



California Association of African-American
Superintendents & Administrators

Lessons Learned: Resources for Championing Equity

A briefing from the California Association of African-American Superintendents & Administrators (CAAASA) and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) on advancing education for Black students

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The History of CAAASA's Professional Learning Network

The California Association of African-American Superintendents & Administrators (CAAASA)'s statewide Professional Learning Network (PLN) began in the Fall of 2017, with the generous support of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). The CCEE is a statewide leader whose mission is to deliver on California's promise of quality, equitable education for every student. As the statewide agency charged with assisting Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) in need of support, CCEE provides universal, targeted, and intensive supports and resources for local LEAs, often working in collaboration with community based nonprofit organizations. The CCEE was established by the California State Legislature and Governor to advise and assist school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools (LEAs) achieve the goals and objectives in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). It was created as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation that redesigned California's school funding formulas to ensure that there would be sufficient support for students who required additional resources to ensure their success. The CCEE works with partners like CAAASA and its PLN members to transform public education, so every student is inspired and prepared to thrive as their best self in the world.

The goal of the CAAASA PLN is to identify the inequities experienced by African American students in California K-12 schools and to address them through a systems-change approach. The CAAASA PLN has worked over the past five years to surface and share best evidence-based practices that improve the educational outcomes of African American students. We aim to uncover the policy, practice, and performance that most effectively address systemic problems and lead to improved student outcomes. Our PLN member counties and districts are as follows:

County Offices of Education

- Napa
- Los Angeles
- San Diego

Unified School Districts

- Pittsburg
- Fresno
- Lynwood
- Compton

From 2017 to 2019, our PLN was led by the late Edwin Javius, the founder and CEO of EdEquity, and a professional development consultant and group facilitator with long experience in educational equity. Javius led our group through a root cause analysis across several key areas to determine the issues at the heart of today's inequitable outcomes for African American and other students of color in California's K-12 public schools. These focus areas were:

- Quality of Instruction
- Internal /External Politics
- Racial Bias / Belief System
- Leadership (Site & District)
- System Structure

After two years of inquiry, including rapid cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act, regular site visits to middle and high schools, and intensive data analysis per LEA, CAAASA published “Equity in Action,” which reported on our first two years of findings and provided recommendations specific to system structures, funding, pedagogy, leadership and the use of data in promoting more equitable learning environments for underserved students of color. CAAASA then convened a Bridge PLN with the same membership that convened in the 2019-2020 school year with the facilitation of Pamela-Jo Wilson, a veteran educator and leader who served as Assistant Superintendent of the Murrieta Valley Unified School District. The PLN’s work under Wilson looked closely at the role of LCAPs in realizing equity shifts and considered shifts in LCAP design and implementation to make it a more effective tool in reaching African American students specifically.

The Reunion as the CAAASA-CCEE Working Group

During the onset of the pandemic, CAAASA worked closely with the CCEE to respond to the crisis conditions in the field of education with professional development resources and forums and venues for information sharing and support. PLN members, including our three county offices, were active in this response, co-developing resources with CAAASA. In late 2021, CAAASA had the opportunity to re-convene the original seven LEAs, including their superintendent leadership, for an in-depth discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our schools, our students, their families, and teaching staff and school site, district, and county leadership. We have been led in this work by Dr. Alicia Montgomery, Executive Director of the Center for Powerful Public Schools. We continued these important discussions throughout the Spring of 2022, recording conversations and interviews on video for CCEE highlight reels and future resource development. Each of our LEAs provided highlights of their individual trajectories, reflecting on the enormous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their anonymized problem of practice summaries, including data findings, are as follows:

Districts

1. One of the CAAASA PLN districts (an urban district with total enrollment of approximately 70,000 and about 100 school sites) had success in the first two years of the PLN with a summer literacy program explicitly aimed at African American students. The goal of the program was full literacy by age 9. District staff devoted significant resources to customized family and community outreach to African Americans and also recruited African American teachers. The program was a big success: student attendance was high, and **participants advanced one or more reading levels in just five weeks**. And the program had another benefit: it increased engagement among African American parents and families, which had not been the norm for the district. These parents established an African American Academic Acceleration (A4) Task Force, which publicly highlighted issues of disproportionality for African American students. In 2020, the school board unanimously adopted the recommendations of the African American Academic Acceleration Taskforce. In terms of the literacy program, the success of the summer cohort led the district to offer a mid-year weekend literacy group and double the size of the summer program. The pandemic brought big challenges including high rates (45%) of chronic absenteeism among the district’s African American students, who make up 8% of the total student body. Still, **English Language Arts (ELA)**

outcomes as captured by 2020-2021 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) testing held steady for African Americans students, with **0.5% increase in students meeting or exceeding standards and the percentage exceeding standards growing by 1%**.

2. In a suburban school district with an African American population of 16%, where many African American families have relocated in recent years, district leadership utilized a system of Early Warning Indicators (EWIs) to identify students in need of support within a cohort of 3rd grade African American boys. The district then assessed how targeted supports to these students were affecting their progress. Within one academic year, 55% of students identified through EWIs demonstrated significant academic growth. At the point the cohort students were in 5th grade, the district saw the impact of its Expanded Learning and Summer Learning enrichment programs with **72% of the cohort showing an increase in their ELA knowledge** during the academic year. As this cohort entered middle school amid the pandemic, the district saw half the students leave the district and saw evidence of academic declines for the remaining students in the 2019-2020 school year. **For 2021-22, the cohort has rallied with 70% showing strong in-person attendance and only one student not meeting ELA standards.**
3. An urban school district with largely low-income students invested in professional development for both principals and teachers in Cultural Proficiency and Trauma-Informed Practices. **After training, 61% of participants demonstrated increased capacity to promote an equitable, positive school climate and intervene when racial discrimination arises.** As the work of our PLN continued, this district pursued professional development strategies focused on retention and support of its African American and Latinx male teachers. The district began supporting a group of male teachers of color to engage in professional development in an affinity space at one district high school and has expanded the program to middle and elementary schools. **More than 90% of participants in the high school pilot have found the groups to be effective in supporting their teaching practice and the network expanded by 75% in its first two years.** More than half of the participants, who work in pairs, choose to meet with their counterpart outside of formal meetings of the group.
4. In another urban district, where African Americans are the second largest student group, district leadership utilized YouthTruth Surveys, Healthy Kid Surveys, and Empathy Surveys to isolate and address issues of school climate. The district used the survey data to direct the district's Equity Department; form new non-profit partnerships; and to provide multiple layers of parent and student engagement. **In the first year of our PLN, 100% of African American seniors graduated and attended either a two-year or four-year college or entered the military.** The pandemic has greatly impacted student trajectories, yet the district's overall graduation rate remains above 90% and over 94% of American students are graduating. The district's board has unanimously passed a resolution officially establishing an African American Parent Advisory Group and **close to 40% of African American graduates are going directly to a four-year college.**

County Offices of Education

5. In a rural county office of education, the school district with the highest population of African American students explicitly set an improvement target in their LCAP to reduce suspensions of African American students. **It has since reduced suspensions of African American students by approximately 30%.** In addition, the district now regularly breaks out metrics in their LCAP by all significant demographic groupings and targets the closure of outcome gaps identified. The county office continues to support equity efforts at this district and others showing disproportionate outcomes by race.
6. The county office with the largest population of African American students statewide has committed resources to dedicated equity personnel including a Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and a Coordinator of Equity, Access and Acceleration. **The office works closely with research institutions, drawing connections between educational studies and their subjects as the basis for ongoing professional development efforts.** Initiatives include a dedicated website for supporting African American students, a Community of Practice engaging the 14 districts with the largest enrollment of African American Students in the county, and four-session professional development series designed to establish African American Parent Advisory Councils (AAPACs) as a vehicle to empower parents and community members to join the conversation on school leadership and equitable practices and policies.
7. In an urban county with a 13% African American student population, the county has partnered with a nonprofit organization to provide a school specifically for homeless students under the umbrella of the Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS). Nearly a quarter of the school's students are African American or multiracial. **The 2019-20 and 2020-21 and graduation rate for the school was 93.8%. Also noteworthy and despite COVID, the graduation rates for court schools increased from 41.8% in 2018-19 to 93.9% in 2020-21; community schools 37.2% in 2018-19 to 79.1%; and school site solely devoted to foster youth increased its graduation rate from 76% in 2018-19 to 92.9% in 2020-21 (the statewide average is 86.8%).** These gains were the result of intentional investment to build socially conscious leadership, create asset-based systems, integrate culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, provide spaces for family and community voices, and nurture student agency and voice. The county has focused on professional development, recruitment and retention efforts for diverse teachers and leadership staff, an action plan for equity, and World Cafe listening spaces for critical communication between students of color, staff, and the community.

Focus Area #1: College Readiness and Success for African American Students

Review of the Data

There is good news around college readiness and access for Black students. Most Black students who graduate high school meeting A to G requirements, enroll in college within a year of finishing high school. In addition, 26% of California's adult Black population has a bachelor's degree. However, the disparities in academic success that occur throughout black students' K-12 experience continues through college. This is not surprising news as based

on the California Department of Education's DataQuest site, only 41% of Black students even graduate high school with all of the coursework necessary to enter California universities. Moreover, even if Black students wanted to take the necessary required courses for admission, only 57% have access to the full range of math and science courses necessary for college readiness, compared to 81% of Asian American students and 71% of white students (UNCF, 2020). According to Community College Review, only 22% of African American students enrolled in community college graduate or transfer to a four-year college. And when it comes to four-year experiences, only 2.5% of California's UC system is Black. Despite this small percentage of Black students attending this system, the gap in four-year graduation rates between Black students and white students at the CSU has increased from 21 to 25 percentage points in recent years.

Profile: Compton Unified

Compton Unified School District and its leader, Dr. Darin Brawley, shared with our PLN participants some wonderful successes: districtwide, 90% of its high school students are completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the college acceptance rate among its students is 84%. This in a district that had a suspension rate over 10% when Dr. Brawley began his tenure (it's now down to 3%). The work to get to this point has been multifaceted and it has started young. Strategies that staff cited as contributing to Compton's college readiness outcomes include:

- Heavy investment in wellness centers in elementary schools
- Mentorship for African American students, especially in 4th grade, 6th grade, and again in middle school and high school
- Addressing chronic absenteeism with a door-to-door, face-to-face approach
- Offering 24/7 learning platforms so students and parents can engage even if a student is out ill or must be home
- A district parent advisory committee and committees at every school site, so parents can be educated about issues of academic, social, and financial preparation for college and also seek support around the process from staff
- Drastically reduced the student to counselor ratio. Counselors in Compton are now at 284 students to 1 counselor versus the average California ratio of 527 to 1 counselor. Reduced ratios allow counselors to get students on the right track for A-G completion and encourage students to complete at least 15 A-G courses to be competitive for the UC system. In addition, there's a higher education coordinator at each high school in the district.
- Compton's successful lawsuit, in partnership with advocacy organizations, to get the UC system to drop the SAT, which was providing an unfair advantage to wealthy, white students. Scholarship consideration was also removed, as students with high SAT scores were eligible for additional financial aid.
- Incentivizing high schools to increase their FAFSA completion rate with a \$30,000 prize that schools could invest however they like.
- Offering 16 dual-enrollment courses with area community colleges and ensuring that all students including immigrant students (whether born in the US or not) have equal access to these courses. Compton Unified advocacy in the space has afforded this sort of dual enrollment access for immigrant students statewide.

- Targeting for additional support coursework that is holding students back from A-G completion, such as world languages (ensuring enrollment, tutoring, etc.)
- Annual Black Student Expo, College Fairs, and virtual college tours for 9th graders
- Dedicated department of Black School Achievement (BSA) providing systemwide support and evidence-based training from experts such as Morehouse College professor and sociologist Dr. Bryant Marks and culturally responsive teaching specialist Dr. Sharroky Hollie.

Field Guide

We invite you to launch **CAAASA Field Guide #9: Preparing African American (and Other Students of Color) for College**. These online learning modules provide comprehensive professional development tools in an array of subject areas. Guide #9 is one of 12 in [CAAASA's Lifting our Voices Field Guides series](#), which are designed to make our post-COVID educational adjustment both possible and successful by capitalizing on the lessons learned in 2020 and 2021. We hope you will explore the guide and consider using it yourself and sharing it with your colleagues in the field.

Focus Area #2: Digital Access

Review of the Data

One thing the past two years during emergency COVID instruction has revealed are inequities existing for students and families around technology and internet access. The LA Times reported (June, 2022) a four percent gap in internet access between Black and White families. In addition, they reported only 15% of Black families have access to a laptop. The majority of internet access for those without laptops occurs through phones. A survey by United Way Greater Los Angeles revealed students are most concerned with taking the technology usage encountered during COVID into the physical classroom. Over the last two years, many districts moved quickly to provide technology to families, but some fell short by about 20% of their student population.

Profiles: Los Angeles and San Diego County Offices

In Los Angeles County, it is estimated that approximately 365,000 households lack broadband Internet service. The disproportionate impacts are mostly located in lower income communities and among populations that are predominately Black and Latinx. Several federal, state and county initiatives are underway to address the crisis, yet digital inequities persist in both rural and urban areas. A computer and reliable internet services are essential to accessing education, employment opportunities, healthcare services, financial resources, and commerce. In San Diego County, similar issues became urgent in March 2020. Both districts worked side by side with fellow public agencies and internet service providers to form public-private partnerships to address the crisis. San Diego connected 77,000 students in the wake of the pandemic working with Verizon and Cox as providers. In Los Angeles, the County office utilized funds allotted from the County board of Supervisors to distribute 11,000 iPads, 36,000 Chromebooks, and 32,000 Hot Spots via 55 school districts. Distribution at the height of the pandemic included drive through events at locations like Dominguez High School in Compton. The LA County

office has continued efforts in this arena, obtaining additional funds from the board of supervisors to address ongoing shortfalls. Both Los Angeles and San Diego COEs provided best practices and lessons learned with respect to digital access and equity:

- Be aware of families fears and barriers faced with respect to immigration in terms of enrollment processes
- Consider financial and banking barriers. Not all caregivers have a bank account or credit card. They may not be prepared to sign a contract, even if the cost is minimal
- Once students are connected, it's important that your teaching staff know how to effectively handle and integrate technology into their teaching practice. You must provide ongoing professional development in this space. Technologies and interfaces evolve.
- Young people are native digital creators. Take advantage of this, especially with respect to the arts. When students create their own reels, music mixes, podcasts, etc. they become invested in the learning process. They need to see their work reflected in their learning environment.
- Provide virtual counseling sessions.
- Integrate online platforms across home and school, so students are using the same tools and getting practice at school for what they'll need to do on their own at home and vice versa.
- For younger grades, consider quality online literacy platforms such as Footsteps2Brilliance.
- Provide parents and students with trainings regarding online safety and norms. Create a culture of online safety in your school community. Everyone should know the rules for social media and boundaries between adults and children/teachers and students while also understanding what contact is appropriate and necessary for school.
- Once a family is issued a device, it's not forever. The transaction should be the beginning of a back-and-forth relationship between the school and family. The family may need training on how to use the device and relevant apps, support in updating software, and assistance when the device needs replacement.
- If you are issuing laptops to students for the first time, consider investing the time and resources to teach them touch typing skills. Most students have been texting with their thumbs alone.

Field Guide

We invite you to launch **Field Guide #3 School Re-Engagement: In-person and Hybrid Learning**, part of [CAAASA's Lifting our Voices Field Guides series](#).

Focus Area #3: Family Engagement

Review of the Data

Now more than ever parents have been seen as a partner in educating students. And when it came time to go back to school physically, two out of three Black parents said they did not want to send their children back to school. While many cited concerns about COVID as a factor, 43% of those respondents who kept their children

home said they were concerned about bullying, racism, and low academic standards for Black children at school. Districts like LAUSD have lost a large percentage of students due to students and families simply not feeling welcomed and included at school. According to Education Next, a journal published by Harvard, in February 2021, months after many schools had reopened nationally, low-income Black and Latino students were still much more likely to be receiving fully remote instruction than higher-income white children. In many cases, schools serving students of color were slower to re-open. In other cases, fear of the virus, anxiety about returning students to a discriminatory environment, and other issues impacted the choices of parents of color: Black parents were 19 percentage points less likely than white ones to choose in-person learning when the option was available. Latinx parents were eight percentage points less likely.

Profiles: LEAs Share Success Strategies

CAAASA's PLN members including Lynwood, Fresno, and Pittsburg unified school districts and Napa County Office of Education gave this issue much consideration. Each saw the national trendlines reflected in their own LEAs with much reduced in-person enrollment, especially for students of color. Below are the successful strategies and best practices they recommend:

- Families engage when they feel safe and appreciated and see their student uplifted. Remember to keep messages asset-based. A counselor telling a student “you can’t go to college” is very damaging and turns the student and their family away from the school. Never criticize or cut down a student’s aspiration. Help them move toward it.
- Consider hiring former students or recent graduates to assist in reaching out to families and supporting your engagement programming.
- Don’t let the first personal phone call or message be when there’s a problem. Proactively reach out to each African American parent or caregiver and introduce yourself. Say what you’ve noticed about their student and what you’re excited about in the learning to come. One county’s community school program contacts every family weekly to check in, offer support, and provide progress updates. They have found this practice to be very productive in terms of keeping families engaged and students attending school.
- Look to community organizations, government agencies, and businesses to partner with your LEA around events and family engagement strategies.
- Follow the money. What agencies are getting federal, state, or local funds? If their mission relates in any way to school age students, your LEA should be connected with them, e.g., Department of Public Health, Housing, Child Welfare, etc. Make sure agency leadership knows your LEA and has heard the voices of your students firsthand. Build relationships and consider how you can partner more meaningfully.
- Consider academic programs such as Springboard Collaborative that use family engagement as part of their strategy. (Springboard helps parents support their students’ literacy development at home.)
- Don’t overlook faith-based organizations (who meet regularly) and street teams (who provide face-to-face interaction) in reaching out to your demographic. In Fresno, the “Street Saints” were instrumental in connecting with parents who became part of the African American leadership council.
- Incorporate direct “in real life” strategies where possible. In Napa County, teachers and principals took lawn chairs to safely visit outside with hard-to-reach families during COVID.

- Provide capacity building for parents (how to advocate for your student, speak to your priorities for LCAP, present at a school board meeting, etc.), which proved successful in Fresno. Also consider the parents' needs and provide resources they could use as a parent or personally (i.e., brain science, self-care practices, practical cooking, resume drafting, how to find a better job, etc.)
- Consider inviting parents to apply for paid work opportunities in your LEA, as appropriate
- Consider extending the emergency resources you developed for COVID. For example, Lynwood developed a districtwide mental health hotline where you could get a call back from a real person. This should always be an option for anyone in your learning community: student, teacher, parent, custodian, secretary, etc.
- Have systems that alert counselors and staff to get ahead of problems. For example, the E-wise system employed in Lynwood. It helps monitor for A-G completion, roots out bad trends in terms of grading. Low grades can cause families to just turn off and give up. Try to avoid this outcome. On the county-wide level, data analytics platforms such as DataZone can provide real time early warning dashboards that county, district, and school-site staff can all access simultaneously. Staff must then coordinate responses.
- Be a resource hub for what your families need. During COVID, Pittsburg pivoted quickly, providing concrete resources (food, tech, testing, etc.). Let this be a model for your regular operation. Look to community schools and their approach. Be the place families can go for health resources, learning resources, social connections, etc. School should be joyful for everyone involved!

Field Guide

We invite you to launch **Field Guide #6 Enhancing Parent Engagement for Student Success**, part of [CAAASA's Lifting our Voices Field Guides series](#).

Call to Action: The Five Most Important Things You Can Do to Advance Equity

Policymakers, district officials, local educators, and students, families, and community members—each of these stakeholders should be aware of at least five things they can do right now to realize equity in our schools. The CAAASA PLN is committing to and sharing out the following Call to Action:

Policymakers

1. At that state level, funds should only be given to projects and initiatives that use data at all levels—district, school, classroom—disaggregated by all student groups (not just LCAP groups). Reporting success, or lack thereof, also needs to be disaggregated.
2. Update curriculum standards and require publishers to create materials that represent our children and affirm cultural and linguistic diversity.

3. Explicitly communicate that dedicating resources, staff, funding, etc., to target specific student groups who are not being well served by the system is not only allowable, but is likely necessary to address inequitable outcomes. Too many local educational agencies (LEAs), both county offices and districts, seem to believe that services targeting Black students cannot be counted towards contributing to increased and improved services in the LCAP. If the data says that an LEA is not meeting the needs of their Black students, then that is exactly where they should be targeting resources in their LCAP.
4. Embed equity principals in teacher preparation programs, ensuring that curricula covers applying an equity lens, culturally competent pedagogy, working with diverse student groups and families, etc.
5. As you craft new policy, build it on foundational structures such as LCAP, which requires stakeholder input. As you set new strategies in place, how are our educational partners (administrators, teachers, families, students) involved in the development of the plans? Where are their experiences reflected?

District Officials

1. Invest in the infrastructure and professional development necessary to make real-time disaggregated data readily available and actionable at all levels of the organization, and establish the expectation that inequitable outcomes in the data will be explicitly discussed and addressed.
2. Purchase and utilize the 5 labs program to extract data differentiated by student group to identify A-G on-track status, grades, and target the needs, then develop programs to address needs.
3. Be courageous enough to set explicit goals for your student groups that are not being served well. All district efforts do not have to serve all students, or only students based on their LCAP categories.
4. Promote student, parent, and community advocacy and voice. District (and county office) level staff can model promising practices, such as organizing and promoting listening circles, world cafés, and student panels.
5. Following the English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) and District English Learner Advisory Committee (DELAC) model, create Black parent advisory committees at each school site and one at the district level.

Local Educators

1. Partner with organizations who already offer the service you want to provide (tutoring, mentorship, extension, enrichment, etc.).
2. Create and participate in a professional learning network to share your challenges, strategies, and successes in better serving Black students.
3. Provide multiple opportunities throughout the year to listen, hear, and apply the input of each educational partner (students, parents, teachers, administrators).
4. Change your mindset from training parents and families to learning from parents and families.
5. Use the highest quality curricula and books you can obtain, engage in professional development whenever possible, and seek in-classroom support from parents and community volunteers as needed to serve your students.

Students, Families, and Community Members

1. Find the advocacy group or space for you: Black Student Union Chapter, Black Parent Advisory Council, school board meeting, school community foundation, etc. and join it!
2. Ask your school to provide student outcome data (academic achievement, graduation rates, disciplinary rates, placements in special day programming, etc.) disaggregated by race.
3. Utilize feedback loops intended for students, families, and community members wherever they exist and request them where they are lacking. You should be able to hear from and share with teachers and administrators at all levels of the educational system (school principal, district staff and superintendent, county office officials, etc.).
4. Learn about legislative efforts to improve Black student experience and outcomes (i.e. Ethnic Studies bill) and consider testifying or organizing to support bills you believe in.
5. The district must have a plan based on student needs that details how they will advance equity in the district. Ask to read it.