

Meeting 46 Summary
**Respecting and Nurturing Every Student: Implementing the New
Excellence and Equity Policy in Long Beach**

March 29–30, 2022

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***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 March 2022, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in person for the first time in more than two years to deepen ongoing attention to matters of educational equity. Using the lens of the recently adopted Excellence and Equity Policy in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), members and guests explored the district's equity journey and considered strategies for embedding equity into efforts to engage students, develop and support principals, and select instructional materials that reflect and elevate student experiences and understanding.

Exploring the Long Beach Excellence and Equity Policy

When other institutions in the Long Beach community responded to the May 2020 murder of George Floyd with official anti-racist statements, the LBUSD Board of Education and district administrators chose to pursue a deeper commitment to racial justice through a comprehensive systemwide policy to end systemic racism and discrimination that harms students. In July 2020, LBUSD commissioned the Equity Leadership Team, made up of staff and community members, to craft a policy that would create a real vision of equity for the future. Eighteen months later, in December 2021, the LBUSD Board of Education voted unanimously to adopt a new [Excellence and Equity Policy](#). Although the board policy represents an important public commitment to acknowledge and address historical and ongoing disparities in opportunities and outcomes, district leaders emphasized that the board policy is the result of a long journey of reflection and planning over three decades and that it is only one step toward the work that is yet to be done to ensure excellence and equity for the students in LBUSD.

Key Aspects of the Excellence and Equity Policy

The board policy defines *equity in LBUSD* as “taking action to end systemic racism and discrimination that harms students because of their race, culture, disability, economic description, immigration status, gender identification, and/or sexual orientation” and not allowing these descriptors to become predictors of success or failure within the LBUSD system. The policy goes on to further state 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 district chose specifically to prioritize these students within the district because of historical patterns of harm and exclusion in LBUSD. This decision has also led to discussions about being thoughtful about creating interventions for groups of vulnerable students who also have diverse needs. District decisions that flow from this commitment include setting aside additional resources to target specific groups of students, prioritizing students with disabilities when creating the master schedule, examining highly accelerated pathways in the district with low percentages of Black students enrolled, auditing textbooks for culturally relevant content, and mandating professional development that centers equity. Explicit attention to BIPOC students and students with disabilities has also prompted intentional communication and engagement between leadership and stakeholders within the district with the message that focusing on the most vulnerable students improves the system for all.

To ensure that educators throughout the district examine decisions with equity at the center, the district mapped out 11 equity initiatives: (1) student voice and participation; (2) principal supervision and support; (3) social-emotional learning and supports; (4) community engagement; (5) curriculum and professional development; (6) equity leadership and talent development; (7) budget engagement; (8) workforce diversity and human resource practices; (9) metrics and opportunity gaps; (10), business engagement and strategic partnerships; and (11) learning acceleration, support, and enrichment. Discussion during the meeting focused in particular on three of these initiatives: student voice and participation, principal supervision and support, and curriculum and professional development.

Key Implementation Challenges and Areas for Attention

Any district committed to centering equity in its policies and practices is likely to encounter some key implementation challenges. First, selecting, collecting, and analyzing evidence of processes, opportunities, and outcomes is critical to understand the degree to which districts are making progress toward their goals. In LBUSD, district leaders emphasize the importance of looking at data to see where the equity agenda is not working. They also note the importance of providing school leaders and teachers comprehensive whole-child data to center equity conversations around data. Second, for any district committed to equity, centering student voice and participation and actively including voices of students who have been historically underserved in decisions related to students’ classroom experiences must be priorities. To meet the needs of these students, school and district leaders must understand these students’ experiences. At the same time, it is

necessary to include a range of student voices, including those that are often found at the fringes. In doing so, leaders must recognize that students may share that they want something that looks very different than what the system offers. Third, any policy that affects students must “fit through the classroom door.” For any policy to translate into improved learning experiences for students, district leaders need to consider what implementation of the policy looks like in the classroom and the role teachers play in implementing the work in instructional spaces. LBUSD is at the beginning stages of this implementation work with school leaders and teachers and acknowledges the importance of including teachers at the table to ensure the sustainability and scalability of the equity work.

Attending to Student Voice and Improving Student Agency

LBUSD’s Excellence and Equity Policy commits to a school environment in which students and teachers are treated with respect. To that end, youth voice is critical for elevating concerns and priorities about students’ lived experiences in schools and in crafting solutions that address these needs. Student representatives from Browning High School joined meeting participants for small-group discussions about strategies the district and school employ to elevate student voice to shape student experience. The insights they shared built on earlier discussions about the LBUSD Excellence and Equity Policy and the importance of centering student voice to understand students’ experiences and priorities to better meet the needs of students who have been historically underserved by the district.

Students emphasized the importance of creating a safe space in which they feel valued and experience a sense of belonging. One student stated, “I want to feel like I’m at home when I’m at school.” To do that, students highlighted school-level strategies that focus on growing student–student relationships and student–teacher relationships. For example, ensuring that staff are always present, from the moment students step onto campus until the students leave, provides a visual reminder to students that there is an adult on campus they can go to for support. Students shared that seeing their principal and teachers at the entrance of the school at the beginning of the day to greet them, mingling with students throughout the day and during lunch, and giving high fives at the end of the day lets students know the principal and teachers care and lays the groundwork to build deeper relationships. Students also described monthly Restorative Practices Community Building Circles that take place at Browning, during which the students meet with different teachers and students each month. The goal is to build relationships with different students and different teachers and give students the opportunity to make multiple connections throughout the school, beyond their usual social circles and classes. Students described the circles as “a way to open up our hearts and let some stress out.”

One challenge that arose from this discussion is the importance of being aware of which student voices within the student population are and are not being represented. Many of the student representatives who participated in the Collaborative meeting are members of a leadership club; however, these students are not representative of all the students on campus and may not fully understand or represent the experiences of students who feel more marginalized in their school community. Another challenge to consider is the impact

of school size and culture on opportunities to develop personal relationships. The student representatives at the meeting attend a small school, which can make it easier to create connections and create a tight-knit community feel. It is equally important for students who attend large comprehensive high schools to have the opportunity to build relationships, have their voice heard, and engage in opportunities to build student agency as an avenue for building equity-centered schools. Students and educators may need to adapt their strategies to address the needs of each school environment.

Leading for Equity

School principals play an essential role in fostering cultures of respect for young people, shifting the hearts and minds of educators and community members, and creating an environment that promotes excellent instruction. Therefore, investing in high-quality principals, high-quality supervision, and instructional coaching can play key roles in advancing a district's equity agenda. LBUSD's strategic work in leading for equity begins with the Equity Leadership Dispositions, six research-based dispositions identified by the Leadership Academy as important for equity-driven school leadership: (1) reflect on personal assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors; (2) publicly model a personal belief that is grounded in equity; (3) act with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decision making and practice; (4) purposefully build the capacity of others to identify and disrupt inequities in the school; (5) confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with minoritized populations; and (6) create systems and structures to promote equity, with focus on minoritized populations. The district's goal and expectation are for their leaders to demonstrate these six dispositions.

In addition, the district developed a rubric of leadership practices, which principal supervisors and principals themselves use to assess school leaders in seven domains: teaching and learning; environment and equity; communication and engagement; supervision, evaluation, and employee development; professionalism, disposition, and ethics; strategy and planning; and organization and management. Within each domain, the rubric incorporates language that specifically calls out the ways in which exemplary practices embed attention to differentiation, cultural responsiveness, attention to disparities, and other aspects of equity. The purpose is to connect these domains to the district's vision of educational equity for all students.

LBUSD invited elementary and secondary principals to participate in fishbowl discussions about their experiences with the Excellence and Equity Policy and the district's approach to leading for equity. First, the principals generally agreed that the board policy was, in the words of one fishbowl participant, "a long time coming." Many of these principals had been in the district for decades and had seen the work being done to create a system in which every student matters and educators believe that all students can learn and achieve at high levels. The official policy helped to solidify and articulate a commitment that has been growing throughout many years. In particular, having clear expectations spelled out in the leadership domains rubric is helpful because this clarity removes any doubt about the expectations the district has for school leaders. One principal stated, "I feel like I have

permission to serve the underserved, and I don't have to apologize for it." Principals also shared that the policy makes the equity-centered work more cohesive across the district, with a clear equity vision that is the same across all schools. Some principals noted that the district's policy does more than support their work with educators in their schools and members of their communities; the district's systemic commitment to leading for equity also prompts school leaders to confront their own biases that might stand in the way of setting high expectations for all students.

Principals also discussed challenges they are facing in taking on the equity-centered work at their school sites. Educators have been forced to confront their complicity in the historically inequitable outcomes for minority students in the district. Examples include the overidentification of boys of color for special education, high expulsion rates for African American males, and accelerated courses with low percentages of historically underserved populations. Moreover, it can be hard to initiate uncomfortable conversations with colleagues that force individuals to face their own biases. One principal mentioned, "It can be a tough conversation, and we move at the pace of privilege. For my school, a lot of the teachers are White, and they have never had to talk about race, and to create the expectation that they will be talking about race at work has been a challenge." Generating commitment among teachers to center and advance equity because it is the right thing to do for students—and not merely a response to a district mandate—is another challenge. Despite these challenges, principals in the fishbowl conversations expressed excitement about navigating the path forward and feel supported by the district to do so.

Pursuing Equity Through Instructional Content

One of the primary ways in which members of the LBUSD community will experience the equity policy is through classroom instruction. The district sought to support more culturally responsive practices, in part, through a recently initiated equity audit. An exploration of this process provided the foundation for discussions about how districts can best use instructional materials and professional development to support culturally responsive learning environments.

Crystallizing District Priorities

To help determine district priorities as the district implements the policy, LBUSD used an appreciative inquiry approach to glean feedback from students, teachers, principals, and parents about what they want from their teachers and their curriculum. Student feedback expressed a desire to explore more points of view from individuals with different backgrounds, especially from different genders and sexualities—including attention to gender identity, preferred pronouns, and gender expression. Parent feedback emphasized the importance of building cultural identity and lifting up different perspectives and affirming multiple identity groups. Principals and teachers indicated readiness to take on the diversity, equity, and inclusion work. However, although educators described themselves as comfortable talking about issues about race, they were less comfortable talking about sexuality and gender. District and school leaders ground their discussions and decisions about curriculum in this feedback from various stakeholders.

Understanding the Existing Curriculum

After receiving feedback from stakeholder groups about what they would like to see in the curriculum, the district worked with HILL Pedagogies to evaluate the existing curriculum and get a better understanding of how culturally responsive the district's existing curricular materials are. Although the district had historically highlighted the importance of rigor and skill development in its instructional materials, the curriculum audit revealed gaps in its cultural responsiveness that required attention in areas such as social justice orientation and representation.

Recommendations, based on this evaluation, to improve cultural responsiveness in the district's instructional materials include: (a) engage in the revision of curriculum units to embed explicit learning goals of intellect, identity, criticality, and joy; (b) reconsider authorship with units that present a White perspective; (c) adopt pedagogical models that will guide teachers on how to teach in culturally relevant ways; (d) provide implicit bias and anti-racist workshops to teachers; and (e) develop critical community conversations about issues of race and racism. The district is considering next steps to build the internal capacity necessary to address these recommendations and is also starting the process of reviewing and selecting curricular materials.

Exploring District Strategies for Reviewing and Selecting Reading Materials

Building on the takeaways and recommendations from the curriculum audit, the district has developed a tool designed to help educators evaluate the appropriateness of using specific texts for instruction in the classroom. Evaluators use the tool to evaluate a text's educational content (e.g., accuracy, connections to academic standards), social content and social-emotional considerations (e.g., gender roles, trauma that can be triggered by the text), cultural relevance, and instructional considerations (e.g., obscenities, drug use).

District leaders led meeting participants through an exercise to examine the appropriateness of *The Cay*, a novel that sparked some parent complaints in the district. The goal of this exercise was to get feedback about the advantages and shortcomings of the tool, as well as considerations district leaders should make as they begin to think about evaluating course materials.

Meeting participants noted the challenges involved in evaluating curricular materials because of the need to balance different stakeholder values and perspectives. There will always be books that challenge someone's beliefs, but participant comments consistently affirmed that conversations about the educational purposes and appropriateness of those texts are essential and need to take place. In those conversations, it is important to consider the desired outcomes and evaluate how a text can lead to conversations that will result in the desired outcomes without triggering traumatic responses among students. One participant recognized the potential value of the tool in highlighting these educational purposes and potential points of dissent but advocated for the incorporation of multiple stakeholder perspectives into a review process to ensure that varied perspectives are acknowledged and considered.

Challenges to Closing Equity Gaps

In the third session of the meeting, two districts shared challenges with which they were struggling in their efforts to pursue equity. Although these challenges were specific to the presenting district, the issues resonated with district leaders across a wide variety of contexts. Meeting participants used a consultancy protocol to provide feedback to each of the presenting districts about the work they are doing.

Closing the Equity Gap in the Teacher Workforce

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of diversity within the teaching workforce. Students of color who learn from teachers of color show improved reading and math test scores, improved graduation rates, increased aspirations to attend college, fewer unexcused absences, and lower likelihoods of chronic absenteeism and suspension.¹ One district shared that they are struggling with the fact that their staffing demographics do not match the demographics of the students in their district. For example, the percentage of teachers who are White is 20 points higher than the percentage of students who are White, whereas the percentage of teachers who are Latino is nearly 30 points lower than the percentage of students. Compounding this challenge of underrepresentation of staff of color, a similar underrepresentation of Latinos and African Americans in higher education results in a smaller pool of teaching candidates, which makes recruiting teachers difficult. The district also shared that, beyond the challenge of recruiting teachers of color, retention for teachers of color tends to be lower due to inadequate preparation and inadequate mentoring.

The district presented the following question: Given that persons of color, particularly African Americans and Latinos, are historically underrepresented in higher education, what can we, as a district, do to combat the effects of historical and institutional racism to increase representation of BIPOC individuals in our certificated workforce? Some of the strategies the district currently employs are hosting recruitment events with an emphasis on recruiting teachers of color, working with local higher education institutions to host student teachers and create residency programs for teachers of color, and creating a student pipeline for students of color in the district interested in teaching.

Meeting participants noted that, to increase the number of teachers of color in the workforce, it is necessary to determine the obstacles that college students of color face that keep them from becoming educators in the first place. Examples might include financial

¹ See, for example, the following articles: Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teaching profession through high-retention pathways* (Research Brief). Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Diversifying_Teaching_Profession_BRIEF.pdf. Redding, C. (2019). A teacher like me: A review of the effect of student–teacher racial/ethnic matching on teacher perceptions of students and student academic and behavioral outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(4) 499–535. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319853545>. Yarnell, L. M., & Bohrnstedt, G. W. (2018). Student–teacher racial match and its association with Black student achievement: An exploration using multilevel structural equation modeling. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(2), 287–324. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217734804>

obstacles such as paying off student loans, the high cost of housing, and low compensation that disproportionately impact teachers of color. Once the obstacles are identified, districts can better target strategies for recruitment. For example, loan forgiveness programs and providing affordable housing might specifically target some of the barriers to a diverse workforce. Additionally, one participant noted that reaching out to young teacher candidates of color requires utilizing social media platforms they are more likely to use rather than relying on traditional forms of advertising such as radio and newspaper. Participants also acknowledged the broad scale of this challenge, which affects all districts, and therefore recommended that districts work together to develop collective solutions.

Closing the Equity Gap in Accelerated Pathways

Accelerated coursework and pathways offer high schoolers opportunities to gain skills and demonstrate competencies in the kinds of learning they can expect to see in postsecondary education. Traditional approaches to accelerated coursework have too often tracked students into predictable patterns in which White and Asian students have access to high-quality teachers and courses and students of color and students from low-income households encounter teachers and courses characterized by lower quality and lower expectations for students. One district shared their challenge in attempting to close the equity gap in accelerated pathways, noting the overrepresentation of White students with higher socioeconomic status in pathways designed to serve students who are high achieving.

Although tracking is a particularly noticeable problem at the high school level, district leaders trace disparities among students to a district program for high achievers in the early elementary years. The elementary program began as an incentive to keep families in the district; however, it has resulted in an unintended consequence of creating a process of separating students into different academic tracks very early on in students' academic careers. Although the district recognizes the threats to equity that this program creates, it is also operating in context of declining enrollment and competition for students. Any change to a program perceived to be important to student success risks alienating families of students who are high achieving.

Discussion among meeting participants suggested that true commitment to equity often requires bold and difficult decisions. If a program like the accelerated course option in early elementary school helps to perpetuate patterns of advantage that exclude some student groups, cutting that program may override concerns about disgruntled parents.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet again in June 2022, using the context of Burbank Unified School District to deepen and expand our exploration of the pursuit of equity. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to develop publications as well as other means of sharing key lessons and takeaways from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.