DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 161 UD 033 446

TITLE	Greater Expectations for California's Neediest Students: A Call to Action. Recommendations from the California Superintendents Council on Language, Culture, Poverty, and Race.
SPONS AGENCY	WestEd, San Francisco, CA.
PUB DATE	1999-06-00
NOTE	14p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Black Students; *Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Finance; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; Hispanic Americans; Limited English Speaking; *Low Income Groups; *Professional Development; *Racial Differences; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	*California

ABSTRACT

This document summarizes key recommendations developed to address the needs and issues of low-income students of color, many of whom are also English language learners. It grew out of discussions among California school district superintendents, school board members, and other educators. These educators noted that 60% of California students are not white, and 25% are considered poor. The recommendations are: (1) facilitate teacher training and continue meaningful professional development programs; (2) mandate training on racial bias and its effects; (3) recruit teachers and school administrators of color; (4) respect diversity in all aspects of learning; (5) implement standards at all levels of education; (6) use data to drive results; (7) provide academic support for full remediation; (8) promote parent involvement and capacity building; (9) provide appropriate school facilities; (10) fund education adequately for all students; (11) expand student leadership programs; and (12) enhance student health and well-being. (SLD)

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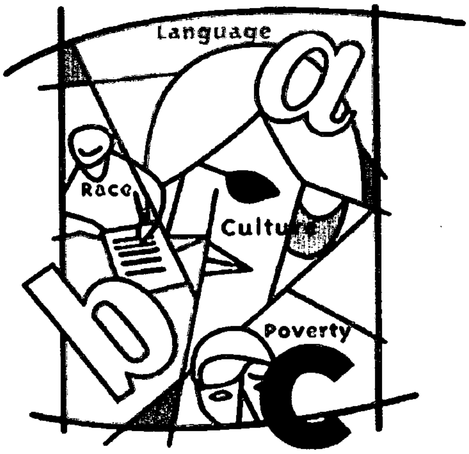

A Call to Action

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Recommendations from the
California Superintendents Council on
Language Culture Poverty and Race
June 1999

UD033446

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This document summarizes key recommendations that were developed by the **Northern California Superintendent's Council on Language, Culture, Poverty and Race**, to address the needs and issues of low income students of color, many of whom are also English language learners. The educators were brought together by the Northern California Comprehensive Assistance Center at WestEd to identify and deal with the most pressing issues in education today.

This **Call To Action** is being presented to the Governor and Legislature, as well as to educational policy makers and key business and community leaders. The Northern California Superintendents' Council on Language, Culture, Poverty and Race, along with the Northern California Comprehensive Assistance Center is committed to taking action to improve the achievement levels of low income children and children of color. To ensure that this topic remains at the forefront of public debate, they are in the process of planning an institute for superintendents and board members to consider further the issues addressed here. The institute will be held in the fall of 1999.

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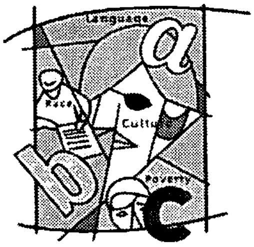
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A Call to Action

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I. Background

In the fall of 1997, many of the superintendents from California's largest school districts and county offices of education came together under the auspices of the Northern California Comprehensive Assistance Center located at WestEd, a nationally recognized educational leadership organization based in San Francisco, to address the most pressing issues we face. Invariably, we agreed that California's growing population of low-income students of color, many of them living in settings of extreme deprivation, have significant unmet needs.

In a second meeting held in October 1998, we expanded the forum to include school board members and diverse school professionals. Again, there was broad agreement that, despite some improvement in the overall educational picture in recent years, poverty-area schools and students still lag far behind their more affluent peers and the inequities are increasing. These problems are exacerbated by racial bias, discrimination, segregation, and a lack of sensitivity to the cultural and language development needs of California's low-income children and families of color.

This paper grew out of those discussions. It was designed to present California's new Governor and Legislature with recommendations that recognize and address the needs and issues of low-income students of color, many of whom are also English language learners, with practical strategies and action.

Recent events and new leadership, particularly the election of Gray Davis as Governor, make this a highly promising time for education in California. We believe the November 1998 elections were a clarion call for significant change, particularly for K-12 education. The purpose of this paper is to make specific recommendations for change based on our collective wisdom about what works (and what has not worked) in the schools that serve more than 60 percent of California's students. Our schools are primarily urban schools characterized by serious funding and staffing inequities when compared with schools in wealthy districts.

If the schools and children whose needs this paper addresses are to succeed, deep commitment, bold ideas, and vigorous support will be required. Yet under the leadership of the past decade and more, these schools have suffered disproportionately from California's steep educational slide. The time is right to make a real difference for the children and schools in California that need the most help—and consequently for California's future.

II. Challenges and Issues

No one questions that California's educational system, once the envy of the nation, has fallen from grace. The consequences of Proposition 13 in 1978 and later tax-related measures, such as Proposition 218 in 1997 that required a two-thirds vote in order to increase locally generated revenues, have been devastating to our elementary and secondary schools. Throughout California class size has increased dramatically in the past two decades (at least until two years ago); resources for such crucial "extras" as arts and athletic programs, libraries, counselors, and nurses have been reduced to a pittance; and school physical plants have seriously deteriorated.

To a significant degree, the wealthier, primarily suburban, school districts have been able to address these problems more effectively than the poorer urban districts. In some cases wealthier communities have voted to tax themselves at higher rates in order to make up for school funding shortfalls and the threatened loss of nonessential programs. Many wealthy communities have created their own educational foundations to restore activities such as music and art. Wealthier families are more able than poor families to purchase items such as athletic equipment and uniforms, and to rally their communities to provide cultural enrichment for students or to build playing fields. Low-income communities frequently have multiple families living in a dwelling normally used by a single family, thus creating a larger school population dependent upon the same tax base.

Slowly, inevitably, the gaps between the schools in wealthy and poor communities have widened over the years. As a result, the flight from low-income, inner-city schools, by families and school professionals alike, has steadily increased. As Jonathan Kozol has observed in his landmark book *Savage Inequalities*, our poorest children and schools now resemble those in third-world countries. Kozol notes that although many social programs have been "turned back" several decades by the wave of government cutbacks of the 1980s, "in public school, social policy has been turned back almost one hundred years," leading to significant disparities in learning opportunities for low-income children of color.

The main result of these broad social trends has been a huge and growing population of students at serious risk of continuing school failure. For low-income students of color and English language learners, who now comprise more than 60 percent of California's public school population, the outlook for the future is grim. Large numbers of these students will graduate from high school (if at all) with a lack of basic literacy and computational skills; most of them will do poorly in their efforts to obtain post-secondary education if they even try. Because of an inferior educational experience in the K-12 grades, these students are likely to be permanently relegated to low-paying jobs and second-class citizenship.

The specific issues and consequences about which we are most concerned include:

- Racial bias, insensitivity to, and ignorance of the needs of diverse students among educational leaders, administrators, teachers, and other school staff;
- Lower expectations of students from low-income families and students of color, leading to a dumbing-down of the curriculum and school failure;
- Curriculum, materials, instruction and assessment methods that do not adequately or appropriately address the diversity of California's students;
- Low-achieving students and students at risk getting lost in the educational system while no one is held accountable for their failure;
- A lack of school professionals of color to provide positive role models for student teachers in low-income settings;
- Poor preparation, lack of professional development, and insufficient mentoring of teachers in schools that serve low-income students of color;
- A lack of opportunities and encouragement for parent involvement in schools that serve low-income students of color;
- Serious inequities between the physical plants of school districts that serve wealthy families and those that serve low-income families of color, leading to a perception that inner-city schools are inferior;
- Continued inadequate funding of public education—despite some recent progress, California ranks 41st among the states in state funding for education; resulting in a disproportionate level of Title I funding;
- The lack of involvement of students at risk in school decisions;
- Inadequate/inappropriate support systems for students at risk;
- Poor health care and preventive services for low-income families at risk ;

III. Recommendations

To address these problems and issues, the California Superintendents Council on Language, Culture, Poverty, and Race recommends the following actions be taken immediately:

Facilitate teacher training and continue meaningful, appropriate professional development programs: Lengthen the school year, adding time for the professional development of teachers. Expand the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program for new teachers and offer incentives for the best teachers to work in schools that serve low-income students of color. Also, expand and strengthen programs such as the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) program, which helps to improve the academic performance of educationally disadvantaged students in order to prepare them for entrance to and success in the University of California.

Mandate training on racial bias and its effects: Require all prospective teachers in credential programs and all current school staff to participate in training that addresses the role of racial bias ("the day-to-day wearing down of the spirit") in educational failure. Two excellent models are the training titled "Beyond Diversity: The Essence of Effective Antiracism for School Leadership," offered by the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA), and the Center for Research on Education Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) program at UC Santa Cruz, which helps teachers connect with their students' prior knowledge and culture.

Recruit teachers and school administrators of color: Support programs such as pre-internship programs that motivate and help minority college and graduate students to become teachers, administrators, and role models in education.

Respect diversity in all aspects of learning: Ensure that curriculum, teaching methods, educational materials, and assessments reflect the diverse cultures represented in California's schools. Incorporate educational equity models such as the National Coalition for Equity in Education and the Voices of Alum Rock in San José.

Implement standards at all levels of education: Ensure that textbooks and curriculum are aligned with state standards and standardized tests for all students, with a particular emphasis on reading, writing, language development, mathematics, and science.

Use data to drive results: Enact a tough accountability system, using achievement results disaggregated by race, ethnicity, language, poverty, attendance, special needs and geography. Hold schools and teachers accountable and support them in improving results of the lowest-achieving students and in disseminating information about research-based, measurably effective practices and programs. Get at the roots of student failure, rather than favoring headlines and quick fixes.

Provide academic support for full remediation: Create after-school, weekend, and summer tutorial centers for students; support the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which has demonstrated significant success in promoting the achievement of at-risk students; and partner with institutions of higher education to prepare students for college eligibility and success.

Promote parent involvement and capacity building: Encourage and support involvement of parents/guardians in their children's education and provide resources and assistance to empower parents as their children's educational advocates. This might include workshops and classes for parents; working with parents in low-income communities of color so they become more comfortable talking with school staff about their expectations and concerns for their children; and giving businesses tax breaks for releasing parents to attend conferences with teachers or providing interested employees time to volunteer in schools.

Provide appropriate school facilities: Build and maintain public schools so that every student and teacher in every neighborhood has a clean, safe learning environment. Extend school safety into the community at large.

Fund education adequately for all students: Provide funding to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn.

Expand student leadership programs: Require leadership classes for all secondary school students; focus on leadership skills to promote student involvement in local social and community issues.

Enhance student health and well-being: Expand school-based ("one stop") health and social services for students and their families, continue the Healthy Start program, and strengthen support for early childhood education, as in the federally funded Head Start and Even Start programs. Solicit assistance from religious and community-based organizations to provide adult supervision for youth and support for families and communities.

IV. The Big Picture: Children and Youth at Risk

The student population with which we are concerned in this paper consists of those young people who have the least in our society—and who have learned to expect the least. They are the children of poverty. Because of the history and dynamics of racism and classism in the United States, they also tend to be children of color: African-American, Latino, American Indian, and many different Asian groups. They are often the children of recent immigrants and single mothers who are themselves undereducated and underemployed, who have little hope for their own or their children's future.

A Life of Challenges
What are the problems these children—and their families—face?*

- Today, one in three children in the United States lives in poverty sometime before reaching adulthood.
- Five percent live in poverty for more than ten years.
- In the last year, 500,000 more children were added to our nation's poverty rolls.

For too many children in our society, poverty has become a way of life, a prison that becomes more difficult to escape as the years of imprisonment increase. The consequences of poverty become everyday realities for these children. They include:

- Low birth weight, one of the surest predictors of developmental problems in childhood and school failure.
- A likelihood of encountering lead poisoning, violent crime, and being held back in school (at least twice as high as the national norm for children and often higher).
- Dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, violence, spousal abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and chronic illness.

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* Data in this section are taken from the 1998 "Kids Count" report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Washington, DC), on-line databases of the Council of Great City Schools and the Children's Defense Fund, the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the California Department of Education EdSource on-line database.

- Substandard and inadequate housing in which low-income families often live four or more to a room, making it virtually impossible for children to find a quiet place to read, study, and complete homework assignments even when they are motivated to do so.

The poverty population of children in the United States has increased from 4.4 million in 1979 to 5.9 million today. More than half that increase, nearly 800,000 children, has occurred in California, Texas, and New York. These are not only the most populated states; they are rapidly becoming the states where the "minority" is the majority.

Conditions in California

In California 60 percent of our students are not Caucasian. Although in our nation 20 percent of children are poor, in California one-quarter are poor. In addition, California also has one of the highest populations of Limited English Speaking students of any state.

When children of poverty go to school, they do not leave behind the problems and challenges that characterize their lives at home. Yet instead of meeting these challenges head-on, for many years California's reaction has been one of denial and neglect. During the 1996-97 school year:

- California ranked 41st among the states in per-pupil expenditures.

- Nine other major industrial states had a pattern of strong upward growth in per-pupil spending over the last decade. By contrast, California's per-pupil spending grew until 1990 but changed very little in the following six years. As a result, California's ranking on per-pupil expenditures fell sharply in the 1990s compared to the national average.

- Although California ranks 9th among the states in teacher salaries, our state is 50th in pupil-teacher ratio. California's class-size reduction program, which began in 1996-97, lowered the pupil-teacher ratio by 1.2 students, making it approximately the same as it was a decade ago.

California spends far less than the other large, industrialized states even though it is one of the wealthiest. In the 1994-95 school year, California spent $33 for K-12 schools for every $1,000 in personal income. The national average was $40. That year, California ranked 48th in school spending, tied with Arizona.

Among the recipients of $17 billion in federal education spending for the 1998 fiscal year, California ranked 31st among the states and last among the six most populous states. The news is even worse for federal Title I funds, which provide $7.3 billion to assist students living in poverty. California ranks near the bottom in receiving Title I funds.

Effects on Educational Achievement

In the past, it has been difficult to measure precisely the effects of poverty and racial discrimination on educational achievement, even when the evidence of disproportionate school failure among poor children of color has been obvious. In recent years several assessments, both nationally and in California, have begun to shed light on the extent and seriousness of the problem.

For example, a key educational goal for the nation, as stated by the U.S. Department of Education, has been that the performance distribution for minority students will more closely reflect that of the student population as a whole. Findings of the most recent (1996) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) include:

- *Differences between white and black students.* In mathematics and reading, scale score gaps between white and black students aged 13 and 17 narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s. There was some evidence of widening gaps during the late 1980s and 1990s. In science, a narrowing of the gap between average scores of white and black students aged 9 and 13 occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s. There has been little change in the 1990s.

- *Differences between white and Hispanic students.* In 1996, white students had higher average scores than Hispanic students at all three ages in each of the four NAEP subject areas. In reading, scale scores gaps among 17-year-olds decreased from 1975 to 1990. However, recent assessment results revealed some widening of the gap, and in 1996 the gap was not significantly different from that in 1975. Although in mathematics the gap among 17-year-olds has generally decreased across the assessment years, resulting in a gap in 1996 that was lower than that in 1973, the gap among 13-year-olds appears to have widened somewhat since 1986. In science, there was some evidence that the gap between white and Hispanic 13-year-olds' average scores decreased between 1977 and 1982, but the gap has changed little since that time.

A recent review of a variety of measures of minority student performance in California found that:

- In 1995, blacks from the highest-income families scored lower than whites or Asians from the poorest families in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

- In schools where cumulative SAT scores are in the top 20 percent of the nation, enrollment is overwhelmingly white and Asian. In schools scoring in the bottom 20 percent, enrollment is overwhelmingly black, Latino, and American Indian.

Although data on the educational performance of American Indian students is hard to come by, this population also encounters numerous difficulties when compared with the majority population. California has one of the largest American Indian student populations in the country, with 32,137 identified students for 1996-97, the most recent year for which data are available. These students are among the poorest in the state, and the percentage of American Indians living at or below the poverty level is increasing. Between 1988 and 1990, the percentage of poor American Indians increased from 24 to 31 percent. Poverty, widespread unemployment, health problems, and conflict with the dominant culture in most schools all tend to hamper educational opportunities and achievement for American Indian students.

For 1996-97, the graduation rate for American Indian students was the third lowest in the state at 62.1 percent. The dropout rate for that same year was the third highest at 4.2 percent. The percentage of American Indian twelfth grade graduates meeting UC/CSU entrance requirements was less than any other ethnic group, 20.2 percent for male students and 24.9 percent for female students.

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Weaving together the strands of school reform

This document was developed with support from the
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