

# Instructional Equity and Respect for Diversity in Schools: Staff Perceptions Vary by Race/Ethnicity and by Role

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As student populations become increasingly diverse, more schools are recognizing the importance of providing safe, engaging, and supportive school environments. As a part of these efforts, national attention has focused on promoting instructional equity and respect for diversity. Given that instructional equity and respect for diversity are important indicators of school climate, this brief explores how secondary staff perceive these conditions and how their perceptions vary based on their race or ethnicity and role.

Respect for diversity—or respect for individual differences among all members of the school community in terms of gender, race, and culture, for example—is commonly identified as a key dimension of positive school climate (National School Climate Center, 2020). This dimension is particularly important regarding children of color, who now comprise the majority of K-12 students. For the same reason, instructional equity—defined as the extent to which all students are treated fairly and receive what each needs to be successful in learning—is another important indicator of a positive school climate. Studies have produced evidence suggesting that attending racially diverse schools can have a positive impact on achievement and intergroup relations for all students (Mickelson, 2008; Wells et al., 2016). Yet, African American and Hispanic or Latino/a<sup>1</sup> students in the aggregate continue to experience academic outcomes that are less positive and report perceptions of school climate that are less positive than those of their White peers. Research

## Key Findings

Based on responses to the California School Staff Survey in 2017/18 and 2018/19:

- » **On average, African American school staff perceived their school's instructional equity less positively and had more negative perceptions of respect for diversity in their school settings, compared with colleagues from other races/ethnicities.**
- » **Teachers, special education teachers, and administrators had the most positive perceptions of their school's instructional equity, whereas paraprofessionals, school resource officers, and counselors and psychologists had the least positive perceptions of their school's instructional equity.**
- » **Teachers and administrators had the most positive perceptions of respect for diversity in their schools, whereas counselors and psychologists as well as police and school resource officers had lower average perceptions of respect for diversity.**

<sup>1</sup> Race and ethnicity descriptors vary across the country. Some terms are widely accepted while others are dependent on region, community, or personal preference. For the purposes of this brief, the nomenclature used to refer to race or ethnicity is based on the terms used in the main source of data for this brief: the California School Staff Survey from the 2017/18 and 2018/19 school years.

suggests that these differences may be attributed to racial or ethnic disparities in access to effective teachers, challenging curricula, and teacher expectations for high performance (Hanson et al., 2012; Murray, 2018).

By contrast, greater equity in schools is linked to greater feelings of school connectedness and improved engagement (Debnam et al., 2014). This connection can be particularly strong in schools that use equity-informed school-based strategies, which help promote positive student-teacher interactions and social-emotional development (Lea et al., 2021).

Although some research has examined students' perceptions of equity and respect for diversity in their schools, fewer studies have explored the perceptions of school staff members. One study recently identified that staff perceptions of school equity tend to be more positive than student perceptions, and an incongruence in these perspectives can negatively impact how connected to school students feel (Debnam et al., 2021). This brief explores staff perceptions of instructional equity and respect for diversity in their schools and how those perceptions vary by race or ethnicity and by role. The brief draws on recent data from the California School Staff Survey (CSSS; see the appendix for more information), the oldest and largest survey of its kind in the nation.

A previous analysis of CSSS data showed that staff in predominantly White and Asian schools reported more positive school climates than their counterparts in schools with predominantly African American and Hispanic or Latino/a populations. There was also evidence that staff experience differences in school climate based on their own race. White and Asian

staff were more likely than African American and Hispanic or Latino/a staff to report that their schools provide a positive, supportive, and safe learning environment for students and that the students they serve come to school ready to learn (Austin et al., 2012). One caveat of this finding is that staff of different races may work in different roles within schools, thus affecting their perceptions of the school environment (Voight et al., 2013), so this brief analyzes not only how staff perceptions may differ by race or ethnicity but also analyzes data disaggregated by staff role.

## Survey Sample and Measures

Given the unique perspective of staff in secondary schools, this brief is based on an analysis of CSSS data from 118,986 secondary school staff (all of the survey's respondents from secondary level schools) who completed the survey in the 2017/18 or 2018/19 school years, which are the two most recent years with full data from the survey. These respondents represent 433 districts and 3,132 schools across the state. (See the appendix for more information on the CSSS.)

A majority (60.3%) of this set of respondents self-identified as White, with just over 20 percent identifying as Hispanic or Latino/a and less than 3 percent identifying as African American (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> Almost 70 percent of the staff worked as teachers or special education teachers, with fewer staff representing prevention staff or service providers (e.g., school nurses, occupational therapists), police or school resource officers, and counselors or psychologists (see Table 2).

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<sup>2</sup> The demographics of the survey respondents in this sample are similar to the state's overall teacher demographics. For example, in 2018/19, 61 percent of California teachers identified as White (California Department of Education, n.d.).

**Table 1. Staff Demographics in California School Staff Survey Sample From 2017/18 and 2018/19**

Race/Ethnicity	N	%
African American	3,034	2.6
American Indian or Alaska Native	831	0.7
Asian or Pacific Islander	7,027	5.9
White	71,725	60.3
Hispanic or Latino/a	26,214	22.0
Other or Multiethnic	10,155	8.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>118,986</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Note: Percentages do not total 100 because the table does not include classified staff or staff in unidentified roles.*

**Table 2. Staff Roles in California School Staff Survey Sample From 2017/18 and 2018/19**

Role	%
Teacher	59.8
Special Education Teacher	8.2
Administrator	3.9
Paraprofessional	8.1
Prevention Staff/Service Provider	2.7
Police/School Resource Officer	0.6
Counselor/Psychologist	3.5

*Note: Percentages do not total 100 because the table does not include classified staff or staff in unidentified roles.*

## Exhibit 1. California School Staff Survey Items Assessing Perceptions of Instructional Equity

Respondents were asked to rate each of the following seven items on a four-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

- » **This school encourages students to enroll in rigorous courses regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality.**
- » **This school emphasizes using instructional materials that reflect the culture or ethnicity of its students.**
- » **This school staff examine their own cultural biases through professional development/other processes.**
- » **This school considers closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap a high priority.**
- » **This school has high expectations for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or nationality.**
- » **This school fosters an appreciation of student diversity and respect for each other.**
- » **This school emphasizes showing respect for all students’ cultural beliefs and practices.**

To examine staff perceptions of school climate, this brief uses data from two CSSS scales: a seven-item scale assessing perceptions of Instructional Equity (see Exhibit 1) and a three-item scale assessing perceptions of Respect for Diversity by students and staff at school (see Exhibit 2). Psychometric analysis shows that both scales have good internal consistency and reliability and no evidence of substantively meaningful bias across staff racial or ethnic groups (Mahecha & Hanson, 2020). Each item is worded as a positive statement about a condition, policy, or action in the school that would support or reflect

equity or respect for diversity. Respondents rate each item on a four-point scale, with responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” A mean score (percentage) was compiled for each of the two scales’ four response options based on staff members’ responses to the relevant survey items for each scale. Higher percentages of agreement on the mean scale scores reflect staff perceptions that the school is characterized by conditions, policies, or practices that foster equity or respect for diversity.

## School Staff Members’ Perceptions of Instructional Equity and Respect for Diversity Varied by Race or Ethnicity

Given that respect for student diversity is central to equity in schools, it is not surprising that the results for items on these two scales were very similar to each other overall (see Table 3). However, less than half of the respondents in this sample strongly agreed on either scale (46% for Instructional Equity and 45% for Respect for Diversity), indicating room for improvement in these crucial aspects of school climate and student success.

## Exhibit 2. California School Staff Survey Items Assessing Perceptions of Respect for Diversity

Respondents were asked to rate each of the following three statements on a four-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

- » **Students in this school respect each other’s differences.**
- » **Adults in this school respect differences in students.**
- » **Teachers show that they think it is important for students of different races and cultures to get along.**

**Table 3. Responses to Instructional Equity and Respect for Diversity Scale Items**

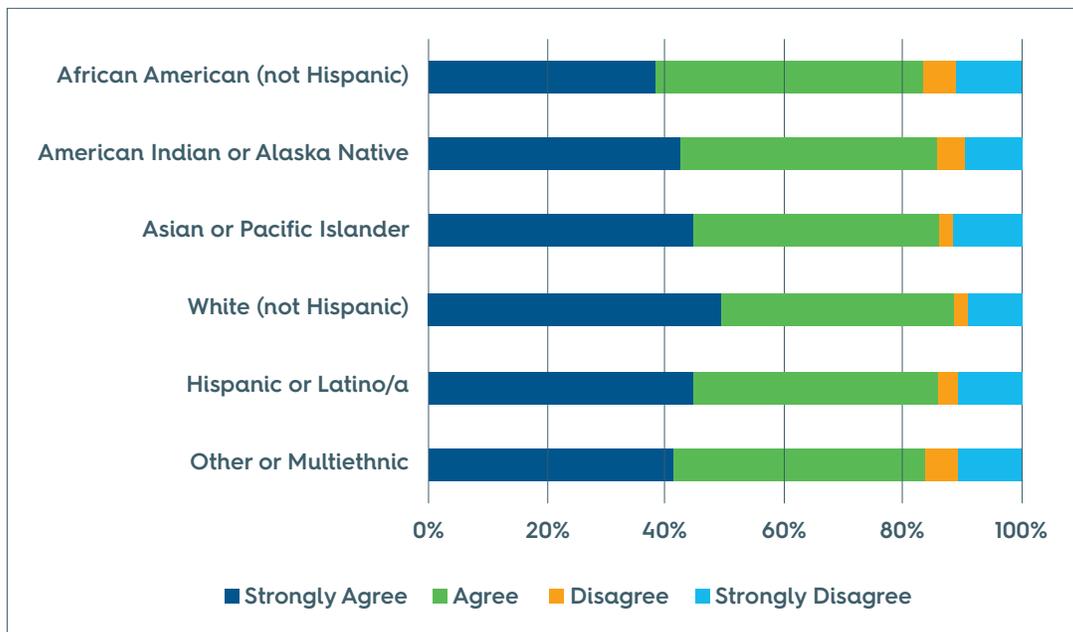
Response	Instructional Equity (%)	Respect for Diversity (%)
Strongly Agree	46	45
Agree	40	42
Disagree	3	2
Strongly Disagree	11	12

*Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100 due to rounding.*

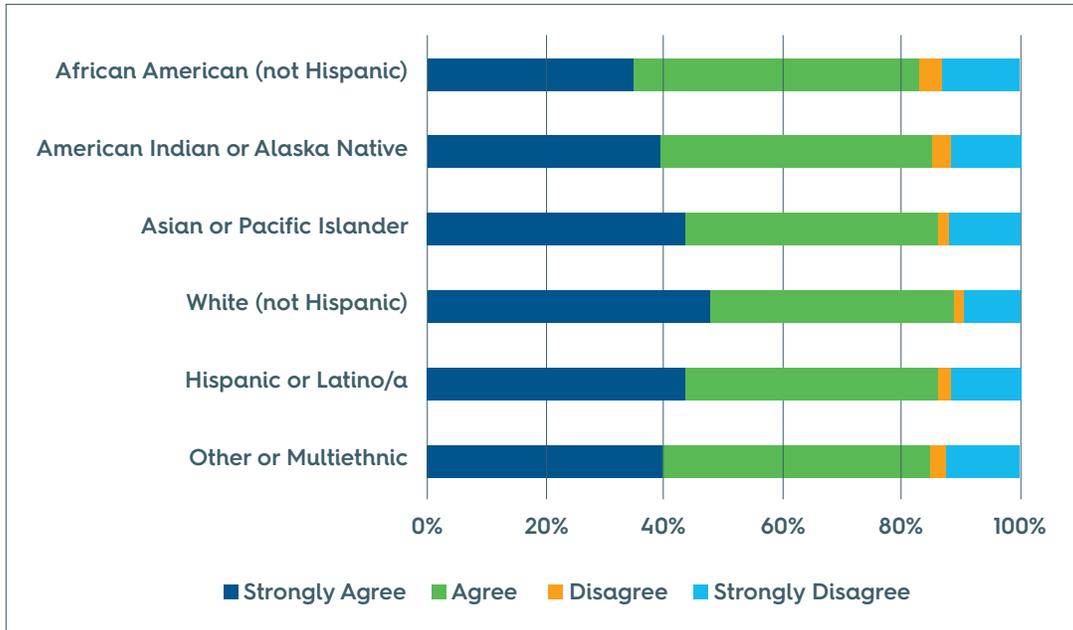
On the Instructional Equity scale, the mean agreement for all staff was above 80 percent, but there were statistically significant variations in perceptions by race or ethnicity (see Exhibit 3). **Overall, African American school staff indicated perceptions of their school’s instructional equity that were less positive than the perceptions of their colleagues from other backgrounds.** Staff identifying as White and Asian or Pacific Islander had the highest agreement with items on the Instructional Equity scale, slightly above the rate of agreement among staff identifying as American Indian, Hispanic or Latino/a, or multiethnic.

On the Respect for Diversity scale, although the mean agreement for all staff was higher than on the Instructional Equity scale, at close to 90 percent, there were also statistically significant variations in perceptions by race or ethnicity (see Exhibit 4). As with the Instructional Equity scale, staff identifying as African American had more negative perceptions of respect for diversity in their school settings. Staff identifying as White and Asian or Pacific Islander had the highest agreement with items on the scale, slightly above the rate of agreement among staff identifying as American Indian, Hispanic or Latino/a, or multiethnic.

**Exhibit 3. Percentage Agreement on Instructional Equity Scale Items, by Race or Ethnicity**



**Exhibit 4. Percentage Agreement on Respect for Diversity Scale Items, by Race or Ethnicity**



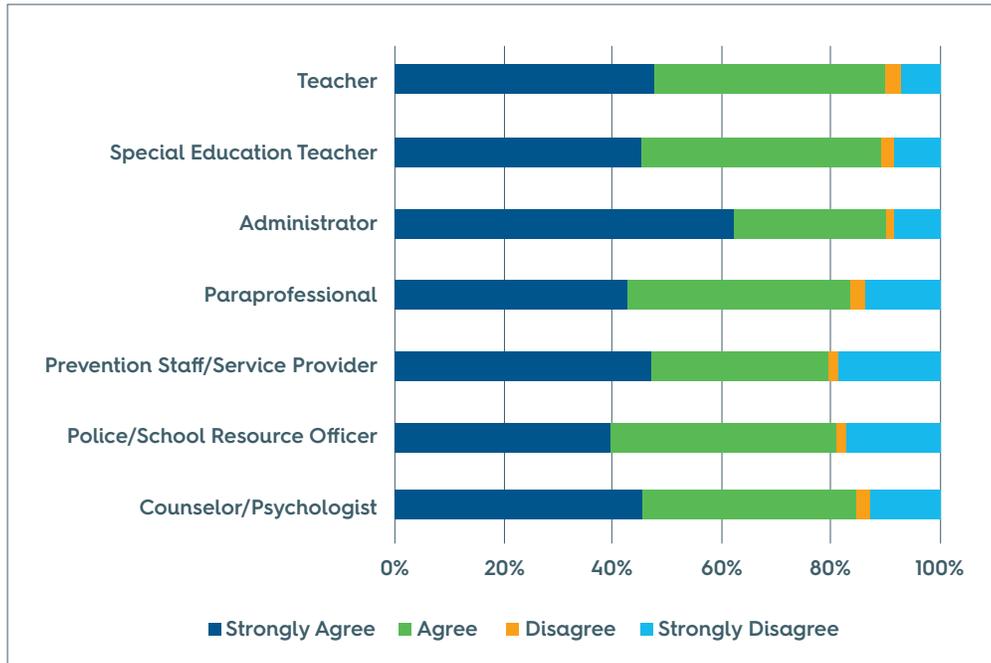
**School Staff Members’ Perceptions of Instructional Equity and Respect for Diversity Varied by Role**

As with race or ethnicity, staff’s roles were associated with statistically significant differences in their perceptions of instructional equity in their schools (see Exhibit 5). Teachers, special education teachers, and school administrators had the most positive perceptions on the Instructional Equity scale. Conversely, paraprofessionals, school resource

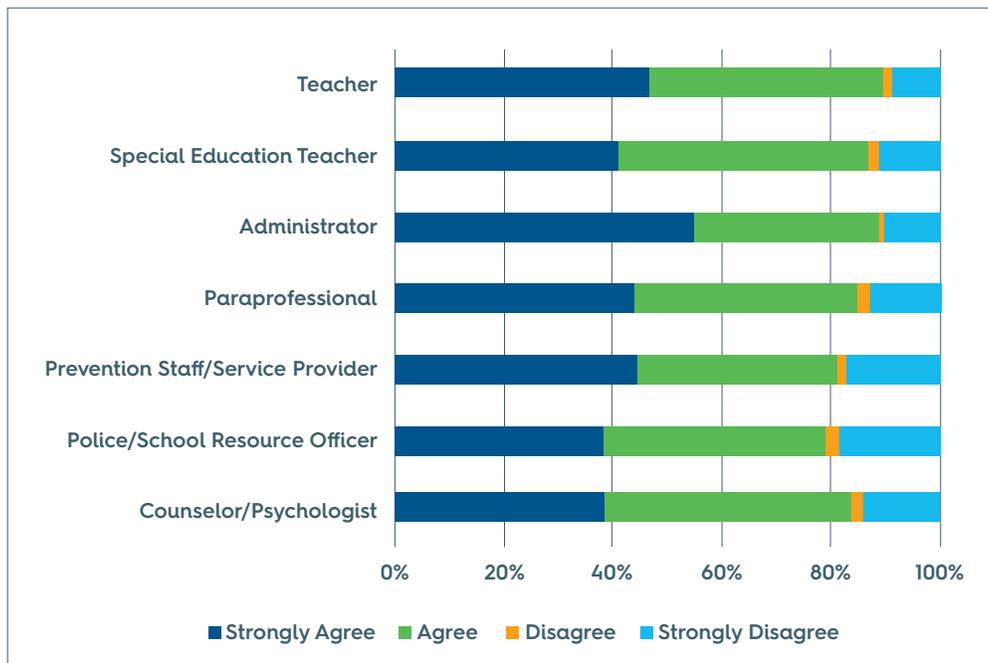
officers, and school counselors and psychologists agreed with the equity items less frequently. Uniquely, prevention staff and other health-related service providers (e.g., school nurses, occupational therapists) were polarized, with high levels of strong agreement and strong disagreement on the Instructional Equity scale items.

Responses to items on the Respect for Diversity scale were generally more positive. However, there were also statistically significant differences in perceptions by role (see Exhibit 6), consistent with the results for instructional equity. Teachers and administrators reported the most positive perceptions of respect for diversity in their schools. Counselors and psychologists, along with police and school resource officers, reported lower average agreement. Again, prevention staff and service providers were polarized, with high levels of both strong agreement and strong disagreement on the Respect for Diversity scale items.

**Exhibit 5. Percentage Agreement on Instructional Equity Scale Items, by Role**



**Exhibit 6. Percentage Agreement on Respect for Diversity Scale Items, by Role**



## Conclusion

The data presented in this brief highlight secondary school staff perceptions of the degree to which their schools have climates and conditions that foster instructional equity and respect for diversity, and the brief details how these perceptions vary by race or ethnicity and by role. Though the staff in this sample generally agreed that conditions related to promoting instructional equity and respect for diversity existed in their schools, the mean scale scores for strong agreement were under 50 percent, indicating more attention needs to be paid to promoting conditions that foster these important aspects of school climate and student success. Responses also varied both by race or ethnicity and by role in ways that were consistent in both areas. Specifically:

- African American school staff had the least positive perceptions of both instructional equity and respect for diversity. Conversely, the data suggest that staff identifying as White had the most positive perceptions in both areas.
- School administrators reported the most positive perceptions of both instructional equity and respect for diversity, whereas school resource officers tended to have the most negative perceptions, and prevention staff had the most polarized views.

With the understanding that positive perceptions of school equity and respect for diversity are important indicators of school climate, these findings highlight the need to look beyond the aggregate perceptions of staff, which may primarily reflect the views of White respondents (60% of the sample) and teachers (68% of the sample), which are the groups that reported the most positive perceptions. These data suggest that school staff identifying as African American, along with school resource officers and prevention/service provider staff, may have unique insights into unwelcoming and inequitable aspects of school climate, areas that may need more attention than most other staff may realize. Finally, additional research on this topic may be useful in understanding the gap between student and staff perceptions and for addressing the causes of this gap, with the aim of improving school climate for all.

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## Appendix: California School Staff Survey

The California School Staff Survey (CSSS) and its companion student survey (the California Healthy Kids Survey, or CHKS) and parent survey (the California School Parent Survey, or CSPS) form the California Department of Education's (CDE's) California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys (CalSCHLS) System. CalSCHLS is the largest, most comprehensive effort in the nation to regularly assess students, staff, and parents at the local level to provide key data on school climate and safety, learning supports and barriers, and stakeholder engagement as well as youth development, health, and well-being.

Schools are provided with detailed survey planning and administration instructions. CDE guidelines call for the CSSS to be administered online at the same time as the CHKS among all staff in grades 5 and above. Staff participation is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The CSSS survey questions were

selected with the assistance of an advisory committee to assess the key variables that research and theory indicate are most associated with successful learning and teaching, particularly in regard to school climate.

CHKS data have been used to analyze racial/ethnic gaps in student perceptions of safe, supportive learning environments (Voight et al., 2013). For example, studies have found significant disparities in students' sense of school connectedness, safety, and supports, with White students having the highest levels, followed by Asian students, American Indian and Hispanic or Latino/a students, and, lastly, African American students (Austin et al., 2010; Hanson et al., 2012). Studies have also found Asian students to be the most likely group to believe that all students are treated with respect and African American and Hispanic or Latino/a students to feel less respected by staff than Asian and White students. In high school, African American and Hispanic or Latino/a students have been found to be more likely to feel that students are not disciplined fairly. And Hispanic or Latino/a students have tended to rate overall school climate lower than White and Asian students, even when adjusting for student socioeconomic status (Austin & Hanson, 2012). In addition to finding differences among student groups, students have also found that schools that serve mostly African American and Hispanic or Latino/a students had lower overall school-climate ratings than schools that serve mostly White and Asian students, even when adjusting for student socioeconomic status (Austin et al., 2007). Furthermore, racial gaps in both achievement and perceptions of school climate have been found to exist within individual schools as well as between schools. Indeed, research found that these gaps within schools contributed more to the overall racial gaps in California than the fact that White and Asian students tend to attend different schools than African American and Hispanic or Latino/a students (Hanson et al., 2012).

The California School Staff Survey is an assessment from the California Department of Education developed by WestEd. This brief was prepared by the Resilient and Healthy Schools and Communities Team at WestEd and funded by The California Endowment as part of its School Health Data Team.

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