

Enacting Equity: Implementing an **EQUITY BLUEPRINT** With a Focus on **BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS**

A Case Study of Eastside Union School District



The Education Trust—West



Taking an Action-Focused Approach to Supporting Black Student Success

In 2015, The Education Trust–West’s *Black Minds Matter* campaign shone a light on the ways that structural racism perpetuates gaps in educational quality and outcomes for Black students across California.¹ More recent data published in a [2022 fact sheet](#) updating the original report reveals that, despite some progress over the ensuing seven years and high aspirations for college and career success held by Black students and families, Black students continue to experience among the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, are the least likely to be supported to reach grade-level standards in math and reading, and graduate from high school and enroll in college at lower rates than their peers.²

Much more work remains to be done by state and local leaders to eradicate disparities in opportunities and to clear the path for all Black students to thrive. Although state leaders can play a significant role in ensuring districts and schools have adequate, equitable resources and guidance to close equity gaps, there is also an urgent need for district

leaders to take a data-informed, action-focused approach to ensuring Black students receive the rigorous and culturally affirming educational opportunities they deserve.

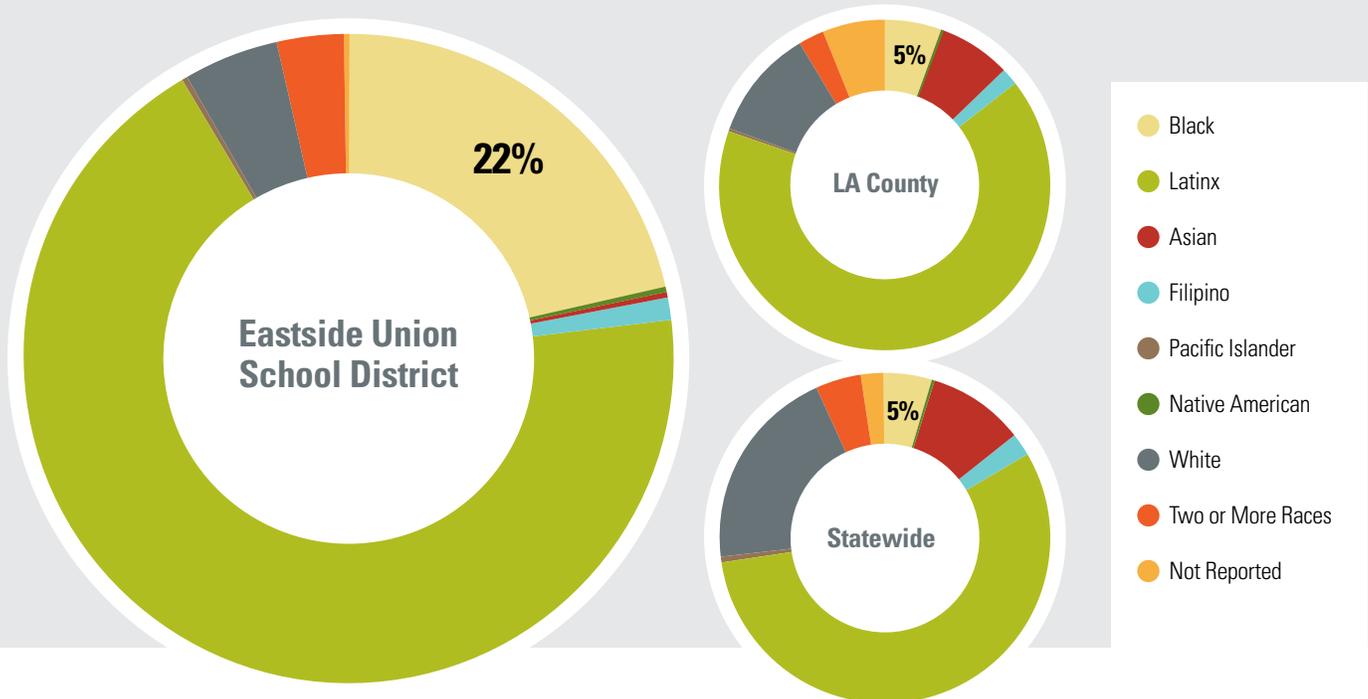
The Eastside Union School District (EUSD), located in southern California, provides an example of how system leaders can intentionally undertake this critical work. **This case study highlights EUSD’s implementation of strategies focused on improving educational experiences and supports for Black students and families, uplifting both promising practices and emerging challenges during the early stages of the process. We hope this case study will inspire districts across the state to adopt proven equity-centered practices and to adapt strategies to fit their unique local contexts.** We also hope that EUSD’s story, which reflects work needed in countless classrooms and districts across California, provides an example that galvanizes state leaders to invest in, and hold schools and districts accountable for, supporting Black student success.

Committing to Continuous Improvement

Everyone Contributes, Every Student Achieves — that is the vision statement of EUSD, an elementary school district in Los Angeles County serving roughly 3,120 students across six schools (four elementary schools, one middle school, and one transitional learning center).³ In 2020, recognizing a need to identify the root causes of equity gaps and address

them head on, leadership and staff at the district enlisted the support of The Education Trust–West to facilitate a Systemic Equity Review with EUSD — a process of data collection and analysis, reflection, planning, and action focused on ensuring that every student is indeed supported to succeed.

Black students make up nearly a quarter of EUSD’s student population, a higher proportion than LA County and the state as a whole.



Investing in understanding and meeting the needs of Black students, who make up 22% of the district’s students and face the largest equity gaps across measures of school climate and culture, absenteeism, and academic outcomes, was identified as a top priority for EUSD during the Systemic Equity Review. The district included this priority in its Blueprint for Equity, a plan the district developed with Ed Trust–West’s support in 2021 that outlines specific strategies to create equitable and humanizing learning experiences for each of its students. Once the Blueprint was adopted in 2021-22, district leaders engaged with key district and school staff to circulate the plan and to continually provide opportunities for staff and community members to collaborate around implementing the plan’s strategies.

The 2022-23 school year marked the second year of EUSD’s Blueprint implementation. In spring 2023, Ed

Trust–West’s team members visited the district in person and conducted site visits at each of the district’s schools to learn how Blueprint implementation was progressing. During this visit, Ed Trust–West’s staff conducted classroom observations, hosted focus groups with students, and conducted in-depth interviews with school administrators. The Ed Trust–West team also facilitated three virtual focus groups — one each for EUSD parents, district leadership, and the district’s equity committee, which included teachers as well as administrators. Finally, an analysis of district documents and staff and student data (including school climate and culture surveys, test score data, and absenteeism data) was conducted to measure the impacts of early Blueprint for Equity implementation and to provide a benchmark from which to measure future progress.

Systemic Equity Reviews and Blueprints for Equity

Ed Trust–West Tools for Supporting Continuous Improvement

Since 2007, The Education Trust–West has provided technical assistance to **more than 30** school districts and counties (also referred to as Local Education Agencies, or LEAs) across the state by conducting Systemic Equity Reviews (formerly referred to as **Educational Equity Audits**) and guiding them in the process of Blueprint for Equity Action Planning. This multiphase research and facilitation process begins with an analysis of data reflecting students' academic outcomes as well as classroom observations; interviews with school and district leaders; and focus groups with school staff, parents and families, and students themselves.

Once the Systemic Equity Review has identified the barriers that limit student success within an LEA, Ed Trust–West leads the LEA through the Blueprint for Equity Action Planning process, which uses those learnings and data to inform a plan for concrete actions the LEA intends to take to change and improve local policies and practice with the specific goal of closing equity gaps for students of color, students from low-income households, and multilingual learners. Working with an external partner with whom LEAs can engage in difficult but necessary conversations about educational equity gaps and the steps it will take to close them has contributed to tangible progress for students from Carlsbad to the Central Valley.

To learn more about Systemic Equity Reviews and Blueprints for Equity, see west.edtrust.org/educator-engagement/

Equitable action planning to improve student achievement is a complex process that is neither one-size-fits-all nor static. Districts must focus on monitoring progress through regular reviews of data that is disaggregated by student demographics, refining their own strategies when needed, and providing ongoing opportunities for staff to collaborate and improve implementation approaches in the school year and professional development calendars.

Although EUSD is still in the initial stages of implementing its Blueprint, our analyses reveal that the district is beginning to see improvement in two key areas. First, through dedicated staffing and leveraging of both in-person events and direct communications between teachers and families, the district is making progress toward building more positive relationships with parents and families. Second, students have demonstrated notable academic growth in math and English based on performance on formative assessments administered throughout the school year. However, significant work remains to translate this growth into high rates of proficiency for all student groups because many students begin the school year more than one year below grade level. This means that even with significant within-year growth, many students still end the school year shy of reaching grade-level standards.

Here, we share four learnings from EUSD's first two years of its Blueprint for Equity implementation:

1. Family engagement efforts should be centered on building trust and empowering parents as partners.
2. Equity-focused annual planning and instructional reform must include an explicit focus on racial equity to begin to close opportunity gaps.
3. To improve attendance, schools should start with disaggregating data by student demographics to inform targeted outreach and support.
4. Ongoing, embedded professional development for all staff and dedication to pursuing mindset and culture shifts are key ingredients for changing practice.

These learnings highlight both the strategies the district is undertaking and how the district is responding in timely ways to insights from parents, families, and educators to engage in continuous improvement.





Key Learnings

Family at the Forefront



Family engagement efforts should be centered on building trust by establishing open and consistent communication with caregivers about student needs and experiences and by empowering parents as partners who have a pivotal role to play in their students' success. Dedicated staff committed to building community connections are an asset for these efforts.

Survey data from more than 300 families in the district helped EUSD identify that engaging families as key players in students' education was an area for improvement within the district, with especially low levels of connection reported by Black and Latinx families.⁴ Acting on these findings was deemed especially urgent in light of robust research showing that high levels of family engagement are associated with higher motivation and improved academic outcomes for students.⁵

Hiring dedicated staff was the district's first step toward building more trusting relationships with families. EUSD expanded an existing coordinator of student services role to explicitly focus on the effective implementation of the district's Equity Blueprint. Before the Systemic Equity Review process, Eastside Union had a parent liaison for the district and a staff member at each school site who served as a liaison. As a direct result of the Blueprint, EUSD hired a second district parent liaison to dedicate capacity to establishing and deepening connections with Black parents and families in particular.

Getting parents into schools to build relationships has been especially important considering the disconnection and isolation fostered by remote conditions during the pandemic. To address that need, one cornerstone of EUSD's family engagement strategy is the hosting of five annual Parent Universities, held at various school sites. During these events, the district uses a small-group format to provide parents with a space to have discussions about their children's experiences with the school and to actively seek feedback from participating parents. Parents and families learn about available programming and their children's education and are also given a platform to voice their concerns, suggestions, and insights, which creates a collaborative environment between families and school staff. This structure is aligned with research that suggests that families benefit more from being invited to work with school staff, thus establishing a reciprocal partnership in supporting students rather than being treated as passive recipients of information.⁶

Attendance at Parent Universities has increased steadily over the past two years. Although the district does not yet disaggregate Parent University attendance data by race, it intends to begin doing so in the hopes of identifying whether more targeted outreach or creative strategies for engagement are needed to ensure Black families are represented and feel welcome and empowered to actively participate.

Eastside Union has also recognized the importance of understanding the specific needs of various parent groups within the Eastside Union community and valuing diversity rather than treating all groups as a monolith.⁷ To put that principle into practice, the district has created the African American Advisory Committee, modeled on an existing English Learner Advisory Council within the district. Both invite community members to bring their lived experiences and perspectives to district planning and to provide input on processes like budgeting, curriculum redesign, and school climate and culture initiatives.

School staff and leadership recognize the importance of trust building, particularly within communities whose past experiences have fostered a mistrust of institutions in general. School and district leaders shared a renewed commitment to establishing a foundation of trust by actively listening to concerns, addressing them transparently, and consistently demonstrating a commitment to the well-being and success of every student and family.

Parents feel that the school has made important inroads in this area. They especially value the district's shift to using the Parent Square app, which teachers and administrators use to create open lines of individualized communication directly with parents. Parents also appreciate the frequent and thoughtful communication from teachers and quick response times when they reach out with a question or feedback, noting that "it's like a parent conference every day" and "a little time goes a long way."

Although parents see some improvement in this area during the first few years of Blueprint implementation, survey data from the 2022-23 school year reveals that family engagement remains an area for growth. This challenge is a focal point for ongoing improvement, and schools within the district are actively seeking ways to bridge the gap, beginning with offering more family-focused school events, including district-hosted celebrations of Black and Latinx communities and culture. The district is also using its Community Center as a hub for connecting with families and for maintaining and expanding community resource provisions like food and school supply drives. Through the center, which now serves as the heart of EUSD's family engagement efforts, families can access services and supports and can connect with parent liaisons, the district social worker, the district nurse, and translators.





Explicitly Embracing a Racial Equity Focus

Implementation of a Blueprint for Equity requires a comprehensive, holistic weaving of equity principles into all aspects of district operations, including annual planning and instructional reform.

Statewide test scores released in October 2023 reveal that schools across California still fail to eradicate equity gaps in academic outcomes for Black students and other students of color. At no point in the past nine years have more than one in five Black students in the state been at grade level in math.⁸

In EUSD, only 11% of Black students meet or exceed grade-level standards in English language arts as of the 2022-23 school year. Fewer than 7% meet grade-level standards in math. Roughly twice the percentage of Latinx students and a similar proportion of White students are at or above grade level in each subject.⁹ These scores are a big part of the reason the district is undertaking such extensive efforts to break from business as usual. Updating curricula and embedding their Blueprint for Equity strategies in their annual planning process are the two main approaches they have taken to ensure that intention is translated into action.

At the heart of instruction lie curricula, which shape the content that students are exposed to and engage with in their classrooms. With input from the district's African American Advisory Committee, a group comprising family members and school staff, EUSD identified that the use of outdated curricula, which, in some cases, was more than 20 years out of date and lacked inclusive content and cultural relevance, was a root cause of student disengagement with content and poor outcomes. They decided to replace their curricula for science, history, English language arts, and math to address the African American Advisory Committee's concern that curricula "accurately portray the influence of African Americans in literature, science, and social studies."¹⁰ This work is done sequentially and includes a process of engaging school staff and the community in review of options for new curricula, as well as the creation and use of a rubric to evaluate the relative quality of those options, and piloting and evaluation that precede full adoption.

Equity was explicitly made a central consideration in evaluating and choosing curricula, with discussions focused on ensuring that content and material are relevant and meaningful to students of all backgrounds. This shift, in concert with an increased emphasis on project-based learning, has been well received by students. One middle school student noted, for example, that they appreciated and enjoyed "learning more about [my] ancestors." Rigor was also a focal concern in curriculum selection, as district stakeholders viewed holding all students to rigorous, high standards as a vital component of equitably serving students.

Districts' Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) can also be powerful tools for institutionalizing equity-focused instructional reform work and for ensuring a commitment to staying the course. Administrators recognize that the district's LCAP and Blueprint for Equity go hand in hand because the LCAP outlines the ways the district will spend over the next three years to meet their goals. In 2022, the district shaped many of its LCAP goals using its Blueprint for guidance, as well as input from community stakeholder groups like the African American Advisory Committee, thus leading to goals focused on culturally responsive teaching, improving social and emotional outcomes, hiring educators who reflect the diversity of the student body, and developing resources for families and communities.

This planning puts the district slightly ahead of a new state requirement, beginning in 2023-24, for districts to create focused goals within their LCAP specifically related to improving outcomes for student groups with persistently low outcomes. In the case of EUSD and far too many other districts across the state, this includes Black students. Going forward, the district will need to work to ensure that expenditures of Local Control Funding Formula dollars on high-need student groups align closely with intended expenditures on these student groups, critically interrogate discrepancies when expenditures are lower than planned, and adjust approaches accordingly.

An Emphasis on Attendance



Districts must be creative and persistent in their focus on improving attendance, starting with disaggregating data to inform targeted outreach and support.

Research on the relationship between attendance and outcomes shows that making sure students consistently show up to school is a bare minimum necessity for supporting students' academic growth, fostering connections within school communities, and enabling social and emotional learning.¹¹ Unfortunately, schools across the state and nation have faced record-breaking rates of chronic absenteeism in the wake of the COVID pandemic, thus contributing to learning losses and leading national leaders and advocates to call for an "all-hands-on-deck approach" to improving attendance.¹²

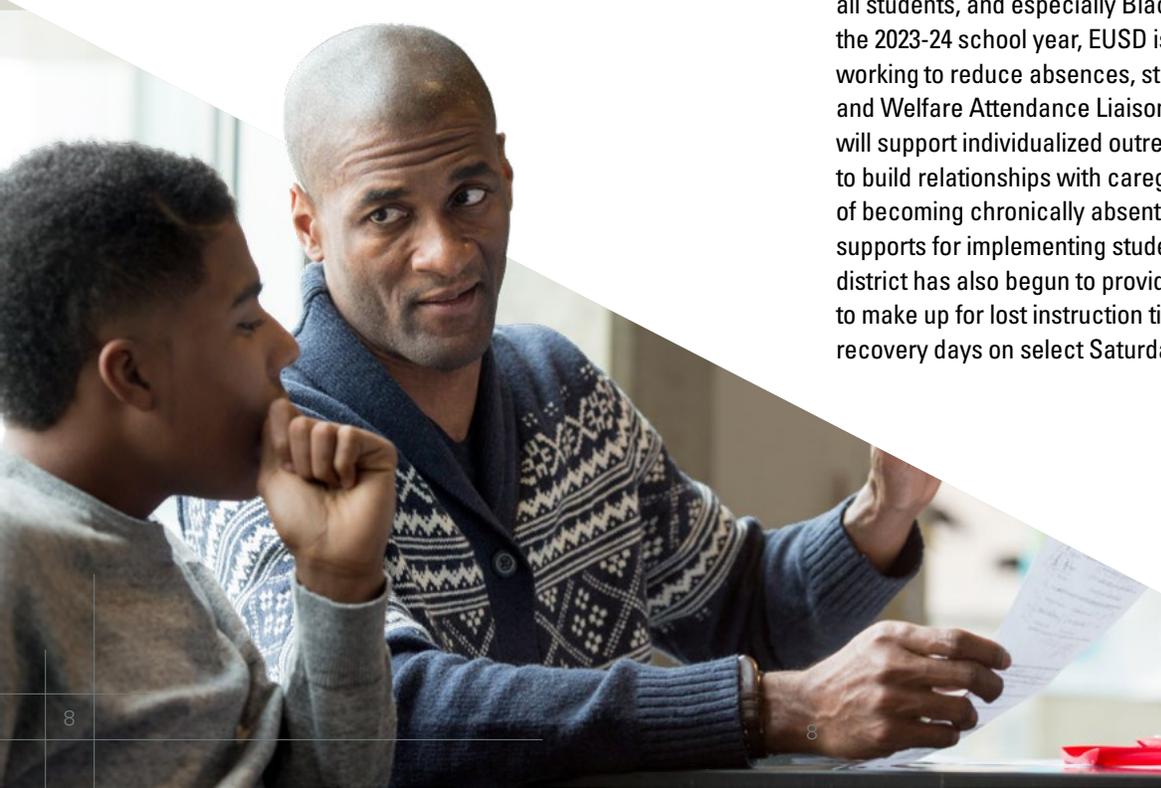
Students are considered chronically absent if they were absent for 10% or more of the days that they were expected to attend. In the 2021-22 school year, nearly one-third of students in the state were chronically absent, and although schools saw slight improvement over the course of the past school year, one-quarter of students (25%) were still chronically absent in 2022-23. In Eastside Union School District, as in the state, Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander students have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism by far, in some cases reaching nearly double the chronic absenteeism rate for White students. In a 2023 poll of more than 1,000 Black voters in California, 93% saw addressing chronic absenteeism as an urgent problem for school districts to address.¹³

EUSD has made addressing this problem a top priority. District leaders formed an Attendance Advisory Committee comprising representatives from each of the district's

schools that regularly meets to review absenteeism data disaggregated by student demographics and identify where intervention is needed. When students are absent, a series of communications are sent directly to both students and caregivers as part of a tiered intervention to educate families about the importance of attendance, clarify district attendance policies, and create a direct dialogue with caregivers when students accumulate a concerning number of absences.

Attendance Advisory Committee members and school staff take an individualized approach, recognizing that each family's experiences are unique. They call parents and caretakers when students are in danger of becoming chronically absent to gain a better understanding of families' circumstances and offer to connect them with district and community resources to mitigate barriers to regular school attendance. School staff also engage parents and caregivers by inviting them to participate in conferences when students are frequently absent to discuss ways in which families and educators can work together to support students in attending.

Even as these strategies are enacted, reducing chronic absenteeism rates has continued to be a significant challenge for the district. In 2022-23, 44% of EUSD students were chronically absent, a slight increase from 41% the previous year, and 52% of Black students were chronically absent in 2022-23 compared with 49% the previous year.¹⁴ After seeing these data points, district leadership has dedicated additional resources to improving attendance rates for all students, and especially Black students, in 2023-24. In the 2023-24 school year, EUSD is focusing on proactively working to reduce absences, starting with hiring two Child and Welfare Attendance Liaisons. These new positions will support individualized outreach, including home visits to build relationships with caregivers of students at risk of becoming chronically absent, and will identify needed supports for implementing students' attendance plans. The district has also begun to provide opportunities for students to make up for lost instruction time by offering attendance recovery days on select Saturdays throughout the year.





Shifting Mindsets and Shaping Culture



Ongoing, embedded professional development for all staff and dedication to pursuing mindset and culture shifts are key ingredients for changing practice in schools and classrooms.

One key recommendation Ed Trust–West made during its work supporting Eastside Union’s development of its Blueprint was to normalize discussions and vocabulary about identity, bias, privilege, and race, while always providing concrete examples of how these concepts manifest in classrooms, schools, and workplaces. The district was also advised that the district would benefit from establishing team cultures where people can safely challenge deficit viewpoints in a constructive, open manner.

In response, the district’s Culture and Climate Committee supports the implementation of restorative practices, including staff training and professional development. This is an important step toward reducing disproportionality in discipline, rooting out bias, building trusting relationships with students of color, and building a healthy and inclusive school environment.

The district is also working to build awareness and understanding among staff of the need to take an asset-based approach to this work, uplifting the valuable contributions students and families bring to their school communities.

Beyond the social-emotional learning component of this work, building a culture of open, frank acknowledgment of racism and its impacts among district staff and leadership is an ongoing process. Staff and students alike suggested a need to ensure that all staff are trained in identifying and combating implicit bias and engaging in courageous conversations, with one staff member suggesting the district, like many in the state, is in the “beginning of the arc” of developing in this area. The district continues to seek out and provide relevant professional development to leadership, classified staff, and teachers to deepen understanding, change practices, and promote joyful and inclusive schools.

Conclusion

The 2022-23 school year saw Eastside Union begin its work to implement the district's Blueprint for Equity and to intentionally create an environment that supports Black students in growing academically, socially, and emotionally; harnessing their potential; and achieving their aspirations. Thus far, the district has assembled many of the key components needed for this ambitious overhaul. In the face of early data that reaffirms the urgent need for this work, the district is engaging directly with families and the community to pinpoint ways it can continuously improve. Now, like so many districts across the state, the district must persist with engaging in the hard work of shifting culture and changing practices to dismantle inequitable structures, unlearn implicit and explicit bias, and rebuild bonds of trust with parents and the community that have eroded over time.

A Blueprint for Equity, like any architectural plan, is just that — a set of instructions for building something. Continuous improvement, an approach to educational change focused on implementing, evaluating, and course-correcting strategies along the way, can be a powerful tool for that construction. The four key learnings featured here are examples of equity-focused continuous improvement in action. We hope they spur districts to look inward at their own plans and practices, to question how they might strengthen their approaches to creating conditions that allow Black students and families to thrive, and to take the urgent action needed to build that reality, not at some abstract future point, but today.



Endnotes

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The Education Trust–West

580 2nd Street, Suite 200, Oakland, CA 94607

P 510-465-6444 | EdTrustWest.org | @edtrustwest

