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WEST

BLACK MINDS MATTER

Building Bright
Black Futures

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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I do not want to write this introduction letter. I do not want to write this letter because I wish there wasn't a need for this type of report. Why? Because what the pages after my letter demonstrate is that even in what is arguably the most progressive state in our nation, even ten years after a resounding call to action around desperately needed changes, California still isn't doing right by Black students. Because what this report demonstrates, section after section, graph after graph, is that the brilliant Black students in our state who succeed do so too often in spite of the treatment they receive from our education systems - not because of it.

When Black Minds Matter first came out in 2015, the response in California clearly conveyed just how palpable the inequities in education are for the hundreds of thousands of Black students and communities in the state. The California Legislative Black Caucus held a hearing in the State Capitol calling for more accountability. Legislators then took the show on the road, hosting regional convenings discussing the report and proposed solutions. Equity advocates on college campuses and in school district offices called looking for "classroom sets" of the report to discuss and use as launching pads for more action. One thousand Black students and educators held a rally in Sacramento. An entire college course was designed around the report's call to action. Ten years later we're asking: Did California leaders live up to the obligation we called out in 2015?

Black Minds Matter 2025 is not just an updated report. It is not just a phrase. Just as we said ten years ago, Black Minds Matter is a rallying cry, and a powerful statement that Black minds do, indeed, matter. It is an acknowledgment and affirmation that from our preschools to our college campuses, Black students deserve better in California. It is a call to action about the fundamental duty of our state's leaders to do much more.

While we've seen some movement on education equity in the ten years since Black Minds Matter was originally released, those efforts are too often piecemeal and performative. Now, in the wake of years of contentious politics and rhetoric around the concepts of equity and diversity, California will be pushed to further weaken any efforts that embrace what our state leaders claim to value around progress, justice, and equality. It is not the time to water down efforts to do what's right, it's time to shore them up. We need courageous leaders who will find a way through the difficulties, and not accept defeat easily.

The work of racial justice in education and centering Black people and students has always been an uphill battle. From the students at San Francisco State that started the nation's first Black Student Union to the women and men of the Black Panther Party whose school breakfast program became a model for the country, Californians know this all too well. My hope is that Black Minds Matter 2025 gives advocates a renewed set of resources to use in their communities and in the halls of power across our state. We encourage everyone to use the data and stories in this piece in service of California's brilliant Black students. Share Black Minds Matter 2025 at school board meetings. Demand responses to the recommendations from campus leaders. Host events - and join EdTrust-West at ours - to connect and sustain the work.

Black Minds Matter 2025 is about action. What will you do?

Onward,

Dr. Christopher J. Nellum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overwhelming majority of young Black Californians (88%) are optimistic about their futures and believe they can achieve their dreams (93%) — the highest rates among all racial groups.[1] What does the state of California need to do to ensure that our educational systems support, rather than stifle, this powerful mindset of abundance and aspiration?

A decade ago, EdTrust-West created the **Black Minds Matter campaign** to serve as a rallying point for engagement, discussion, and action to dismantle structural racism in California's schools and colleges. Now, with the Black Minds Matter 2025 report, we highlight how the state has failed to dedicate adequate leadership and resources to provide the high-quality education Black Californians deserve. A full 70 years after Brown v. Board of Education (1954), it is far past time for our leaders and institutions to choose a different path. In the face of national leadership that openly opposes the pursuit of racial justice and aims to dismantle public education, courageous action by the state on behalf of Black students and families is needed now more than ever.

Data is a powerful tool that enables us to understand the stubborn persistence of inequities baked into our educational systems and project what our children's futures might look like depending on the choices we, as a state and society, make today. The simple fact is if we allow our schools to continue neglecting Black students and families, it will take at least until 2089 for all Black students to reach grade-level standards in math and at least until 2070 for the same in reading.[2] The hundreds of thousands of Black students served by our public schools, colleges, and universities deserve better than for us to settle for the glacial progress that is the status quo.

In Black Minds Matter 2025, we lay out data on disparities over the past decade, document the current state of education for Black Californians, and imagine an alternative future where policymakers and education leaders are willing to take bold action to build robust, joyful, loving schools and systems for Black students. Following is a summary of our findings and recommendations, divided between transitional kindergarten through 12th grade (TK-12) and college access and success.

TK-12 In TK-12, segregated opportunities continue to create unequal outcomes for Black students.

California's education systems create opportunity gaps by:

▶ Fostering low levels of inclusion and engagement for Black students and their families.

▶ Failing to create affirming, joyful learning environments for Black students.

▶ Depriving Black students of access to Black teachers, fully prepared teachers, and teachers with the most experience.

▶ Operating with inadequate resources and ineffectively targeting existing funding toward improving educational quality for Black students.

These systemic barriers hold Black students back from achieving their aspirations by creating outcome gaps. Black students are:

▶ Not supported to consistently meet grade-level standards in core subjects.

▶ Supported to learn less material over the course of a school year than every other student group.

▶ Too often pushed out of school, causing Black students to graduate from high school at the lowest rates of any racial group.

COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS In higher education, segregated access and supports derail students' dreams of attaining a degree.

California's high schools, colleges, and universities all have a role to play in supporting college access and success. High schools currently contribute to opportunity gaps for Black students by:

▶ Limiting students' access to colleges and universities by supporting too few Black students to participate and succeed in college preparatory coursework.

▶ Neglecting to support half of all Black high school seniors to apply for financial aid.

And colleges and universities create additional opportunity gaps by:

▶ Enrolling Black students at disproportionately low rates.

▶ Lacking sufficient holistic supports to meet students' basic needs and enable them to persist through degree completion.

These inequities in college participation, affordability, and supports contribute to outcome gaps that have long-term effects on Black Californians' educational attainment, professional prospects, earnings potential, and overall well-being, including the following:

▶ Only a third of Black Californians hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and gendered gaps in completion have widened.

▶ Across all three of California's public higher education systems, Black Californians stop out of college at higher rates than other groups and are supported to earn their degrees at some of the lowest rates.

▶ Black Californians are forced to take on more college debt than any other group.

RECOMMENDATIONS We can, and must, do better. What would it take to change the trajectory California's schools and colleges create for our Black students?

Although the data we trace over the last decade reveals sobering structural problems, positive change is well within our grasp. Change agents in communities across the state are already doing powerful work to create pathways to educational success. They provide proof that we can pave a path to a brighter future, starting with listening to and following the lead of Black students and families.

We urge local and state leaders to become change agents themselves by taking bold, visionary actions needed to break free from the current cycle of complacency and provide the high-quality education California's Black students deserve. Only then will the Golden State finally make meaningful progress toward eradicating gaps in opportunity and outcomes in our schools and colleges once and for all.

To provide a strong foundation for transformative change, we recommend California create a State Commission on Black Education Transformation charged with guiding, monitoring, and evaluating the immediate implementation of policies and practices to support Black students' success. The Commission should have the authority to allocate resources, set timelines, and ensure that state and local agencies follow through on commitments, including holding state leaders accountable for taking action to rebuild schools and colleges into settings where all Black students thrive.

In TK-12, we also recommend that the state:

▶ Modify the state's funding formula to address racial disparities and provide abundant resources for Black students' education.

▶ Fully scale comprehensive community school models that create welcoming and affirming environments for Black students.

▶ Invest in and require schools to use proven strategies to recruit, support, and value Black teachers.

When it comes to college access and success, we also recommend that the state:

▶ Require all high schools to make A-G their default curriculum.

▶ Create a universal dual enrollment policy and shift to automatic acceleration.

▶ Fund free college that covers the full cost of attendance.

▶ Enact a statewide direct admissions policy.

▶ Use the Black Serving Institution (BSI) designation to secure funding and raise the bar for colleges' responsibilities for Black student success.

INTRODUCTION

As a state, California is fully capable of enabling innovation and progress — when its leaders and power brokers prioritize it.

Computing and technology within the state have progressed exponentially over the past decade, bringing the future to life with self-driving cars and artificial intelligence. The Central Valley — known as "the nation's fruit basket" — continues to modernize farming, producing more than a third of the United States' vegetables and three-quarters of its fruit and nuts.[3] We lead the country in bold actions and investments to combat the climate crisis, which are already beginning to pay off with unprecedented increases in clean energy production. Yet, leaders in California do not approach the education system with a similar fervor for innovation and progress. As a result, Black students enter schools and colleges every day where everything from textbooks to teacher preparation is woefully inadequate and has not changed much in the past few hundred years, far less the past decade.

Glaring opportunity gaps continue to shortchange Black students in California's schools and colleges today, just as they did when EdTrust-West first published the original **Black Minds Matter** report in 2015. In this report, we look at data on the state's progress, or lack thereof, against key educational metrics for Black students over the past decade, identify the unfair educational conditions that create gaps, and chart a better course forward.

We begin by sharing data on the current landscape for Black Californians, uplifting the assets and aspirations of Black parents and students, and providing a timeline of policies affecting Black students over the past decade.
We then present data on the educational experiences of Black students in two sections. The first is focused on exposing segregated learning opportunities and unequal outcomes produced by the public school system serving students in transitional kindergarten through 12th grade. The second focuses on identifying the barriers Black students face in attaining a degree from one of the state's three systems of public higher education: the California Community Colleges, the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC).

Along the way we also uplift examples of progress where change agents are leveraging resources, policies, and community assets to break from the status quo, remove obstacles, and empower Black students to reach their incredible inherent potential. They set an example for other local leaders and demonstrate what the state must do at scale through decisive policymaking.

New in this report, we both look back at the persistence of gaps over the past 10 years and model future outcomes if recent trends are allowed to persist, mapping out a choice of possible futures for key educational indicators. These projections lay bare the stark realities of where our state is headed unless we make much more dramatic progress toward providing fair and full education for every student, starting now. In direct contrast to that bleak picture, we propose an alternate path — one where we imagine a brighter future within the state's grasp if, and only if, our education systems accelerate progress by fundamentally shifting how they serve Black students.

We conclude each section with two sets of recommendations, one for educational institutions (schools, school districts, colleges, and universities) and the other for state leaders, that lay out clear actions urgently needed to repay the educational debt owed to Black students and families and finally make the Golden State a place of prosperity for Black Californians.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR BLACK CALIFORNIANS

California's Black students attend public schools across the entire Golden State

Legend:
- ■ 0% – 3%
- ■ 4% – 7%
- ■ 8% – 12%

FIGURE 1. BLACK STUDENTS' SHARE OF TK-12 ENROLLMENT BY COUNTY (2023-24)

Source: California Department of Education

With more than 2 million Black residents, California is home to the sixth largest Black population in the United States. Because of the state's staggering size, its Black population is sometimes minimized in policy discussions and given less consideration than groups that make up a bigger share of the overall population. In reality, the Black population in California is large and widely dispersed across the state and should be neither ignored nor dismissed.

To put things in perspective, at 635,000, the number of Black Californians who are under the age of 25 alone is nearly equal to the entire population of the state of Vermont.[4] About 287,400 of these young people attend transitional kindergarten through 12th grade, representing 5% of our public school population. Another 150,000 attend college in California, either at a public or private institution.

As has long been the case, the population of Black Californians is more highly concentrated in some cities and counties than in others. Solano County has the largest share of Black TK-12 students at 12%, closely followed by Sacramento, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, and San Bernardino counties, where

Black students constitute 8% to 10% of the total student population (Figure 1). Although Black students make up a smaller share of the student population in Los Angeles County (7%), the county serves a third of the state's Black students (88,638 in 2023-24).

The past decade has seen high rates of migration among Black Californians, as Black families leave large cities to seek more affordable housing options in the face of gentrification and skyrocketing rents and home prices, either relocating within California or leaving the state entirely in search of a more reasonable cost of living and brighter economic prospects.[5]

BLACK CALIFORNIANS' ASSETS & ASPIRATIONS

Black Californians create community assets & carry ambitious aspirations

Black Californians provide significant opportunities for their children and contribute a rich array of assets to their communities despite unfair and often openly hostile conditions created by the state's education, health care, and criminal justice systems.[6] An accurate accounting of these assets is critical to combating warped and untrue stereotypes perpetuated about Black families.[7]

Adapted from the 2013 report *Being Black Is Not a Risk Factor* by the National Black Child Development Institute and from the 2021 *Black Child National Agenda*, the following are a handful of examples of the social, cultural, and intellectual wealth Black Californians generate and contribute to their families, communities, and state.

(1) **The vast majority of the more than 20,000 Black babies born in California every year are welcomed by stable families with diverse structures and extensive networks of loved ones.**[8] In 2023, an estimated 86% of Black Californians maintained stable housing over the prior year.[9] Black families report high rates of social ties among relatives, friends, and faith-based communities.[10] These reciprocal relationships are especially important considering recent evidence that strong social connections help buffer against the negative impacts of racism for parents of young children.[11]

2   **Nationally, 80% of Black households have at least one family member who is employed.** This is 1 percentage point higher than the share of white families with at least one family member employed (79%).[12] However, because of enduring wage gaps, this high rate of employment for Black parents does not always translate to higher, or even comparable, earnings between these groups.

3   **Nine in 10 Black Californians believe attending preschool is important to students' future academic success, the highest of any racial or ethnic group.** According to a survey conducted in March 2024 by the Public Policy Institute of California, 87% of Black Californians thought attending preschool was important to a student's long-term educational success compared with 80% of Asian and Latinx families and 71% of white families.[13]

4   **Black parents overwhelmingly aspire for their children to attain a postsecondary degree.** In a national study of low- to moderate-income Black Americans, 84% of Black parents agreed that it was extremely or quite important that their children attend college.[14]

5   **Nearly 9 in 10 Black students agree that it is important to earn a postsecondary degree.** Students also view academic success as important, with 89% of Black youth from low-income households agreeing that it is important to obtain a postsecondary education.[15]

6   **Black parents are highly engaged and invested in their children's educations, particularly in the early years.** Nationally, 98% of Black families with preschoolers (ages 3-5) spend time at home actively fostering literacy by teaching their young children letters, words, and numbers — the highest of any racial group.[16] This high level of support continues as children get older: One 2022 study showed that 92% of Black parents of children in kindergarten through 12th grade found more time to talk to their children about everyday assignments during the past school year.[17]

7   **Even with currently high levels of engagement, Black families desire more opportunities to be involved in their children's education and want more input into education laws.** Nearly 90% of Black parents participating in a national study said it would be helpful to have resources to assist in their efforts to advocate for high-quality education in their communities, and 93% said they wanted more opportunities for involvement in their child's education and to have input into education laws.[18]

8   **Young Black Californians are optimistic about their futures and actively engage in civic life at higher rates than any other group.** In 2023, Power California and Latino Decisions surveyed 1,557 young Californians ages 18 to 30. They found that despite facing economic insecurity at higher rates than other groups, 88% of Black respondents are optimistic about their futures, and 93% believe they can achieve their dreams.[19]

9   **Black college graduates in California have high rates of workforce participation (90%), comparable to other groups.**[20] This high level of participation underscores the fact that Black college graduates (ages 25 to 54) successfully leverage their educational attainment, actively pursuing and securing job opportunities at rates comparable to their peers. This is true despite lower rates of employment among younger Black Californians who hold a college degree (21 to 24 years old) compared to their peers.[21]

10   **Black Californians contribute significantly to the state's economy, including as majority owners of 15,000 businesses and a relatively large share (8%) of the state's arts, entertainment, and recreation firms.**[22] Black-owned small businesses (20 employees or fewer) are powerful economic drivers, with 175,000 Black-owned nonemployer or sole-proprietor small businesses in 2019 and 10,000 additional small businesses employing 22,000 workers.[23]

This list merely scratches the surface of the assets, aspirations, and cultural and intellectual wealth that Black students and families hold and contribute to California's communities. Yet, far too often, policies that shape opportunity within our education systems fail to create the conditions to fully realize these strengths.

Despite these assets, racist policies and practices suppress the economic well-being of Black students and their families

The education debts owed by the state to Black families centered in this report do not exist in isolation — they are compounded by injustices across other key dimensions of well-being.[24,25] Decades of discriminatory banking practices and predatory lending, a long history of exclusionary housing markets and redlining that denied Black families the chance to purchase houses in certain neighborhoods, and inequities in hiring and compensation have entrenched racial wealth gaps so

effectively that in 2019, the median white household had nine times the amount of financial assets held by the median Black household.[26]

Black children in California experience poverty at disproportionately high rates because of the same structural racism that severely limits Black Californians' economic prospects, earnings, and wealth-building. The California Department of Education uses a robust measure of socioeconomic disadvantage that considers factors like whether a child's parents have a high school diploma and whether they are homeless or in foster care, in addition to income-based eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. This data reveals that 3 in 4 Black TK-12 students are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Figure 2). That is 13 percentage points higher than the statewide average and more than double the share of white students in the state who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.[27]

3 out of 4 (76%) Black TK-12 students in California are socioeconomically disadvantaged
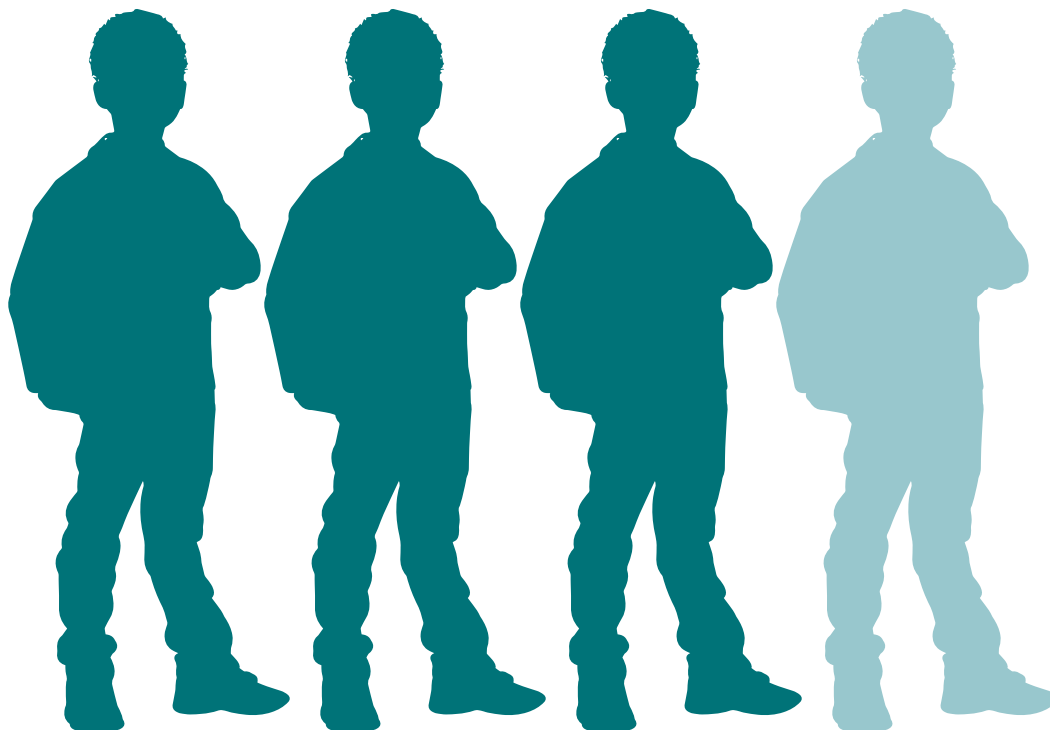
FIGURE 2. SHARE OF BLACK TK-12 STUDENTS WHO ARE SOCIOECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED (2023-24)

Source: California Department of Education, Enrollment by Ethnicity and Grade

POLICY & POLITICS TIMELINE

Moments of progress and missed opportunities for California's Black students (2015-25)

The following timeline highlights promising policies passed over the last 10 years in California, many of which were explicitly designed to further racial justice, but have yet to create impact at full scale. It also documents turning points in the state's conversation about anti-Black racism and identifies missed opportunities to make meaningful improvements in educational quality and outcomes for Black students.

California and the nation have long used legislation and legal decisions to shape the educational opportunities afforded to Black students. In our 2015 Black Minds Matter report, we traced 150 years of policies affecting Black students, from fugitive slave laws banning Black children from attending California schools in 1852, through the state's dismantling of affirmative action in the 1990s, to incremental efforts in the 2000s to begin addressing racial gaps in education.

2015

▶ **Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives Expand in California** | The first chapter of Black Lives Matter formed in Los Angeles (2013) to coordinate protests after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of a Black boy, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, in Florida.[28] By 2015, after the killings of Black Americans by police, including Michael Brown,[29] Rekia Boyd,[30] and Eric Garner,[31] Black Lives Matter gained momentum across the nation and in California, with major demonstrations in cities like Los Angeles, Oakland, and Sacramento demanding police accountability and calling out racial inequities in education, housing, and employment.[32]

2016

▶ **Establishment of California College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP)** | Established through Assembly Bill (AB) 288, the CCAP program expands dual enrollment opportunities for students who may not already be college-bound or who are underrepresented in higher education.[33]

2017

▶ **State Provides Funding for California College Promise Programs** | California allocated $46 million in 2018 and $85 million in 2019 in state funding to provide financial support to first-time, full-time community college students by waiving fees for eligible low-income students. Discretion afforded to community college districts around the use of these funds likely diluted the extent to which these grants narrowed racial gaps in college affordability.[34]

▶ **Passage of Equitable Course Placement and Completion Legislation** |
AB 705 mandated that community colleges place students directly into
transfer-level courses in English and math, benefiting Black students
who were disproportionately placed in remedial courses. The policy
has increased access to transfer-level coursework, although enactment
has been inconsistent across community college districts. It became
necessary in 2022 to pass additional legislation (AB 1705) to close a
loophole in the original law to strengthen implementation.[35]

2019

▶ **California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act (Senate Bill 75)** |
Through legislation, the state formally established a longitudinal
data system to track students from early childhood through
employment. Advocates for marginalized communities championed
the system's creation and continue to call for data to be meaningfully
disaggregated by race and easily accessible to educational decision-
makers as well as students, families, and communities.[36]

▶ **Passage of the CROWN Act** | In July of 2019, California became the first
state in the nation to pass the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open
World for Natural Hair) Act, which prohibits schools and employers from
enforcing discriminatory policies that restrict natural hairstyles, including
locs, braids, twists, and knots.[37]

2020

▶ **COVID-19 Pandemic and Distance Learning** | Black Californians were
disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, making up 7%
of COVID-19 deaths in the state despite comprising 6% of the state's
population.[38] In addition to the mental and emotional toll of losing loved
ones and the stress of living through a pandemic, the abrupt shift to
online learning also disproportionately affected Black students, 36% of
whom lacked reliable access to a computer or the internet.[39] The "digital
divide" exacerbated existing inequities, leading to increased learning
loss, lower engagement, and widening opportunity and outcome gaps.[40]
Importantly, remote learning offered some Black students a welcome
reprieve from the hostility they experienced in school.[41] Black parents
and communities also came together during the crisis to create safe and
supportive learning spaces.[42]

▶ **Black Lives Matter 2020 Protests** | Widespread protests again erupted
across California as part of a national movement against police
violence and systemic racism in response to the unjust murders of
George Floyd,[43] Breonna Taylor,[44] and Ahmaud Arbery.[45] The movement
catalyzed many racial justice-oriented conversations and actions
statewide and at school districts, largely because of organizing by
students, families, and community members.

▶ **Ethnic Studies Requirement at California State University** | CSU
passed a policy requiring that all students take an Ethnic Studies course
to graduate starting with the class entering in 2021, promoting a more
inclusive curriculum that highlights the experiences of Black communities
and other marginalized groups.[46]

▶ **Failure to Pass Proposition 16** | Proposition 16 sought to repeal
Proposition 209 (1996), which banned affirmative action in public
employment, contracting, and education. As a result, California
continued to be prohibited from considering race in university
admissions or state hiring practices, limiting the state's ability to
take explicit actions to address racial inequities in education that
disproportionately affect Black students.[47]

▶ **Reparations Task Force Created** | On September 30, 2020, the governor enacted AB 3121, establishing the Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans and charged the California Department of Justice with providing administrative, technical, and legal assistance to the task force.[48]

2021

▶ **AB 101 Makes Ethnic Studies a High School Graduation Requirement** | In 2021, California became the first state to require that all high school students complete a semester of Ethnic Studies, starting with the graduating class of 2029-30.[49] This curriculum includes African American history and perspectives, promoting a more culturally responsive education.

▶ **Black Student Achievement Plan (BSAP) Adopted by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board of Education** | In 2021, after widespread community calls to action, the LAUSD Board of Education adopted BSAP to address persistent achievement gaps faced by the district's 38,500 Black students.[50] BSAP provided additional funding to identified schools to offer targeted social-emotional and academic support aimed at closing opportunity gaps. In response to conservative pushback, the district overhauled the plan in late 2024, removing the exclusive focus on Black students and changed the criteria for selecting schools for the program.[51]

2022

▶ **Book Bans Targeting Black History and Antiracism Literature** | As part of a broader national movement, some California school districts saw efforts to ban or challenge books that discuss race, Black history, and antiracist movements ramp up in the early 2020s. In 2023, the state passed AB 1078 to prevent book bans in schools and protect students from this targeted call[52] for censorship, and in 2024, the state extended these protections to public libraries.[53]

▶ **AB 469 Introduces Financial Aid for All** | AB 469 mandated that school districts ensure high school students complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) before graduating, increasing access to financial aid for college.

2023

▶ **Failure to Pass AB 2774** | Modeled after the Lowest Performing Students Block Grant and first proposed in 2018,[54] this bill would have required that school districts target funding through the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to the student groups that are "lowest performing" on state standardized tests, which as a result of systemic racism, consistently includes Black students. This policy had the potential to shift policy toward targeted interventions for Black students but was quashed over concerns that it violated Proposition 209. Instead, the governor included an "Equity Multiplier" in the LCFF formula, which targets funding to districts with high mobility rates and poverty levels.[55,56]

▶ **Supreme Court Decision Bans Race-Conscious Affirmative Action in College Admissions** | The U.S. Supreme Court banned race-based affirmative action in college admissions in June 2023. The ruling in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard reversed the 2003 decision that allowed colleges to consider race in admissions to promote diversity. Although California's Proposition 209 predated this legislation by nearly two decades, the national anti-affirmative action shift is worth noting for its chilling effect on race-conscious policymaking generally.[57]

▶ **California Reparations Task Force Released its Final Report** | Released in June 2023, the report details comprehensive recommendations to address the lasting harms of slavery and systemic racism on Black Californians. It outlines proposals for reparative justice, including policy changes in education, housing, health care, and criminal justice, with the goal of reducing racial discrimination across the state.[58]

2024

▶ **SB 1348 Designates California Black-Serving Institutions** | The first of its kind in the nation, this legislation is aimed at supporting higher education institutions that serve a significant number of Black students and have demonstrated a commitment to supporting Black students to excel. Modeled after historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), it lays the groundwork for improvement of academic support, recruitment, and retention for Black students in California's higher education systems.[59]

▶ **Cayla J. v. the State of California** | In one of the largest education-related settlements in U.S. history, California committed to proposing new legislation and allocating at least $2 billion to support students who fell behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding will prioritize evidence-based programs aimed at closing achievement gaps, particularly for students from low-income Black and Latinx communities, who faced disproportionate educational challenges.[60]

TK-12

SEGREGATED OPPORTUNITIES CREATE UNEQUAL OUTCOMES

As the timeline in the previous section demonstrates, Black students too often pay the price for incremental policy progress and piecemeal implementation. In 2025, even as policies intended to create fair and just TK-12 education begin to have some of their intended impacts, Black students in California's public schools still experience learning environments where they are less likely to have the funding, curriculum and materials, and culturally responsive instruction they deserve.

In this section, we identify four glaring opportunity gaps that Black elementary, middle, and high school students are expected to navigate, as well as the racially disparate outcomes these systemic failures perpetuate. We then present a choice of possible futures and recommend steps that local and state education leaders can take to set a course for meaningful change.

TK-12 OPPORTUNITY GAPS

Opportunity Gap 1:
Our schools are fostering low levels of inclusion and engagement for Black students and their families

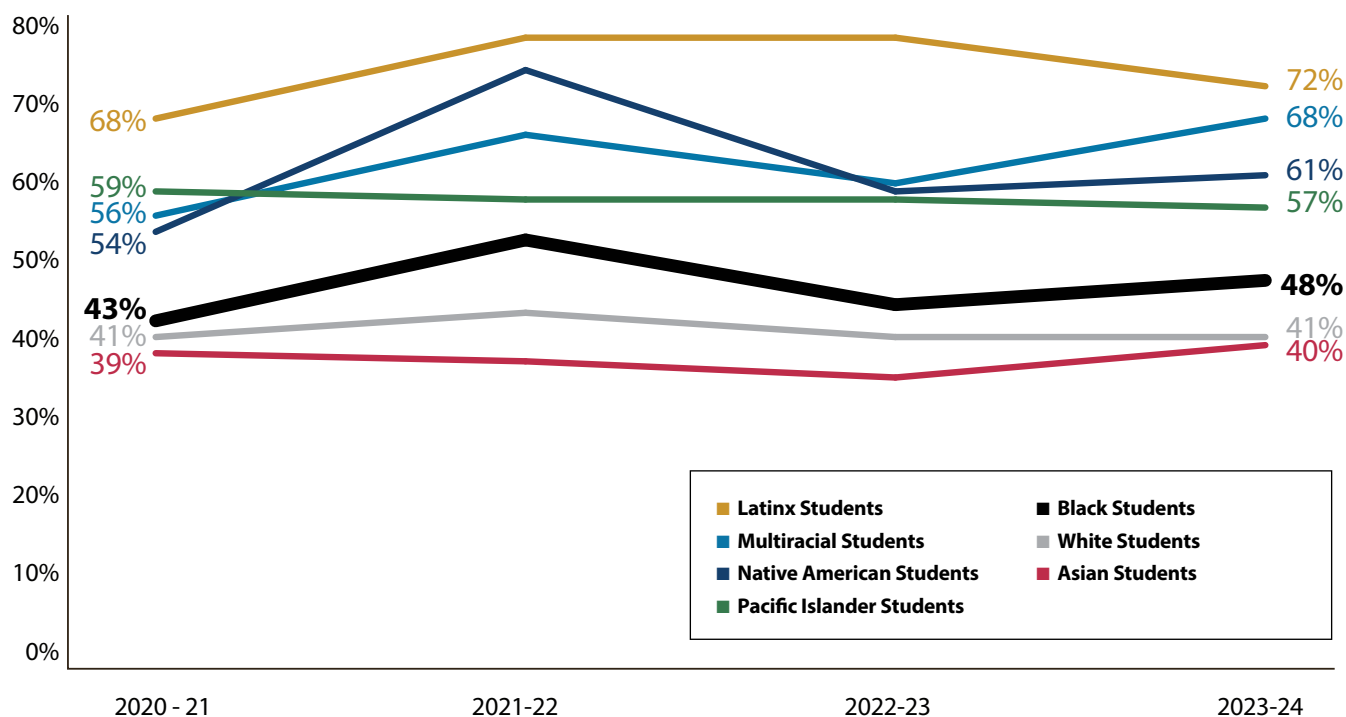**California's Transitional Kindergarten (TK) expansion still isn't reaching enough Black families**

Recent survey data shows that 87% of Black Californians recognize the importance of high-quality preschool for students' future academic success.[61] A robust early care and education system would ensure all families with young children have their choice of affordable, high-quality preschool options. In pursuit of this goal, the state is expanding school-based TK to all 4-year-olds by 2025-26. However, if leaders fail to broadly communicate the benefits of TK and build trust with Black families, they risk leaving many Black parents and caregivers feeling unwelcome or unconvinced that TK will provide children with high-quality early learning and care.

Despite Black Californians' accurate high estimation of the value of preschool, the rate at which Black families enroll eligible 4-year-olds in TK lags other groups. Although Black children showed substantial TK enrollment gains in the 2023-24 school year, significant opportunity remains to increase participation among eligible students who are not currently enrolled in other programs. On the bright side, following dramatic drops in TK participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Black children enrolled has rebounded. In 2023-24, more than 6,000 Black 4-year-olds were enrolled in TK — more than double the number enrolled in 2021.[62] But the number of eligible 4-year-olds has increased alongside enrollment as the state gradually expands eligibility. That means the share of eligible Black students in TK remains low. Fewer than half of eligible Black

Fewer than half of eligible Black 4-year-olds are enrolled in TK

FIGURE 3. SHARE OF ELIGIBLE FOUR-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN (2020-21 THROUGH 2023-24)

Source: EdTrust-West analysis of California Department of Education Annual Enrollment data *(2023-24) and Transitional Kindergarten* Program Participation data *(2020-21-2022-23) and Department of Finance* population projections *(2023).*

4-year-olds (48%) were enrolled in 2023-24, compared to 60% of all eligible 4-year-olds (Figure 3).

Reasons for relatively low levels of TK enrollment among Black Californians likely vary across communities and include logistical issues like limited awareness of TK eligibility expansion and lack of alignment of TK program hours with parents' work schedules.[63] However, recent survey data shows that Black parents highly value cultural relevance in early care and education settings, raising the sobering possibility that those logistical barriers may only tell part of the story. Early evidence from parents and community leaders suggests that many Black parents are choosing, given that the public school system has not generally provided nurturing and culturally relevant settings to Black students, to rely on trusted community-based programs or friend, family, and neighbor care rather than enrolling their children in TK.[64] EdTrust-West and partners are conducting research to further understand Black families' priorities when choosing early learning and care providers.

As they scale up to universal TK, school and district leaders should work to ensure their TK programs are high quality and inclusive and that they are adding value to, rather than disrupting, a healthy mixed delivery system for early learning and care by designing and expanding TK with direct input from Black families.

1 in 3 Black TK-12 students in California is absent for more than 10% of the school year, the second highest rate of any group
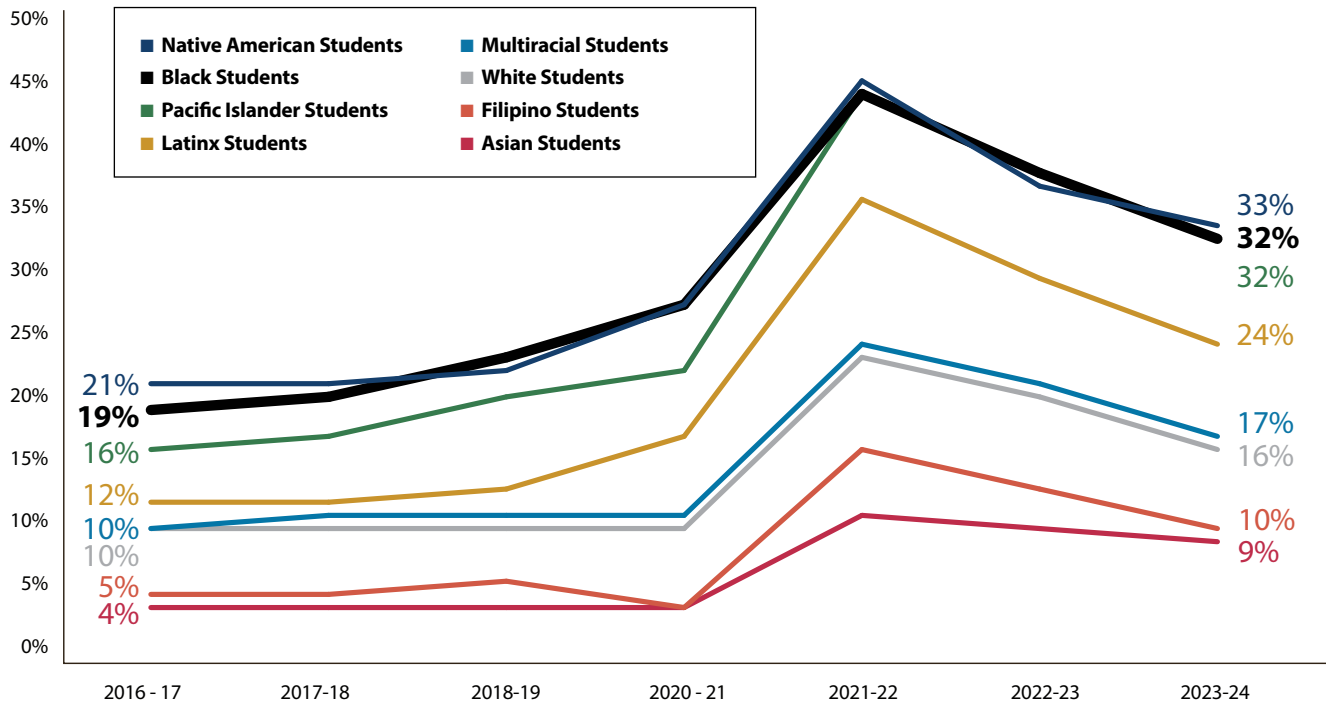
FIGURE 4. RATES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM OVER TIME, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2016-17 THROUGH 2023-24)

Note: As a result of the statewide physical school closures that occurred in February/March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the California Department of Education (CDE) has determined that the 2019–20 absenteeism data is not valid and reliable, and is therefore unavailable for public release.

Source: California Department of Education, Chronic Absenteeism Rate

Schools struggle to improve attendance rates for Black students

Students with consistent attendance earn better grades, have higher rates of classroom engagement, and demonstrate greater self-efficacy.[65] When students are absent, they miss crucial instructional time, fall behind in their coursework, and struggle to catch up, which can set off a cycle of disengagement from school.[66]

Chronic absenteeism — when students are absent for 10% or more of the school year — has increased to alarming levels since the COVID-19 pandemic, growing by 20 percentage points for Black students between 2018-19 and 2021-22 to a high of 43%. Encouragingly, the share of students of all races who are chronically absent, including Black students, has decreased steadily over the last two school years, though absenteeism rates remain far above

pre-pandemic levels. Black students (along with Pacific Islander students) still have the second-highest rate of chronic absenteeism of any student group at 32% — nearly 1 in 3 Black students (Figure 4).[67]

Some reasons for absenteeism may be beyond schools' control, like higher rates of chronic health problems such as asthma among Black children resulting from systemic health care disparities. But these factors are exacerbated when schools fail to create welcoming, inclusive environments for students and families and instead inadvertently foster conditions where Black students are more likely to be absent.[68] Tackling chronic absenteeism requires a systemic shift to ensure schools are responsive to the needs of Black students, offering proactive, tailored interventions that support consistent attendance and engagement.

Black students bear the mental and emotional burden of racism and bullying in school

At EdTrust-West, we learn the most about how schools can improve by talking directly to students when we partner with schools and districts to conduct Systemic Equity Reviews, a process of identifying root causes of educational outcome gaps and the changes needed to close them. When asked what they like most about school, students — from bright-eyed third graders to self-conscious high school seniors — point to teachers and staff members who create learning environments that make them feel safe and supported. Too frequently, when asked what they would change about their schools if they could, students of color, and Black students in particular, share anecdotes of bullying or exclusion and reveal a desire to feel safe and cared for at school.

In addition to experiencing systemic racism, Black students bear the brunt of more direct, personal forms of racism in their schools and classrooms at the hands of fellow students, educators, and school staff.[69] Data from the Youth Behavior Risk Survey, a nationwide survey of high school students, found that nearly half of all Black students (46%) report having experienced racism in school.[70] Black students in California also report the second-highest rate of bullying based on their race. Nearly a quarter of Black students (23%) reported being bullied or harassed in school because of their race, exposing the pervasive anti-Blackness and racism that Black students face in school (Figure 5).

Research shows that these experiences cause grave damage to Black students' mental and emotional health, inflicting a form of trauma that leads to symptoms similar to those of posttraumatic stress.[71] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that exposure to racism in school was associated with a higher risk of substance abuse and suicide.[72] Although many Californians wrongfully believe that racism of the kind Black students report experiencing is a relic of the past, this data clearly shows otherwise.[73]

Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey reveals heartbreaking realities about the depth of the disconnection and depression that Black students as young as fifth grade are experiencing in schools. At the elementary level, 24% of Black fifth graders report feeling frequent sadness — a higher rate than any other group.[74] Black elementary students also reported "feeling good and happy" at the lowest rate of any group at 68%. In the later grades (7, 9, and 11), only 37% of Black students, just more than 1 in 3 Black students, report high levels of feeling happy, safe, connected, and supported at school.

No child should bear the harm of racist words or actions, and schools especially should be safe harbors that protect against these attacks by actively promoting antiracist practices. Ample evidence confirms that ignoring this problem is literally life-threatening for Black students, underscoring the urgent need to create protective environments and to name and combat anti-Black racism in our schools.[75] As such, California's educators and school leaders have an important role to play in creating learning environments where Black students always feel welcomed and affirmed.

Rather than being nurtured, Black students are disproportionately punished and pushed out of classrooms

Schools have a longstanding history of disproportionately suspending Black students compared to their peers.[76] Over the past decade, Black students have been consistently suspended at a rate more than double the statewide average and three times the rate of white students (Figure 6).

Research shows that suspensions increase the likelihood that students will drop out of school, meaning that schools are directly contributing to the pushout of Black students, especially given evidence that the dramatic differences in levels of punishment applied to Black students and their peers is not explained by differences in behavior.[77] In other words, when a Black student and a white or Asian student engage in the same disruptive behavior, the Black student is more likely to be suspended as a result, and their peers are more likely to receive a less exclusionary consequence.

Breaking down rates of suspension by gender reveals that Black male students are suspended at the highest rates of any group at 10% in 2023-24 compared to 4% of white male students.[78] Black girls are also disproportionately disciplined in our schools, with 7% of Black girls suspended compared to fewer than 2% of white girls, as are Black nonbinary students, over 7% of whom were suspended in 2023-24.

Beginning in 2024 and for the next five years, schools will no longer be able to suspend students for "willful defiance," or being intentionally disruptive, as a result of SB 274, which extends the state's previous ban on exclusionary discipline to students in first through eighth grade. It is a critical step in the right direction, but effective implementation of the prohibition will also require a shift from punishment to restorative practices, adequate staffing of positions like counselors and school psychologists,[79] the elimination of unnecessary police interaction in schools,[80] and training for all staff on disrupting bias and effectively using culturally responsive, restorative practices.[81]

23%
of Black Students

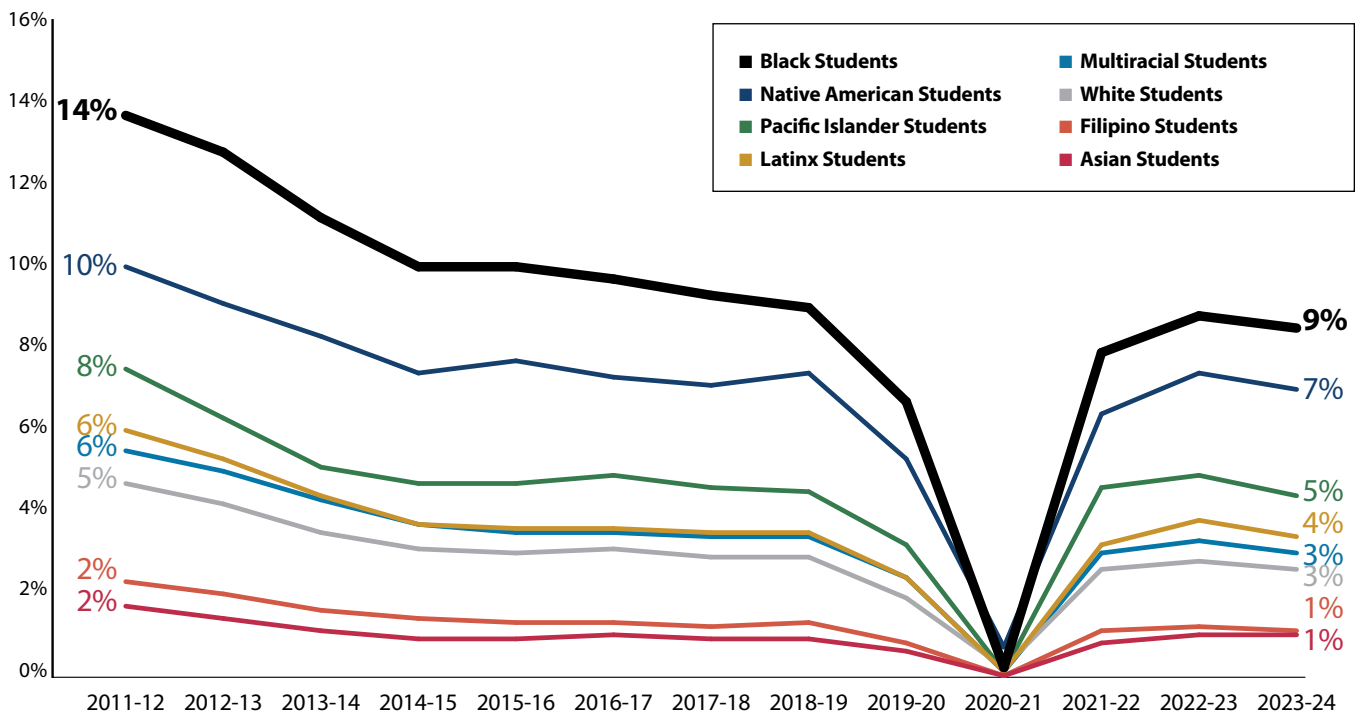Nearly a quarter of all Black TK-12 students in California report being bullied because of their race
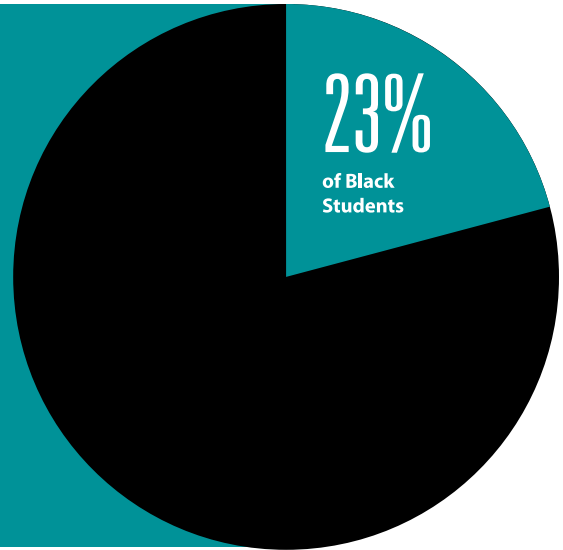
FIGURE 5. SHARE OF BLACK STUDENTS WHO WERE BULLIED OR HARASSED AT LEAST ONCE THE PREVIOUS SCHOOL YEAR ON THE BASIS OF THEIR RACE, ETHNICITY, OR NATIONAL ORIGIN (2017-2019)

Source: KidsData, Race/Ethnicity or National Origin as Reason for Bullying/Harassment, by Race/Ethnicity. Data are self-reported and include students in 7th, 9th, and 11th grade and non-traditional programs.

Black students are three times as likely to be suspended as white students — just like a decade ago

Legend:
- Black Students
- Native American Students
- Pacific Islander Students
- Latinx Students
- Multiracial Students
- White Students
- Filipino Students
- Asian Students

FIGURE 6. SHARE OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED FROM SCHOOL, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2013-14 THROUGH 2023-24)

Note: Data for 2019-20 reflect the initiation of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the 2020-21 school year reflects disruptions caused by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (all groups were suspended at roughly 0%).

Source: California Department of Education, Suspension Rate.

Opportunity Gap 3:
California's teacher pipeline deprives Black students of access to Black teachers, fully prepared teachers, and teachers with the most experience

Black Students Are Not Adequately Reflected by the Teacher Workforce

Students are more engaged in school and achieve greater academic success when teachers reflect their diversity. The presence of Black teachers significantly reduces the prevalence of harms like chronic absenteeism and toxic school environments. One recent study found that Black students who are taught by at least one Black teacher in their earliest years of schooling are 13% more likely to graduate from high school and 19% more likely to go to college compared with Black students at the same school who did not have a Black teacher.[82] Students of all races benefit from having a Black teacher, earning higher test scores and fewer absences even years later.[83]

Despite this clear evidence, the share of Black teachers has remained lower than the share of Black TK-12 students in most of the state's school districts over the past decade (Figure 7). Black teachers make up a smaller share of the workforce than the share of Black students in 74% of districts. Only 26% of school districts have similar shares of Black teachers and students. In contrast, white students are well represented or overrepresented by the share of white teachers in 98% of school districts.

Black students have one of the lowest levels of access to fully prepared teachers and are least likely to have teachers with the most experience
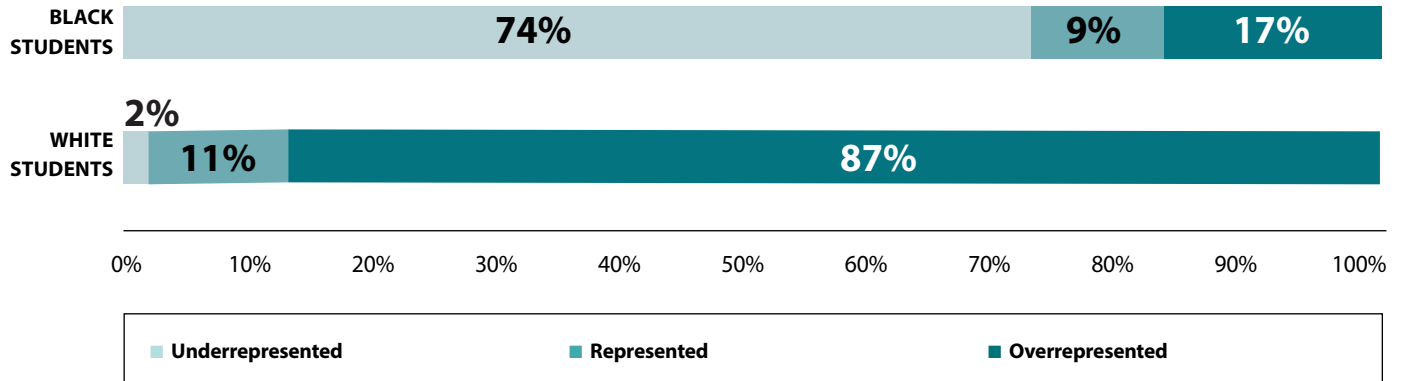
Teacher preparedness is a major driver of student outcomes in California. Well-prepared teachers help create the conditions for supporting Black and Latinx students to achieve academic success.[84] Yet California's Black students are among those most negatively affected by lack of access to fully prepared teachers. Schools with a high concentration of Black students have 6 percentage points fewer fully prepared teachers compared with schools with a low concentration of Black students.[85]

Experienced teachers, who have refined their pedagogy over years in the classroom, are also drivers of improved outcomes for students. Yet nearly 1 in 4 Black students (22%) attend schools with a high percentage of novice teachers, compared to 16% of students who are not Black (Figure 8).

Depriving Black students of the **teachers they need** — Black teachers, fully prepared teachers, and expert teachers who have honed their craft over many years — willfully robs kids of one of the most powerful research-based keys to educational success. School and district administrators can work to hire, support, retain, and learn from Black teachers, and the state can act, in the budget and through legislation, to strengthen investment, data reporting, and accountability to communities for supporting Black educators across the entire teacher pipeline.

Nearly 3 in 4 school districts have too few Black teachers to reflect their community's share of Black students

BLACK STUDENTS	74%	9% 17%
WHITE STUDENTS	2% 11%	87%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Underrepresented   ■ Represented   ■ Overrepresented

FIGURE 7. STUDENT-TO-TEACHER DIVERSITY GAPS IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Note: This figure shows the share of districts where students are proportionately represented or under and overrepresented relative to the share of same-race teachers in their school district. For example, Black students are underrepresented by the teacher workforce in 74% of school districts.

Source: EdTrust–West analysis of California Department of Education student and teacher demographic data, 2018-19.

Many Black students attend schools with a high percentage of novice teachers

22%
of Black Students
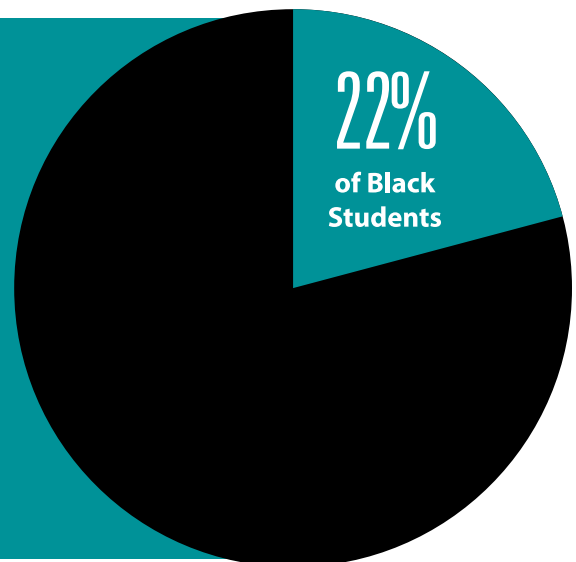
FIGURE 8: SHARE OF BLACK STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS WITH HIGH PERCENTAGES (AT LEAST 20%) OF NOVICE TEACHERS

Source: EdTrust, Educator Diversity State Profile, California

Opportunity Gap 4:
Schools and districts have inadequate resources and are ineffectively targeting existing funding toward improving educational quality for Black students

The state provides insufficient funding for public schools and lacks effective mechanisms for accountability that tie spending to increased academic growth.

School districts in turn, many of which are funded far below adequate levels, shortchange Black students by inefficiently targeting funds rather than providing evidence-based components of a high-quality education to students with the highest levels of need.

A 2024 national analysis found that California spent an estimated $513 less per pupil than the national average and ranked 28th in education spending adequacy (Figure 9).[86] Until 2022, the state had been underspending compared with the national average for decades.[87] This middling level of spending reflects a choice, not a lack of available resources — indeed, the state ranked 34th for funding effort in the same analysis, measured by education revenue as a share of a state's gross domestic product (GDP), spending less than 3% of its GDP on education (Figure 10).

Adding insult to injury, Proposition 13, the same law that severely limits the state's ability to raise education revenues, also creates what researchers have referred to as a "Black tax" by causing property owned by Black Californians to be assessed and taxed higher than that of white homeowners, increasing housing costs for Black Californians and contributing to both wealth disparities and neighborhood segregation.[88]

Although the state has taken a significant step in the direction of fair, needs-based school funding over the past decade by implementing LCFF and spending more per student on districts with a high share of students of color than those with smaller shares,[89] the amount spent on evidence-based practices to support Black students remains woefully inadequate.[90] Research suggests that districts dilute the impact of LCFF funds intended for underserved student groups, including students from low-income households, English language learners, and foster youth — by spreading funding evenly across schools rather than targeting schools and students with the highest levels of unmet need.[91] Wealthy districts also continue to manipulate alternative funding sources, including parcel taxes, bonds, and private donations, to inflate spending per pupil, thus widening funding gaps that LCFF was intended to narrow.[92]

In recent years, efforts to address these issues designed to target spending on students who fall into the lowest performing group on the state's standardized tests have been shot down out of concern that they are prohibited by Proposition 209 and the more recent federal ruling banning affirmative action in college admissions.

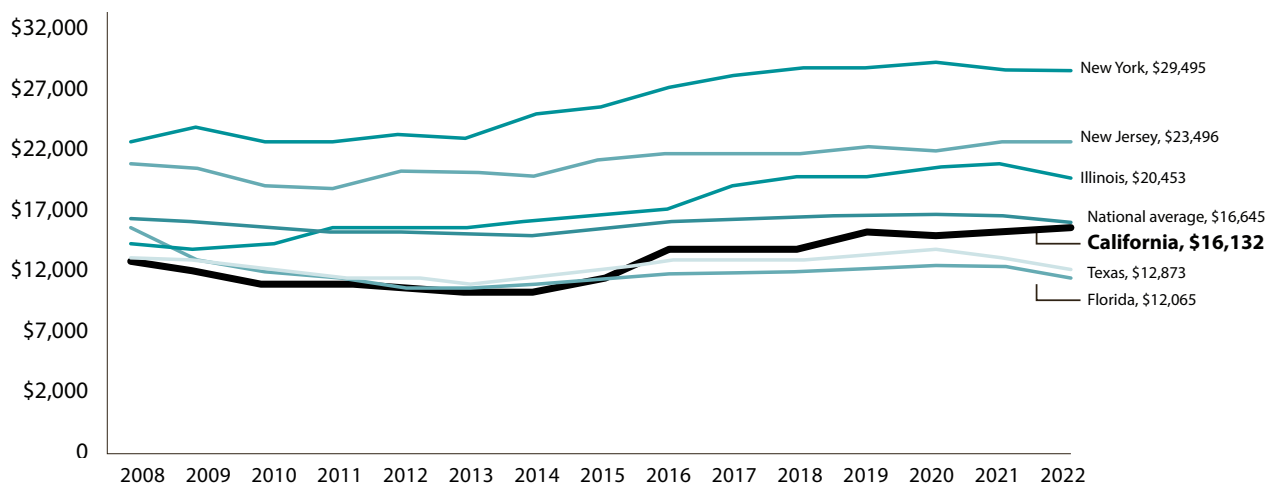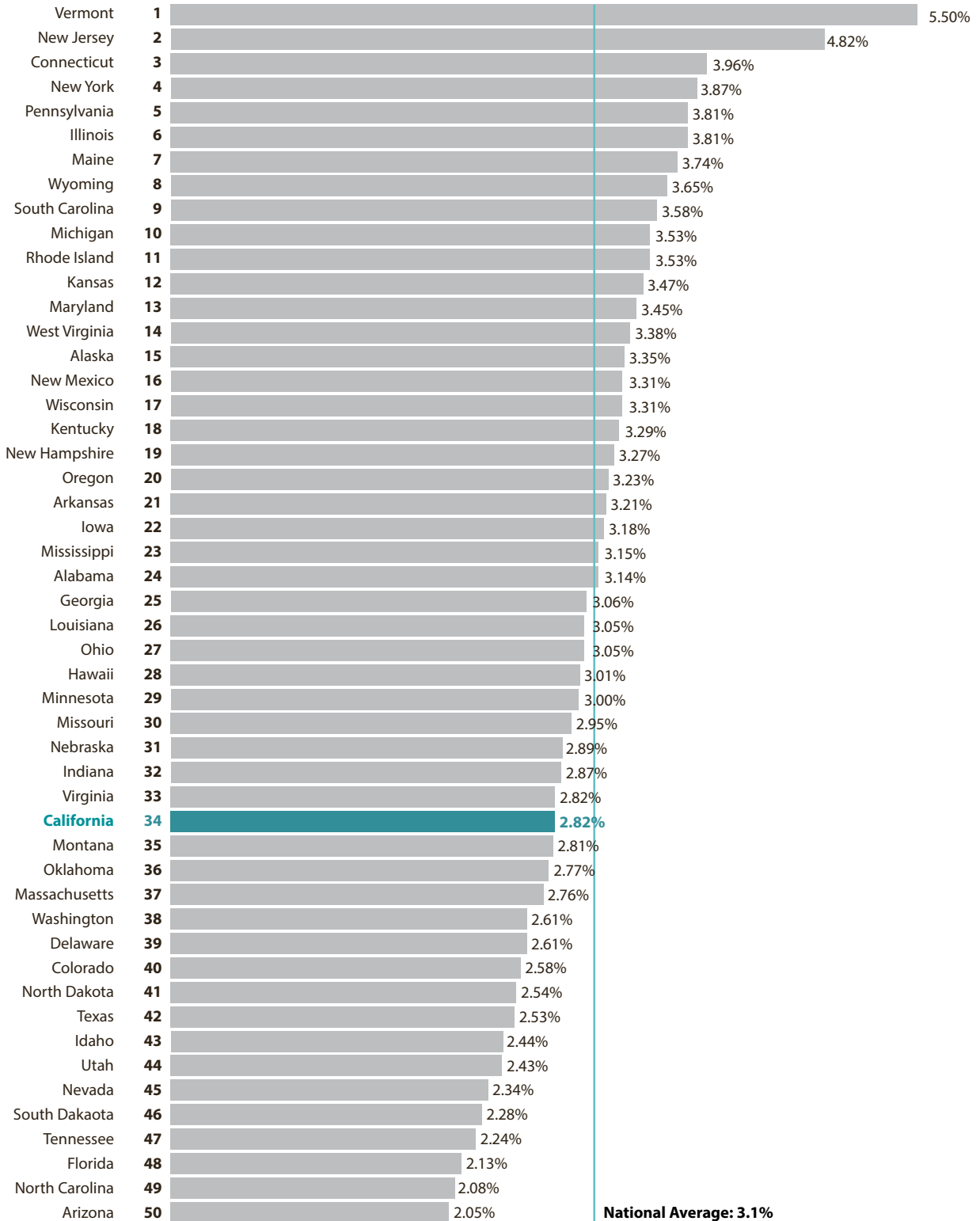## California has spent less per pupil than the national average for decades, despite its considerable wealth

New York, $29,495
New Jersey, $23,496
Illinois, $20,453
National average, $16,645
California, $16,132
Texas, $12,873
Florida, $12,065

FIGURE 9. FUNDING LEVEL (IN 2022 DOLLARS)

Source: Education Law Center, Making the Grade Funding Effort Profiles. Reflects geographically cost-adjusted per pupil revenue from state and local sources.

California spends a smaller share of its GDP on education than 33 other states

Rank	State	Percentage
1	Vermont	5.50%
2	New Jersey	4.82%
3	Connecticut	3.96%
4	New York	3.87%
5	Pennsylvania	3.81%
6	Illinois	3.81%
7	Maine	3.74%
8	Wyoming	3.65%
9	South Carolina	3.58%
10	Michigan	3.53%
11	Rhode Island	3.53%
12	Kansas	3.47%
13	Maryland	3.45%
14	West Virginia	3.38%
15	Alaska	3.35%
16	New Mexico	3.31%
17	Wisconsin	3.31%
18	Kentucky	3.29%
19	New Hampshire	3.27%
20	Oregon	3.23%
21	Arkansas	3.21%
22	Iowa	3.18%
23	Mississippi	3.15%
24	Alabama	3.14%
25	Georgia	3.06%
26	Louisiana	3.05%
27	Ohio	3.05%
28	Hawaii	3.01%
29	Minnesota	3.00%
30	Missouri	2.95%
31	Nebraska	2.89%
32	Indiana	2.87%
33	Virginia	2.82%
34	**California**	**2.82%**
35	Montana	2.81%
36	Oklahoma	2.77%
37	Massachusetts	2.76%
38	Washington	2.61%
39	Delaware	2.61%
40	Colorado	2.58%
41	North Dakota	2.54%
42	Texas	2.53%
43	Idaho	2.44%
44	Utah	2.43%
45	Nevada	2.34%
46	South Dakaota	2.28%
47	Tennessee	2.24%
48	Florida	2.13%
49	North Carolina	2.08%
50	Arizona	2.05%

National Average: 3.1%

FIGURE 10. FUNDING EFFORT – PRE-K THROUGH 12 EDUCATION SPENDING AS PERCENTAGE OF STATE'S GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (IN 2022 DOLLARS)

Source: Education Law Center, Making the Grade 2024

TK-12 OUTCOME GAPS

Black students are fully capable of flourishing as young scholars and meeting and exceeding rigorous learning standards. But the opportunity gaps documented in the previous section lay the groundwork for deep and enduring racial disparities in student outcomes like test scores, rates of student learning, and high school graduation rates.

Unequal Outcome 1: Black students are not being supported to consistently meet grade-level standards in core subjects

Our schools have consistently failed to foster math and English language arts (ELA) attainment among Black students over the past decade. Shockingly, according to national test data, the gap in reading proficiency scores between California's Black students and white students has not changed significantly since 1998.[93]

Test scores provide a limited but valuable snapshot of the extent to which students are supported to demonstrate mastery of grade-level skills and knowledge. Across third, eighth, and 11th grades, Black students are the least likely to attain ELA proficiency on California's statewide tests (Figure 11). Just under 1 in 3 Black third and eighth graders are supported to meet or exceed grade-level ELA standards. White students are supported to meet standards at twice the rate of Black students, and Asian students are prepared at more than twice the rate.

Only 3 in 10 Black students are supported to meet grade-level English language arts standards — the lowest rates of any racial group
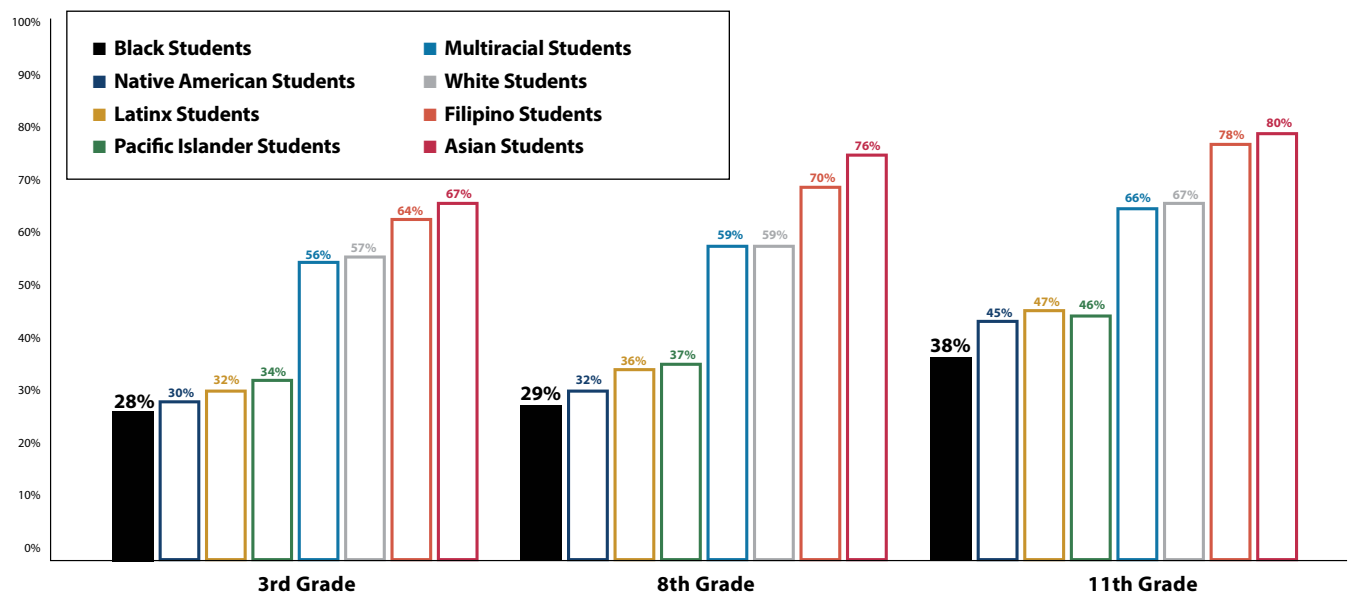

Legend:
- Black Students
- Native American Students
- Latinx Students
- Pacific Islander Students
- Multiracial Students
- White Students
- Filipino Students
- Asian Students

3rd Grade: 28%, 30%, 32%, 34%, 56%, 57%, 64%, 67%
8th Grade: 29%, 32%, 36%, 37%, 59%, 59%, 70%, 76%
11th Grade: 38%, 45%, 47%, 46%, 66%, 67%, 78%, 80%

FIGURE 11. SHARE OF STUDENTS MEETING OR EXCEEDING GRADE-LEVEL ELA STANDARDS, BY RACE, ETHNICITY AND GRADE (2023-24)

Source: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, California Department of Education. English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics research files, 2023–24.

Gaps in English language arts outcomes have remained virtually unchanged for the past decade
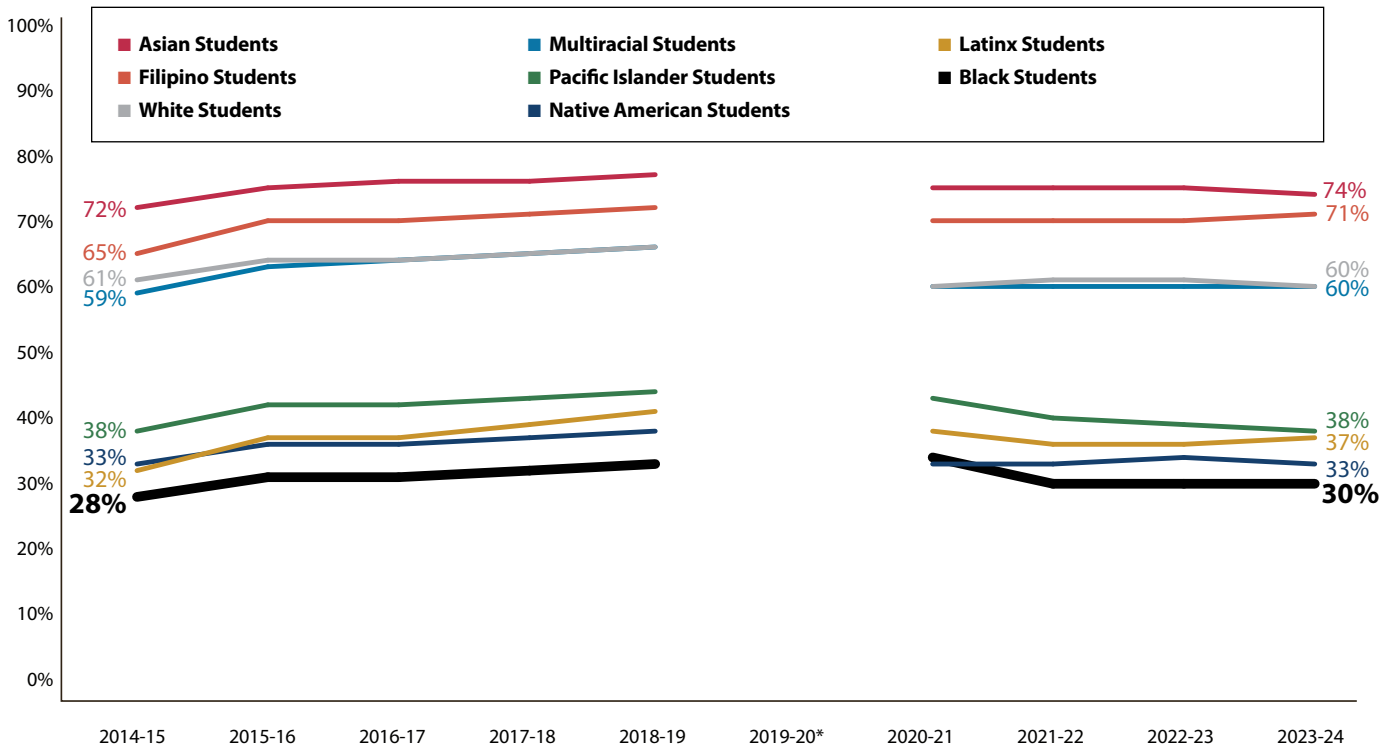
FIGURE 12. SHARE OF STUDENTS MEETING OR EXCEEDING GRADE-LEVEL ELA STANDARDS OVER TIME, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2014-15 THROUGH 2023-24)

Source: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, California Department of Education. English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics research files, 2023–24.

Since 2014-15, the percentage of Black students supported to reach proficiency in ELA increased by 2 percentage points (Figure 12). The gap in ELA proficiency between the statewide average and Black students (all grades) has persisted, hovering around 17 percentage points for the past decade. Only 69 districts (16%) supported more than half of their Black students to consistently meet grade-level standards in ELA, and even fewer did so in math (15 districts, or 3%). These conditions were true for Black students before the COVID-19 pandemic and remain virtually unchanged five years later.

Across third, eighth, and 11th grades, Black students are also supported to attain math proficiency at the lowest rates of any racial group. Only 1 in 4 Black third graders and roughly 1 in 10 Black eighth and 11th graders are supported to consistently meet or exceed grade-level math standards (Figure 13).

As is the case with ELA, the state has demonstrated nearly no measurable progress in supporting higher rates of Black students to develop math proficiency over the past decade (Figure 14). The percentage of Black students at grade level in math in 2023-24 is the same as in 2015-16: 18%. As with ELA, the gap in math proficiency between the statewide average and Black students has also persisted, ranging from 16 to 19 percentage points over the past decade.

Very few Black students are supported to meet grade-level math standards — the lowest rates of any racial group
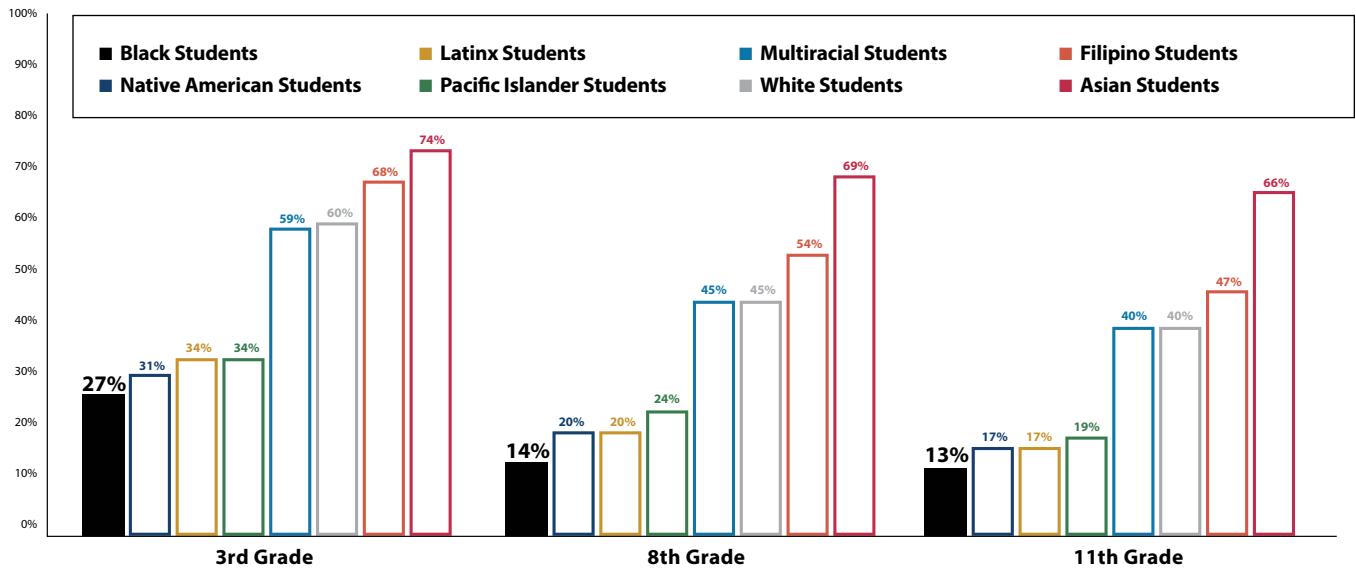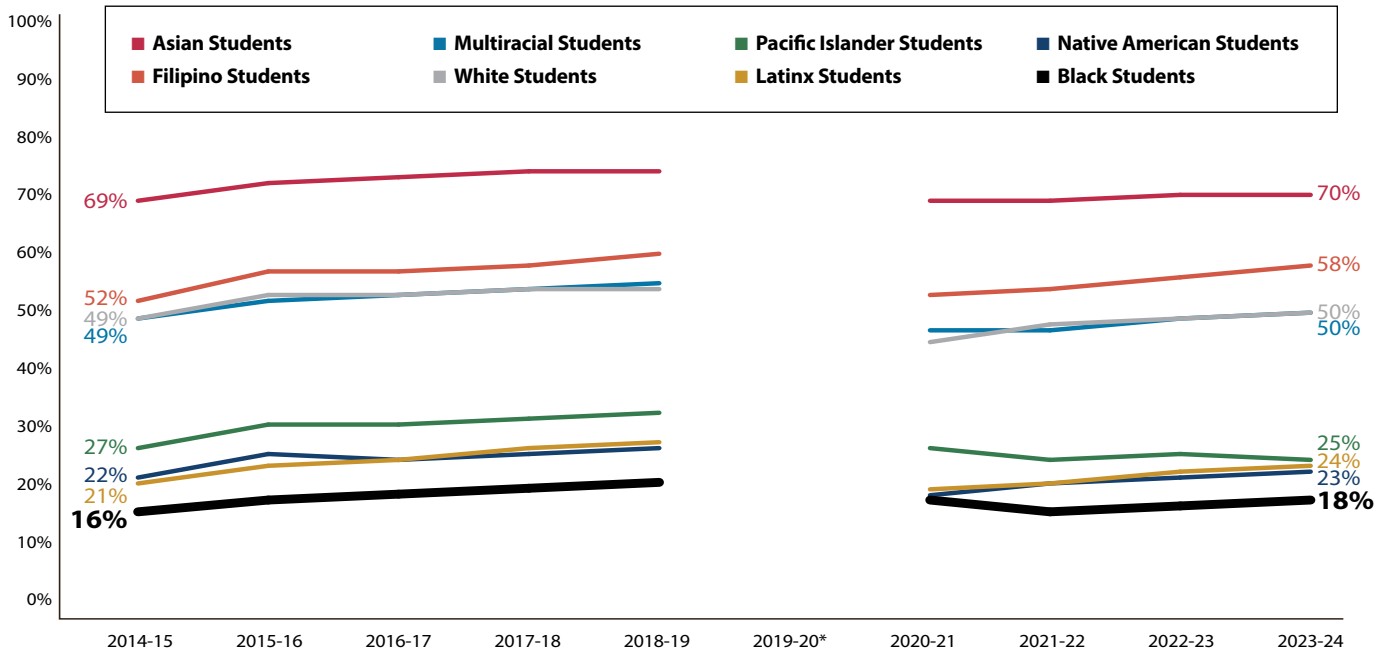

FIGURE 13. SHARE OF STUDENTS MEETING OR EXCEEDING GRADE-LEVEL MATH STANDARDS, BY RACE, ETHNICITY & GRADE (2023-24)

Source: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, California Department of Education. English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics research files, 2023–24.

Gaps in math outcomes have persisted over the last decade

FIGURE 14. SHARE OF STUDENTS MEETING OR EXCEEDING GRADE-LEVEL MATH STANDARDS, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2014-15 THROUGH 2023-24)

Source: California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, California Department of Education. English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics research files, 2023–24.

Unequal Outcome 2: Black students in California are supported to learn less material over the course of a school year than every other student group

National data using test scores from 2008-09 through 2018-19 shows that Black students in California have test scores that are roughly two grade levels below the national average for all students, whereas test scores for California's white students are roughly two-thirds of a grade level above the national average, and Asian students are nearly two full grade levels above the national average.[94]

Data on learning rates shows that Black students in California are supported to learn 7% less material each grade than the U.S. average, whereas the state's white students learn 7% more and Asian students learn 17% more

each grade than the U.S. average (Figure 15). Put another way, this means that during the five years between third grade and eighth grade, California's Black students are supported to learn only 4.7 years' worth of material, a third of a grade level less than the average student of any race, whereas Asian students in California learn nearly 6 years' worth of material over the same time frame. Although the Golden State considers itself a national leader in terms of equity, these stark gaps in the rates at which students are supported to learn tell a much bleaker story.

California's Black students are supported to learn less over the course of a school year than any other student group
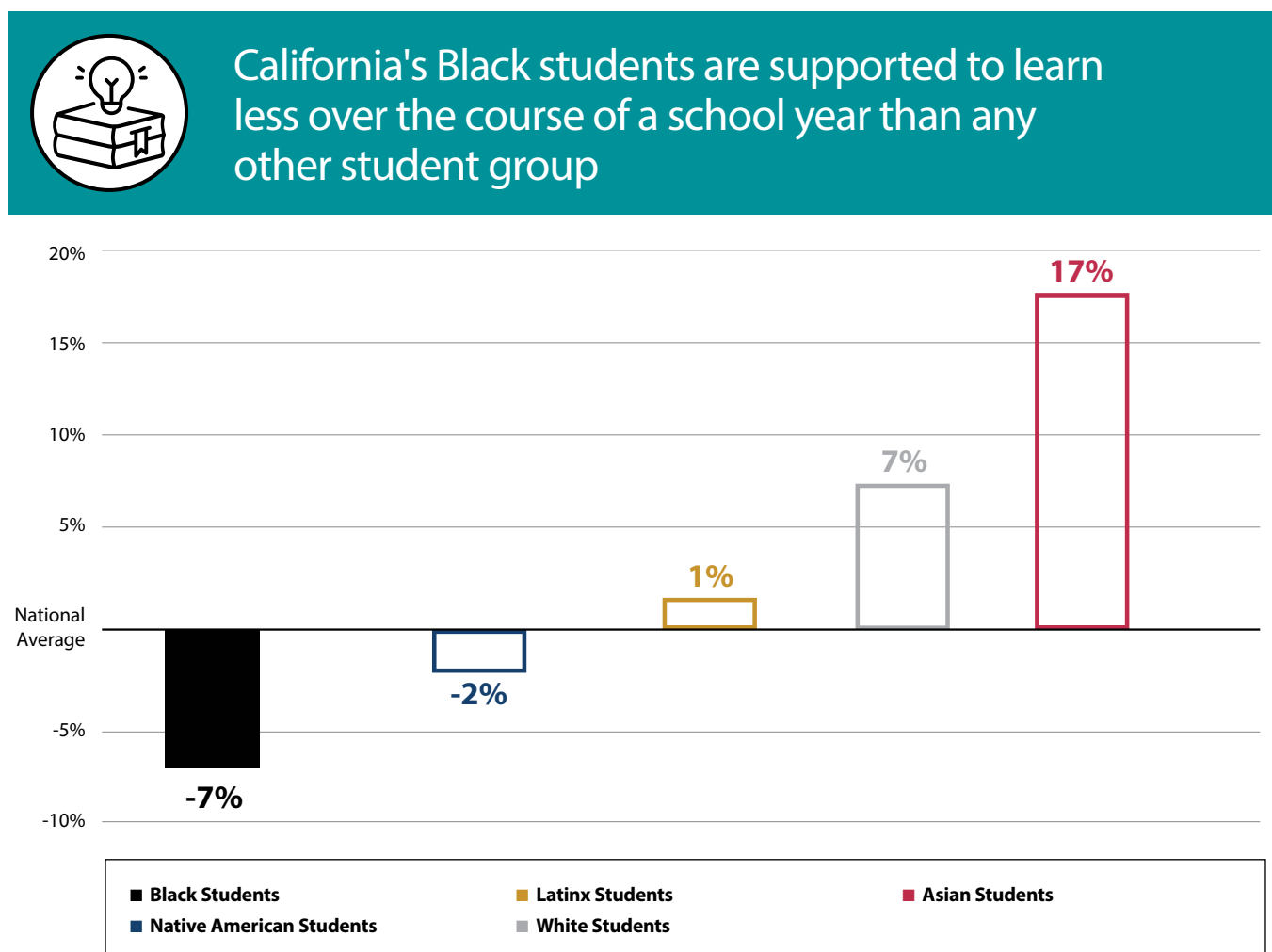

FIGURE 15. LEARNING RATES FOR CALIFORNIA STUDENTS COMPARED TO NATIONAL AVERAGE BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2009-2018)

Note: Learning rates measure how much students' scores improve each year while they are in school. A value of zero represents the national average for all students; a value below zero indicates learning rates below the national average, and a value above zero indicates learning rates above the national average.

Source: Educational Opportunity Project, Stanford University.

Black students have the lowest high school graduation rate in California, and at 15%, the dropout rate for Black students is almost double that of white students

100%

BLACK
WHITE
STATEWIDE AVERAGE

78%
89%
86%

- Graduation Rate
- Dropout Rate
- Other

0%

15%
8%
9%

7%
3%
5%
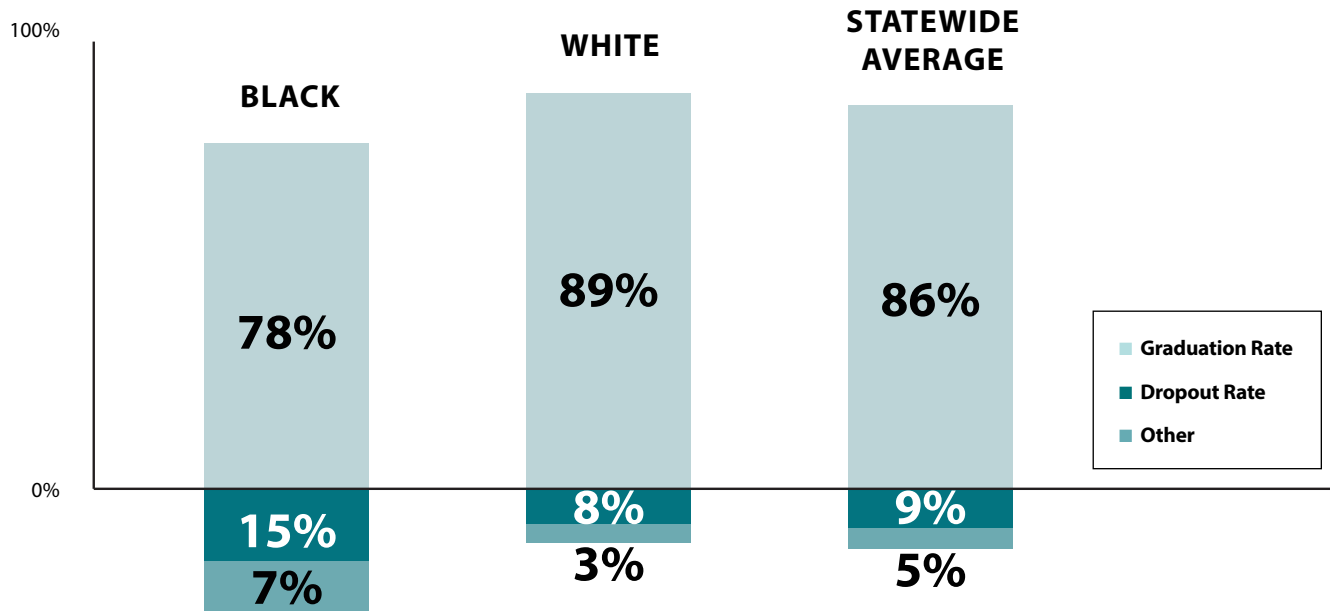
FIGURE 16. GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2023-24)

Note: "Other" includes students who are still enrolled and those who have completed high school without a regular diploma. Data may not sum precisely to 100 due to rounding.

Source: California Department of Education, Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Outcome data (2023-24).

Unequal Outcome 3: Black students are too often pushed out of school and graduate high school at the lowest rates of any racial group

Black students are pushed out of school at a higher rate than their peers and, conversely, are supported to graduate from high school at the lowest rate of any group. According to 2023-24 data, 78% of Black students in California were supported to graduate from high school in four years — 8 percentage points lower than the statewide graduation rate (Figure 16). This rate reflects improvement by 10 percentage points over the past decade; in 2013-14, only 68% of Black students were supported to graduate. This progress must be sustained and ideally sped up to close lingering gaps given that 2 of every 10 Black high school students still are not supported to graduate.

At 15%, the dropout rate for Black students is roughly double that of white students. This opportunity gap is

particularly alarming given research showing that students who drop out are more likely to struggle financially, face mental health challenges, interact with the criminal punishment system, and have lower life expectancy than their peers who graduate from high school.[95]

California can, and must, do better. None of the opportunity gaps or outcome gaps explored in this report are new — all have been allowed to linger over the past decade. Rather than settle for this unacceptable status quo, we can start building a better future for Black students in our TK-12 public school systems by making changes at the local and state levels.

A CHOICE OF POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR CALIFORNIA'S TK–12 SYSTEM

Black students deserve better from California's schools and state leaders

The data shared in this report shows stagnation and makes it clear that the current pace of progress our school systems create for Black students is unacceptable. The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened existing decades-old injustices. If the state and its school districts fail to make bold changes in policy and practice, it will take half a century or more to support all Black students to thrive.

At the current pace of progress, multiple generations of Black students will pass through California's schools without experiencing the conditions that foster school success. Even if we base projections only on the higher rates of progress before COVID-19, Black students will not all test at grade level in math until 2089, and all Black students will not test at grade level in ELA until 2070 (Figure 17). And when we look at other important outcome measures with even more recent data, the story gets even worse. At the current pace of progress, Black students will not reach a 100% graduation rate until 2103. This glacial pace of growth is clearly unacceptable.[96]

This status quo is not an accident — it is the consequence of systems designed to produce unequal outcomes operating largely unchecked for centuries. It is also the consequence of incremental changes made in place of what's called for: much more fundamental transformation. Finally, it is the result of active attacks on attempts to move beyond anti-Black state policies and school practices — attacks in the form of challenges to racial equity initiatives and censorship of curriculum and books to limit students' knowledge of themselves and their world.

At the current pace of progress, multiple generations will pass through California schools before all Black students are supported to read and do math on grade-level

Black students reading at grade level in 2070

Black students at grade level in math in 2089
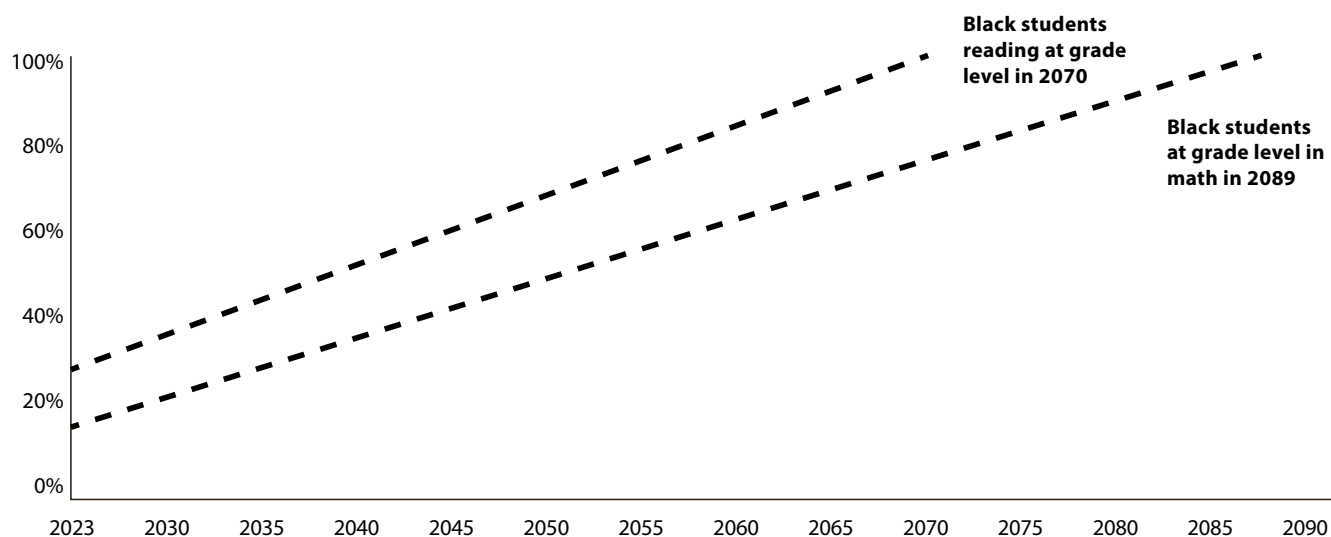
FIGURE 17. YEAR ALL BLACK STUDENTS WOULD REACH 100% MEETING/EXCEEDING STANDARDS AT CURRENT RATE OF CHANGE

Source: EdTrust-West analysis of California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress proficiency rates. Math and ELA projections reflect the average rate of change for each student group based on all years of available CAASPP prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# BRIGHT FUTURES TAKE BRAVERY:
Backlash and backpedaling on Los Angeles Unified School District's Black Student Achievement Plan

Los Angeles Unified provides a chilling example of how bold student-centered initiatives can be undercut by conservative backlash and scarcity mindsets.

As a result of community advocacy following George Floyd's murder in 2020, the LAUSD Board of Education approved the **Black Student Achievement Plan** (BSAP) in February 2021 to address longstanding educational disparities. BSAP, a transformative race-conscious program, earmarked funds to address persistent equity gaps in educational outcomes between Black students and their non-Black peers by fostering high academic achievement, social-emotional awareness, and positive cultural identity for Black students. To make this possible, the district redirected $25 million in funding from the Los Angeles School Police Department — which has historically and currently harmed Black students — to BSAP. The district committed to developing culturally responsive curricula, establishing partnerships with community-based organizations, and increasing staffing of counselors, climate advocates, restorative justice teachers, and psychiatric social workers at 53 top-priority schools that educate **a third** of the district's Black students. In 2023, LAUSD expanded the program by $26 million.

In a **survey** of 2,300 students across 100 LAUSD schools, 87% of Black students reported benefiting from BSAP since its implementation, although challenges persist. Nearly half of students reported that their schools do not have enough resources for Black students. According to **district data**, the percentage of Black students in top-priority schools accessing psychiatric social workers and school site advocates increased by 15 and 9 percentage points respectively between 2022 and 2023. Top-priority schools have not yet experienced much growth on academic measures such as ELA and math proficiency, though test scores are a lagging indicator, making it unlikely that improvements would be immediately evident after just one year of implementation and instead requiring sustained implementation.

Recently, under pressure from conservative groups, the district fundamentally shifted BSAP, removing its key focus on Black students. This shift threatens to abandon the historic potential for progress that BSAP held. The district must hold itself accountable to its Black students and families and, even in the face of pressure to protect the status quo, must instead maintain a laser focus on supporting Black students' academic and holistic success.
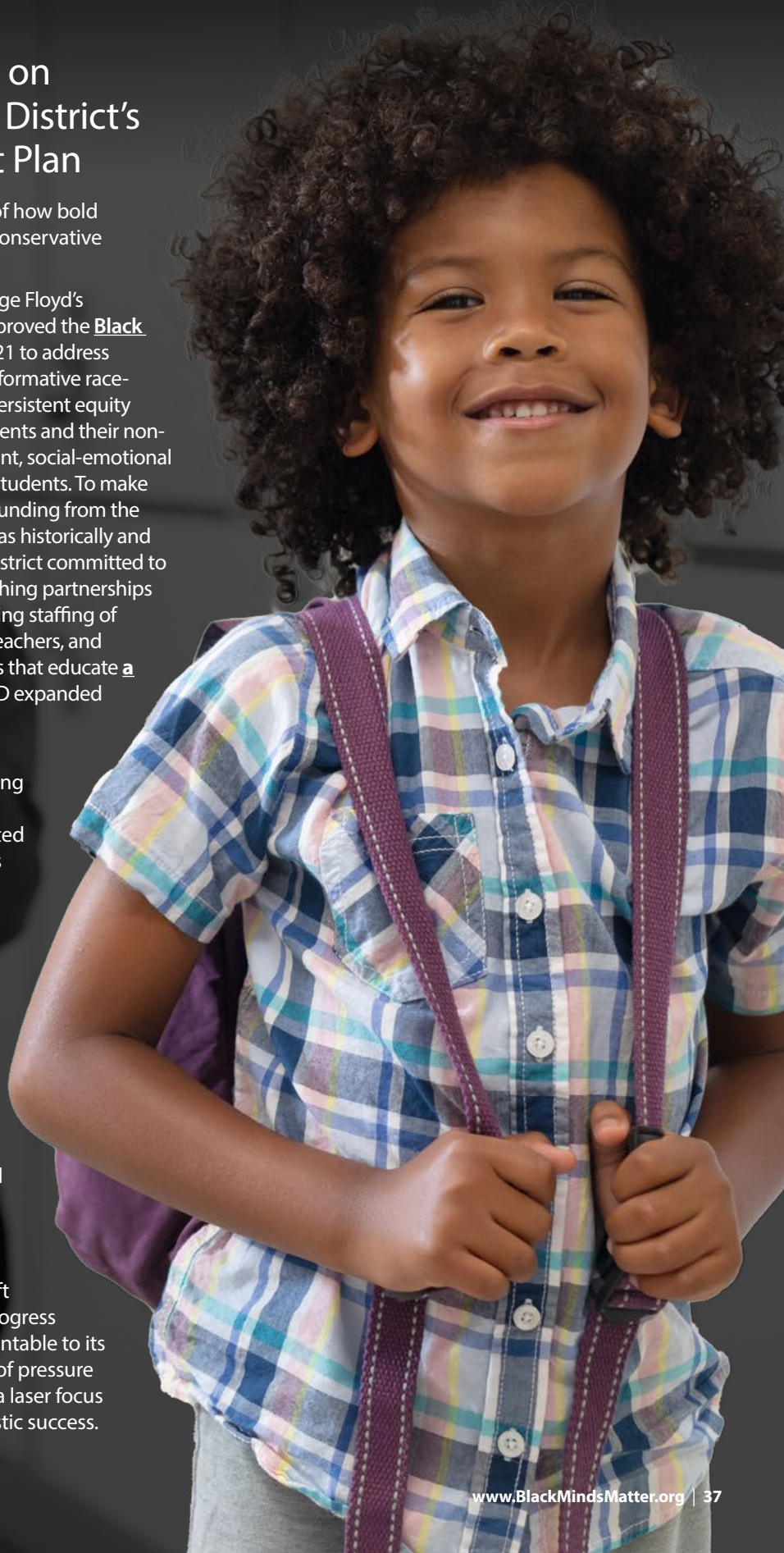
TK-12 STATE RECOMMENDATIONS

What will it take to close opportunity and outcome gaps for Black students in TK-12 schools?

Create a State Commission on Black Education Transformation

To reject the status quo and create a brighter future for California's Black students in both TK-12 and higher education, the state should create The Commission on Black Education Transformation, a standing commission responsible for supervising the immediate implementation of policies and practices for Black student success. Decades of research and advocacy, including from EdTrust-West and other advocates, activists, and community members, have yielded several recommendations, some of which are listed below.

In addition, the state has taken an important initial step toward acknowledging its obligation to make transformative changes to benefit Black students by establishing the Reparations Taskforce to assess the harm the state of California has caused to the Black community and recommend policy changes to address and reverse those harms. The Taskforce's 2023 report included 16 specific recommendations for addressing harms California's educational systems have inflicted upon Black students, in line with the policy changes Ed Trust-West has consistently identified and advocated for over two decades. The Commission on Black Education Transformation should be charged with moving the state's intention to address harms to Black students

into action by creating implementation plans for Black student-centered policy changes and delineating clear responsibility to state agencies and other stakeholders for executing those plans. The commission should include Black students, parents, educators, policy experts, community leaders, and advocates to ground its work in the collective knowledge of those directly impacted, ensure accountability, and foster transparency. Additionally, the commission must have the authority to allocate resources, set timelines, and ensure that state and local agencies follow through on commitments and take steps to scale promising practices.

While there have been past state efforts to improve the way our schools serve Black students in California, the commission would signal a commitment to holding state and local leaders accountable for executing policy and practice changes focusing on transforming our education systems in ways that center Black students' success.[97] An example of a similar approach can be found at the federal level, in the Biden administration's creation of a Presidential Advisory Commission on Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Black Americans.[98]

In TK-12, we recommend the commission oversee prompt enactment of these state-level solutions:

(1) Modify the state's funding formula to address racial disparities and provide abundant resources for Black students' education.

Opportunity gap this recommendation addresses: Inadequate and ineffectively targeted resources

The state should take the following actions to revolutionize school funding and begin repaying educational debts owed to Black students:

▶ **Modify the state's funding formula to target racial disparities** | Although LCFF provides a strong foundation for equitable school funding, data from the past decade reveals the need to strengthen the formula for Black students. To do so, the state should create a mechanism within LCFF that allocates funding directly to schools to close racial disparities. These funds should be distributed based on a Systemic Disparity Index that targets funds according to the prevalence of systemic factors in school communities. The index should include metrics that reflect the disproportionate impact of systemic racism on California students, including inputs like the prevalence of asthma, levels of adult educational attainment, and homeownership rates. Los Angeles' Student Equity Needs Index (SENI), spotlighted here as a change agent, provides a successful example of this approach.

▶ **Strengthen accountability mechanisms** | The state should support continuous improvement and meaningfully hold schools and districts accountable for spending on approaches proven to close outcome gaps for Black students. They can do so by requiring districts to report in their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) the evidence-based strategies they plan to implement at the school level to meet the needs of Black students and requiring them to report back on the impact of those interventions.

Why Reparations For Education?

Reparations for slavery and racial discrimination against Black people in the U.S. are commonly misunderstood as being limited to cash payments to individuals who qualify. In fact, reparations are a much broader concept. Reparations are actions taken by a government to repair harm caused by its wrongful acts or negligence against a specific group of people.[100] Given this broad definition of reparations, California has an obligation to repair the educational harms caused to Black students and the Black community through transformative education policy change that directly addresses and reverses past and continued harm.[101]

▶ **Increase education spending overall** | The state should increase the amount of revenue it dedicates to school funding, given that at present, funding levels are woefully inadequate to cover basic costs, and California dedicates a smaller share of its GDP to education than most other states.

(2) Fully scale comprehensive community school models that create welcoming and affirming environments for Black students.

Opportunity gaps this recommendation addresses: Low levels of inclusion and engagement for Black students and families and the need for loving and affirming learning environments

Community schools embrace a holistic view of education, providing comprehensive supports and sharing decision-making power with students, families, community partners, and educators. In 2021, in response to advocacy from students and families of color and more than 50 organizations, California invested $4.1 billion to create, expand, and strengthen community schools across the state, enough to allow every high-poverty school to become a community school within the next five to seven years.[99]

So far, implementation and planning grants have been awarded to schools that serve higher shares of underserved students than the state average; 8% of students in schools receiving implementation grants are Black compared with 5% of students statewide.[102] This landmark investment is an example of how bold state action can facilitate transformative change. Now, the state must do the following:

▶ **Ensure every school in the state becomes a community school** | The state must stay the course by maintaining investments in community schools so that every school can replace outdated models of education with more inclusive, empathetic, and collaborative approaches to teaching and learning.

▶ **Require schools to demonstrate how they are following Black families' leads** | As community schools scale up, the state should use existing reporting mechanisms like LCAPs and community

school grantees' annual progress reports to actively hold schools accountable for increasing and sustaining trusting relationships with Black parents and students. Soliciting input proactively from Black families and students, and then acting on that guidance, will be critical for community schools to stay true to their original mission of redesigning education for racial justice.[103]

▶ **Mandate that all schools end disproportionate discipline and pushout of Black students** | This will require strategic staffing in line with the community school model that prioritizes support and care over punitive and exclusionary discipline (such as investing in counselors, school psychologists, and social workers rather than school police) as well as making it mandatory that all staff receive training and support to fundamentally shift mindsets and practices.

③ Invest in and require schools to use proven strategies to recruit, support, and value Black teachers.

Opportunity gap this recommendation addresses: Shortage of Black teachers and lack of access to fully prepared and experienced teachers

California's leaders must create clear goals and a concrete plan for supporting more Black teachers to enter and stay in the profession. Anything less would mean accepting the futility of a colorblind approach to increasing teacher diversity, which the data in this report reveals has clearly failed over the past decade. Instead, this work should be grounded in community-informed strategies laid out in the Educator Diversity Roadmap and follow recommendations that come directly from Black educators and leaders.

In 2025, EdTrust-West created the Teachers We Need campaign to build a movement of parents, families, and community leaders that pushes policymakers across the state to support educators of color and multilingual educators. We call on the state to do the following:

▶ **Create a State Commission on Educator Diversity** | This advisory body would coordinate the development and execution of comprehensive solutions to the state's teacher pipeline issues, including the shortage of Black teachers and Black students' lack of access to fully prepared and experienced teachers. It should be empowered to set ambitious diversity goals for every stage of the teacher pipeline, coordinate the implementation of large-scale policy and practice changes to meet those goals, ensure data transparency, and track progress on key performance indicators.

▶ **Increase teacher compensation for Black teachers** | The legislature and governor should increase and target teacher diversity workforce investments. Attracting and retaining diverse, high-quality teachers will require the state to increase and sustain funding for programs across the pipeline that reduce the cost of becoming a teacher, like residencies and Grow Your Own programs. It will also require increasing teacher compensation to ensure the profession is a financially stable option and is competitive with other career choices.

▶ **Mandate annual releases of teacher demographic data at the school and district levels** | The state should pass legislation that unequivocally requires that the California Department of Education annually publish data on teachers' demographics and ensure that this and any other relevant teacher employment data are provided to the state's Cradle-to-Career data system.

LOCAL STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN TK-12

State policies ultimately succeed or fail based on whether they are translated into changes within schools and classrooms. In the original Black Minds Matter, we uplifted strategies to create learning environments where Black students are supported to thrive, all of which remain relevant today, a full 10 years later. Here, we update those strategies by calling on school and district leaders to make four fundamental shifts in the ways they serve Black students and families.

Although some schools may already use these strategies, the undeniable opportunity and outcome gaps Black students face make it clear that they are not yet doing so in a comprehensive way. To effectively serve Black students, school and district leaders should partner with, and follow the lead of, the proven approaches innovated by Black Californians on behalf of Black students, examples of which are demonstrated by the change agents featured in the next section.

1

Take an honest accounting of opportunity gaps and commit to concrete changes, including educational reparations.

Every school community will need to closely examine their unique local context to identify the specific ways their policies, practices, and norms contribute to the gaps identified in this report. To follow the lead of Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), local education leaders can fully commit to change by intentionally setting out to understand what reparations are owed to Black students in their community, commit to taking steps to repair harm, and change school practices.

School districts can conduct a **Systemic Equity Review** to engage in this critical reflection on the root causes of disparities that Black students experience. The process involves taking a deep dive into district data as well as having frank conversations among district and school leaders, educators, and staff that explicitly name how current practices harm students of color and their families. This means hearing directly from Black parents and students, as well as disaggregating school and classroom-level data on both academic measures and the Healthy Kids Survey and California School Parent Survey to identify areas for change. From there, districts can create and implement a blueprint for improvement. As they do so, districts should hold themselves accountable to students and families by transparently engaging in regular evaluations of progress against key indicators, which should include both academic outcomes and measures of school climate and culture.

2

Ensure academic relevance, rigor, and supports to nurture Black students' brilliance.

Comprehensive adoption of culturally relevant instruction that centers students' diverse identities, cultures, and contexts is key to disrupting decades of discriminatory educational experiences for Black students. Schools and districts should provide high-quality professional development and coaching focused on building this competency, make such training mandatory for all staff, and set the expectation that all educators provide culturally relevant instruction.

Progress also requires that schools implement equitable policy changes urgently and comprehensively rather than treating them as compliance exercises. Implementation of Ethnic Studies in high school, which will be a graduation requirement for all students starting in 2030, is a perfect example of a policy that, although an important step in the right direction, will only have its intended impact if schools implement it with fidelity and intentionally weave principles of Ethnic Studies throughout the curriculum more broadly. They can do so by selecting high-quality curricula and instructional materials in core subjects like math, science, and ELA, and by engaging Black families and community members around vetting options to verify they meet high standards for cultural responsiveness.

Finally, districts should strategically spend on maintaining and expanding pandemic-era supports associated with improved student outcomes, like before- and after-school programming and academic tutoring, that enable differentiated instruction tailored to students' individual needs.

3

Hire and support Black educators and ensure equitable access to effective educators.

School district leaders and principals should work closely with educator preparation programs and community colleges to support Black students who aspire to become educators to complete the requirements for an associate degree. They could also partner with community-based organizations to create pathways for classified staff and expanded learning staff to transition to full-time classroom roles. Finally, schools should leverage state funding like the Teacher Residency Grant Program and Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program to lower the cost for a teaching credential for aspiring Black educators.[104]

Recruiting and preparing more Black Californians to become teachers is only half of the equation. School and district leaders also need to create supportive environments where Black educators are not isolated, they feel valued and psychologically safe, their professional expertise is respected, and they are not forced to shoulder uncompensated emotional labor.[105]

4

Consistently engage Black parents and caregivers as active partners in students' success.

Schools should create regular opportunities for Black parents and caregivers to share their insights, concerns, and ideas through parent-teacher conferences, community meetings, and advisory boards, ensuring their voices shape school policies and practices. Beyond ensuring families have a seat at the table, school leaders should actively empower Black parents and caregivers to participate in school governance and decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration in their children's educational journeys. This means schools need to do more than extend an invitation to Black families and call it a day. Instead, they must ask Black parents and caregivers what they need to enable their involvement and actively create conditions that support participation, like scheduling meetings at times that work with parents' schedules and providing meals and child care during meetings.[106]

Meaningfully including Black parents in districts' LCAP development, which outlines specific ways they will allocate funds to meet goals for improving student performance, is an excellent place to start. Following through on making concrete changes to school policy and practice that reflect Black families' input will also help build trust and strengthen relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

TK-12 CHANGE AGENTS ILLUMINATE A BETTER PATH FORWARD

Every moment that education leaders allow current unjust educational conditions to persist reflects an active choice to force Black students to settle for the status quo rather than tackling systemic change head on. But it doesn't have to be this way. Change agents in communities across the state are already leading transformational work on behalf of Black students, lighting the path to a brighter future. Their approaches and impact provide a model of what is possible when Black educators and advocates lead and have the resources and institutional support to enact creative community-informed solutions.

School and local leaders should learn from and replicate these approaches, but state education leaders — including the legislature, governor, California Department of Education, and State Board of Education — should learn a larger lesson: Although the individuals and programs making these transformational changes should be celebrated, the success of Black students in California should not depend on if they are lucky enough to live near one of these outstanding programs. Our leaders have an obligation to the children and young people they represent to move away from incremental change and instead to require and facilitate the expansion of best practices through state investments and policies.

Black Educator Advocates Network — Statewide

Founded in 2020 by Black educators, [Black Educator Advocates Network](#) (BEAN) strives to increase the number of Black educators across California and ensure that their school environments support, uplift, and retain them. BEAN cultivates a base of Black educators who collectively influence and transform practices and policies that affect Black educators.

In 2023, BEAN [surveyed](#) hundreds of current and former Black educators in California to understand their experiences as teachers in California schools and to surface how schools and districts can better support them. Reponses elevated the need for hiring more Black staff, fostering inclusive environments, creating safe spaces for educators and students, providing culturally responsive training for all staff, and meaningfully involving Black educators in decision-making processes. Based on this data, BEAN designed a trailblazing [Liberatory Black Educator Retention Framework](#) that school leaders can use to create antiracist environments where Black educators are uplifted and recognized as leaders. To date, BEAN's efforts have reached more than 120 Black educators and 10,000 students in Los Angeles County and across the state.[107]

Watts of Power Foundation: The Village Initiative — Los Angeles

[The Village Initiative](#) (TVI), a culturally affirming, community-based teacher residency program by the Watts of Power Foundation, strengthens the pipeline of Black male educators in Los Angeles. In partnership with Los Angeles Unified and Cal State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), TVI's curriculum supplements credentialing programs by nurturing the development of Black teachers over two years. In their first year, fellows attend classes through CSUDH's credential program and build experience as paraprofessionals or after-school program providers. In their second year, fellows work alongside a mentor teacher in the classroom. During this program phase, participants receive a living stipend of $45,000.[108]

Fellows also participate in a preservice summer institute (Freedom Schools), have access to emergency funding when unexpected expenses arise, receive support from a therapist and life coach, and receive training in financial literacy and centering care and culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. In 2023, TVI served 15 Black, male aspiring teachers who collectively reached 1,500 students.[109] Now, TVI is on track to place 113 fully credentialed, Black, male teachers in schools over the next 10 years.

Los Angeles Unified: Student Equity Needs Index — Los Angeles

A product of successful community advocacy led by the [Equity Alliance for LA's Kids](#), a coalition of organizations including Community Coalition, InnerCity Struggle, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, and Catalyst California, the [Student Equity Needs Index](#) (SENI) aims to better address historic and current inequities, largely driven by racial disparities, by allocating school funding according to student need in LAUSD. SENI incorporates a set of academic, systemic, and community-based indicators, such as suspension rates, asthma prevalence, and gun violence exposure, to identify schools with the highest needs.

Using SENI to guide funding decisions, the district has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to prioritize high-need schools, ensuring they have greater support and resources. SENI has also informed strategic resource allocation within the district, such as decisions about where to build community schools or establish grab-and-go centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach is vital for addressing the inequities that disproportionately affect Black students and their Latinx and Native American peers. A study by the [American Institute of Research](#) shows a positive correlation between how LAUSD distributed resources and outcomes of high-need students in the highest-need schools. As LAUSD continues to refine this equity-based index, SENI provides a transformative model for fostering racial justice in education funding.

Oakland Unified School District: Reparations for Black Students Resolution, African American Male Achievement Initiative, and African American Female Excellence Initiative — Oakland

In 2021, the Oakland Unified School District Board of Education adopted the Reparations for Black Students Resolution, a historic response to community-led advocacy spearheaded by the Justice for Oakland Students Coalition. This resolution formally acknowledges the long-standing effects of systemic racism on Black families and establishes the Reparations for Black Students Task Force to drive systemic change. The task force, informed by the input of over 250 community members, is charged with implementing and monitoring progress on key recommendations to advance Black student success.

As part of its 2024-25 LCAP adoption, OUSD allocated more than $4.4 million in targeted investments to support Black student achievement. Key initiatives include the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) program, launched in 2010, and the African American Female Excellence (AAFE) initiative established in 2017.[110] AAMA provides full-time teaching staff at over 22 OUSD sites, while AAFE supports more than 13 full- and part-time teaching staff across the district. Additionally, OUSD has expanded its commitment by investing in Black Thriving Teachers on Special Assignment (TSAs) across five schools that historically serve a high proportion of Black students. These TSAs play a pivotal role in delivering culturally relevant pedagogy, mentoring, and targeted interventions tailored to the specific needs of Black students. These programs are designed to cultivate academic excellence, intellectual curiosity, and a strong sense of self, ensuring that Black students thrive both academically and personally.

The impact of these initiatives is reflected in measurable academic progress. From 2015-16 to 2023-24, the district-wide four-year cohort graduation rate for Black students increased by 14 percentage points, accompanied by a 17 percentage point rise in graduates meeting A-G requirements.[111] However, ELA and math proficiency for Black students have each remained concerningly low, reinforcing the importance of OUSD's continued prioritization of the academic and holistic needs of its Black students, including by offering daily Black student-centered classes, weekly empowerment groups, city-wide field trips, and family-focused events.

Calculus Roundtable — Statewide

Recognizing the crucial role that science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills play in our present and future world, Calculus Roundtable (CR) works to improve access to STEM activities, eliminate disparities in math learning, and provide pathways to sustainable careers in STEM for students of color in San Francisco and beyond. At the heart of CR's programming is the commitment to culturally relevant, inclusive education that connects with students of all backgrounds and ethnicities. CR partners directly with schools, libraries, and community organizations to deliver rigorous, engaging, and culturally responsive STEM activities and curricula through their flagship initiatives such as STEM Broadcasting Network, Think Like a Game Designer, Digital One Room Schoolhouse, and Girls Math

Club. Additionally, partnerships with organizations like 100 Black Men of America and the Silicon Valley Black Chamber of Commerce have launched high-impact STEM events that engage hundreds of Black students, sparking interest and opening doors to STEM careers.

CR's initiatives have demonstrated measurable success. Over 10,000 Black students across 51 school districts have achieved an average 27-point increase in math standardized test scores.[112] In total, CR has reached more than 30,000 students of color, 40% of whom are Black. Looking ahead, CR plans to deepen community connections, expand partnerships, and develop new programs that continue to uplift Black students. The goal remains clear: to equip every student with the skills, confidence, and opportunities needed to thrive in STEM, ensuring that Black students have a voice, a presence, and a path in the STEM fields.

Berkeley High School African American Studies Department — Berkeley

The powerful activism of the Black Student Union in 1968 drove Berkeley High School to establish the only-of-its-kind African American Studies Department (formerly the Black Studies Department). The department offers a comprehensive exploration of the African American experience framed within broader national and global contexts through a broad curriculum encompassing history, literature, language, dance, drum, economics, and psychology. The Black Student Union also successfully campaigned for increased representation of Black educators to staff the department.

Today, the African American Studies Department continues to thrive, empowering students to connect with their heritages and recognize their cultural contributions. In the 2021-22 school year, the department's co-chairs established the Black Scholars Center, a drop-in center where students receive academic support, do their coursework, and discuss college applications. The department hires students to serve as peer tutors and mentors after school. Beyond academic support, they also host programs such as the Black Scholar Awards Ceremony, Black Graduation, and Black History Month events that cultivate a sense of community and recognize students who are going above and beyond with their education. Now, in the most recent school year, 95% of Black students at Berkeley High School graduate in four years, far exceeding the statewide average.[113]

COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS

SEGREGATED SUPPORTS DERAIL STUDENTS' DREAMS

Our TK-12 public schools and systems of higher education each have critical roles to play in paving a smooth path for Black students to achieve their postsecondary aspirations.

In this section, we identify four systemic opportunity gaps that undermine Black students' efforts to earn a college degree and lay out the resulting unequal outcomes Black students experience. As in the TK-12 section, we then present a choice of possible futures for California's colleges and universities, provide recommendations for how education leaders and policymakers can ensure our systems of higher education support all Black students to attain their goals for college and career, and highlight change agents already leading the way.

COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS OPPORTUNITY GAPS

Opportunity Gap 1: High schools do not support Black students to participate and succeed in college preparatory coursework

For students, it can feel like the distance between high school graduation and college enrollment is a treacherous canyon stretching out before them, blocking their path to a degree. But research suggests that high schools can enact strategies that build sturdy bridges connecting students to the next step of their educational journeys. These strategies include supporting students to complete the A-G course sequence, which is required for students to be eligible to attend the UC and CSU systems and supporting them to complete early college coursework in the form of dual enrollment classes.

Fewer than half of Black high school graduates are supported to complete the A-G course sequence

In the 2023-24 school year, only 44% of Black high school graduates were supported to complete the A-G course sequence, placing them at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to admission into the state's four-year public universities (Figure 18). Only 57 school districts in the state (out of 235 with Black students in their senior cohort) support at least half of their Black graduates to complete the A-G sequence.

A-G completion rates for Black students have been relatively unchanged for the past decade. Since 2016-17, the percentage of Black graduates completing the A-G course sequence has only increased by 4 percentage points (Figure 19).

Comparing college-going rates among Black students who complete the full A-G sequence and those who do not reveals the fork in the road that schools create when they fail to support students to complete A-G classes. Eighty percent of Black students who graduate having completed the A-G requirements enroll in college within 12 months of graduating compared to only 48% of Black high school graduates who did not meet the A-G requirements.[114] That means that failing to support students to take and pass A-G classes relegates many of them to a non-college-going track.

A-G rates are higher for all students, including Black students, when high schools make A-G the default curriculum and intentionally foster a college-going culture.[115] In addition, a focused approach ensuring all Black students are supported to take and complete A-G courses is needed to make college an attainable next step for every Black high school student.

Fewer than half of Black high school graduates are supported to complete the A-G course sequence

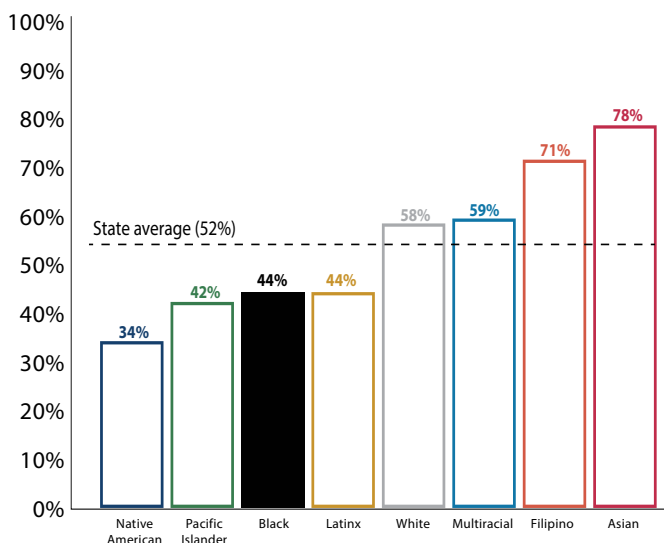A-G completion rates for Black students have been relatively unchanged for the past decade

FIGURE 18. SHARE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WHO COMPLETED THE A-G COURSE SEQUENCE, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2023-24)

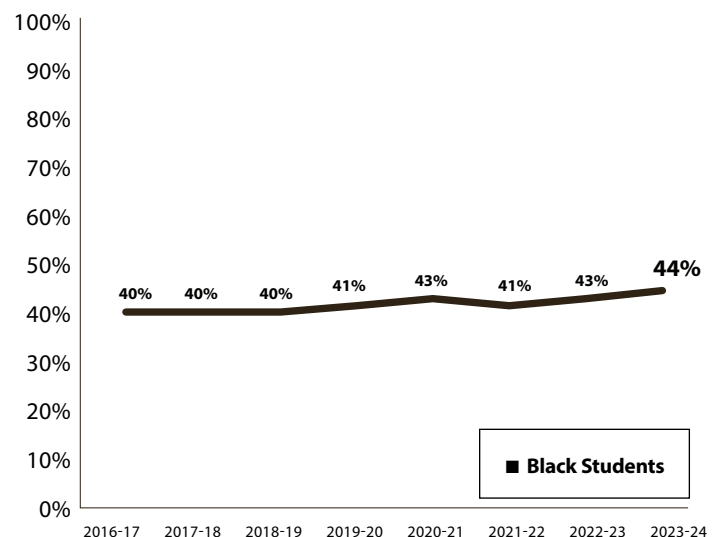*Source: California Department of Education, Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Outcome data (2023-24).*

FIGURE 19. A-G COMPLETION RATE OVER TIME FOR BLACK STUDENTS (2016-17 THROUGH 2023-24)

Source: California Department of Education, Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Outcome data (2016-24).

Black students are supported to participate in dual enrollment at the lowest rates of any student group

Black students in California are currently deprived of dual enrollment opportunities, which allow students to take college classes while in high school and create a strong pathway to higher education success. Only 37% of high schools serving more than 75% of Black and Latinx students even offer dual enrollment.[116]

This disparity widens college access gaps because students who take dual enrollment courses are more likely to graduate from high school and are less likely to take remedial classes in college than students who do not participate in dual enrollment. Underrepresented students who participate in dual enrollment also accumulate more credits and increase their likelihood of transferring to a four-year college. Black students who participate in dual enrollment apply to and are accepted at more four-year colleges and are more likely to be admitted to highly selective in-state universities.[117]

Alarm bells should also go off for high schools and colleges in light of recent data showing that participation in dual enrollment has recently leveled off after several years of steady increases, with participation stagnating since the pandemic. Black students continue to participate in dual enrollment at the lowest rates of any student group, with 17% of Black students in the 2021-22 graduating class participating in dual enrollment — roughly half the rate of Asian students and two-thirds the rate of white students (Figure 20).

These data should galvanize schools and community colleges to ensure all Black students have access to dual enrollment courses and that they are supported to participate in and pass those classes.

Only 17% of Black high school graduates are supported to complete dual enrollment coursework
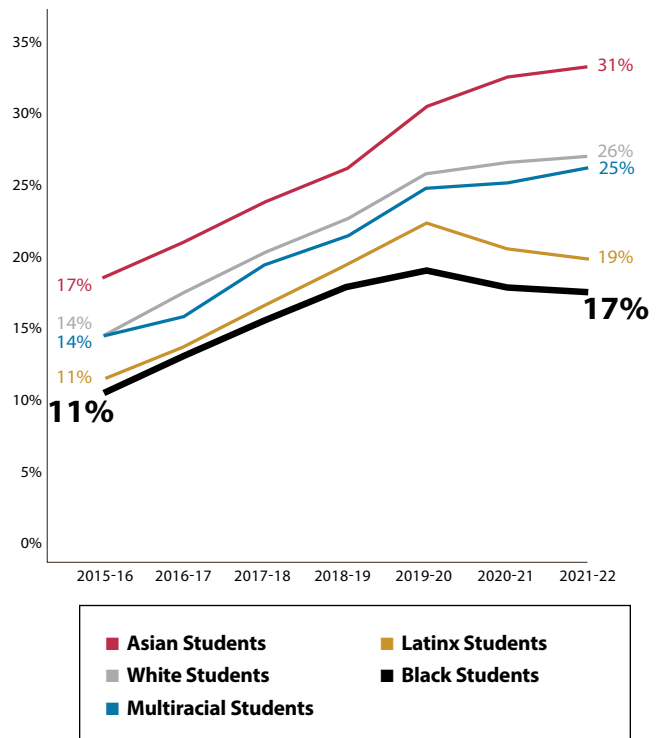
FIGURE 20. DUAL ENROLLMENT PARTICIPATION BY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING COHORT, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2015-16 THROUGH 2021-22)

Source: Policy Analysis for California Education

Despite some progress during the first year of the state's universal financial aid policy, fewer than half of Black high school seniors are supported to apply for financial aid.

A statewide survey of high school seniors in the graduating class of 2023 showed that 1 in 3 Black students (34%) are worried about being able to afford living expenses like rent, transportation, and food, while a similar share of Black college students (33%) are worried about affording books, tuition, and equipment.[118] Federal and state financial aid help lower the often astronomical cost of college for students, bringing it within reach for them and their families, but most Black students are excluded from these opportunities because they are not supported to apply for aid while in high school.[119]

To help level the playing field, the state recently passed legislation that, beginning in the 2022-23 school year, mandated that high schools ensure all students complete a FAFSA or CADAA before graduating or actively opt out of doing so. Although this was a critical step toward helping students bridge the chasm between high school and higher education, data from the first year of the law's implementation reveals that, despite the rate of application submission increasing for all student groups, Black students are still among the least likely to be supported to apply for financial aid; in 2022-23, only about half of Black students (48%) submitted FAFSA or CADAA applications (Figure 21). Even more work remains to improve financial aid application rates for Black students in the wake of the 2023-24 federal overhaul of the application process, which disrupted students' abilities to submit financial aid applications across the board and led to lower overall rates of completion.

Every single Black student should be supported to complete a financial aid application before graduating high school, as required by law, because obtaining aid is often the deciding factor that either empowers students to enroll and persist in higher education or excludes them from doing so. Counselors, teachers, and school leaders all have a role to play in working with students and families to make this goal a reality. Right now, they allow what should be a relatively quick and simple step on the way to college to instead act as a locked gate blocking the path to college for half of our Black high school graduates.

Fewer than half of Black high school seniors are supported to apply for financial aid
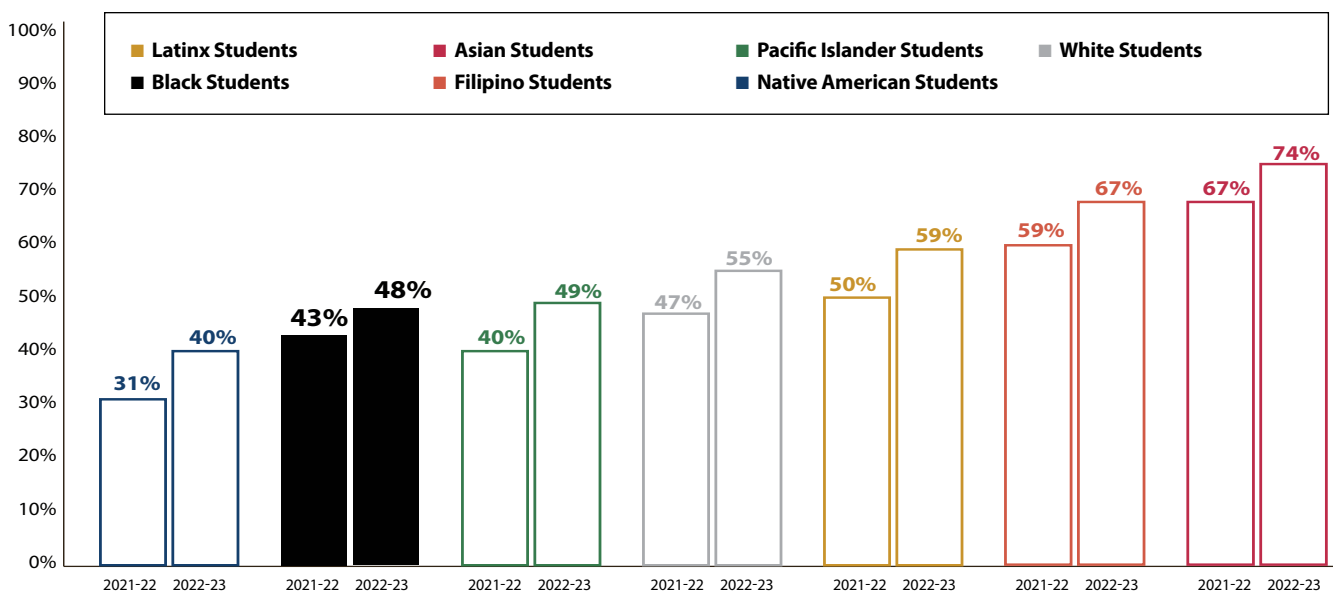
FIGURE 21. SHARE OF STUDENTS COMPLETING FAFSA OR CADAA BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2021-22 AND 2022-23)

Source: California Student Aid Commission

Opportunity Gap 3: College-going rates for Black students have fallen over the last decade and the UC and CSU continue to fail to enroll representative shares of Black students

Obtaining a bachelor's degree significantly increases an individual's career options and earning potential, and it is associated with a broad array of positive outcomes, including better physical and mental health and greater longevity.[120] In 2023, the median earnings for a bachelor's degree holder in California was $78,278, nearly twice that of someone holding a high school degree alone ($40,803).[121] In addition to a higher income, degree holders also have lower levels of unemployment and hold jobs with more benefits than individuals with lower levels of education, and their children are more likely to have positive educational and life outcomes in turn.[122] Most Black parents and students recognize the value of attaining a college degree, but our systems fail to support Black students to enroll in — much less graduate from — four-year colleges and universities.

Just over half of Black high school graduates are supported to enroll in college within 12 months of graduating

California's schools and colleges together create conditions that severely constrain Black students' postsecondary options; Black students have one of the lowest college-going rates of any group. In 2021-22, the share of Black high school completers who enrolled in college within 12 months of graduating was 55%, compared with 68% of white graduates and 85% of Asian graduates. Strikingly, the college-going rate for Black students in 2021-22 is 7 percentage points lower than it was in 2014-15 (62%) (Figure 22).

Fewer than 1 in 5 Black community college students who intend to transfer to a four-year college are supported to do so within four years

Transfer rates from California's community colleges to four-year colleges or universities provide insight into another dimension in which the state is definitively failing to support Black students to earn at least a bachelor's degree. Among students who entered community college between 2017 and 2019 and intended to transfer, only 17% of Black students did so within four years, even though it should only take two years to do so.[123]

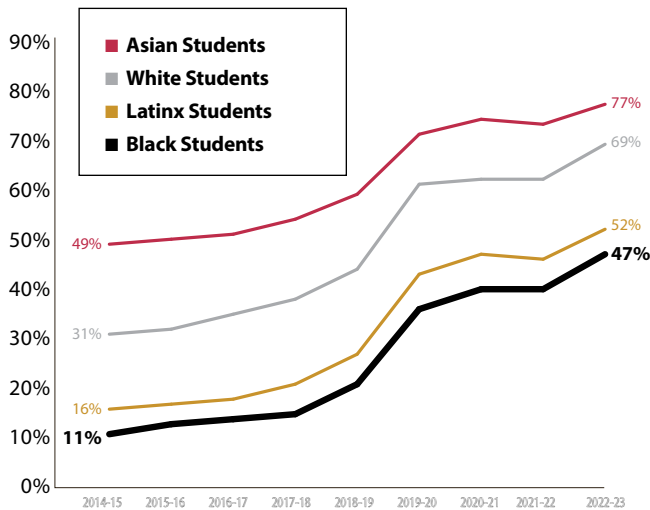## Fewer Black students are going to college after high school than ten years ago
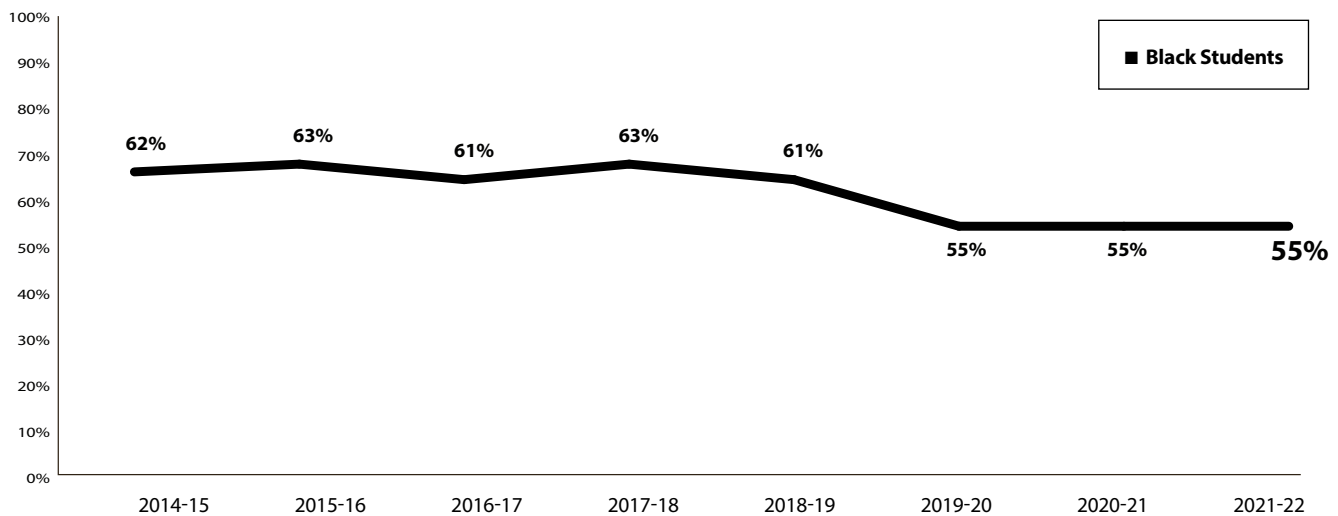
Figure 22. SHARE OF BLACK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES ENROLLING IN A POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION WITHIN 12 MONTHS OF GRADUATING (2014-15 THROUGH 2021-22)

Source: California Department of Education, College-Going Rate for California High School Students

FIGURE 23. MATH ONE-YEAR TRANSFER-LEVEL COMPLETION RATES, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2014-15 THROUGH 2022-23)

Source: California Community Colleges Transfer-Level English and Math Completion Dashboard

One of the most effective levers for supporting Black students to transfer to a four-year college is clearing the way for students to pass transfer-level coursework within their first year of community college. Completing transfer-level math in their first year increases Black students' likelihoods of making it near to or through the transfer gate by 160% and completing both transfer-level math and English in their first year increases the chances by 310%.[124]

Landmark legislation (AB 705 in 2017 and AB 1705 in 2022) requiring community colleges to maximize students' access to credit-bearing transfer-level coursework recently spurred important progress on this front, quadrupling the share of Black students completing transfer-level math within their first year compared to a decade ago (11% in 2014-15 compared to 47% in 2022-23; Figure 23). The share of Black first-time students completing transfer-level English has grown from 32% in 2014-15 to 56% in 2022-23. This increase shows the power of targeted investments and the replacement of deficit-based, often arbitrary placement practices with a focus on acceleration and corequisite support.

However, that good news is undercut by the fact that, even with this progress, Black students are still supported to pass transfer level math and English at lower rates than their peers. Colleges need to provide more effective corequisite support, require professional development for faculty, and nurture a positive campus racial climate.[125] The latter is needed especially urgently: Black students who reported no experience with microaggressions on campus were far more likely to pass transfer-level math on their first try (80%) compared to students who experience microaggressions regularly on campus (25%).[126]
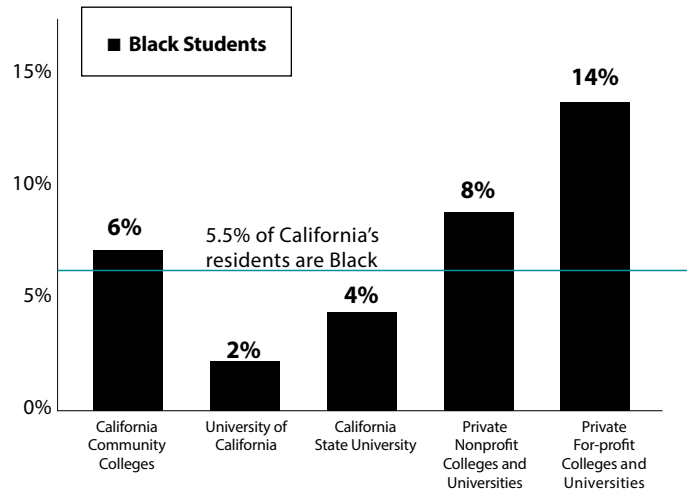
FIGURE 24. BLACK UNDERGRADUATE SHARE OF ENROLLMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS (2022-23)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 12-month Enrollment Component (2022-2023), Tables: EFFY2023.

The state's four-year colleges and universities enroll Black students at a rate lower than the state's share of Black Californians

After the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996 banning affirmative action in the state's public institutions, the share of Black students enrolled in the CSU and UC systems plummeted and, in many instances, has yet to recover, though many schools have made strides by implementing holistic review of applications, which can increase representation of Black students.[127] Although Black students make up 5.5% of California's residents, only 4% of CSU students and 2% of UC undergraduates are Black (Figure 24).

The failure of the state's public systems to enroll and support Black students means that a larger share of Black students attends private and for-profit colleges, forcing them to pay a much higher cost of attendance than they would at a UC or CSU campus.

Several states have used direct admissions policies to remove logistical barriers that prevent many Black students from applying to college in the first place. Direct admission uses existing data to proactively admit students to colleges based on a predetermined set of criteria, allowing students to then "claim their place" using a simplified form rather than being forced to run the gauntlet of completing the entire application process.[128] In one study, students randomly assigned to receive direct admissions letters were four times more likely to apply to the institution and 30% more likely to also apply to another college.[129] Results were strongest for Black and first-generation students, suggesting a promising avenue for addressing this opportunity gap in college enrollment.

Opportunity Gap 4: Colleges and universities do not address Black students' basic needs, allowing barriers like food and housing insecurity and mental health challenges to stand between students and their degrees

Black college students experience housing and food insecurity at the highest rate of any group

Once on campus, students are more likely to graduate if their basic needs like food and housing are met, yet here again, we see persistent disparities for Black students.[130] Nontuition costs like food, housing, and books make up 80% of the average cost of attending community college and 61% of the total cost of attending a four-year college.[131] Yet state and federal financial aid awards are often insufficient to cover these costs, leaving students to fill the gap themselves, and many struggle to do so.

According to a survey administered by the California Student Aid Commission, 78% of Black college students in California were food insecure and 65% were housing insecure in 2023, the highest rates of these basic needs challenges experienced by any group (Figure 25).[132]

Black students experience mental health challenges at higher rates than their peers

Young Black Californians report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and stress than their peers in other groups, all of which threaten students' abilities to navigate college and persist to complete a degree.[133] Often exacerbated by the demands of an academic workload, these challenges make Black students more likely to drop out and contribute to higher rates of substance abuse and suicide.[134] Nationally, 40% of Black college students report considering withdrawing from their program, citing stress, mental health, and costs as their leading reasons.[135] Students at CSUs, UCs, and community colleges report increasing rates of sadness, hopelessness, and depression after the pandemic, and rates are highest for students of color.[136]

The availability of mental health services and supports varies across the state's public higher education systems. Both increased funding and a targeted focus on serving Black students are needed to ensure these grave opportunity gaps are eliminated and Black students are supported to thrive while in college.
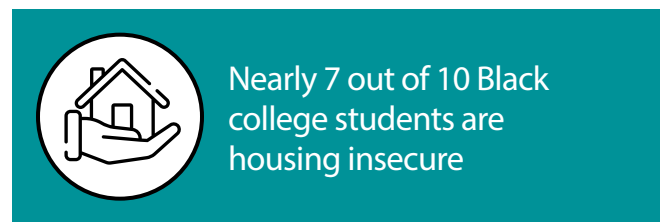

8 out of 10 Black college students are food insecure

Nearly 7 out of 10 Black college students are housing insecure

FIGURE 25. SHARE OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FOOD AND HOUSING INSECURITY, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2022-23)

Source: California Student Aid Commission, 2023 Food and Housing Survey

COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS OUTCOME GAPS

Black scholars recognize the value of higher education and pursue degrees that have the power to unlock fulfilling careers. But the opportunity gaps documented in the previous section undermine those aspirations, resulting in outcome gaps in degree completion and racial disparities in debt burdens that rob Black Californians of hard-earned postsecondary success.

Unequal Outcome 1: In 2023, only 1 in 3 Black adults in California held a bachelor's degree or higher, and gendered gaps in completion have widened

In its 2022-23 budget, California set the goal that 70% of working-age adults ages 25 to 64 would hold a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030. In 2022, 40% of Black adults in California held a postsecondary degree or credential — a long way off from the 70% goal.[137] Although the state's postsecondary attainment goal includes certificates and associate degrees, it is worth drilling down specifically into the share of Black Californians supported to attain a bachelor's degree or higher because that level of attainment has the most power to narrow racial gaps in employment and earnings.

Promisingly, the number of Black adults who hold a bachelor's degree has increased by nearly 105,000 over the past decade, growing from roughly 370,000 in 2015 to nearly 475,000 in 2023. That growth reflects an increase in the share of Black adults who hold a bachelor's degree from 24% in 2015 to 32% in 2023 (Figure 26). This progress is encouraging but still woefully insufficient given that more than 80% of Black parents and an even larger share of Black students believe it is important to obtain a degree.

State leaders must make sure every single one of California's public colleges and universities create the conditions that empower more Black students to achieve their postsecondary aspirations.

It is also important to consider that average rates of college attainment mask gendered gaps in degree completion among Black Californians at UCs, CSUs, and community colleges that echo the gender gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes our systems produce in earlier years of education.[138] In 2023, 35% of Black women in California held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to only 29% of Black men. Both groups saw gains in their share of degree holders over the past decade, but Black women increased their attainment at nearly twice the rate of Black men. These disparities suggest a need for California's higher education systems to intentionally consider students' intersectional identities as they tailor improvements to the ways they serve Black students.

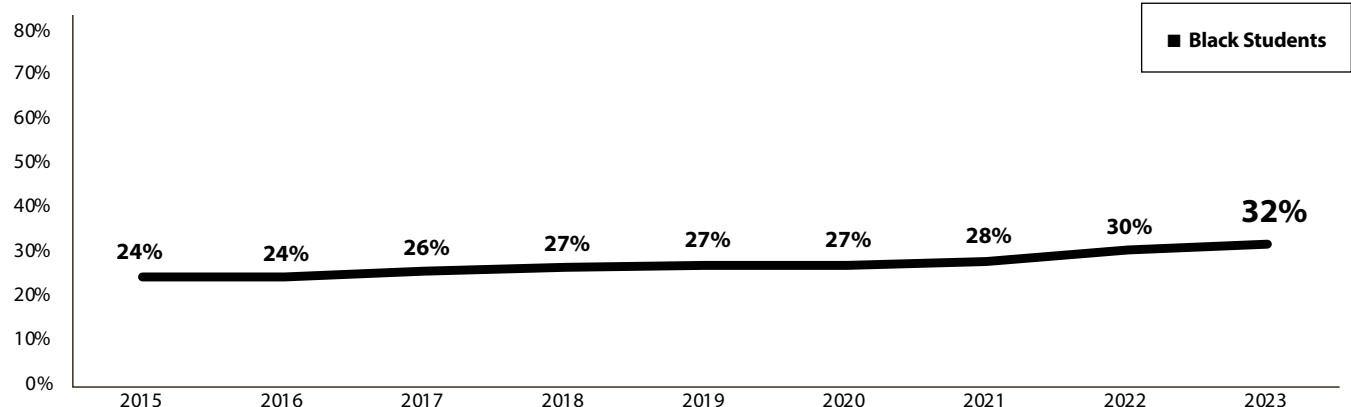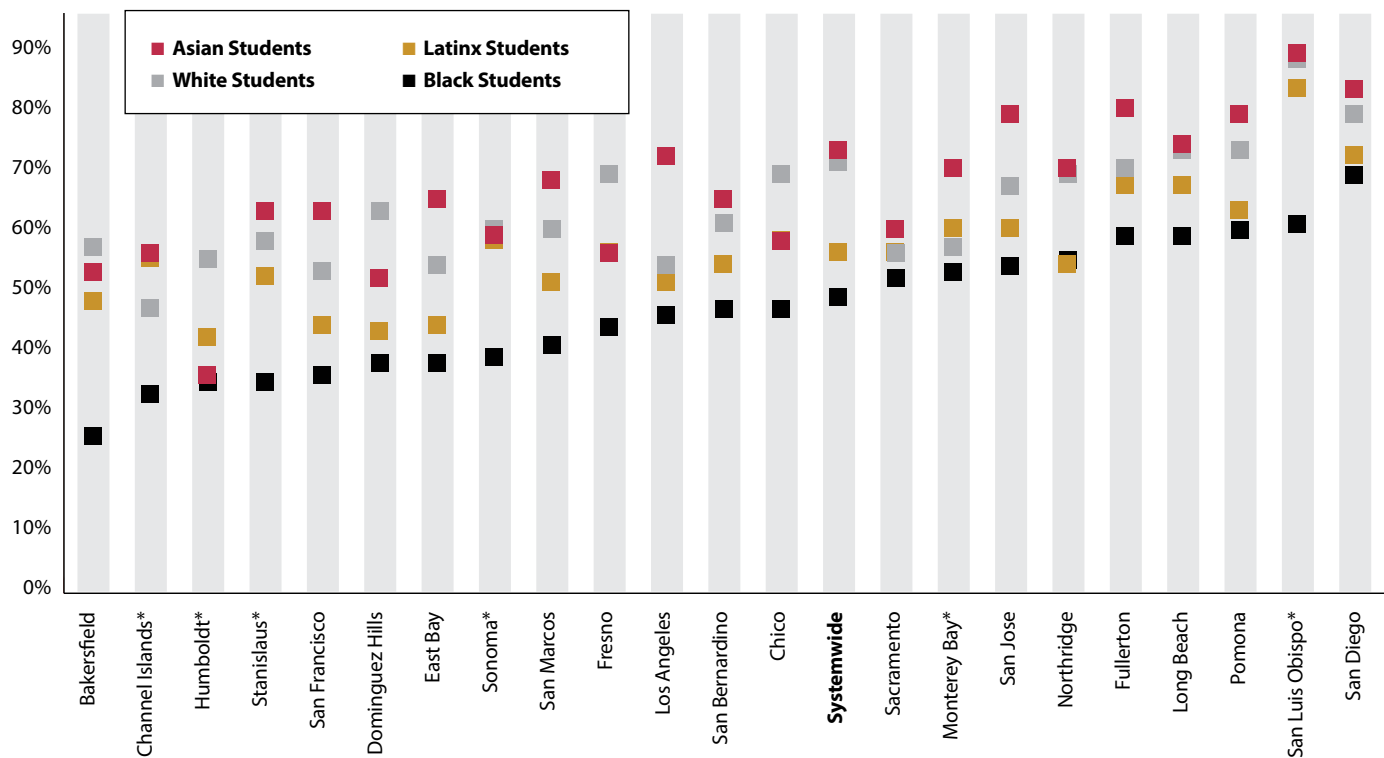## Only a third of Black Californians hold a bachelor's degree after a decade of slow progress

FIGURE 26. PERCENT OF BLACK CALIFORNIANS (25 AND OLDER) HOLDING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER (2015 THROUGH 2023)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1501, 2015-2023.

Asian Students **Latinx Students**
White Students **Black Students**

FIGURE 27. 6-YEAR GRADUATION RATES AT CSU CAMPUSES, BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2024)

Note: Six-year graduation rate data is for 2024 and represents students who started college in fall of 2018. Campuses denoted by an asterisk included fewer than 50 Black students in the fall 2018 cohort and should be interpreted with caution. The CSU does not publish data for Black students at the Maritime campus because too few Black students attend the school as first-time students.

Source: The California State University Graduation and Continuation Rate Dashboard

Unequal Outcome 2: All three of California's public higher education systems create conditions that cause Black Californians to stop out of college at higher rates and earn degrees at lower rates than other groups

Attending one of the state's public four-year colleges should be a reliable pathway to a degree, yet for too many Black students in California, colleges instead turn pursuing this goal into a risky gamble.

In the CSU system, the percentage of Black students supported to graduate within six years lags the systemwide average by 15 percentage points on average (47% compared to 62%). Thirteen of the 22 CSU campuses that publish graduation data on Black students fail to support more than half of their Black students to earn their degree in six years (Figure 27). All have glaring racial gaps, graduating Black students at far lower rates than other student groups. That means the odds are very much stacked against Black students looking to earn a degree from the majority of CSU campuses, which is unacceptable.

Graduation rates at the UC are higher, with a systemwide four-year graduation rate of 60% for Black students and a six-year completion rate of 76% for Black students.[139] However, these rates lag completion rates for the UC as a whole — the four-year graduation rate for all students is 73%, 12 percentage points higher than the system's graduation rate for Black students, and the six-year rate is 86%, 10 percentage points higher than the rate at which Black students are supported to complete their degrees. Considerable variation also exists in the rates at which Black students are supported to complete a degree at different UC campuses, with six-year completion rates ranging from 67% at UC Merced to 81% at UC Berkeley. In short, the UC also has work to do to make sure Black students have the same odds of completing a degree as their peers.
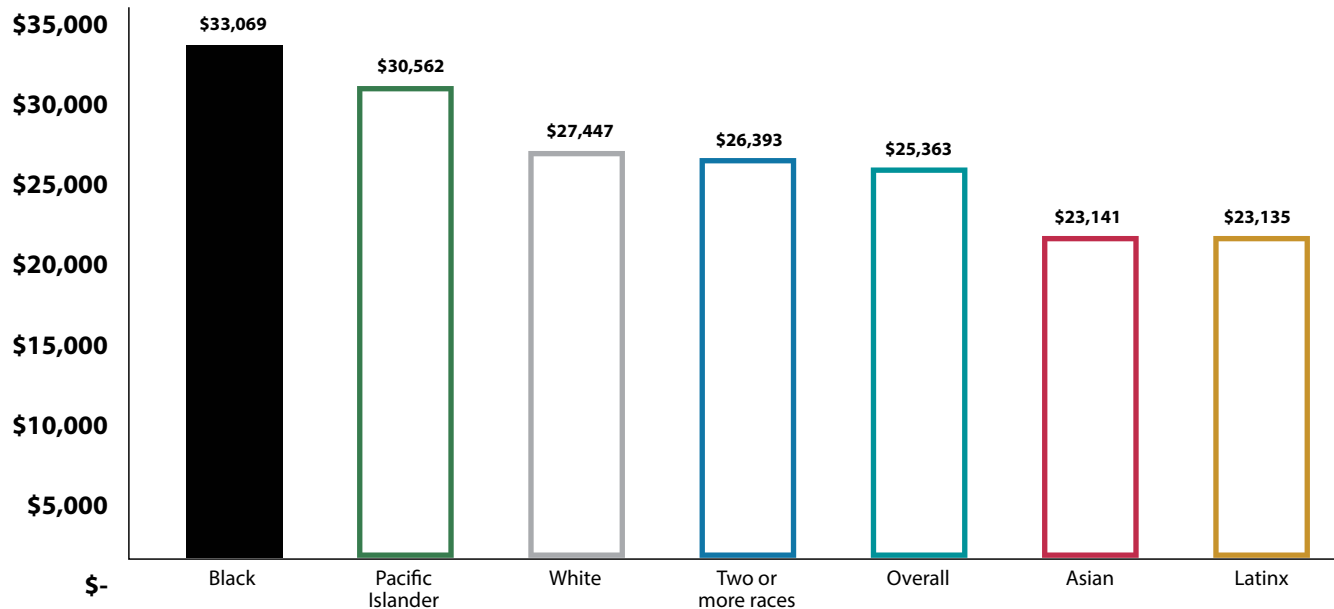
FIGURE 28. GRADUATING UNDERGRADUATES' AVERAGE CUMULATIVE LOANS BY RACE & ETHNICITY (2015-16)

Source: *What the Data Tell Us About Student Debt in California*, The Century Foundation. Analysis of National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data. Percentages reflect in-state students in the 2015–16 academic year.

Unequal Outcome 3: Black Californians are forced to take on more college debt than any other group

California's high cost of living and stark income gaps combine to place Black Californians in a no-win situation when it comes to paying for college. Black students are often forced to take on an overwhelming level of debt, severely limiting the same upward mobility and earnings power they sought to gain by earning a degree.

The California Student Aid Commission recently convened a Student Loan and Debt Service working group to study the issue, which found that California is one of the worst states in the nation when it comes to borrowing and debt, and the problem is especially dire for Black and Latinx students.[140] A larger share of Black undergraduates in California (28%) borrowed for college in 2015-16 than did the overall share of students in the state who took on loans (21%).[141] As students approach the end of their bachelor's degrees, the share forced to borrow increases even further, with 84% of Black students forced to borrow compared to 62% of all students. Black students in California also carry higher debt balances, meaning that by the time they graduate with a bachelor's degree, Black students are both more likely to have borrowed to finance their degree and to have done so at higher amounts than any other group. Average total loan balances for Black students upon completion of a bachelor's degree were $33,069, roughly $7,700 higher than the statewide average (Figure 28).

Black students who seek a degree to expand economic opportunities should not be burdened by debt that undercuts their financial security and ability to build wealth, yet that is exactly the trap our systems currently create.

A CHOICE OF POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS IN CALIFORNIA

As in TK-12, the state has a choice to make between accepting a future where Black students continue to be excluded from college opportunities or creating one where all Black students are afforded the dignity of charting their own postsecondary courses, free from systemic barriers blocking the path to a degree.

The current pace of progress when it comes to increasing college access and success is far too slow. If we remain on the current path, Black students will not reach a 100% A-G completion rate until 2111, nearly 90 years from now. College enrollment rates for Black students are projected to remain stagnant through 2040 if current trends persist.[142] Projecting four- and six-year graduation rates for the UC and CSU also shows that the current pace of increasing degree completion for Black students in both systems will not be enough to reach their goals by 2030 (Figure 29).

Choosing to rebuild our education systems so they serve Black students and create a brighter future will require creativity and courage from high schools, college and university leaders at individual campuses, our public systems of higher education, and the state's elected leaders. The next section provides recommendations for actions needed at the state and local levels to reimagine college access and success for Black students.

Graduation Rate Projections for Black Students at the CSU

Graduation Rate Projections for Black Students at the UC
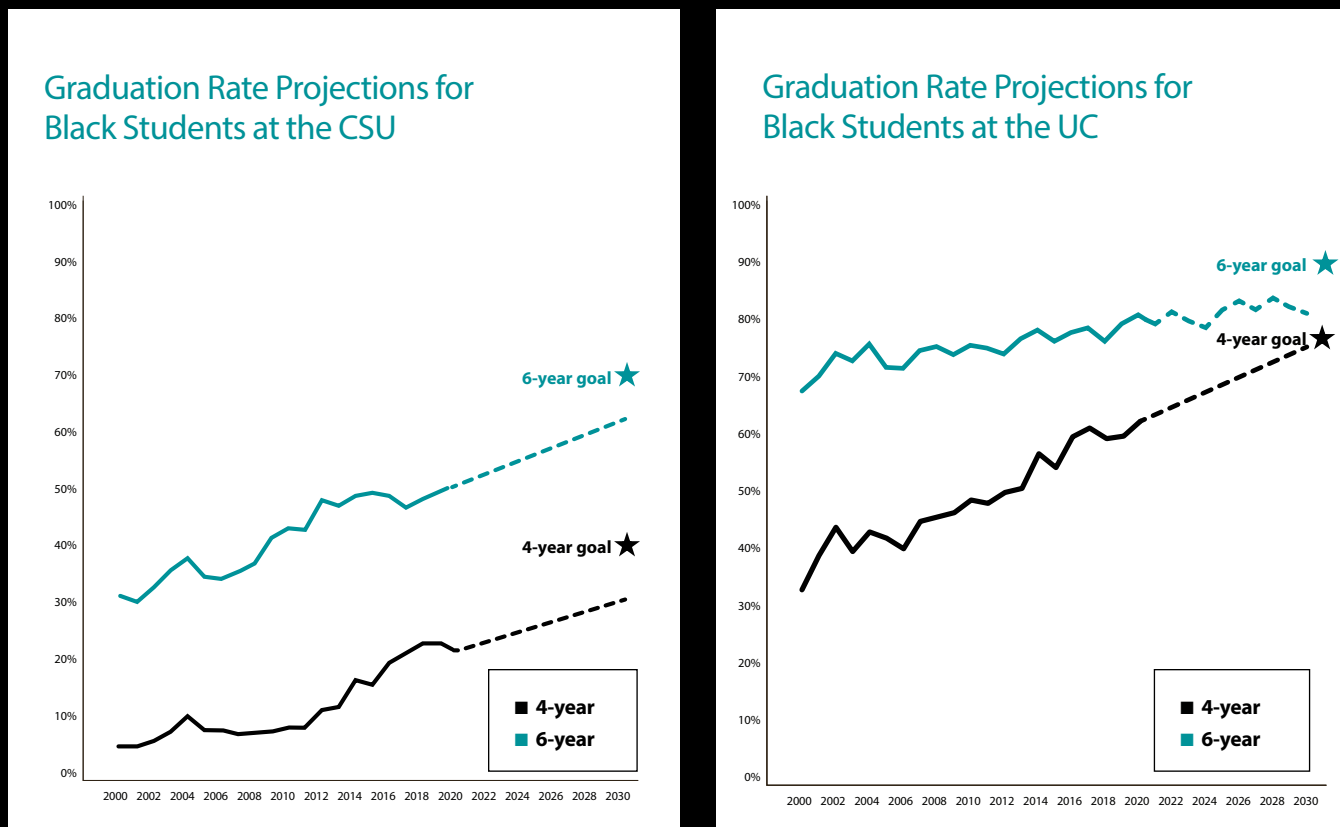
FIGURE 29. 4-YEAR AND 6-YEAR GRADUATION RATE FORECAST FOR BLACK STUDENTS AT THE CSU AND UC

Note: Forecasts were created using linear regression to project future data points along a line that best fits historical data and use a 99% confidence interval. Goals for the CSU reflect Graduation Initiative 2025 goals for all students and Goals for the UC reflect UC 2030 Goals.

Source: EdTrust-West analysis of CSU and UC Graduation rate data.

COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS STATE RECOMMENDATIONS

What will it take to close opportunity and outcome gaps for Black students in higher education?

Create a State Commission on Black Education Transformation

As with TK-12 public schools, we believe a critical first step toward closing the gaps in access and success that California's educational systems create for Black students is to create the state Commission on Black Education Transformation described earlier in this report.

That commission would enable the state to break from its history of fragmented education governance and focus on creating the conditions for Black students to flourish all the way from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary school. As in TK-12, the commission should have the authority to hold state agencies, colleges, and universities accountable for improving outcomes for Black students.

We urge the state to enact the following recommendations to urgently increase college access and success for Black Californians:

① **Require all high schools to make A-G their default curriculum.**

Opportunity gap this recommendation addresses: Insufficient access to and support in completing college preparatory coursework

Making A-G the default curriculum is the best way to provide a guarantee that all Black students can access and benefit from rigorous coursework and graduate eligible to attend a UC or CSU. Schools and districts that have already made A-G the default curriculum have seen increases in A-G completion for students of color.[143] The state should do the following:

▶ Make it mandatory that all high schools enroll students in the 15-course A-G sequence needed for UC and CSU eligibility starting when students enter high school in ninth grade.

▶ Accompany this mandate with funding to ensure schools and districts can take the steps necessary to swiftly enact this shift, such as building master schedules that ensure access to courses based on students' needs.[144]

With A-G as the default course sequence, emphasis would be placed on creating positive learning environments with necessary supports and students' ability to graduate high school would not be jeopardized if they do not successfully complete the sequence. As A-G access and supports improve because of this policy change, a future shift to align high school graduation requirements with A-G could further strengthen high-school-to-college connections for Black students.

② **Create a universal dual enrollment policy and shift to automatic acceleration.**

Opportunity gap this recommendation addresses: Insufficient access to and support in completing college preparatory coursework

Both high schools and community colleges stand to benefit from universal dual enrollment, with high schools likely to see higher student engagement and better graduation rates and community colleges gaining increases in enrollment. Most importantly, this shift would be a win for Black students currently excluded from this opportunity. To make dual enrollment access universal, the state should do the following:

▶ Pass legislation requiring that all California school districts serving high school students establish College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP) partnerships with their local community college district to offer all students the chance to complete college-level coursework. This would align with the ambitious call from the California Community College chancellor for all incoming ninth graders to automatically be enrolled in at least one dual enrollment class.[145] California would not be the first to do this. Right now, the state lags behind 23 other states that require all high schools to participate in dual enrollment programs to some degree.[146]

- Provide grant funding to enable school districts to initiate partnerships and incentivize districts to prioritize supporting Black students, currently the most underrepresented in dual enrollment, to participate and succeed in dual enrollment coursework.

- Follow the lead of 47 other states that require high schools and colleges to grant dual credit for dual enrollment courses. Right now, policies for granting credit are set locally and some schools do not grant high school credit for community college coursework.

- Remove arbitrary red tape and requirements that impede Black students' access to advanced coursework, like the requirement that students receive a recommendation from their principal to participate in CCAP.

(3) Fund free college that covers the full cost of attendance.

Opportunity gaps this recommendation addresses: High college costs and lack of support for financial aid application completion

Eliminating the prohibitive cost of college is critical to ensuring Black students can afford to attend and graduate without assuming debt that would limit their post-college opportunities. State leaders can make meaningful progress by taking these steps:

- Improve the existing Cal Grant program by increasing award amounts to keep pace with inflation and ensure students can afford nontuition costs of attendance.[147]

- Provide funding for institutions across all three public California systems to replicate and scale a program for Black students modeled after the UC's existing policy of waiving tuition and fees for Native American students who are state residents and members of federally recognized tribes.

- Protect higher education appropriations in the state's annual budget and increase funding to provide adequate resources for public colleges and universities to tackle college affordability in the long term.

(4) Enact a statewide direct admissions policy

Opportunity gaps this recommendation addresses: Declining college-going rates and low rates of enrollment in public four-year colleges and universities

The state can take a simple but revolutionary step to increase college access for Black students by introducing a statewide direct admissions policy. Already being implemented

successfully in several states including Minnesota, Idaho, and Hawaii, this approach would benefit both students, by removing complex application processes, and colleges impacted by declining enrollment. The CSU system is piloting direct admissions in Riverside County starting with the fall 2025 term, mailing brochures notifying all eligible high school seniors (those on-track to meet A-G requirements) of their conditional admission to 10 CSU campuses and inviting them to complete the process by simply selecting the colleges of their choice online.[148] This effort should prompt state leaders to:

- Create and develop a timeline for enacting a statewide direct admissions policy, using data from the CSU pilot to inform policy design.

- Intentionally weave together direct admissions policy with A-G equity and financial aid expansion to increase students' likelihoods of enrolling and completing a degree.

(5) Use California's Black Serving Institution designation to secure funding and raise the bar for colleges' responsibilities for Black student success

Opportunity gaps this recommendation addresses: Lack of basic needs supports and declining college-going rates and low rates of enrollment in public four-year colleges and universities

California lawmakers passed SB 1348 in 2024, establishing the Black Serving Institutions (BSI) Program to designate campuses that excel in providing academic resources to Black students. To be eligible, a college or university must have a headcount of at least 1,500 Black students or Black students must comprise at least 10% of the student body. Schools that meet one of these thresholds can submit an application describing their institutional initiatives dedicated to Black student success as well as share baseline data on key performance indicators that would be tracked during the first five years of their designation as a BSI. The BSI designation can be a valuable tool for amplifying Black student success if the state builds upon the designation itself by:

- Maximize funding allocation by targeting state and federal funding to colleges and universities designated as BSIs to support evidence-based programs and practices.

- Require that key performance indicators for BSI designation prioritize evidence-based practices that have proven effective in supporting Black student success and cultivating a positive, antiracist campus climate.

- Strengthening data transparency and reporting by requiring each BSI to create a committee that includes Black students, staff, faculty, and community members to assess progress toward the institution's goals for Black student success and adjust plans and budgets accordingly.

LOCAL STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS

1

Together, high schools and colleges should build stronger bridges for Black students to access higher education.

The state has begun to lay a foundation for high schools and colleges to improve college access for Black students in the form of universal financial aid and elimination of remedial courses at the state's community colleges, but it still falls to schools to implement those changes in a way that impacts students. In both instances, the data shows that schools need to focus more intentionally on making sure that Black students benefit from these policies and that gaps are closed.

To that end, high schools should set the expectation that every Black student must be supported by school staff to submit a FAFSA or CADAA before graduating. School districts should also invest in hiring counselors to create college plans for all Black students starting early in high school. Schools also do not have to wait for the state to pass policies requiring that A-G be made the default curriculum or that all districts offer dual enrollment courses. Instead, they can and should proactively work to make these shifts locally, clearly communicating the importance of A-G and early college to students and families along the way. Finally, high schools should actively foster a college-going culture that encourages Black students to see themselves as abundantly capable of higher education success.

2

Colleges and universities should ensure Black students' basic needs are met so they can learn and thrive.

When basic needs go unmet, students are more likely to experience interruptions in their education, making it crucial for institutions to address these challenges head on. Colleges must view the work of meeting students' basic needs as part and parcel with providing instruction so both students and institutions can meet their goals for degree attainment. Colleges can do this by connecting students with resources like housing, food assistance, and financial aid. Providing clear, frequent, and consistent communication about available supports is essential to ensuring students can navigate these systems effectively. Rather than taking an "if we build it, they will come" approach, colleges should be creative in finding ways to share information about resources directly with students.

Expanding on-campus mental health supports is equally critical for student success, particularly as many students face increasing stress and anxiety. Institutions should connect proactively with students to make sure they know how to access counseling services and other mental health resources when they need them.

3

Colleges and universities must foster a strong sense of belonging for Black students.

Campuses can and must create inclusive and welcoming environments where Black students feel a strong sense of belonging to address lingering higher education opportunity gaps. That begins with supporting Black students in navigating the transition to college starting as soon as they enroll, with every campus providing robust programs to help students prepare for and adjust to the new demands of college life. These early days are critical for setting the tone and providing students with the tools and confidence to succeed.

Colleges and universities should also prioritize hiring and retaining Black faculty, particularly in disciplines where Black educators are underrepresented and at campuses that serve the highest numbers of Black students. Representation among faculty allows students to see themselves reflected in leadership and academic roles, affirming that they belong at and are valued by the institution.

Finally, colleges should help Black students build connections with one another by supporting affinity groups, creating dedicated spaces for Black community-building, and facilitating mentorship opportunities. Partnering with community organizations can deepen students' ties to both their college and the broader community, helping them feel more connected and supported as they pursue their educational goals. These investments in belonging are critical to ensure Black students not only access higher education but thrive and successfully complete their degrees.

CHANGE AGENTS ILLUMINATE A BETTER PATH FORWARD FOR COLLEGE ACCESS & SUCCESS

Across the state, select programs in specific colleges and communities are already blazing new paths when it comes to reimagining the way our higher education institutions serve Black students. These change agents serve as examples for other institutions to follow. They also provide beacons for state leaders that shine a light on the kinds of policies the state should enact and investments they should scale up to dramatically shift the trajectory of Black Californians' futures.

BLU Educational Foundation's College Exodus Project — Inland Empire

In a **2018 survey** of nearly 1,100 Black parents, students, and community members, **BLU Educational Foundation**, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing educational and human services programming to youth and adults, and its partners identified college and career access as a top educational priority for Black families in the Inland Empire. To address this priority, BLU's College Exodus Project (CEP) works to increase degree completion by equipping students with skills and resources for postsecondary success. CEP provides personalized college and career planning, academic advising, and mentoring grounded in a culturally responsive approach. Students participate in college tours, are supported to navigate the application and admissions process, and receive financial aid and scholarships. Additionally, BLU partners with local high schools to support students with applying for financial aid through "Get Money Monday Financial Aid Nights," scholarship raffles, and direct student support.

With a strong emphasis on community collaboration, CEP partners with and is implemented in local schools, churches, and community organizations to expand outreach and access. In the fall of 2023, nearly 600 Black students connected with BLU through the United College Action Network HBCU college fairs.[149] Notably, a third of the students BLU serves are Black, and a fifth of their students' college acceptances are from HBCUs. BLU also surpassed its goal to support 200 financial aid submissions in 2023-24 by nearly double (396), 100 of which were submitted by Black students.[150] By fostering a comprehensive network of resources and support, BLU is transforming educational opportunities and paving the way for future Black leaders in the Inland Empire.

California State University San Marcos & Coalition for Black and African American Education — San Marcos

In February 2022, **California State University San Marcos** (CSUSM) established a **five-year agreement** with the Coalition on Black and African American Education, a key community partner, guaranteeing admission for first-year and transfer students affiliated with the coalition, which strives to increase educational access and social mobility for Black students. To be eligible for guaranteed admission, students must meet CSU admissions requirements, including a minimum 2.0 grade point average.

Beyond guaranteed admission, CSUSM provides robust resources, including onboarding support, new student programming, success coaching and dedicated career counseling, and access to the Black Student Center. Designed to foster academic achievement, cultural engagement, and a sense of belonging, these resources help students smoothly transition to college and prepare for their chosen career.

The Coalition on Black and African American Education includes community-based organizations and an entire school district. The coalition guides students through the application process for CSUSM and promotes the university's programs and initiatives supporting first-generation, underrepresented, and low-income students. Each semester, the coalition and CSUSM leadership and staff meet to "discuss strategies to specifically support Black student applicants and foster a welcoming environment focused on Black excellence and belonging," **according to the university**.

UC Santa Cruz: African American Resource & Cultural Center — Santa Cruz

The **African American Resource & Cultural Center** at UC Santa Cruz serves as a hub and an advocate for the Black community on campus, fostering an environment that encourages exploration of identity and culture throughout students' educational journeys. To do so, the center offers various resources and programs designed to empower and support students from the African, Black, and Caribbean communities, including the African American Mentorship Program (AAMP), Black Academy, and Facilitators for Racial and Ethnic Diversity (FRED).

Both AAMP and Black Academy offer transitional support for students as they navigate their first years at UC Santa Cruz. AAMP matches first-year students, including transfer students, with mentors who hold similar personal or academic interests to support their college transition and cultivate a sense of community and belonging. Similarly, Black Academy provides students with a structured orientation experience that guides new students as they transition to college while introducing them to campus resources and the broader Black community through events, activities, and workshops.

Additionally, the FRED program aims to create a safer and more inclusive campus climate for students of color across intersecting identities. Through peer-led workshops, FRED fosters open dialogue and meaningful engagement with diverse cultures, identities, and experiences, helping create a transformative "brave space" that promotes understanding, respect, and communication among all students.

Sacramento State University — Sacramento & Statewide

In June 2024, the California State Assembly recognized Sacramento State University as the state's first Black-serving institution, celebrating the university's dedication to increasing both enrollment and graduation rates for Black students. With over 2,000 Black students — 7% of its student body — Sacramento State leads the CSU system in supporting Black students.[151] In fall 2024, the university launched the nation's first Black Honors College, welcoming a cohort of 80 students.[152] The **Black Honors College** is open to all students interested in learning about Black history, culture, life, and contributions. This groundbreaking initiative offers specialized coursework, mentorship, scholarships, and research opportunities tailored to enhance both academic and professional development. Students also gain valuable experience through paid internships, weekly study hours, and bi-weekly leadership seminars designed to foster their leadership skills and economic success.

Additionally, Sacramento State will house the first CSU Statewide Central Office for the Advancement of Black Excellence, funded with an initial $1.3 million investment provided by the Chancellor's Office. This office will oversee initiatives across the CSU system to promote Black student success. It aims to implement strategies from the CSU's **Black Student Success Report** to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of Black CSU students, including developing and implementing an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum, creating culturally affirming environments, and recruiting and retaining Black faculty.

Compton College — Los Angeles

At Compton College, 2 in 5 students have child dependents — the second highest percentage of parenting students (41%) among community colleges in Los Angeles County.[153] Although limited data exists on the racial makeup of the college's student parents, about 25% of Compton College students are Black.[154] The college has established various resources on its campus that offer financial support and welcoming, family-friendly environments for students and their children. Students who qualify for CalWORKs and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education may be eligible to participate in the college's **Guaranteed Income Program**, which provides students with $500 per month for six months during the academic year to cover their nontuition-related expenses such as child care. This resource aims to lower students' financial burdens without taking away from their financial aid.

Located in the CalWORKs office and Welcome Center, Small Scholars Spaces provide entertainment to children while their parents complete homework, take meetings, or participate in virtual classes. Compton College is also building on-campus housing to support students with families and other student groups. This housing facility will include **family-friendly housing** and child play areas. The **Child Development Center** also offers campus-based child care that permits students — and employees — to enroll their children ages 12 to 48 months, giving student parents an opportunity to carve out dedicated, focused study time. Ensuring that the children of student parents have priority enrollment for on-campus child care would offer even more robust support. Together, these resources provide student parents with various spaces to ensure their children are safe and taken care of while they focus on their coursework.

ENVISIONING A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR CALIFORNIA'S BLACK STUDENTS

Black communities in California have a long history of envisioning a better future in the face of unfair conditions and taking collective action to secure change. One prime example of that unwavering commitment to freedom dreaming and self-determination is point five of the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program, which called for accurate teaching about history and the present to provide Black students with a knowledge of self.

Following in that tradition and drawing on research capturing the educational hopes and aspirations of California's Black families, we urge state leaders to unite around a common set of goals for systemic transformation that are specific to Black students.

EdTrust-West's vision for the world-class education systems that California's students deserve is one in which all Black students:

1   **Are supported from their earliest years to read and write at grade level and master and exceed grade-level standards for math and science**

2   **Are taught by teachers and professors who reflect their own rich racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity and who are well-prepared, consistently supported, and competitively compensated**

3   **Are provided with modern, high-quality, inclusive learning materials, including curricula and textbooks**

4   **Learn in classrooms, schools, and colleges that are safe, welcoming, and affirming, where they feel joy, curiosity, and a sense of belonging**

5   **Are treated as worthy of instruction that is challenging and rigorous and are supported to meet high standards**

6   **Graduate from high school ready to thrive in whichever postsecondary pathway they choose**

7   **Attain a high-quality degree or credential that opens the door for the career and life they desire**

8   **Complete college or university debt-free, empowered to attain their aspirations while building generational wealth**

Ultimately, California's leaders should be accountable to Black students and families for doing their jobs: making this vision a reality. A brighter future begins with state and local leaders enacting the recommendations in this report, centralizing governance, accountability, and resources with an explicit focus on Black students' success and following the lead of change agents who are already forging a better path forward.

> "
> We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
>
> — The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program, written October 15, 1966

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