



LONG BEACH
UNIFIED • SCHOOL • DISTRICT

The Center of Black Student Excellence: **A Place Without Barriers and the 10 Elements That Lay Its Foundation**



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**“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”
—African Proverb**

Introduction

“Equity in LBUSD means taking action to end systemic racism and discrimination that harms students because of their race, [and] culture. ... If acting upon this definition, then those descriptors will not be predictors of success or failure in our system.” (Excellence and Equity Board Policy 0145, 2021)

Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) has made considerable strides toward excellence and equity throughout the district. For example, the Black Student Achievement Initiative (BSAI), launched in 2021, offers a range of programs that support liberatory environments and aim to improve outcomes for Black students and families within the district. Despite these positive strides, the latest academic performance data suggest there is still significant work to be done.

Recent assessment results paint a disconcerting and complex picture of the current challenges. The 2024 Smarter Balanced ELA Assessment Consortium (SBAC) data reveal that Black student scores are behind all other ethnic groups and English Language Learners (ELLs), with only 20 percent meeting or exceeding achievement in math and 34 percent in English language arts (ELA). Based on A-G completion rates, less than 50 percent of Black graduating seniors met the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) systems’ course requirements and were therefore not qualified to attend a 4-year California state college or university.

In addition to academic performance, school climate plays a pivotal role in student success, and LBUSD's review of the latest school climate surveys reflect similar concerns. The 2023–2024 California Office to Reform Education (CORE) Survey, taken by students and families, assesses school climate indicators that predict positive academic achievement. The survey revealed that 65 percent of elementary and 47 percent of secondary Black students and families reported a positive sense of belonging—which are lower reports than *all* other groups in grades 4 through 12. The 2024 PULSE Survey confirmed these findings, maintaining that Black students reported lower scores in having a sense of belonging, as well as identity, agency, and sense of safety, than *all* other groups in grades 6 through 12.



These troubling data are not representative of the capabilities and potential of Black students. Instead, they demonstrate the present-day effects of an education system with a long, painful history of excluding and devaluing Black students and families. Subsequently, there is a need to redress harmful systemic institutional practices and policies that have yielded these disparities and, in their place, establish tangible means to support those most impacted.

Through targeted actions, LBUSD reaffirms its commitment to creating an inclusive educational environment. Our vision embraces academic achievement for each student and a sense of belonging within their school communities. The district's commitment to making this vision a reality is unwavering. We actively seek the partnership of families, educators, and community members in this critical endeavor; their involvement is essential for driving these transformational changes.

Building upon our commitment to inclusivity, we recognize that investing in an approach to center Black students is essential to redressing structural inequities in LBUSD. Our aim is to ensure equitable access to resources and to elevate the entire district by fostering an inclusive environment where *all* students can thrive. It is important to emphasize that centering Black students is *not* about excluding other students but rather about addressing specific, long-standing disparities that disproportionately affect Black students. This public investment benefits the whole community by laying the groundwork for an equitable system that will ultimately support all students by creating a more just and liberatory learning environment.

This brief is intended for district allies and advocates who are dedicated to supporting, designing, and fostering contexts that ensure equitable opportunities for LBUSD's Black Community to feel a sense of belonging and achieve success. The district is committed to listening to, honoring, and relying upon the shared voices and experiences, leveraging these valuable insights to inform the vision and establishment of The Center of Black Student Excellence.

Brief Overview

This brief evolves from a deliberate and concerted effort by LBUSD to understand and address the specific educational needs of our Black students. Grounded in a data-driven approach, it is the result of extensive and substantial engagement with members of the Black Community, spanning students, families, teachers, and community members—frequently referenced collectively as the Black Community. Their voices, experiences, and hopes

of a liberatory educational system were critical to informing this brief's contents and constructs such as Liberatory Space and several others. The purpose of this brief is to illuminate what was learned and detail how it will be leveraged to establish the foundation for The Center of Black Student Excellence.

This brief is organized according to 10 Elements of Black Excellence—themes that emerged based on voices from the Black Community. Each element is discussed in its separate section, with direct quotes from members of the Community to elucidate the significance and meaning of each element. These quotes are supplemented and expanded upon with a collective definition. Next, each section offers plausible Center aims in support of that element. Finally, each section identifies viable practical approaches that the Center can implement in *response* to what was *asked* and *learned by community members*. These practical approaches are representative of what was shared most often. Although these practical approaches were shared out of the voices and expertise of LBUSD's Black Community, they are also research and evidence based. These are listed as additional resources at the end of the brief.

Inquiry and Data Collection

LBUSD and BSAI leaders partnered with WestEd to learn from those most impacted by harmful educational practices and policies. The purpose of this community-based research was to actively engage *with* the Black Community—to ask, to learn, and to respond to their expressed needs. A wide range of voices and experiences were shared and collected in listening sessions with more than 314 Black students, families, teachers, and community members within the district. These sessions were instrumental in better understanding the district's successes and identifying areas needing improvement in serving Black students and families.

A Liberatory Space is an environment, or system, that embodies and promotes true freedom, joy, and self-empowerment, allowing Black students, families, and community members to achieve their fullest potential without constraints (for example, prejudice, stereotypes, and low expectations). A liberatory space nurtures the mind, body, and spirit, and thus enables the Black Community to transcend societal and institutional barriers and embrace their identities with pride and resilience.

—Voices of the Black Community

Black Excellence is a dynamic concept that embodies the empowerment of Black students, families, and communities to reach their full potential by nurturing inherent talents and overcoming systemic barriers. It celebrates Black identity and cultural pride while challenging stereotypes. It encourages high standards, supports outstanding achievements, values intergenerational wisdom, and promotes social justice. It centers health and wellbeing and uplifts the community through service and civic engagement. Black Excellence encourages authenticity, fosters an environment that cultivates beauty and joy, and provides opportunities for personal and collective growth and development.

—Voices of the Black Community

Throughout the listening sessions, students, families, and community members were asked several questions, including the following:

- **What is Black Excellence?**
- **What is liberation? How does that look/feel/sound in practice?**
- **What is your hope and dream for your child?**

Session data were qualitatively analyzed and organized based on recurring themes, which became the 10 Elements of Black Student Excellence.

The Center of Black Student Excellence

The Center of Black Student Excellence will be a place of empowerment, joy, and liberation, recognizing the inherent brilliance, beauty, and agency that exists within each Black child and community member.

—Voices of the Black Community

Description

The Center of Black Student Excellence (CBSE) will be a transformative enterprise within LBUSD. It is a visionary establishment whose design is shaped *by* and *for* the Black Community where they can proudly discover and honor their identity, history, and cultural heritage, which fosters a sense of inclusion and confidence. This liberatory space is more than a physical location. Rather, it is a commitment to nurturing a sense of belonging, pride, and agency among Black students and their families. The goal is for them not only to envision but also to achieve a future filled with excellence and opportunity.

The Center of Black Student Excellence will stand as a beacon of empowerment, opportunity, and progressive change while embodying freedom, pride, joy, and resilience. It will be a place where students, families, and communities feel liberated to pursue their dreams while embracing their inherent Black Excellence.

—Voices of the Black Community

The 10 Elements of Black Excellence



**NOTE: The 10 Elements are not displayed or presented in particular order. Each shares equal importance. These elements were identified and named based on the expressed envisioning of representative voices of LBUSD's Black Community.*

Community Aim: By representing and elevating the 10 Elements of Black Excellence through center staffing, resources, programs, and design, the Center aims to be a beacon of empowerment, joy, opportunity, and positive change. It strives to create an environment where individuals are encouraged to reach their highest potential, overcome challenges, foster community growth, and celebrate Black identity. It seeks to engage the community in mutually beneficial partnership, programming, and decision making based on their needs. It is a place where the doors of opportunity and advancement are open for all who enter.

—Voices of the Black Community

Empowering Genius

[I want our children] to be free to pursue their academics, learn, and participate in ways that help them build the necessary stairs to success, without prejudice.

I want to be prepared and supported enough to feel empowered to believe in myself so I can achieve my hopes, dreams, and goals in life.

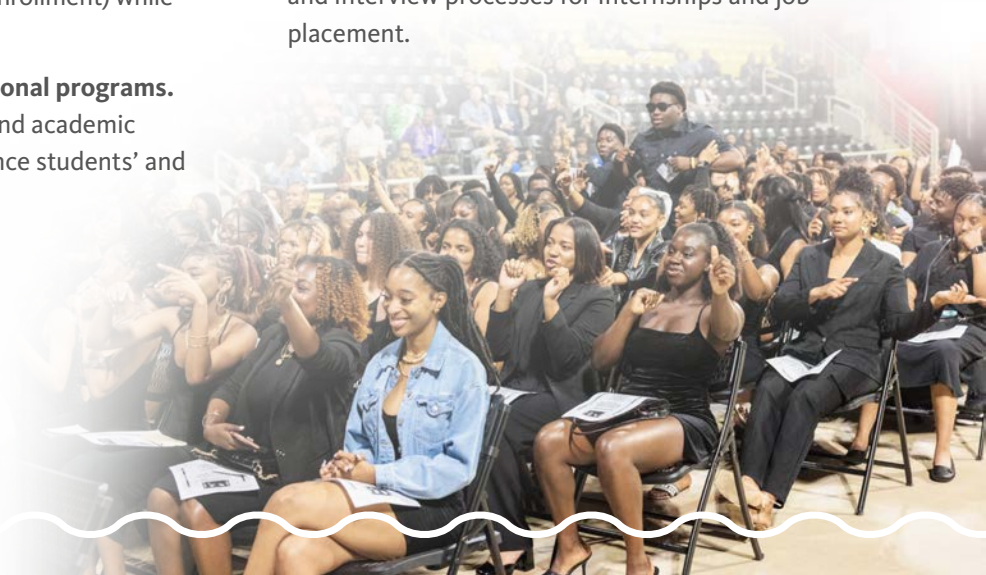
—Voices of the Black Community

Empowering Genius focuses on recognizing and nurturing the inherent brilliance of Black students. It promotes intellectual freedom and encourages exploring ideas and setting high personal and academic goals. By fostering an environment free from societal limitations and stereotypes, this element supports the pursuit of academic excellence.

The CBSE's goal is to inspire critical thinking, foster intellectual exploration, and enable students to challenge assumptions and achieve their full potential free from judgment or systemic barriers.

The Center will pursue a range of strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Encourage exploration and goal setting.** Offer opportunities such as interest surveys and career days to explore diverse ideas and guide pathways to achieve academic and professional goals.
- **Establish high expectations.** Support curricula and advanced learning opportunities (e.g., Gifted and Talented Education, Dual Enrollment) while embracing productive struggle.
- **Offer comprehensive educational programs.** Provide tutoring, mentoring, and academic enrichment to assist and advance students' and families' aspirations.
- **Facilitate workshops and provide resources.** Assist students and families with higher education preparation, such as SAT/ACT prep, scholarship and college applications, and essay writing.
- **Support multiple pathways to advancement.** Aid in industry skills development, application, and interview processes for internships and job placement.



Overcoming Systemic Barriers

[Liberation is] . . . where our children have opportunity and access to achieve what everyone else's does. Where they are not held back from being successful and are allowed to be on par with the other kids and feel good about themselves.

—Voices of the Black Community

Overcoming Systemic Barriers focuses on addressing and dismantling obstacles that have historically and persistently limited Black families' access to opportunities and resources. It aims to create new pathways for success while ensuring these pathways are accessible to everyone. This element seeks to develop the skills necessary to navigate barriers and demonstrate resilience and strength in the face of adversity.

The CBSE's goal is to ensure equitable access to opportunities, resources, and programs and to enable access to success, free from discrimination or bias. The Center will pursue a range of strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Advocate for equity and access.** Collaborate with schools, policymakers, and organizations to eliminate systemic barriers and advocate for equitable policies and practices.
- **Create and sustain programs.** Develop initiatives that open opportunities in education and employment and that advance career prospects to increase internships and employment.
- **Offer career and entrepreneurship support.** Provide career counseling, parent/caregiver support, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial training.
- **Provide legal aid and resources.** Facilitate access to legal advice and networks that help families and communities navigate systemic obstacles.
- **Create safe and supportive spaces.** Establish counseling and support services that address both academic and personal challenges, offering safe spaces for students and families to express concern or seek help.



Embracing Black Identity

We want opportunities to learn and honor our real Black and African history, roots, and cultural heritage so we can hold that knowledge close and gain strength and wisdom from that.

—Voices of the Black Community

Embracing Black Identity celebrates the importance of cultural education and awareness. It involves learning about Black history, honoring and celebrating Black identity, and affirming one's culture with pride and respect. By recognizing the valuable contributions of Black Americans and the African Diaspora, members become grounded in their rich ancestry, feel empowered to express pride in their history, and are encouraged to express all aspects of their Black identity freely and confidently.

The CBSE's goal is to promote a culture where students and members are valued, celebrated, and inspired for *who* they are, *whose* they are, and *where* they come from, rejecting limiting stereotypes or low expectations. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Integrate Black history.** Incorporate Black history, culture, and contributions throughout the year while highlighting modern accomplishments and scholars.
- **Offer cultural programming.** Organize community events exploring Black history, culture, and heritage. Engage in academic competitions focused on Black inventors and STEM contributors.
- **Provide opportunities for cultural expression.** Offer lessons in art, music, dance, and ancestral traditions such as basket weaving and hair braiding, celebrating Black identity.
- **Enhance positive Black representation.** Incorporate Black identities and achievements into murals, materials, décor, and media to reflect and celebrate Black culture.
- **Affirm cultural identity.** Host year-round programs and trips that celebrate the beauty and richness of Black culture and Black folks—past and present.



Liberating Greatness

I just want to be great! I want to do great work for the community and do great things for people in the world. All I need are resources and opportunities to excel.

—Voices of the Black Community

Liberating Greatness entails striving to be exceptional in all endeavors. This element is about liberating individuals to pursue and achieve their highest potential and about uplifting and empowering students and the wider community by creating opportunities for outstanding success. It aims to provide students with equitable access to pursue their dreams, free of systemic barriers. It emphasizes setting and achieving high standards. It champions excellence over mediocrity in personal, academic, and professional pursuits.

The CBSE's goal is to create an environment where Black students and community members feel empowered to dream big and pursue their aspirations supported by the resources and tools necessary to achieve their goals. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Promote a culture of excellence.** Foster an environment in which high expectations are the norm. Encourage individuals to strive beyond anticipated or assumed outcomes.
- **Celebrate achievements.** Publicly recognize and celebrate outstanding accomplishments and contributions in academics, sports, and community service. Inspire others through the acknowledgement of exceptional achievements.
- **Offer leadership and enrichment programs.** Provide opportunities for leadership development, public speaking clubs, and enrichment activities. Support skill-building and personal growth to help individuals in achieving and exceeding their goals.
- **Develop mentorship and career support.** Create mentorship programs that connect individuals with accomplished professionals. Offer career development resources to guide and support success in various fields.
- **Create pathways and opportunities.** Develop initiatives that create clear pathways to success. Ensure access to advanced educational resources, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.



Elevating Intergenerational Wisdom

We should be sharing ideas and experiences across generations, schools, and neighborhoods.

We are all Black kings and queens—young and old. Together we are powerful and make each other better.

—Voices of the Black Community

Elevating Intergenerational Wisdom entails the exchange of knowledge and experiences between different generations. Elders mentor younger individuals by passing down valuable insights and fostering respect. Younger generations, in turn, strive to gain this knowledge. This dynamic element embraces the African proverb “Sankofa” which says, “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.” It emphasizes the importance of elevating the knowledge and experiences of older generations and ancestors as essential lessons for future generations.

The CBSE’s goal is to connect passionate role models and mentors with mentees to convey intergenerational wisdom, stories of survival and perseverance, and guidance that fosters pride and resilience. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Facilitate mentorship programs.** Connect elders with younger generations so they can share valuable knowledge and experiences to foster young adults’ personal and professional growth.
- **Organize storytelling sessions.** Host events where elders narrate historical and personal stories that encourage and pass on cultural wisdom to younger generations.
- **Encourage intergenerational projects.** Promote volunteer opportunities that facilitate different generations working together to benefit the community.
- **Establish legacy programs.** Develop initiatives that allow for the sharing and creation of legacies, ensuring that the contributions of older generations are respected and preserved.
- **Honor youth voice.** Provide opportunities for younger generations to showcase their personal stories and creativity as valuable contributions to the intergenerational exchange.



Promoting Advocacy and Awareness

It's about using our strengths and talents to uplift the community like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. They made speeches and acted on real problems—that's what we should do.

—Voices of the Black Community

Promoting Advocacy and Awareness embraces being well informed about critical issues impacting the Black Community and communicating effectively to advocate for change. It fosters a sense of critical consciousness so that Black students and members of the entire community are knowledgeable about racial issues, history, and current social or political challenges. Creating opportunities to develop public speaking and advocacy skills enables individuals to confidently use their voices and advocate for positive change.

The CBSE's goal is to create a space where the Black Community feels welcomed and encouraged to openly discuss critical issues and equip the members of said community as change agents through the Center's programming and resources. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Provide education on government, policy, and social issues.** Offer workshops on current social and political challenges that impact the Black Community.
- **Facilitate debate clubs.** Create debate clubs to develop critical thinking, public speaking, and effective writing techniques to develop informed and eloquent students and community advocates.
- **Implement media literacy programs.** Teach skills to critically analyze media and their impact on public perception and policy to enhance understanding and advocacy.
- **Encourage open dialogue.** Foster platforms for discussions on race and systemic challenges while promoting awareness, understanding, and constructive dialogue.
- **Support youth empowerment programs.** Develop initiatives that empower young people to engage in community leadership and improvement efforts while enhancing their advocacy and leadership skills.



Centering Health and Well-Being

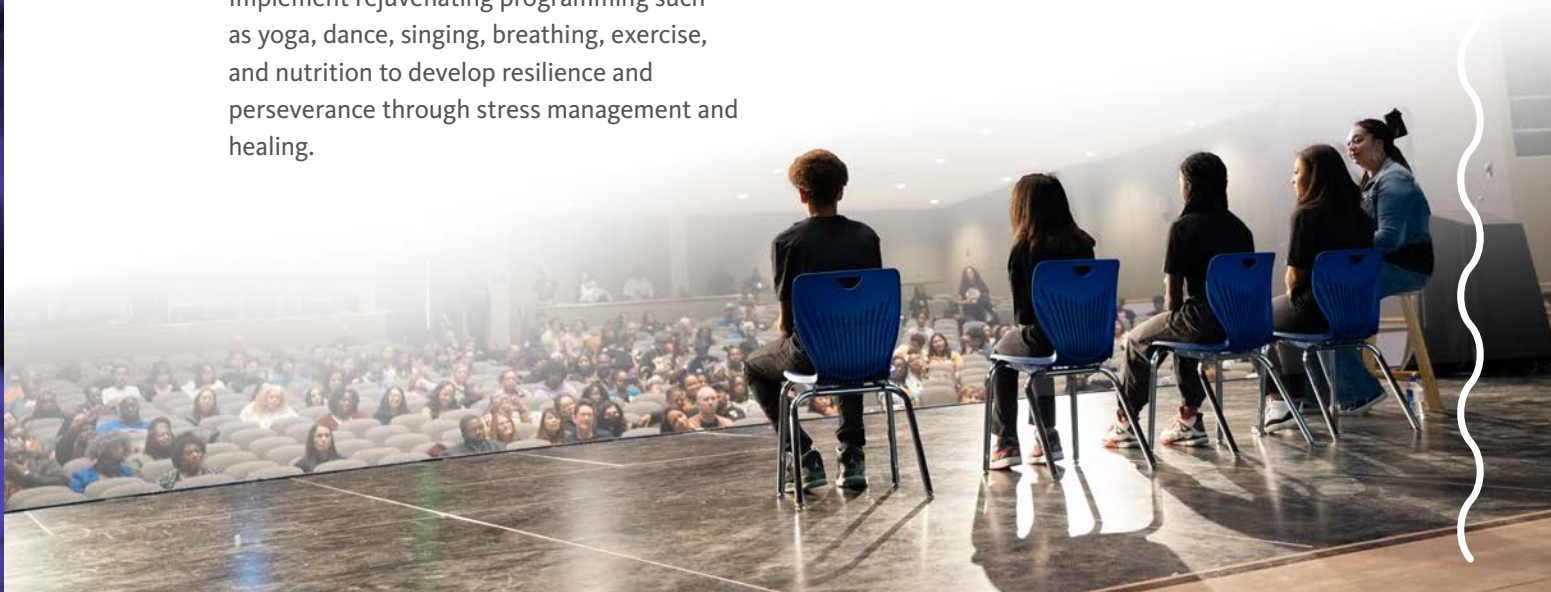
There should be gardens—a Zen Garden to promote peace, tranquility, and healing; and a fruit and vegetable garden where we can learn how to grow food like our ancestors, food that’s better and more nutritious.

—Voices of the Black Community

Centering Health and Well-Being is a communal effort to enhance personal and collective wellness. It encourages individuals to attend to their physical, mental, social, and spiritual health while demonstrating empathy, kindness, and respect for oneself and others. This element acknowledges that “it’s okay not to be okay,” and it seeks to nurture a thriving community through cultivating compassionate care. It extends grace, promotes well-being, and fosters resilience amid societal barriers.

The CBSE’s goal is to actively uplift and support the well-being of the Black Community, offer resources that promote individual and collective healing, and advocate for the rights of Black students and families within a nurturing atmosphere. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Foster a compassionate environment.** Engage in genuine practices of care in all interactions to make a community of care evident.
- **Offer wellness services and initiatives.** Provide access to mental health services and urgent care procedure training, such as CPR, to support emergency care.
- **Promote nutrition and self-care practices.** Implement rejuvenating programming such as yoga, dance, singing, breathing, exercise, and nutrition to develop resilience and perseverance through stress management and healing.
- **Encourage community-based healing.** Develop programs that promote mending and resolution through healing circles and crucial conversations.
- **Promote physical activity and health education.** Offer initiatives and facilities that support fitness (running, basketball, dance, weightlifting) and opportunities to learn about healthy lifestyle choices.



Uplifting the Community

It's about helping others in the community. ... It's not enough to just be successful on our own, we need to help others. It's about using our talents, gifts, and interest to make our own lives, our families' lives, and our community better.

—Voices of the Black Community

Uplifting the Community supports efforts and projects that strengthen the Black Community through acts of service. It contributes to the collective growth and development of the entire community. This element embraces a collective effort to increase positive visibility and create powerful counternarratives. This commitment not only uplifts the community and those who are actively engaged in it but also acknowledges the deep interconnectedness between individual success within the Black Community, the broader Black Communities, and the overall narrative of Black success.

The CBSE's goal is to create opportunities that promote volunteerism and engagement to encourage unity and address systemic inequities within the community and to ensure that all voices are represented and heard and that their needs are met in educational and community spaces. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Encourage volunteerism and community projects.** Partner with local organizations to create and support volunteer opportunities that address local needs and desired areas of development.
- **Facilitate affinity groups.** Provide safe and caring spaces for students and parents/ caregivers that foster unity, mutual support, and accountability.
- **Support local initiatives.** Engage in local projects and organizations that contribute positively to the community.
- **Foster civic engagement.** Create opportunities for community members to participate in local governance and civic activities.
- **Promote counternarratives.** Elevate the community's positive representation through actions, contributions, and celebration of the achievements of its members.



Encouraging Authenticity

It should feel safe, comfortable, and encouraging like Grandma's house or a family function, where they love you but hold you accountable. It would be good if it smelled like cocoa butter.

—Voices of the Black Community

Encouraging Authenticity creates an environment in which students and families feel safe, valued, and supported in being their true selves. It offers the freedom to express oneself openly and authentically without feeling fear or pressure to conform. This element allows each Black student, family, and community member to exist as their “full self,” empowering them to achieve their fullest potential.

The CBSE's goal is to establish an inclusive environment that supports freedom for students and families to be and become their authentic selves while empowering them to stand strong against societal pressures and barriers. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Cultivate safe spaces.** Create spaces where members feel a sense of physical, emotional, and psychological safety and where they are protected, respected, and welcomed to engage fully.
- **Foster an inclusive culture.** Establish a space where everyone is encouraged to bring their full humanity, recognizing and celebrating differences, and ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.
- **Offer opportunities to belong.** Promote spaces where people feel valued and supported, free from limited perceptions and misconceptions about Black identity.
- **Provide support services.** Offer counseling, mentorship, and other resources to help individuals navigate their journeys toward authenticity and self-expression.
- **Embrace vulnerability and bravery.** Encourage and support difficult conversations through various means (including art) to encourage individuals to be vulnerable and courageous and to express who they are without fear of judgment or rejection.



Cultivating Beauty and Joy

It should be beautiful and sound like joy, laughter, expressions of love, and happiness.

It should feel like a hug, and have vibe-y music, by Black artists of all genres—old and new; but it should be music that builds and doesn't tear down our community.

—Voices of the Black Community

Cultivating Beauty and Joy acknowledges that Black beauty is *within* Black people and thus should be reflected *around* them and that Black joy is a constant celebration of life. Together, they create an environment that fosters holistic development vital for motivation, creativity, and overall well-being. This element embraces the Black essence, inspiration, and connection among each person, the community, and the world.

The CBSE's goal is to intentionally curate spaces that offer a safe, joyful, and aesthetically pleasing environment to inspire excellence and encourage individuals to thrive and to design a vibrant and dynamic culture where smiles, hugs, and joy make evident that the Center, and each member, celebrates life. The Center will pursue various strategies to support this aim, such as the following:

- **Encourage positive self-affirmation.** Offer opportunities to learn more about the Crown Act, shades of Blackness, and positive affirmations to foster positive self-identity.
- **Support joyful being.** Embrace Black music and murals from different generations and encourage spaces where laughter, play, and lively conversations are welcomed.
- **Promote care.** Establish a safe, representative, familial, and welcoming environment where individuals are called by their names, held accountable, and supported with encouragement and love.
- **Support peaceful being.** Designate quiet places for meditation, prayer, and reflection to encourage calmness, peace, reflection, and tranquility.
- **Provide opportunities for creative expression.** Offer various forms of artistic and cultural expression (e.g., art, dance, poetry, cooking, music, media, storytelling, journaling, theater arts and production, photography), and allow individuals to showcase these and other talents and giftedness.
- **Embrace beauty in nature.** Create a warm environment that embraces real plants, flowers, and trees both inside and out, along with outside seating areas and a community garden to foster a connection with nature.



Conclusion

The hope is that our Black children can be free to exist and dream without fear or boundaries.

That they feel confident, courageous, and unapologetic about their Black genius and Black beauty.

That they feel loved and unconditionally love themselves.

That we have every opportunity to pursue our hopes and dreams.

And ultimately want for nothing. That is the dream.

—Voices of the Black Community

The Center of Black Student Excellence is not an advantage; it is an equal opportunity for success. It will serve as a transformative “village” where members of the LBUSD Black Community can proudly explore and embrace Black identity, culture, and history in ways that traditional schooling may not. The Center of Black Student Excellence is a district entity necessary for fostering a greater sense of belonging and safety; elevating Black identity; and engendering a sense of agency within LBUSD’s Black students, families, and community. It will embrace them in ways that will inevitably counter systemic harm while yielding positive academic and life outcomes.

The Center is *not* tasked with reversing the harm done to Black students and families; this responsibility lies with the school system, which is striving to improve its service to Black students and families. However, the Center will act as a *bridge*, strengthening the relationship between the district/schools and the Black Community. As the district works to redress institutional harm and invest in the Black Community, the Center will engage with the Black Community to support the district in identifying and addressing areas of improvement. Additionally, the Center will offer resources reflecting Black culture, advocate for student and family support, encourage Black student leadership in extracurricular activities, and foster meaningful Black Community engagement and participation. It will assist schools in examining ways to effectively integrate the 10 Elements of Black Excellence in programs and classrooms.

The district additionally supports this initiative by promoting a culture in which these 10 elements are considered foundational and by offering opportunities to embed them within the district and school environments, curricular materials, and classroom practice.

The Center of Black Student Excellence will remain committed to ongoing dialogue and input with the Black Community to refine its design; influence programmatic offerings; and identify ways to foster inclusivity and belonging throughout the community, district, and classrooms. Through this collaboration and partnership, the Center of Black Student Excellence and LBUSD aim to create more empowering environments where Black students, families, and community members feel welcomed and liberated to flourish *without* barriers and *with* joy.

Additional Resources

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