



The Impact of Racial Bias on Black Students in L.A. Unified

How School Culture Affects Black Student Achievement and Decisions About Returning to Campus During the Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

One of the most shameful aspects of American public education is the mistreatment of Black students. Study after study shows that Black students receive fewer opportunities than other children and suffer from disadvantages caused by institutional racism and segregation, leading to lower test scores compared with their peers.¹ Yet, despite years of administrators and experts acknowledging that Black students are suffering, little to no progress has been made in creating educational justice.²

This tragedy has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who could least afford to miss classroom instruction time spent a year largely unsupervised or with few resources that could help them learn under difficult conditions, and studies show that Black students suffered greater learning loss than their white peers.³

The pandemic marks a turning point in public education. Distance learning has made the disparities in schools impossible to ignore. Most parents have been largely disconnected from their children's educational experience by design, sometimes only seeing their student's classrooms a few times a year. But during the pandemic, families played a greater role in their child's learning, whether they wanted to or not.

To measure parental views toward L.A. Unified, Speak Up surveyed 500 parents⁴ about their educational experiences over the past year. Speak Up also measured how their views toward public education changed during distance learning.

Among the findings:

- Bullying was widespread among children of all races before the pandemic, but 40% of Black parents reported their child had been bullied, the highest among all groups. The percentage of Black parents who said their child had been bullied fell to 6% during distance learning.
- Nearly two out of three Black parents said they did not want to send their children back to school. While many cited concerns about COVID as a factor, 43% of those respondents who kept their children home said they were concerned about bullying, racism, and low academic standards for Black children at school.



¹ "Educator bias is associated with racial disparities in student achievement and discipline," Brookings Institute, July, 20, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/07/20/educator-bias-is-associated-with-racial-disparities-in-student-achievement-and-discipline/>

² See Exhibit 12

³ "A lost generation: Surge of research reveals students sliding backwards, most vulnerable worst affected." Washington Post, Dec. 20, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/students-falling-behind/2020/12/06/88d7157a-3665-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html

⁴ Surveys were conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research between March 18 and 23, 2021. Parents were recruited by Facebook ads targeted at parents who live in L.A. Unified zip codes. Surveys were conducted in English and Spanish and include 96 Black parents.

- In an indictment of how Black families experienced in-person schooling prior to the pandemic, Black parents were more likely to say their kids' educational experience improved during distance learning than other groups. Twenty-seven percent of Black parents said their child's behavior improved during the pandemic, while only 8% said it got worse. Thirty-four percent of Black parents said their children got better support from their teachers during distance learning, while only 12% said their children got worse instruction while learning at home.
- Nearly two out of three Black respondents agreed that "institutional racism is built into our public education system," while only one in three Latino parents felt the same way. Nearly half of white parents agreed that racism is built into public schools.
- Nearly 60% of Black parents agreed that L.A. Unified "does not provide Black children with the same academic opportunities as white children." Only 24% of Latino parents and just 14% of white parents agreed with this statement.
- Fewer Black parents (58%) than Latino parents (71%) report that schools supported their child's racial identity.



Speak Up also analyzed publicly available data from L.A. Unified that measured student satisfaction, which showed that 16% of Black students reported being bullied, the highest of any racial group, while only 44% reported that they felt they were treated with respect by adults at school, the lowest of any group.

Speak Up also conducted a series of focus groups with Black parents who discussed how they have navigated the public school system both before and during the pandemic. They described a system that is indifferent and even hostile to them and their children, as well as their reluctance to send their students back to in-person learning because they feel their children will be better off not going back to a campus where they do not feel welcome.

Black families in L.A. Unified feel even more marginalized as the number of Latinos in the district grows and the percentage of Black students shrinks. In the 1994-1995 academic year, Black students made up nearly 14% of students.⁵ By 2009-2010, Black students had dropped to 8%, roughly where they remain today.⁶ During the same period, Latino students grew from 67% of the student body to about 74%.⁷

⁵ Ed Data, Los Angeles Unified School District <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DstEnrAll.asp?cYear=1994-95&cChoice=DstEnrAll&cSelect=1964733%2D%2DLos+Angeles+Unified&Level=District&myTimeFrame=S&cTopic=Enrollment&cLevel=District&TheName=Los^Angeles^Unified>

⁶ Dataquest, California Department of Education, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/Enrollment/EthnicGrade.aspx?cChoice=DstEnrAll&cYear=2009-10&cSelect=1964212--ABCUNIFIED&TheCounty=&cLevel=District&cTopic=Enrollment&myTimeFrame=S&cType=ALL&cGender=B>

⁷ Dataquest, California Department of Education <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/Enrollment/EthnicGrade.aspx?cChoice=DstEnrAll&cYear=2009-10&cSelect=1964212--ABCUNIFIED&TheCounty=&cLevel=District&cTopic=Enrollment&myTimeFrame=S&cType=ALL&cGender=B>

The research revealed that many Black parents felt discriminated against, tokenized, and voiceless. And, as much as many Black parents are wary of returning their children to school because of concerns over COVID-19, many parents are also reluctant to send their children back to campuses that they believe are stacked against Black families.

These findings represent a failure in L.A. Unified and across the nation to provide educational justice to Black families. Rooting out racism in L.A. Unified will require recognizing the connection between school culture and student performance and winning back the trust of Black families who have felt abandoned for decades.



THE LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT: AN OVERVIEW

In the 2019-2020 school year, Los Angeles Unified was the second largest school district in the nation and the biggest in California, serving 574,996 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade at over 1,000 schools.⁸

The Los Angeles Unified School District's elected seven-member Board of Education has authorized over 200 independently-operated public charter schools which are currently under its purview. Los Angeles Unified boundaries stretch across 710 square miles, which includes most of the city of Los Angeles, along with all or portions of 26 cities and unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County.

Latino students make up the majority of L.A. Unified's population at 74.1% followed by white at 10.2%, Black/African American at 7.6%, Asian at 3.6%, Filipino at 1.8%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander at 0.2%, and American Indian/Alaska Native at 0.1%. Students identified with two or more races constitute 0.2% of L.A. Unified, and no race/ethnicity data was reported for 0.3% of students.⁹

⁸ California Department of Education DataQuest Page. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cde=1964733&gglevel=District&year=2020-21&ro=y>

⁹ California Department of Education DataQuest Page. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrEthGrd.aspx?cde=1964733&gglevel=District&year=2020-21&ro=y>



BLACK STUDENT PERFORMANCE BY THE NUMBERS

Black students' yearly assessment scores are typically the lowest scores of all the subgroups except for English Learners (see Exhibit 1). Only one-third of Black students achieved proficiency on the ELA Smarter Balanced Assessment in 2019, and their performance in math was worse (see Exhibit 2). On average, a Black student was 3.4 times less likely to achieve proficiency in ELA and math than their peers, according to a Speak Up analysis of standardized test data.

This performance fits historical trends, and there are no signs that L.A. Unified is making any significant progress toward closing the gap between Black students and their peers. The gap between Black and white students' scores ranged from 28% to 40% depending on subject and grade level, according to a Speak Up analysis of ten years of test data. The analysis also found that these gaps are closing at a rate of less than 1% per year - but only at the elementary and middle school levels. For high school students, the gap in scores is actually increasing slightly.

Black students also encounter more social and emotional obstacles at school, according to a Speak Up analysis of L.A. Unified's School Experience Survey (SES), which is administered annually to students, teachers, and staff in the fall by L.A. Unified. The results are made available on the L.A. Unified website but have not been analyzed by race.

The 2019-2020 survey contains responses from 815,512 people, including 224,203 who were high school students. Of those high school students who identified their race/ethnicity, 40,270 were Asian, 55,475 were African American, 62,894 were Hispanic, and 58,748 were white.

Analysis of the 2019-2020 SES revealed significant differences between Black students and their peers that closely resembled the findings of the Speak Up parent survey.

Black students reported more frequent instances of bullying (see Exhibit 3). Black students also believed that they were bullied based on the way they looked and spoke and experienced physical aggression due to bullying (see Exhibit 4). Additionally, Black students felt less connected to their schools than their peers and felt less respected by school staff and other adults on campus (see Exhibits 5 and 6).

Black students are also far less likely to be prepared to enter college, based on their performance on standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, according to a Speak Up analysis (see Exhibits 7-10).

PARENTAL VIEWS ON LAUSD TREATMENT OF BLACK FAMILIES

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that many Black parents that participated in Speak Up focus groups felt that the public school system is systemically racist. During the interviews, several themes stood out:

- Black parents felt that L.A. Unified teachers and administrators were unable to effectively communicate with them or their children, with mothers saying they often felt like they were automatically seen as “angry Black women,” and their kids were seen as guilty in any student conflict.
- Black parents were reluctant to send their children back to campus this spring, especially because all secondary students (and some elementary students) would only be doing “Zoom in a Room.”
- Black parents felt they had to advocate more persistently for their children since Black families are a minority in L.A. Unified and are also often not as wealthy as white parents.



The following are quotes from Black parents, grandparents and caregivers who participated in Speak Up focus groups. Another collection of quotes from students is attached (see Exhibit 11).

“

“I believe that [institutional racism] is built so deep that I don’t think anybody recognizes it. It looks like this: They have been teaching false narratives. They’ve never taught us about who we are and how we, too, contributed to society. They are not teaching these children how to own businesses or be CEOs. They are teaching children how to be employees. Not that there’s anything wrong with being an employee, but other options are never introduced,” said Monique Bacon, a mother of two LAUSD graduates and grandmother to a current LAUSD elementary student in Westchester.

”

“

“We also don’t have the economics. I have the experience where certain groups are catered to because of either the numbers or the economics. I live on the Westside so I’ve seen the gentrification process where our schools were predominantly Latino and Black, and then they were gentrified, and we have a lot more white parents attending the school, and I’ve watched the catering to change because of economics and the changing demographics,” said Chantel Hunter Mah, a mother of a Venice High graduate and a Venice High student.

“I’m an attorney and there’s never the assumption that I’m educated or that I’m on equal grounds as a white parent. That just never happens in LAUSD,” Hunter Mah said.

”

“I have a child with special needs, and I’ve had the worst school year ever. Connecting with the school office, assistants, getting help. It’s almost like ever since the pandemic happened, it’s been more of a reason to put him on the back burner. It’s been pretty much impossible to get my needs met,” said Tiffany Johnson, a mother of a 7th grader at Johnnie Cochrane Middle School and two kids who have graduated from LAUSD.

“He knew that his teacher was not for him. He knew his school was not for him. My kid, being Black, had to work the extra. I’m not showing off, I’m pissed. My kid, because of his skin color, had to do the extra. No game time, no friends time, because he wants something for himself. And that’s sad because it took a lot of letters, it took a lot of going to the principal every week, it took a lot of time off from work. I could have lost my job, but it didn’t matter to me. What mattered to me was my child’s education. And they finally heard me out. It took a lot of visits. It took a lot of fighting.... And that’s unfair. But that’s LAUSD. That’s their culture,” said Michelle Tillett, a mother of three children, a junior and freshman in college, who graduated from Dorsey High, and an eight year old in L.A. Unified, who lives in South Central Los Angeles.

“They don’t understand our kids. It’s more like a pipeline to prison. When they see our kids, they just don’t think our kids deserve to be engineers. They just don’t think our kids deserve to be doctors,” Tillett said.

IMPROVING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Creating a better environment for Black students must start in the classroom. Speak Up analyzed the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the union and district and found that it contains provisions that often impede the equitable distribution of quality teachers within the district and limits efforts to combat racist behaviors or practices.

The frequency of evaluations is limited by the CBA to once every two years for permanent employees, and teachers with more years of experience may only be evaluated every five years.¹⁰ Evaluations are also limited to two distinct classroom visits annually,¹¹ which means teachers do not get regular feedback to improve their practice, depriving schools of the ability to support teachers who need it the most. It also limits the likelihood of observing and responding to racist practices like those identified by the students and parents in Speak Up focus groups. This means the district rarely disciplines a teacher for the racist behaviors cited by the Black students and parents.

¹⁰Article X, Section 3.0, Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles. (2019). 2019-2022 Agreement. https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/2019-2022_utla-laUSD_collective_bargaining_agreement.pdf

¹¹Article X, Section 5.0, Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles. (2019). 2019-2022 Agreement. https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/2019-2022_utla-laUSD_collective_bargaining_agreement.pdf

Compounding the problem is the system of professional development delivery and evaluation, which puts the schools at the whims of external planners who are not familiar with each school's instructional priorities. While professional development for teachers and administrators is encouraged, this mismatched system is upheld by the collective bargaining agreement, preventing school-level administrators from instituting enrichment opportunities best aligned with school needs. Furthermore, since there is no way of assessing what is most appropriate at a given school or the effectiveness of a particular workshop, it is impossible for the district to determine if its required cultural bias training is working.

Both the CBA and California state law contain a provision that teachers must be notified of a student's suspensions within the past three years.¹² Teachers surely appreciate a discreet notification that a student may need extra patience or a different support strategy, but in practice, this also undoubtedly perpetuates anti-Black bias in the school system.

This bias is born out in the numbers. In the three years preceding the pandemic, Black students were suspended at almost five times the rate of white students.¹³ When Black students are criminalized, it is often for nonviolent actions. Between 2014 and 2017, four of the top five charges assigned to students by the Los Angeles School Police Department were for non-violent acts, including public disturbance, trespassing, and property damage.¹⁴

While the process of notifying teachers of past behavior might seem fair on paper, in practice this procedure fosters further discrimination and bias against Black students.



¹²Article XXIV, Section 4.0, California Education Code § 49079) https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=EDC§ionNum=49079.

¹³California Department of Education Dashboard 2019, 2018, 2017

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19647330000000/2019/conditions-and-climate#suspension-rate>

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19647330000000/2018/conditions-and-climate#suspension-rate>

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19647330000000/2017/conditions-and-climate#suspension-rate>

¹⁴"Policing Our Students, An Analysis of L.A. School Police Department Data (2014-2017)" Allen, Bryan, Guerrero, ect. <https://ucla.app.box.com/s/0lhrqp3bz8exw4kk735odbbz3efyhjje>

CONCLUSIONS

Public education in Los Angeles was already facing an enormous challenge before the pandemic and is now at the brink of crisis. Many families are balking at sending their children back to campus. Only 7% of high school students and 12% of middle school students have returned to L.A. Unified campuses,¹⁵ and many seem to have lost faith in their schools.

While many families are keeping their children at home over concerns about COVID-19, others have reached a breaking point with the district. Black parents were able to see how their children were treated by their peers and instructors while kids learned at home, and in some cases, saw a system that did not benefit them. Many of the same parents who saw that their children seemed to learn better and thrive emotionally away from school now question whether it is in their child's best interest to return to campus.



Whether or not children return to in-person learning in the fall, this loss of faith in the public school system will have long-term repercussions. The only way to undo the damage of the pandemic is to dramatically reimagine how the public schools system serves its Black students. This is a task that L.A. Unified has largely paid lip service to over the past 40 years. With the findings of this report and the funding finally available to do something about it, the Board has an unprecedented opportunity to address the educational debt owed to Black students. LAUSD is receiving a massive influx of COVID relief dollars, with \$375 million¹⁶ dedicated to schools that serve Black students, in addition to the \$36.5 million the Board voted earlier this year to divert toward an achievement plan for Black students.¹⁷

The Board must use this funding to truly address issues of overt and systemic racism and create measures of accountability that ensure the nation's second largest school district makes progress on these issues. If the Board does not, it is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past 40 years.

¹⁵"How many high school students will come back in the fall? Dismal return rate raises alarms." Los Angeles Times, May 11, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-05-11/alarming-7-percent-laUSD-high-schoolers-back-open-campus>

¹⁶"Path to Recovery Update." Board of Education, May 25, 2021. <https://boe.lausd.net/sites/default/files/05-25-21SpclBdChartersPathToRecovery5-24-21.pdf>

¹⁷"L.A. school board cuts its police force and diverts funds for Black student achievement." LA Times, Feb. 16, 2021 <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-02-16/lausd-diverting-school-police-funds-support-black-students#:~:text=In%20a%20major%20overhaul%20of,the%20education%20of%20Black%20students.>

APPENDIX I

These graphs are based on a Speak Up analysis of L.A. Unified student performance based on California Dept. of Education Reports from 2003 to 2019

Exhibit 1

ELA and Math Proficiency in LAUSD by Race/Ethnicity, 2003-2019

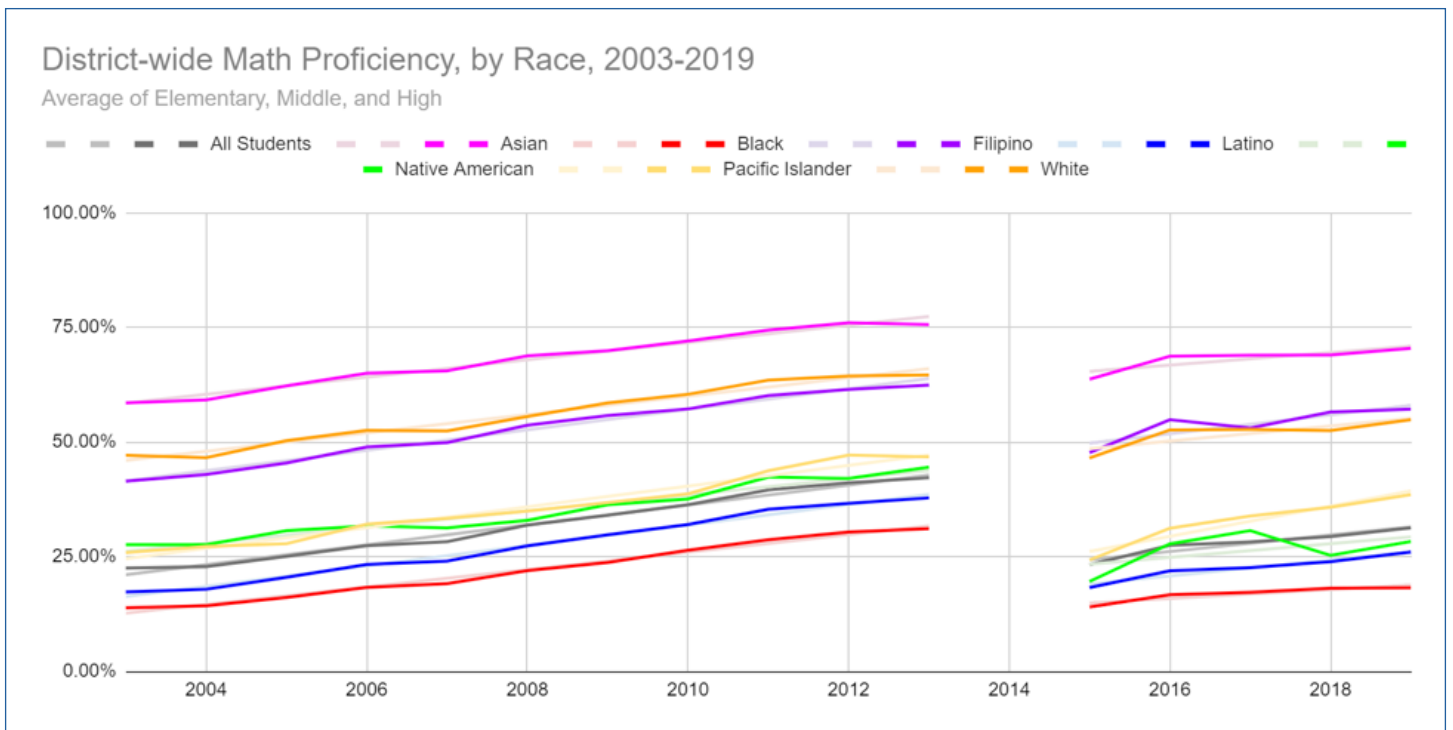
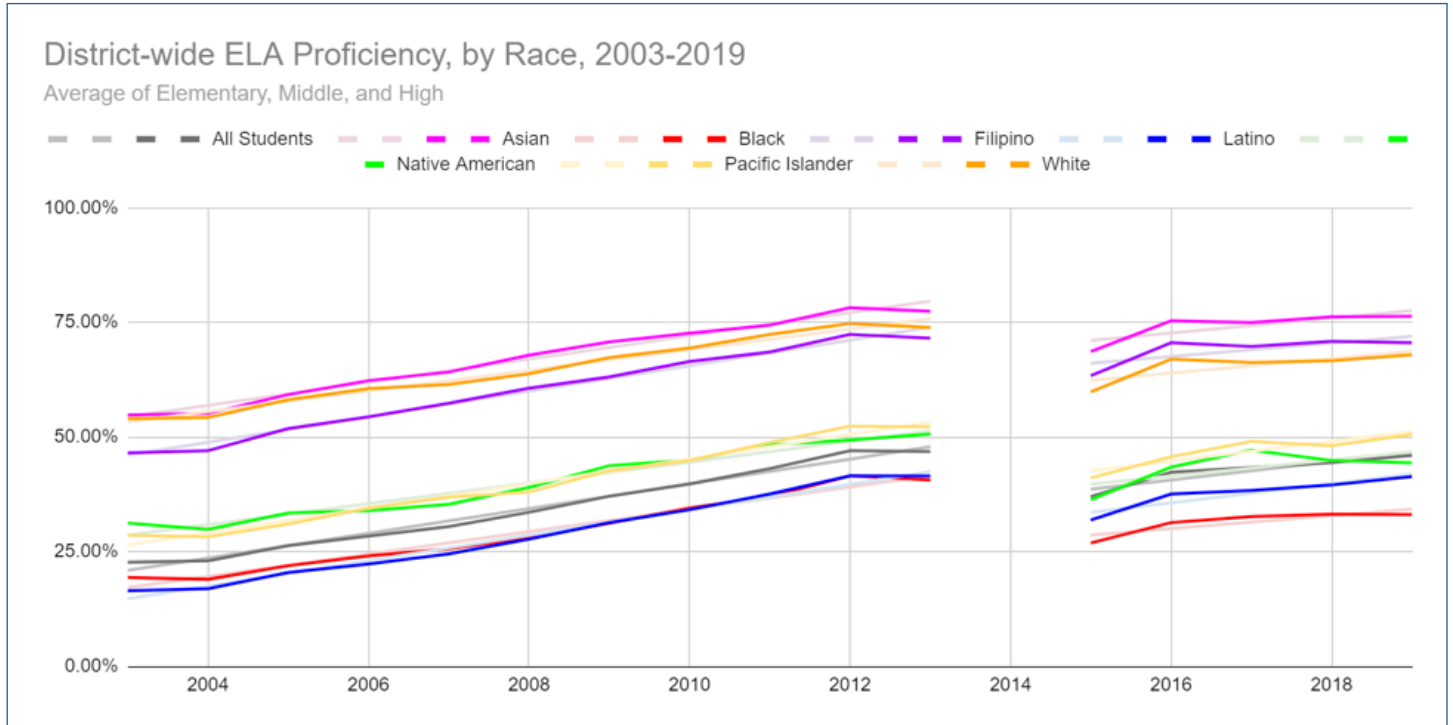
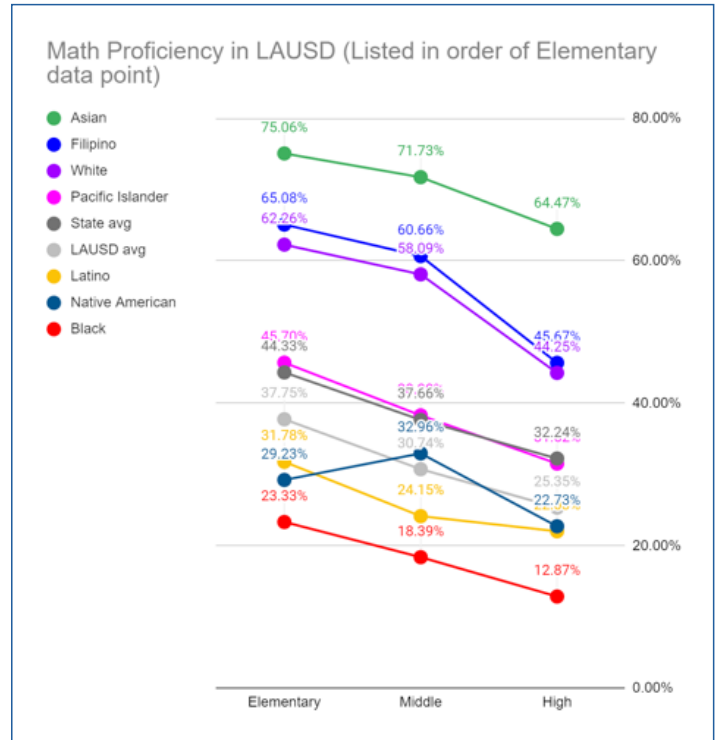
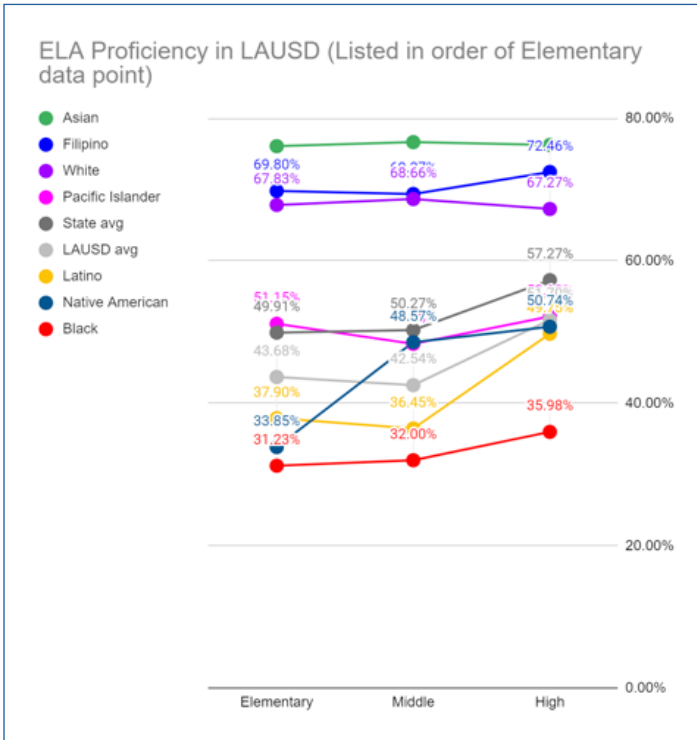


Exhibit 2

ELA and Math Proficiency in LAUSD by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-19



APPENDIX II

These graphs are based on a Speak Up analysis of the 2019-2020 L.A. Unified School Experience Survey results <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/8397>.

Exhibit 3

Students' Reports of Bullying by Race/Ethnicity

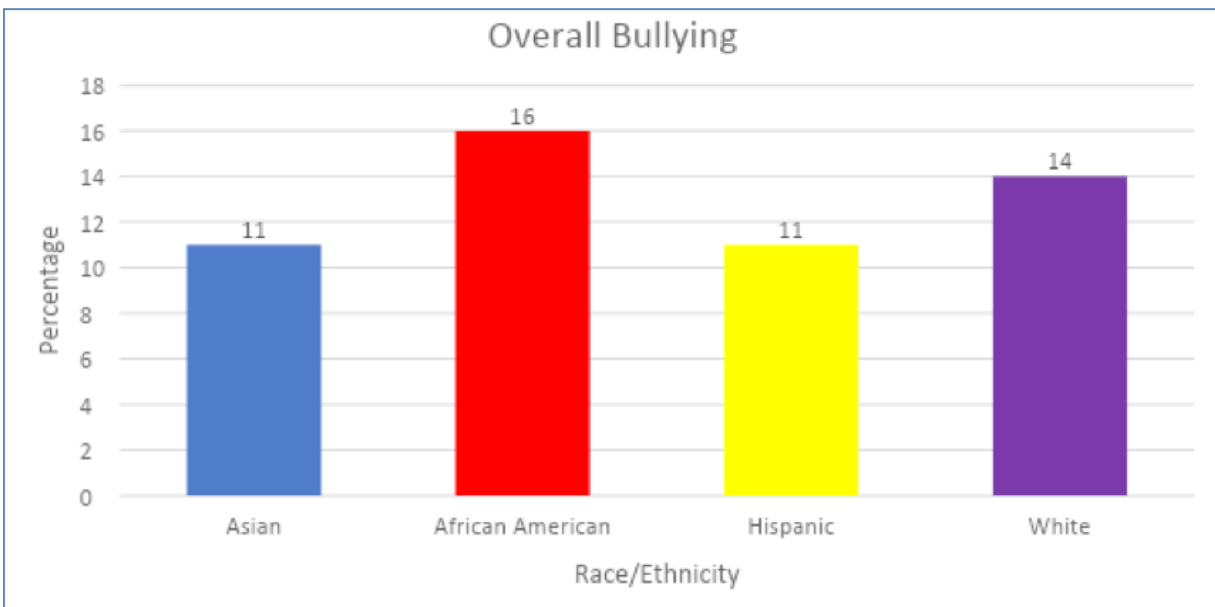


Exhibit 4

Students' Reports of Bullying Based on Their Appearance or Speech by Race/Ethnicity

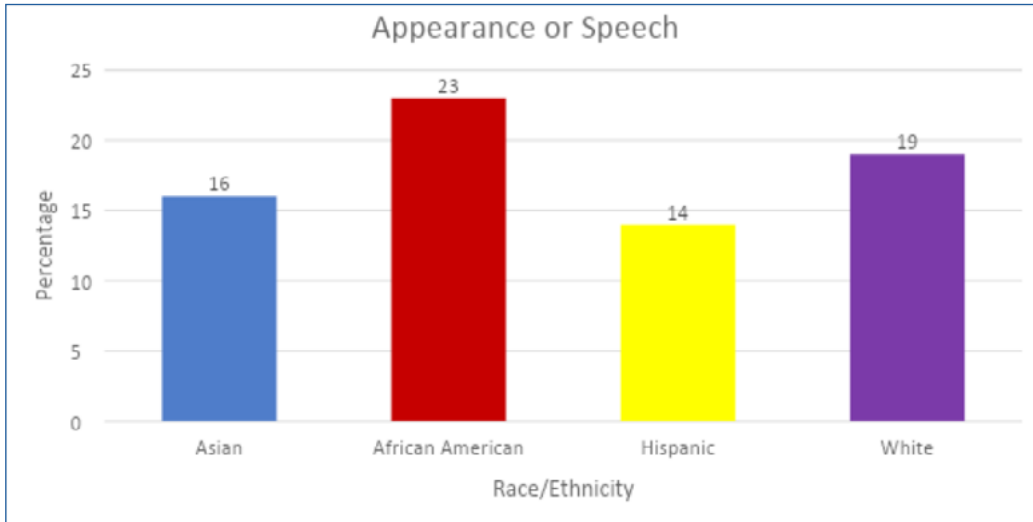


Exhibit 5

Students' Perception of Overall Connectedness by Race/Ethnicity

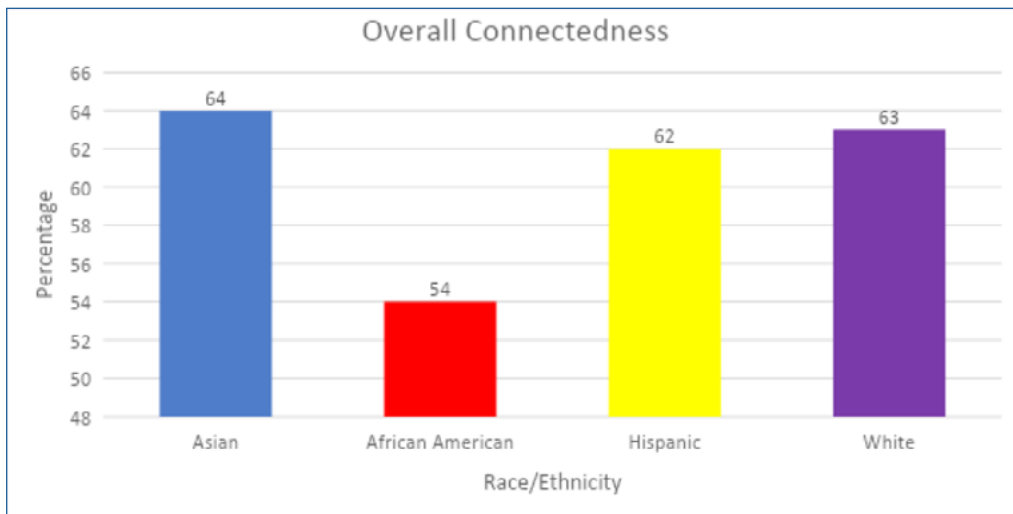
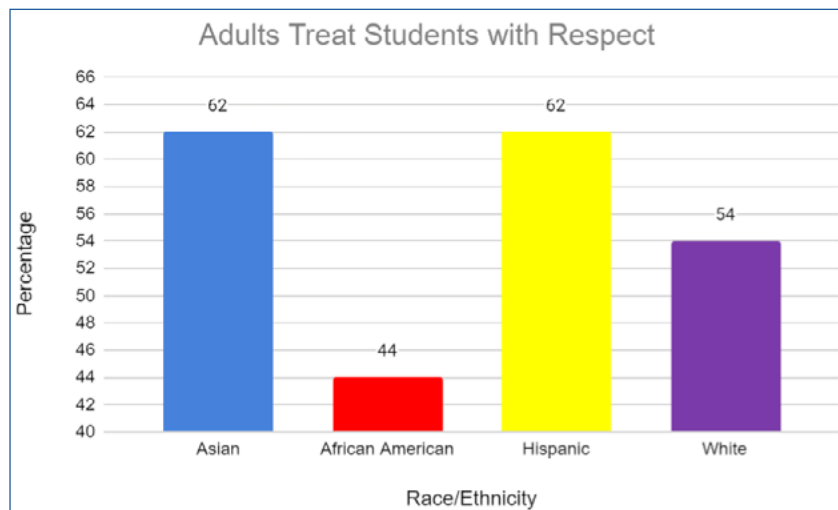


Exhibit 6

Students' Perception of Adult Respect for Students



APPENDIX III

Exhibit 7

Schools serving specific racial populations were defined as campuses serving at least 8% and a minimum of 20 students of that race, according to the Speak Up analysis. The exception was for schools serving Asian students, which were defined as schools serving at least 3.5% and minimum of 20 kids of that race.

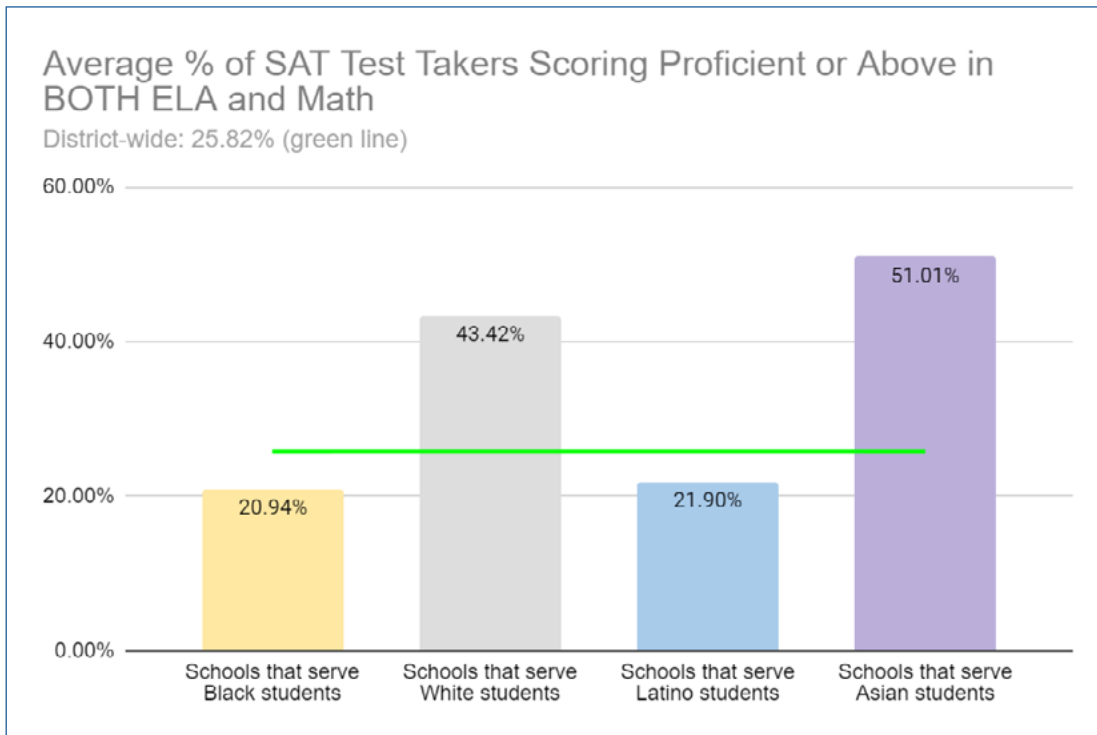


Exhibit 8

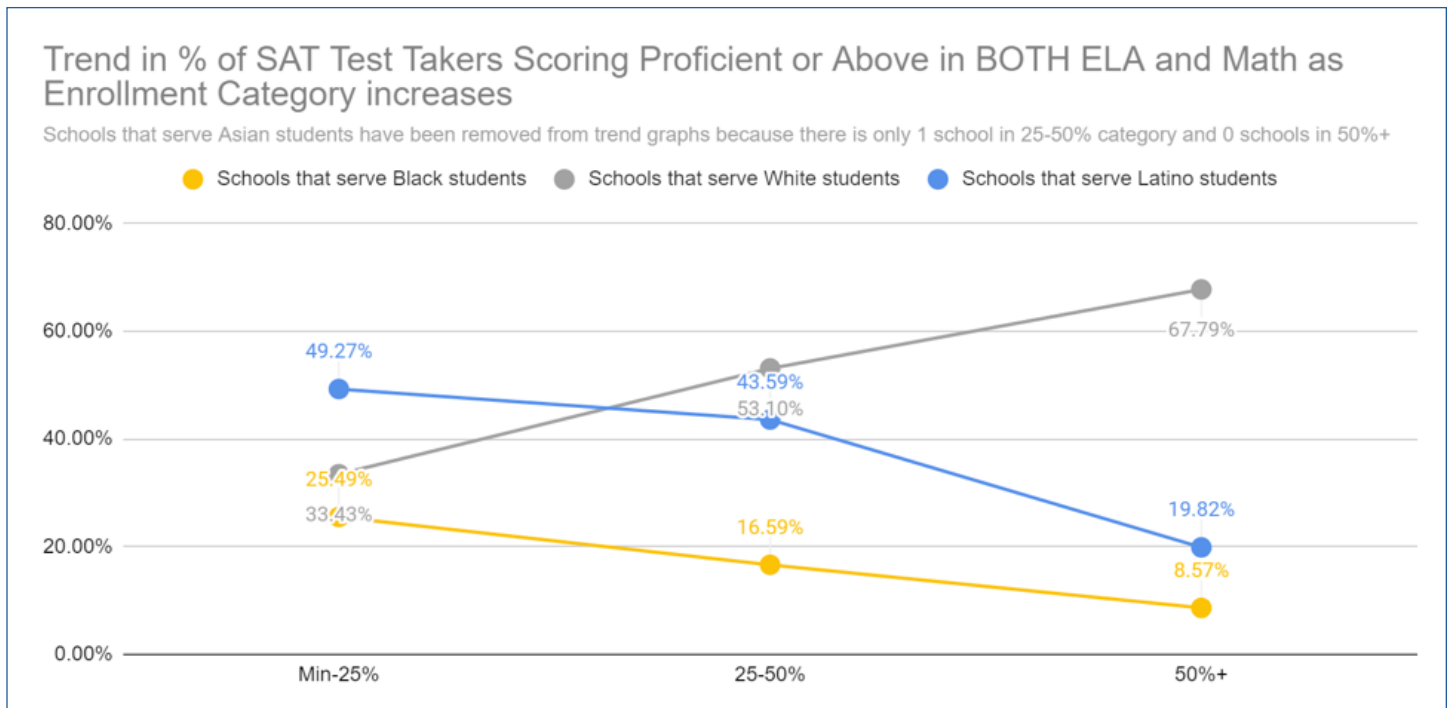


Exhibit 9

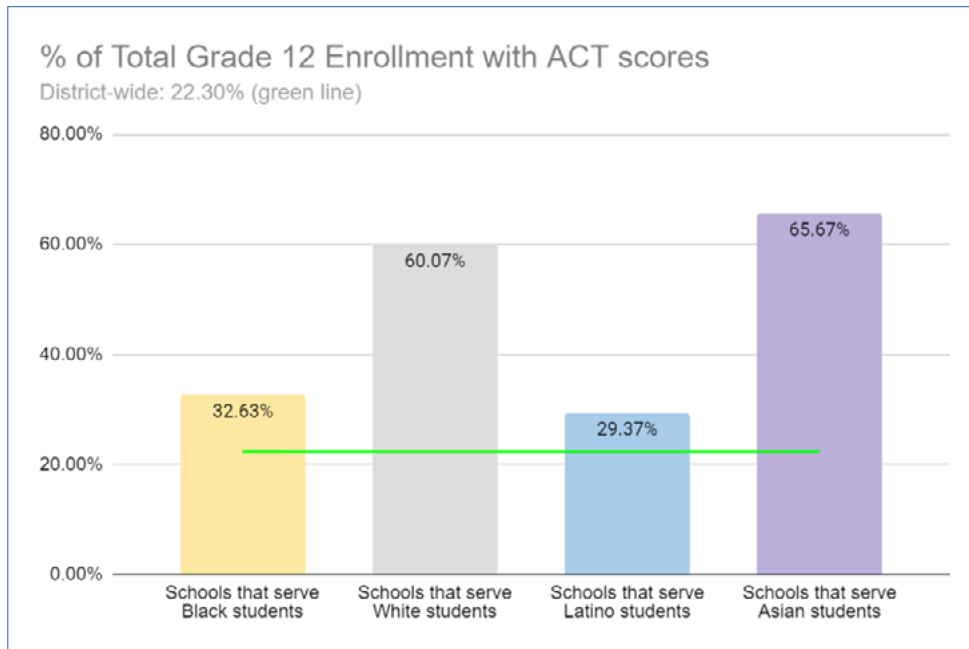
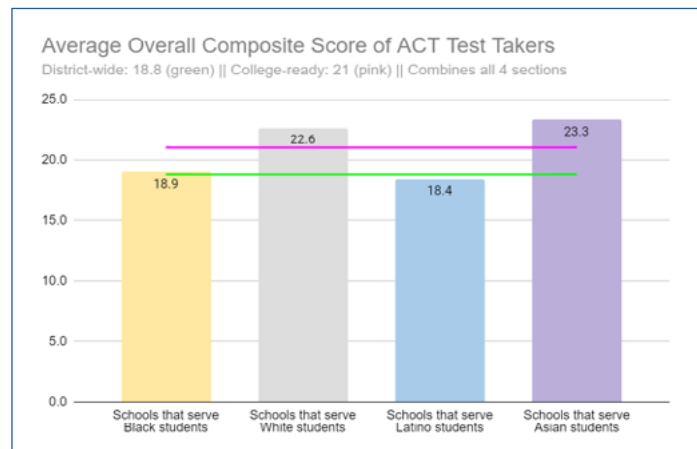
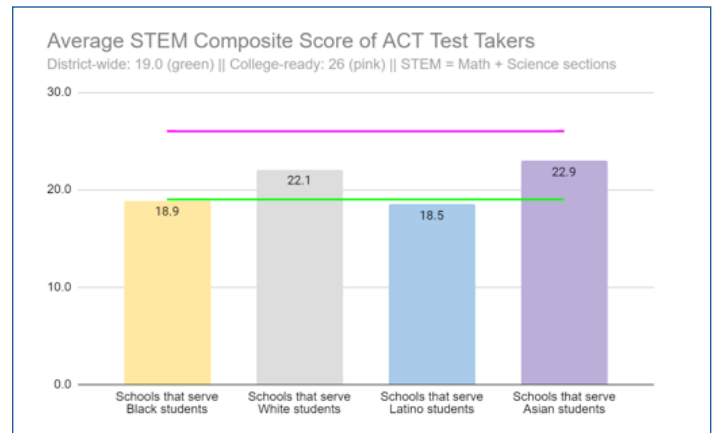
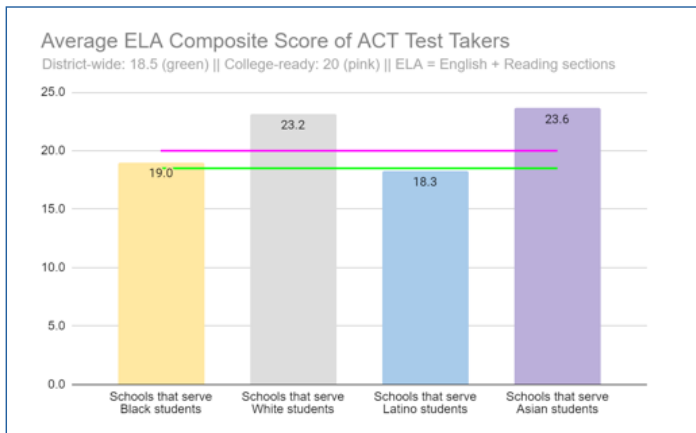


Exhibit 10

Average Composite Scores of ACT Test Takers Across All Schools that Serve Each Race/Ethnicity



APPENDIX IV

BLACK STUDENT VOICES

Exhibit 11

Speak UP conducted focus groups and remote interviews in 2020 with 82 Black 11th and 12th grade students. The students came from 10 L.A. Unified high schools. Students who participated in the interviews did so anonymously.

"There are only 2-3 Black kids in my AP classes. A lot of people (including faculty) don't expect us to take some of these classes seriously."

"We were told we weren't 'equipped' to take certain classes. It comes from the top down ... admin, teachers, and people who make decisions on campus."

"I know my school is systematically racist because I believe students are being tracked. I haven't had Black students in my class in years."

"Faculty didn't speak out when everything around George Floyd happened... Knowing that they have a lot of Black students in their class. It's not even about race but just humanity - it took a bunch of students writing on Schoology for faculty and staff to speak out."

"I've seen more people arrested and pepper-sprayed than I've seen walk the stage."

"The school systems are always trying to assimilate us into white culture even though America has no culture. Diversity in America is due to the dissociation of resources in native countries. So for them trying to impose their white supremacy onto minority students - it just shows that school, in America, is not made for students of color."

"They never look at the Black students and ask how can we better them as a community or how can we engage in their community."

"Sometimes I'd be the only Black kid who would show up to class [during remote learning] and peers would say jokes about it and the teacher would laugh as well."

APPENDIX V

Exhibit 12

The L.A. Unified Board has attempted to address Black student achievement over the past two decades, including numerous resolutions that decried the lack of proper instruction for Black students and limiting school suspensions. However, the resolutions have not led to better academic outcomes for Black students.

Key L.A. Unified Board Resolutions and follow through

1. Challenged-School Teacher Attraction and Retention Program (2000)

This resulted in the district recognizing the overwhelming number of "under-qualified teachers" in "low-performing schools." There were no specific recommendations for how the district should remedy this inequity.

2. Academic Performance of African American Students (2001)

This resolution included no solutions, but did declare that African American students were "not receiving instruction that produces high academic achievement" and that "the strengths of African American students are treated as deficits".

3. Comprehensive Plan to Close the Achievement Gap for African-American and Latino Students (2002)

In the resolution, there was a call for new initiatives, professional development plans and instructional programs with an emphasis on culturally relevant and responsive strategies.

4. Providing Basic Resources to Improve Achievement and Eliminate the Achievement Gap Among the Four Lowest Performing Groups of Standard English Learners (2005)

Three years prior, the district called for a plan to close the achievement gap for Black and Latino students. This time, the district specified closing the gap for the “four lowest performing groups of SELs,” which included Black, Mexican American, Hawaiian American and Native American students.

5. In 2007, the term “students of color” emerged in board resolutions and we begin to see the erasure of Black students.

During 2007 and 2008, there was a strong emphasis on the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs). Test scores of ELL students are presented to justify initiatives, especially in relation to No Child Left Behind and Title I funding. Black students are not mentioned in these resolutions at all.

6. School Discipline Reform and Restorative Justice (2012)

Resolutions were passed and enacted to limit out-of-school suspension for “low level offenses” and focus on restorative justice and “positive behavior interventions,” which was significant for Black students who were suspended at a rate nearly six times that of white students.

7. Equity is Justice (2014)

This resolution directs the Superintendent to allocate school funding to high-need schools using the Student Equity Needs Index (SENI). The SENI was developed by the Equity Alliance for L.A.’s Kids, a collaboration between the Advancement Project California, Community Coalition, and InnerCity Struggle. The adoption of the SENI came in response to a state-level movement towards the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and increased funding.

8. Realizing the Promise for All: Close the Gap by 2023 (2018)

The Board acknowledges that the performance gap between Black and white students has not changed much since 1965. However, although this resolution identifies specific plans to support English Learners and low-income students, Black students are forgotten and lumped in with “all students” when it comes to resolving injustices.

9. Equity is Justice 2.0: Moving toward a New Direction (2018)

Then-President of the Board Mónica García drafted a resolution to expand the district’s funding formulas to include dropout rates, chronic absenteeism, and neighborhood risk factors, among others. While SENI 2.0 helps allocate more funding toward low-income schools and high-need communities, there are no explicit and named benefits for Black students despite their persistent performance gap.

10. Making Good on Los Angeles Unified School District’s Commitment to All Students: Maximizing the Talents and Gifts of African American Students by Putting Equity into Action (2019)

This resolution is the first acknowledgement of anti-Black disparities in the district in five years, calling out specific areas for improvement:

- Overrepresentation of Black students in special education
- Underrepresentation of Black students identified as gifted and talented;
- Disproportionate school suspension rates;
- Low math and English language arts test scores.

The resolution also identified Black students as the “district’s most underserved student group” (LAUSD, 2019). This framing is important because it acknowledges that the students are not being served equitably.