



California Association of African-American  
Superintendents & Administrators



# EQUITY IN ACTION

California Association of African-American  
Superintendents and Administrators (CAAASA)

California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE)

Professional Learning Network (PLN):  
Project Report and Recommendations,  
March 2019



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The CAAASA Equity in Action Report is based on a two-year study identifying barriers and evidence-based solutions to improving the academic and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) outcomes of African American students in California. Through a grant awarded by California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators (CAAASA) convened several Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) as a Professional Learning Network (PLN). The Network engaged in a deep analysis and examination of the problem of why African American students are disproportionately targeted for discipline and are suffering low academic outcomes in California schools. The network was charged with the task of researching perceptions, pedagogies, and practices that have successfully impacted African American students' educational experiences.

Four school districts (Compton, Lynwood, Pittsburg, and Fresno) and three County Offices of Education (Los Angeles, Napa, and San Diego) participated in the Network over the course of the two-year project. This report records key findings of the Network's collective problem of practice: **to identify root causes of inequities and best practices** of the K-12 system as it impacts the educational outcomes of African American students. Driven by data from the California School Dashboard on graduation rates, academic outcomes, suspension rates, and more, each of the participating LEAs agreed to focus on this collective problem of practice within their district or county.

The report records preliminary findings of key areas that surfaced as barriers and solutions: Based on research from various studies and actual current district and county practices, the PLN members concluded that the root causes that contribute to poor educational outcomes for African American students, include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Insufficient Teacher Qualifications
- External & Internal Politics
- Racial Bias/ Belief System
- Leadership (Site and District)
- System Accountability

The report has identified practices that are currently being implemented in the LEAs that have shown evidence of a positive impact on educational outcomes. Successful practices include:

- Implementing Early Warning Systems
- Incorporating culturally conscious teaching principles into SEL
- Developing a literacy program specifically for African American students.

The report highlights these practices among many others. Lastly, the Equity in Action Report suggests recommendations to further study institutional and instructional best practices to ensure that California K-12 public schools are empowering African American students and providing them with an equitable and excellent education.

- Michael Watkins, President, CAAASA

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The goal of the CAAASA PLN is to **identify the root causes of inequities** experienced by African American students in California K-12 schools and to **address the inequities by providing and promoting solutions through a systems-change approach.**

### CAAASA and CCEE Collaboration

The California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators (CAAASA) responded to a request for proposals from the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) in order to facilitate a **statewide learning network** focused specifically on the lowest performing ethnic group in California K-12 schools: African American students. The CCEE awarded CAAASA a grant to carry out the PLN with a shared understanding that, as Augustus F. Hawkins, the first black politician west of the Mississippi River elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, said: "Black children are the proxy for what ails American education in general. And so, as we fashion solutions which help black children, we fashion solutions which help all children."

### Project Rationale - What is the Challenge African American Students Face in California Schools?

Despite the fact that **African American students** are not directly identified as a priority group under California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), educators know from the California School Dashboard that African American students demonstrate the most disproportionality of any ethnic group in the state as identified **by multiple state accountability measures.** We know that only 20% of African American students meet or exceed state standards in math, and only 32% meet or exceed English language arts standards. Those are the lowest percentages for any ethnic group in the state.

While suspension rates for all students have decreased statewide in recent years, African American students are still suspended at the highest rate—a rate 3-to-17 times as high as other ethnic groups. In addition, African Americans drop out of high school at the highest rate of any ethnic group in the state (20% drop out). Nevertheless, African American students are entering California schools with potential to master reading, writing, and mathematical skills. As cited in federal reports addressing academic achievement of African American students, when pedagogy is culturally responsive, positive teacher-student relationships are formed, and a racially safe learning environment and high expectations are present in schools, African American students thrive and demonstrate exceptional learning and increased educational outcomes. The CAAASA Professional Learning Network sought to explore, examine, and document the conditions that will increase the learning experience and educational outcomes for African American students. Moreover, the PLN was diligent in identifying the institutional and instructional barriers that prohibit educational success for African American students.

*Courageous ownership of the inequities in our system is a prerequisite for creating equity for each and every student. —PLN Participant*

From a funding perspective, there is an unfortunate misperception that districts are legally restricted from directing Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) supplemental and concentration grant funds toward African American students as a discrete group, because they are not specifically targeted by the LCFF formula. However, all LCFF funds are **unrestricted**. The intent of the LCFF is to promote equity, and to set priorities at the local level, based on student needs, using data across multiple measures. Clearly the data show that resources must be directed towards the needs of African American students in order to achieve more equitable outcomes.

### CAAASA's Statewide Learning Network

CAAASA intentionally designed its PLN to be a statewide network composed of both district and county offices of education administrators, in order to better undertake a systems-change approach and identify institutional barriers that exist in the California public school system. CAAASA carefully selected participating members of the PLN for their expertise, knowledge and commitment. All of their work is grounded in solid research and methodology. All CAAASA PLN participants are well positioned to implement policy changes that can have a profound impact on educational practice statewide for African American students. The CAAASA PLN network consists of:

#### County Offices of Education

- Napa
- Los Angeles
- San Diego

#### Unified School Districts

- Pittsburg
- Fresno
- Lynwood
- Compton



*I used to have surface-level knowledge of our disparities for African American kids. It wasn't something I was spending any time on. After participating in this Professional Learning Network, I have a much deeper understanding of the problems, and that they are not going to be addressed without intentional leadership*  
–PLN Participant

Over the course of the two-year project, the Network has been committed to meeting twice monthly throughout the school year: once in person and once via video conference, to identify a problem of practice and explore root causes using the California School Dashboard and multiple data points. Participants then developed continuous cycles of improvement to test the various practices and pedagogies to address the identified educational problem. During face-to-face meetings, the PLN was intentional in providing various ways to examine the problem of practice. PLN activities consisted of, but were not limited to:

- Examining federal and state reports on African American achievement and discipline
- Implementing improvement science methodology
- Considering student and parent voice through the Empathy Interview protocol
- Taking school Equity Walks
- Hearing district and county superintendents' perspectives.

Through collaborative work of the members, data analysis, and deep examination of processes within the members' district and/or county office, five key areas emerged to guide the PLN's work of exploring solutions that address the problem of practice for African American students:

1. Quality of Instruction
2. External & Internal Politics
3. Racial Bias & Belief Systems
4. Leadership–Site, District & County
5. System Structure & Accountability

The CAAASA PLN drew on the tenets of Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo's **Continuous Improvement Cycle** [Santiago Rincón-Gallardo Michael Fullan , (2016), "Essential features of effective networks in education," Journal of Professional Capital and Community, Vol. 1 Iss 1 pp. 5 - 22 ] in particular, and on the resources of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, such as The Six Core Principles of Improvement to pursue policy and practice changes that address the pernicious access and opportunity gap for African American students. The aforementioned research and methodology served as the foundation in critically examining barriers to success for African American achievement.

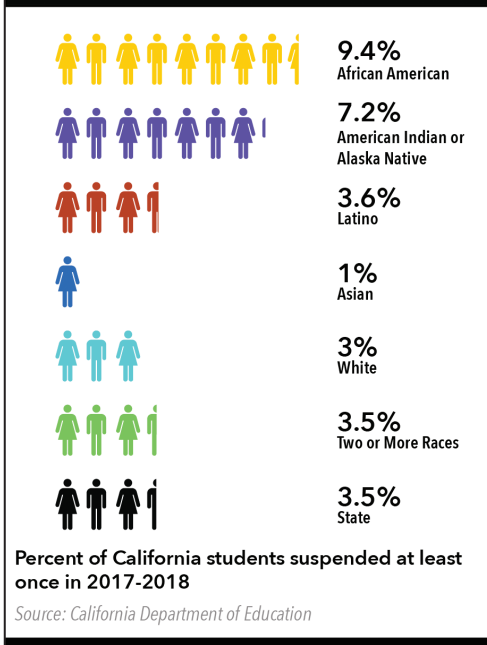
*My two-year journey with the CAAASA-CCEE PLN has been transformative from the perspective of revealing my personal unconscious biases related to educating students of color. I now know that it is incumbent on me as an equity-focused leader to accomplish systems change if we are going to close the opportunity gap for students of color, particularly African American students.*  
–PLN Participant

To gain multiple perspectives relative to the achievement of African American students, each PLN participant adopted a **problem of practice** to explore how their organization provides supports or actions for African American achievement. This approach provided insight into:

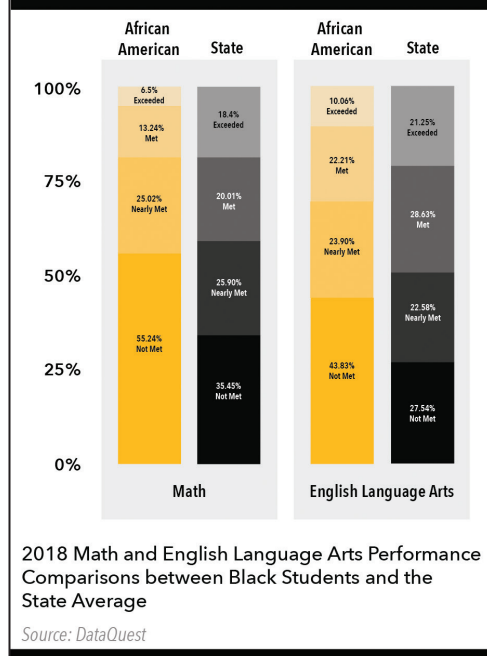
- System solutions
- Data identification
- District early warning processes
- Targeted literacy solutions
- Culturally responsive learning environments
- Positive racial identity through tiered student support
- Collaboration with local/community agencies as advocates for Court and Community Schools
- Courageous leadership at every level of the system
- Student discipline solutions through Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

As illustrated in the graphics to the right, the deep disparities experienced by California's African American students, both in disciplinary measures and academic outcomes, provided urgency to the PLN to fully understand the causes of the problem and implement effective solutions through our collective work.

## BLACK STUDENTS ARE MORE THAN THREE TIMES AS LIKELY AS WHITE STUDENTS TO BE SUSPENDED



## BLACK STUDENTS LAG IN MATH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PERFORMANCE



PLN participants engaged in **root cause analysis** using the Improvement Science Methodology. Within the Methodology, the members were taught to use tools such as:

- The fishbone diagram
- The empathy interview protocol
- The 5 Whys root cause analysis protocol
- Process Map
- Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle of Continuous Improvement

Throughout the PLN meetings and work process, participants would regularly **ground their inquiry informative data** from numerous sources including California State Dashboard data, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results, California Healthy Kids Survey, and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) accountability data points as well as other key indicators such as student's classroom grades, and records of attendance, suspension, and graduation. For instance, one participant used the district's **Early Warning Indicators (EWIs)** and Local academic assessments such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and iReady, as well as state-provided tools like CAASPP, to monitor the behavior and attendance of a specific student cohort in order to determine if interventions were working. The students were identified for the study cohort based in part on EWI data.

The goal of the PLN was to go beyond re-articulating the problems we already know are facing African American students daily in California's K-12 schools to **taking disruptive and effective action** to improve conditions for students now. Members identified specific issues (i.e. students not reading on grade level) and targeted a specific cohort for intervention: For instance, one district partnered with Springboard Collaborative to provide a summer reading program that addressed the chronic summer learning losses of elementary-grade African American students. When findings after year one of the PLN were positive—as they were in the case of this culturally responsive reading support program, where 83% of students who attended regularly advanced one or more reading levels in just 5 weeks—fellow PLN members adopted the practice.

At another Local Educational Agency (LEA), previously unrecognized shortcomings related to serving African American students were identified for the first time and administrators are now focused on **improving the learning conditions** specifically for this student group.

We also saw participants consider how best to coordinate multiple agencies in serving high-needs students, such as one urban county's strategy for Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS), where 13% of the student population is African American.

*Our system has to be better than our people, because people leave, but problems stay. Improvement and success should not depend on a single charismatic leader. We need a deeper analysis of the system and where within it we can build structural capacity. Does our system have checks and balances? Accountability? How are our plans addressing system issues instead of getting another program?*

**–PLN Participant**

## Successes of the CAAASA PLN

- In one large urban school district, African American students who participated in a summer literacy group **advanced one or more reading levels in just 5 weeks.** The program engaged African American educators and provided culturally responsive teaching. In response to the success of the summer cohort, the district has offered a mid-year weekend literacy group and is doubling the size of the summer program.
- In a suburban school district, where many African American families have re-located 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.**
- A large, urban 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.
- In a large County Office of Education where inequitable outcomes for African American students had not been prioritized as a problem, the County has now committed to and funded **a dedicated "Equity and Access Unit"** that has brought educational leaders to the table countywide to play a role in addressing problems and in identifying **a systems-approach to a Theory of Change.**
- In a county with very few African American students, county leadership engaged the district with the largest population of African American students in the county. After examining their data for African American students specifically, the district has developed **an explicit improvement target for African American suspension rates** in their LCAP.
  - 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 Juvenile Court and Community Schools (JCCS). Nearly a quarter of the school's students are African American or multi-racial. **More than 80% of the school's students are graduating high school, more than three times the rate of homeless students statewide.**

- In a large 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; with the result that in the 2017-18 school year, **100% of African American seniors graduated** and attended either a two-year or four-year college or entered the military.



*While we do need vastly more money for schools, money alone cannot solve this problem. We have to have the knowledge and political will to target funds where they make a real difference for students. We must use funds to build a better system: A better pipeline of teachers, better professional development, better teacher-student ratios, better curricula, better health and mental health supports, better food, greener campuses, more real books, more experiential learning for children, etc.*

**–PLN Participant**



## System

- 1) While dedicated equity units and staff, i.e. Student Equity & Inclusion Departments, Directors of Equity, etc. should be established and maintained, all staff and units in a county, district, or school-site office must collaborate with equity staff and units in order to achieve systems improvement.
- 2) Even when African American students make up a small proportion of a district or school site, it is important to examine their outcomes as a student group, because the academic failure of African American students is not limited to schools with predominantly African American populations. Often, disproportionality is present that is not identified through the Dashboard or other large-scale measures. All county, district, and school-site leaders should be aware of the status of their African American students so they may respond in a targeted manner.
- 3) Implement or incorporate an Educational Equity Certification into the teacher credentialing program and administrative credentialing program. Incorporate educational equity principles to renew credentials at every level in the system.
- 4) Implement Equity Summits in districts to review Equity Action Plans twice a year to find specific evidence of Plan implementation, successes, challenges, and needed support.
- 5) Implement Community Equity Walks to actively involve the community, parents, and caregivers to learn about and provide feedback to schools.

## Funding

- 6) Establish dedicated funding streams and structural mandates for the presence of equity staff and units in order to maintain equity services and work through retirements and personnel transitions.
- 7) Ensure that your county, district, or school is fully utilizing existing state and federal educational support structures as intended, i.e. LCAP, state-equity grants, County-provided professional development services, etc.

## Pedagogy

- 8) Equity interventions must be both externally focused practices that promote equitable classroom teaching and improved parent and family engagement, and internally focused on the culture and awareness within the county, district, and school-site administrative offices.
- 9) Major statewide developments in teaching practice, such as the growing emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), must be explicitly connected to specific student groups, including African American. Counties, districts, and schools should articulate how SEL efforts relate to racial equity goals.
- 10) Train all certificated and classified staff on the implementation of educational equity and culturally conscious practices and regularly assess progress.

## Leadership

- 11) Equity work is not just the responsibility of people of color and other marginalized groups. All administrative leaders, faculty, and staff members in our education system, irrespective of their personal identity, must be engaged in the work of making schools equitable.

## Data

- 12) The role of data should be to provide insight and prompt timely, accurately targeted interventions on the part of educators. Student academic outcome data should never be confused as a measure of student potential or used to limit student access to quality instruction or college and career readiness resources.
- 13) Whenever possible, the use of data should be geared toward early identification of problems and the provision of evidence-based interventions to address them, whether those problems relate to student learning and wellness, teacher preparedness and retention, the cultural proficiency of educational leadership, or the efficacy of family engagement efforts, etc.



Despite efforts from policymakers, state and local educational leaders, and courageous equity leaders, a great need remains to move from research to accountable actions as the next step in addressing the persistent problem of under-achievement of African American students. Many reports exist which address various barriers and solutions to the problem. As education researcher Ron Edmonds so eloquently stated, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it or not must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not done it so far."

The research and actions that need to continue are:

- Develop statewide data tools that allow educators and communities to easily access data to determine not just student performance, but also weaknesses and strengths of instructional practices.
- Implement a progress-monitoring system to quickly identify African American students needing intervention.
- Regardless of the demographics within a specific LEA, culturally conscious leadership and teaching professional educational practices are integral actions within the LCAP.
- Train governing School Board Members on the external and internal politics of institutional racism and its impact on Superintendents' ability to lead Educational Equity efforts.
- Push for LEAs to fund African American student achievement specifically through the LCAP.

CAAASA is committed to exploring and implementing best practices for African American students. CAAASA has recognized that critically examining current practices within the LEAs alone will not yield the acceleration of African American student achievement. Further research must focus strategically on eradicating institutional practices that overtly and covertly plague schools by maintaining the status quo. CAAASA, through initiatives such as its CCEE PLN, empowers the adults in California's educational system to act courageously to provide positive educational experiences and outcomes for African American students.



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Secretary



Dr. Mark Marshall  
Treasurer



Dr. Donald Evans  
Leadership Development



Dwight Bonds  
Executive Director

Founded in 1993, CAAASA is a non-profit organization whose mission is to address critical issues in education as they relate to African-Americans in California. The organization's primary purpose is to positively impact educational outcomes for K-16 African-American students and their families.

CAAASA is particularly concerned that our African-American and Latino students, as well as our underserved students, continue to fall below national norms of student achievement and performance measures. In addition, low graduation rates coupled with high dropout rates, the disproportionate over-representation of students of color enrolled in special education programs, and the high rate of school suspension and expulsion for our underserved students are critical concerns that must be addressed by California's education community.

We work closely with the California State Department of Education and other statewide organizations to address key educational issues. We also work with African-American administrators by providing training, mentoring and support for those members who are aspiring to become superintendents and/or advancing in other administrative careers. Our on-going activities are:

- **CAAASA Annual Statewide Professional Development Summit**, focusing on critical issues in educational policy. This conference attracts national leaders in educational equity (superintendents, district leaders, principals, teachers and more) who share ideas and experiences. The event provides opportunities to facilitate the implementation of strategies to empower African-American students to successfully matriculate through each level of their educational experience.
- **Annual Education Round-Up**, galvanizing superintendents, administrators, parents, educators, legislators, civil rights leaders, elected officials, and other community members

to identify and address key statewide education initiatives and/or concerns that impact African-American students.

- **CAAASA Health and Equity Leadership Institutes:** Founded in partnership with The California Endowment, CAAASA brings together superintendents and other key district leaders from around the state to better understand how issues of student social-emotional and physical health can impact equitable learning.
- **CAAASA Leadership Academy for Aspiring and New Superintendents: "Breaking The Glass Ceiling,"** held five times a year, focuses on professional development, including strategies to support career advancement and equity.
- **California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) Professional Learning Community**, focuses specifically on improving outcomes for African American students. The two-year project, which engages educational leaders in the study of best practices, is the only PLN statewide to focus exclusively on the experience of African American students.
- **Social Justice and School Climate Technical Assistance Project:** Developed with and supported by The California Endowment, this project works through County Offices of Education statewide to provide technical assistance and professional development training on equity interventions.

If you have additional questions, contact CAAASA Executive Director **Dwight Bonds** at **(818) 217-6310** or **dwightbonds@caaasa.org**.





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CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE  
FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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