CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE
on District Reform

Meeting 43 Summary
Accelerating Learning to Promote Equity:
Challenges and Strategies in the Midst of a Pandemic

March 4-5, 2021

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> *Note: This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In March 2021, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened for the third time since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the disruption of in-person learning in districts across the state. Members of the education community have seen and experienced continued stress and frustration as students, families, and educators alike battle ongoing threats to health and safety and profound inequities in learning. The meeting presented an opportunity for participants to examine the urgency and depth of student learning needs that have always been in place but have emerged particularly strongly over the course of the pandemic. Through two days of dialogue, meeting participants explored how best to approach individual interactions with students and system-wide strategies and priorities to help students meet their academic, social, and emotional needs.

Framing and Measuring the Problem of Lost Learning Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted typical modes of instruction for all California students, revealing disparities in opportunities and outcomes among student groups. As the pandemic has continued, concern has heightened among educators, researchers, and others about students' ability to maintain their academic progress, let alone reduce long-standing learning gaps.

The meeting began with participants unpacking the problem of lost learning opportunities by examining emerging evidence about the pandemic's effects on learning trajectories. Of

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[1] Thanks to Mary Louise Baez, Marina Castro, and Candice Handjojo for managing technical aspects of the meeting, taking careful notes, and synthesizing key takeaways from small group conversations to make this summary possible.

particular attention were the disparities in achievement that will likely require targeted intervention and acceleration.

Perspectives on Student Learning Needs

To introduce this issue, a panel of practitioners and support providers shared their observations from the field about how the reduced learning opportunities over the past year are showing up for students. On the one hand, panelists shared examples of bright spots for students. For example, some students have developed academic resilience, coping strategies, and self-discipline in uncertain and unpredictable times while becoming more autonomous learners who have developed skills in technology they would not have otherwise acquired. On the other hand, in addition to experiencing lost learning opportunities, many students have had to navigate a year without the stability, security, and the sense of community that come from regular interactions with peers and a supportive learning environment. Panelists noted students' resulting struggles with anxiety and depression, which are impacting some students' ability to access academic learning.

Evidence of Student Learning Progress During the 2020-21 School Year

To get a better understanding of what student learning looked like during the pandemic, the meeting shifted to a presentation of data collected through the CORE Data Collaborative and analyzed by Education Analytics. Using data from the NWEA MAP Growth, Renaissance Learning Star, and Curriculum Associates i-Ready assessments administered across 23 California school districts, researchers found that on average, the learning progress for students in these districts scored was between one and three months behind in English language arts (ELA) and about two to three months behind in mathematics what it had been in the comparable fall-to-fall period in prior years. In addition, data showed that students who are economically-disadvantaged learned less from the fall 2019 through winter 2021 compared to their non-economically disadvantaged peers. This pattern held for English learners as well.

In addition to assessment results that illustrate how the pandemic affected student learning progress, presenters also shared the results of a well-being survey administered to approximately 30,000 students across California. Results showed that younger students generally responded more positively about their learning environments than older students, but even students who responded positively at the first administration of the survey in the fall of 2020 were less positive about their learning environment at the second administration of the survey in the winter of 2020.

Although these data provide a useful window into student learning needs during COVID, meeting participants raised important considerations for interpreting the findings. For example, students who had not been attending class and did not take the assessments are invisible in these data. In other words, educators likely know the least about students in greatest need of support. These students are likely those who were not being served well by schools even before the pandemic. Participants therefore underscored the urgency of re-engaging these students but noted the absence of a comprehensive state plan for what that re-engagement process might look like.

Implications of Student Experiences on Actions to Support Students

In discussions among meeting participants about actions needed to support students, several tensions arose.

How can school and district leaders balance the time needed to attend to students' academic needs with the imperative to address their social and emotional growth and well-being?

By all accounts, many students have experienced trauma, anxiety, and depression during this past year of the pandemic, and those social and emotional needs must be met. At the same time, evidence about learning progress indicates that students, particularly historically underserved students, have learned less academically during this period and thus may require additional time and attention dedicated to academics if they are to stay on track in their schooling. Both are important, *and* they are interrelated. The tension lies in trying to wrestle the time and space to focus on relationships and healing while also providing the time and space to engage students academically to make up for the learning opportunities missed during school closures.

How can school and district leaders balance the priority of all students mastering standards with a differentiated approach that meets individual students where they are?

Meeting participants suggested that responding to the data on student learning calls for attention to the standards and curriculum. But this brought up the tension between maintaining common expectations for all students while also acknowledging the varying levels of preparation and incoming skill levels that students bring into the classroom. As one meeting participant pointed out, "So many curricular materials are designed and oriented as grade-level curriculum and grade-level standards. But we have always known that students are starting in different places, and it's been hard to be flexible around grade-level curriculum. It seems important to develop new ways to be flexible in teaching kids where they are as opposed to arbitrary grade levels." In a school year when students have had less instructional time, seeking to cover the full range of standards may be impractical and insufficient to address the wide range of student learning needs within a classroom. A narrower set of essential standards may be an especially useful strategy for focusing classroom instruction.

How can schools and districts leaders create additional opportunities to accelerate learning while working within the finite capacities of their individual teachers and their collective staff?

Once schools and districts probe available data sources to better understand students' needs, many strategies for addressing those needs call for extended learning opportunities. Because many of these approaches work with students beyond the school day, they require staff who are willing to work extended hours to meet students' needs. However, this can feel overwhelming to teachers and administrators who have struggled to navigate intensified personal and professional demands during the pandemic. And even if all staff were willing and individually capable, there may simply be insufficient numbers of staff to provide the extra time and attention needed to accelerate student learning—especially if

social distancing restrictions remain in force. A combination of supports for teacher learning and well-being and plans to increase the number of adults working with students inside and outside school could allow for smaller groupings of students. This, in turn, could allow for more personal interactions between teachers and students and create the conditions for more effective and equitable instructional time for all students.

Summer Programming to Accelerate Learning and Promote Student Engagement

Given patterns in instructional loss and gaps in student learning, a range of instructional strategies might be needed to help address student learning needs. The second session focused specifically on summer programming as one avenue for accelerating learning and promoting student engagement. There are several reasons why it might be a good strategy to follow. First, many districts already have existing structures and practices in place for summer learning that can be adapted to the current circumstances. Second, there is a large research base to draw on so districts can adopt best practices as they implement summer learning. Third, COVID-19 relief funds through the American Rescue Plan have introduced new resources into school systems that can enable the creation or expansion of summer programing efforts.

Characteristics of Effective Summer Programming

A presentation by Jennifer Peck from the Partnership for Children and Youth highlighted several key elements from the research on effective summer programming: (1) intentional design to meet participant needs, (2) full day programs for five to six weeks with a blend of academics and enrichment at no cost to students, (3) at least one certified teacher running the academic portion of the program, (4) provision of meals and transportation to students at no cost, and (5) partnerships with community-based organizations to offer enrichment activities.

Peck also shared findings concerning the impact of summer learning on academic learning from a study conducted over eight years looking at five school districts that were part of the Wallace Foundation's National Summer Learning Initiative. After one summer of programming, researchers saw some improvements in students' math achievement but did not see effects in reading and social and emotional outcomes. However, after two summers, researchers did find that students who attended consistently made gains in math, reading, and on social and emotional measures.

Lessons From Practice

Following an overview of the research on summer learning, a team from Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) shared their experiences and perspectives based on multiple years of implementing high-quality summer program and developing a well-established infrastructure to support it. Describing a philosophy that guides the district's work, one representative shared, "We see summer learning as a way to make sure that we are reaching the whole child all year round. Summer learning connects academics with social-emotional learning, with behavioral health, with mental health."

Across the two presentations and subsequent small group discussions, several key ideas emerged for district leaders to consider as they prepare for summer programming in 2021 and beyond.

Leverage assets in the community

In OUSD, the district partners with community-based organizations (CBOs) to combine certificated OUSD staff, who deliver academic content, with non-certificated staff from CBOs, who deliver the enrichment and social-emotional learning opportunities. District staff identified some additional benefits of leveraging CBO staff: They often live in the community, have language backgrounds that enable them to connect with students, and are able to forge strong personal relationships that make them especially well-suited to meet students' social-emotional needs.

By leveraging these already existing assets and relationships, schools and districts can better assemble the full set of staff required to run a summer program while addressing both academic needs and social and emotional needs for participating students. One district staff member explained, "By using OUSD teachers and afterschool workers and community partners, it shows that you don't have to outsource summer. You can use your own people and it's a stronger investment for kids and families."

Engage families

Members of the OUSD summer learning team also emphasized that engaging families and soliciting their feedback were critical in the summer planning process and these activities have helped Oakland to recruit students, improve attendance, and assess priorities. This process includes getting input from families on the types of experiences they would like to see for their children, informing parents about the types of summer programming available, showcasing the results of students' learning and talent development over the summer, and providing training to parents about how they can continue to support their students at home. One OUSD representative shared, "We like to operate on the idea that any solution that we have for our students, that strategy has to hold the family at the center of the strategy so the schools can be a place of trust. And when that happens, there are no limits to the things that we can have our students achieve."

Tailor the focus of summer programs

Discussion at the meeting also emphasized the importance of tailoring summer learning opportunities in age-appropriate ways. Student participation may be driven by academic needs, but different sources of motivation may be necessary to promote attendance and engagement. At the elementary and middle school level, academics are intertwined with enrichment activities because the enrichment focus is what motivates students to attend every day. At the high school level, paid internships—in which high school students can gain valuable work experience—and dual enrollment classes—which enable student to earn college credit—are two strategies that might help engage them. Meeting participants mentioned that it is important to remember that the valuable experiences that protect from

summer losses and build social capital are exactly the opposite of what is typically available for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, including students of color. For school systems that have traditionally taken a more remedial approach in their summer programs for students who struggle academically, a shift in focus toward engagement can have valuable impacts.

Use the summer to learn and plan for the long run

Peck and representatives from OUSD stressed that planning for summer learning is a year-long process. Ideally, one district member argued: "Summer planning begins in the fall." However, for districts and schools that are considering implementing a summer program this year [summer 2021] but have not been planning for it all year, Peck suggested "Go with what you know." By building on strengths and partnerships that already exist, schools and districts can think about this summer as a learning opportunity for themselves and staff as they plan for the following summer.

Considerations for State Policy

After discussing the value of quality summer learning programs, meeting participants discussed considerations for state policy to support summer learning.

Commit to multi-year funding

Because of the research demonstrating the additive effects of multiple-year participation, meeting participants suggested that educators should see summer programming as a multi-year investment. One-time COVID-19 relief funds provide resources for schools and districts to implement summer programs this year, but there is no guarantee of continued funding for summer programs. One consideration for state policy therefore is to make a commitment to funding summer programming year after year. Collecting and analyzing data this summer may be important to make a case for continued funding in future years.

Build in requirements and incentives for planning time

Presenters emphasized that a quality summer program requires time, resources, and staff. However, many districts have not yet developed the infrastructure for doing this; they may lack dedicated full-time staff or have few existing community partnerships. Meeting participants discussed the possibility of state policy advocating for planning time for school staff to develop a quality summer program as an incentive or requirement to receive funds.

Incentivize allocating spots for the most underserved students

Given that research shows the value of a quality summer program for student learning, student engagement, and student well-being, meeting participants discussed the role that state policy could play in ensuring that summer programs prioritize and allocate spots for the most vulnerable students. They discussed the possibility of attaching dollar incentives to recruit and enroll disadvantaged students. Interrupted learning impacts have been most profound for the students who have been historically underserved in K-12 schools. If summer programming is to help mitigate those disparities, attention to equity in the design of summer learning is essential.

Additional Strategies to Address Student Learning Needs

Summer programming is one of many strategies that districts might employ to help accelerate student learning. The third session of the meeting gave meeting participants the opportunity to workshop a set of solutions in small groups for addressing student learning needs.

Helping Students Transition From High School to Higher Education

Students who have been historically underserved in the K-12 public school system, especially those without a family history of college access or success, often struggle to successfully navigate the transition from high school to higher education. That challenge will become even more pronounced for high school graduates in 2020-21, who may not have attended class in person in more than a year and a half by the time classes begin in fall 2021. Without an adequate support system in place, the risk may be higher than ever that these students will fall through the cracks once they are in college. In one district, leaders have been supporting seniors by encouraging them to complete their FAFSA forms as a partial response to this challenge. However, district leaders were also eager to identify additional strategies and solutions to help students transition from high school to higher education in this learning environment.

Small group discussion explored partnerships that might help to address the transition challenge. Participants suggested the district start by connecting with colleagues at local two and four-year colleges with whom relationships already exist. These partners in higher education can play a vital role in identifying support structures within the institutions that can help students navigate the transition process.

Participants also suggested the district explore partnerships with foundations that have already developed or supported bridge program opportunities for college-bound students. These organizations have thoughtfully created these types of programs and may have resources and knowledge school districts can leverage without having to start from scratch.

Opportunities may also exist within the K-12 school district. For example, districts might leverage former students to create a mentor/mentee program by pairing current college students who graduated from the district with college-bound high school seniors. Because these students are already familiar with the application and matriculation process, having navigated it themselves recently, they might have important insights about lessons learns and tips for success. In addition, because these current college students are in the same age range and have experienced a similar K-12 education, current high school students may find them to be relatable and easy to trust.

Exploring Strategies for Systematically Closing Opportunity Gaps Within the District

Building on topics explored in the Collaborative's December 2020 meeting, one district sought feedback on the highest leverage strategies to focus on racial equity and systematically close opportunity gaps within the district. As they start to focus on fall 2021,

district leaders do not want to lose sight of the tremendous inequities that have become exacerbated by the pandemic.

Leaders from this district gave two examples of policy changes intentionally made to disrupt inequitable patterns in the district after the COVID-19 pandemic prompted school closures. First, recognizing that the toll of the pandemic and distance learning had led to substantially higher course failure rates, the district shifted its grading policy to allow students to make up work until the end of January, one month after the fall term formally ended. This change enabled 12,000 students district-wide to improve their grades. Second, the district offered support to students through one-on-one Zoom meetings, which enabled more students to complete the FAFSA than had been the case by the same time in the previous (pre-pandemic) academic year.

District leaders sought feedback on ways to continue to create policies that would dramatically reduce the prospects for academic failure for their students in small group discussion which centered around two themes. The first is that details matter, including from the curriculum selected to align to the standards, the strategies teachers use in their classrooms, the goals set by school and district leaders, the pipelines in place to bring in diverse teachers, and the processes in place to leverage student voice and agency.

The second is that in order to close the opportunity gaps, the district needs to move beyond compliance-oriented expectations and start the hard work of changing behaviors and addressing individual teachers' biases. One participant suggested that one strategy to start changing adult behaviors is to get them to understand the impact that changing a policy or behavior can have on students: "Around issues of bias and systemic racism, people need to see it in action, so if you change a specific policy so people can see what it means for kids, that helps break down the implicit bias a bit more. People need to understand the why of changing a policy steeped in bias and racism." When districts can facilitate growth in adult beliefs, they are better positioned to change behavior.

One district leader shared an example of a district goal to create a professional learning community by pushing on adult beliefs that all students can learn and succeed. Over the course of two to three years, the district leader estimated that 20% of the staff in the district—those with the belief that students who don't turn in homework will never succeed—ended up leaving the district. The district then hired individuals with belief systems aligned to the district's goals, helping to shift the culture of the district toward that of a collaborative professional learning community that believes that all students can learn.

Increasing Student Interaction in Early Reading Instruction

In a third small group, district leaders shared a realization that upon returning to school in a hybrid model during the 2020-21 school year, their students were experiencing insufficient levels of teacher-student interaction during literacy instruction. District leaders further recognized the inequitable levels of teacher-student interaction across schools due to varying school size. In schools with fewer students, teachers were able to meet with their students more frequently for guided reading groups, which resulted in those students

receiving more teacher instruction. In addition to opportunities for interaction, the district had also identified a desire for improved knowledge and skills within the teaching staff; district leaders reported that teachers in early grades had requested additional professional development specific to early reading instruction.

To meet teachers' professional development needs, the district planned to hire a balanced literacy instruction specialist at the district level to provide teacher professional development and instructional support to teachers. To increase teacher-student interaction in early reading instruction, the district planned to hire reading development teachers as additional instructional staff for a handful of schools in the district that needed it the most. This person would work in multiple classrooms to meet with groups of students in guided reading groups at the same time teachers were engaging in the same activity with other students. This would cut the time students are working independently in half.

The district sought feedback about the challenges that might emerge if they implemented this strategy. Small group participants suggested that given the district's long history of work around literacy, it could leverage the expertise of current literacy specialists in addition to hiring additional staff. Furthermore, participants also stressed the importance of frequent progress monitoring to gauge whether or not the strategy to increase teacher-student interaction in early reading instruction is yielding desired results.

Building Consensus Among Stakeholder Groups About Priorities for Fall 2021

The final small group session had a slightly different orientation than the other three. Rather than deriving from the context of a single district, this conversation explored the emerging work of a coalition of education-focused organizations that came together to consider what an equitable start to the school year in the fall would look like. The group identified five priorities for at least the first 6 weeks of school, based on the input from 30 organizations statewide. Coalition leaders were seeking feedback from Collaborative members to further develop and refine their approach and recommendations. The five priorities for a restorative restart toward a more equitable education system are: (1) engaging students, (2) building relationships, (3) addressing students' social-emotional needs, (4) supporting meaningful learning that is accelerated over the course of the year, and (5) thinking about what systemic transformation can look like. [2]

One meeting participant urged school and district leaders to remind teachers that they do not have to address these five priorities on their own: "It feels like a lot of pressure to say, 'Here's what needs to be done in these first few months,' knowing the reality of where the systems are. The timeline is concerning because teachers are tired and because they need the space to focus on re-entry. And many teachers will be working in the summer with the summer learning opportunities to make up for instructional loss over the last year." Other

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[2] The ideas presented in this discussion have since been refined and articulated in *Reimagine and Rebuild: Restarting School with Equity at the Center*. Note that the five priorities articulated in the final brief are framed slightly differently than they were during the meeting.

small group participants agreed and emphasized the importance of both leveraging existing relationships *outside* the school system with community-based organizations to aid in the restart of the school year in addition to hiring more individuals *inside* the school system such as additional psychologists and counselors to support teachers in meeting whole-child needs after the trauma of a pandemic.

In addition, meeting participants observed that these five priorities are essential even after the first six weeks of school. Given the varying levels of readiness among districts, persistent attention to these priorities with multiple on-ramps for tackling them may be important.

Moving Beyond the Immediate: Combatting Systemic Barriers to Equitable Learning

The fourth and final session of the meeting addressed the tension between two simultaneous and sometimes competing messages. On the one hand, Collaborative members have repeatedly observed that if schools go back to the way things were in February 2020, the California education community will have missed an opportunity to interrupt the inequities baked into the way our school systems operate and move toward a truly equitable system. On the other hand, the sense of urgency in dealing with ongoing pandemic-related crises has made it impossible to take a step back from the everyday work to look at those long-term deep-seated issues. The meeting closed with an opportunity to reflect on some of these deeper systemic barriers to progress and the potential opportunities for addressing them.

Reflecting on the Past Year

The session opened with a period of individual reflection and subsequent small group conversation in which members and guests reflected on the past year. Several key themes emerged:

There is deep, systemic racism in schools

Meeting participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the pervasive, insidious, and persistent presence of systemic racism, and how the crisis exacerbated all manifestations of inequity. As one meeting participant stated: "This is not news, but it has become ever more apparent" in news stories about unequal access to food, technology, safe learning spaces, and instructional time. Participants lamented the fact that deep, systemic racism is often ignored but this must change.

The system is capable of adaptation and innovation

As much as the crisis highlighted the deep inequities in the school system, the responses of many districts also highlighted that change in the system is possible. At the local level, districts and schools were able to mobilize on a large scale to distribute devices and food, change grading policies, and provide professional development to teachers as they pivoted to distance learning. One meeting participant stated, "Disruption can lead us to improved

practice, can push us to rethink priorities, create an urgency to utilize technology and strategies we might not have embraced so quickly and completely."

Educators need support to simultaneously address pressing issues and make transformative change

The adaptations schools made to meet students' basic needs and adapt instruction were inspiring as they revealed the agility possible within local school systems. The challenge lies in building on the innovations in ways that become transformative. Meeting participants commented that experiences this past year demonstrate the importance of supports such as financial resources, time, additional staff to address wellness needs, and strong state leadership to simultaneously address pressing issues and make lasting change. One district leader stated: "I'm not sure we can ever step away from the pressing issues," but many agreed that to create some space for change, educators cannot do it alone. Supports such as additional mental health and social services staff on school sites to help meet whole-child needs, time to collaborate and plan, and stronger state leadership that takes on the burden of setting parameters could free up local leaders to do the kind of strategic thinking and systemic planning that can address deep longstanding barriers to progress.

Planning for the Future

After this initial period of reflection, conversations turned toward planning for the future and the high priority areas for school and district leaders to address when reopening schools in the fall of 2021.

Prioritize equity when hiring more adults in the service of students

One key point that emerged throughout the meeting has been the challenge of hiring, preparing, and supporting personnel. For example, members of the OUSD summer learning team advised district leaders to leverage the human capital resources within the community when planning for and hiring summer staff. Another district team shared their plan to hire more literacy specialists to provide students with more teacher-student interaction during early literacy instruction. But meeting participants also emphasized that teachers alone cannot fully meet whole-child needs; mental health and social services staff are essential to meeting the full range of student needs. In moving forward, meeting participants stressed the importance of building capacity within districts and schools by hiring more adults into the service of students. They emphasized the importance of committing to equity in the hiring process by hiring more educators of color that are representative of the student population. One way to do that is to remember that the community can be a source of talent and resources. One participant recommended, "Hire from homegrown people in your community. They are from the neighborhoods, the community. With enough rigorous training, they can be the staff you need."

Prioritize equity by centering the voices of stakeholders at the margins

District leaders stated that in the past year, the number of families participating in school board meetings and engaging with schools increased. Additionally, schools and districts

administered multiple student and family surveys to determine student and family needs. Looking forward to fall of 2021 and beyond, meeting participants urged schools and districts to continue to leverage the power of student and family voices and, in the words of one participant, to: "…figure out how to really incorporate student voice, choice, and agency in all areas. If we really did that for disenfranchised youth, I think that we would have really formative repercussions in our school system."

Prioritize equity in adapting academic policies

At the start of COVID, school districts made dramatic temporary changes to grading and attendance policies out of necessity and crisis. For example, a strategy used in one district extended grading windows for students to turn in late assignments, which resulted in thousands of students improving their semester grades. As educators move forward, now is the time to think about long-term changes that can close opportunity gaps and make a difference for students. One district leader stated: "This might be a good time to look at all our policies and ask ourselves if this is the right way to do things. Maybe we start shifting away from the A-F grading model and start investing our dollars in an anti-racist curriculum."

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet again in June 2021 to continue exploring district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the pursuit of equity in planning for schools to reopen in the fall of 2021. Collaborative staff will identify specific topics for conversation in consultation with members. Collaborative staff will continue to pursue publications and activities that share key lessons from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators.

Resources from this and previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members are available on our website at www.cacollaborative.org.