

Beyond Neutrality:

Race-Conscious Approaches as Catalysts for Education Equity in California's TK-12 Schools

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Curriculum and Instruction

Racial justice does not require anyone to lose for others to win. Yet systemic racism has long relied on a manufactured scarcity mindset, fueling the false notion that equity is a [zero-sum game](#). Race-neutral policies [ignore the historical and structural inequalities](#) that define our education system, perpetuating disparate outcomes for racially minoritized students. Black students, in particular, continue to face chronically underfunded schools, limited access to rigorous coursework, and disproportionately high rates of disciplinary action.¹ To dismantle these inequities, we must reject fear-driven narratives and advance solutions that explicitly target the root causes of education inequity.

In California, race-conscious policies and practices are vital tools in advancing education justice. These approaches help us to identify racial disparities; direct resources to where they are most needed; and implement targeted interventions that affirm students' identities, honor their lived experiences, and foster their academic success.

EdTrust-West, alongside a diverse group of partners² in the Greater Los Angeles region committed to education equity, developed a series of action guides for education leaders, advocates, and community organizers dedicated to this work.

The following sections outline how leaders should approach key areas of curriculum and instruction:



Ethnic Studies

What Leaders Should Do

District and school leaders must implement and expand [Ethnic Studies](#) programs that reflect the histories, struggles, and contributions of racially minoritized communities. These programs should be required courses, not electives, and should be developed in collaboration with scholars and community organizations.

Why This Matters

Ethnic Studies has been proven to increase student engagement, academic achievement, and critical thinking skills.³ These courses benefit all students by fostering a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of history and society, equipping them with the tools to engage in a diverse and complex world.



How to Implement Change

- ▶ Align Ethnic Studies curricula with state goals and consider making it a graduation requirement.
- ▶ Develop partnerships with historians, educators, and community organizations to design curricula that are accurate, inclusive, and empowering.
- ▶ Provide professional development for educators to teach Ethnic Studies effectively, including through partnerships with institutions of higher education, and to counteract resistance.
- ▶ Ensure courses are accessible to all students and reflect the intersectional experiences of race, gender, and class.



Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Practices

What Leaders Should Do

Schools must ensure that teaching practices and curricula affirm the cultural and linguistic identities of racially minoritized students. This means integrating diverse literature, histories, and linguistic diversity into all subject areas. Leaders must also invest in professional development that equips teachers with the skills to implement culturally responsive pedagogy⁴ effectively.

Why This Matters

Traditional curricula and instructional practices often marginalize racially minoritized students by ignoring or devaluing their cultural and linguistic heritage. [Culturally and linguistically](#) responsive teaching fosters stronger academic outcomes, higher levels of student engagement, and a learning environment where all students feel valued and empowered. These approaches also prepare all students to thrive in a multicultural and multilingual society.



How to Implement Change

- ▶ Review existing curricula to identify and address gaps in representation.
- ▶ Integrate authors, history, and contributions from diverse communities across all disciplines.
- ▶ Implement ongoing professional development in culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices.
- ▶ Engage families and communities in shaping culturally responsive curricula.
- ▶ Provide bilingual and heritage language programs that support linguistic diversity and affirm students' identities.



Dual Enrollment and Advanced Coursework

What Leaders Should Do

Education leaders must remove systemic barriers that prevent racially minoritized students from accessing [dual enrollment](#) and advanced coursework. Schools must actively recruit students into these programs, provide the necessary academic support, and eliminate exclusionary prerequisites that disproportionately disadvantage students from historically underserved communities.

How to Implement Change

- ▶ Regularly collect, analyze, and report on data related to academic achievement to identify and eliminate barriers to student participation in advanced coursework, highlight areas for improvement, and ensure equitable outcomes for all students.
- ▶ Provide targeted outreach, mentorship, and academic support for racially minoritized students in dual enrollment programs.
- ▶ Train counselors and educators to recognize and address implicit bias in course recommendations and tracking systems.
- ▶ Partner with local colleges and universities to ensure that dual enrollment programs are accessible, well-supported, and credit-bearing.

Why This Matters

Racially minoritized students have been [systematically underrepresented](#) in dual enrollment and advanced coursework, limiting their access to college credit and rigorous academic preparation. Expanding access to these opportunities increases college readiness, boosts confidence, and ensures that students are not locked out of high-level academic and career pathways.^{5,6} Access to these courses benefits all students by fostering an environment of academic excellence and diverse perspectives in advanced learning spaces.

Moving From Rhetoric to Action

Racial equity in curriculum and instruction requires bold, immediate action to dismantle systemic barriers that have long denied racially minoritized students access to rigorous and affirming education. Leaders must reject neutrality and take a stand against efforts to suppress truthful history, invest in programs that uplift students, and hold themselves accountable for supporting students' academic achievement. By prioritizing Ethnic Studies, culturally responsive teaching, and equitable access to advanced coursework, district and school leaders can transform schools into spaces of excellence where all students receive the education they deserve.



Endnotes

- 1 EdTrust-West. (2025, February 27). *Black minds matter: Building bright Black futures*. blackmindsmatter.org
- 2 See "[Acknowledgments](#)" for a complete list of contributing partners.
- 3 Bonilla, S., Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2021). Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 118(37). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2026386118>
- 4 Ladson-Billings, G. (1995, September). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3): 465–491
- 5 Hughes, K. L., Rodriguez, O., & Edwards, L., Belfield, C. (2012). Broadening the benefits of dual enrollment: Reaching underachieving and underrepresented students with career-focused programs. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED533756.pdf>
- 6 Liu, V. Y. T., Minaya, V., & Xu, Di. (2022). The impact of dual enrollment on college application choice and admission success. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/impact-dual-enrollment-application-choice-admission-success.html>



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