Governance Brief

Educational Equity: The Need for Boards to Support Equity-Based Decisions

By Nicole Anderson with contributions from Manuel Buenrostro

Introduction

School boards play a key role in setting local education policy, and as such, have an important role in creating conditions within a school district or county office of education to support student success. Vital to those conditions is the ability of district and county office of education leaders to make equity-based decisions, recognizing that students and schools with higher needs require greater resources. Equitable education policies and practices ensure that all students have the opportunities they need to learn. In such systems, all students can thrive.

CSBA is committed to providing board members with assistance in promoting equity in their school districts and county offices of education. One way we are doing this is by producing tools, including a series of educational equity briefs to provide school board members with research-based information and resources to support equity-driven decisions. The series will focus on concepts that can help boards promote the implementation of equity-driven policies and practice, and guide the use of data and research to reveal and address opportunity and achievement gaps. This first brief in the series provides background on the issue of equity and the role of board members in supporting the concept in their local school districts and county offices of education. CSBA has also developed an Equity Policy (BP 0415) that is available to subscribers of CSBA's policy service (GAMUT Policy).

The Roots of Inequity in the U.S. Education System

The inequities in today's education system reach back to the beginning of the United States public school

In this brief you will find:

» Evidence supporting the need for equity, including examples of opportunity and achievement gaps;

» A description of shifts in California's education landscape, which present an opportunity to focus on educational equity;

» A discussion of the role of equity-driven boards, including the importance of defining equity; and

» Questions for board members to consider.

system—and there is a distinct connection between this history and our current reality. It is critical that we recognize that educational inequity is a symptom of societal inequities: racism, classism, sexism, and many other 'isms' that have an impact on our students and their families.

The history of public education in the U.S. is rooted in the belief that it is acceptable for some students to have greater opportunities than others. This is, in fact, a foundational idea in U.S. education, as evidenced in 1779 when Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track educational system, with different tracks, in his words, for "the laboring and the learned." Scholarships would allow only a select few of the laboring class to advance, Jefferson says, by "raking a few geniuses from the rubbish."[1] Vestiges of this view are manifested in our current school system—for example, through the disproportionate gaps persisting in excessive suspensions[2] and lack of access to Advanced

Placement/honors courses and courses meeting A-G requirements for students of color and in poverty.[3]

And despite federal statutes on segregation, we find many of our public schools today more segregated than ever. California has its own history of decisions that separate students in ways that curtail their ability to receive a quality education in which they can learn from peers of different backgrounds. For example, over half of Latino (56 percent) and nearly half of African American students (49 percent) attend schools where at least 75 percent of students are eligible for the free or reduced-priced meals program (the most common barometer for measuring poverty among student groups).[4] These high-poverty schools have more limited access to factors that create educational opportunities, including the most experienced teachers, 21st-century facilities, libraries, and other key resources (Figure 1).

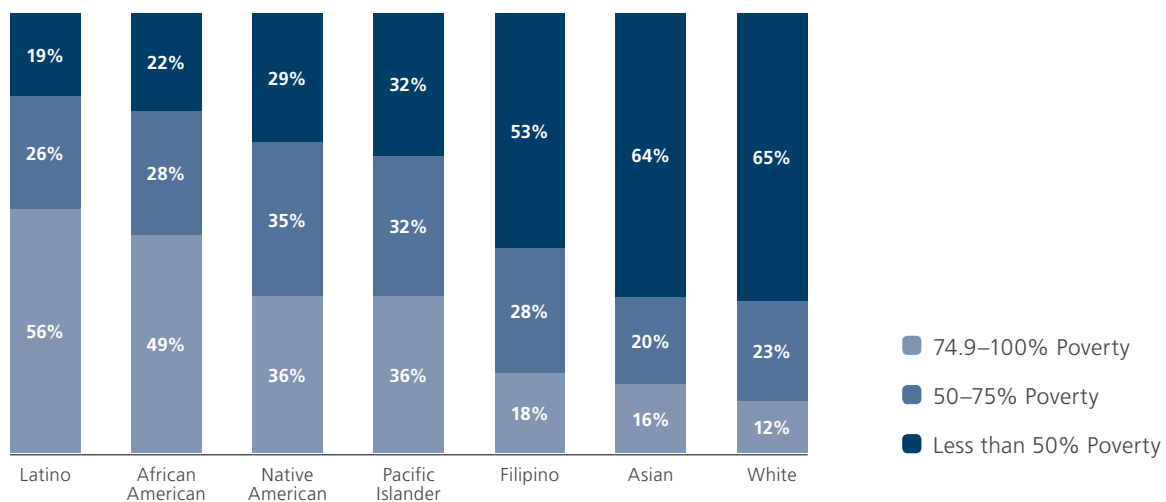## An Urgent Need to Focus on Equity: Opportunity Gaps

Research and data reveal numerous opportunity gaps among California students ranging from early literacy to access to college preparation courses. The intersection between race, poverty, disability, gender, and language provide a clear indication of systemic inequities that have a long history in U.S. public education. Very often, students of color and low-income students have more limited access to opportunities that can put them on a path to graduate from high school ready for college, career, and life success. Therefore, it is imperative that board members understand these opportunity gaps and how they are evident in their communities as a first step to making decisions that can help to close them.

CSBA's 2017 report, *Meeting California's Challenge: Key Ingredients for Student Success*, presented eight key factors for student success that would be available in an education system with Full and Fair Funding. In the same report, we documented gaps in opportunity for low-income students and students of color that include lack of access to several key educational opportunities such as:

» **A Rigorous, Well-Rounded, and Relevant Curriculum.** Students of color and low-income students are less likely to attend schools that offer rigorous courses. Even when such courses are offered, these students are under-represented in advanced STEM and AP courses.[5] They are also more likely to graduate from high school without meeting A-G requirements.[6] This under-representation is due to multiple factors, including few counselors who can advise students on courses and prerequisites, family experiences that may not include college preparation, and lack of the necessary preparation in earlier grades for more advanced courses in high school.

» **Academic Support to Enable Achievement.** Compared to all other states, California has the highest number of students per teacher, the second highest number of students per counselor, and the third highest number of students to total staff.[7] This means that access to an adult at school who can provide guidance and support

Figure 1: 2018-19 Enrollment by School
Proportion of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals

- 74.9–100% Poverty
- 50–75% Poverty
- Less than 50% Poverty

for education decisions is lacking for many California students, a fact that disproportionately impacts students whose parents are not able to provide this guidance. A gap also exists regarding other supports, such as enrichment activities, which are more difficult for economically disadvantaged students to access than their peers from wealthier backgrounds.[8]

» **Staff with the Skills, Competencies, and Knowledge to Promote Student Success.** Our highest-need students are most often in classrooms with the least experienced and prepared teachers. Low-income students and students of color are more likely to attend schools with more teacher turnover; underprepared and underqualified teachers; and staff absenteeism.[9, 10]

» **Early Support Services.** By age three, children from high-income families have double the vocabulary of same-age children from low-income families.[11] Moreover, only two in five California students have access to quality early education programs,[12] with low-income families more likely to attend lower quality programs.[13] This lack of access is the root of many inequities in the later grades—children who did not attend kindergarten are less successful as they move through elementary school. Those children are less likely to read proficiently by the third grade, and even more likely to drop out of high school.[14]

» **Education and Assistance for Families to Support and Guide Learning.** Parents or guardians care about their children's education. Nonetheless, parents or guardians with extensive education understand the system better, know what needs to be done in preparation for college, and more often have professional jobs that allow them the time to participate in school activities as well as the financial resources to invest in trips, learning experiences, and supports such as tutoring. All of this contributes to a positive association between student achievement and parents' level of education.[15] Gaps are also associated with income status (which is itself strongly associated with education level) and neighborhood characteristics.

» **Physical, Mental, and Environmental Health Supports.** Nearly one in three students ages 10–17 in California are overweight or obese,[16] a condition associated with missing more days of school, among other problems.[17] Moreover, nearly two-thirds of California students do not meet health and fitness standards in the fifth, seventh, and ninth grades.[18] Physical and mental health challenges are particularly prevalent among economically disadvantaged students, who are more often students of color. Children in poverty are more likely to suffer from asthma, heart conditions, hearing problems, digestive disorders, and elevated levels of lead in the blood.[19] These children are also more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress—and have lower levels of health insurance coverage and more limited access to quality health services to address these issues.[20]

» **Schools with 21st-Century Infrastructure and Technology.** A higher percentage of public schools in poor areas need repair than those in wealthier locales.[21] There is also more limited access to the internet[22] and teachers report more obstacles to using technology in low-income areas.[23] Another important infrastructure issue that impacts the health of students is access to a healthy water supply. While adequate water consumption has been associated with several health benefits and stronger student achievement,[24] aging lead water pipes are more common in the lowest-income neighborhoods or cities.[25]
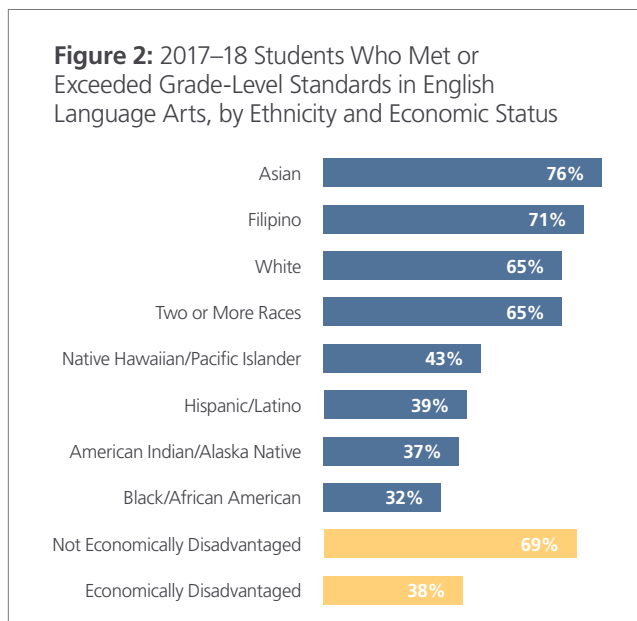
Impact of School Climate and Discipline

Disproportionate discipline is another gap that is evident between California's students of color and their peers. Students of color are suspended at disproportionately higher rates than White students, even for the same offenses. Students with disabilities are also suspended at rates much higher than their non-disabled peers—the same disproportionality exists for students who identify as LGBTQ. Gender also plays a role in whether a student will be suspended. Nationwide, more suspensions are given to males than females—males make up 66 percent of the students receiving a single out-of-school suspension and 74 percent of the students expelled.[26] In California, African American students are three times as likely to be suspended as their White peers (18 percent vs. 6 percent).[27] In some districts, the disparities are more profound. Variation in suspension rates among schools is largely due to the characteristics of the school and behavior of school personnel—schools with high suspension rates often have high student–teacher ratios, lower academic quality, reactive (as opposed to proactive) disciplinary programs, and ineffective school governance.

The Results of Opportunity Gaps: Achievement Gaps
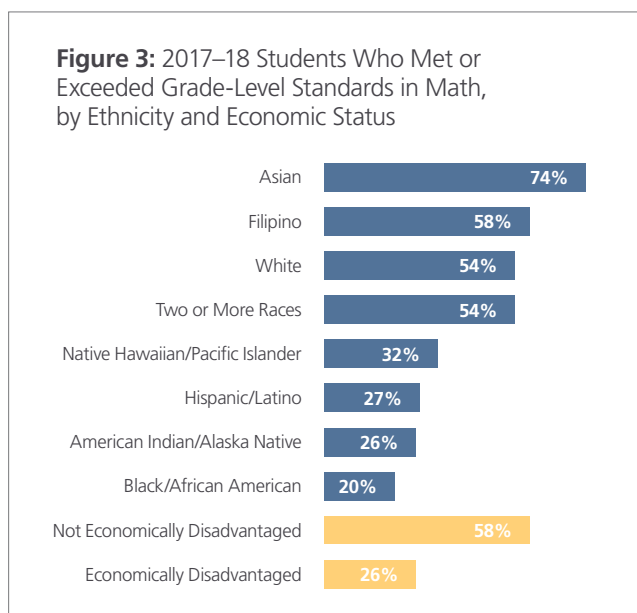
The lack of access to opportunity and the disproportionate impact of school discipline policies are major contributors to persistent academic achievement gaps. According to the 2017–18 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results in English language arts and math, a significant achievement gap persists between students of color and their White peers:

» **In English language arts**, there is a 33 percentage-point gap between African American students and their White peers, a 27 percentage-point gap for Native American students, and a 26 percentage-point gap for Latino students. The gap is 32 percentage points between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.[28]

Figure 2: 2017–18 Students Who Met or Exceeded Grade-Level Standards in English Language Arts, by Ethnicity and Economic Status

Group	Percent
Asian	76%
Filipino	71%
White	65%
Two or More Races	65%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	43%
Hispanic/Latino	39%
American Indian/Alaska Native	37%
Black/African American	32%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	69%
Economically Disadvantaged	38%

» **In math**, there is a 34 percentage-point gap between African American students and their White peers, a 28 percentage-point gap for Native American students, and a 27 percentage-point gap for Latino students. The gap is 32 percentage points between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students.[29]

Figure 3: 2017–18 Students Who Met or Exceeded Grade-Level Standards in Math, by Ethnicity and Economic Status

Group	Percent
Asian	74%
Filipino	58%
White	54%
Two or More Races	54%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	32%
Hispanic/Latino	27%
American Indian/Alaska Native	26%
Black/African American	20%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	58%
Economically Disadvantaged	26%

A gap also exists in high school graduation statistics. According to 2017–18 four-year adjusted cohort graduation data, 73 percent of African American students, 71 percent of Native American students, and 81 percent of Latino students graduated from high school, compared to 87 percent of White and 94 percent of Asian students.[30] However, despite the progress in high school graduation rates, there is a larger gap in preparation for entrance to a University of California or a California State University campus (exemplified by completion of A-G coursework). Out of all of the cohort students, only 29 percent of African American, 23 percent of Native American, and 34 percent of Latino students graduated from high school having met UC and CSU entrance requirements—compared to 47 percent of White and 70 percent of Asian students.[31] This means that although there have been increases in graduation rates for all students, there is a larger and often hidden achievement gap in preparation to enter and succeed in college and career (Figure 4, page 5).
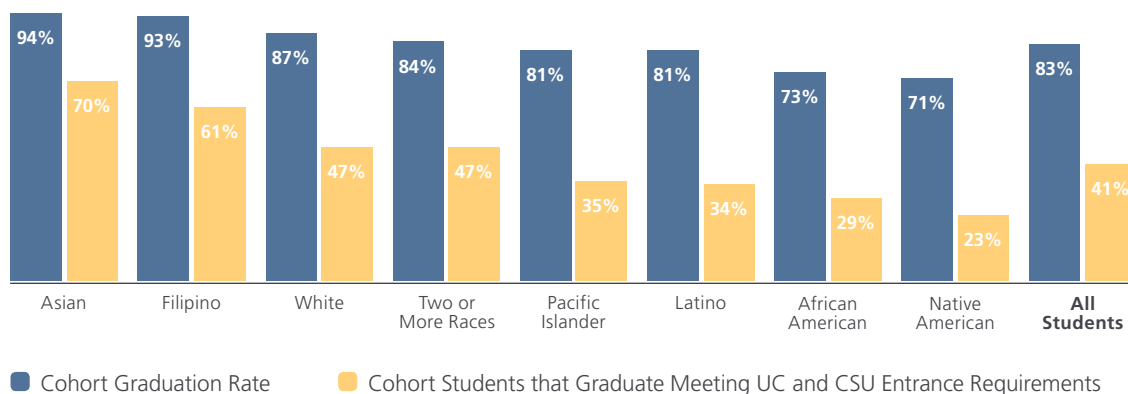
The Current Opportunity to Focus on Educational Equity in California

There is a moral imperative to close educational gaps in a system in which some students have not been served well since the inception of schooling. Changing trends in public education in California can help school board members seize the opportunity to make decisions for their district or county office of education that can make a real difference in the lives of their students and community.

Two changes that have taken place in California public schools within the past 10 years can help local educational agencies to think differently about how to provide a quality education for all students. These changes include:

1. **A shift to a funding formula and accountability system focused on student need and local empowerment.** The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) shifted California's funding for public schools toward a system focused on students and their needs, as opposed to programs and categories. The Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) process and new accountability system (in the form of the California School Dashboard and the California System of Supports) encourages districts and county offices of education to focus on the opportunity gaps in their schools and determine strategies to close them. The LCAP and Dashboard further push districts and county offices of education to redistribute funds to better serve the students who need them the most. Moreover, the stronger focus on continuous improvement should empower districts to work in collaboration with their

Figure 4: 2017–18 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and Cohort Students that Graduate Meeting UC and CSU Entrance Requirements, by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Cohort Graduation Rate	Cohort Students that Graduate Meeting UC and CSU Entrance Requirements
Asian	94%	70%
Filipino	93%	61%
White	87%	47%
Two or More Races	84%	47%
Pacific Islander	81%	35%
Latino	81%	34%
African American	73%	29%
Native American	71%	23%
All Students	83%	41%

● Cohort Graduation Rate   ● Cohort Students that Graduate Meeting UC and CSU Entrance Requirements

county offices of education to improve outcomes for students in the schools identified for support.

2. **A shift toward an assets-based philosophy and a focus on cultural relevance, where the backgrounds of students are viewed as an asset to the education of all students and not a hinderance.** Recent policy changes in California reflect a shift toward an assets-based and culturally relevant approach to education. Moreover, several of the strategies based on these views have a strong research base indicating their effectiveness at improving student outcomes. These attitudes are reflected in the support of bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism with the passage of Proposition 58, the expansion of the State Seal of Biliteracy, and the English Learner Roadmap. The move toward a more culturally relevant curriculum has also been seen in the expansion of ethnic studies. In 2016, California passed a law requiring the state to develop a model curriculum in ethnic studies and encourage districts to offer an ethnic studies course based on this curriculum for high school students (Assembly Bill 2016, now Education Code 51226.7). In 2018, a new law was passed, allowing the board of a school district to apply for a three-year grant from the California Department of Education during the 2019–20 school year, in order to provide a semester- or year-long course in ethnic studies and make it a high school graduation requirement, commencing with the 2020–21 school year (AB 2772). Regarding school discipline, the expansion of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and other research-based practices are positive developments toward creating a more inclusive school climate.

These ideas and shifts are not new, but when coupled with a stronger focus on local control and decision making that is better aligned with the needs of each community, there is an opportunity for school district and county boards of education to implement sustainable change that is tailored to local community needs.

The Role of Equity-Driven School Boards

School board members are local policymakers who can support access to programs that serve the educational needs of all students. Therefore, it is critical that board members understand their role in relation to the intersection between educational policy, leadership, and equity.

One way that educational leaders can create expectations for equitable schooling and outcomes is by beginning with equity conversations. To shape an equity discourse, school leaders must first encourage and lead the conversation in schools, districts, and county offices of education. How can board members do this? One way is to make equity an ongoing agenda item, providing space for not only board members, but also staff, parents, and community stakeholders to engage in conversations that can lead to progress in policy and practice designed to close opportunity and achievement gaps. Frank discussions of challenging issues, such as racially motivated behavior displayed by students or the bullying and harassment of students who identify as LGBTQ, can lead to the passage of resolutions; development of a new vision, mission, and goals; as well as policy to bring about systemic change.

Equity-driven work is undeniably politically charged, therefore educational leaders must understand the importance

of relationship building, including leveraging strategic alliances to move an equity agenda. Board members must reflect upon their roles as strong influencers on policy that directly impacts students. They must be bold in their convictions to advocate for the students who have the least power to invoke change in the system and act with urgency and intentionality to examine, revise, and develop policy with an equity focus. To successfully implement equitable practices across the district or county, board members must also understand the dynamics of school leadership and find ways to balance accountability with support of their superintendent and staff.

The following are general recommendations for board members to consider as they seek to develop and implement equity-driven policies:

1. Create a common definition and understanding of equity for the district or county office of education and what it means for board members, staff, parents and guardians, students, and other community members.

2. Analyze and question relevant data to identify root causes of opportunity and achievement gaps and use these analyses as drivers of an equity agenda.

3. Discover strategic ways to effectively discuss, interpret, leverage, and implement policy while aligning with and supporting current district or county office of education initiatives.

4. Communicate the message of equity effectively and often, beyond teachers and students, out to the larger community.

5. Cultivate alliances with the community and advocate for policies that have an impact beyond schools, reaching the community.

6. Listen to and consider student voice as an important lever for change in the educational system.

7. Embrace all stakeholder voices to provide ongoing assessment of progress toward educational equity goals.

The Importance of Defining Educational Equity

It is essential that equity-driven leaders take the time to define the term before diving into equity-driven decision making. The term often raises emotions based on past experiences and can be associated with the concept of racism or confused with the word equality. Because many people have been conditioned to avoid discussing race, it is critical to unpack the meaning of equity.

In addition, equity has become a buzzword in education, and its overuse and misuse can lead to a loss of meaning. Therefore, developing a common understanding of what is meant by equity in a district or county office of education is essential to working toward that shared understanding and vision. Without this common understanding, leaders run the risk of applying the word equity to efforts that do not substantially change structures, policy, or practice. This can undermine future initiatives and decrease trust and support as community members and other stakeholders perceive new equity initiatives as false promises.

Developing this definition is a foundational step in an organization's equity journey. To do this, strategic facilitation with shared community agreements must be established up front. There are numerous ways to collaboratively develop a definition of educational equity. It is often effective to have a skilled external facilitator work with the various stakeholder groups because the process can result in discourse and raise emotions that can create barriers to progress. There are multiple activities that can be utilized during this process, depending on the readiness of the group and the level of expertise of the facilitator. Examples of activities include allowing stakeholders to share their personal experiences with equity and inequity (which allows for storytelling, building of empathy, and making cultural connections) and asking stakeholders to share one word that expresses equity for them (which fosters deeper discussion and buy-in). Moreover, activities to define equity can be used as a tool to improve staff culture, deepen shared belief systems, and create a shift from equity as a side item on the agenda to equity as the focus of the agenda.

Once a definition is developed, it can be revisited and revised until consensus is reached. This process is a simple, organic, yet profound starting point that could last the entire school year and beyond. The definition can then be used as a lens for reviewing, revising, and developing policy that promotes equitable practices.

Conclusion

Our public education system faces equity challenges that call for board members and others in the education system to build capacity as equity leaders in order to gain the tools and strategies to close educational equity gaps. To meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and families, leaders must commit to a long-term plan for equity. A pivot to an equity paradigm requires a shift away from a focus on compliance with legislative initiatives and educational trends to a focus on the moral imperative to create an equitable school system. Board members have a unique and critical role and

opportunity to lead an equity-driven agenda and impact the closing of opportunity gaps in their schools. Future CSBA briefs will provide additional information and resources on educational equity to support this journey.

Questions for Board Members

Based on the information covered in this brief, board members might consider the following questions:

1. What are some of the opportunities in our district or county office of education to improve services for historically underserved students?

2. How can we use data to guide, support, and communicate about equity-based decisions?

3. What is the role of board members in leading for educational equity?

4. Does our district or county office of education have a common definition of equity?

   a. If not, how can we begin an ongoing conversation to establish one?

   b. If we do, how can we use the definition to continuously foster equity-based decisions?

Endnotes

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