing district reflection and adjustment to meet all student needs.

Indicators of System Capacity

Additional indicators can reveal information about system capacity to address issues of racial justice and equity. Small group members who explored these kinds of potential measures focused much of their attention on indicators of teacher quality, including credentialing, turnover, experience, and qualifications. With an equity lens, participants advocated for analyzing these data at the school level to help reveal disparities across communities and for students with different backgrounds and needs. Even within a school, attention to which teachers teach Advanced Placement versus remedial classes can shed light on the degree to which a school's strongest resources are applied in service of its greatest needs.

Student Voice in the Development and Interpretation of Indicators

Conversations across the meeting about student voice also applied to discussions of measurement: Participants suggested that orienting measurement and intervention plans around the perspectives of students will increase the quality, impact, and meaningfulness of all district work. Schools and districts have been turning to students and parents often during the pandemic, perhaps more than ever before. Nevertheless, noted one participant, "The adults designed the survey. How much more powerful would it be if the kids should tell us what the questions should be and what the evidence should be?" Building on this observation, and encapsulating sentiments expressed across the two-day convening, another participant shared this maxim in the Zoom chat window: "Students are our secret weapon to combat (fill in the blank)."

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet again in March 2021 to continue exploring district responses to COVID-19 and pursuit of equity; Collaborative staff will identify specific topics for conversation in consultation with members. In the meantime, the Collaborative staff will continue to pursue publications and activities that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. As always, resources from this and

previous meetings, updates regarding Collaborative members, and information concerning upcoming events are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.