

Meeting 47 Summary

Digging Deeper into Equity: Instructional Content and Inclusive Culture in Burbank

June 23–24, 2022

Prepared by Linda Choi, 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, and 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 June 2022, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened to continue their yearlong deep dive into matters of educational equity using the work conducted in Burbank Unified School District (USD) to ground their discussions. Picking up on a topic discussed in the previous Collaborative meeting in Long Beach, members and guests continued to explore the review and selection of instructional materials that foster inclusivity and engagement for all students. Conversation then turned to examine hate speech on school campuses and ways in which restorative practices can promote healing and understanding. The meeting concluded with a discussion on the role teachers can play in bringing a district's equity commitments to life, and how professional development can serve as a critical vehicle for cultivating skills and mindsets.

Exploring the Burbank Equity Journey

Burbank USD serves about 14,000 students. Nearly half of the student population are classified as White, which includes a large Armenian population; 33% are classified as Latinx, and 2.5% are classified as African American. One third of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 10% are English language learners, and 12% are students with disabilities. In recent years, the school board and district leaders have publicly committed to advancing equity by adopting an anti-racist statement and creating subcommittees on policy, instruction, social and emotional learning, and engagement.

¹ Thanks to Cristina Alvarez, Mary Louise Baez, Marina Castro, and Ashley Sunde for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

The Role of Context in the Equity Journey

Context shapes where the strengths and greatest needs lie within a district, what the priorities are, and what work is even possible. As such, committing to the work of equity requires an understanding of the societal context in which a district is operating, as well as the specific district context and, finally, the personal contexts of its stakeholders.

Societal Context

A commitment to equity requires careful attention to the societal context in which districts operate. One meeting participant shared a metaphor to emphasize why societal context matters: “Racism is not the great white shark[out] to get us while we’re swimming in the ocean; it is the water we swim in. It surrounds us.” Because racism is ubiquitous, educators must be aware of the larger societal context in which they operate. For example, as Burbank USD strives to ensure an excellent education for all students, it does so against a historical backdrop of discriminatory practices, including its former status as a “sundown town,” the practice of excluding non-whites from white towns with discriminatory laws and practices, such as ordering non-white individuals to leave town by sundown.

District Context

A district’s size, resources, and history shape the work that can be done. One meeting participant reflected on how their district’s context has shaped its equity journey: “Our equity journey has been about learning from the past and what policy levers you need to pull to move the work forward.” One district leader echoed this sentiment, stating that because of its long history of practices resulting in the harm and exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and students with disabilities within the district, they chose to prioritize these populations when adopting a district-wide equity policy. This historical context shaped the district’s priorities and decisions, such as 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. Another district leader described the history of a district which included bankruptcy and being found guilty of intentionally segregating its schools in the 1980s. This backdrop has prompted educators in the district to take intentional steps to acknowledge the harm done to students historically, disrupt the inequities in the system, and create optimal conditions for all students to learn. One of the most significant ways the district has approached these goals is by examining their resource allocation practices and codifying their approaches to ensuring that resources go where they are most needed despite pushback from communities of privilege within the district. A third district leader noted that pursuing a commitment to equity as a small district shapes the equity work they take on in-house versus what they outsource, and the speed at which the work gets done.

Personal Context

In addition to the broader societal context and the history and resources of a particular district and its community, a commitment to equity requires understanding and addressing

people as individuals to meet specific needs. Therefore, it is important to be aware of one another's personal narratives. It is important for educators to know students' stories and the assets and challenges students face that shape their needs. It is important for educators to share their stories as well to establish a common purpose, understand and foster one another's motivation to pursue equity, and build trust among adults and between adults and students. Burbank USD emphasized that to learn one another's personal contexts, it is necessary to create safe spaces for storytelling and to articulate the rationale and importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). To illustrate this, Burbank USD leaders from the central office set the tone of a safe and brave space by sharing their personal stories, their hurts, their painful experiences, their frustrations and hopes, and why the work of DEI is an imperative for them.

Instructional Materials that Reflect a Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

After sharing stories and a discussion of the context Burbank USD is operating in, meeting participants continued a conversation that began in Long Beach USD in March 2022 about how districts can best use instructional materials to support culturally responsive learning environments. In Burbank USD, this journey began during distance learning during COVID (?) when a student pointed out the use of the n-word in texts the students had been assigned and asked for a pause on using these texts during distance learning. That initial request sparked a conversation about removing these materials from the curriculum which led to dissenting voices and emotional reactions to such a change. But ultimately that discussion produced a shift in the district's overall approach to selecting texts.

Debate around the district's decision highlighted tensions that can emerge from the incorporation of novels such as *The Cay*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Some members of the community opposed removing such books from the curriculum arguing that doing so would be removing Black stories from student learning experiences. Others who supported removing these books from required reading lists argued that including them caused harm and trauma to students. One student participant shared, "To read these novels, you have to know what Black people have experienced to fully understand. Schools don't teach the effects of lynching on the Black community in the 1950s and 60s, how that affects black people to this day, and how the lynching of Black people continues to this day. [You] can't understand it if you don't know the history behind it."

To consider different stakeholders' points of view, Burbank USD created a committee of district leaders, parents, and teachers to examine the books, consider student experiences with the texts, and present a recommendation on whether to retain books that use the n-word as part of the core instructional curriculum. The committee could not come to unanimous agreement, but based on students' traumatic experiences, the superintendent chose to remove these texts from the core instructional reading list, though they are still available in school libraries. This decision, and the discussion about it during the meeting, highlighted the kinds of key issues districts may need to navigate when exploring changes to curricular materials.

Clarifying Policies and Procedures Regarding Adding or Removing Curricular Materials

Some teachers in the district expressed the opinion that it is necessary to add additional curricular materials, not just at the high school level, but throughout the grade levels. One teacher explained, “Our young students read more books about animals than they do about people of color. That needs to change.” However, as this change happens, questions about when and how curricular materials can or should be added or removed will require clarification of existing policies and procedures or the creation of new procedures if they are not already in place.

Selecting Instructional Materials is Also About Inclusion

Curating instructional materials is not just about removing harmful texts from the classroom, but also about expanding the authors and points of view to which students are exposed. Including these additional perspectives supports and empowers students. One student participant shared an experience she had reading the book *Hair Love* to younger students in the district: “I was reading a book called *Hair Love*, and one student shared her experience having curly, afro hair and that it’s hard to not get as many compliments about her hair.” Including diverse instructional materials in the curriculum to which various groups of students can connect and relate is another important step districts can take to advance a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Ensuring the Buy-In and Support of Senior Leaders

To tackle these steps along their equity journey, meeting participants discussed the importance of building a district leadership team that not only has the necessary knowledge and skills, but also the conviction and commitment to take on the hard and uncomfortable work of ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion in instructional materials. One teacher leader shared how committed district leaders have influenced her work: “Because [the assistant superintendent] is firm in her beliefs and doesn’t back down, that empowers me to join in with her. I know that if I stick my neck out for our cause, that she has my back.”

Cultivating Relationships

While much of the conversation revolved around curricular materials and policies, meeting participants stated that the work is also about establishing relationships between educators and students. Interactions around content can either be inspiring and uplifting or they can be traumatic with long-lasting effects. As such, creating an environment where teachers and students can positively engage with one another is also absolutely critical.

Growing Teacher Knowledge, Skills, and Mindsets through Professional Development

As discussed in many previous Collaborative meetings, any initiative or policy needs to fit through the classroom door. That is, for student experiences to change in meaningful ways, teachers need to have the skills, support, and buy-in to embed new ideas into their daily classroom practice. Teacher professional development focused on diversity, equity, and

inclusion—particularly as they relate to instructional materials—is a foundational step in this equity journey, so that all teachers develop shared knowledge, language, skills, and experiences to build upon. However, teacher leaders in Burbank USD shared that this can be challenging. Finding common ground can be a struggle, with some teachers arguing that the work is not necessary, while others argue that the work is happening too slowly.

Meeting participants broke into small groups to discuss steps and strategies districts can take to navigate the path forward with teachers.

Build Empathy in Teachers

Individual stories—from those of district leaders who experienced trauma as students to parents and students who deal with the trauma currently—can powerfully illustrate the threats to equity and the need to attend to the well-being of all community members. Creating spaces for students to share their stories with teachers about their trauma resulting from non-inclusive, harmful materials encountered in the classroom could help to build empathy in teachers and change mindsets.

Heed Formal Systems and Labor Processes

Conversations and decisions about equity can be emotional and controversial, and some stakeholders may seek to stall or thwart equity-focused efforts. Districts put their approaches at risk if they circumvent established guidelines for decision-making. Any district taking on the work of changing curricular materials and offering teacher professional development should therefore take care to follow formal systems and processes such as involving the teachers' union and examining teachers' contracts to ensure compliance with collective bargaining agreements. One meeting participant stated, "It is necessary to work within the structures in place with plenty of transparency and communication. You cannot drop surprises on teachers."

Attend to a Variety of Subject Areas

While the conversation in the district began with the issue of novels in English classrooms, growing teacher mindsets and knowledge extends beyond teachers who teach English/language Arts. One student shared an incident in her health class as an example: "The teacher was sharing statistics about different groups and the teacher said that gay men have the highest rate of AIDS. My gay friend talked about how it made him feel to hear that. It is irresponsible to put that statistic out there without also stating that there was neglect during the AIDS crisis or explaining the historical bias behind these statistics because then students will develop their own mistaken understandings." District efforts to address student trauma in classrooms and expand the set of perspectives to which they are exposed should address curriculum and pedagogical practices across content areas.

Addressing Hate Speech to Reduce Trauma and Foster Healing

Incidents of hate speech on school campuses and in the broader community inflict trauma on students and threaten to undermine an environment in which all members of the school community feel welcome and have opportunities to thrive. Guidelines around language use invite complex discussions around student identity and agency, and the discussions about them can create space for learning and community building. Students in Burbank have played leadership roles in framing and advancing important conversations in this area by planning schoolwide assemblies to educate peers and teachers about hate speech, specifically using the n-word. Meeting participants listened to a panel of students sharing their experiences with hate speech on campus to help district and school leaders consider the ways in which students and educators set expectations for and respond to violations of respectful and affirming language use.

Listen to and Validate Students' Experiences

Throughout the meeting, student participants shared the importance of feeling heard and validated when incidents of racism and hate speech occur. Students also commented that they have too many experiences of teachers ignoring the hate speech they hear in their classrooms and in the hallways, and that it makes them feel invisible and worthless. One student noted, "I don't expect my administrators and teachers to solve racism with one conversation, but I do expect them to acknowledge that it happened." Another participant described his son's experience the first time a teacher acknowledged hate speech that was directed at him, and that it was so meaningful and impactful to not be ignored. These experiences suggest that educators play an essential role in combatting hate speech by acknowledging and addressing what they observe and what they hear from students.

Create Safe, Positive Spaces and Experiences

Hate speech and the use of the n-word can threaten safe spaces for learning and growing because they create traumatic experiences for students. Insights during the meeting also emphasized the importance of recognizing that creating safe spaces extends beyond the use of racialized language. For example, bathrooms on campuses can be especially unsafe spaces for trans students. One possible solution suggested during the meeting is to ask staff to wear badges that identify themselves as adults who are willing to stand at the bathroom door; doing so can help students feel safer.

In the face of trauma, it is also important to not only remove negative experiences but also actively foster safe and positive spaces. One student poignantly shared, "Creating safe spaces isn't just about creating a lack of negative experiences but an abundance of positive spaces and experiences. It's not always the negative things, but the lack of positive things. Saying you're not taking up space, but that you're beautiful." This can be done by intentionally hiring staff to match the demographics of the student body in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The students expressed the importance of representation numerous times and emphasized the impact of connecting with someone who shares something in common with you.

There are specific actions districts can take to foster these safe spaces. For example, district leaders can adjust data systems to include students' preferred names, which can be especially important in honoring the experiences of trans students who no longer call themselves by their birth name. Though they cannot legally change a student's name, this is one way in which the district can acknowledge the student's identity.

Inform Students and Educators

Students also mentioned the importance of acknowledging their bias, changing mindsets and being more inclusive. Students in the Black Student Union created a video informing the student body about differing perspectives on the use of the n-word, the history of the n-word, and why the n-word should not be used in schools²². External partners can also help districts build capacity and access expertise in these areas; in Burbank USD, partnerships with groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and Walk in My Shoes have offered guidance on the appropriate way to conduct teacher professional development and educate students.

Restorative Practices as a Pathway to Understanding and Healing

Restorative justice is a growing practice in schools around the country. It began as a strategy for repairing harm in a school setting through mediation, reflections, and making amends and rejoining the community rather than applying consequences through exclusionary disciplinary practices. Restorative approaches also recognize the long-standing inequities present in schools and society and are grounded in ameliorating those inequities by building safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments. Burbank USD has embraced these practices as a means of creating understanding and healing. Insights from Burbank USD leaders and other meeting participants helped to elevate lessons and considerations for using restorative practices as part of an equity-focused agenda.

Saying "I am Sorry" Can Help the Healing Process

Saying "I am sorry" is a powerful first step in restoring a relationship. As mentioned previously in the meeting, students are not looking for all their problems to be solved by one teacher or through one restorative justice circle. However, one district leader emphasized, there is a need to understand the power of apologizing to a student because it can help that student feel heard and validated: "When it comes to the victim, I can't express how important it was when we said, 'I'm sorry.' I remember several students breaking down because they haven't had anyone say that before." At the same time, this individual acknowledged how difficult it can be for teachers to say the words because they feel like they are apologizing for doing something wrong or that they are ceding their authority as a school or classroom leader. One message that might resonate with teachers is that saying, "I am sorry" is a way of apologizing for how the system failed the student.

²² The video also celebrated Black students' identities and culture, but in order to streamline the meeting, participants did not view that portion of the video.

Building Capacity to Do the Work of Restorative Justice Takes Time and Commitment

The work of restorative justice is a time-intensive endeavor that can take years to take root. One person whose district has engaged in this work for well over a decade emphasized that restorative justice cannot be seen as a separate program or initiative. Rather, educators need to see it as a philosophy integrated with other aspects of caring for and teaching students. Burbank USD is in the early stages of building the capacity of their staff to engage in restorative justice at each of its 22 school sites. Although the plan is to identify school leaders and train a restorative justice response team at each school, there is recognition that the work will take time because it also requires changing ingrained attitudes and behaviors.

Unintended Consequences can Result from Misguided Approaches to Restorative Justice

Restorative practices can offer powerful tools and mindsets for repairing harm, but they are fundamentally about building stronger relationships and shared purposes among members of a community. If educators employ strategies from restorative justice only in response to harm or conflict, the approach can turn into a punitive model. Moreover, restorative justice requires a willingness of all parties to engage in a healing process. If approaches are mandated or forced onto people, they can intensify the damage in the original case of harm. Engaging in the work successfully requires extensive preparation so that involved parties can engage in dialogue and healing.

Preparing and Supporting Teachers to Foster Equitable Practices

The importance of growing teachers' knowledge and empathy and changing teachers' mindsets came up numerous times throughout the meeting. Conversation during the discussion of instructional materials and the final session of the meeting focused on approaches to professional development to equip educators to bring a district commitment to equity to life in the school and the classroom.

Elements of Effective Professional Development

The session began with meeting participants reading through and discussing the elements that the literature has identified as components of effective professional development³. Researchers have found seven widely shared features Effective professional development: (1) is content focused, (2) incorporates active learning, (3) supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts, (4) uses models and modeling of effective practice, (5) provides coaching and expert support, (6) offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and (7) is of sustained duration. Meeting participants were then invited to listen to Burbank's journey of equity-focused professional development and think about how that aligns with these seven features.

³ https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_BRIEF.pdf

Burbank USD's Journey of Equity-Focused Professional Development

Burbank USD began delivering DEI-focused professional development to ensure that teachers and staff had a common language and approach to DEI. Because of the district context where there are only a handful of district administrators at the central office, the district is not a position to develop its own professional development curriculum. Therefore, they began working with *Facing History* to deliver teacher training. The district invited a panel of teachers to share some of the successes and challenges, and the tensions between the two, from their first year of equity-focused professional development.

Creating Time for Reflection and Interaction

Consistent with research that highlights the importance of reflection, teacher panelists thought the time provided during the session on professional development allowed them to reflect on their own personal equity stories which was valuable because “every teacher and staff member has a different baseline because they all came from different places and lived experiences.” However, at the same time, teachers thought that building in more time to engage and share stories with one another would help build empathy and accountability among teachers as they take on meaningful work. As discussed earlier in the meeting, taking the time to learn about personal context and why the work is important for everyone can contribute to a culture of accountability.

Proceeding with Urgency While Fostering Depth

Teachers also felt that the content delivered during the professional development session was current, timely, and on-point-- aligning with the first element of effective professional development. As a result, some teachers were so inspired that they wanted to immediately get started on DEI work that should have been taken on years ago. Nevertheless, districts must find ways to navigate the potential tension between moving urgently and fostering depth. As one teacher shared, “I’d rather go in-depth at a sustainable pace; set action plans and find ways to measure growth. That takes time. It doesn’t all have to be right now, this minute, because we can’t change everyone’s perspective now.”

Leadership at the District and School Site Levels is Critical

Teachers mentioned the criticality of the district leadership’s commitment to equity, stating that for real mindset shifts to occur, “it needs to come from the leadership down.” And while they felt supported and backed by district leadership, teacher panelists mentioned that not all school site leadership provided the same commitment to equity and support. One meeting participant stated, “It was wild to hear from the teachers that they got DEI training, and their site administrators did not even know about it.” In the absence of awareness and support at the site level, equity-focused work can fall prey to other priorities that administrators emphasize and for which their teachers are held accountable.

Building Capacity in the Face of Turnover

Meeting participants discussed an additional obstacle and consideration districts may face in planning for effective equity-focused professional development that was not discussed

by the teacher panel – teacher turnover. For any given training delivered in a school year, a cadre of teachers each year afterwards will not have experienced that training due to absences, departures, and new hires. This challenge is especially pronounced at a time when many districts are struggling to fill all open teaching positions. As a result, districts face the challenge of training up their teacher workforce every year in meaningful and impactful ways. One participant suggested tackling this issue during the hiring process by hiring individuals who are already equity minded. This district leader shared that they ask a lot of mindset questions in the first round of interviews, and if candidates do not get a passing score, they do not move on to the second round.

The Role of the Statewide System of Support in Facilitating Teacher Learning Around Equity

The conversation about teacher professional development closed out with a discussion about the role of the state in facilitating teacher learning around equity. Meeting participants acknowledged the tension in a potential state role. On the one hand, policy solutions and the policymakers who design them often seek evidence of progress in a short period of a time to fit a two-year reelection cycle. On the other hand, participants suggested that designing a system of support for teacher professional development that is intentional and has a continuous improvement feedback loop built in but will take years to accomplish. The tension between these positions comes from an urgency to meet students' needs in real time, while also considering long-term sustainability. But sustainability is a complex issue that takes courage to tackle because it involves changing behaviors, belief systems, and practices.

DEI in the Current Political Context

The meeting began with discussions about the importance of understanding the context in which schools, districts, and students operate, and that this context can determine the path forward in DEI work. Throughout the meeting, however, the importance of understanding the current political context in which schools and districts operate was also recognized. As schools and districts across the country work to address systemic racism and embrace inclusive mindsets, conservatives have taken steps to constrain how teachers talk about race in the classroom and how districts fight systemic racism. Debates over critical race theory have divided communities and led to shifts in the degree to which districts can implement DEI work. As an example, one school district described an active lawsuit filed by a high school religious club in response to the district's decision to revoke the club's charter after it required club officers to take an oath stating that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman. The religious club filed the lawsuit against the district superintendent and the school principal, arguing that they are being discriminated against for their religious beliefs and are not being afforded the same protections as other campus clubs, such as the Satanic Club. Meeting participants commented on the implications of districts operating in this political context, and on the importance of districts being clear about the values they are committed to when fighting for equity. They also noted that pursuing DEI in the current political context can create untenable conditions that deter educators from continuing in the profession. When pursuing equity feels like a political minefield—in which committed adults face resistance from parents and community

members and feel their very jobs may be at risk—attracting and retaining teachers and administrators becomes a growing challenge. Comments throughout the meeting suggested that consistent and unequivocal commitment and support from senior district leaders is critical to maintaining forward progress under these circumstances.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet again in the fall of 2022. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to share 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.