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Governance Brief

African-American Students in Focus, Issue 2

Closing Opportunity and Achievement Gaps for African-American Students

Introduction

As California continues to target additional K-12 public school resources to meet the needs of low-income, English learner and foster youth students, it is crucial for school communities to focus on tackling achievement gaps. Education leaders must think strategically about building partnerships and making investments that best support these and other students to make equal opportunity for all a reality.

This governance brief is part of CSBA's effort to shed light on the education needs of California's diverse student population and is the second in a series focused on African-American students. The goal of the series is to describe challenges that must be addressed to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve their potential. It highlights schools, districts, and programs that are successfully meeting these challenges and closing achievement gaps—and serve as guideposts for broader efforts. While CSBA's previous governance brief, *Demographics and Achievement of California's African-American Students*, focuses on the challenges faced by African-American students, this brief focuses on considerations for board members and state, county, and district leaders to help close gaps.

Shared Responsibility to Meet the Challenge

As was highlighted in *Demographics and Achievement of California's African-American Students*, the challenges faced by African-American students are significant and rooted in a myriad of factors, including the higher prevalence of childhood poverty, higher concentration in high-poverty and less diverse schools and lower access to resources, including rigorous courses, quality instructional materials, and

qualified teachers.^{1,2,3,4} Overcoming these challenges will require the efforts of many institutions, with the public school system playing an important role.

The state's Local Control Funding Formula framework supports local decision-making by those who best understand the needs of their community's students and families. School and county boards provide direction and approve the resources necessary to pursue that direction. While the roles are different for other county and district leaders and staff, they all have a responsibility to work collaboratively amongst themselves and community members to improve student outcomes and ensure equity.

This brief is organized in two parts. The first focuses on district strategies and programs. The second addresses how boards can exercise their governance responsibilities. While not exhaustive, these recommendations can be a starting point for districts, counties, and communities to think proactively about their role in ensuring that African-American students achieve their potential.

State, County, and District Strategies and Programs

State, county, and district leaders, including board members, superintendents, principals, and staff, can implement or support programs focused on serving the needs of African-American students. By using research and evidence, they should identify the most promising investments and practices that can close achievement gaps. The following recommendations are research-supported and are viable strategies for improving African-American student achievement. They center on seven areas:

1. Invest in Early Education
2. Provide Access to High-Quality Curriculum and Materials

3. Support Access to High-Quality Staff
4. Ensure Adequate Student Supports
5. Cultivate Cultural Respect and Relevance
6. Foster Collaboration
7. Support Family and Community Engagement

1. **Invest in Early Education.** As mentioned in the previous brief, the condition of African-American children is such that many are behind academically once they enroll in kindergarten, as a result of being less likely to have attended preschool or have access to high-quality programs.⁵ There is strong evidence that supports investing in early childhood education as one of the most effective means of improving outcomes for students. These investments can address knowledge gaps early and prevent students from getting progressively further behind as they move through the grade levels. Research shows that children who attend high-quality preschool enter kindergarten with significantly larger language, literacy, and mathematics skills.⁶

Transitional Kindergarten in California.

In 2010, through the Kindergarten Readiness Act, California added Transitional Kindergarten (TK) as the first year of a two-year district run program. TK is available to students who turn five years old between September 2 and December 2, of the program year, filling the gap that might exist between preschool and kindergarten. The program also uses a modified kindergarten curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate and taught by an appropriately credentialed teacher and, unlike preschool or child development programs, is part of the K-12 public school system by statute.

A critical aspect of providing all students with the opportunity to attend preschool is accessibility in terms of location and hours. Options should be widely available within a community and not require extensive travel by parents/guardians and young children. The quality of early childhood education programs is another important consideration. There is a wide range of program quality, with African-

American students less likely to have access to the highest-quality options.⁷ Expanding and improving existing programs, while also investing in well-trained professionals and other staff, is critical for districts looking to provide equitable early childhood programs to all families.

Preschool for All Program, City of San Francisco.

The city of San Francisco has expanded its preschool program so that all four year olds are eligible for free enrollment. This program is a full year longer than the California TK program. Eligible preschool providers are located in many San Francisco neighborhoods. Many of these neighborhoods have been previously underserved and have been home to a large proportion of African-American and Latino students. According to the Education Trust-West's 2015 *Black Minds Matter* report, the program serves three fourths of all four year olds in Bayview-Hunters Point, the neighborhood with the highest proportion of African-American students in the city.⁸

2. **Provide Access to High-Quality Curriculum and Materials.** High-quality instruction means providing students with access to rigorous coursework and materials. This access is essential to prepare students for college and career and to ensure that they can make post-high school choices based on their wishes and interests, not on the limitations of their high school preparation. In addition, rigorous, challenging, and relevant curriculum and instruction that motivates students is crucial to their engagement in school. Many students do not drop out because they are unable to keep up with their peers, but rather because they are unmotivated or do not see the connection between their education and their lives.⁹ All students should also have equal access to rigorous courses, including A-G coursework, Advanced Placement classes, and other opportunities to enroll in college-level coursework while in high school. Programs that can deliver rigorous and relevant coursework for African-American students can include Linked Learning, career academies, career and technical education, and partnerships with community colleges and universities that allow for dual enrollment.

Fair and Transparent Policies to Counteract Math Misplacement.

Math misplacement is a practice where students are held back in mathematics despite earning good grades and test scores. Research has shown that African-American and Latino students are disproportionately affected by this practice. For example, a 2010 report by the Noyce Foundation found that only about one third of African-American and Latino eighth-grade students who earned good grades and test scores in Algebra I were promoted to Geometry in ninth grade.¹⁰ Districts and counties must implement fair and objective placement policies (such as CSBA Sample Policy BP 6152.1 – Placement in Mathematics Courses) to close this gap. At least 22 districts in California have already taken steps to adopt fair mathematics placement policies. They report that such policies have helped eliminate the potential bias in mathematics placement decisions and ensure fairness and accuracy throughout the mathematics placement process. For more information, see CSBA's joint governance brief with the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, *Math Misplacement*: www.csba.org/mathmisplacement.

Advanced Placement Initiative, Corona-Norco Unified School District.

Corona-Norco USD collaborated with Equal Opportunity Schools to close the race and income participation gaps in AP courses, raise AP performance, and develop systems and structures to sustain and improve upon results in the future. During the 2014-15 school year, students who were underrepresented in AP courses were recruited, placed into an AP course for the 2015-16 school year, and provided with supports including summer institutes, before- and after-school tutoring, and review sessions. In just one year, the enrollment of African-American students in AP courses grew by nearly 60 percent.

3. **Support Access to High-Quality Staff.** Finding ways to ensure that all African-American students have equal access to experienced and qualified teachers is essential, especially considering that such access is currently not a reality.¹¹ With the ongoing teacher shortage crisis, strategies that expand the teacher pipeline and ensure that new teachers with the skills, competencies, and attitudes to teach in the highest-need areas are brought into the profession and are provided with the support that keeps

them there, are more important than ever. Staffing policies that equitably allocate teachers are also an important and effective strategy to ensure that the highest-need students receive instruction from the most qualified teachers. Incentives to place the most qualified and experienced teachers in the highest-need areas can include salary increases, bonuses, extra support, or housing subsidies.

California State University, Chico Rural Teacher Residency (RTR).

The RTR is a comprehensive partnership between the CSU Chico's School of Education and four high-need, rural school districts in northern California designed to improve the preparation of new teachers, address the needs of rural schools, and improve the achievement of all students. The program provides residents with classroom experience alongside trained mentor teachers, with graduate coursework at CSU Chico and a support system of university faculty, school administrators, and other teacher candidates. Both general and special education residents participate together to cultivate professional learning communities, collaboration, and promote school change. An induction program gives support for the first two years of teaching. Upon completion, residents receive a dual masters degree and teaching credential, and are placed in cohorts, facilitating collaboration and online professional development communities to provide continued support. National statistics on teacher residency programs show an 84 percent, three-year retention rate and an enrollment of significantly more teachers of color than traditional credentialing programs.¹³ Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Fresno also have similar teacher residency programs.

Diversity and cultural competencies are also part of the definition of quality. Teachers and administrators with an understanding of the cultures and backgrounds of diverse students and a predisposition to work with diverse populations, including African-American students, have been shown to have higher expectations as well as being more adept at communicating with and involving parents—all of which is associated with greater student success.¹² Cultural sensitivity training during pre-service and throughout teachers' careers are essential strategies for closing achievement gaps for African-American students. Recruiting efforts should also seek out diverse

candidates for teaching, leadership roles, and other school staff positions. Teachers and leaders who are from similar backgrounds can be powerful role models for students.

Teach Tomorrow in Oakland (TTO). This initiative within the Oakland Unified School District recruits and retains local teachers. The program does not wait for colleges to graduate teachers; it operates in partnership with community organizations, undergraduate unions, churches, and other groups that are already working with people of color towards developing a pipeline of community candidates. The program provides support that removes barriers to becoming a teacher, including providing reimbursements for teacher test, credential, and fingerprinting fees and provides tutoring for teacher tests (e.g. CBEST and CSET) at no charge. The program does not require a specific credentialing program, but strongly recommends that candidates attend partner universities as a cohort. Once teachers are placed in the classroom, the program also provides materials and supplies, helps to decorate teachers' classrooms, and offers monthly professional development sessions led by TTO teacher-leaders. The professional development uses a critical race theoretical lens, which helps participants to understand the impact of race, poverty, and other factors on the lives of their students. Currently, TTO has a 78 percent retention rate, and more than half of its teachers are on track to complete their five-year commitment to teach in Oakland.¹⁴

4. **Ensure Adequate Student Supports.** As districts and counties provide greater access to rigorous coursework, they must also provide students with the supports and school time that they need to succeed. These supports can take various forms, including additional staff who can provide students with mentoring and tutoring to ensure that they are meeting grade-level standards. Another important strategy for helping students increase their learning at a more rapid pace is providing them with extra learning time. Extended learning time can include before-school, after-school programs, and summer learning opportunities. Finally, in many of the districts and schools

with a large number or proportion of African-American students, supports can include having healthcare workers and mental health professionals on site to ensure that the needs of the whole child are met. These strategies can include the important element of collaboration between a district and one or more community organizations.

Fresno Summer Learning Programs. The Fresno County Office of Education provides funding for most of the after-school programs in the county and works closely with the California Teaching Fellows Foundation (CTFF), a local non-profit organization that hires and provides professional development for college students who work in more than 200 after-school programs in Fresno and Madera counties. Working with local school districts, the two organizations leverage this structure to provide summer learning programs. Reading, leadership, nutrition, and science have been central learning goals in the programs, largely depending on district priorities. Several districts have allocated a portion of their LCFF funds to underwrite facility and transportation costs and to cover the per-pupil fee that the CTFF charges in order to pay program staff. For more information on how to implement summer learning programs, read CSBA's *Summer Learning Resource Guide*: www.csba.org/summerlearning.

Riverside Unified School District's Heritage Plan. The Heritage Plan program is focused on improving academic outcomes and college-going rates for African-American students attending Riverside USD. Mentor teachers at each high school recruit students in grades 10-12 and work closely with counselors, who review the student transcripts. Through this review, the counselors and teachers identify A-G courses still needed for college eligibility, monitor grade progress, and help students plan for college. Building college awareness is a large component as students visit nearby colleges and universities, and receive help in completing applications for college, applying for financial aid, drafting personal statements, and transitioning to college through partnerships with California State University, San Bernardino and University of California, Riverside's Early Academic Outreach Program.

5. **Cultivate Cultural Respect and Relevance.** Students need to see the relevance of their educational experience to their lives, cultures, and future aspirations. The curriculum, textbooks, and other content materials should include the stories, achievements, and perspectives of peoples from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including those of African Americans. Investing in materials and programs that support instruction in which diverse cultures are represented in a balanced light, recognizes their challenges, and highlights their contributions to society, is an important strategy for closing achievement gaps. As the state develops new instructional frameworks aligned with the California Common Core State Standards and approves new instructional materials for adoption, it should consider cultural relevance and diversity as critical factors.

Oakland's African-American Male Achievement Initiative (AAMAI). This initiative from Oakland USD, in partnership with the Urban Strategies Council and the East Bay Community Foundation, coordinates efforts and develops strategies and programs tailored to support the potential of African-American students. The initiative's main component, the Manhood Development Program (MDP), is an elective course that enrolls more than 400 African-American male students across 16 schools. The course is designed to address and counteract the negative narrative about African-American males and develop a strong sense of self. The curriculum is uniquely rooted in African-American history and culture, while infusing a strong focus on college and career preparation. In addition, the initiative matches elementary students with middle and high school student mentors. To date, suspension rates for MDP students have decreased by one third, while both GPA and graduation rates have increased. Oakland USD has continued to support the initiative through community partnerships and funding through the Local Control and Accountability Plan process. In addition, other California districts have started to explore similar initiatives. For example, Antioch Unified School District implemented an initiative in 2013.

Cultural respect and relevance can also improve through policies related to staff recruitment and training. As mentioned previously, students need

teachers with the knowledge, skills, and predispositions to teach children from diverse backgrounds. Such teachers are often those who come from the same backgrounds as their students, and these teachers provide the crucial advantage of serving as positive role models and examples of success. Teachers and staff should receive cultural sensitivity training that helps them to be aware of implicit bias and understand how to mitigate its impact on students. State efforts promoting diversity in the teacher pipeline, along with investing in training that leads to a better understanding of students' backgrounds and needs, are effective strategies for improving outcomes for African-American students.

Youth Leadership Summit, ABC Unified School District. The Youth Leadership Summit program primarily focuses on developing African-American and Latino student leaders. These individuals positively affect the climate at their high schools by using their knowledge of the consequences associated with high-risk behaviors (e.g. bullying, smoking, poor choices in relationships, etc.) to influence the behaviors and attitudes of their peers. A noticeable decrease in the number of student disciplinary referrals, and an increase in student attendance and participation in leadership opportunities, is an indicator of the impact of the Youth Leadership Summit program. This program received CSBA's Golden Bell Award in 2015.

6. **Foster Collaboration.** Collaboration is an essential strategy for ensuring that programs and strategies achieve desired results. This includes collaboration across district departments and programs and across various stakeholders, community organizations, and non-district agencies to leverage the resources available in a community. For example, several city and county agencies can help schools provide supports for homeless and foster youth, while partnerships with healthcare providers can ensure that students remain healthy and ready to learn. Collaboration to provide enrichment opportunities such as internships and other work-related experiences is also critical. These opportunities are often provided in cooperation between schools and employers through programs such as career academies, Linked Learning and career and technical education.

School-Based Health Centers. School-based health centers bring vital primary care services into low-income neighborhoods. These programs have more than doubled over the past decade, serving nearly 250,000 K-12 students and their families. There are currently 243 school-based health centers located in schools from Del Norte County to San Diego County, with large concentrations in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. Most centers are in schools with low-income Latino and African-American students—ethnic groups that are more likely to suffer health disparities. They also have lower rates of health insurance and less access to health and mental health services. Amongst the many positive outcomes, school-based health centers have improved school attendance, reduced dropout rates, and improved academic achievement.¹⁶ The California School-Based Health Alliance provides a list of funding opportunities and other resources on their website at <http://bit.ly/GrantsWithDeadlines>.

Linked Learning. The Linked Learning approach integrates rigorous academics that meet college-ready standards with sequenced, high-quality career and technical education, work-based learning, and supports to help students stay on track. Linked Learning pathways are organized around industry-sector themes. These programs require collaboration amongst teachers across subject areas, industry professionals, and industry leaders that can support programs by facilitating work-based learning experiences and mentorship opportunities. Given that Linked Learning aims to increase equity by graduating college and career-ready students, it is of particular importance that this initiative serve African-American students, who face the lowest high school graduation and highest unemployment rates of any racial or ethnic group.¹⁷ African-American students in certified pathways earn more credits through 9th and 10th grade than their similar peers in traditional high school programs.¹⁸ There are currently nine districts participating in the ConnectEd Linked Learning initiative, including Antioch, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Pasadena, Sacramento, and West Contra Costa Unified School Districts, all of which enroll an African-American student population that is above the state average.

7. **Support Family and Community Engagement.**

Meaningful and ongoing collaboration with families and the community should be a key component of any strategy to close achievement gaps. Research has shown that family and community engagement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes.¹⁹ State, county, and district leaders should create welcoming environments in school sites and district and county offices so that parents/guardians are encouraged to attend meetings and participate in school activities. In addition, engagement should be meaningful so that parents/guardians are true partners in the education of their children. For example, activities that simply inform parents of district decisions are not as powerful as continuous engagement that allows them to help shape such decisions.

Staff and parent/guardian training is also critical. Staff training can better help them to understand the culture and background of their students' families. Parent/guardian education can help them learn how to be proactive in their child's education and ask questions to understand what is happening in school.

The Parent Teacher Home Visit Project. This initiative, started in Sacramento City Unified School District, has brought school staff and parents together to build trust, instill cultural competency, and increase capacity to support students. The program involves teachers conducting home visits to meet with parents, reinforce their importance as their child's first and most important teacher, and share information about their student's school program. Initial visits are followed by the establishment of Academic Parent Teacher Teams, which bring parents to their child's classroom once every other month to learn activities that are adapted to their child's specific needs, practice how to use these activities at home, and review student data on how their child is progressing. During the 2012-13 school year, the program had over 3,300 home visits conducted by over 400 teachers. Students with participating parents also saw increases in their academic achievement.²⁰

PTA National Partnership Standards. The PTA has collaborated with education leaders to develop National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. These research-based blueprints make it easy and effective for families, educators,

and community members to work toward shared goals. The standards include:

1. Welcoming all Families Into the School Community
2. Communicating Effectively
3. Supporting Student Success
4. Speaking Up for Every Child
5. Sharing Power
6. Collaborating with Community

These standards can provide a blueprint from which counties and districts can build their family engagement efforts. In addition, CDE has developed a family engagement framework available at <http://bit.ly/EngagementFramework>.

Governance Recommendations for Board Members

Board members can work with their superintendents to set direction for their districts and counties and ensure that there is a continual focus on closing achievement gaps for African-American and all students. The following are strategies for board members to consider as they carry out their governance responsibilities:

- » **Request, Consider, and Understand Data.** Boards need information about the conditions of students, communities, and schools, as well as student achievement. Through careful consideration of data, board members can better understand the outcomes of the students in their schools and the factors contributing to those outcomes. To gain a full picture of student progress, boards should request a combination of data on academic assessment, school climate and access to resources, to inform further actions.

When considering data, it is important to identify achievement gaps by considering disaggregated and school-level data. While the overall achievement of a school might be high, district leaders must look further into that school's data to ensure that all students, including African-American students, are achieving.

- » **Set Ambitious Goals to Close Gaps.** Board members have the responsibility to ensure that the goals of their districts are appropriately ambitious and resonate with the community. Goals must be differentiated by significant subgroups of students. To close gaps, the bar for progress must be set higher for the students who are currently trailing behind their peers. For example, a goal of raising achievement for all students by 5 percentage points is not acceptable when African-American students trail behind their white peers by 20 percentage points. Goals for African-American student achievement must display a commitment for faster growth.
- » **Align Investments to Close Gaps through the LCAP.** Once districts and counties have a clear picture of the challenges faced by their students and have set appropriately ambitious goals for moving them forward, the LCAP can be a vehicle for investing in improvement and aligning resources to produce the desired results. Moreover, as data are collected and priorities are set, district and county leaders should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their investments and consider expanding successful strategies and abandoning those that are not having the desired effect on student conditions or academic achievement.

Equity with regard to resource allocation means that all students receive the resources they need to succeed. When data show gaps in student outcomes, additional supports and resources should be targeted to accelerate achievement and close gaps. District and county leaders should consider adequacy in terms of the amount invested per child, the quality of those investments, and their impact. For example, equal spending on instructional materials is not equal when African-American students have more limited access to culturally relevant textbooks.

These strategies are interconnected, and when taken together, will help board members to better understand the challenges faced by African-American students in their districts and individual schools, and help boards to set ambitious goals and effectively assign resources to meet those goals. Continuous improvement and reflection must also be the norm. After resources are assigned through the LCAP process, data collection efforts should measure the impact of new strategies, which will inform whether such strategies should be adapted or expanded.

Conclusion

There is much work ahead to close the historic achievement gap that has denied opportunity to many generations of African-American students. California is at a crossroads with its new funding system that has shifted resources and responsibility to local districts. In addition, a new accountability system is being developed. This shift has made it more critical than ever for district leaders to understand how to ask the right questions, consider the right data to answer those questions, and allocate resources adequately to address student needs.

CSBA will continue to support boards in their efforts to improve outcomes for California's diverse student population. Ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to achieve their full potential must continue to be one of the top priorities for all governance teams.

Endnotes

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