LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Understanding the School Experiences of Black Students in Sacramento County

SCOE
Sacramento County Office of Education
EDUCATION EMPOWERS

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Sacramento County Office of Education
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LETTER FROM COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT DAVID W. GORDON

Dear Community Members,

In Sacramento County, Black students make up just 10% of our student population—but they account for nearly 25% of all suspensions. They are also the lowest-performing racial group on our annual statewide assessments. These numbers urge us to consider systemic changes that will provide equal educational opportunities for all students.

This report is an urgent call to listen deeply and act boldly. It seeks to center the voices of Black students, families, educators, and community members. Their stories, insights, and experiences must guide our collective efforts to create a public education system that works for every child—especially those furthest from opportunity and those we have historically and systemically underserved.

We offer this report as a resource for system leaders across our county—not to cast blame, but to encourage—to support your ongoing work, to spark new ideas, to shine light on what is possible when we commit to transforming the systems for the benefit of all students, and especially our Black students. We know that true change will take courage, collaboration, and relentless focus. But we also know that it is both necessary and achievable.

This work is aligned with the Sacramento County Office of Education's Equity Imperative: to promote a sense of belonging for every learner, family, educator, and employee. We believe our diversity is a strength, and that we must design creative, innovative strategies to meet the needs of all learners, eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps, and disrupt the stark differences in performance that persist in our schools.

The promise of a quality public education—one that prepares every student to thrive, contribute, and lead—is a cornerstone of our democracy. We owe it to our community, to Black students, and to all students, to fulfill that promise.

There is urgency. This is our imperative.

With commitment and hope,

David W. Gordon
County Superintendent of Schools
Sacramento County Office of Education

Sacramento County Office of Education
EDUCATION EMPOWERS

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

"In a real sense all life is interrelated. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) serves as a key partner for educational institutions in our community, providing support and guidance to help them thrive and meet the educational needs of all students. To fulfill its mission of "providing leadership, building partnerships, and implementing innovative programs and policies that ensure opportunity and access to empowering educational experiences for each and every learner," SCOE recognizes the importance of addressing the persistent challenges faced by underperforming student groups within the county's districts and schools. Students in California have a fundamental right to educational equality,[1] and this fundamental right is violated when significant disparities exist within our school system.[2]

As an educational entity, we have an affirmative duty to take action when specific policies are disproportionately harming student groups.[3] Among these groups, students who identify as Black are notably underserved by the educational system, as reflected in the most current, available data. This issue isn't unique to Sacramento County; in fact, Black students across California—and the United States more broadly—often score significantly lower on standardized academic performance measures, typically performing at about 50 percent of the level of their white peers. California law places an obligation on public schools to ensure that all students have equal rights and equal educational opportunities, regardless of race or other protected characteristics.[4] As such, the disparity in performance data compelled a focused inquiry into the unique experiences and needs of Black students in Sacramento County.

In the fall of 2023, SCOE began a landscape analysis as a key part of its inquiry process to understand the experiences of Black students. By examining the perspectives of students, teachers, parents, and administrators, we seek to identify the systemic factors that contribute to educational disparities. This effort aims to illuminate any barriers these students face, as well as the opportunities for positive change within our districts and schools. Through a participatory action research approach, incorporating qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and observations, this study will seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape as experienced by Black students.[5]

The findings of this analysis serve multiple objectives: to deepen our knowledge of the challenges and strengths within the system, to identify patterns and themes that can inform policy, and to propose actionable recommendations for SCOE and local districts and schools. This work is not about diagnosing issues but about fostering solutions that improve outcomes and promote excellence for Black students across Sacramento County. Congressman Augustus Hawkins, California's first Black Representative once 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." Taking that wisdom to heart, by engaging in this important research, SCOE is taking a vital step toward a more inclusive and effective educational system for all.

[1] Cal. Const. art. I, § 7[EL1] (a); Cal. Const. art. IV, § 16(a); *Butt v. State* (1992) 4 Cal. 4th 668, 685.
[2] *Butt v. State*, 4 Cal. 4th at p. 681.
[3] California courts have found that it is a violation of California's equal protection clause when a policy "has a substantial disparate impact on the minority children of its schools, causing de facto segregation of the schools and an appreciable impact to a district's educational quality, and no action is taken to correct that policy when its impacts are identified." *Collins v. Thurmond* (2019) 41 Cal. App. 5th 879, 896–897 [reviewing disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of students of color].
[4] Cal. Ed. Code, §§ 200–201.
[5] For a more detailed description of the methodology, see Appendix A.

CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

Understanding the state of Black students requires an acknowledgment of the historical and systemic factors that continue to shape their experiences today. The challenges faced by the African American/Black community in Sacramento County are deeply rooted in the state's history, beginning with the enslavement period, continuing through the Jim Crow era, and persisting in contemporary systems and structures. California, often perceived as a progressive state, has not been immune to these historical injustices or their enduring effects.

In 1852, Black children were explicitly banned from attending California's public schools, establishing an early precedent for educational exclusion and inequality. Following the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) U.S. Supreme Court decision, which upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine, segregated schooling became a norm in many parts of the state. These policies laid the foundation for disparities in educational access, resources, and outcomes that persist to this day; out of roughly 1,000 districts in the state, Black students are concentrated in only 25 districts in California, often in the highest poverty schools (Frankenberg, Auscue, & Orfield, 2019).

California's education system has undergone significant shifts over the past several decades, shaped by policy decisions and funding challenges. Following the passage of Proposition 13[6] in 1978 and subsequent budget cuts in the 1990s and early 2000s, California's public education system faced severe financial constraints. By 2010, the state ranked near the bottom nationally in nearly every measure of school funding, staffing levels, and student achievement. These financial challenges disproportionately impacted high-need districts, leaving them with less funding than the state average and exacerbating existing inequalities.

[6] By capping property tax increases, Proposition 13 directly reduced the amount of local revenue available for public schools, creating a system where wealthier communities can generate significantly more funding than lower-income areas. This imbalance has led to widespread resource disparities, as schools in affluent neighborhoods benefit from higher property values and local tax measures, while those in less affluent areas struggle to provide the same level of educational support and opportunity.

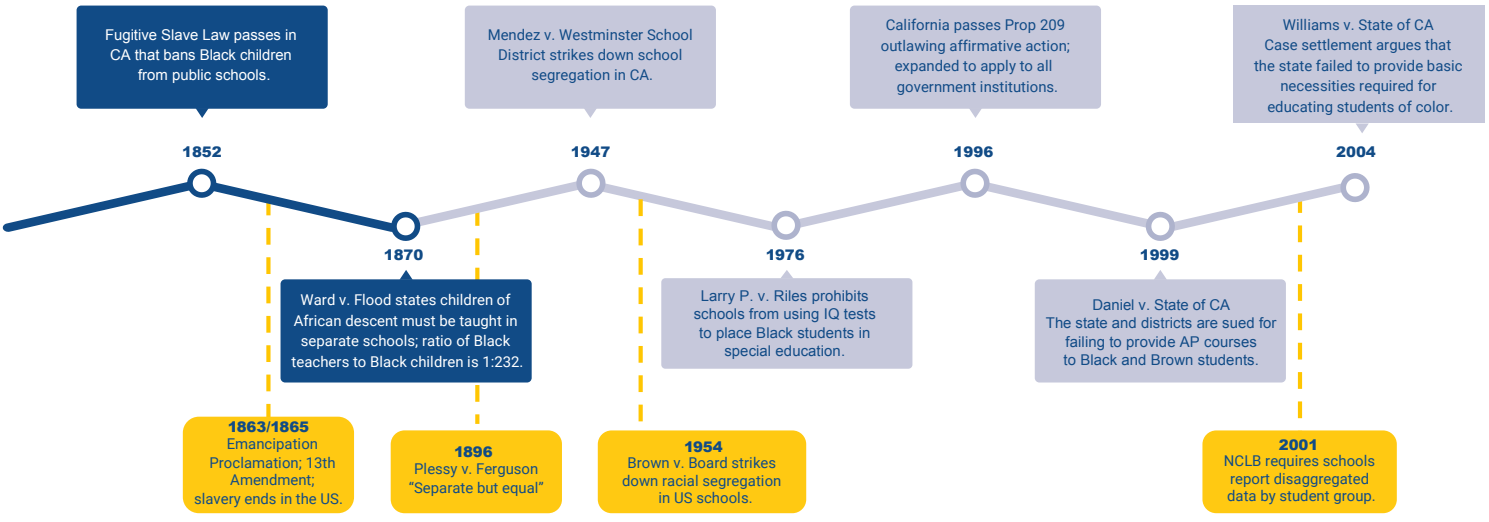
In response to these disparities, California implemented the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in 2013, alongside new academic standards and accountability systems. These reforms aimed to address funding inequities and improve student outcomes, particularly for historically underserved populations. Between 2011 and 2019, California experienced some of the nation's steepest gains in reading and math achievement. However, despite these improvements, significant achievement gaps and resource disparities remain, highlighting the ongoing need for sustained investment and equity-driven policies in California's education system.

California has made further attempts at closing the achievement and opportunity gap by investing more heavily in districts and schools serving students with the greatest needs. The 2023–24 Equity Multiplier is a key strategy within the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to advance this goal. The Equity Multiplier provides additional funding to school sites where more than 25% of students experienced instability in the prior year and where over 70% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. These funds must be used for evidence-based services and supports aimed at improving student outcomes. To ensure transparency and accountability, local educational agencies (LEAs) must document their efforts to support these schools within their 2024–25 Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). By prioritizing resources for historically underserved students, California is taking targeted, data-driven steps to advance educational equity and close persistent opportunity gaps.

The legacy of discriminatory practices extends beyond education, however, influencing the economic, social, and health-related challenges that many Black students and their families face in Sacramento County. Structural barriers—such as discriminatory housing policies, economic inequality, and limited access to quality healthcare—intersect to shape the conditions in which children grow and learn, increasing their exposure to adversity, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage, and limiting access to educational opportunities. The educational experiences and outcomes of Black youth are not simply the result of shortcomings within the education system but rather the cumulative and compounding effects of broader systemic inequities that shape their opportunities and success (Banaji, Fiske, & Massey, 2021).

Addressing the educational needs of Black students in Sacramento County requires both a historical lens and a commitment to dismantling the structural barriers that have been in place for generations. Only through such an understanding can meaningful progress be made toward equity, justice, and opportunity for all students.

Figure 1. Education of Black Students in California[7]



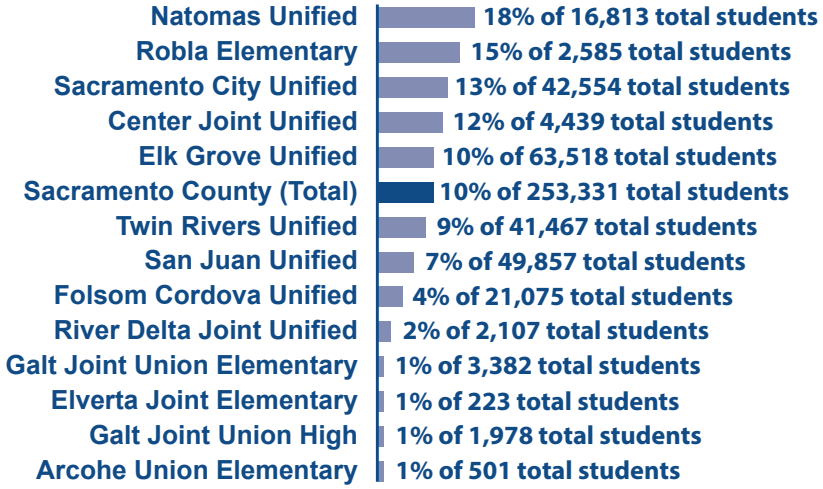
[7] These exclusionary educational laws existed in conjunction with a suite of other laws that simultaneously oppressed the Black community in the United States. Examples of such include: Land Property Seizures (Homestead Acts, 1862, which excluded Black people from receiving land during the expansion of the United States; reversal of Special Field Order No. 15 or "40 Acres and a Mule" that was promised to formerly enslaved people after Emancipation; Civil Asset Forfeiture and Eminent Domain Abuse where Black communities have been disproportionately targeted by asset forfeiture laws and aggressive eminent domain seizures often without fair compensation or due process); Housing Segregation (Redlining, 1930–1960s, that marked black neighborhoods as high risk and would deny loans; Racially Restrictive Covenants that would include clauses that banned the sale of property to Black people and other non-white groups; Sundown Towns where Black people were banned from being present after dark); Exclusions from the GI Bill or Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 where discriminatory administration of these laws ensured that many Black Veterans were unable to use their education and home loan benefits.

SACRAMENTO COUNTY CONTEXT

Sacramento County is one of the most diverse regions in the United States, with its student population reflecting this rich diversity. In the 2023–24 academic year, there were 24,973 Black students enrolled in public schools countywide, including charter schools. This represents 10% of the total 253,331 students enrolled in Transitional Kindergarten (TK) through 12th grade across the county (DataQuest, 2023–24).

Two Sacramento County school districts, Natomas Unified and Elk Grove Unified, were recognized among the 10 most diverse districts in the United States, ranking first and sixth, respectively. The proportion of Black students varies significantly across districts, ranging from as high as 18% in some areas to as low as 1% in more rural districts.

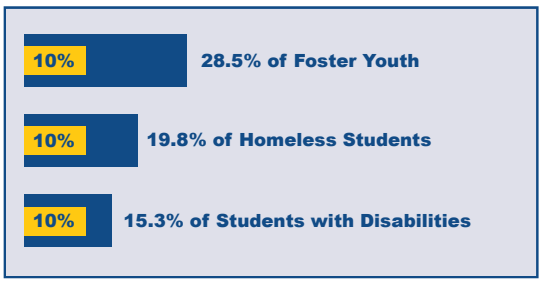
Graph 1. Black Student Enrollment Across Sacramento County Districts



Sacramento County itself is also geographically diverse. While 85% of the county's land is classified as rural, the majority of its population resides in suburban neighborhoods. Despite this, Sacramento County is officially designated as an urban county in California,[8] and the total population of Sacramento County exceeds 1.5 million residents.[9]

Countywide, Black/African American students make up only 10% of the overall student population, but they are disproportionately represented in many high-need student groups. Black students account for 28.5% of foster youth, 19.8% of homeless youth, and 15.3% of students with disabilities. These disparities highlight the systemic barriers and challenges that persist, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and resources to support these vulnerable student populations.

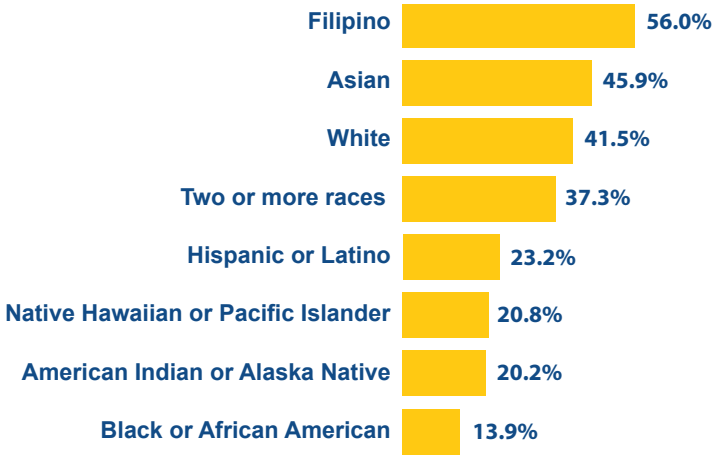
Graph 2. Countywide, Black Student Overrepresentation in High-Need Student Groups



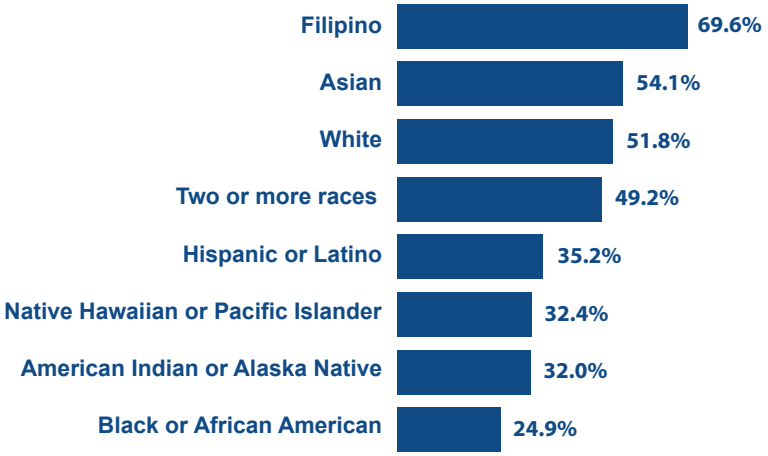
[8] California State Association of Counties, 2020
[9] Sacramento County Demographics and Facts

The 2023–24 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results indicate that Black/African American students continue to face significant academic challenges. In Sacramento County, only 24.9% of Black students met or exceeded standards in English Language Arts (ELA), and just 13.9% did so in mathematics, reflecting persistent achievement gaps (see graphs 3 and 4 below). It's important to note that Sacramento County's results are even lower than the state averages, where 30.3% of Black students met or exceeded standards in ELA and 17.8% did so in Math.

Graph 3. 2024 Countywide Percent Met or Exceeded Standards: Math
Sacramento County, All Students (Includes both charter and non-charter)



Graph 4. 2024 Countywide Percent Met or Exceeded Standards: English Language Arts
Sacramento County, All Students (Includes both charter and non-charter)

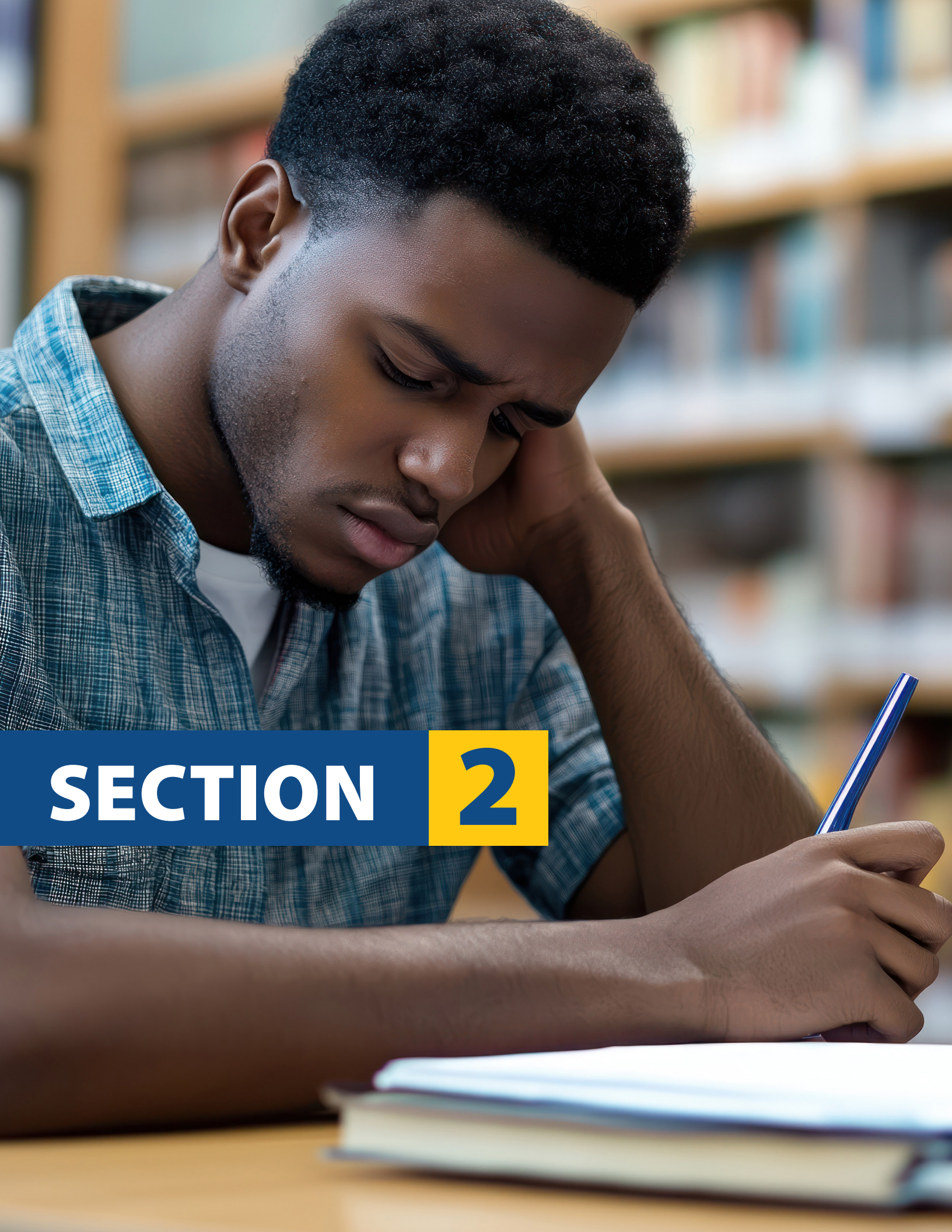


Many school districts across Sacramento County are making intentional efforts to improve outcomes for Black students by leveraging Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars and incorporating the voices of students, families, and community partners. These efforts are reflected in Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) actions that address academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, school climate and culture, career and college readiness, and efforts to reduce bias and stereotypes. Addressing the impacts of structural inequities and improving educational outcomes for Black students requires commitment and investment from districts and schools, including the strategic allocation of resources to address equity gaps.

This complex landscape highlights both the diversity and disparities within Sacramento County, emphasizing the need for policies and practices that address the unique challenges faced by Black students across district and community contexts.

In 2021, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond launched a new effort to support and improve Black student achievement in the state of California. During a press conference he said:

"I am committed to the success of all six million of our students, but we feel we are in a moment where we need to be explicit in calling out the opportunity to support Black student achievement. This is not a new question. This is a conversation that we have had in every state in this nation for quite some time, yet this achievement and opportunity gap has persisted, and this is our opportunity to be intentional and to do important work about it. We have more than two dozen schools that have some of the highest rates of racial segregation and poverty in our state. These experiences call out for us to make change. We have to overcome environmental injustices, overcome health disparities, overcome racism and all these barriers that have impacted our students."



SECTION 2

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."

— Maya Angelou

The following section presents four key themes that emerged from our interviews and focus groups with students, families, educators, and community members. These themes reflect shared experiences, concerns, and hopes for the future of education. Each one highlights a critical area of focus for improving outcomes for Black students—ranging from the need for culturally responsive teaching and the importance of rebuilding trust, to the value of honest conversations about race and the necessity of systemwide collaboration.

To bring these themes to life, we have included direct quotes from participants that illustrate the lived experiences behind the data. In addition, each theme is supported by relevant research and evidence-based practices that point to promising strategies for addressing the challenges identified. Together, these insights offer both a deeper understanding of the barriers Black students face and a foundation for designing more equitable, inclusive, and responsive educational systems that will benefit all students.

THEME 1

BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAP: The Need for Culturally Responsive Education

The education system has long fallen short in equitably serving Black students. One of the key factors identified as contributing to the educational disparities faced by Black students, as revealed through the participatory action research process, is the widespread lack of culturally responsive teaching and learning practices in schools. Dr. Sharroky Hollie defines culturally responsive teaching as the deliberate practice of validating and affirming students' cultural identities while leveraging their cultural strengths to enhance learning and engagement (Hollie, 2017). This approach requires educators to actively integrate students' lived experiences into instruction. Education Code 60040 et seq. requires that instructional materials accurately portray the cultural and racial diversity of our society, including the contributions of African Americans. Culturally responsive practices go beyond simply adding diverse perspectives to the curriculum; they reshape educational spaces to actively validate and empower students. When schools fail to recognize, incorporate, and affirm the cultural backgrounds of Black youth, the consequences are significant—widespread disengagement, lower academic achievement, and a breakdown in trust between students and educators (Hammond, 2015). Culturally responsive education (CRE) is a pedagogical approach that acknowledges the lived experiences, histories, and identities of students while fostering meaningful learning environments. Implementing CRE is essential to ensuring that Black students feel seen, valued, and supported, not only academically but also socially and emotionally. This is especially important, as students consistently express that "the biggest struggle for Black students is being seen, heard, or valued by others who don't look like us, whether it's teachers, faculty, or even our peers."

> *"The biggest struggle for Black students is being seen, heard, or valued by others who don't look like us, whether it's teachers, faculty, or even our peers."*
>
> *— Student*

Recurring throughout interviews with students, educators, and community leaders was a lack of culturally responsive education resulting in Black students feeling alienated, disengaged, and unsupported in school environments. One nonprofit leader emphasized the importance of culturally relevant curricula stating, "We need curricula that are aligned to [students'] personal interests and culture. There is not enough programming with African Studies. Currently, the curriculum is not enriching, stimulating, or relatable. This leads to low grades." Traditional curricula in the United States have historically centered Eurocentric perspectives, often neglecting the histories, contributions, and cultural wealth of Black communities (The Education Trust, 2023).

When Black history is included in the curriculum, students frequently report that it tends to focus on singular narratives. As one student remarked, schools should provide "a more thorough education on African American history, not just centered around slavery." Students want to "learn about our history in a positive light" that "goes beyond slavery." A Black male high school student, currently incarcerated, expressed his frustration stating, "I never learned about Black culture, history, or art [in school]. I learned about Malcolm X when I got [to the juvenile detention facility]." This exclusion from the classroom reinforces the implicit message that Black history is secondary, less significant, or only worthy of recognition during moments such as Black History Month, rather than being an integral part of the broader historical and educational narrative.

Across student interviews, there was a strong desire for a more engaging and meaningful education on Black history—one that goes beyond narratives of oppression to highlight the achievements, contributions, and cultural impact of Black individuals. Students expressed the importance of learning about Black leaders, innovators, and movements that have shaped history, as well as the resilience and excellence of Black communities. They emphasized that a curriculum that authentically represents Black history fosters a greater sense of pride, identity, and connection to their education.

There was strong sentiment throughout the interviews that the stories and voices of Black people are often not prioritized in school curricula. One district educator acknowledged this, stating, "We work in a system that has a white-dominant, male perspective," referring to the books, content, and discussions in classrooms. Research supports this observation, as studies have shown that school textbooks and literature selections often emphasize white historical figures and authors while offering limited representation of Black voices and perspectives (The Education Trust, 2023). When students do not see themselves reflected in their education, they are more likely to disengage from learning, experiencing decreased motivation and self-efficacy (Gay, 2018). Ladson-Billings (1995) found that students perform better academically when their cultural backgrounds are incorporated into the curriculum and pedagogy. This was evident across interviews with Black students. One young person, who faced significant challenges in school and ultimately discontinued his attendance in the ninth grade, was asked if he could recall a time when he enjoyed school and actually felt engaged. Smiling at the memory, he responded, "The one teacher I liked was my [middle school] English teacher. She made me actually like English. She saw what types of books I was interested in and got some for me."

Ladson-Billings (1995) found that students perform better academically when their cultural backgrounds are incorporated into the curriculum and pedagogy.

In an analysis of district Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) from 2023 and 2024, it was clear that districts have heard and prioritized increasing student access to a more diverse and culturally rich curriculum. In seven of the thirteen districts in Sacramento County, districts included specific actions related to training teachers in

how to use culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. Often, these actions were accompanied by other LCAP actions that emphasized expanding supplemental curriculum and school libraries to include a diversity of texts and resources that are representative of the student body. These actions are consistent with recent amendments in California law that evince the state's intent for a more diverse curriculum.[10]

This unwavering desire for an engaging education is evident in student reflections. One student articulated the challenges of navigating an education system that was historically designed without consideration for Black students, stating, "This country wasn't built with [Black people] in mind and so neither was its education system. Trying to learn through a system that at one point refused to cultivate [Black peoples'] intelligence or even recognize it is very difficult because you run into numerous obstacles with no way around it. You almost have to understand you are all you have, and you have to attain success yourself… this is very hard and draining, and without the right support system, this lesson can go over students' heads quickly, and they drown within the system." This quote reflects the belief that Black students must empower themselves, relying on their communities for knowledge and support related to their racial identity. Another student emphasized their personal pride in overcoming these challenges, remarking, "I am most proud of the fact that despite being brought up in a white country with white education, I was able to see through all that white fog and understand my own personal roots and the roots of this very country itself." These experiences underscore the importance of community and self-empowerment in the face of an education system that often neglects to affirm the cultural identities of Black students.

> *"We need to focus on an institutional shift and culture development for and with Black students…We need affirming, enriching, culturally relevant curriculum that instills pride and confidence."*
>
> *— District Principal*

In addition to feeling unseen in the curriculum, Black students consistently expressed in interviews that they lacked deep and meaningful relationships with their educators—a crucial component of culturally responsive practices. Many expressed that their educators sometimes demonstrated performative cultural competence, or actions that superficially acknowledge diversity, but they did not feel genuinely known or understood by their teachers. One student reflected on his K–12 educational experience, stating, "I needed to be more well known." He expressed feeling invisible to his teachers throughout the years, as though they never truly saw or understood him. An educator echoed this sentiment, stating, "There is a cultural gap between students and staff. Black students don't feel like their predominantly white staff understand their ways of talking, family style, etc." To bridge this gap, several districts in Sacramento County have established robust partnerships with local, community-based organizations to provide rich, cultural programming during and after the school day to complement the types of instruction students receive from their teachers during the typical school year.

There is a body of research that indicates the importance of meaningful, affirming relationships between teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020). One key reason these relationships are not being formed is that the secondary school or classroom structure often does not facilitate the opportunity for building such connections. As one non-profit leader emphasized, "Black culture is relational… The school day isn't set up for these sorts of interactions." Culturally responsive teaching is rooted in the understanding that relationships are the foundation of learning. When educators take the time to build trust, affirm students' identities, and demonstrate high expectations, Black students, like all students, are more likely to feel valued, supported, and invested in their education (Hammond, 2015). One community leader summarized this point, saying "We need to focus on an institutional shift and culture development for and with Black students… We need affirming, enriching, culturally relevant curriculum that instills pride and confidence."

[10] See AB 1078, Stats 2023 ch 229 § 7, effective September 25, 2023. For example, instruction in social sciences "shall include" a study of the role and contributions of African Americans "to the economic, political, and social development of California and the United States of America," with particular emphasis on portraying the role of African Americans and others in contemporary society. (Ed. Code, § 51204.5.) Books may not be removed from the curriculum or school libraries because they include the study of the role and contributions of African Americans or other enumerated individuals. (Ed. Code, §§ 243.)

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of culturally responsive education (CRE), many districts face significant challenges in implementing it as a systemwide practice. One of the primary barriers identified in the research process is educator mindset. As one district leader observed, "There is a mindset of 'this is the [school's] way,' and that is how it has always been." In other words, shifting the mindset of educators is challenging when there is a longstanding tradition of teaching in a particular way. This mindset often leads educators to rely on conventional instructional methods, rather than embrace culturally responsive strategies. For meaningful change to take place, both educators and school leaders must reconceptualize CRE—not as an optional practice, but as an essential component of student success.

Another recurring barrier identified in interviews is the difficulty of applying theoretical knowledge to classroom settings. Although many educators recognize that culturally responsive practices support student success, they often struggle to understand how these practices should be implemented. A common concern expressed by educators is the lack of sufficient training in this area. As one Sacramento County educator explained, "It's a challenge to move from theory to practice," emphasizing the difficulty of determining how to actualize theoretical concepts within their instruction. A significant factor contributing to this challenge is the lack of structural support. As one educator pointed out, "One of the biggest challenges in supporting Black students is that training for teachers isn't mandated." *Future educators* who are obtaining their credential through a teacher residency program in California are required to receive training in the use of culturally responsive practices, but most have not received such training. (Ed. Code, § 44415.) Without district-wide professional development mandates, the implementation of culturally responsive practices remains inconsistent, limiting their potential to improve the educational experiences of Black students.

Bridging the cultural gap in education through culturally responsive teaching is not merely an aspirational goal—it is an essential step toward educational equity for Black students. When schools fail to implement culturally responsive education, Black students can experience disengagement, lower achievement, and a breakdown in trust with educators. However, when schools prioritize culturally responsive practices—by integrating Black history and culture into the curriculum, fostering affirming relationships, and using inclusive and identity-affirming instructional strategies—Black students are more likely to thrive academically and socially.

THEME 2

REBUILDING TRUST: *Repairing the Relationship Between Schools and Black Communities*

Across interviews with students, families, and educators, a consistent theme emerges: there is a need to rebuild trust between Black youth, families, and the educational systems that exist to support them. Black students consistently shared that their educators perceive and regard them in ways that make them feel dismissed, undervalued, and looked down upon. Students expect to be underestimated by their teachers and often feel that their educators will not offer support to them. They also express that teachers view them through a biased lens, assuming they will behave poorly. In other words, Black students do not feel like they have equal rights and opportunities to an education free from racism and bias, contrary to California law. (Ed. Code, §§ 200–201.)

For instance, many Black youth interviewed expressed feeling constantly watched, highlighting an overwhelming sense of surveillance that reflects the underlying distrust adults in positions of authority have toward them. One Sacramento County high school student stated, "I feel like I'm being watched more [than others]," explaining that Black youth are often subjected to heightened scrutiny compared to their peers. This hyper-surveillance creates an environment where Black students feel as though they are being monitored for failure rather than supported for success. Black students aren't just feeling more scrutinized—they are, in fact, disciplined at significantly higher rates than their peers. According to 2023–24 data, the suspension rate for Black students in Sacramento County is 12.9%, nearly four times higher than that of White students. Despite making up less than 10% of the student population, Black students account for almost 27% of all suspensions across the county's schools.

When Black students face harsher disciplinary measures for the same behaviors as their peers, it reinforces othering and fosters a sense of inferiority and marginalization, making students feel devalued.

One student expressed a sentiment that resonated with many other Black youth, saying "It felt like [teachers] thought Black kids could never do good or be good." They described feeling as though teachers and school staff consistently expected them to underperform and misbehave, even in the absence of any behavior that would justify such assumptions. Another student observed, "Black students get in trouble a lot more for the same things other students do, but those students don't face consequences." Students recognize this disparity in disciplinary actions and articulate that it undermines their trust and faith in their educators. When Black students face harsher disciplinary measures for the same behaviors as their peers, it reinforces othering and fosters a sense of inferiority and marginalization, making students feel devalued.

Beyond discipline, many Black students report feeling overlooked in academic settings. One student shared, "Teachers would skip over me if I was raising my hand and not want to help me," reflecting a common experience where Black students feel ignored or dismissed in the classroom. Another explained, "Since my teacher thought I wasn't going to do the assignment, and I knew that they didn't believe in me, I didn't want to even do it." Such experiences highlight how subtle but consistent cues from teachers can signal to students that they are not worthy of support or attention. Over time, these cues can lead students to internalize the belief that they do not belong in the academic environment, diminishing their sense of self-worth and reinforcing feelings of alienation. As one student insightfully noted, "Schools don't make Black students feel smart enough to want to ask for help. It's so easy for schools to write off Black kids upon arrival, and sadly they start to internalize those same behaviors. It's at this point where a person doesn't feel they can learn or feel like they 'just aren't cut out for this school stuff,' and this is so common within Black youth."[11]

These repeated moments of being underestimated or disregarded contribute to a broader pattern where Black students question whether their teachers genuinely care about their growth and academic success. "All teachers should care–push students to the fullest, and don't let us get away with not learning… If the teacher actually showed they cared, I would go to their class. [They] need to be strict and hold us to a high standard," said one high school student who explained that his low attendance was due in part to not feeling welcomed at school. Some educators echoed students' sentiments and mentioned that they also observed their fellow educators and colleagues treating Black students in ways that further marginalize them. In interviews, they expressed frustration, emphasizing how often "educators are not held accountable for treating Black students badly." A community leader added, "We have lower expectations for Black students. If they get a B, we say great job! If a white student gets a B, we try to push them to get an A. Teachers and administrators are too permissive and don't hold [Black] youth to a high standard." Over time, these patterns erode trust, causing students to lose confidence that educators will support and challenge them to achieve at high levels, which makes it even harder to build meaningful relationships.

[11] DataQuest https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqCensus/DisSuspRate.aspx?year=2023-24&agglevel=County&cds=34. The Legislature has amended school disciplinary laws on multiple occasions in an attempt to address the disproportionate impact of exclusionary disciplinary practices on Black/African American students. (See Legislative Findings, AB 1729, Stats. 2012, ch. 425, Section 1; Legislative Findings, SB 274, 2023, ch. 597, Section 1.)

Low expectations have significant consequences. Both Black youth and their parents articulated a deep sense of exhaustion stemming from repeated negative interactions with educators and school staff. One student expressed that the low expectations teachers held of him "made [him] feel like [he had] to prove them wrong and try even harder than anyone else." A significant body of research has shown that teachers' perceptions about their students shape expectations that often predict student achievement apart from prior ability (Dweck, 2017; Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Steele, 1997). The pressure to constantly disprove unconscious beliefs can be demoralizing and profoundly taxing, leading to overwhelming stress and anxiety. Research consistently shows that when students feel disconnected from their schools, their academic engagement declines, and they face increased risks of long-term negative outcomes. According to research, a strong sense of belonging in school is directly linked to higher academic achievement, motivation, and persistence (Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018). Conversely, students who feel alienated or undervalued are more likely to disengage from learning, leading to lower performance and higher dropout rates.

The mistrust that Black students feel from their educators—and, in turn, toward the education system—is the product of both historical exclusion and ongoing inequities. Systemic racism and discrimination throughout U.S. history—including laws that denied Black people access to education, segregation under Jim Crow, and other forms of institutional discrimination—have influenced the way Black people are perceived and treated in society. These historical injustices have perpetuated deeply ingrained implicit biases that continue to influence perceptions and interactions within schools today (Banaji, Fiske, & Massey, 2021). District and school leaders express that educators, like all members of society, have internalized these biases, which manifest in their interactions with Black students through lowered expectations, heightened surveillance, and diminished support. Black youth, along with their families and ancestors who have historically endured similar patterns of exclusion and marginalization in schools, continue to witness and experience these dynamics. As a result, their mistrust in the education system persists, reinforced by ongoing disparities in treatment, opportunity, and institutional accountability. Many youth, parents, community leaders, and educators voiced an urgent need for systemic change, a sentiment echoed by one teacher who questioned, "Why do we keep doing the same things with our kids and expect different results? The kids who excel in this system know how to play the game and in many instances they're still harmed... We keep having the same conversations. I'm tired. When are we actually going to do something different?"

Many districts are taking intentional steps to create structures that seek to remove barriers to underrepresented students, including Black students, to access a more challenging course of study in secondary schools. Seven of the thirteen districts in Sacramento County have crafted LCAP actions that specifically point to efforts to increase graduation rates, increase UC/CSU A-G completion rates, increase student access to career pathways, and lower drop-out rates. In some districts, these efforts go even further, with actions identified to pay for students' advanced placement exam fees and UC/CSU college entrance exam fees, providing application preparation training and supports, and providing financial aid application training.

Despite the many challenges they face, Black students express taking immense pride in their racial identity. Students emphasized their commitment to embracing their authentic selves unapologetically—without shame—a key factor in the resilience they demonstrate. They also attribute much of their resilience to the intentional efforts they make to cultivate a sense of community among other Black students. This sense of solidarity and camaraderie is particularly significant given how the broader school environment often fosters feelings of marginalization and exclusion. By forming these peer networks, whether formally, through the establishment of clubs such as the Black Student Union or UMOJA, or informally, Black students not only counteract the alienation they may experience but also actively create spaces where they can affirm their identities, provide mutual support, and cultivate collective strength. One student shared that she is committed to bringing Black women together and raising awareness of the issues they face. Her pride in her community, despite the lack of representation among teaching staff, has empowered both herself and her peers.

> *"I feel most empowered when I feel like I'm making an impact and making a difference."*
>
> *— Student*

Another student noted, "I feel most empowered when I feel like I'm making an impact and making a difference." This sentiment, which was shared by many Black students, catalyzed their desire to be involved in racial affinity clubs or events on campus. In spaces such as this, students express a sense of belonging and empowerment to collectively advocate for themselves and their communities. In an LGBTQIA+ Black youth focus group, many expressed feeling a profound sense of agency through their collective participation in Black Lives Matter protests and other forms of political activism. Districts in Sacramento County understand the power of affinity spaces and in recent years, many supported culturally affirming events and clubs—including Black Student Unions and Black Graduations. This district support sends a message to Black students and communities that is a powerful acknowledgment of their identity, experiences, and contributions—and affirms that they belong, are valued, and deserve to see themselves reflected and celebrated within their schools.

Overall, peer networks play a vital role in Black students' success and perseverance within systems that frequently do not provide the support and sense of community they need. One parent explained, "When I've been on school campuses, I observe the students, young people, creating safe places for their counterparts… it's something different and special and understood when they're interacting with other African American students who are having a hard day or need some extra encouragement." Another parent echoed this sentiment, stating, "Black kids, they understand each other. And seeing them creating that safe space when sometimes the adults in the community around them are not able to do it…the adults just don't understand them for whatever reason. I think this empathy is something very special about our students."

THEME 3

UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS: Having Conversations About Race and Equity in Education

Another recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was the widespread hesitation to engage in meaningful discussions about race within schools and educational systems. This pattern persists despite overwhelming evidence of racial disparities in student achievement, discipline, and overall educational outcomes. The reluctance reflects a broader societal discomfort with race-related conversations and the persistent inequities that exist across student groups (Tropp & Rucinski, 2022). By avoiding these discussions, schools not only fail to address the root causes of these disparities but also inadvertently perpetuate them.

A primary factor contributing to this hesitation, as noted by educators and community leaders, is the discomfort that discussions about race and equity often evoke—particularly for white educators and school leaders. Historically, discussions about race have often been shaped in ways that prioritize the comfort of white individuals (DiAngelo, 2018). This involves avoiding certain topics, minimizing the experiences of marginalized communities, or deflecting difficult emotions. In leadership spaces, white administrators and staff may find it difficult to engage meaningfully in conversations about race due to fear of conflict, personal discomfort, or a lack of experience in navigating

these discussions (Matias, 2016). In contrast, Black educators tend to express both a need and a desire for these conversations. Research highlights the stark difference in how racial discourse is experienced by white educators compared to educators of color. While many white staff members often avoid or feel unequipped for these discussions, Black and other educators of color regularly engage in them as part of their lived experiences (Kendi, 2019). Ultimately, the persistent dynamic of centering comfort shifts the focus away from addressing systemic inequities, thus hindering meaningful progress toward racial justice (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019). As one educator stated, "Schools need to stop shelving-off topics [about Black students] and putting band-aid [solutions], like hiring a single black teacher to stop a problem they know is systemic."

Another significant barrier to meaningful dialogue is the absence of accountability systems for addressing harm. Across interviews, students shared about numerous instances where teachers were not held accountable for inappropriate behaviors, such as making subtle and often unintentional comments or actions that convey a prejudiced attitude or belief toward a marginalized group (microaggressions) (Hammond, 2015). The lack of formal accountability systems means that schools fail to fully address these harmful actions by not holding space for discussion and reflection, therefore missing vital opportunities to confront bias, mend relationships, and foster trust with students and families.

Despite these challenges, there is evidence that conversations about race and equity are becoming more frequent and intentional in many LEAs. As one district superintendent stated, "We're not afraid of saying that we are not doing well. We are not trying to hide from [the data]." Over the past few years, educators express that there has been a marked increase in professional development and training focused on equity, implicit bias, and culturally responsive teaching.

> *"There is a need for white allies to say something so that the burden doesn't land on just people of color. We need the system to name that a culture of whiteness exists and lean into these uncomfortable conversations."*
>
> *— District Educator*

Many school districts in Sacramento County have taken significant steps toward fostering open conversations about race and equity. In nearly all the districts in Sacramento County, there have been explicit anti-racist, anti-bias training in the past five years. In some districts, these trainings have been integrated into staff onboarding, requiring all new employees to participate in a series of sessions focused on self-reflection and learning about historical inequities and their impact on today's educational system. These training sessions provide educators with the knowledge and tools to recognize biases, examine their instructional practices, have difficult conversations, and shift towards using more inclusive and equitable approaches.

A district leader echoed this progress, noting that "data conversations are so different than where they were a year ago." Another leader emphasized that "the equity conversation has taken off in the last five years. People are more open now. There is a sense of openness to talk about equity issues." This increasing openness signals a positive shift in the willingness of educators to engage with these critically important issues.

While these conversations are gaining momentum, there remains a significant disparity in who is expected to initiate and sustain them. Across interviews, school and district staff of color expressed frustration that the burden of leading discussions on race and equity disproportionately falls on them. As one district equity leader put it, "Equity leaders pay a tax for pushing people to engage in reflective practice." Another educator emphasized the need for non-Black staff to step up, stating "There is a need for white allies to say something so that the burden doesn't land on just people of color. We need the system to name that a culture of whiteness exists and lean into these uncomfortable conversations." Research supports this sentiment, highlighting that effective anti-racist work requires the active participation of all stakeholders, particularly those in positions of power (Kendi, 2019). California has recognized that part of creating an equitable learning environment where all students feel welcome, including Black students, requires "honest discussions of racism," and the Legislature has directed the California Department of Education (CDE) to issue guidance by July 1, 2025, to help school districts, county offices of education, charter schools, and school personnel manage conversations about race. (Ed. Code, §§ 202, 60040.5.)

Training sessions, professional development programs, and coaching on equity and implicit bias have provided valuable opportunities for educators to engage with these complex issues. However, interviews reveal that significant work remains in expanding these discussions to include a broader range of stakeholders. School districts must continue fostering spaces where educators can critically reflect on biases, challenge assumptions, and assess their role in either perpetuating or dismantling racial disparities. Importantly, students and families also want to be included in conversations around equity. As one student emphasized, "To better support Black students, I would tell school principals, teachers, and staff to engage with Black students, their families, and communities to understand their experiences, challenges, and needs." Echoing this sentiment, a parent and community leader added, "When schools implement policies in a rushed mode to address student needs, we don't take into consideration what the students are saying or what the root causes of the issue are. We make assumptions about student experiences when we can simply just ask the kids." While students and families are eager to participate in these conversations, they emphasize the need for educators to take the initiative in creating opportunities for open dialogue.

Overall, although these efforts are still developing, the progress made in recent years marks an important first step toward creating a more just and equitable educational system for Black youth. By fostering an environment where difficult conversations about race and equity are normalized rather than avoided, schools can move closer to meaningful and lasting systemic change.

THEME 4

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH: Aligning Systems and Ensuring Meaningful Engagement and Support for Black Students

While efforts have been made to address racial disparities in academic achievement, there remains an opportunity to enhance support for Black students by aligning systems and fostering meaningful collaboration between schools, community-based organizations, and families. Interviews with educators, district leaders, and community-based organizations highlight the vital role that external organizations play in providing Black students and families with essential support. These organizations often offer resources and services that supplement those available in schools, reinforcing the benefit of having a more integrated approach to addressing student needs.

Community-based organizations have become indispensable resources for Black students and their families, bridging the critical gaps in the education system. When asked about the biggest challenges facing Black students, many youth cite family stress linked to financial instability, inadequate housing, and limited access to healthcare.[12] This creates obstacles that impact students' ability to thrive academically and personally. In response, community-

12 While many of the challenges Black students face are tied to socio-economic conditions, it is important not to conflate socio-economic status with race. These struggles are not simply the result of individual economic hardship but are rooted in a long history of systemic racism. As discussed in Section 1, a range of historical laws and policies—including redlining, school segregation, and discriminatory labor and housing practices—have collectively disadvantaged Black Americans over generations. Many students and families continue to grapple with the lasting impacts of these injustices today.

based organizations provide a comprehensive range of services, including healthcare access, mental health counseling, stable housing support, food security programs, academic enrichment, mentorship, and case management. Beyond simply offering resources, a number of these organizations serve as de facto community schools, delivering holistic, culturally responsive support that addresses both the educational and socio-economic needs of Black students and their families. By fostering safe, empowering environments, these organizations play a crucial role in uplifting Black youth and ensuring they have the tools and opportunities needed to succeed.

A recurring theme in interviews with community organizations was the prioritization of student and family voices in determining the types and scope of services provided. One community leader emphasized this approach, stating that their guiding principle is "listening to the kids, always." This perspective highlights the belief that effective interventions must be directly informed by the needs of the youth and families they aim to support, necessitating the integration of their feedback into program development. Additionally, many organizations stress the critical role of parental involvement, recognizing that sustainable improvements in student achievement and the overall well-being of Black students requires meaningful partnerships between schools and families. Research indicates that when parents are actively engaged in their children's education—through advocacy, communication with educators, and shared decision-making—students demonstrate higher academic achievement, improved attendance, and increased motivation (Ishimaru, 2019).

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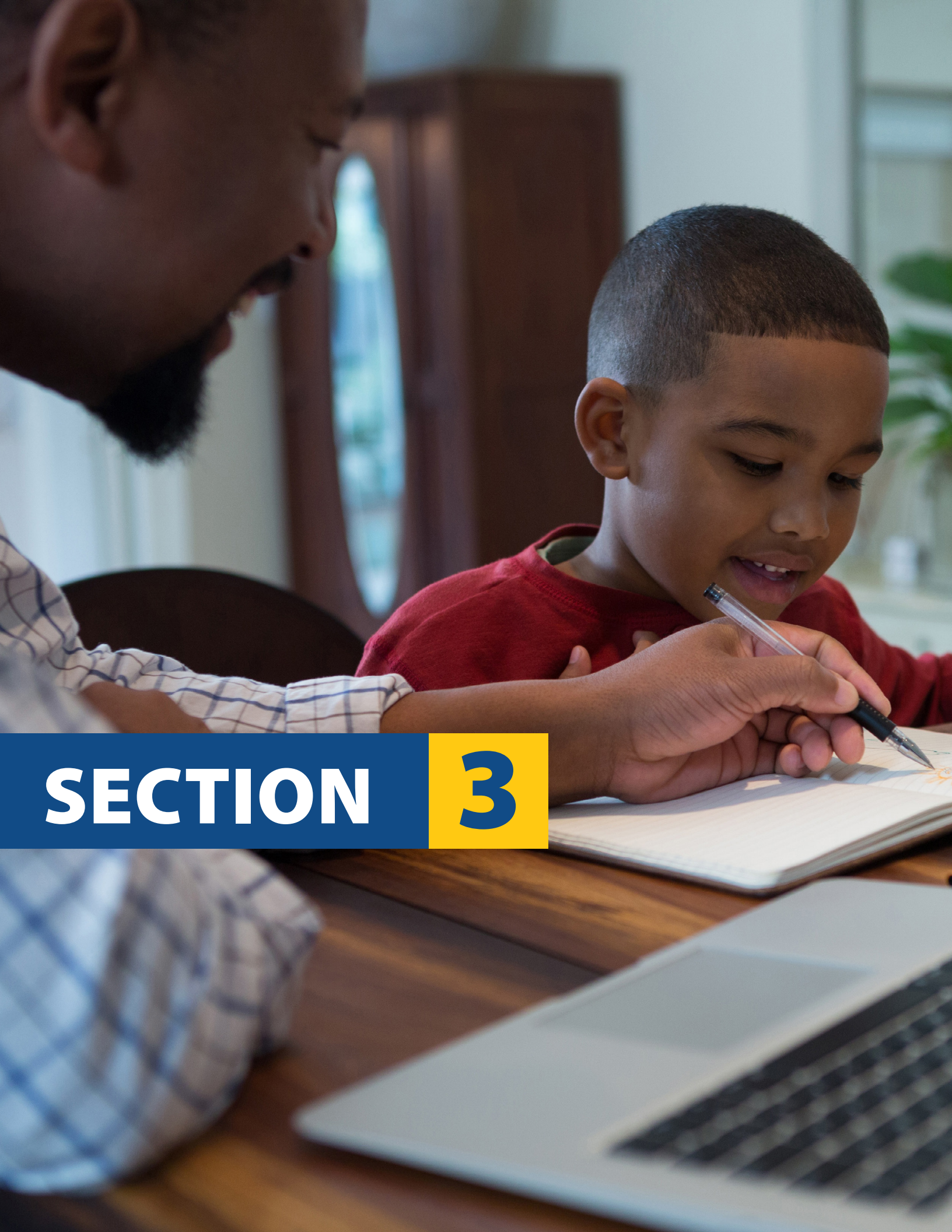
Despite the invaluable work being done by community organizations, many of the people we interviewed acknowledge the need to further integrate these types of comprehensive supports within the school system, rather than relying solely on external providers to fill the gaps. While community-based organizations play a crucial role in providing resources and advocacy, schools have an opportunity to further strengthen these partnerships and more intentionally institutionalize equitable support structures. By expanding school-based interventions, collaborating with community organizations, and building authentic relationships with families, the diverse needs of Black students will be more fully understood, supported, and prioritized.



SECTION 3

"In all living systems, change always happens through emergence. Yet emergence doesn't start big. It begins with small local actions. Large-scale change emerges from connections among these local efforts, from the exchanges of learning and the forging of relationships."

— Margaret Wheatley, "Bringing Schools Back to Life"

RECOMMENDATIONS

The work of transforming the educational experiences and outcomes for students necessitates a critical examination of the various levels at which students interact with and are influenced by the people and systems around them. In finding ways to better understand, and therefore serve, Black students, we can ultimately improve our educational system for all learners.

1. **Individual:** How a person's beliefs, mindsets, and identity factors influence their behavior, actions, and understandings. This level considers the impact of both explicit and implicit biases, which shape perceptions and interactions.
2. **Interpersonal:** Interactions between individuals. This level explores the dynamics and nuances of interpersonal discourse and the behaviors that can reinforce inequities.
3. **Systemic:** policies, norms, structures, and practices at the institutional (e.g., school) or system (e.g., district) level that sustain and reinforce patterns of inequity and lead to racialized outcomes. This level involves a broad historical examination of how institutions and societal policies collectively perpetuate inequitable outcomes for marginalized communities, providing a deeper understanding of the historical and structural factors that shape contemporary educational disparities.[13]

During our interviews and focus groups, a set of recommendations emerged, highlighting the specific needs, wants, and requests from students, educators, community members, and families regarding the type of educational experiences they desire for themselves and their children. We have organized these recommendations into three categories: individual, interpersonal, and systemic, underscoring that change cannot occur on a single dimension alone. Leaders must adopt a multifaceted approach to develop a comprehensive plan, identifying areas where intentional efforts should be directed for meaningful change.

The recommendations can be considered a starting point, a point of reflection for self and system. Each recommendation should be further developed, in each local context, with specific action steps, measurable outcomes, timelines, and accountability metrics in the implementation phase. To ensure effective and sustainable change, this detailed planning should be done in continued partnership with Black students, families, educators, and community stakeholders at school, district, and county levels.

13 Adapted from The National Equity Project "Lens of Systemic Oppression."

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

- Engage with Black students as capable, intelligent, and eager to learn.
- Commit to professional learning and self-reflection practices to become aware of implicit bias, microaggressions, and stereotypes—and take action to disrupt these patterns.
- Foster confidence in Black students' abilities and potential.
- Challenge and dismantle harmful stereotypical thinking and stigmatization.
- Recognize the factors that contribute to Black students feeling simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Develop policies and practices that ensure Black students are neither hyper-surveilled nor overlooked, addressing systemic biases in discipline, recognition, and academic placement.
- Prioritize student-directed learning to empower Black students to explore personally meaningful topics.
- Engage students in creative learning experiences where they are encouraged to utilize critical thinking to explore and deconstruct harmful narratives, leading to deeper understanding, empowerment, and empathy.

INTERPERSONAL ACTIONS

- Leverage research on intersectionality and systemic oppression to inform staff discussions about the socioeconomic challenges some Black students face.
- Foster a school culture that affirms and normalizes Black identity.
- Integrate Black culture into everyday school experiences through open dialogue, representation, and school practices.
- Strengthen engagement and trust among Black students, educators, and families.
- Acknowledge and address the socioeconomic challenges some students and families may face.
- Develop a deeper understanding of the intergenerational impact of systemic racism on families and how it affects their interactions with schools.
- Acknowledge and support the intersectionality of students' identities, recognizing the unique challenges faced by those who are Black and also part of other historically and systemically marginalized groups (e.g., Black and disabled, Black and LGBTQ+, Black and foster/systems involved, Black immigrant students).
- Partner with nonprofits and community-based organizations to address support gaps for Black students.

SYSTEMIC ACTIONS

ACCESS & REPRESENTATION

- Provide transparent access to educational resources and clearly communicate their purpose and benefits to students and families.
- Address systemic disparities in access to opportunities.
- Increase diversity among faculty, recognizing the importance of racial representation.
- Create an environment where diverse staff feel welcomed, safe, valued, protected, and fully supported.
- Regularly celebrate the depth and diversity of Black culture by integrating it into school events and curricula throughout the year.
- Create and enhance cultural programs such as Black Student Unions (BSU), Freedom Schools, and Black Excellence Awards.

ACCOUNTABILITY & EQUITY

- Establish clear reporting systems for students to report racial bias or discrimination, ensuring thorough investigation, appropriate corrective action, and educational measures to prevent future incidents.
- Develop policies and practices that ensure Black students are neither hyper-surveilled nor overlooked, addressing systemic biases in discipline, recognition, and academic placement.
- Regularly assess and address the overrepresentation of Black students in areas such as disciplinary actions, special education placements, and lower academic tracks, closely evaluating intersectionality data.
- Focus on continuous improvement efforts to identify and analyze disproportionality, ensuring that root causes—such as bias in policies, practices, and decision-making—are examined and addressed.
- Adopt data-driven interventions, revise policies that contribute to systemic inequities, and implement training for educators on equitable discipline, anti-bias practices, and culturally responsive teaching to create more just and supportive learning environments.
- Ensure staff training on bias and systems of oppression are led by experts with firsthand knowledge to create a truly authentic, meaningful, and transformative learning experience.

INCLUSIVE & CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

- Expand history courses to include a broader and more accurate representation of Black and African heritage, beyond slavery.
- Implement inclusive teaching strategies and provide educational experiences that honor students' cultures, recognize their assets, and help them explore untapped potential.
- Integrate Black history and culture into the curriculum beyond entertainment, incorporating content that highlights Black contributions to history, science, literature, politics, and social movements.
- Design hands-on learning opportunities that engage students in meaningful ways.
- Develop programs that empower students to identify their strengths and actively shape their academic and career paths.
- Offer "real-world" courses that prepare students for adulthood through practical life skills and personal development, such as financial literacy, workforce readiness, and independent living.
- Expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) beyond structured pathways and classes, providing hands-on workforce readiness experiences in a safe environment where students can experiment, learn from mistakes, and build confidence before entering the job market.
- Redesign alternative education programs to individualize learning experiences tailored to students' needs.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & SUPPORT

- Equip educators with training and resources to understand the intersecting identities of students.
- Foster an environment where all aspects of a student's identity are affirmed and valued by promoting awareness, inclusivity, and culturally responsive support systems that address these layered experiences.
- Provide accessible, culturally aligned mental health services for all students.
- Establish and strengthen youth leadership programs that elevate Black students' voices in decision-making, ensuring that their perspectives contribute to shaping policies, curricula, and school culture.
- Co-create solutions with Black students and families by establishing advisory councils and participatory decision-making structures that directly influence school policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

The landscape of Black student experiences in Sacramento County reflects both the enduring challenges and the resilience of a community striving for equity, recognition, and success. Black students, their families, and Black educators continue to express a fundamental desire—to be seen, valued, and supported as capable learners without facing discrimination or mistreatment. Their experiences underscore the need for a more inclusive and affirming education system, one that extends beyond representation to authentically fostering their success.

While initiatives such as Black student clubs and affinity spaces provide a sense of belonging, students emphasize that true equity requires systemic change. They call for culturally relevant curricula that celebrate Black excellence, rather than centering on trauma, and for educators who not only reflect their identities but also genuinely invest in their success. Black students want to be taught history that uplifts, rather than marginalizes, and to engage in learning environments where their voices are heard and their contributions are respected. In fact, personalizing the educational setting so that it responds to individual students' interests and needs, as well as their home and community contexts, is one of the most powerful levers educators have to change the trajectories for children's lives (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Furthermore, there is a need for mental health support that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges with cultural competence that exists systemically. Black students and families seek an end to systemic biases, the dismantling of racism in education, and the promotion of inclusivity at all levels. Achieving these goals requires collective action—educators, policymakers, and communities must work together to ensure that Black students are not only supported but empowered. One student, when asked what makes Black students unique, captured the power, creativity, and determination of the community with striking clarity:

> "What I think makes a Black student unique is our ability to bring out our own individual energy into whatever space we enter.… We breathe life and authenticity into the spaces we choose to enter [and] since none of these spaces were meant for us in the first place, this individualism is very refreshing, [it] trickles all the way down to how Black students act, even within the classroom. This ability to shift energy and bring [our] own personality to the classroom specifically is what makes Black students unique."

This sentiment is a call to action—a reminder that Black students are not seeking special treatment, but fairness, opportunity, and the chance to thrive in a system that has historically marginalized them. Their resilience, pride, and commitment to excellence shine through despite systemic barriers. It is now the responsibility of the broader education system to meet them with the same dedication and belief in their success.

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APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study centers on amplifying the voices, experiences, and insights of Black students, families/caregivers, and community. This research adopts a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, which is grounded in the belief that individuals are experts of their own experiences and are capable of leading research efforts to address issues that affect their lives and communities. This is especially true for historically, intentionally marginalized and minoritized communities. By prioritizing lived expertise and fostering collaboration, this approach ensures the inclusion of authentic narratives, actionable insights, and equity-driven solutions. All research activities will comply with ethical standards, including obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through California State University, Sacramento (CSUS).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Black students in Sacramento County, multiple qualitative research methods were utilized, including interviews, focus groups, and observations. Together, these methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of the unique challenges, accomplishments, and systemic barriers faced by Black students.

PARTICIPANTS

1. **Students:** A focus on Black students across various grade levels, gendered identities, sexual orientation, and abilities.
2. **Caregivers:** Individuals who are caretakers of Black youth provide vital perspectives on students' educational journeys as well as offer insight into their own racialized experiences in the educational setting.
3. **Educators and School Staff:** Teachers, counselors, administrators, and non-certificated staff, particularly those who work closely with Black students.
4. **Community Members:** Representatives from Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and other stakeholders engaged in student advocacy.

Recruitment efforts prioritized diversity within the sample, with targeted outreach to ensure representation from Black educators, parents, and students. A snowball sampling technique supplemented the recruitment process, enabling the identification of additional participants through referrals.

DATA COLLECTION

RESEARCH METHODS

1. **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR):**
    a. YPAR and PAR positions Black students and the adults who support and work with them as co-researchers, empowering them to play an active role in identifying issues, co-designing research questions, and analyzing findings. This participatory approach ensures that the research process remains community-centered and reflects the authentic voices of students.
    b. Through YPAR and PAR, Black students are not merely subjects of the research but are active agents in uncovering systemic inequities and proposing solutions.

2. **Interviews**
    a. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews are conducted with Black students to provide a space for open and honest dialogue. These interviews delve into their personal experiences, challenges, successes, and aspirations.
    b. Interviews are also conducted with key stakeholders such as educators, administrators, caregivers, and community leaders to provide additional context and a broader understanding of systemic issues affecting Black students.
3. **Focus Groups**
    a. Focus groups create a collaborative environment where participants can engage in collective storytelling and shared reflection. The group setting fosters discussion, allowing participants to build on each other's experiences and identify common themes. The use of focus groups and storytelling as research methods indicates a participatory approach. Focus groups allow for group dynamics to shape the conversation, encouraging students to share and build upon one another's experiences.
    b. These discussions also provide a platform to explore collective strategies for addressing inequities within Sacramento County.
4. **Observations**
    a. Observations are conducted within classrooms, school events, and/or community spaces to gain a contextual understanding of the environments Black students navigate daily.
    b. By observing interactions, behaviors, and institutional practices, the research identifies patterns and dynamics that may contribute to disparities or successes.

LIVED EXPERTISE OF THE COMMUNITY

The lens used to study the lived experiences of Black students is intentionally rooted in the community's perspective. This approach recognizes the critical importance of lived expertise—the deep, first-hand knowledge that individuals who are Black, especially Black students, bring to understanding their own educational journeys. By centering the voices of individuals from the Black community and engaging them as collaborators, this research challenges traditional, top-down methodologies and seeks to deconstruct the systemic barriers that have historically marginalized Black youth.

This methodology is designed not only to document the experiences of Black students but also to honor their narratives as a foundation for advocacy and change. The insights gained through this process will contribute to a richer understanding of what Black students in Sacramento County have endured, achieved, and struggled with, as well as the systemic transformations necessary to create more equitable educational outcomes.

DIRECT POINT OF VIEW FROM THE BLACK COMMUNITY

The study is focused on gathering data directly from a diverse pool of Black students, caregivers, educators, and community members emphasizing the importance of their first-hand accounts and lived expertise. This suggests a phenomenological approach, where the aim is to understand and describe the lived experiences of participants in their terms, rather than imposing predefined categories or assumptions.

STORYTELLING AND COLLECTIVE VOICE

Storytelling allows individuals who are Black to share their personal narratives, offering rich, detailed accounts of their experiences in a way that numbers or surveys might not capture. The emphasis on collective voice highlights a collaborative methodology.

It suggests that the research prioritizes the shared experiences and communal insights of Black students, recognizing that individual experiences are connected to a larger social context. By tapping into collective voice, the study values the strength and solidarity of the community, rather than isolating individual perspectives.

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS AND DESIRES

The ultimate goal of the methodology is to understand the needs and desires of Black students within the educational system. This reflects a goal-oriented methodology where the research not only aims to understand past experiences but also identifies actionable outcomes that could lead to changes in the educational system that better serve these students.

TYPE OF DATA	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Interviews & Focus Groups	**51** School-based Educators (teachers and principals) **19** District Leaders (directors, coordinators, and superintendents) **154** Students and Young People **23** Community-based Organizations **28** Families and Caregivers
Observations	**5** Family and community engagement observations specifically geared towards Black students and families
Convenings	**May 2024:** 31 participants **November 2024:** 100 participants **March 2025:** 102 participants

DATA ANALYSIS

All collected data underwent a thematic analysis process, identifying:

1. Recurring themes and trends.
2. Unique insights specific to the experiences of Black students.
3. Systemic barriers and opportunities for positive change.

This methodological framework ensured a comprehensive and actionable understanding of the educational challenges and opportunities for Black students in Sacramento County.


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