



Evaluation of Los Angeles Education Partnership's (LAEP's) 21CSLA Initiative, 2023 to 2025

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The Evaluation, Accountability & Impact team would like to thank the LAEP staff (listed below) for their support in implementing the 21CSLA LPL and COP conference registration and evaluation methodology.

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21CSLA PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LESSON STUDY & RESEARCH WORKGROUP

The 21CSLA evaluation design was supported by the 21CSLA Professional Learning Lesson Study and 21CSLA Research Workgroup.¹ Our team would like to thank the following 21CSLA leaders and researchers for strengthening the 21CSLA evaluation approaches and methodology:

- Dr. Nancy Parachini
- Dr. Melissa I. Virrueta-Peters
- Dr. Alison Munzer
- Tawny Laskar
- Ricardo González

EAI Mission

LAEP's Evaluation, Accountability, and Impact (EAI) department's mission is to authentically partner with our colleagues, interest holders, and clients to design and implement culturally responsive and racially equitable evaluations that amplify stories of impact. Aligned with the lived experiences of the people we serve, our highly qualified and diverse team designs human-centered evaluations, shares data in innovative, accessible and actionable ways to support decision-making, and strengthens the evaluation capacity of interest holders.



¹ The 21CSLA Professional Learning Lesson Study, “guides Regional Academy Leads and Research Representatives to collaboratively investigate the effectiveness of their professional learning offerings and activities, with a particular focus on educational leaders’ capacity to lead for equity in TK-12 schools in California (21CSLA, 2025).” The Research Workgroup “investigates how educational leaders learn to lead for equity in TK-12 education through systematic examinations of professional context, leadership capacities, and equity in schools. Evaluation is a part of the Research to inform our decision making by engaging in ongoing inquiry (21CSLA, 2025).”

Positionality Statements



I am a cisgender bilingual Latina evaluator and community researcher with a background in Education and Program Evaluation. As a former foster youth, a first-generation college graduate, the daughter of Central American immigrants, a mother of a mixed-heritage 10-year-old boy, I acknowledge the rich personal experience that I bring to the evaluation of the 21CSLA initiative. While my personal and professional experiences inform my evaluation and research, I also strive to approach my work with humility and amplify the experiences of diverse community members, especially those who face inequities while supporting their families and communities. – Alejandra Portillo



I identify as a transgender, queer, Latinx evaluator and community-based researcher with a background in education and educational evaluation. I am second-generation Mexican American and come from a background wherein education was uplifted and supported by family. I acknowledge the inherent privilege that comes from being able to access and be supported through my educational journey, and it is my personal ethos to use the knowledge and experience I have gained from my education to empower and uplift the communities I work within. I strive to bring my personal experiences, identity, and education into my work to amplify and work in service of diverse communities. – Gisselle Diaz



As a cisgender, heterosexual woman of Mexican immigrant parents, I enjoy some privileges and overcome challenges connected to my heritage. On one hand, I struggle to notice and work against White supremacy culture to uplift quieter voices of less represented people. On the other hand, my advanced degree and long career in education evaluation gives me a special status that motivates me to act with transparency and work in service of equity for the communities I inhabit and serve. – Rosa Valdés

Additional Contributors

John Reséndez is the director of CORE, the LAEP department that leads the 21CSLA initiative work. John has over twenty-five years of experience as a teacher and site administrator serving diverse communities throughout Los Angeles County. For the 21CSLA evaluation, he served as a lead thought partner, co-designing evaluation processes and data sense-making sessions, providing feedback on data collection tools, and offering overall guidance on the evaluation design.

Talia Villa is the founder and lead consultant of Luma Data Studio. Talia is an evaluator capacity builder whose work focuses on making data accessible and meaningful for organizations and communities. For the 21CSLA evaluation, she served as an external data analyst, conducting rigorous qualitative analysis of interview data for the 21CSLA leadership coaching offering.

Sarah Morales served as AEA's Graduate Education Diversity Intern and scholar. Sarah supported the design of 21CSLA's conference model survey for Equity Camp and Equity in Action. With guidance from LAEP's evaluation team, she conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of survey findings and co-facilitated data sense-making sessions.

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Executive Summary

This evaluation report focuses on the support provided to 21CSLA Cohort 2 participants for their leadership development in the cohort's first and second years (2023 to 2025) by the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP). LAEP's Evaluation, Accountability, and Impact (EAI) team worked collaboratively with the Cultivating Organizational Resilience and Empowerment (CORE) team to design this evaluation, which was guided by Empowerment and Utilization-Focused approaches. These frameworks emphasize community ownership, data capacity building, and using findings to inform program design and program implementation. Additionally, our evaluation provided both formative and summative support.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation sought to answer questions in the areas of reach, movement towards equity, and impact. The following are examples of questions in each of these areas:

- **Reach** Ex: How many educational leaders were served?
- **Movement towards equity** Ex: How does participating in 21CSLA offerings impact educational leaders' understanding of equity?
- **Impact** Ex: To what extent did 21CSLA meet its grant and logic model short-term to mid-term outcomes?

METHODS

The methods we employed to gather and analyze data included registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking, pre- and post-coaching interviews with leaders, pre- and post-coaching leader equity assessments, end-of-year coaching survey, Localized Professional Learning (LPL) conference survey, LPL and Communities of Practice (CoP) participatory methods (art wall, phone data collection, video booth data collection), case studies, Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) professional learning modules survey, site visits, and UTK module observations.

LEADER PARTICIPATION

Table A summarizes the numbers of leaders who took part in 21CSLA offerings through LAEP in Years 1 and 2. Participation was relatively similar across the two years in coaching, Localized Professional Learning (LPL), and Communities of Practice (CoP). However, participation in the Universal Transitional Kindergarten modules tripled from Year 1 to 2.

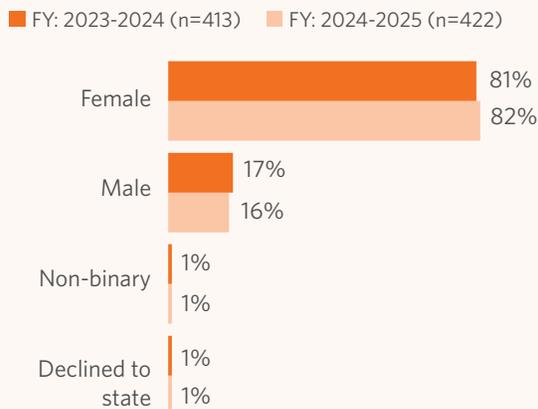
Table A. Leader Participation in Offerings Across Years

Year	Coaching	LPLs	COPs	UTK Modules
2023-24	73	202	233	39
2024-25	81	158	264	117

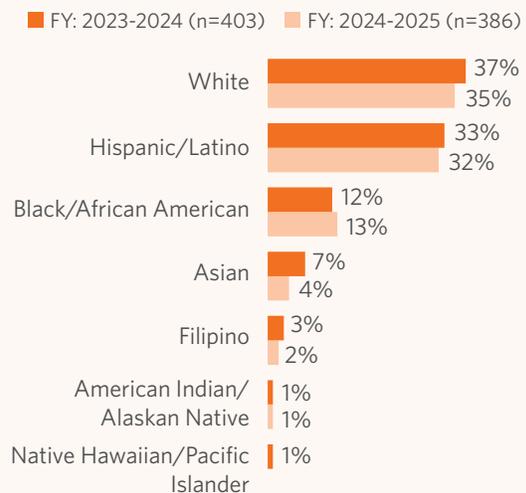
Note: Totals are not unduplicated as leaders could have participated in multiple offerings.

Figure A. Larger proportions of participants identified as female, White or Hispanic.

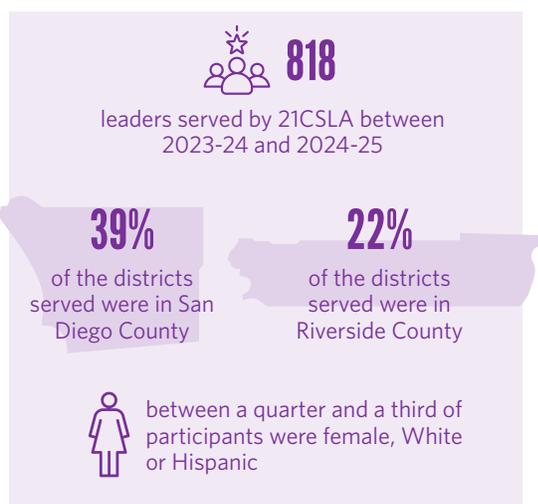
21CSLA primarily served leaders who identified as **female**, with a smaller proportion of leaders identifying as male and non-binary.



21CSLA has served a larger proportion of leaders who identify as **White** or **Hispanic/Latino**



FINDINGS ABOUT OUR REACH



1. Between 2023-24 and 2024-25, 21CSLA served a total of 818 leaders, 69 of whom participated both years. Leaders represented 67 school districts across San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties.
2. Over one-third of the districts served by the initiative (39%) were in San Diego County, while over a fifth of the districts (22%) were in Riverside County.
3. Between a quarter and a third of participants served by LAEP 21CSLA were teacher leaders, with larger proportions of leaders identifying as female, White or Hispanic.
4. Overall, leaders were served largely by COPs and LPLs.

FINDINGS ABOUT OUR MOVEMENT TOWARDS EQUITY

Feedback from leaders indicated that across 21CSLA offerings, participants improved their understanding of equity and applied it in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

1. Across the three conferences, most participants felt that these events deepened their understanding of and prepared them to address equity issues.
2. Leaders reported that, as a result of their conference participation, they had shifted their equity lens, that they had taken more brave and empowered action.
3. LAEP coaches built relational trust by creating safe spaces and listening deeply to the unique needs of leaders. As a result, leaders felt that their coaches were exceptionally effective in creating safe spaces and in listening to their ideas and perspectives.
4. The great majority of leaders reported that coaching improved their work.
5. Leaders experienced key changes in wellness, reflective practice, and leadership approaches because of their participation in coaching.
6. 21CSLA's Universal Transitional Kindergarten offering helped leaders to 1) shift their practices, 2) build awareness of new strategies to implement in their professional settings, 3) increase their confidence in implementing strategies, and 4) deepen their understandings of equity issues.
7. UTK leaders reported experiencing changes in their leadership practices related to self-awareness, emotional disposition, knowledge, and future actions.
8. UTK leaders reported engaging in a range of actions to advance equity in their work, including increasing equitable instructional practices, strengthening parent engagement activities, sharing knowledge with colleagues, and strengthening partnerships.
9. In collaboration with the 21CSLA Bay Area, North Bay/North Coast, and ValCo Regional Academies, LAEP launched the first ever Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module.

FINDINGS ABOUT OUR IMPACT

During the first two years of LAEP's support for 21CSLA Cohort 2 leaders, our primary goals were to help leaders 1) build understandings around equity and wellness, 2) commit to sharing these with their teams, 3) increase their ability to make equity actionable, 4) apply leadership practices, and 5) develop a data culture. Our collaborative and comprehensive data collection and analysis helped us arrive at the following conclusions about the extent to which these goals were met.



**build understandings
around equity and wellness**



**commit to sharing
these with their teams**



**increase their ability to
make equity actionable**



**apply leadership
practices**



**develop a data
culture**

1. 21CSLA LAEP helped leaders across Southern California to advance their understandings of equity-focused instructional leadership practices.
2. Across offerings, leaders reported that they learned and practiced approaches to building an equity-centered culture in their settings.
3. Because of their participation in 21CSLA LAEP offerings, leaders felt prepared and were beginning to apply their learning to advance education equity in their settings.
4. 21CSLA LAEP conferences and coaching supported leaders' wellness, modeling for them the importance of wellness for their teams.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the 21CSLA initiative, LAEP made strong progress towards supporting educational leaders in building equitable practices and mindsets. The following recommendations aim to strengthen the future efforts of LAEP as it continues to implement the 21CSLA initiative in Southern California.

- 1 Expand leader outreach in Imperial County.
- 2 Increase site leader representation across offerings.
- 3 Extend leader outreach to include leaders who may be resistant and most in need of clear equity messaging.
- 4 Continue to focus on cultivating and sustaining meaningful relationships with leaders across the San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties.
- 5 Continue to implement offerings through an asset-based and human-centered approach.
- 6 Ensure offerings continue to focus on instructional leadership practices, data utilization, and systems change/coherence.
- 7 Continue to focus on integrating wellness approaches and strengthening the network of leaders across 21CSLA offerings.
- 8 Sustain and expand data and evaluation efforts to continue documenting the impact of the initiative and building the internal evaluation capacity of the implementation team.



LOOKING AHEAD

To conclude, in the Fiscal Year 2025-2026, LAEP will continue, now more than ever, to support the wellness, leadership, and professional development needs of educational leaders across Southern California. Our current political and social environment calls us to ensure that educators are equipped with tools, strategies, and practical resources to keep equity alive and address equity resistance in their local settings and communities. To this end, LAEP will offer the following professional development opportunities to leaders in our priority counties¹.

- *Meeting the Moment: Activating our Collective Power Community of Practice*
- *Breath and Balance Wellness Offering*
- *BIPOC & Mixed Roots Healing Space (Affinity Group)*
- *Moving Towards Us: Divesting from Whiteness (Affinity Group)*
- *Universal Transitional Kindergarten Modules*
- *2026 Spring Conference*
- *One-on-one Leadership Coaching*

² For a detailed description and list of 21CSLA offerings for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026, please see the 21CSLA Digital Program Offerings.

Introduction

BACKGROUND OF THE 21CSLA INITIATIVE

LAEP's work with the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) began during its work to support leaders in Cohort 1, from 2020 to 2023 as the only non-profit organization across the state to lead a region. The initiative organized its grants around cohorts of leaders who would participate for three years. Currently, LAEP has a grant to support Cohort 2 leaders from July 2023 to June 2026 in the five counties of the SoCal Region: Imperial, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego. This report focuses on findings from Cohort 2, Year 1 and Year 2 participants.

In the spring of 2024, 21CSLA published a guidance document³ for Cohort 2, outlining the program's purpose and its 8 areas of work, namely, 1) Collaborative Organizational Structures, 2) Educational Partner Engagement, 3) Digitally Mediated Learning and the Hub, 4) Statewide Special Projects (Inquiry Now: Equity-Centered Instructional Leadership, UTK Training Modules, and UTK Leadership Certificate), 5) Research and Evaluation, 6) Professional Learning Through Communities of Practice, 7) Localized Professional Learning, and 8) Professional Learning Through Equity-centered Leadership Coaching. This document guided our work and evaluation.

21CSLA Grant Calendar

COHORT 1:

June 15, 2020 to June 30, 2023

Cohort 1, Year 1

Cohort 1, Year 2

Cohort 1, Year 3

COHORT 2:

July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2026

Cohort 2, Year 1

Cohort 2, Year 2

Cohort 2, Year 3

The mission of the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP)

is to advance educational equity. Together with families, schools, and the community, LAEP facilitates access to and opportunities for quality educational and wellness practices so that children thrive from diapers to diplomas. Founded in 1984, LAEP was the first nonprofit in Los Angeles to focus exclusively on educational equity, and among those the organization was at the forefront of the educational nationwide education transformation movement nationwide. Over the decades, LAEP's efforts in the areas of community schools, pilot schools, interdisciplinary curriculum, and equity-focused leadership inquiry-based teaching have evolved into nationally recognized best practices.



³ 21CSLA Guidance Document Cohort 2, Rev. March 15, 2024.

LAEP'S APPROACH TO THE WORK

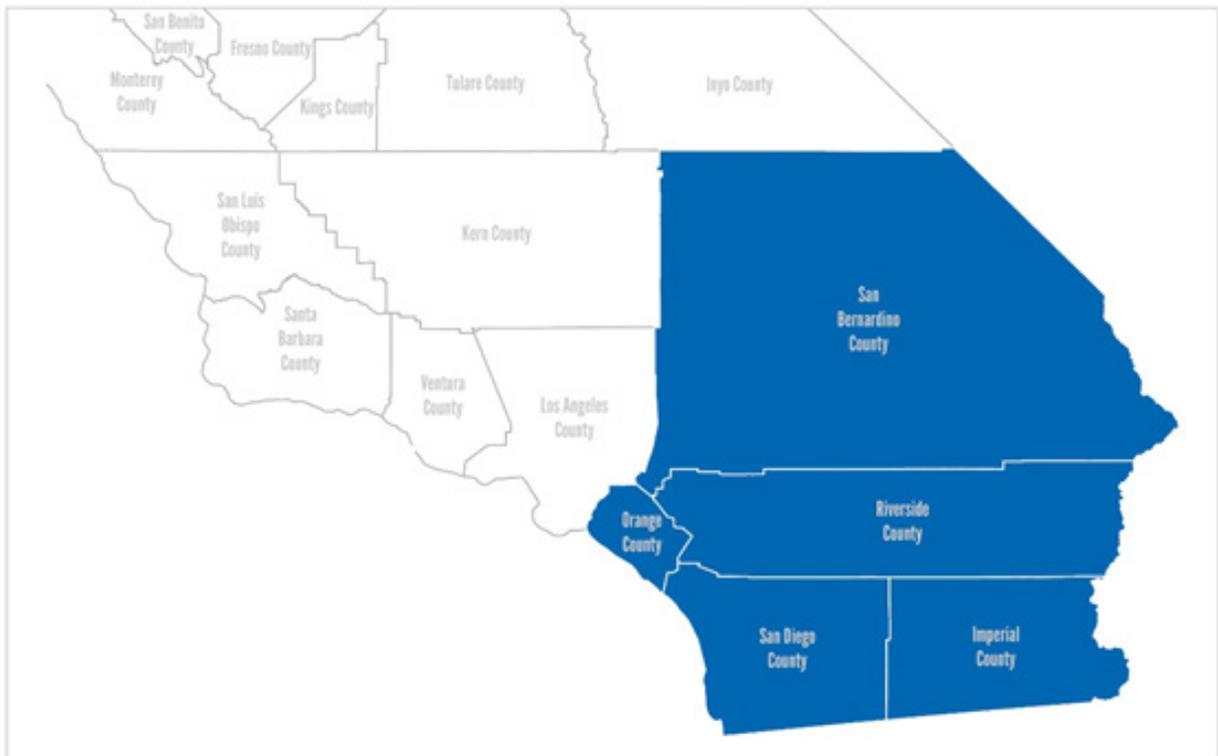


To address each of these areas in service of Cohort 2 participants, LAEP structured a team including a Department Director, Coaches specialized in cultivating organizational resilience and empowerment as well as Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK), Consultants with expertise in various topics featured across localized professional learning (LPL), Communities of Practice (COP), and UTK offerings, and in-house Evaluators. LAEP supports the entire spectrum of learners from birth through K-12 and workforce development through programs that work together across our various departments. As such, the Cultivating Organizational

Resilience and Empowerment (CORE) Department, within which the 21CSLA project operated, relied on support from LAEP's Transform Schools and Early Childhood and Family Engagement departments. For example, several members of those departments supported the LPL conferences as session facilitators, registrants, and other logistics providers, and UTK designers worked with members of the Ready2Teach early learning workforce development program to share expertise and capacity.

The LAEP 21CSLA team organized its members to support education leaders in the five counties shown in Map 1.

Map 1. Counties LAEP Serves Through 21CSLA



IMPORTANCE OF THIS WORK IN THIS MOMENT

Year 2 of the second cohort posed important challenges to this work, including suspension of funding in spring 2025 that created delays and adjustments to programming threatening the quality of our offerings, additional pressure on equity-focused leaders in school communities because of heightened negative political rhetoric, not to mention the fear instilled in these communities by aggressive immigration and customs enforcement and attacks on DEI initiatives, including those seeking to reverse protection for LGBTQ+ individuals' rights.

During focus groups held in July 2025, we heard from leaders across three counties about their experiences in their equity leadership path. Among the barriers to implementing their leadership work, they mentioned most frequently encountering resistance to the work and maintaining their own wellness while engaging in this work in racist structures and the existing political climate. One leader commented,



When you look at disenfranchised groups, the one constantly left out are Black kids. There's no department or policy that can see the needs of Black students. You have policy makers, community leaders, and union people who don't see it from the lens that you see it, and so, depending on who the person is, they perpetuate the racism that you're trying to constantly fight."

Another leader shared,



I'm reaching my shelf life. I've been telling my team, 'I need y'all to step up. I need you all to come and fill these gaps.' It's very tiring to fight. I look at it in three dimensions: you're fighting the system that you work in; you're fighting the actual policies and practices that are carried out by the people you work with; and then you're just fighting this whole notion of racism."

Their comments emphasized what may be understood - on any given day, the work of building equity in education settings is difficult across multiple facets. In our current political and social environment, supporting equity-focused leaders and their wellness becomes essential.



Evaluation Methods

LAEP's 21CSLA evaluation of the first two years of Cohort 2 (2023 to 2025) was guided by Empowerment and Utilization-Focused Evaluation, which emphasize community ownership, data capacity building, and using findings to inform program design and program implementation. Additionally, our evaluation provided both formative and summative support. Key formative evaluation activities included

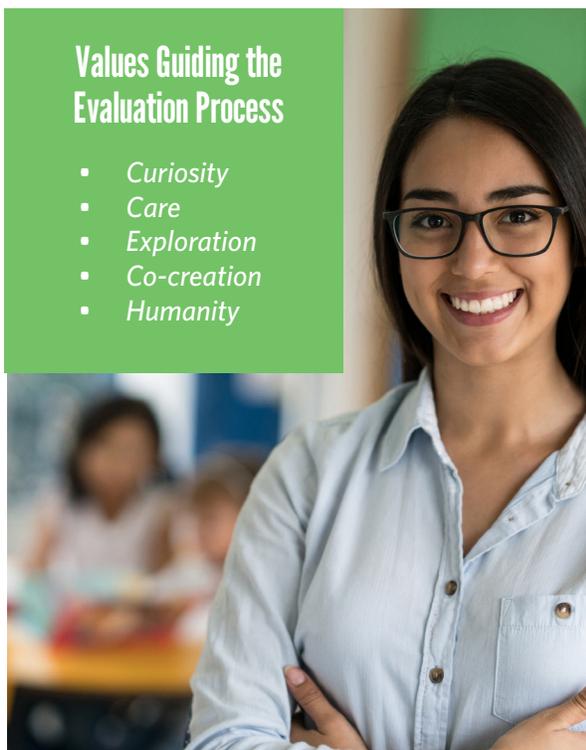
- 1 co-designing foundational documents such as the 21CSLA logic model**
- 2 providing ongoing real-time feedback on the implementation of the professional development offerings**
- 3 supporting the team in their continuous improvement efforts**

Summative evaluation activities included

- 1 synthesizing key outcome data across offerings to assess the progress made towards key outcomes quarterly and annually**
- 2 documenting this progress in this and other reports**
- 3 sharing our findings through the 21CSLA "Hub" and publication to LAEP's website, through webinar presentations, and at conferences**

A detailed overview of the evaluation framework, guiding questions, methodology, and limitations is provided next.

GUIDING APPROACHES AND VALUES TO THE 21CSLA EVALUATION



As noted above, the evaluation of 21CSLA was rooted in Empowerment and Utilization-Focused Evaluation approaches due to the complexity of the initiative, the number of professional development offerings, and the size of the implementation team. These approaches allowed the real-time adaptation of the evaluation process, co-creation of data tracking systems, rapid feedback, ongoing data sharing, data use capacity building, while also building ownership and enabling shared decision making in all aspects of the evaluation process. Additionally, the evaluation team was actively involved in all aspects of the program design, planning, and implementation, ensuring integration of our evaluation throughout the program's lifecycle rather than solely at its conclusion.

The evaluation team also embraced key values in our work, including curiosity, care, exploration, co-creation, and humanity. Given that 21CSLA aims to increase educational equity for underserved populations, it was vital for the evaluation process to be aligned with these values.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

As illustrated in Table 1, the 21CSLA evaluation and learning areas focused on reach, movement, toward equity, and impact. As 21CSLA offerings were being designed and implemented, the evaluation questions evolved from those initially written to questions that better align with the implementation team’s desire to understand how leaders were **applying knowledge and skills** gained through the initiative. Additionally, the questions aimed to assess how the offerings **increased understanding and awareness of equitable practices**, as well as their impact on **leader wellness**.

Table 1. Learning Areas and Evaluation Questions

Learning Area	Questions
Reach	<p>How many educational leaders were served?</p> <p>What counties were served and represented?</p> <p>What are the demographic characteristics of educational leaders who participate in 21CSLA offerings?</p> <p>How many offerings were implemented through the 21CSLA grant?</p> <p>How many educational leaders participate in multiple offerings?</p>
Movement Towards Equity	<p>How does participating in 21CSLA offerings impact educational leaders’ understanding of equity?</p> <p>In what ways do educational leaders’ understanding of equity influence their classrooms, schools, or districts?</p> <p>What specific equity leadership practices do educational leaders learn through their participation in 21CSLA offerings?</p> <p>What are educational leaders’ professional learning needs related to equity?</p>
Impact	<p>To what extent did 21CSLA meet its grant and logic model short-term to mid-term outcomes?</p> <p>To what extent are leaders increasing their understanding of equity-focused instructional leadership practices, building an equity-centered culture, and systems thinking?</p> <p>To what extent are leaders applying their learning in their settings?</p> <p>To what extent are leaders sharing their understanding of equity within the systems they operate?</p> <p>How, if at all, do our offerings support leader wellness?</p>

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation design used a mixed-methods approach aimed at gathering qualitative and quantitative data to inform the implementation of the initiative and track progress towards key outcomes. These methods are described below, and Table 2 provides a breakdown of the evaluation methods implemented for specific 21CSLA offerings.

Logic model development. The evaluation team and the Director of LAEP CORE-21CSLA co-designed a logic model that helped the implementation team make sense of the various components of the initiative. Through this process, the team created shared language and understanding of the key outcomes to be achieved. The implementation team provided feedback on the logic model and used this document to plan and refine their offerings.

Participant registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking. In 2023-24 and 2024-25 the evaluation team created data tracking systems to continuously monitor participant registration, attendance data, and demographic data for all 21CSLA professional development offerings. These offerings included one-on-one coaching, localized professional learning, communities of practice, and UTK modules. The

registration, attendance, and demographic data were used to track participation rates, adjust recruitment strategies, and to gain an understanding of the demographic profile of educational leaders engaging in 21CSLA offerings.

Qualitative data. In 2024-25, the evaluation team implemented several qualitative data collection methods, including one-on-one interviews and case studies to capture rich stories and additional perspectives from leaders participating in one-on-one coaching and the Communities of Practice Conference (Equity in Action). We conducted seventeen pre-coaching interviews with leaders participating in the coaching offering, representing 20% of the entire participant pool. These leaders were also invited to participate in a post-coaching conversation to gain an understanding of how one-on-one coaching supported their leadership practices. Additionally, we carried out four case studies with leaders attending the Spring 2025 Community of Practice Conference (Equity in Action). The case study approach included a pre- and post-conference interview as well as partnering with leaders during the conference to gain a greater understanding of their learning trajectory and to assess the overall impact of the conference.

Quantitative data. In 2023-24 and 2024-25, the evaluation team designed and implemented various web-based surveys to assess the impact of each 21CSLA offering and identify areas for improvement. The 21CSLA offerings with specialized surveys included individualized coaching, localized professional learning, communities of practice, and UTK modules.

Data Sense making sessions. In 2023-24 and 2024-25, the evaluation team led a series of data sense-making sessions after the implementation of key offerings and during 21CSLA team retreats. The data sense-making sessions provided an opportunity for the 21CSLA implementation team to review preliminary findings, interpret findings, and contribute their own experiences and context to the data. These sessions typically included diverse participation formats including discussion questions, individual reflection, large group presentations, and small group discussions.

Table 2. Data Collection Methods by Fiscal Year

21CSLA Offerings	Data Collection Methods	FY 2023-24	FY 2024-25
One-on-one Coaching	Registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking	✓	✓
	Pre- and Post Coaching Interviews with Leaders		✓
	Pre- and Post-Coaching Leader Equity Assessment	✓	✓
	End-of-Year Coaching Survey	✓	✓
Localized Professional Learning (LPL) Conference	Registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking	✓	✓
	LPL Conference Survey	✓	✓
	LPL Participatory Methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art Wall, Phone Data Collection, Video Booth Data collection 		✓
Communities of Practice (CoP) Conference	Registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking	✓	✓
	CoP Conference Survey		✓
	CoP Participatory Methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art Wall and Phone Data Collection 		✓
	Case Studies		✓
UTK Professional Learning Modules	Registration, attendance, and demographic data tracking	✓	✓
	UTK Professional Learning Modules Survey	✓	✓
	Site Visits		✓
	UTK Module Observations		✓

Conference Survey. Conference participants in 2024-25 completed a survey comprised of close- and open-ended items about knowledge and skills gained, confidence in applying learning, emotional and physical health and wellbeing, feelings of connection and community, reflections on learning and shifts in practice or mindsets, and specific intentions to take equity-focused action. The same survey was administered during the fall and spring conferences, with some refinements and new items related to strategy, implementation, and creating smaller communities in the spring version. Surveys were completed online, with response rates of 41% (N=65/158) in fall and 70% in spring (N=169/243).

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

As with any evaluation effort, there are several limitations to the evaluation design that are important to outline. First, the evaluation team was integrated into the 21CSLA work midway through 2023-24. As a result, a large part of that first program year was dedicated to designing data tracking systems, building the data capacity of the team, and engaging in discussions with the 21CSLA director and team leads to co-design the evaluation framework. Additionally, the 21CSLA logic model was not finalized until the end of 2023-24, and systematic data collection began in 2024-25. Lastly, minimal qualitative data was gathered in 2023-24 compared to 2024-25, when the evaluation was better established and supported by more evaluators. For 2025-26, the evaluation team plans to increase our focus on case studies, observations, and interviews to ensure that the evaluation is well rounded, and that leaders have increased opportunities to share their learnings and stories of impact.

Formative Evaluation Approaches

LAEP's evaluation team engaged in a formative evaluation process to provide ongoing feedback to the 21CSLA team about the 21CSLA initiative's progress, what was working, what needed refinement, and to assess the needs of leaders across San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties. More specifically, the team implemented the following approaches:



Data sense-making sessions. LAEP's evaluation team designed and facilitated virtual or in-person data sense-making sessions, which aimed to present data to the implementation team in a timely and accessible manner. During the data sense-making sessions, the implementation team reviewed key data sets, added additional context to the findings, and identified opportunities and areas for improvement.



Needs assessment surveys. To assess the professional development needs of educational leaders, the evaluation team conducted two web-based needs assessment surveys and consistently asked leaders to share their current equity challenges in registration forms and during evaluations.



Live data tracking. To track grant deliverables and leader participation, the evaluation team maintained coaching, registration, and attendance trackers. The implementation team utilized these trackers for real-time planning and tracking participation.



Ongoing check-ins with leads. The Senior Evaluator met weekly or bi-weekly with the leads of each 21CSLA offering. These meetings were crucial in fostering a shared understanding and co-ownership of the evaluation design, data collection methods, and data tracking systems.



Ongoing participation in all initiative planning meetings. By Fiscal Year 2024-25, the evaluation team was fully integrated into the planning and implementation of the 21CSLA initiative, enabling the evaluator to provide real-time feedback, adapt data collection approaches, and integrate data into planning and key decision-making processes. This approach was successful in ensuring that data and evaluation remained at the forefront of program planning and design, rather than being considered at the end of a program cycle.



Our Reach Through 21CSLA Offerings

Table 3 summarizes the total unduplicated counts of leaders served and the number of leaders who participated in multiple offerings. The unduplicated count refers to the unique number of leaders served. Throughout 2023-24 and 2024-25, 21CSLA served a total of 818 leaders (unduplicated count), representing 67 school districts. Additionally, 69 (17%) leaders who participated in 2023-24 returned to participate in 2024-25.

Table 3. Cohort 2 Leaders Served Across LAEP-Led Counties

Year	Leaders Served (Unduplicated Count)	Leaders Who Participated in Multiple Offerings
2023-24	407	135
2024-25	411	131

LEADER PARTICIPATION IN OFFERINGS

Overall, COPs and LPLs served a larger number of educational leaders. 2024-25 saw an increase of 12% in leaders who engaged in COPs, a 10% increase in leaders who participated in coaching, and a 200% increase in leaders who participated in the UTK modules.

Across the two program years, a larger number of leaders participated in LPLs and COPs, while smaller shares of leaders engaged in the coaching and UTK offerings. This trend was largely due to the grant requirements and to the intentional transition from single-session or series offering LPLs and COPs to a conference model.⁴ As illustrated in Table 4, there was a 13% increase in COP participation and a substantial 200% increase in leaders who participated in the UTK modules.

Table 4. Participation in Offerings Across Years

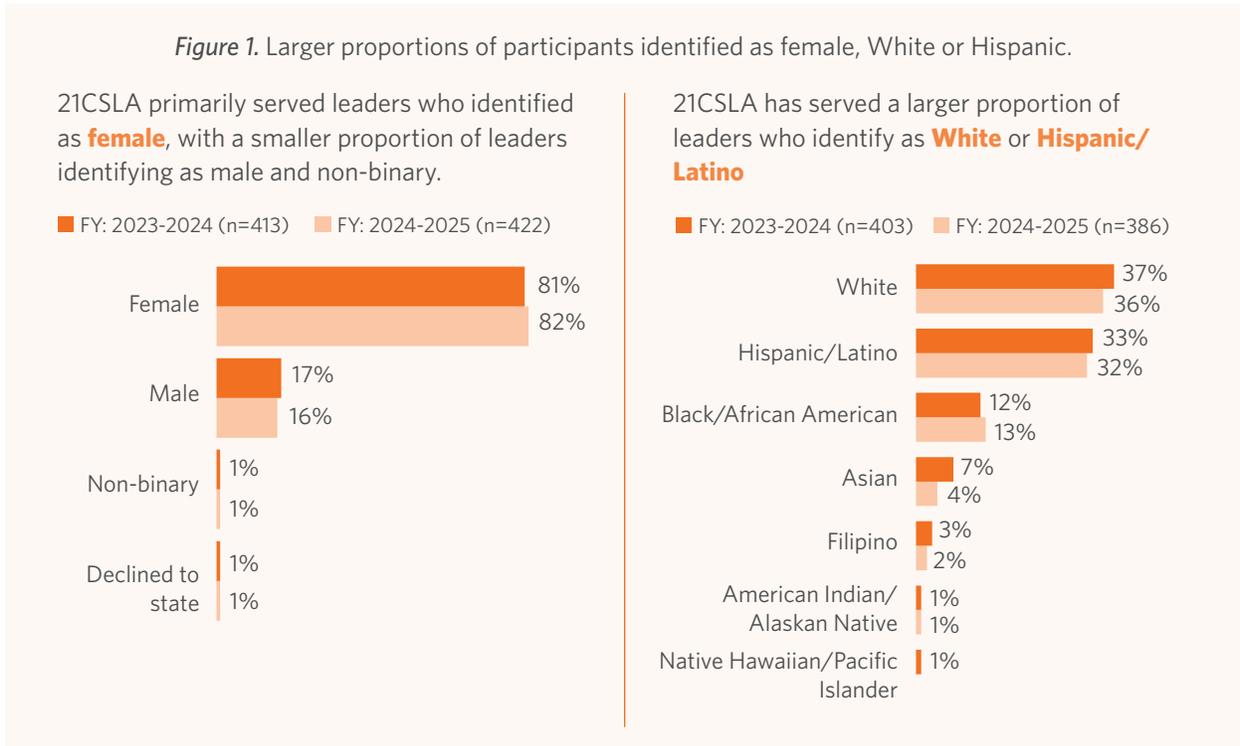
Year	Coaching	LPLs	COPs	UTK Modules
2023-24	73	202	233	39
2024-25	81	158	264	117

Note: Totals are not unduplicated as leaders could have participated in multiple offerings.

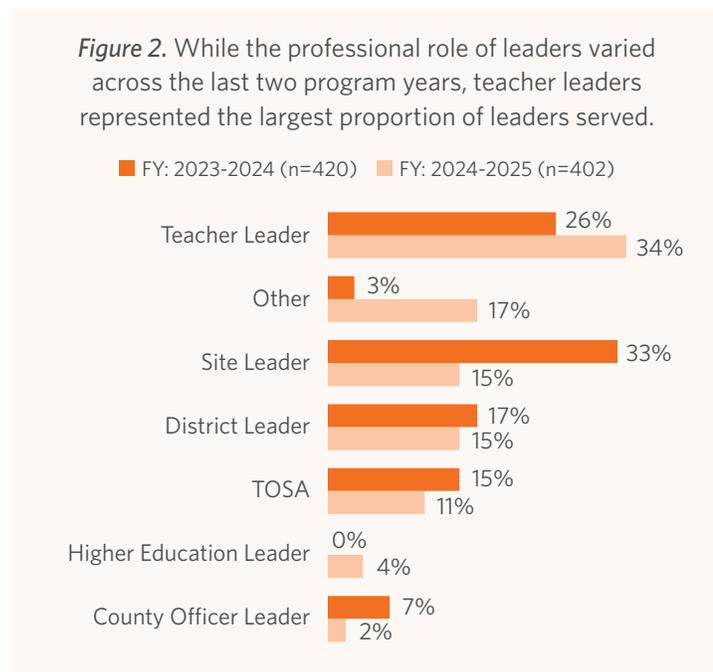
⁴ Find details about how LAEP used a conference model to implement COPs and LPLs in the conference findings section.

LEADER DEMOGRAPHICS ACROSS ALL OFFERINGS⁵

As illustrated in the Figure 1, across 2023-24 and 2024-25, most leaders who participated in 21CSLA offerings identified as female (about 80%), while 18% and 16% identified as male. Additionally, about 1% of leaders identified as non-binary. White and Hispanic/Latino leaders accounted for over half of the leaders served across the two program years. Smaller proportions of leaders identified as Black/African American, Asian, Filipino, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.



Teacher leaders consistently represented the larger proportion of leaders served in the last two program years. As displayed in Figure 2, in 2023-24, teacher leaders accounted for roughly one quarter of the leaders served (26%), while in 2024-25, teacher leaders were 34% of all participants. Additionally, 2024-25 saw a decline in leaders who described themselves as site leaders from 33% to 15%. Generally, smaller proportions of leaders identified as district leaders, teachers on special assignment, higher education leaders, and county office leaders. During the most recent program year, 21CSLA also served other leader roles (17%), namely program specialists, school counselors, psychologists, speech language pathologist, and instructional coaches.



⁵ See the demographic breakdown by offering type in the conference, coaching, and UTK findings sections.

DISTRICTS SERVED ACROSS ALL OFFERINGS

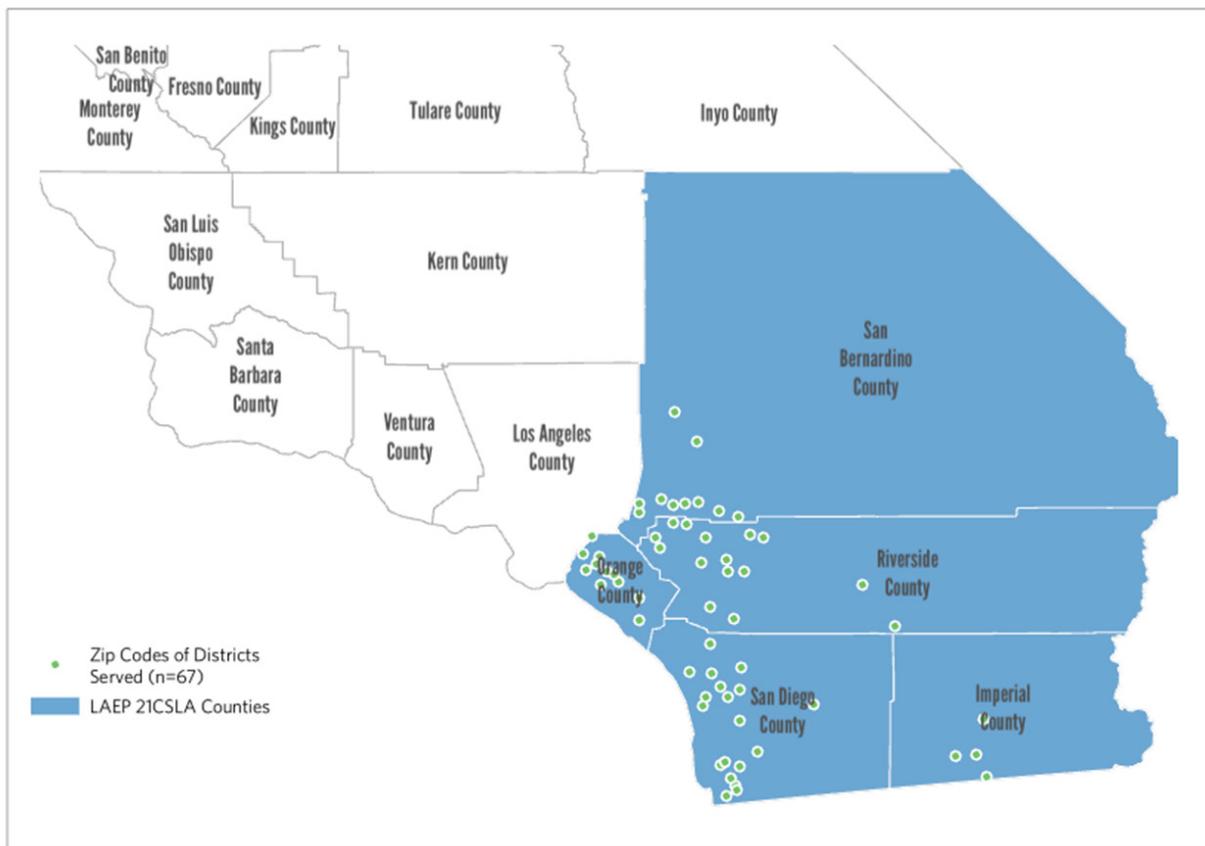
Through the 21CSLA initiative, LAEP served a total of 67 school districts across 2023-24 and 2024-25. The largest proportion of districts served was in San Diego County.

Table 5. County Location of Districts Served (n=67)

21SCLA Counties	% of Districts
San Diego	39%
Riverside	22%
San Bernardino	16%
Orange	16%
Imperial	6%

Educational leaders represented 67 school districts across 2023-24 and 2024-25. Across the two years, over one-third of the districts (39%) were located in San Diego County, while over a fifth of the districts (22%) were located in Riverside County. Additionally, 16% of the districts were situated in Orange and San Bernardino Counties. Only 6% of districts served were in Imperial County, indicating an area in need of attention in the upcoming program year. In 2024-25, the program team continued to build relationships with local county offices of education – an effort that will support future expansion of the program’s reach in Orange, San Bernardino, and Imperial Counties. The map below displays the geographic distribution of the districts served by district zip code and county.⁶

Map 2. Geographic Distribution of Districts Served Through 21CSLA



⁶ Map 2 displays only the zip codes that fall within the five southernmost counties in California. Through 21CSLA, LAEP also served participants from districts outside of these counties, including Belflower USD, Lakeside Union SD, Lancaster SD, and Los Angeles USD.

Conference Model for LPLs and CoPs

Between summer 2023 and spring 2025, LAEP hosted four conferences that served as the grand majority of region’s LPL and CoP learning opportunities – Learn, Lead, Liberate in summer 2023, A Gathering of Giants in spring 2024, Equity Camp in Fall 2024, and Equity in Action in Spring 2025. Figure 3 outlines the timeline of these four conferences. While all four of these conferences were designed to deepen participants’ understandings of equity, increase networks of support, activate leaders to action, and promote leadership practices that center healing, justice and transformation, this section of the report emphasizes the three most recent conferences, briefly referencing the first.⁷ All of our conferences were intended to bring the 21CSLA Equity Statement to life:

Leaders for opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marainalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.



Figure 3. Timeline of our Four Conferences



Innovative, Inclusive Participatory Data Collection Methods Collection

To answer questions about the quality and impact of these conferences, we analyzed data from registration records, participant surveys, Art Wall renderings (collaborative visual prompt board allowed attendees to contribute affirmations, quotes, or drawings that reflected their learning or emotions during the event), audio recordings from a phone booth (participants responded to reflection prompts via private voice recording into a simulated landline phone), and video recordings from a video booth (brief video reflections captured on-site). These participatory data collection strategies selected by the team were intentionally innovative, creative, collaboratively designed, non-traditional methods to increase response rates and create opportunities beyond a traditional survey. Our team combined traditional methods and more actively participatory ones to increase inclusion.

⁷ Our 21CSLA evaluators were hired after the first conference and began to gather data systematically during the second conference.

Early in 2023-24, when single or series sessions were offered to Cohort 2 leaders as their CoP and LPL options, LAEP experienced very low attendance. For example, at one carefully prepared session with a distinguished speaker scheduled to facilitate, there were no attendees at all. To address this problem and the problem of leaders working in isolation, the sessions were re-envisioned as conferences that would gather leaders to learn, practice, and build community together. LAEP created this conference model with the goals listed below in mind. Additionally, the CORE team re-designed its structure to include Program Leads that could bring specialized skills and focus to specific offerings and areas of work.

- **Build a sense of community** among like-minded leaders from across the five counties through in-person opportunities to share their stories, connect in affinity groups, and experience and reflect on their learning together.
- **Reduce the sense of working in isolation** through structured networking, sessions that created cohorts within the larger cohort, and activities that brought teams together to plan their collective next steps.
- Leverage the **talent of local leaders** with roots in communities within the five counties. Educators, poets, advocates, and other experts were invited to be keynote speakers, encouraging resilience and connection among conference attendees.

SUMMER 2023 CONFERENCE: LEARN, LEAD, LIBERATE

The first convening offered in a conference format was Learn, Lead, Liberate – a two-day event held in San Bernardino. It was important for the design team to bring visionary speakers and trusted names in equity work to our leaders. As a first gathering of the Southern California region in one space, visionary thinking was essential to ground participants in shared language and shared understanding of the work of equity. While this conference was organized and facilitated by a different team from the team who led the subsequent conferences and while we did not have formal evaluation capacity, it is important to highlight this initial conference because LAEP’s work continued on the foundation built by gathering a community and centering them in visionary equity principles.

Keynote speakers at this conference were Zaretta Hammond, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, and Michael Fullan. Presentations and sessions were intended to meet the needs of leaders around rampant inequities in society and schools, politicized learning environments, movements that deny the right to exist, to hold certain identities, and to learn, the loneliness of leading, and to begin to connect leaders across the five counties in Southern California: San Bernardino, Riverside, Imperial, Orange, and San Diego.

SPRING 2024 CONFERENCE: A GATHERING OF GIANTS

The second conference prioritized wellness, connection, and the application of learning. **A Gathering of Giants** was held in Spring 2024, and was attended primarily by out-of-classroom leaders (e.g., counselor, coach, TOSA), site-based leaders (e.g., principal, assistant principal), teacher leaders, and district or county leaders. Most of the respondents to our survey represented public organizations, with far fewer from charter schools, institutes of higher learning, private schools, and county offices of education. The largest groups of respondents worked with 9th-12th and TK-12th grade students and had two to five years of experience in their current position. These findings are summarized in Table 6.





LOS ANGELES EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP - LEADER'S EQUITY MEETING - MARCH 2024

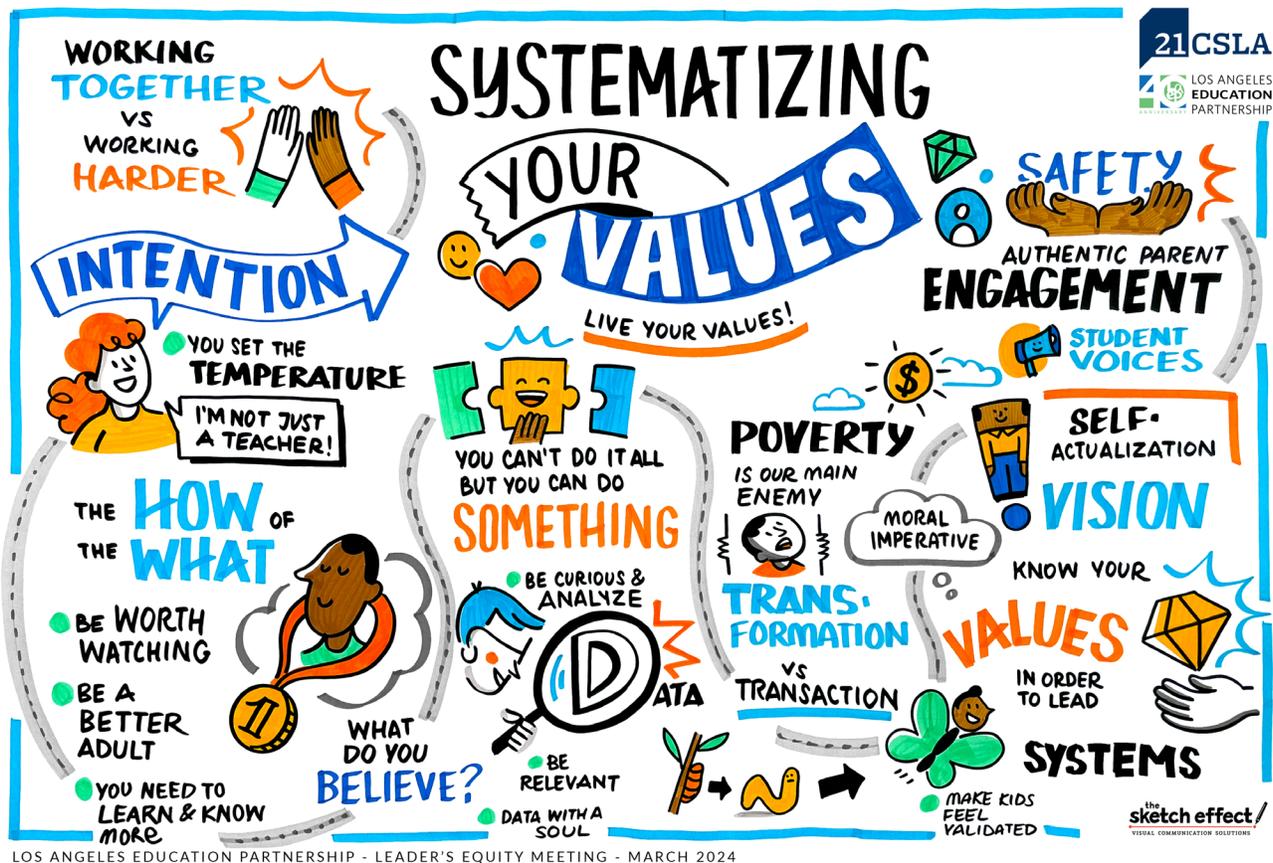
The feedback received from conference participants was highly positive, with 96% rating the overall event as “very good.” The great majority of participants felt that the materials, content covered, facilitation, and the event’s location were either “good” or “very good.” An overwhelming majority of participants (96%) found the event beneficial for their everyday work. Participants shared that during the conference, they were able to connect with their problems of practice and everyday work issues through opportunities to reflect and identify strategies to address the issues they faced in their roles and work. The majority of participants felt that the event deepened their understanding of equity issues and felt “extremely confident” or “moderately confident” in applying what they learned in their work. One leader suggested, “More intentional shuffling of groups- even if it is just inviting people to seek out people outside of their current circles.”



I really appreciated that the different sessions provided were relevant to the work I'm doing and the field I'm in. I wanted to attend more than two different sessions. I really appreciated that the hotel was so nice, and the staff ... was so amazing.” - Gathering of Giants Attendee

Conference Model Vision

In evolving toward a conference model to meet 21CSLA goals for leaders, LAEP was thoughtful in treating leaders as professionals who face challenging situations in their work settings, offering a comfortable setting and amenities conducive to wellness, in addition to content and interactive forums that expand their knowledge and skills related to equity-focused leadership. Keynote addresses, breakout sessions, meals, interactive exhibits, affinity group meetings, and fun activities were carefully designed to foster inclusion, belonging, and thoughtful discussion.



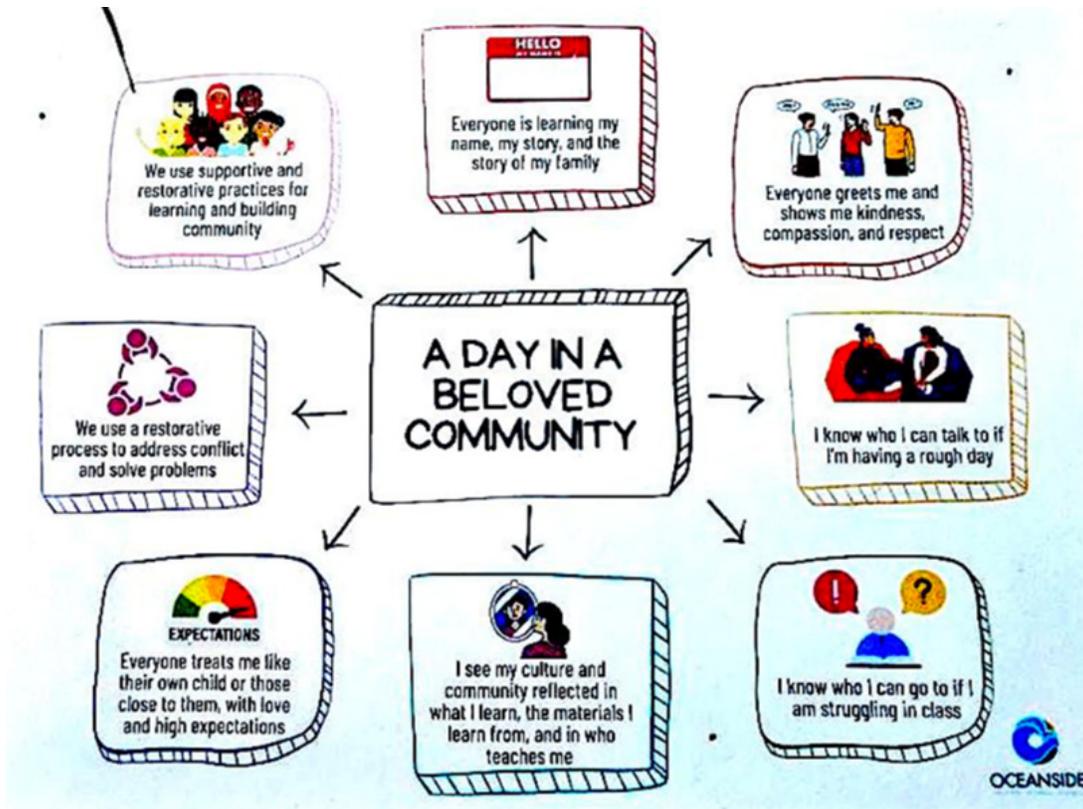
The *Social Change Ecosystem Map* is a framework that guided and inspired conference planners and served as a tool for reflecting on how LAEP's conferences uplifted important roles in social change. The map illustrates how disruptors, caregivers, first responders, storytellers, and six other roles are essential and united by common values in activating and sustaining social improvements. Each of our conferences relied on these roles. Learn, Lead, Liberate featured **Visionaries** including Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Zaretta Hammond, and Michael Fullan. A Gathering of Giants invited leaders to honor the **Guides**, on whose shoulders today's leaders stood. Equity Camp centered **Storytellers**, and Equity in Action purposely highlighted **Frontline Responders**.

Leaders offered **suggestions for improvement** of future conferences including a focus on restorative practices, time for teams to plan collectively their next steps and share their learning, and topics for alternative school educators.

Among the **bright spots** identified by participants were the useful content, like the Maker Space and keynote speeches, opportunities to connect with like-minded colleagues, and the amenities that contributed to participants' wellness.

After the conference, a team of leaders for education equity from Oceanside Unified School District, who had attended together, created the postcard shown in Figure 4. The postcard centered on their learnings from the two-part Beloved Schools, Beautiful Schools keynote address. To share their learning with their school district, they distributed the postcard to every single educator in Oceanside Unified School District. While only a small fraction leaders in Oceanside Unified attended the conference, the **impact of the learning was far reaching**.

FRONT



BACK

Everyone is learning my name, my story, and the story of my family
 Name = Identity. How are we creating spaces for students' full identities to show up and be welcomed, affirmed, and celebrated in our classrooms and schools?

Everyone greets me and shows me kindness, compassion, and respect
 Don't be long where you don't belong.
 Go where you are celebrated, not where you are tolerated.

I know who I can talk to if I'm having a rough day
 Does every student have a person with whom they can connect? A mentor? A teacher? Coach? Adult?
 Does each student know what resources, support, or personnel is available and how to access them?

I know who I can go to if I am struggling in class
 How might we empower students and build agency in a way that helps them access resources for support?
 Do all students know how to access support and/or help?

I see my culture and community reflected in what I learn, the materials I learn from, and in who teaches me
 "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part."
 (Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop)

Everyone treats me like their own child or those close to them, with love and high expectations
 How might we strive to strike a balance between love and high expectations, holding our students accountable to being great because we already recognize their greatness?

We use a restorative process to address conflict and solve problems
 In what ways can we ensure accountability for our students by helping them understand intent and impact?

We use supportive and restorative practices for learning and building community
 Restorative Practices = Community Building
 Restorative practices go well beyond discipline and can be used to build community, teach content, discuss learning, and strengthen relationships

Figure 4. Leadership learning from a Gathering of Giants impacted all educators at Oceanside Unified School District.

A Gathering of Giants Breakout Sessions

During A Gathering of Giants leaders had an opportunity to attend up to three of the following impactful workshops. Please refer to the conference program to learn more about the event and the workshops.

- Developing Deeper Meaningful and Engaged Classrooms with Jordan Harrison
- Early California Laws and Policies Related to California Indians with 'ataaxum Pomkwaan
- Overcoming Negative Self-Talk for Leaders with Mark Kabban
- What Did You Just Say?! Using Compassionate Dialogue as a Protocol to Interrupt Implicit Bias and Discuss Tough Topics with Myeshia Whigham
- Fair & Square - Leveraging Text for Representation in K-12 Curriculum with Mick Rabin
- Leading for Equity with Habits of Mind Workshop with Dr. Regina McDuffie
- Balancing the Books: A Time-Out for School Leaders - Mastering the Art of Self-Care and Dodging Burnout Like a Procrastination Expert! with Sally Stevens
- Schooltalk in an Era of Attempted Restriction: Continuing Student Support Through Our Efforts to Talk About Race, Diversity, and Inequality in Schools. with Dr. Mica Pollock
- Liberatory Leadership Flowershop with Dr. Julie Jhun + Dr. Roberta Benjamin
- Equity Amplified: Leading the Inclusive Classroom Evolution with Dhalia Balmir
- Strengthening Leadership Through Research-Based Practices and Creating Transformational Change to Building your Career of Tomorrow with Dr. Brigitte Blazys
- Keep this Kid in My Class! Decision Making for Inclusivity with Dr. Orleta Nguyen
- Leading With Love for Liberation with Jose Navarro

FALL 2024 CONFERENCE: EQUITY CAMP



Following the second conference, the LAEP team reflected on feedback from participants and their own experiences to refine their approach in developing the next conference - **Equity Camp: The Strength of Our Stories**. This second conference was offered in Fall 2024, and like the first conference, was attended by a large number of out-of-classroom leaders. Most attendees represented public organizations, and many worked with TK-12th grade students and had 2 to 5 years of experience. These findings are summarized in Table 6.

Over a third of participants mentioned the variety of **opportunities to speak, collaborate and learn meaningfully** with other educational leaders as aspects of the conference that helped them feel connected. For example, one participant commented, “Equity Camp provided opportunities for dialogue and sharing in safe and supportive spaces with other educational leaders who were so eager to listen and learn. It was very validating, and I truly felt seen in my experiences.” Participants also commonly held up the conference’s **ambiance** (e.g., good music, giveaway items, felt spoiled) as an element that supported their feeling of connection. One wrote, “The location ... was AMAZING!!!! I’m happy that finances didn’t hold me back from being here. I liked the touchpoint check-in. It gave me a space and group to digest and feel everything I learned.”

A Leader’s Journey Through 21CSLA Offerings FY 2024-2025



Nearly half of respondents mentioned that they were walking away with **tools that were immediately implementable** like storytelling, data, lists of books to read, a Liberation Library. For example, one respondent offered, “The What Did You Say? [session] started a great conversation that we can continue on our own. The data session offered a wealth of information that I will continue to revisit. The Neurodiversity session was more presentation, but this discussion could engagingly go on for days.”

Why Stories?



One of the most valuable things we can do to heal one another is to listen to each other’s stories.”

- Rebecca Falls

The power of sharing stories was the impetus for LAEP’s Fall 2024 Conference. Curating a collection of several keynote stories by Southern California equity-focused leaders (see Appendix for these stories printed in their entirety), as opposed to featuring one highly paid speaker from outside the area. This was an intentional process that allowed the speakers to cultivate and refine their stories through an intentional storytelling process with a local non-profit whose mission is to help community members tell their stories better. This storytelling process resulted in humanizing and inclusive outcomes for planners, facilitators, and participants. For example, LAEP was able to spotlight home-grown genius in the Southern California region, celebrating their powerful shifts toward integrating equitable practices in schools. Additionally, relationships and networks were strengthened among like-minded story-telling facilitators, collaborators, friends, and family members.

Equity Camp Breakout Sessions

During Equity Camp leaders had an opportunity to attend up to three of the following impactful workshops. Please refer to the [conference program](#) to learn more about the event and the workshops.

- Critical Consciousness. Embodiment. Leadership with Abdoul-Rehman Issa
- Systems Coherence: A Deep Dive Into Science of Relationships and Networks with Dr. Alan Daly
- When Leadership Meets Science & Ancestral Practice: Navigating the Pushback to Decolonizing Education Initiatives with Dr. Mark. N. Kabban
- Unpacking Bias: Empowering Educators and School Leaders for Inclusive School Systems with Jordan Harrison
- Decolonizing Equity in Schools with Cereescia Sandoval
- Leveraging Student Voice Data to Lead for Equity with Kimberly Tsai Cawkwell
- Equity Stances for Liberatory Leadership with Nikki Hinoistro
- Rhetoric to Reality: Neurodiversity-Affirming Practices in Today's Schools with Justin H. Dove
- Centering Students, Centering Equity in an Era of Loss, Recovery, and Discovery with Maruth Figueroa and David Ruitter
- What did you Just Say?! Using Compassionate Dialogue to Interrupt Implicit Bias and Tackle Tough Topics with Myeshia Williams and Dr. Jordy Sparks

SPRING 2025 CONFERENCE: EQUITY IN ACTION

Equity in Action was the fourth in the series of intentionally designed conferences for Cohort 2 participants. Responding to the challenging socio-educational climate in early 2025, this conference was designed to build community through elements like panel conversations and uplifting as many diverse perspectives as possible. Characteristics of leaders who attended this conference were similar to prior conferences, with the exception that the largest group were teacher leaders. Another significant difference was that attendance from San Bernardino County increased from about 5% at prior conferences to 15% at Equity in Action. These findings are summarized in Table 6.

Almost half of attendees shared that what helped them feel prepared to **integrate equity into their work** were the new knowledge, resources, tools, strategies and action steps that they gained during the conference. One respondent shared ...

Phone Voicemail Message

Prompt: Leave a voicemail to your future self about your learning intentions for your conference experience!



What I learned here is to chart the course, be present for students, continue to do the work in fidelity. To remember why we do the work, and that liberation comes in the spaces we create in our classrooms. And I feel so fortunate that I get to provide those spaces for students. So, thank you for the reminders."



Reflection and Self-Awareness: *The conference provided valuable space to reflect on my own leadership, biases, and areas for growth. This helped me think more critically about how I approach equity in my work. Practical Strategies and Tools: I gained concrete strategies to integrate equity more intentionally, from improving family engagement to aligning student support services with a Community Schools mindset. These tools will help me take actionable steps. Collaboration and Shared Learning: Engaging in candid conversations with others who are also committed to equity reinforced that this work isn't done alone. Learning from different perspectives and best practices gave me ideas to bring back to my team and implement collaboratively."*

Leaders also shared reflections about whether the conference affirmed or shifted their **understanding of equity**, with almost a third commenting that the conference affirmed their understanding. One participant offered, "Confirmed that the work is righteous and arduous. Being supported by allies provides strength to fight."

Participants were asked what specific behaviors or actions they would adopt as a result of this conference to advance equity, and the largest group commented that they would **reflect critically on personal and professional beliefs** and commit to long-term growth. They were also asked what they had changed in their practice since the prior conference, Equity Camp, and almost a quarter responded that they had **shifted their equity lens** (e.g., "Met people who shifted my thinking;"), and another near quarter responded that they had taken **more brave and empowered action** (e.g., "Joined the district's equity team.")

Participants were also asked to share aspects of the conference that helped them feel that their **health and wellbeing were prioritized**, about half named hospitality-related amenities like kind staff and luxurious space. For example, one leader commented, "The beautiful location. Nature. Wonderful amenities." "The hotel accommodations and the ease of registry. I felt so valued and so supported. Treated like my voice and my presence mattered no matter my age, years of service or even education. I felt included in the work and my contribution mattered." Another offered, "The location ... and materials were all vital supports, they helped me be present for learning and growth."



Equity In Action Breakout Sessions

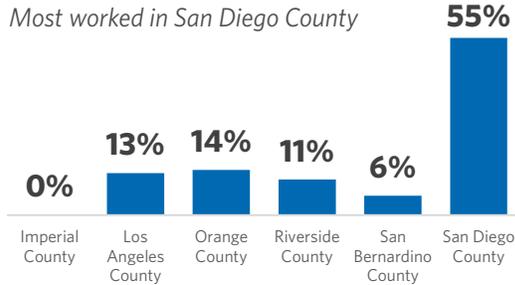
During Equity in Action leaders had an opportunity to attend up to three of the following impactful workshops. Please refer to the [conference program](#) to learn more about the event and the workshops.

- Critical Moments in Action: Protecting Neurodiverse Students & All Students from Discriminatory Disciplinary Action with Dr. H Orletta Nguyen
- Steadfast Leadership from the Inside Out: Uncovering Our Hidden Resistance to Collective Change with Dr. Mark Kabban
- The Culture Connection: Rethinking Student Behavior and Attendance through a Culturally Responsive Lens with Dr. Ingrid Twyman
- Loco Parentis: Serving, Supporting & Standing with Our Undocumented Students with Jose Luis Navarro
- Beyond School Walls: Engaging with Community to Move Toward Equity with Dhalia Balmir
- Commonalities & Differences: A Bullying Prevention Module About Celebrating and Embracing Differences cofacilitated by Mick Rabin and middle school Ally Action student leaders
- Reimagining Schools as Communities of Care with Dr. Rania Saeb
- LGBTQ plus Race, Ethnicity, Culture, Class: An Intersectional Conversation with Dr. Lan Nguyen

Table 6. Demographic and survey findings from the three conferences in Years 1 and 2.

A Gathering of Giants

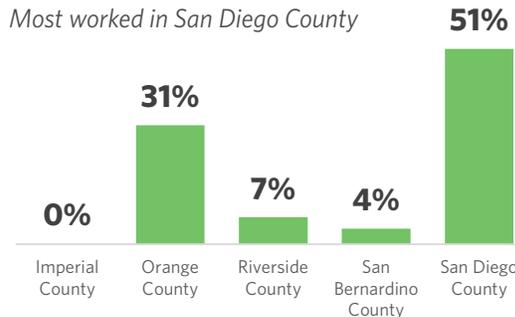
March 2024, San Diego, CA
 182 participants
 39% survey response
 Most were from San Diego County.



41% White, 32% Latino, 19% Black, 10% Asian
 32% Out-of-Classroom Leader
 72% Public organizations
 27% TK-12th grade focus
 42% 2 to 5 years' experience
 96% felt event was "very good"
 96% found the event useful for their everyday work
 Participants felt that the event deepened their understanding of equity issues and felt extremely or moderately confident in applying what they learned in their work.
 Participants chose from among 11 breakout sessions and gave a range of ideas for how they would use their learning in their setting.

Equity Camp: The Strength of Our Stories

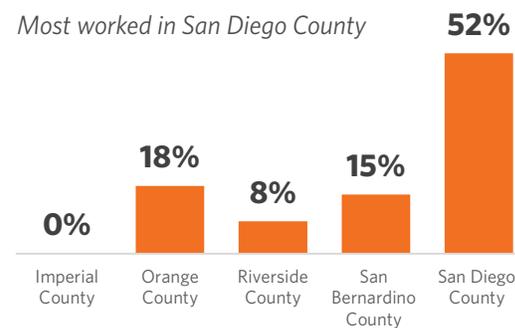
November 2024, San Diego, CA
 158 participants
 41% survey response



40% White, 31% Latino, 7% Black, 4% Asian, 4% Filipino
 27% Out-of-Classroom Leader
 61% Public organizations
 35% TK-12th grade focus
 26% had 2 to 5 years' experience
 92% agreed that Equity Camp provided purposeful spaces to connect with other leaders.
 95% felt heard by other education leaders.
 Participants valued opportunities to speak, collaborate, and meet like-minded others.

Equity in Action

March 2025, Huntington Beach, CA
 243 participants
 70% survey response



37% White, 24% Latino, 14% Black, 5% Asian, 4% Filipino
 34% Teacher Leader
 80% Public organizations
 29% TK-12th grade focus
 95% agreed that experiences at the conference supported their overall health and wellbeing.
 99% stated they will continue to participate in 21CSLA offerings.
 The largest group of leaders attended The Culture Connection breakout session on student behavior and attendance, with 75% expressing they were very or extremely confident applying their learning.

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT CONFERENCE MODEL

LAEP adopted a conference model for engaging 21CSLA Cohort 2 leaders in professional development that would accomplish the following specific learning goals:

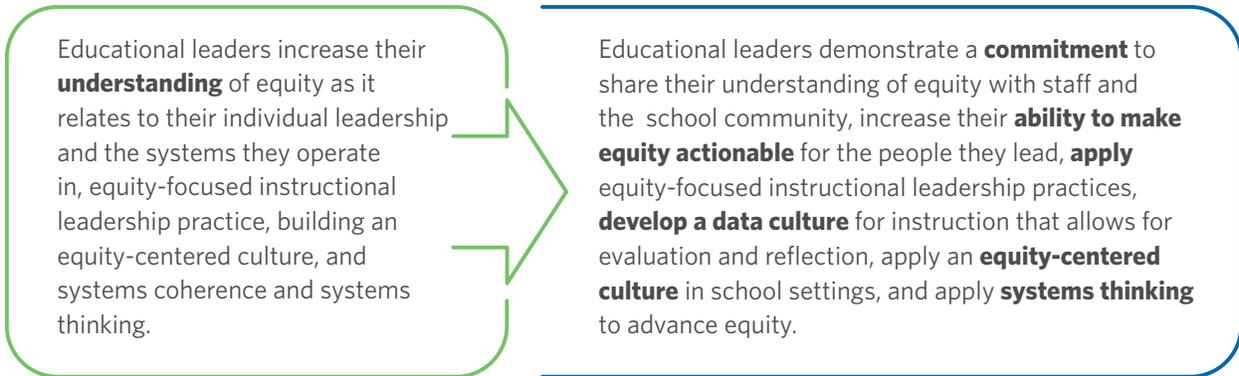


Figure 5. Goals of the Conferences for Educational Leaders

Across three conferences carried out in Years 1 and 2, participants tended to be out-of-classroom leaders and teacher leaders, represent public organizations, serve TK-12th grade students, with about 2 to 5 years of experience in education. The conferences were attended by representatives from all counties in LAEP’s region except for Imperial County. About half of attendees worked in San Diego County. Attendance increased from 182 to 243 participants from the first to the third conference.

Feedback from across the three conferences was mostly very positive, with participants consistently reporting they were satisfied with the quality of the resources, location, collaboration with like-minded peers, support from staff, and sense of connectedness. They also expressed that the knowledge, skills, tools, practices, and networking that they took away were useful in preparing them to apply new approaches to their equity-focused leadership and wellness. Figure 6 highlights percentages of attendees who agreed or strongly agreed that the conferences increased their understanding of equity, provided them with tools and skills to use for their health and wellbeing and to advance equity in their work, and that they felt confident and prepared to apply these tools and skills.

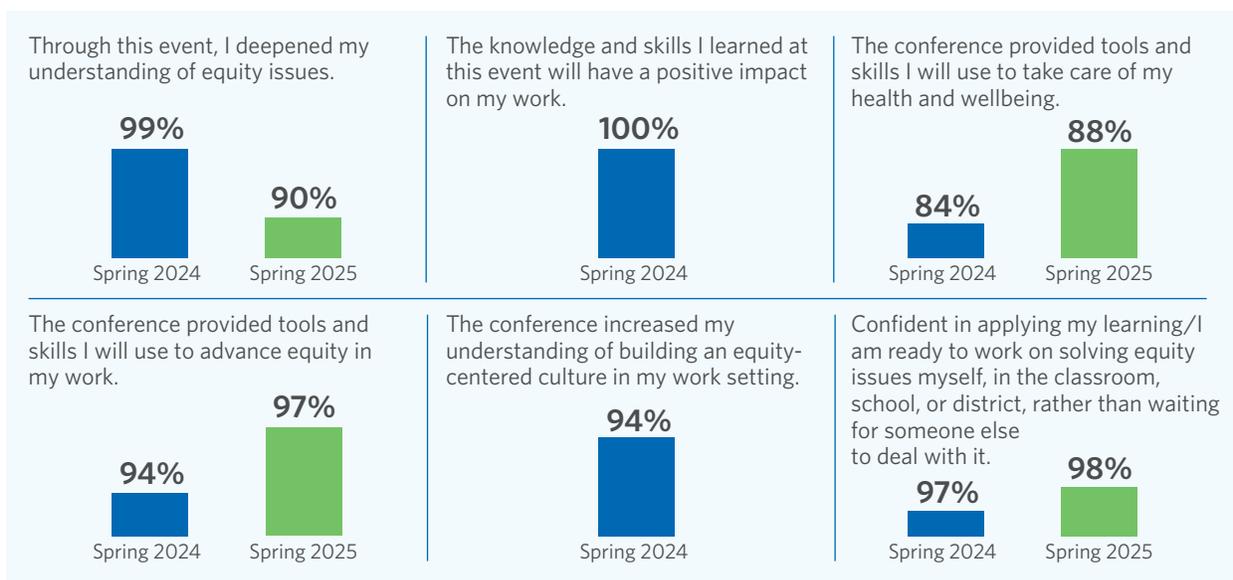


Figure 6. Very high proportions of participants felt the conferences prepared them for equity work.

Participants consistently shared that they benefitted from the conferences tangibly as well as emotionally and mentally. Evidence of leaders' growth toward the conference goals of building understandings and abilities to effect systems changes included the following findings:

- 1. Most participants were highly satisfied** with the materials, content, facilitation, and conference location: Specifically, leaders appreciated the useful content, like the Maker Space and keynote speeches, opportunities to connect with like-minded colleagues in meaningful ways, and the amenities that contributed to participants' wellness.
- 2.** About half of attendees at one conference shared that what helped them feel prepared to **integrate equity into their work** were the new knowledge, resources, tools, strategies and action steps that they gained during the conference.
- 3.** As a result of their participation, leaders shared that they had **started to shift to using an equity lens** and taken **more brave and empowered action**. They also mentioned that they would continue to **reflect critically on personal and professional beliefs** and commit to **long-term growth**.



The learning and knowledge I'm walking away with have solidified my beliefs in this work and has given me some renewed hope of the future of our youth."

- Equity Camp Attendee

Very few participants were unsatisfied with some aspects of the conferences, and some offered their thoughtful recommendations for improving future conferences:

- 1. Offer extended training and materials.** Leaders suggested making all sessions available to all participants because time did not allow for participating in all breakout sessions. Similarly, they felt taking home presentation slides and other resources would be helpful. (e.g., "So much information in each session I would love to have had more time in each workshop or at least a link to each of the session slide decks.")
- 2. Allow for more collective team processing.** Participants commented that there was a lot of content to process and plan with, and they wished there was more opportunity to do this with their work site teams.
- 3. Improve accommodations for neurodivergent learners and focus more on special needs of students.** Leaders recommended focusing more carefully on the needs of students with disabilities. Another voiced the need for compliance with legal requirements related to accessibility like captions.
- 4. Continue to provide physical supports for wellness.** For example, one comment was about the breakout session rooms being too small, another participant missed the massage chairs that were offered previously.



To truly be inclusive and work together as a beautiful group, I believe we are missing those voices (of neurodivergence) at the table. I mean, I get to thinking about "What about our family members who are BIPOC and have disabilities?" I am sharing it here, because that is a skill I have learned through these conferences is really try to seek and understand. How can we seek to understand if we don't have people speaking on their experiences?"

- Equity in Action Attendee

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark top and a white necklace, is leaning over a table. She is looking down at something on the table. There are several children around the table, some looking at the same thing. The background shows a classroom with a whiteboard and other educational materials. The entire image has a green tint.

LEADER CASE STUDY #1: A heart-focused leader and her team learn together to create equity for their students

Leader Profile

County: San Bernardino

Role: Equity and Access Coordinator

Number of Years in Role: 1 year

Number of Years in the Education Field: 27 years

Participation in 21CSLA Offerings: Equity Camp, Equity in Action, Affinity Groups

Journey Towards Educational Equity through Crisis and Awakening

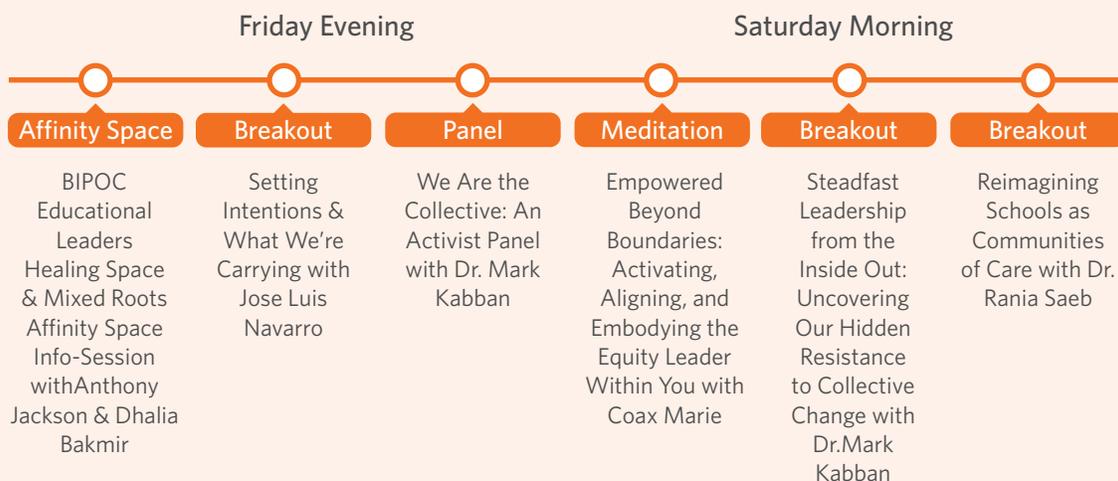


You have to be able to manage your own personal feelings as well as being able to create that system that's going to work for people. How do you manage yourself while you're doing that?" - Dr. Gable

She began her career in education 27 years ago as a substitute teacher. Always reaching for the next plateau, Dr. Gable⁸, now Coordinator of Equity and Access at a school district in San Bernardino, continued to expand her knowledge and sphere of influence as she became a teacher-on-assignment, then a curriculum specialist, then pursued an EdD program after experiencing a deep internal crisis during the 2020 summer of social justice awakening. She embraces her identities as an African American, Christian, heterosexual woman who leads with compassion and empathy, and reflects on her experiences to push beyond race and gender biases that threaten to stop collaboration before a trusting work relationship develops.

Dr. Gable is strengthening her leadership by learning and practicing how to be more directive, delegating, and enabling emerging leaders to “take my position.” She is focusing on systems and structures to identify specific inequities for African American students in her schools and turning these into opportunities for their success. A primary aspect of this work for her is acknowledging that leaders in this work tend to come from marginalized communities themselves, and processes of re-creating systems and structures require a lot of discomfort for a lot of people. She described the complexity of managing her own discomfort while supporting others to do the same, “You have to be able to manage your own personal feelings as well as being able to create that system that's going to work for people. How do you manage yourself while you're doing that?” Mental health resources and hopeful perspectives are critical in these processes, she added, but in our current climate, “things that made people feel safe, that made people feel secure ... are being deleted. You have to manage those feelings as well.”

DR. GABLE'S PATH DURING EQUITY IN ACTION CONFERENCE, MARCH 2025



⁸ A pseudonym was assigned to the leader to protect her privacy.

EMBRACING DISCOMFORT TOGETHER



The messiness of the equity work is that you're always trying to articulate something in a way where it's not offensive to someone, especially when you are offended. If you happen to be the person that has been offended, you're having to articulate thoughts or feelings, or are advocating for this group of students or teachers or parents."

- Dr. Gable

Her participation in 21CSLA - in particular the LAEP conferences - supported her and her team by expanding their thinking, encouraging them to build stronger strategies together, and offering "heart spaces" to process difficult learning. At Equity Camp in the fall, she appreciated the format of the conference with a variety of keynote speakers, panels, breakout sessions that allowed for closer interaction with panelists, and Touchpoint sessions for building connections with peers that extended beyond that weekend. "They had lots of activities," like community building activities, opportunities for networking, Smores Night. Mike Tyson was fighting, people were connecting. She met new people, and Touchpoints allowed them to network. [With] repeated exposure to the same facilitator and group, "you grew strong relationship with those people because you circled back to them." At the Equity in Action conference in the spring, Dr. Gable brought an even larger team of colleagues with her, and she felt a sense of connection with other districts, having engaged them in the fall. She and her team took an organized approach to their collective learning by attending sessions that aligned with their district's equity initiatives, processing together, articulating

phrasing, and planning how to share their learning back at their district. Dr. Gable appreciated the session with Dr. Mark Kabban, where she confronted a problem she had identified earlier in the year, "The messiness of the equity work is that you're always trying to articulate something in a way where it's not offensive to someone, especially when you are offended. If you happen to be the person that has been offended, you're having to articulate thoughts or feelings, or are advocating for this group of students or teachers or parents." She found the vulnerability and sharing of others in the room especially supportive.

CARRYING INTO THE FUTURE STRONGER RESOLVE, MORE STRATEGIC APPROACHES, A SENSE OF COMMUNITY, AND A COMMITMENT TO CARE

At the end of the 2024-25 school year, Dr. Gable reflected on how the 21CSLA conference had influenced her own leadership practices and prepared her to meet the needs of diverse students. She named her Affinity Space experience and the debrief with her team as one of the most impactful aspects of her conference participation. "The affinity space was phenomenal for me. ... You don't understand how freeing it is to walk into a space where you don't have to spend 20 or 30 minutes proving you're a person or a human, that you get to just be and then continue." She described her team debrief as essential to processing with her task force in the moment, identifying what to return to, and what their collective work would look like in 2025-26. She was moving into the new year with a stronger resolve, more strategic approaches, a sense of community, and a commitment to care for herself as much as for others. "Equity work sometimes can be very isolating. You know, you start pissing people off. You start making people uncomfortable, and people pull away, and then you still have to, you know, you still want to do the work. So how are you able to sustain your core values and goals in the process? ... Every time I go [to a 21CSLA conference], I walk away with some more strategies that help to sustain me in the work, as well as connecting with people that are in the work too."



21CSLA Leadership Coaching



Individualized coaching is built on relational trust, aligned to the CPSEL, focused on equity-centered problems of practice using continuous improvement principles.” - 21CSLA

Leadership coaching for equity is a foundational 21CSLA professional learning offering that focuses on “building the capacities of educational leaders to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion, for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they thrive (21CSLA, 2024).” Through LAEP, leaders working in San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties receive 25 hours of virtual or hybrid coaching over a one-year period. To deliver intentional and effective leadership coaching, the LAEP coaching team is structured with one coaching lead, three in-house coaches, and five coaching consultants. This diverse coaching team has a wealth of experience in the field of education,

with most coaches having backgrounds as former educators, professors, site leaders, and early childhood educators. The LAEP coaches receive ongoing support and training through monthly coaching meetings, which focus on building community, leadership development, and the development of coaching skills; participation in the 21CSLA conferences; and formal professional development opportunities through the 21CSLA Coaching Clinic and cognitive coaching training.

This report highlights key evaluation findings related to LAEP’s implementation of the individualized leadership coaching for equity.

A RELATIONAL AND HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH TO COACHING

The Coaching Team Centers Relationships and the Humanity of Leaders



The LAEP Coaching Team complements the coaching qualities and the 21CSLA Equity Statement through its relationship and human-centered approach to supporting leaders. In terms of centering relationships, LAEP coaches prioritize building meaningful relationships with leaders, cultivating trust, deep listening, and establishing safe spaces for leaders to “You never evaluate people to greatness. You coach them to greatness.” – Coaching Lead express their needs and areas of support. The human-centered approach to coaching focuses on coaches building empathy and curiosity towards

their practices, and moving away from evaluative practices, so that they uplift the humanity, feelings, and needs of their leaders. As the coaching lead states, "You never evaluate people to greatness. You coach them to greatness." By engaging in these approaches, LAEP coaches hold space and serve as thought partners for leaders to support them in thinking through their most pressing equity challenges.



You never evaluate people to greatness. You coach them to greatness." - Coaching Lead

The following 21CSLA coaching qualities as described by 21CSLA Guidance Document guide LAEP's coaching offering.

- 1 Asset-based:** Uncovers and builds on assets providing support to enhance the skills, resources and creativity a leader already possesses.
- 2 Purpose-driven:** Helps leaders clarify and lead from their purpose, values, vision, and goals.
- 3 Embodied practice:** Focuses on leaders' ways of being, beliefs, and behaviors.
- 4 Builds resilience:** Builds the emotional intelligence and resilience of leaders.
- 5 Continuous improvement:** Supports leaders to develop learning teams and a culture of continuous improvement throughout the organizations in which they lead.
- 6 Systems thinking:** Develops leaders as systems thinkers.
- 7 Lens of systemic oppression:** Builds leaders' capacity to facilitate conversations and processes to address systemic oppression and biases by developing their own self-awareness, identity, values, beliefs, and impact.
- 8 Relational trust:** Continually seeks to deepen trust and mutuality.
- 9 Use of evidence:** Uses observation and various forms of data, i.e., feedback and reflection on observations of practice, meeting agendas, strategic plans, survey results, etc., to ensure coaching goals and growth are grounded in evidence.
- 10 Goal-oriented:** Works toward concrete, measurable goals, co-created by the coach and leader, and grounded in the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL) or other locally adopted definitions of leadership or framework.

Source: These qualities were taken from the 21CSLA Guidance Document Years 2-3 - Rev. 9/1/2024

Figure 7. Qualities of 21CSLA Leadership Coaching

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF LEADERS PARTICIPATING IN LEADERSHIP COACHING

Most leaders who engaged in the leadership coaching were female who identified as White or Hispanic/Latino.

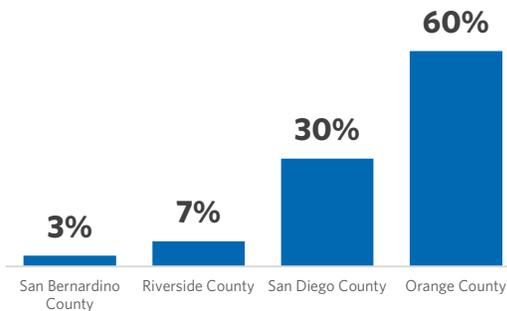
As summarized in Table 7 below, across the last two program years, most of the leaders who participated in leadership coaching were female leaders who identified as White or Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, most leaders worked in San Diego, Orange, and Riverside Counties. Program Year 2024-25 saw an increase in leaders served across two counties, with growth ranging from 3% to 15% in San Bernardino County and from 7% to 14% in Riverside County. Additionally, in 2024-25, there was a 10% increase in the leaders served. In terms of the type of leaders served, this varies by program year. For instance, in 2023-24, over half of the leaders served were site leaders, while in 2024-25, the larger proportion of leaders served were teacher leaders.

Table 7. Demographic Breakdown of Leaders Participating in Leadership Coaching

Program Year 2023-24

73 leaders served

During FY 2023-2024 a large proportion of leaders participating in leadership coaching Learning were from Orange County (n=73)



75% identified as female

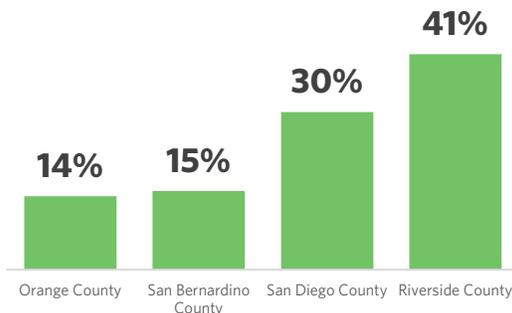
30% were Hispanic or Latino and 23% identified as White.

62% identified as site leaders, while 21% were teacher leaders.

Program Year 2024-25

81 leaders served

During FY 2024-2025 a large proportion of leaders served were from Riverside and San Diego Counties (n=79)



81% identified as female and 19% were male

36% identified as White and 28% were Hispanic or Latino

About one third (31%) were teacher leaders.

17% were site-based leaders. Equally, 17% identified as out of the classroom leaders, and district leaders

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT LEADERSHIP COACHING



To assess the impact and effectiveness of the leadership coaching offering, an end of year coaching survey and the evaluation team conducted pre-and-post interviews with a small sample of leaders (17 pre-interviews and nine post interviews) who expressed interest in supporting the qualitative data collection and who completed the 25 hours of coaching. Due to modifications in the implementation of the coaching offering, the LAEP evaluation team is currently

gathering and analyzing data from leaders who began coaching in 2024-25. As a result, the data in this section primarily reflects the end-of-year survey data collected at the end of 2023-24. Figures 7 and 8 below summarize the end-of-year coaching evaluation data collected during 2023-24.

As displayed below, educational leaders felt that their coaches were exceptionally effective in creating safe spaces and in listening to their ideas and perspectives. Similarly, educational leaders reported that the LAEP coaches were exceptionally effective in listening attentively to their needs and in being available when needed. These findings highlight the intentional design that LAEP coaches undertook to build relational trust by creating safe spaces and listening deeply to the unique needs of leaders.



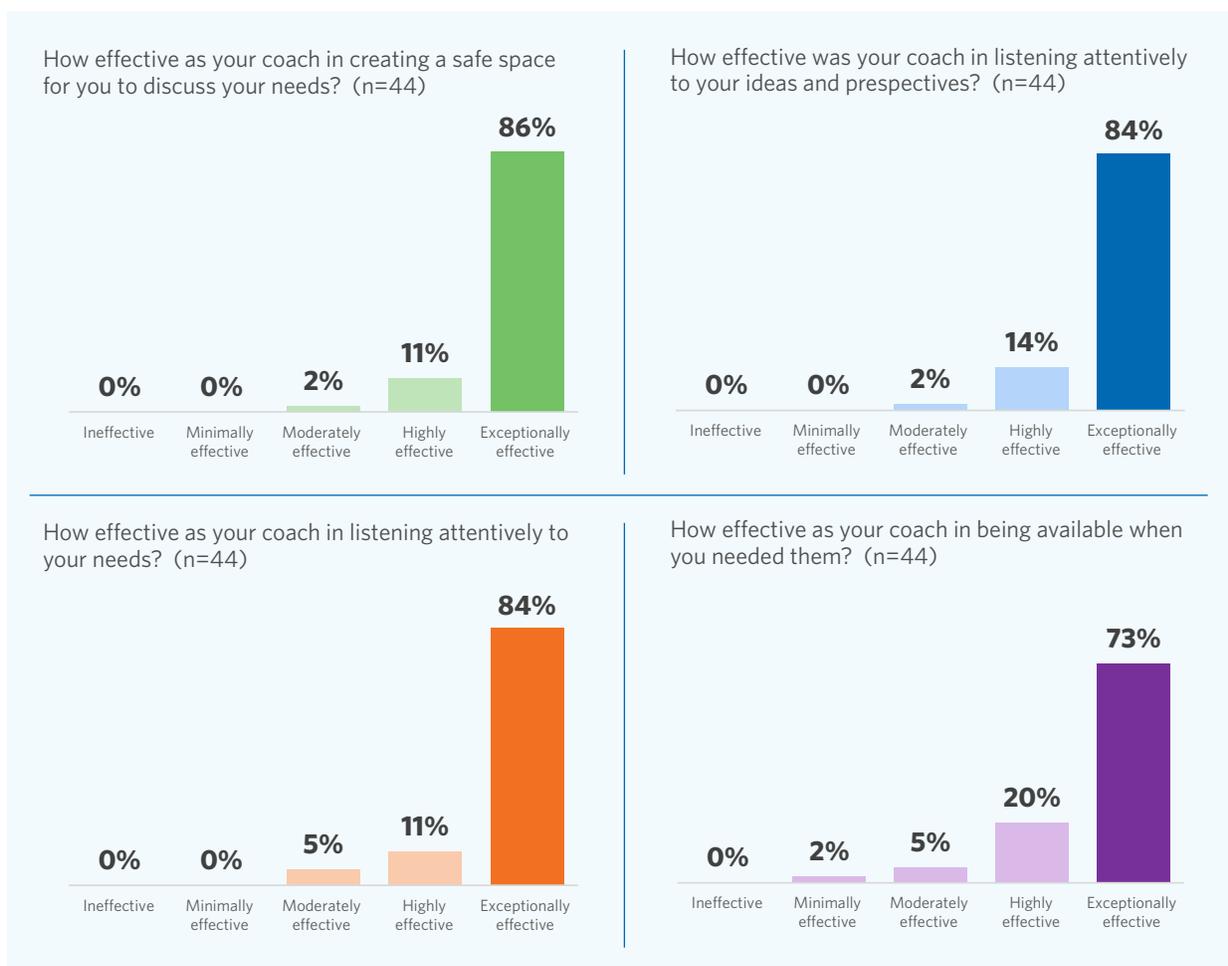


Figure 8. LAEP coaches were exceptionally effective in creating safe spaces, in deep listening, and in being available when leaders needed them.

Survey data also show that leaders benefited positively from coaching. In particular, as highlighted in the Figure below, leaders agreed or strongly agreed that coaching enhanced their knowledge of leadership practices, allowed them to advance equity in their work settings, and move forward equitable practices for students of color and students from diverse backgrounds.



Figure 9. Leaders reported that coaching increased their knowledge of equitable leadership practices and allowed them to advance equity for students of color and students from diverse backgrounds.

Leaders experienced key changes in wellness⁹, reflective practice, and leadership approaches as a result of participating in coaching.

Coaching participants were asked to describe the changes they experienced in their practice as a result of participating in one-on-one coaching. Leader responses¹⁰ to the shifts in their practices fall into key domains, including wellness, reflective practice, leadership practices, and confidence. These domains and findings related to changes in practices are explained in detail below.

- **Wellness.** Leaders reported that coaching impacted their wellness practices. To get a more specific understanding of the wellness areas that the coaching offering impacted, leader responses were mapped onto the 8 Dimensions of Wellness for Educators as outlined and defined by Angel L. Montoya and Laura L. Summers. This revealed that coaching influenced occupational and emotional wellness. Montoya and Summers (2021) define occupational wellness as “the ability to contribute unique skills and formal education to personally meaningful work.” While emotional wellness relates to “awareness, acceptance, expression, and management of emotions” (Montoya & Summers, 2021). Coaching influenced occupational wellness by strengthening leaders’ ability to refine skills in time management, workload management, balanced goal setting, and allowing leaders to reconnect with their values. As one leader explained that they are “more efficient with use of my calendar and [I] don’t overcommit to activities.” Another leader explained that coaching allowed them to “[to be] more realistic with my goals, being kinder to myself and [to focus on] my own wellness.” In terms of emotional wellness, coaching provided a space for leaders to recognize, express, and process their stress and feelings to a trusted coach who was not their supervisor or evaluator. This allowed leaders to be more present and engaged with their students and work. As one leader noted, “My coach helped me with taking time for myself each day, so that I would be less stressed and more available for my students and my department.” These findings also reflect the intentional modeling of wellness and mindfulness practices during internal LAEP coaching meetings. During monthly coaching meetings, LAEP coaches practice mindfulness and breathwork, which they are then encouraged to practice with the leaders they support.
- **Self-Awareness.** Across the open-ended data, leaders shared that coaching deepened their reflection practices. Leaders expressed becoming more reflective about their decision-making processes, areas for growth, internal biases, and actions. In this regard, leaders shared the following:
 - “I have become more reflective in my practice. I feel I am more able to take action when situations arise.”*
 - “I am more reflective and aware of why I am making decisions.”*
 - “I have noticed that I have increased my reflective capacity...[I am] more reflective with my staff.”*
- **Leadership Practices.** Several leaders also reported experiencing shifts in their equitable leadership practices. For instance, leaders felt more equipped to support challenging colleagues or staff members who respond in emotionally diverse ways. Additionally, some leaders also learned how to refine their own coaching practices when supporting teachers or other colleagues. Other leaders emphasized the importance of maintaining the needs of students at the forefront while focusing on smaller improvements and ensuring that equity remains central to their leadership and work.

⁹ The LAEP Evaluation, Accountability and Impact Department is exploring the impact of leadership coaching on leader wellness through their participation in the 21CSLA Professional Learning Lesson Study and through pre- and post-interviews with coaching participants. Findings will be summarized and presented in subsequent evaluation reports.

¹⁰ Analysis is based on open-ended responses to survey items.

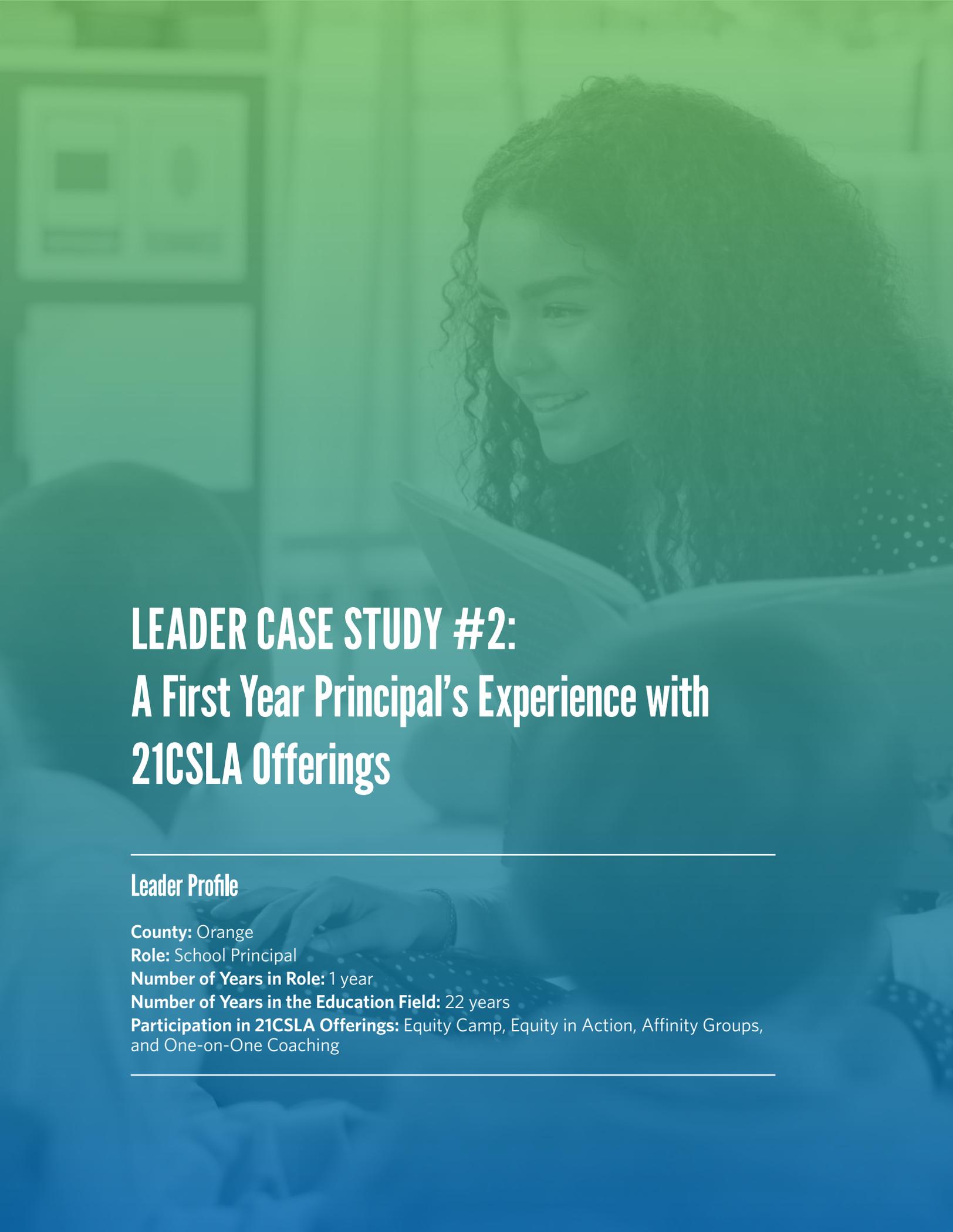
Table 8. Shift in Leader Practices in 2023-24

Domain	Examples of Shifts as Reported by Leaders	Leader Quotes
WELLNESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Workload management • Realistic goal setting • Recentering on core values 	 <p>[Coaching allowed me to be] more realistic with my goals, being more kinder to myself and [to focus on] my own wellness."</p>
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased reflection on actions, decision-making, and areas of growth • Self-reflective with staff 	 <p>I learned new ways to question and to be more self-reflective with my staff."</p>
LEADERSHIP PRACTICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen coaching capacity of leaders • Enhanced ability to support staff and colleagues experiencing different emotions or feelings. • Learned to support the capacity building of challenging colleagues 	 <p>My leadership/coaching skills have improved as a result of this work. My coach was able to share resources that I could put into practice immediately."</p>

Spotlight: Integrating 21CSLA and Community Schools Coaches into the Conference Model



In 2024, during Equity Camp, the Team Learning Lead integrated the 21CSLA coaches and Transform Schools coaches into the conference model to ensure leaders received support throughout the conference experience. The inclusion of coaches into the conferences, was a cross-departmental effort for LAEP, where two coaches from Community Schools worked collaboratively with the 21CSLA coaches to support with data collection, session facilitation, story sharing, and facilitating processing spaces or “Touch Point” spaces. Educational leaders who participated in the coaching offering and attended the conference also benefited from the inclusion of the coaches. Coaching participants were able to see a familiar face, engage with their coaches in the larger context of equity work, and see their coaches as leaders of equity. As one leader noted, *“I want to be at the conference to see [my coach] and see him in the larger context of [this work]. He is a great resource and source of support for me.”* Elevating the role of coaches at the 21CSLA conferences has proven to be an effective strategy for building community across offerings, increasing leader engagement, deepening relationships with leaders, and leveraging the expertise of the coaching team by incorporating their unique set of skills and strengths into the conference model.



LEADER CASE STUDY #2: A First Year Principal's Experience with 21CSLA Offerings

Leader Profile

County: Orange

Role: School Principal

Number of Years in Role: 1 year

Number of Years in the Education Field: 22 years

Participation in 21CSLA Offerings: Equity Camp, Equity in Action, Affinity Groups, and One-on-One Coaching

Finding Empowerment and Purpose Through Education



I am the son of Chinese immigrants who came to this country seeking a better life. Education has allowed me and empowered me to better in my life and to make an impact.”- Nathan

Nathan¹¹ is a seasoned educational leader with two decades of experience working in schools, primarily in Title I public schools in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. He is the proud son of Chinese immigrants who found empowerment and purpose through his educational journey. As the first in his family to attend college and receive a higher education degree, he views education as the key to achieving a successful career and making a meaningful impact in communities, particularly among students and families. Nathan is an educational leader who values diversity, care, and equity. He views working in schools as a privilege and an opportunity to build safe, caring and inclusive spaces for all students.

VISION OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY & TRANSITIONING TO FIRST PRINCIPALSHIP IN ORANGE COUNTY

Nathan defines equity as students accessing high-quality instruction and having opportunities inside and outside of school to be successful and be “productive, responsible, and engaged adults.” Additionally, for Nathan, educational equity is also about engaging parents authentically, uplifting their strengths, and empowering them to take an active role in their children’s educational journey. Seeking to carry out this educational vision, in the 2024-25 academic year, Nathan took on his first principalship at a public middle school in Orange County. Having worked in Los Angeles Unified School District for most of his career, starting as a new Principal in Orange County was an exciting but also overwhelming experience as he began building relationships with his staff and getting to know his school community, he realized that his site still needed support in building a community of care for adults and students, identifying and uplifting the assets of students and families, and using trauma-informed strategies to foster an inclusive and equitable environment for children, families, and adults.

CHALLENGES OF A FIRST-YEAR PRINCIPAL



I want to work with other people doing this work because it can get lonely especially as a [first year] principal.” - Nathan

Armed with 22 years of experience as an educator, Nathan entered his first principalship with a strong commitment to support his students, families, and staff. Like many first-year principals, he encountered a range of challenges, including feelings of isolation in his leadership, the need to foster a culture of care in his school for adults and students, encouraging staff to leverage the cultural assets of students, addressing staff resistance to engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices, and leaning into practices that move away from deficit thinking. In the midst of these obstacles and as the only one championing equity work in his school,

Nathan yearned to be in connection with other like-minded leaders engaging in equity work, so that he could learn to improve his leadership practices and learn from other leaders’ successes and challenges implementing equitable strategies in their school settings.

¹¹ A pseudonym was assigned to the leader to protect his privacy and identity.

NATHAN'S PATH DURING EQUITY IN ACTION CONFERENCE, MARCH 2025



21CSLA OFFERINGS FOSTER COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT



I want to network with other leaders. Understand how they navigate challenges. I want to feel connected to a larger movement that is happening across different counties."

- Nathan

In the Fall of 2024, Nathan began his journey with LAEP participating in the Equity Camp conference and then continuing to attend the Equity in Action Conference in the Spring of 2025. Both conferences were designed to deepen participants' understanding of equity, increase their networks of support, activate leaders to action, and promote leadership practices that center healing, justice, and transformation. Nathan also received one-year of individualized coaching and participated in several sessions of the BIPOC Mixed Roots Healing Space. The 21CSLA offerings supported Nathan in the following ways:

BUILDING A NETWORK OF SUPPORT & FEELING RE-ENERGIZED TO ENGAGE IN EQUITY WORK

Through his participation at the 21CSLA conferences, Nathan had access to a network of over 300 like-minded leaders. Through smaller processing groups or Touch Point Spaces at the conferences facilitated by our 21CSLA coaches, he had an opportunity to build community with other leaders through mindfulness practices and reflective dialogue. Nathan strengthened his relationships with several leaders from the Equity Camp Conference and later reconnected with them at the Equity in Action Conference, which allowed him to feel included, in community, and in connection with LAEP's leader network. Additionally, the conferences re-energized Nathan and reminded him of his purpose as a leader in education. To this point, he shared, *"I felt included and supported at the [conferences] and I want to recreate that here at my school...I felt reaffirmed and re-energized on why I am doing this [work]."*

PROVIDING ACCESS TO INDIVIDUALIZED COACHING

Through 21CSLA's one-on-one coaching, Nathan received weekly one-hour virtual coaching sessions where he was able to receive tailored support, guidance, and advice from one of our highly trained coaches who was also a former principal. This individualized support from a former school leader provided Nathan with specific and relevant guidance on how to create a culture of care in his school. For instance, through his conversation with his coach, Nathan was reminded that taking a trauma informed approach in his leadership is a key component

of building a culture of care for adults and students. Nathan explained, *“the other thing I learned in talking with my coach is that building a culture of care and in order to kids to feel comfortable they have to trust you, they need to feel cared for, and that comes from understanding trauma.”* Nathan also had access to his coach during the Equity Camp and Equity in Action conferences, which allowed him to connect with his coach outside of his coaching sessions. In this regard, Nathan reflected, *“I want to be at the conference to see [my coach] and see him in the larger context of [this work]. He is a great resource and source of support for me.”*

OFFERING TRAINING IN RELEVANT EDUCATION ISSUES AND SUPPLYING CONCRETE RESOURCES

At Equity Camp and Equity in Action, Nathan attended professional development training workshops that were relevant to the current issues he was navigating as a first-year principal. For instance, through both conferences he has participated in workshops related to **supporting neurodivergent students**, **strategies for supporting LGBTQ+ students**, and **rethinking behavior and attendance through culturally responsive lens**. For Nathan, the most impactful conference workshop was Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ+ Students. This was a student-led workshop, with the aim to model lessons that foster inclusion in school settings through an analysis of commonalities and differences. Nathan brought the concrete resources shared during this workshop back to his school. He shared the lesson plans with his leadership teacher and together they explored ways to have students lead the lessons in various grade levels to begin fostering care and inclusion in classroom settings. Nathan explained, *“The most impactful workshop was the student led workshop because we are designing learning for kids. I brought that back to my school and shared it with the leadership teacher. The conference gave me something concrete to bring back [and] through the commonalities and differences lessons we can unite rather than divide.”*

Next Steps on Equity Journey

As Nathan begins his second year as a principal at a new site through the Los Angeles Unified School District, he continues to be committed to advancing equitable practices in his role. He remains connected to his network of support at LAEP through his coach, who check-in on him periodically, and the broader LAEP leader community. The work Nathan engaged in through 21CSLA's conferences and coaching has equipped him with valuable skills, knowledge, and reaffirmed his purpose as an equity-centered leader.



Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) Leadership Initiative



In response to California's groundbreaking commitment to TK for all 4-year-olds, the 21CSLA UTK initiative is designed to prepare California's educational leaders to "lead for equity" through innovative, high-quality professional." - 21CSLA



The statewide 21CSLA initiative is also responsible for leading the Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) Leadership Initiative, which aims to support site leaders, teacher leaders, and central office staff in implementing Transitional Kindergarten in California School districts. As the SoCal Regional Academy, LAEP supports this statewide effort through the implementation of UTK Professional Learning Modules, which aim to equip leaders in San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties in fostering equitable, inclusive, and high-quality learning environments for parents, educators, and students. The following section of this report highlights key evaluation findings related to LAEP's implementation of the UTK Professional Learning Modules.

A STRENGTH-BASED AND LOCALIZED APPROACH TO THE UTK LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

The LAEP UTK team conducted 13 site visits across four counties to identify regional strengths and needs.

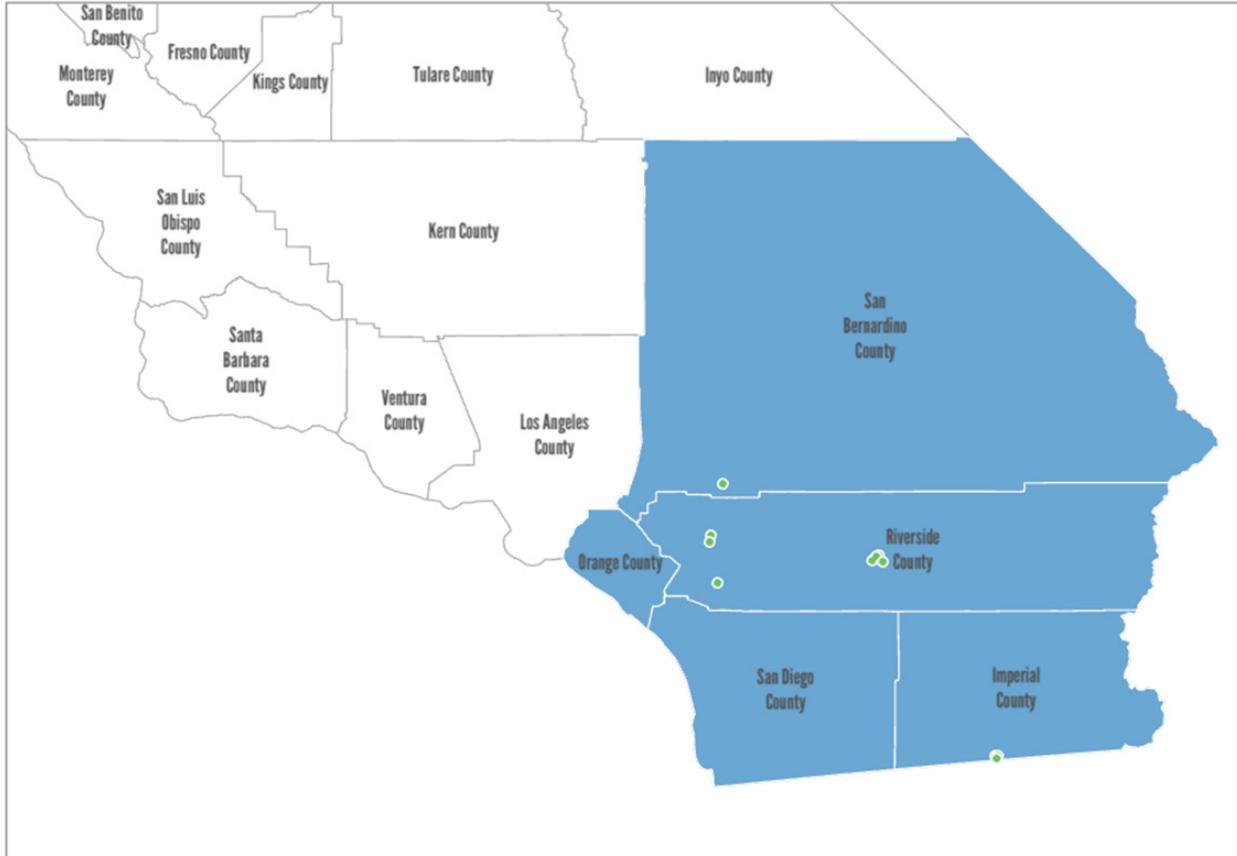
To implement the UTK Leadership Initiative, LAEP adopted a localized, strength-based approach rooted in developmentally appropriate practices in ECE and UTK settings, which aim to uplift children's strengths, unique identities, and foster joyful learning environments.¹² Aligning this approach to the 21CSLA UTK work, allowed the LAEP UTK team to gain a deeper understanding of the southernmost counties in California and uplift their unique strengths, needs, and practices. During 2024-25, the LAEP UTK team conducted 13 site visits in four counties to identify what was already working, uplift localized best practices, build relationships within each region, and encourage the UTK team to approach the work through a lens of humility and curiosity. As the UTK lead explains, "Our attempt to do site visits is to highlight what is already working. We know that while child development there are best practices and research, a lot of the work is time bound, space bound, location bound, because the families and the community that are around [also] play a pivotal role [in these settings]. It's never just a child; it's a child and somebody else. And so that's kind of where we start. We start in a place of humility. We start in a place of not knowing, of curiosity. And then we want to know what is already working here, so that we can amplify it, and we can perhaps share it, where it needs to be shared." The LAEP UTK team visited 13 sites, including four HeadStart sites and nine TK Classrooms in public elementary schools. Table 9 below provides a breakdown of the sites the team visited and any special characteristics the noted during their time at the sites. Additionally, as depicted in the Map 3, the site visits were conducted in Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial Counties.

¹² DAP: Defining Developmentally Appropriate Practice | NAEYC

Table 9. Site Visits Conducted by the LAEP UTK Team

Site Name	Type of Site	Special Characteristics
Mount Vista Elementary	TK Classroom	
Judson & Brown Elementary School	TK Classroom	Multiple classrooms on site
Perris HeadStart	HeadStart/State Preschool	
Las Brisas CDC	HeadStart/State Preschool	Infant/Toddler Center
Perris Transitional Kindergarten	TK Classroom	TK Museum Model
Martha's Village and Kitchen	HeadStart/State Preschool	Homeless Shelter
Palm View Elementary	TK Classroom	
Mountain View Elementary	TK Classroom	
Oasis State Preschool	HeadStart/State Preschool	Outdoor School
Perris HeadStart	TK Classroom	
Mount Vista Elementary	TK Classroom	
Judson & Brown Elementary School	TK Classroom	
Perris HeadStart	TK Classroom	

Map 3. Geographic Distribution of Site Visits





The LAEP UTK team provided localized regional offerings through a facilitator model.

LAEP uses a facilitator model and a “deep, not wide” approach to implementing the UTK Professional Learning Modules. In 2023-24, LAEP had four active UTK trainers and added three additional trainers to support the implementation of the UTK Professional Learning Modules. The LAEP team leverages the information gained from the site visits and the relationships with the five County Offices of Education across the southernmost region of California and other partners to identify the regional priority learning topics and brings the most needed UTK Professional Learning Modules to each region.

DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF LEADERS PARTICIPATING IN UTK PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MODULES

Most leaders who engaged in the UTK Professional Learning Modules were female teacher leaders who identified as Hispanic/Latino or White.

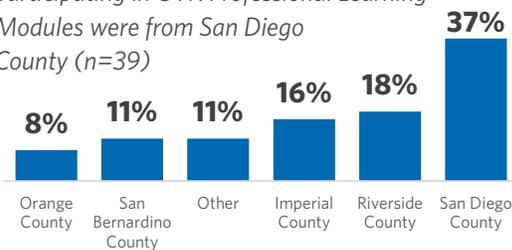
As summarized in Table 10 below, across the last two program years 2023-24 and 2024-25, the majority of leaders who participated in the UTK Professional Learning Modules were female teacher leaders who identified as Hispanic/Latino or White. The data show slight variations in terms of the regions served. For example, in 2023-24, a larger proportion of leaders (37%) worked in San Diego County, while in 2024-25, over half of the leaders served represented Riverside County. 2024-25, saw a 200% increase in the number of leaders served.

Table 10. Demographic Breakdown of Leaders Participating in the UTK Professional Learning Modules

Program Year 2023-24

39 leaders served

During FY 2023-2024 a large proportion of leaders participating in UTK Professional Learning Modules were from San Diego County (n=39)

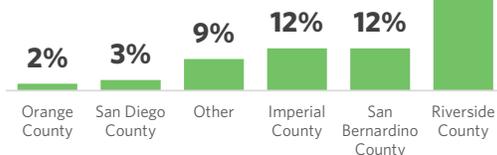


85% identified as female
 33% were Hispanic or Latino and 33% identified as White
 44% identified as White
 36% identified as teacher leaders and 23% were out of the classroom leaders.

Program Year 2024-25

117 leaders served

During FY 2024-2025 more than half of the leaders participating in UTK Professional Learning Modules were from Riverside County (n=117)



97% identified as female
 60% were Hispanic or Latino and 30% identified as White
 Roughly over one-third (38%) were teacher leaders and 12% were program specialists
 23% identified as other, including paraprofessionals, and ECE program administrators.

UTK PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MODULES IMPLEMENTED



The LAEP UTK team implemented a total of five modules, with specific modules being implemented more than once.

As summarized in Table 11 below, the LAEP UTK team implemented five UTK Professional Learning Modules, with specific modules being implemented more than once at the request of regional partners. The UTK Professional Learning Modules that were facilitated frequently cover content related to envisioning equitable TK classrooms, supporting and aligning equitable TK classrooms, and equitable TK classrooms through inclusive practices.

Table 11. Site Visits Conducted by the LAEP UTK Team

UTK Modules	Learning Objectives	2024-25		2024-25	
		Implemented In FY	# of Times Implemented	Implemented In FY	# of Times Implemented
UTK Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action	After exploring research, leaders can identify “look-fors” to support and sustain equitable, high-quality TK classrooms in their community.			✓	2
UTK Module 3: Supporting, Integrating, and Aligning Equitable TK Classrooms	Leaders develop the knowledge and understanding to support their role in leading for high-quality, developmentally appropriate, and equitable UTK programs.			✓	2
UTK Module 4: Continuous Improvement through Equitable P-3 Assessments	Leaders can make specific connections between existing assessments and how they can inform equity-centered continuous improvement for systemically marginalized and historically underserved students.	✓	1		
UTK Module 6: Equitable TK Classrooms Through Inclusive Practices	Leaders have a deepened understanding of the principles and practices of inclusion in order to increase access, support, and participation for all students.	✓	1	✓	3
UTK Module 8: Inquiry Through Play	Leaders deepen their understanding of high-quality TK classrooms by observing and experiencing play-based and inquiry-oriented TK instruction to promote equity. They also expand their knowledge about integrated, developmentally appropriate subject matter instruction in TK to promote equity.	✓	1		

KEY FINDINGS ABOUT UNIVERSAL TK

To assess the impact and effectiveness of the UTK Professional Learning Modules, the UTK team distributed a web-based evaluation survey available in English and Spanish at the conclusion of each module (see Table 11 for a list of modules).

Figure 10 below summarizes the UTK Professional Learning Modules evaluation data that was gathered across the last two program years. Findings from across the evaluation data show consistent positive findings, with participants reporting shifts in their leader practices, awareness of new strategies to implement in their professional settings, confidence in implementing learnings, and deepening their understanding of equity issues.

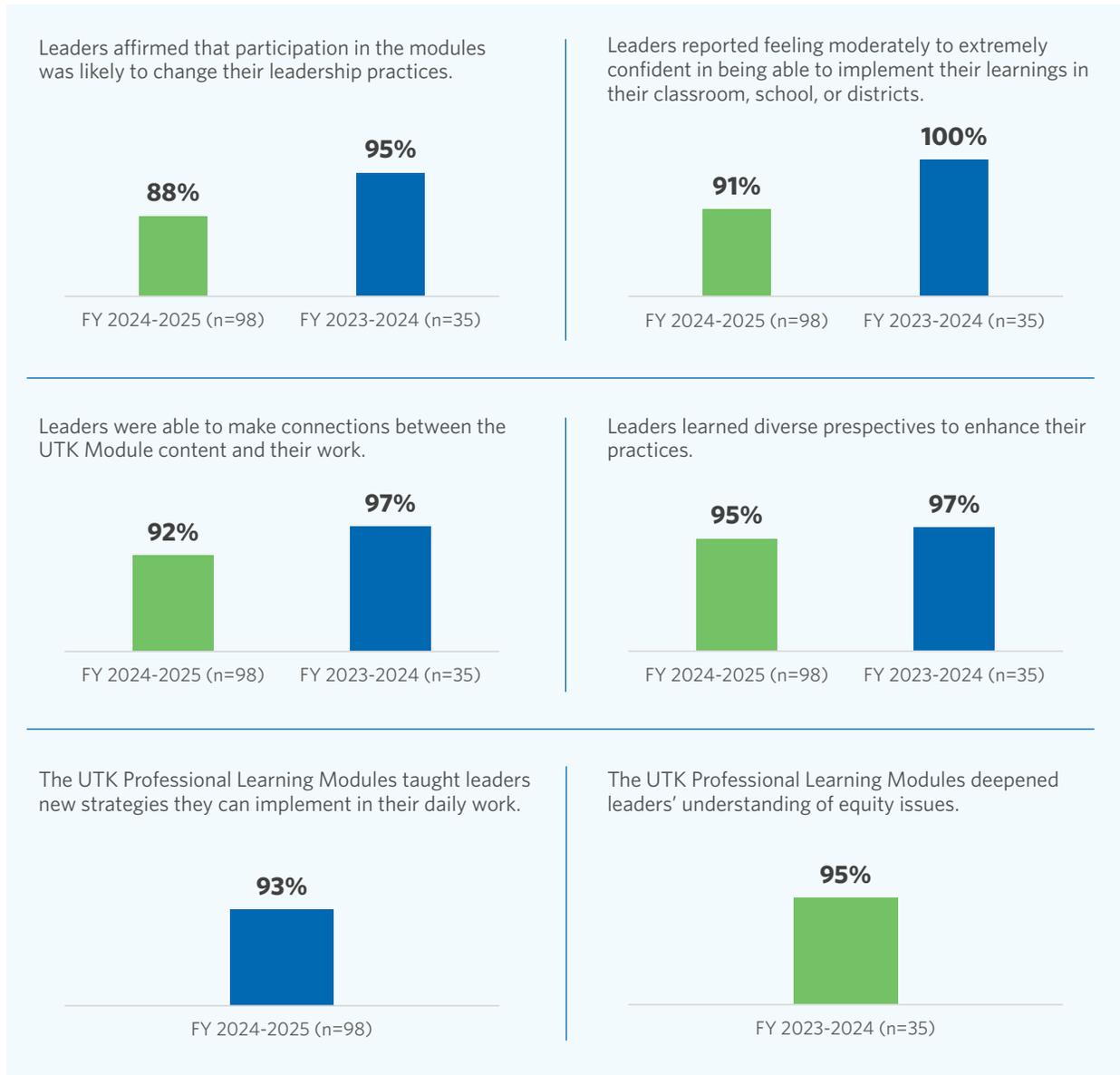


Figure 10. The UTK Professional Learning Modules shifted leader practices, introduced new strategies for implementation, facilitated connections between content and work setting, and deepened their understanding of equity issues.

UTK leaders identified the module content, community building, learning modalities, and the focus on equity mind-set as helpful aspects of the modules.



As summarized in Table 11, during 2024-25, the LAEP UTK team implemented three modules, UTK Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action, UTK Module 3: Supporting, Integrating, and Aligning Equitable TK Classrooms, and UTK Module 6: Equitable TK Classrooms Through Inclusive Practices, a total of seven times. As part of the evaluation surveys, leaders were asked to describe the most valuable aspects of the UTK Professional Learning Modules. Educational leaders identified the following elements of the UTK Professional Learning Modules as particularly useful for their practice¹³.

- **Module content.** Across the open-ended evaluation data, leaders expressed that the content and information presented during the modules by experts in the field was particularly valuable for their practice. More specifically, leaders uplifted that learning about the purpose of play, bias, inclusion, the P-3rd grade system, relevant research, and Belonging Design Principles was valuable and informative. Additionally, leaders also expressed that the literature, handouts and resources provided like the “Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and Early Grades,” were useful for their growth and to share with other colleagues.

Leader Voices on Content Covered

Below are quotes from leaders identifying the most valuable elements of the UTK Professional Learning Modules.

- “[The module provided] valuable information on how to get stakeholders and district leaders/staff engaged in UPK.”
- “[Learning] new information about the P-3rd grade and how this initiative can impact early education.
- “The “Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and Early Grades” activity was great. It really helped me reflect on what the expectations are for principals and what needs to be done to achieve those expectations.”
- “I appreciate understanding a little bit more of what inclusion means in the classroom.”
- “[The module] was a reminder of the importance of inclusion and why learning about it and implementing it is important for the benefit of all students.”

- **Community building.** During the UTK Professional Learning Modules, leaders were able to build community with like-minded leaders through conversations, listening to diverse perspectives, sharing experiences, identifying challenges and crafting solutions. In particular, the leaders who participated in the UTK Professional Learning Modules reported enjoying the think-alouds, rich discussions, networking, and having “hands-on” collaboration opportunities through group work.

¹³ Analysis is based on open-ended responses to survey items.

Leader Voices on Community Building

Below are quotes from leaders identifying the most valuable elements of the UTK Professional Learning Modules.

- *“Having the time to think aloud and hear the thoughts and perspectives of others was very refreshing.”*
- *“[It was useful] listening to leaders advocating for early childhood.”*
- *“Hands-on collaboration [was useful].”*
- *“The opportunity to network and collaborate [was useful].”*
- *“I heard feedback from different groups of people in child development.”*
- *“Being able to talk with other teachers and brainstorm on different UDL strategies.”*

- **Learning modalities.** Leaders also found the diverse participation formats and learning modalities engaging and helpful. For example, leaders enjoyed whole group discussions, small group work, gallery walks, the modeling of instructional practices, and discussions. Additionally, leaders emphasized that building in intentional journaling and self-reflection was a valuable experience that supported their learning process.

Leader Voices on Learning Modalities

Below are quotes from leaders identifying the most valuable elements of the UTK Professional Learning Modules.

- *“I loved the interactive activities and intentional journaling. My learning style is note taking and putting things down in my own words, so I appreciated the intentional journaling and reflection time.”*
- *“I really appreciate the multiple activities that we did that got us moving as we learned about inclusion. Great way of modeling instructional practices.”*
- *“The breakout groups to discuss with other people [was useful].”*
- *“The gallery walk was wonderful.”*

- **Equity and leader mindset.** Leaders also walked away with a sense of heightened leadership, increased equity knowledge, and were motivated to advocate for their students. Several UTK Professional Learning Module participants explicitly reported seeing themselves as leaders for inclusion or play in their respective professional settings. Others realized that play is right in UTK settings and left with increased motivation to advocate for play and inclusion. In terms of building an equity lens, several leaders reported being able to reflect on their own biases, learning to be mindful of the children’s and family feelings, and the importance of decreasing inclusion barriers and eliminating assumptions, but instead leaning into learning about the unique needs of students and families.

Leader Voices on Building an Equity and Leader Mindset

Below are quotes from leaders identifying the most valuable elements of the UTK Professional Learning Modules.

- *“Great information on the purpose of play. How to support the whole child and advocate for play. It’s right!”*
- *“Knowing that I’m a leader and I can have an inclusive classroom.”*
- *“The discussions as well as explanation about inclusion were extremely helpful. We are all different but perfect. I can make a difference on some little eyes.”*
- *“The most useful aspect of today’s session was to confirm that equity requires transformation of mindsets and a willingness to transform oneself!”*
- *“[The most useful aspect of the module was] helping me realize that self-reflection is crucial in identifying my own biases so that I can be a better person and teacher.”*

UTK leaders reported experiencing changes in their leadership practices related to self-awareness, emotional disposition, knowledge, and future actions.

During 2024-25, the leaders participating in the UTK Professional Learning Modules were asked through an open-ended question to reflect on how the modules shifted their leadership practices. Leader responses¹⁴ to shifts in their leadership practices fall into key leadership domains, including self-awareness, emotional disposition, knowledge, and actions. These domains and findings related to changes in leader practices are explained in detail below.

- **Self-Awareness.** UTK leaders shared that the UTK Professional Learning Modules encouraged them to be more self-aware and to reflect on their leadership practices. In terms of self-awareness, leaders reported planning to increase their awareness of language use and of the impact their practices have on adults and children. As one leader shared, *“I am constantly becoming more aware of what I say and how I make people around me feel, especially children and parents.”* Additionally, several leaders shared that they would engage in identifying and addressing their internal biases to better serve their students and communities. Leaders also reported a desire to engage in self-reflection to improve their teaching practices, prioritize inclusion practices, and identify ways to continue supporting children and families effectively.
- **Emotional disposition.** After participating in the UTK Professional Learning Modules, the UTK leaders felt empowered, motivated, and inspired to continue supporting children and families in their respective work sites. For instance, several leaders felt empowered to share their learnings with district leaders and to fully step into their leadership roles in their classrooms or programs. They walked away feeling empowered to create positive learning environments for all individuals in their classrooms, to share their learnings with other staff or colleagues, and support other educators. Further, the modules inspired UTK leaders to participate in additional professional development and motivated them to continue showing up to provide the best of themselves to their students and families. As one leader shared, *“I will work more and give the best to all children in my care and their families.”*

¹⁴ Analysis is based on open-ended responses to survey items.

- Knowledge.** As noted in Table 11, in 2024-25, the LAEP UTK team implemented UTK Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action, UTK Module 3: Supporting, Integrating, and Aligning Equitable TK Classrooms, and UTK Module 6: Equitable TK Classrooms Through Inclusive Practices, all of which provided critical information to using high-quality equitable learning environments in TK settings. Leaders reported that the knowledge and resources gained through the modules enhanced their leadership practices. For example, leaders felt that the research presented deepened and broadened their understanding of implementing equitable practices in TK settings. Leaders thought they were armed with tools to defend their practices, had a greater sense of age-appropriate practices, identified a need to align around a P-3 vision, and had a greater understanding of inclusion and were committed to reducing barriers for children and families.
- Actions.** Leaders also identified key actions they planned to implement to enhance their leadership practices after participating in the UTK Professional Learning Modules. Primarily, leaders reported intentions to share learnings with staff and colleagues, advocate for increased equitable practices and professional development, and use key instructional strategies presented during the modules. Additionally, several leaders aimed to strengthen their family engagement practices by continuing to identify their needs and sharing information about the importance of inclusion.

Table 12. Shift in Leader Practices in 2024-25

Domain	Examples of Shifts as Reported by Leaders	Leader Quotes
SELF-AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of language use and its impact on students and parents Awareness of the impact leader practices have on children, parents, and adults Open mind towards inclusion Self-reflection on internal biases Self-reflection to refine and strengthen teaching practices 	 <p>I am more aware of the big impact I can have on little minds."</p>
EMOTIONAL DISPOSITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowered to engage in advocacy and share learnings with district colleagues Empowered to view themselves as "leaders" Inspired to engage in future professional development opportunities Motivated to make a difference in communities Inspired to give the best of themselves to children and families 	 <p>I feel empowered to share these facts with my district and help coach other TK teachers."</p>
KNOWLEDGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessed research and data to support practice and advocacy Increased understanding of age-appropriate activities Greater awareness of the importance of P-3 vision alignment Greater understanding of inclusion Increased understanding of the different types of disabilities 	 <p>I am armed with more knowledge and research to defend what is happening in a TK classroom."</p>

Domain	Examples of Shifts as Reported by Leaders	Leader Quotes
ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share learnings with other staff and colleagues Increase collaboration with other staff Strengthen family engagement practices Engage in advocacy Use instructional strategies Continuing to pursue professional development 	 <p>I want to share with my families the importance of inclusion in our classroom. I also want to advocate and push for support from our administrators."</p>

Spotlight: Supporting UTK Spanish Speaking Leaders

In collaboration with the 21CSLA Bay Area, North Bay/North Coast, and ValCo Regional Academies, LAEP launched the first ever Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module.



In California, 39% of early educators are multilingual, and 37% speak Spanish (Powell, A., Kim, Y., & Montoya, E., 2021). According to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, in the seven southernmost counties in California, including Imperial, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura, 43% of early educators speak Spanish, and 40% were born in a country outside the United States. Recognizing the substantial proportion of early educators in Southern California who speak Spanish and the sense of empowerment that comes from receiving professional development in one's native language, in May of 2025, the LAEP UTK Team along with the 21CSLA Bay Area, North Bay/North Coast, and ValCo Regional Academies collaborated to implement the first ever Spanish 21CSLA UTK Professional Learning Module with English interpretation support. The LAEP team and the 21CSLA Valco and North Bay/North

Coast Regional Academies selected UTK Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action to implement in Spanish as it provides key research and a comprehensive overview of implementing equitable practices in high-quality TK classrooms. The Spanish module was implemented virtually and split into two parts across two days, with each day requiring leaders to participate in two hours of training. The following Spotlight report highlights the successes of this approach, the evaluation results specific to the Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module, and the future plans to continue supporting Spanish speaking early learning leaders in Southern California.

LAEP experienced several successes in the implementation of the Spanish UTK module, including increased collaboration with 21CSLA Regional Academies, participation of Spanish speaking leaders, and effective use of language justice approaches.

The LAEP team and the collaborating 21CSLA Regional Academies experienced the following key successes from implementing a UTK Spanish language module.

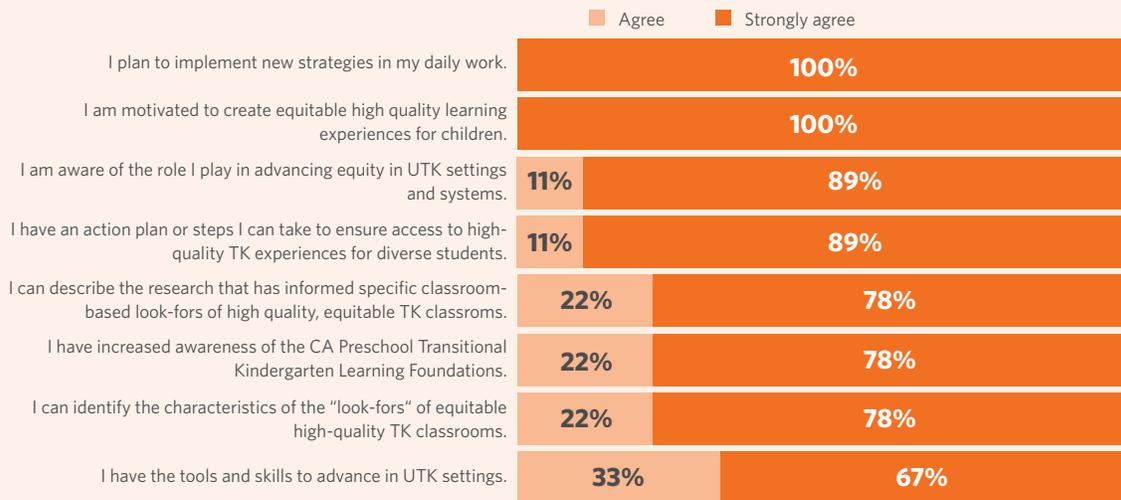
- **Increased collaboration and relationship building across regional academies.** As noted earlier, the implementation of the Spanish UTK Professional Learning module was a cross-Regional Academy effort, with three 21CSLA Regional Academies intentionally sharing facilitator resources, expertise, and best practices to create an inclusive and effective learning experience for Spanish speaking early learning leaders. The three regional academies played a key role in the module design and facilitation supporting one another in translating content, reviewing content, and providing each other feedback before and during the implementation of the module.
- **Attendance and leader participation.** A total of thirteen leaders participated in the Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module, with most leaders (n=10) participating fully in Spanish, while three leaders received English interpretation. A key success for the facilitation team was achieving a 70% participation rate from Spanish-speaking leaders on the second day of the module implementation. Additionally, the facilitation team observed that many leaders encouraged their team members to participate informally in the module, which meant that early education teams were sharing a single device or computer to participate in the module. This success is important to highlight as leaders rarely have the opportunity to receive this type of professional development as a whole team.
- **Implementation of language justice approaches.** By translating and delivering this offering in Spanish, the facilitation team honored language justice approaches which aim to create multilingual spaces and environments where individuals have the “right to communicate in the language in which [they] feel most comfortable” (Ghanbarpour, Noguez Mercado, & Palotai, 2020). The facilitation of the Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module prioritized the first language of Spanish speaking leaders, who often rely on or are asked to use interpretation or their English language skills to participate in professional development or training.
- **Modeling equitable practices.** By conducting the entire UTK Professional Learning Module in Spanish and providing English speakers with interpretation support, the facilitation team and educational leaders were able to “disrupt privilege and [challenge] English dominance and Western-centered knowledge, communication, and leadership” (Racial Equity Tools, 2020). Typically, in formal professional development spaces, it is non-English speakers who receive interpretation support and English is upheld as the dominant language. In contrast, in the Spanish UTK Professional Learning module, the facilitation team disrupted this traditional approach and created a learning environment that invited curiosity and discomfort by allowing English speakers to engage in a professional development experience through interpretation supports.



In general, leaders had very positive feedback on the Spanish UTK Module. All leaders reported that the module changed their leadership practices.

The UTK Spanish module had a positive impact on the participating leaders. As summarized in the Exhibit below, all leaders reported planning to implement new strategies in their daily work and were motivated to create equitable high-quality learning experiences for children. Additionally, 100% of leaders reported that module changed their leadership practices. Leaders reported planning to be more intentional in their interactions with students, implement more play-based strategies, and continue advocating for their young learners.

Leaders planned to implement new strategies in their work and felt motivated to create equitable learning experiences for children.



Looking Ahead

The LAEP UTK team has planned the following next steps to continue supporting Spanish speaking UTK leaders in Southern California.

- A Call to Action: Family and Community Engagement for High Quality TK.** In October of 2025, the LAEP UTK team will implement a virtual professional learning offering designed to equip leaders to support Black, Brown, and Spanish speaking communities who are impacted by our current immigration and political climate. Using an assets-based approach, leaders will learn how to effectively measure family engagement and learn practical strategies to support diverse communities in their local regions.
- In-Person Spanish Language UTK Professional Learning Modules.** The LAEP UTK team will begin offering in-person Spanish Language UTK Professional Learning Modules to the five southernmost California counties, including San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties. The team will prioritize the implementation of Spanish Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action since it offers a broad overview of equitable practices in TK settings.

Sources: Powell, A., Kim, Y., & Montoya, E. (2021). Demographics of the California ECE Workforce. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/data-snapshot/demographics-of-the-california-ece-workforce/>
 Language Justice RVA. (n.d.). Language Justice RVA. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from <https://languagejusticerva.org/>
 Racial Equity Tools. (n.d.). Plan, Issues, Language Justice. Racial Equity Tools. Retrieved September 30, 2025, from <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resources/plan/issues/language-justice>
 Ghanbarpour, S., Noguez Mercado, A. P., & Palotai, A. (2020). A language justice framework for culturally responsive and equitable evaluation. BetterEvaluation. Retrieved from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/language-justice-framework-for-culturally-responsive-equitable-evaluation>.

Leaders reported engaging in a range of actions to advance equity in their work, these include increasing equitable instructional practices, strengthening parent engagement activities, sharing knowledge with colleagues, and strengthening partnerships.

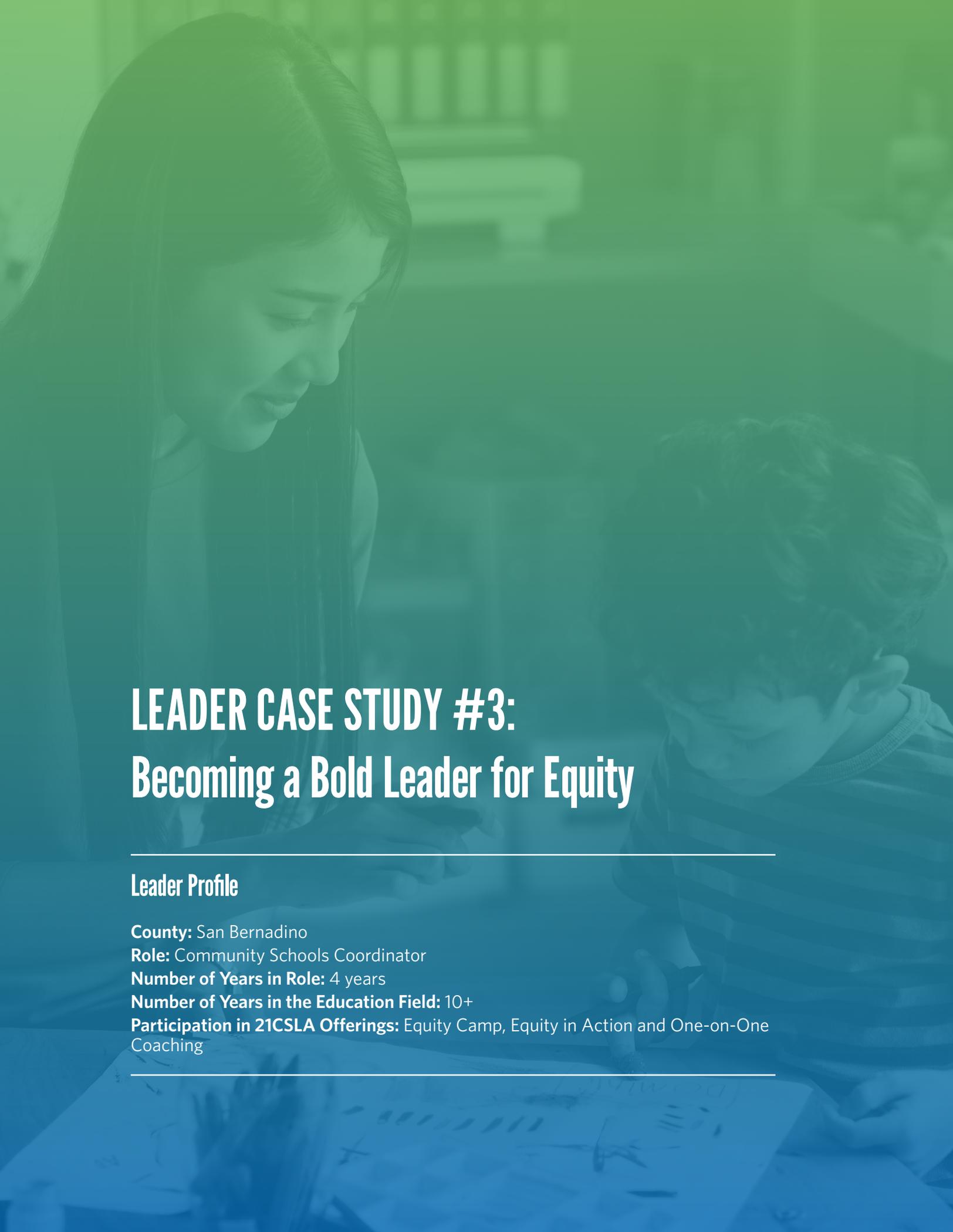
After completing the UTK Professional Learning Modules, leaders reported a range of ways in which they planned to apply their new knowledge. These include increasing equitable instructional practices, providing opportunities for parents to learn about inclusion, and sharing their new learnings with colleagues and leadership. Additionally, site leaders shared planning to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on inclusive practices, facilitating conversations with leadership teams around the content covered in the modules, and providing more training opportunities to teachers on inclusion and equity topics. As one site leader noted, “I will provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on what inclusion is and what practices are they putting in place to eliminate barriers or even reflect on their implicit biases that influence the work they do on a daily basis. Table 13 below provides highlights of the specific UTK module evaluation results and summarizes the ways in which leaders planned to apply their learnings to advance equity in their respective settings.

Table 13. UTK Professional Learning Module Evaluation Highlights for 2024-25

Module	Evaluation Highlights	Leader Plans for Applying Learnings to Advance Equity
<p>UTK Module 2: Envisioning Equitable TK Classrooms in Action 25 leaders served</p>	<p>After participating in this module 100% of leaders...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Had a greater understanding of characteristics of equitable high-quality TK classrooms. Felt motivated to create high quality learning experiences for children. Had a plan of action to ensure access to high-quality TK experiences for diverse children. Understood their role in advancing equity in UTK settings and systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in self-reflection and adapt practices. Increase structured playtime in classroom settings. Share learnings with colleagues. Build relationships with district leadership to expand trainings for UTK teachers. Increase access to training related to equitable TK classrooms to teachers.
<p>UTK Module 3: Supporting, Integrating, and Aligning Equitable TK Classrooms 32 leaders served</p>	<p>After participating in this module...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 95% of leaders were motivated to create a shared vision for pre- PreK-K3rd grade alignment in my work setting. 91% of leaders had a greater understanding of California’s PreK-3rd grade vision. 92% planned to implement new strategies into their daily work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase parent engagement via trainings on equity, ensuring that parents have an understanding of how to support their children. Increasing inclusion practices in classroom settings. Promote P-3 alignment. Expand teacher support for understanding and implementing equitable practices. Engage in self-reflection. Sharing new learnings with administration. Increasing collaboration across districts.

Module	Evaluation Highlights	Leader Plans for Applying Learnings to Advance Equity
<p>UTK Module 6: Equitable TK Classrooms Through Inclusive Practices 59 leaders served</p>	<p>After participating in this module...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 95% of leaders understood the benefits of inclusion of children with disabilities and nondisabled children. 94% of leaders felt motivated to increase access and supports for all students. 93% of leaders were able to identify the key features of inclusion in high quality p=3 classrooms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement inclusive teaching strategies, such as increasing collaboration time among students, incorporating inclusive read-alouds, applying Universal Design, and strengthening belonging practices. Strengthen family engagement efforts by educating families about equity and inclusion and acknowledging parents' needs and identities. Commitment to meet students where they are and to include all students. Continue training and professional development in equity and inclusion. Reflect on implicit biases. Advocate for students and families.



A woman with long dark hair is looking down at a young boy who is holding a piece of paper with a drawing on it. They are both smiling and appear to be in a classroom or office setting. The background is slightly blurred, showing what might be a bookshelf.

LEADER CASE STUDY #3: Becoming a Bold Leader for Equity

Leader Profile

County: San Bernadino

Role: Community Schools Coordinator

Number of Years in Role: 4 years

Number of Years in the Education Field: 10+

Participation in 21CSLA Offerings: Equity Camp, Equity in Action and One-on-One Coaching

Paving Your Own Pathway to Leadership in Education



Culturally, education has always been valued. But because of the financial barriers and challenges, it was never an option. I had to make it an option.” - Wendy

Wendy is a passionate, equity-driven leader with more than ten years of experience in education. The proud daughter of Mexican immigrants, she comes from a culture and familial background that deeply values education and learning. As she planned her future after high school, she faced financial barriers and a lack of understanding of the college system. She stated, “Culturally, education has always been valued. But because of the financial barriers and challenges, it was never an option. I had to make it an option.”

Wendy began her work in the private sector before returning to school. Her own children motivated her to leave the private sector and pursue education. She saw her children struggle from an early age to meet grade-level standards. Their teachers were continuously replaced by new teachers and substitute teachers. Seeing her son struggle with literacy, she began teaching her son and advocated for him and his peers to have a consistent teacher throughout the year and more supportive systems for students’ learning.

A reflective leader, Wendy considered how while she had the ability and capacity to support her son’s literacy learning, many parents did not. After asking herself how she could help others who do not have these resources, she began supporting her son in the classroom as a bilingual aide. Wendy’s pathway to leadership began there, moving upwards to become a teacher at the high school level. She stated, *“I loved it, but I really wanted to make more of a difference. What do I need to do? I thought, I can work with teachers.”* After receiving her administrator credentials, she began working as a school climate and culture coach, learning and working her way up through the district to become a district administrator in the MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) department and coach. Now, Wendy serves as a Community Schools Coordinator, utilizing the Community Schools model to train and coach other leaders in areas of MTSS, PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems), culturally responsive SEL (socio-emotional learning), and restorative practices. Throughout her leadership journey, Wendy has demonstrated what it means to pave your own pathway in education to support the needs of students, parents, and educators.

CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF EQUITY

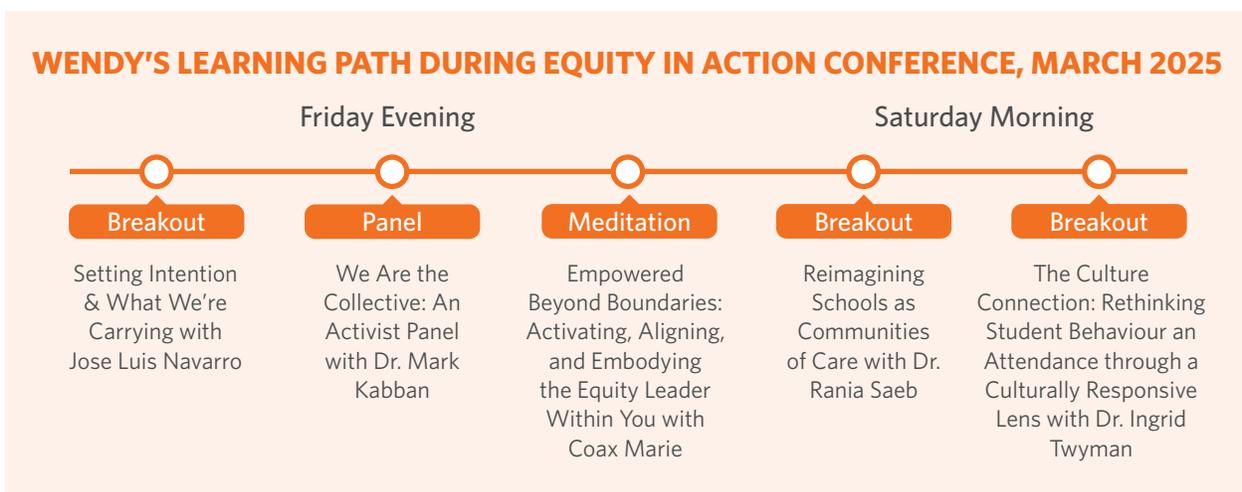
Wendy defines educational equity as aligning access to resources, learning, and educators for students and families, while removing barriers or challenges so that they can “have a voice, have agency, and own their own education.” Equity has been a through-line and lens throughout Wendy’s praxis, particularly through her current role as a Community Schools Coordinator. As a Community Schools Coordinator, she trains and coaches other educators and school teams on integrating equitable practices into MTSS/PBIS and builds their capacity for equity-based school policies and practices. Her approach is defined by an equity-first mindset, supporting educators to integrate culturally responsive, mindful, restorative behavioral practices within the Community Schools model. Reflecting on her four years as a Community Schools Coordinator and her shift from working with students to adults, she stated, “I’m not going to lie. It’s a lot more frustrating working with adults. ... They’re set in their ways, and it’s harder to shift their mindset [towards equity]. But, it makes it all the more rewarding when we do see a shift.”



I would like to just label it and say, this is what equity is, don’t be afraid of it. Let’s talk about it and let’s remove some of those stigmas that word has now, so that we can get to the work.”
- Wendy

Also challenging her work were the shifting attitudes towards equity and politics during 2024-25, which made educators and schools view equity as a “bad word.” This shift in the landscape that Wendy operates in directly impacted her work and made addressing equity more of a challenge. She stated, *“What I have found with some of the districts I work with is that equity is not a good word. Equity is a bad word. So, how do I incorporate that into conversations, or even address equity in my coaching and training in a way that everyone can understand what it is, know the benefits of it, and the impact that it can have on students and adults, without using the word ‘equity’? ... But I would like to just label it and say, this is what equity is, don’t be afraid of it. Let’s talk about it and let’s remove some of those stigmas that word has now, so that we can get to the work.”*

Thus, identifying feasible strategies to create a common definition of equity and de-stigmatize the word within schools was Wendy’s primary goal for participating in 21CSLA offerings. In addition to working with a coach through 21CSLA’s leadership coaching offering, Wendy attended 21CSLA conferences to further her learning and increase her toolbelt of strategies to address equity challenges. At the most recent conference, Equity in Action (March 2025), Wendy attended the following panels and sessions with this goal in mind.



ENACTING BOLD LEADERSHIP AND BOLD STRATEGIES



I want to do more bold-faced equity work.” - Wendy

Wendy’s experiences at 21CSLA conferences remind her of the importance of being a bold leader for equity in her role. Specifically, the explicit focus of the conferences on equity reminds her that, despite challenges in her work, equity is not a “bad word.” Reflecting on her conference experience at Equity Camp, she stated, *“I’ve taken personal days so that I can go and learn and really be with community, because I want to dive deeper into the work.”*

Wendy’s experience at Equity in Action inspired her to be bolder in her equity work, rather than follow along with districts and educators who worked to scrub equity from their practices and policies in the current political landscape. She stated, *“These days, parents are highly involved in school politics, and they can get ‘in your face’. I think a lot of times teachers are afraid to talk to parents and talk about this topic. And the reason why is because we don’t teach them how to have these conversations. ... After hearing the speakers on the activist panel, I want to do more bold-faced equity work.”*

With bold leadership, comes the need for bold strategies. At Equity in Action, Wendy began to understand the power that storytelling can have as a strategy for community-building and for aligning educators with a digestible standard of equity that can be acted upon. Wendy learned the importance of communication, and

how to communicate with educators the practice of using an equity lens to address student behaviors, as well as policies and practices that are inequitable or limit access to supports for high-need students. She stated, *"I learned more holistic, bold strategies that I can use to help school or district leaders come together and create more culturally relevant, equitable solutions to problems their school or district is facing with consideration of the community context."* For Wendy, attending Equity in Action and the breakout sessions inspired her to continue being bold in her equity work, as well as begin enacting bold, equity-first strategies to training and educating other leaders in what it means to be equitable.

MOVING FORWARD WITH EQUITY WORK

As Wendy reflected on her total experience with 21CSLA offerings, she noticed how she became more emboldened and motivated to continue her journey towards sustaining herself as a leader of equity. In the current political and social climate of education, with equity work being actively targeted in policies and practices, Wendy saw first-hand the importance of being bold in her work and enacting bold leadership, now more than ever. She stated, "[My conference experience] reaffirmed that, hey, we can move forward with equity work and call it what it is. ... The conference provided that opportunity to say, you know what? We can still be doing this, we can still continue doing the work and not be afraid to." Wendy, as a result of participating in 21CSLA offerings, has acquired meaningful strategies to continue her work and continue to become a bold leader for equity.



We can still continue doing the work and not be afraid to."

- Wendy



Cross Cutting Findings

Our evaluation focused on the reach, movement towards equity, and impact of the 21CSLA initiative in Southern California.

REACH

- 1. Between 2023-24 and 2024-25, 21CSLA served a total of 818 leaders**, 69 of whom participated both years. Leaders represented 67 school districts across San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties.
- 2. Over one-third of the districts served by the initiative (39%) were in San Diego County**, while over a fifth of the districts (22%) were in Riverside County. A combined 16% were in Orange and San Bernardino Counties. Only 6% of districts served were in Imperial County, indicating an area in need of attention in the upcoming program year. In 2024-25, the program team continued to build relationships with local county offices of education – an effort that will support future expansion of the program’s reach in Orange, San Bernardino, and Imperial Counties.
- 3. Between a quarter and a third of participants served by LAEP 21CSLA were teacher leaders**, with larger proportions of leaders identifying as female, White or Hispanic.
- 4. Overall, leaders were served largely by COPs and LPLs.** Across the two program years, a larger number of leaders participated in LPLs and COPs, while smaller shares of leaders engaged in the coaching and UTK offerings. 2024-25 saw an increase of 12% in leaders who engaged in COPs, a 10% increase in leaders who participated in coaching, and a 200% increase in leaders who participated in the UTK modules.

MOVEMENT TOWARDS EQUITY

Feedback from leaders indicated that across 21CSLA offerings, participants improved their understanding of equity and applied it in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

- 1. Across the three conferences, most participants felt that these events deepened their understanding of and prepared them to address equity issues.** For example, at the end of the Spring 2024 conference, most leaders felt “extremely confident” or “moderately confident” in applying what they learned to their work. After the Fall 2024 conference, nearly half of survey respondents mentioned that they were walking away with tools that were immediately implementable like storytelling, data, list of books to read, and a Liberation Library. Half of participants shared that what helped them feel prepared to integrate equity into their work were the new knowledge, resources, tools, strategies and action steps that they gained during the Spring 2025 conference.
- Leaders reported that, **as a result of their conference participation, they had shifted their equity lens**, that they had taken more **brave and empowered action** (e.g., “Joined the district’s equity team”), and that they would commit to **reflecting critically** on personal and professional beliefs and to long-term growth.
- LAEP coaches** built relational trust by creating safe spaces and listening deeply to the unique needs of leaders. As a result, leaders felt that their coaches were exceptionally effective in creating **safe spaces** and **in listening to their ideas and perspectives**. They reported that the LAEP coaches were exceptionally effective in **listening attentively to their needs** and **in being available when needed**.
- The great majority of leaders reported that **coaching improved their work** by 1) increasing their knowledge of equitable leadership practices, 2) supporting them to advance equity in their classroom, school, or district, and 3) helping them advance equity specifically for students of color and students from diverse backgrounds.
- Leaders experienced key changes in **wellness, reflective practice, and leadership approaches** because of their participation in **coaching**. Some of these changes included time and workload management, realistic goal setting, recentering on core values, increased reflection on actions, self-reflection with staff, strengthening their own coaching capacity of leaders, enhanced ability to support staff and colleagues experiencing different emotions or feelings, and learning to support the capacity building of challenging colleagues.
- 21CSLA’s **Universal Transitional Kindergarten** (UTK) Leadership Initiative, which was designed to improve the work of leaders in classrooms, schools, and districts implementing TK, helped leaders to 1) shift their practices, 2) build awareness of new strategies to implement in their professional settings, 3) increase their confidence in implementing strategies, and 4) deepen their understandings of equity issues.
- UTK leaders** reported experiencing changes in their leadership practices related to **self-awareness, emotional disposition, knowledge, and future actions**. For example, after their engagement with the UTK Modules, some leaders committed to 1) increasing their awareness of language use and of the impact their practices have on adults and children, 2) identifying and addressing their internal biases to better serve their students and communities, and 3) practicing self-reflection to improve their teaching practices, prioritize inclusion practices, and identify ways to continue supporting children and families effectively.
- UTK leaders** reported engaging in a range of actions to **advance equity in their work**, including increasing equitable instructional practices, strengthening parent engagement activities, sharing knowledge with colleagues, and strengthening partnerships.

9. In collaboration with the 21CSLA Bay Area, North Bay/North Coast, and ValCo Regional Academies, LAEP launched the first ever **Spanish UTK Professional Learning Module**. LAEP experienced several successes in the implementation of this module, including increased collaboration with 21CSLA Regional Academies, participation of Spanish-speaking leaders, and effective use of language justice approaches. Participating leaders gave very positive feedback on the module, with **all leaders reporting that it changed their leadership practices**.

Beyond these areas of leaders' growth, leaders identified particular **professional learning needs** for which they would like to receive support in Year 3. Through listening sessions, coaching interviews, and other data sources at the end of their second year, Cohort 2 leaders communicated that among their areas of need for further equity-focused learning are **community and resistance, instructional leadership, systems change, and wellness strategies to navigate racist systems**. Specific examples of their learning needs included 1) navigating power dynamics: leaders need tools, strategies, resources, and a network of support to confront the push-back against equity, 2) advocating for immigrant, Black, LGBTQ+, Brown, neurodiverse students and students with special needs, and 3) leveraging data to address resistance to equity and create a cohesive system that supports equity: leaders want to leverage data as a way to keep equity alive in their settings.

IMPACT

During the first two years of LAEP's support for 21CSLA Cohort 2 leaders, our primary goals were to help leaders 1) build understandings around equity and wellness, 2) commit to sharing these with their teams, 3) increase their ability to make equity actionable, 4) apply leadership practices, and 5) develop a data culture. Our collaborative and comprehensive data collection and analysis helped us arrive at the following conclusions about the extent to which these goals were met.

- 1 **21CSLA LAEP helped leaders across Southern California to advance their understandings of equity-focused instructional leadership practices.** Across our offerings, leaders reported that they developed clear understandings around equity and strategies to integrate equity intentionally into their work.
 - At **conferences**, leaders accessed concrete tools and strategies to improve family engagement and align student support services with a Community Schools mindset.
 - Leaders reported that **coaching** increased their knowledge of equitable leadership practices and allowed them to advance equity for students of color and students from diverse backgrounds.
 - The **UTK Professional Learning Modules** deepened leaders' understanding of equity issues through topics such as the purpose of play, bias, inclusion, the P-3rd grade system, relevant research, and Belonging Design Principles.
- 2 **Across offerings, leaders reported that they learned and practiced approaches to building an equity-centered culture in their settings.**
 - **Conference** respondents commonly mentioned that they were walking away with tools that were immediately implementable like storytelling, data analysis approaches, lists of books to read, a Liberation Library, and other ideas to take to their teams to implement collaboratively.
 - Nearly all leaders who participated in one-on-one **coaching**, shared that their coaching allowed them to advance equity in their classrooms, schools, or districts.
 - The **UTK Spanish-Speaking Leader** module, in particular, promoted an equity-focused culture and advanced language justice by creating multilingual environments where individuals felt free to communicate in the language of their choice. The facilitation of this module prioritized the first language of Spanish-speaking leaders, who often rely on or are asked to use interpretation or their English language skills to participate in professional development or training.

3 Because of their participation in 21CSLA LAEP offerings, leaders felt prepared and were beginning to apply their learning to advance education equity in their settings.

- The new knowledge, resources, tools, strategies and action steps that they gained at the **conferences** helped them feel prepared to integrate equity into their work. Participants commented that they were motivated to reflect critically on personal and professional beliefs and to commit to long-term growth. Importantly, from one conference to the next, they had shifted their equity lens and had taken more brave and empowered action.
- Leaders who engaged in **coaching** were able to make shifts in their equitable leadership practices to serve their various interest holders. For instance, leaders felt more equipped to support challenging colleagues or staff members who responded in emotionally diverse ways. Additionally, leaders refined their own coaching practices when supporting teachers or other colleagues. They upheld the needs of students, ensuring that equity remained central across their leadership and work.
- Leaders who participated in **UTK** training committed to sharing their learnings with staff and colleagues, to advocating for increased equitable practices and professional development, and using key instructional strategies presented during the modules. Additionally, several leaders aimed to strengthen their family engagement practices by continuing to identify their needs and sharing information about the importance of inclusion.

4 21CSLA LAEP conferences and coaching supported leaders' wellness, modeling for them the importance of wellness for their teams. Leaders commented that features of 21CSLA offerings that uplifted their wellness not only allowed them to learn deeply but also supported their feeling of connection to other leaders and modeled for them the importance of caring for others' wellbeing.

- During **conferences**, amenities boosted participants' enjoyment, contributing to their wellness: Among these were the comfortable and joy-focused environments (e.g., good music, opportunities to meditate and relax with colleagues, giveaway items). Another feature of the conferences that supported leader wellness – likely with enduring impact on their emotional wellbeing – were the multiple, repeated opportunities they had to connect with like-minded advocates and implementers. Participants commonly shared comments such as, “Being supported by allies provides strength to fight,” and “Engaging in candid conversations with others who are also committed to equity reinforced that this work isn’t done alone.”
- **Coaching** influenced occupational wellness by strengthening leaders' ability to refine their skills in time management, workload management, balanced goal setting, and reconnecting with their values.



Recommendations

Through the 21CSLA initiative, LAEP made strong progress towards supporting educational leaders in building equitable practices and mindsets. The following recommendations aim to strengthen the future efforts of LAEP as it continues to implement the 21CSLA initiative in Southern California.

- 1 Expand leader outreach in Imperial County.** Participation from leaders based in Imperial County was low for UTK sessions, lower for coaching, and there was no participation from these leaders in any of the conferences. A listening session with leaders from this county is planned for fall 2025, from which we hope to learn what needs they may have that LAEP and 21CSLA can address to ensure that they are able to engage across all offerings.
- 2 Increase site leader representation across offerings.** Through continuing efforts to gather feedback from leaders across the counties, we look forward to identifying and implementing methods to engage more school administrators and other site-level leaders, since their participation was low across our conferences, UTK program, and coaching.
- 3 Extend leader outreach to include leaders who may be resistant and most in need of clear equity messaging.** Through interviews, surveys, and anecdotal evidence, concern was expressed by 21CSLA LAEP participants that resistance to their equity work that they normally encountered would now be exacerbated by the anti-equity messaging of some political leaders. To help reduce this resistance, it is imperative to broaden our efforts to include leaders who still have space to grow in their equity-focused approaches.
- 4 Continue to focus on cultivating and sustaining meaningful relationships with leaders across the San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Imperial, and Orange Counties.** Feedback from many participants included expressions of gratitude for the learning, skills building, and community offered to them by 21CSLA LAEP opportunities. It was also apparent that to encourage their ongoing efforts in building equitable spaces, leaders would need ongoing, whole-hearted support from their 21CSLA LAEP team.
- 5 Continue to implement offerings through an asset-based and human-centered approach.** The great majority of participants agreed that their engagement in conferences, UTK offerings, and leadership coaching was very positive and useful. Future offerings should continue to empower them, leveraging their strengths and value as individuals.
- 6 Ensure offerings continue to focus on instructional leadership practices, data utilization, and systems change/coherence.** This will allow for foundational learning and relationship building that has taken place to date among leaders to strengthen and extend in these important areas.
- 7 Continue to focus on integrating wellness approaches and strengthening the network of leaders across 21CSLA offerings.** In the face of the current external landscape, it is critical to continue integrating wellness approaches into the 21CSLA offerings so that leaders feel nourished and have spaces to center their wellness, enabling them to continue supporting students and families in their local regions. Additionally, through qualitative data, the evaluation team learned that 21CSLA leaders need to feel connected to a like-minded community of leaders and colleagues whose goals are to advance equitable practices in their local contexts.
- 8 Sustain and expand data and evaluation efforts to continue documenting the impact of the initiative and building the internal evaluation capacity of the implementation team.** Timely, integrated, and innovative approaches that responded to our implementation teams' needs resulted in consistently responsive and highly effective programming. The data that we gathered and analyzed was used for both formative purposes to guide design and adjustments and for uplifting the most important findings in this and other summative reports.

Looking Ahead

To conclude, in the Fiscal Year 2025-2026, LAEP will continue, now more than ever, to support the wellness, leadership, and professional development needs of educational leaders across Southern California. As noted earlier in this report, our current political and social environment calls us to ensure that educators are equipped with tools, strategies, and practical resources to keep equity alive and address equity resistance in their local settings and communities. To this end, LAEP will offer the following professional development opportunities to leaders in our priority counties.¹⁵

- **Meeting the Moment: Activating our Collective Power Community of Practice**
- **Breath and Balance Wellness Offering**
- **BIPOC & Mixed Roots Healing Space (Affinity Group)**
- **Moving Towards Us: Divesting from Whiteness (Affinity Group)**
- **Universal Transitional Kindergarten Modules**
- **2026 Spring Conference**
- **One-on-one Leadership Coaching**

¹⁵ For a detailed description and list of 21CSLA offerings for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026, please see the 21CSLA Digital Program Offerings.

A photograph of a young woman with long dark hair, smiling broadly. She is wearing a dark-colored sweater and a necklace with a small pendant. The background is a blurred classroom setting with other students. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue gradient.

APPENDIX

Equity Camp Stories

The following stories were told by their authors during a keynote session at the Equity Camp conference in November 2024. They are reproduced here in their entirety.

“SILENCE AND SOUND”

By Antonia Issa-Lahera and Abdul-Rehman Mohammed Issa

Antonia

I wonder if my eldest son, who is here with me, listens to the stories I tell from the past about ancestors and the eras I have lived through and if they give him any pause.

I know that I half listened to my own mother’s stories. I wish I had asked questions and listened more carefully as she recalled her mother, a true social justice educator before there was such a term, way back in the 1930’s. I had heard these stories over and over about her work with migrant farmworker children, her protest over the Japanese internment of her neighbors, and her ceaseless commitment to the field of education. I knew my mother mourned her death and never considered she was holding up a model of who I might become.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a hero to my mother and stories of things she had done were told over and over again as well. She held up Roosevelt’s outspokenness and her focus on civil rights as having been pivotal to her own moral development. My mother told how as First Lady, Roosevelt served on the United Nations committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I listened more closely when my mother compared my energy to my grandmother’s, and to Roosevelt. She often traced these qualities back through many generations of the women in our family as their many stories were of bold and brave women.

I often think of the influence of my mother on other parts of my development. My mother was kind, loving and generous beyond belief. She was a person who did not judge others and welcomed everyone in. She loved a constant stream of visitors and houseguests and lived her entire life that way. We learned early that she believed that everyone had a responsibility to comfort the lonely, tend to the sick, and help those who could

not help themselves. And so growing up we not only heard stories, we visited old ladies, helped the needy, and participated in what she showed us was the way to live a life.

She was also a woman who loved words. She read us Shakespeare and recited poetry at the dinner table. She challenged us to read widely, took us to plays and performances. and we sang together all the time. She came from a family of five and her siblings, my aunts and uncles, were larger than life in every possible way. We spent holidays and summers together and those elders welcomed the voices of us children. We were not encouraged, but challenged to be clever, to be storytellers, and to be outspoken. The more interesting we were, the more valued and elevated we seemed. Those folks energized me and I found my voice early as I competed with my cousins to be the sharpest, the wittiest, the most talented of the bunch. They were not only a gregarious bunch, but a loving clan who welcomed strangers in, and there were always new people being added to the fold.

But maybe it was my father, an only child, raised by stoic folks who worked hard and spoke little who influenced me. He was quiet and strong and silent much of the time. So from him I learned to observe the world, to sit with silence comfortably and to take meaningful action decisively. It was his actions that spoke loudly. He and my uncles served in WWII and never spoke of their heroism or the horrors of war but rather dedicated their lives to progressive causes. He was an Olympic champion and resigned his membership in the LA Athletic Club when he invited two friends, one African American, one Jewish to join and their applications were rejected. He got loans for the people who cleaned our house before the Fair Housing Act. But he did not speak of these things.

And so I learned to watch and listen and to be strong and forthright. It was a twofold and simultaneous

experience. My mother inevitably asked the same question of me, “Who did you help?”

While my father’s parallel quiet message was about self-care with the message “Pay myself first in life before you help others.”

Now I feel the presence of both of them in all that I do and must do.

And so, I birthed two mixed-race boys, one full of words and one far more lean in his expression. I expected that their lives would be as enriched as mine. Little did I understand, even coming from the people I did, the insidious power of racism.

Abdul-Rehman

I spent my early childhood in Saudi Arabia, a place that, in memory, feels more like a dream than a formative home. While my name, Abdul-Rehman, ties me to that part of the world, I have no strong connection to the land, the religion, the customs, or even the language. It was not these distant cultural roots that shaped my understanding of myself or my place in the world; rather, it was my experiences of silence, of suffering quietly and enduring the discomfort of otherness, that have left the deepest marks on me. These stories are what shaped my understanding of inequity, the importance of belonging, and called me to action.

When we moved to Southern California, the summer sun settled on my skin as we settled into our new home. It was just before I began first grade, and my mother, ever hopeful to give me a chance to fit in, signed me up for an athletics camp at Cal State Long Beach. I was six, and this was my first taste of navigating a space without her consistent, protective presence. I felt disoriented from the moment I walked into the locker room. The clamor of voices, the sharp echo of sneakers on concrete, all of it overwhelmed my senses. I was small, and the world felt too big, too fast, too loud.

I remember being handed a right-handed baseball glove, the stiff leather awkwardly hugging my left hand, fingers straining inside a space that wasn’t built for them. The counselor, busy with a swarm of more confident children, barely looked at me as he directed me toward a field. I can still feel the weight of that glove on my hand, like an anchor pulling me down as I shuffled nervously across the grass, my heart beating in my throat.

The field was a blur of activity, kids running and shouting, balls flying through the air. I stood there, frozen, feeling the heat of the sun pressing down on me. When the first ball was thrown my way, I reached out awkwardly, and it bounced off the edge of my glove, rolling weakly across the grass. I scrambled to pick it up, my fingers fumbling over the leather. When I finally threw it, the ball wobbled and veered far from its target. I heard the low murmur of voices, a few giggles. My cheeks flushed hot; my stomach knotted.

The counselor gave me a look, disappointment, frustration, maybe a mix of both. In that look, I saw more than a failed catch; I saw my difference. I felt like I was failing at something much bigger than a game. I lowered my eyes, feeling the sting of shame deep inside. But I didn’t say a word. I didn’t tell them I was left-handed. I didn’t tell them the glove felt wrong. Instead, I stayed silent, letting the feeling of isolation burrow deeper inside me.

That day taught me a lesson I didn’t realize I was learning at the time: how to suffer in silence. How to absorb the discomfort and bury it, rather than letting it out. I carried that with me into first grade.

Antonia

I was born with a fierce independence and energy source. In the family lore I arose at the crack of dawn and made my own oatmeal at age 3 (do not ask what my mother was doing letting me cook at the age of 3). I still burn with an energy, a need to act, a calling that never wanes.

I hated how I looked at a very young age. how I felt about my looks. I was freckle faced and it drew comments constantly. Most were not mean-spirited but I hated being singled out and looking different from everyone else. Johnny, a neighbor boy, taunted that I was a freckle faced freak from Mars. I hated those freckles. On top of the freckles, my older sisters were beautiful, and they had not a freckle. I prayed I would be like the ugly duckling like in the fairy tale and grow beautiful. In the meantime, I sought out friends, and developed a keen awareness of people in the margins. Little did I know that the eras I would grow up in would grow this to become my life’s work.

Abdul-Rehman

My first day of first grade is etched into my memory, not for the excitement of a new beginning, but for the feeling of standing at the front of the class, hearing my

name, Abdul-Rehman, stumbled over by my teacher. Her voice tripped over the unfamiliar syllables, stretching them out into something unrecognizable. The sound of my own name felt foreign in her mouth, and it felt like everyone in the room could sense it. A wave of laughter rippled through the class, small giggles that felt like sharp pin pricks on my skin. My chest tightened; my face burned.

In that moment, I shrank inward, retreating into myself, feeling like an outsider in my own skin. I didn't belong. Not in that classroom, not in that school, not anywhere. My name felt like a burden, a mark of my otherness. The heat in my cheeks became a familiar sensation over the next few weeks, as I sat in silence, unable to find my voice.

My teacher, perhaps mistaking my silence for something else, placed me at a table in the corner. I remember sitting there, feeling small and separate, as if I were looking in on the class from the outside. She assumed I had a learning disability, something about my silence giving her the impression that I didn't understand. And in a way, I didn't. I didn't understand why I couldn't speak. I didn't understand why my name made me feel so alien.

At home, I began staring at myself in the mirror, searching for answers in my reflection. I studied the shape of my nose, the color of my skin, and my dark hair. I wondered why I looked the way I did, so different from my family, and why my name sounded unlike those of other kids.

Silent suffering became a reflex, an ingrained response to discomfort. It wasn't until my mother intervened, meeting with my teacher to explain that I did, in fact, understand the language, that I wasn't struggling to comprehend, that the walls began to crack. Slowly, carefully, the love and care I received at home and at school began to coax me out of my shell. After that, I slowly found my way toward friendships, toward academic success, but the feeling of not belonging never left me. It sat in the background, shaping how I saw the world and how I interacted with others.

Antonia

It was a Friday and instead of learning something we were on our way to a pep rally to cheer on our football team. The war in Vietnam dragged on and on, the civil rights movement was trying to insure voting rights and desegregation. The nation was fractured and

chaotic. One of my sisters was at UCSB and students had set the Bank of America on fire in protest of the war. Apartheid and the plight of Nelson Mandela added more horror to the state of the world.

And at school we went to pep rallies and talked about nothing in classes.

I wrote anti-war letters to President Nixon and protested with my mother and volunteered at a suicide hotline. I was so disenfranchised with America that when I graduated from high school I rejected my college admissions and decided to travel for a year in Europe. Ah, that every 18 year old could spend a year traveling. I returned with a new sense of humanity.

The world is wide and wonderful and after college I traveled yet again to lands uncharted. I married a foreigner and lived in Saudi Arabia for a decade.

There is beauty and majesty in all countries and peoples.

In Saudi Arabia, there is a sharp social segregation of men and women. Only in the most modern of homes do men and women socialize. Houses are built with separate living rooms for men and women. To be segregated in most social situations due to my gender was a profound experience. It was a stark parallel to the history of segregation in America.

I had my first teaching job in the Kingdom. The school was founded by an American woman who had married a very wealthy Saudi and founded a school specifically for children of foreign mothers and Saudi fathers. Rich Saudis who spent lots of time outside the Kingdom and were progressive also sent their children to this K-12 school. As expected, girls and boys were segregated after first grade. Religion was foundational in the curriculum and after the second grade boys were kept away from any female teachers. As an American, who knows that our country was founded and must forever have a separation of Church and State, this could not be a reality for my children. I returned with my children to California.

Abdul-Rehman

As I grew older, that feeling evolved into something more curious, more outward-looking. My experiences made me want to understand others who had felt the same, who had sat in silence, who had suffered inside, unsure how to navigate a world that made them feel different.

By the time I reached high school, that awareness sharpened into a sense of justice. I noticed inequities in my classrooms, the way a teacher graded Black and Brown students more harshly reinforced those feelings of not belonging. I remember the disbelief in that teachers' eyes when my mother and I sat in a parent-teacher conference, and she realized I was my mother's biological child. Her assumptions, her biases, were laid bare in that moment, and I felt a pang of recognition. I knew what it was like to be seen as something I wasn't, to be judged for something as simple as a name, a complexion.

Then, there was the day during summer football practice, when a sweltering two-a-day session turned into something far more harrowing. I was riding back to school with two friends, one Black, one Black and Lebanese, in a blue Pontiac Grand Am. Out of nowhere, we were pulled over by police, yanked from the car at gunpoint, and thrown face down onto the hot concrete. I can still feel the searing heat against my skin, the sound of the officer's boots as they stalked between us, and the metallic taste of fear in my mouth, then confusion as my friend's mother, who happened to be driving by, screeched to a halt in the middle of road upon recognizing her son being questioned, and confronted the police. I can still hear her berating the officers when they admitted they were looking for five Hispanic suspects in their 30's driving a red minivan. We didn't match the description, but that didn't matter. The color of our skin was enough.

That moment solidified my understanding of injustice. It was no longer abstract; it was something visceral, something that lived in my body.

Over the years, I began to reclaim parts of myself that I had let slip away. I started wearing my Abdul-Rehman name tag at work, proudly displaying the name I had once felt ashamed of. But 9/11 reminded me of the weight that name carried. I was stocking shelves at Trader Joe's when a customer approached me, eyes narrowed, voice dripping with anger. For the life of me I cannot recall the words he hissed out. I do remember my manager intervening, walking me to the front desk and handing me a name tag with "Tommy" written on it. And just like that, I felt myself retreating again, that familiar silence wrapping around me like a shroud.

But something was different this time. I had been through too much, seen too much, to stay silent forever.

Antonia

I have made many mistakes, my imperfections are visible, and I am not a hero nor a savior. There is the possibility I have not made a difference anywhere. I am certain that I was called to this work in education 45 years ago and I have been "all in" ever since. I have attended too many funerals, watched addiction tear families apart, and simultaneously witnessed unbelievable achievements in millions of situations. I have had the privilege of helping leaders create spaces inside their unjust systems where all were served. I have the good fortune to have relationships still with so many from across the decades.

Every experience, every up, every down, every moment of silence, every moment of sound, fuels the engine that burns brightly inside me and now my pivot is to elevate new voices and create spaces for others to grow.

Abdul-Rehman

In the years that followed, I found my voice again, this time, through my work in education. My belief in the transformative power of school, in the ability of education to create spaces of belonging, pulled me forward. I remember tutoring a friend who had a learning disability, watching his writing grow stronger over time. I remember my first job in education, working at a community college, helping first-generation students navigate a system that wasn't built for them. Those moments, those stories of service, grounded me in a purpose bigger than myself.

Today, I carry all those experiences with me as I work toward equity in education. My path has been shaped by silence, by suffering, by a name that made me feel different, but it has also been shaped by moments of connection, of understanding, of finding my voice and being of service for students as they find their own.

Closing: Both Voices

Antonia: We are mother and son, blood and kin, and have experienced the world in dramatically different ways.

Abdul-Rehman: We are here today, engaged in the challenging and rewarding, dismantling of oppression and injustice in the education system.

Antonia: Many are called to this work through deeply feeling resonance and dissonance through experiencing, witnessing, and participating in unjust

acts and environments, particularly in our school system. There are forces now that plan to round up our students, extinguish their identities, decenter truth in curriculum and teaching, and demolish democracy.

Abdul-Rehman: We are committed to resist those forces with all that we have. Our experiences of power, privilege, oppression, marginalization, silencing, has catalyzed a sense of empowerment, an unwavering resolve, and the agency to act.

Antonia: We hold deep gratitude for our foremothers, whose critical consciousness was

passed down in their stories and their actions. If Harriet Tubman could walk into the fire over and over again, we will do our part.

Abdul-Rehman: A multitude of transformational experiences have cemented our commitment to this work.

Antonia: It has been a lifelong journey of pivots, we right our course over and over again to do what is just and reach a destination that holds space and healing for all.

"DUCKS IN A ROW"

By Cereescia Sandoval

During my kindergarten year my teacher asked my mother to drop in after school one day. They wanted to show her something. When my mom arrived the teacher asked her to look at the rows of clay ducks that students had been tasked with making that day. My mom evaluated them. Ducks sitting upright on top of blue clay puddles, ducks with bills and wings. Then she noticed one waterfowl that didn't look like any of the others. There was no bill. Instead there appeared to be a blob like figure with oddly shaped antenna protruding from it. The teacher asked her to guess which one was mine. My mom didn't need to look again — she knew the dissimilar duck was mine. The teacher explained that at first they were a little worried when they saw my creation. Then they asked me to describe what I had created. I shared that I really liked watching ducks look for food so I had made one with its head beneath the surface of the water and the visible part was its butt and its feet in the air. Although my art at first glance initiated concern from my teacher, after some questioning she realized it was an expression of my creativity and curiosity and wanted to share this with my mom. This is one of my earliest memories of feeling like one of these things (Me) was not like the others, even though I knew my duck wasn't wrong. That duck has come to symbolize so much in my educational experience.

It was one short year laterwhen we had already moved from circles on carpets to desks in rows that my mother got another phone call from a teacher. This time... I was in trouble. And the trouble began a week or so before Thanksgiving. My first grade

teacher passed out sheets of thick white construction paper. On each sheet of paper was a face and body with the dashed marks of a cut out doll. When the teacher handed me my sheet I was confused. The face itself wasn't unusual or a surprise to me. I knew this face well...it was the same version of a person that appeared on every printable handout or poster from the teacher store. What was surprising was that the hat on this girl's head was a conspicuous black bucket, a pilgrim hat.

I feverishly glanced around the room and two rows over and under the moving crayons of another student's hand was what I was looking for...I saw two long braids and a feather. My hand shot up into the air. I told my teacher that there had been a mistake. She had given me a pilgrim. No, she said, she knew she gave me the pilgrim and I needed to get to work. I wilted, but I am an Indian, I have to make an Indian girl. It was the teacher's stern second NO! that unleashed a fury and awoke the ancestors in me.

I began thrashing out from my seat- crying uncontrollably until I was pulled from the classroom and the phone call was made to my mother. Yes, I was in trouble. In trouble for wanting to see myself in the school world I already felt stuck learning in even... if it was a generic stereotypical one feather Indian.

This was the moment I started hating school. As a bi-racial Native American student I always felt like my world view was different, never represented, and mostly not ok. I despised most everything about school down to the obtrusively bright lights and

the squeaky linoleum floors. And I didn't just hate a particular year or subject... I hated all 12 years, actually make it 16 because I hated college too.

I felt dismissed, discouraged. I was a struggling reader, sitting in a resource classroom convinced I was not smart. To this day an anxious math student who dreads numbers because of classroom races to complete problems on the board. I would freeze.... chalk suspended in trembling fingers and then the sound of giggles and whispers would make the air feel heavy and hard for me to breathe. I learned in school that whoever I was needed to be different.

American schooling is designed for ducks in a row, not ducks searching below the surface. The American story of educating the Indian has not been one of equity. It is a story of sameness, assimilation...cut-out pilgrim dolls andducks out of water. I often think of the Santa Fe Indian school, a government run boarding school in New Mexico. Most of my aunties and uncles were stolen from my grandmother and taken there. Not because she was an unfit mother she was an exceptional woman who birthed 10 children. No, she had her children taken but because she was an Indian a savage.

The school was established in 1890 and was not returned to tribal control until 1988. I envision 98 years... 98 years of sterile bunk beds in austere dorms, the same blue colored sheets, the same white walls, uniform clothing & haircuts, and not a single picture or personal object of care or comfort.

My dad did not attend the boarding school but he still went to a school run by nuns where he was punished for speaking the Pueblo language or expressing his culture. He tells jokes about all the kids having to drink milk each day despite their lactose intolerance and the verbose flatulence that would echo through the room. At first I too laugh at these stories and then I realize that it's actually not very funny, it's a story of trying to make kids drink whiteness and the harm it inflicts on their bodies and yet everyday more milk appears, everyday the same swollen tummies, and milk is still served as the primary drink in school at lunch time.

Schooling in this country did what it was designed to do - COLONIZE."Kill the Indian, Save the man." But the reality is no one was saved. I understand this each time we lay our brothers and sisters to rest way before what should be their time.. called to death by heart disease, alcohol, suicide, murder, and most recently

covid. And it is not only native communities. The same outcomes are shared in Appalachia and white rural communities where my mother is from, in urban neighborhoods, and even suburban communities where sameness rules supreme. Ducks in a row, joining the prison pipeline, paddling the dark waters of substance abuse, flocks of sitting ducks with no sense of potential, belongingness or value. The TRUTH, equity is survival.

However, equity is also an Indigenous way of being... The way of sustaining life and humanity that goes beyond survival. Everyone in the community is responsible for your wellbeing, learning, and growth. Anishinaabe scholar Billie Allan calls us to "wade into the water and reimagine equity as balance." What if instead of DEI committees and initiatives we embraced equity as a life source. That we stopped compartmentalizing equity work and stopped making checklists. That we dunked our heads below the surface and tried to make sense of deep culture and belonging.

It sounds monolith and yet it is simple and natural. Although I did not like school there were moments of connection. In middle school I was elated by the prospect of joining band and becoming a badass girl drummer. Those dreams were thwarted when I had to pass a written test. I didn't, and so I was placed in choir.

My choir teacher Mrs. Burton was a small white lady with an impenetrable dome of bleach blonde hairspray. Even though she was small in frame she moved with big intention conducting us with her powerfully expressive hands and pounding foot.. at the piano she would convince the keys to let out emotion...sometimes sadness other times notes of joy or even protest.

"I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside."

We were awkward middle schoolers with braces, bad skin, and meager tonal abilities, and yet in that space we were a community led by a great teacher, who understood the value of our unique voices, who let us be heard and seen, that was able to weave together our identities to make sweet music. Mrs. Burton took us all the way to NYC. We went to Carnegie Hall...we PERFORMED at Carnegie Hall under the direction of the esteemed Dr. Andre Thomas. This woman only ever saw potential, she never doubted these country

kids from Anderson County Kentucky and when we got to the big city..even then I didn't feel small.

Did you know that ducklings still inside their eggs can hear the outside world, the quacks of their mother, and each other long before they hatch. This is so they can begin to make sense of the larger outside world and so that they can emerge from their shells together. Because being in a community is key to their survival. Miss Burton was the hen to our brood of middle school mallards. In a run down school cafeteria for a music room...I began to recognize that I had a place, that I could take up space, and that I was a part of something bigger than myself and full of potential. Yes, I know the hopelessness and heartbreak of systemic oppression. Yet, I also know healing and love the kind of love that Miss Burton dished out. I doubt

Miss Burton ever took an equity class or culturally responsive seminar but she understood the value of creating balance and connection.

The act of being an educator is a story of continuance. What we continue is on us. I personally continue to sit with the truth and the heartbreak of equity as survival. Equally important I embrace equity as balance, a life source, and most importantly liberation. When finally I decided to pursue my graduate degree in education I attended the University of Oregon and the Sapsikwala Indigenous teacher program. I became a NATIVE duck. And guess what, I also didn't hate years 18-19 of school. This duck...nope she didn't turn into a swan. She swam full circle and she is still swimming, with her head searching below the surface of the water and her feet and butt in the air.

"MORE THAN A SWEATER: INSPIRING CHANGE BEHIND LOCKED DOORS"

By Jordan Jerome Harrison

The first time I stepped into juvenile hall, I was 22 years old and I was hit with a wave of reality I hadn't prepared for. My work, serving students in City Heights San Diego, once referred to as the rotten core of Americas Finest city was what brought me here, serving students with a 2.0 and below and having them think about college. Many of them were in this system. In this work I met students where they were at, as they were with the same passion I saw my father have in the south side of Chicago, and here I stood, addressing the continued generational challenge, our "justice" system as I entered the juvenile hall.

As I entered the first time, signed my name and who I was visiting and left all electronic devices in a locker my name was called. They escorted me to the first door and the doors clanged shut behind me, the metal echoing in my chest as if sealing me into a world where hope felt as elusive as sunlight. I walked into a cement room, eyes adjusting to a scene that was both familiar and foreign—a group of young Black men, their faces hardened by experiences they should have never known. They saw me through a small 2x2 window with one bars, sizing me up with a mixture of suspicion, confusion, and a hint of curiosity. In that silence, one boy's voice cut through: "Y'all, a guy who looks like us went to Harvard!"

It was more than a shout. It was a question, an exclamation, a plea—a cry for something they hadn't dared hope for. I stood there, wearing my alma mater Harvard sweater, and suddenly, the weight of it pressed down on me like never before. This wasn't just fabric and a logo. This was a symbol of a path most of these young men believed wasn't for them. The sweater felt heavy, burdened with all the expectations and doubts, with the painful truth that, for too many young Black men, the world had already written their futures—and this cement room was it.

As I looked around, I wondered.. How could these Black bodies dream when they'd been shown a different destiny, one that felt more like a trap than a possibility? In that moment, my heart broke and fight for justice burned even brighter. I knew I had, no WE had, a fight for the dignity of the existence and futures of Black bodies— to dismantle the structures that choked these dreams before they could even form.

Then came my student who I came visit, Chris. Chris was a 15-year-old in my after-school program called Reality Changers, and he quickly became more than just a student. He became a mirror reflecting the complexities of the system I was up against. Chris had been in and out of juvenile hall since he was 12, labeled a problem, a "challenge" schools couldn't—or wouldn't—address. One day, I visited Chris in juvenile

hall while he was serving his two-year term and saw this strong 6'1 Black boy, cry. In a plastic chairs and table Chris broke down, his voice shaking as he whispered, "I keep letting my mom down." Now, this was Chris, a student who I had known for his joy, laughter, brilliance and love of football. But in that moment, I realized that he was a boy burdened not only by his circumstances but by a system that had decided he was irredeemable, worthy of being thrown away. Meanwhile he was more worried about how his actions had placed a debt on his mom and his boring routine in his cell that gave him no choice.. At times too often resembling our schools. Bells representing the control of time, lines representing the control of bodily movement and gates that represented the space one needed to stay in.

I spent hours with Chris and other young men, in and out of juvenile hall, hearing their stories, their heartbreaks, their hopes. They weren't "bad" kids. They were kids reacting to a world that had given up on them, that viewed them not as children with potential but as problems to be managed and often discarded. And the more I listened, the more I saw a system designed not to support these boys but to contain them, trap them—and reinforce the stereotype that unless you body entertains then you are a threat to society- and we have the power to control you.

Chris's story deepened my frustration, resolve and fight. I started asking questions challenging the practices that pushed young Black men out of classrooms and into cells and noticed too many people talked about the school to prison pipeline but never have even driven by one. I met men in Norfolk Virginia doing restorative practices to change their ways and gained some of the greatest wisdom from these men. But still I asked why schools were so quick to label them, so ready to expel them? I dove into restorative practices, researching ways to keep students in school, to help them take responsibility without being cast aside. But it wasn't enough. I began to see that this wasn't just a school problem or even a juvenile justice problem. This was a problem woven into the very fabric of how society views young Black men.

Chris and his family stayed in my mind constantly. His face, the way his shoulders slumped under the weight of his reality—he became, my reminder of what was at stake- the loss of time, youth, hope and

belief. And as I continued, I reflected on a hard truth: the only difference between me and these young men was the side of the wall we stood on and one decision on one night. Their lives could have easily been mine. I even wondered how wearing a sweater like Harvard provides me a visible distance as being a "safe" Black man and the sweater became heavy because safety for Blackness should never be build around proximity to Whiteness. Between me and these young Black men the difference wasn't in worth, but in luck, in circumstance. And that difference is unacceptable and too often orchestrated by zip code, teacher years of experience, and variety of other issues.

My research evolved with my understanding. It was no longer enough to just keep kids like Chris in school. I had to go deeper, to create environments where students' voices weren't just heard but valued. I wanted schools that centered joy honored who these young men were and challenging any societal norm that limited who they could become. This work became a call to build systems that could see their humanity first, not their circumstances. It was about creating spaces where young men like Chris weren't seen as statistics or problems to be managed but as young men with voices, potential, and dreams they hadn't yet dared to speak and to challenge adults to listen. That if we can quote Freire as a disruptor then I must demand more from myself.

That Harvard sweater, though—it stayed with me, a constant reminder of what these young men hadn't been allowed to imagine or ever see. It was a reminder of the expectations and dreams I carried with me—not just for myself, but for Chris, for every boy in juvenile hall who looked at that sweater with a mix of awe and disbelief. The weight of that sweater wasn't just the fabric. It was the burden of being an exception to a rule and a reminder of dreams that had been cut off before they could take root.

And so I keep showing up, keep pushing forward because of what they've taught me. I've learned from Chris and others that resilience grows in spaces of adversity, that transformation isn't a policy or a program—it's a commitment to see these young men for who they are and who they could be. They've shown me that change doesn't happen from the top down. It happens when we listen, when we honor the voices of those affected by the systems we claim to want to fix.

This is my story about transformation—about my transformation, yes, but more importantly, about the possibility of transformation for an entire generation of young Black men who have been deliberately written off. We must build schools that allow them to thrive, spaces that honor their voices. Because if we fail, then we are no better than the walls that keep them contained. Transformation is possible—not just for the students, but for us.

And as I think back to that day, standing there in juvenile hall wearing that Harvard sweater, I realize now that it's not just a symbol of what I've achieved nor should be a desired destination for all. It's a promise of what I still have to fight for — a fight to create a world where Chris, and every young man like him, can wear any sweater that they want to.

30 years, 4 months and 9 days ago, my 20 - person hotshot crew, the Prineville Hotshots, were called to

suppress a fire on Storm King Mountain in Colorado. We had done this hundreds of times before. I believe it is that categorization of this being “just another fire” that still haunts me.

If I knew that would be the last time I saw most of my friends, perhaps I would have smiled at each one of them and lived out the meaning of Tolstoy's 3 questions:

1. What is the right time to do something? Now
2. Who is the most important person? The one I am with
3. What is the most important thing for me to do? To do right by the person I am with.

I would have seen and listened to each person and given them the time and focus I would later miss.

BUT, we went about our business, WE had a job to do.

“CHICKEN SALAD”

By Jose Navarro

I was in the 3rd helicopter load. The first two loads went down the west side of the slope to support the smokejumpers in tying the fire line together. Loads 3 and 4 were told to clear out the debris on the ridge to create another helipad. We were told after doing so we would join our friends on the fire line.

The winds started to pick up to the point that as I cut a small tree down, my partner would toss it in the air and the wind would take it a few hundred feet. At about 3:00 pm our crew boss Bryan, told us to gather our stuff, as we were about to join our friends. We walked up the ridge and right as we were about to go down the fire line we were stopped by a tree flare up.

I remember setting down my gas can to get a better grip. When I looked up the sky went from blue to a wall of black smoke in an instant.

I heard someone say “reverse order” and then I heard “RUN”. I was in the front as we headed up the ridge and now I was in the back. The fire cut us off. We could no longer reverse and go down the ridge so we headed for a cliff with hopes of flanking and sidestepping the wall of flames...like we had done dozens of times before. We'd moved to the side, the flames would go by and we would get back to work.

This time there was no chance of flanking it. I heard a gas can or a chainsaw blow up behind me. We got separated.

The flames were so hot they were melting the reflectors on my hardhat.

As we ran I grabbed Brian's fire shelter at the base of his pack and put it in his arms, and Bill's shelter and put it in his arm, and then I grabbed mine...and we jumped.

We knew we should never lose ground and we should never go into a drainage...that is how people die...

..However this drainage was the only part of the mountain not on fire. We followed the east drainage down to the Colorado river and I-70.

When we reached the bottom and reunited with the other parts of our crew, I saw Eric, a smoke jumper, laying on the pavement face down. His back was smoking so we poured what water we had on him.

I don't think many of us were scared, like I said we had sidestepped fires in the past. This was a little closer though.

We were certain that our friends had done the same on the westside. Three hours later we would find out they had not.

Eleven of us survived and nine of us died. Things get a little foggy after this. Looking at the world through tears, beers, and PTSD will do that.

I survived, and because of that, I have always felt like I need to earn the life that I have been given. Doug is not here, and Scott, Tammy, Kathi, John, Bonnie, Levi, Rob, Terri are not here.

I will never know why my friends died, but I know I am alive... and I need to earn this life I've been given.

I believe that when I die, I will have to answer 1 question from my God.

My God will NOT ask me, Jose why weren't you a lawyer, Jose why weren't you a Dr., Jose why weren't you the president?...I believe she is going to ask me, "Jose, why weren't you a better Jose?"

I gave you 2 legs and you stood for nothing

I gave you 2 hands and you built nothing

I gave you ears and you never listened to anyone

I gave you 2 eyes and you never saw the injustices around you Jose, why weren't you a better Jose?

I believe that is what I will have to answer to.

I don't have everything, but I have a lot...and now I have to earn it

So I entered my classroom with this as my lens:

On this hand my God's mandate—to be the best version of myself and on this hand a need to earn every minute I've been given. So two weeks into my first year teaching I gave my students a quiz...a map quiz. I was going to teach a lesson on environmental degradation to my 10th-grade world history students. I just got out of the Peace Corps and after all that tree-hugging, I felt I had something to offer my students. I decided to give my students a geography quiz, to create some schema, and to teach where and not just what was going on.

Understand that 95% of my classes were Latino, primarily Mexican, and after the quiz, I learned that only 10% of my students could find Mexico on a map. I did not know what to do. How can I teach students

who know so little? I shared my predicament with a colleague who said, "no, man, you don't give these kids tests, you're just going to bum yourself out."

I was dejected. I went to the person who hired me, and they said, "You should speak to Mr. X, he was a mentor teacher with 30 years under his belt", He'll know what to do... So, I met with my mentor teacher. I explained the unit, the quiz, and the 10% pass rate. He could tell I needed something. He knew I was going to be good.. he wanted to help. So my mentor teacher, in a country accent...I don't know why he had a country accent he was from Northridge... Put a foot up on a chair, and through his thick handlebar mustache he said, "If you are going to survive this Jose, one thing you have got to realize...you can't make chicken salad out of chicken shit." Funny Huh?

But I didn't laugh...I was angry. I was one of them

And for Luck God or fate I made it out.

I did not have everything, but I had a lot...I have life ...NOW I had to earn it.

It was a teacher that stood between me and my bad decisions. It was not his skill as a teacher, it was his will as a teacher...to teach. I was not going to let me off the hook.

I know he was trying to help me, he was trying to support this new teacher...he was offering me absolution

I could be absolved of all of my sins...all of my responsibility. It's their fault, they are chicken shit after all

Absolution is all around if you seek it.

Middle school didn't prepare these kids...absolved.

These kids are lazy...absolved

Their parents don't care...absolved.

This culture does not value education, they value manual labor.. absolved. It's not in my contract... absolved.

I was absolved.

But I wasn't looking for absolution. I was looking for redemption... I wanted reconciliation.

I needed to reconcile my ledger.

So how can I teach students who know so little...BY TEACHING THEM!

I met all of my students at the door, every class, every day. Good morning, hello, how are you, shaking hands...you would have thought I was running for office.

I used their failures to teach them...they were not failing, they were learning.

I held them to high expectations and I gave them high levels of support.

I knew that my students didn't mind breaking school rules, some didn't mind breaking the law...but they never wanted to break my heart... so I built real relationships, we sat in circles and we shared. I was vulnerable and I was honest...and they reciprocated.

My students knew they could redo and resubmit every assignment, because I wasn't trying to catch them doing something wrong, I was trying to teach them.

Restorative justice and the practices that support its implementation, are always about helping my students see what they are capable of.

I stopped asking my students "why didn't you do the work?", and instead I asked, "what kept you from doing the work?" Because I knew they wanted to be successful and if they weren't being successful then it was because they couldn't be...

It's hard to see the board with poverty or trauma in your way.

As a principal I hired counselors and not deans. I believe bad behavior needs to be treated and not punished.

Its not efficient, but it is effective.

Operating a school and my life in a way that helps all educational partners be the best version of themselves, allows me to bring forward the best version of myself

I'm not done yet, but I know I have less years in front of me then I have behind me, so everyday I try to earn what I've been given, so I can face my God and tell her, "I did the best I could with what I had...I gave it my all

There are many problems in education,

And they are not our fault...but they are our responsibility You can't do EVERYTHING, but you can do SOMETHING. When an issue arises that's not in your employee handbook, or part of your education classes, USE love.

Because the right time is now

The right person is the one you're with

And the right thing to do, is to do right by the person in front of you.

"GIFTED BY ANY OTHER NAME"

By Justin H. Dove

Ah, kindergarten, a time of Velcro shoes, Elmer's glue, neatly packed lunches (with Dunkaroos, please!), emerging toileting skills, ubiquitous germs, and the realization that "l-m-n-o" is not a single letter. A McDonald's Happy Meal (with a toy) was more valuable to my six-year-old tastebuds and heart than a dry-aged steak. Nestle Quik milk, I favored strawberry, was the cocktail of choice.

I was a faithful rule follower with a curious and rebellious spirit. Put another way, I liked pushing the envelope and coloring outside the lines, without getting caught. I also articulated things in a way that did not always sit well with adult sensibilities. One of my grandmother's favorite stories to retell involves

my retort, "You are old; you just can't see yourself," when she attempted to proclaim otherwise. Mirrors apparently didn't exist in the late 80s, but I digress.

Back in my day, or should I say, "back in my day," half-day kindergarten still existed, but my working parents needed a full-day option. This structure was unavailable at my neighborhood school, so I attended a more highly rated school a little farther away. Conventional wisdom at the time demanded full-day kindergarteners receive a rest period, complete with cots or sleeping bags, dimmed lights, and calming music. (CUE: B1 - Cats record) My teacher, Ms. Katz, played a daily soundtrack of Broadway musicals, including a record considered meta these days.

My nap mate was Timothy, and while time has separated us, the all-knowing arm of Big Brother, AKA Facebook, tells me he eventually went on to a prestigious private school in the Cleveland area, studied government and economics at Cornell University, and now resides on the East Coast. My memories of Timothy are vaguely positive—I don't think he continued at my school through fifth grade—but he was nice, and we got along swell.

Suffice it to say that nap time was the bane of my early childhood experience. Even “Somewhere over the Rainbow” couldn't coax me to sleep. Surrounded by new learning opportunities, social connections, and constant stimuli, my synapses were firing, and new neural networks were being formed.

Neuroscience jargon aside, I was a curious kid who had no interest in wasting precious time sleeping during the day. How quickly things can change, as I rarely turn down an opportunity to nap now as the father of an infant. Nevertheless, the overriding feeling during this portion of my kindergarten day was boredom.

There's a saying that “an idle mind is the devil's workshop.” Naturally, it was in my kindergarten space of boredom where I devised my first caper. (CUE: E1 – school cubbies) Timothy and I napped in an area where our supply boxes were stored, replete with the kindergartener's starter kit, labeled safety scissors, glue sticks, crayons, and pencils. Intrigued by the opportunity to experiment with cause and effect and throw a monkey wrench in classroom harmony, I began switching my peers' supplies around, placing Darren's crayon box in Samantha's supply box or Jason's safety scissors in Xaviera's supply box. When arts and crafts time rolled around each day, I waited for the chaos and confusion to ensue, which was, simply put, enthralling.

Each day, Timothy looked on with bewilderment, intrigue, amusement, and probably nervousness. Why he didn't immediately tell on me, I'll never know. Perhaps we had a silent pact long before the fear of stitches would stop snitches in their tracks worldwide. Everyone needs a good co-conspirator.

Unfortunately, my developing brain hadn't accounted for the fact that Timothy and I were the only students with semi-private access to the materials. Perhaps he eventually sold me out, tempted by Ms. Katz's promises of unlimited Barnum's animal crackers and

Juicy Juice. The “investigation” was easy, and it didn't take Sherlock Holmes, Colombo, Jimmy McNulty, or Steve from Blue's Clues to identify the culprit.

You might say this was my first prank, and unsurprisingly, I developed an affinity for shows like Candid Camera, Punk'd, Crank Yankers, and Scare Tactics that persists as a guilty pleasure to this day. Now that I'm a school psychologist, I'll call it my first social experiment. Fortunately, the teachers and administrators at my school did not throw the book at me. Beyond a stern talking-to from my mother during an afterschool visit to Richmond Mall, I don't remember getting in conventional “trouble.”

I suppose educators at Noble Elementary School saw something in me that demanded mercy. This was a fork-in-the-road moment, as tags and assumptions applied following this experience could have changed the trajectory of my life: oppositional, defiant, emotionally disturbed, or simply “bad.” However, the label I eventually received, gifted and talented, is one from which children who look like me are often excluded.

While this experience was an early indicator of my need for increased mental stimulation, standardized measures were the final bureaucratic litmus test. Later in elementary school, I joined a group of children who were periodically pulled out of “regular” classes to receive specialized programming. In the inner-ring suburb of Cleveland where I completed elementary and most of middle school, I was surrounded by children with whom I could relate. The families who stuck around and resisted white flight had done so intentionally. (CUE: H1 – football & science) The same children I played touch football with during recess were those I sat next to as we examined the finer points of Punnett squares.

Things shifted after my family moved to an outer-ring suburb in eighth grade. I became one of only a few Black students in the gifted program, and in an instant, my blackness was no longer perceived as congruent with intelligence. By the end of high school, I adjusted my schedule, removing all advanced and honors courses in search of increased comfort and safety. The kindergarten-wise guy and prankster was voted the quietest male in his senior class of 200-some-odd students.

“Imagine how you would feel if someone took all of your property.” These were the words of my high

school History teacher, who argued that we should all empathize with the Southern enslavers who must have been crestfallen after losing the humans they “owned.” Immediately sensing something was amiss, I lacked the voice to challenge it as the only student in the room who looked like me or seemed affected by his words. “There are not two sides to a story when one side is a lie.” Educational spaces can create great opportunities for empowerment or harm, life or death.

So, where does the kindergarten prankster find himself today? As Childish Gambino’s song can attest, life is the biggest troll. I found my voice during college, activated by the diversity of peers, course offerings, and experiences. Understanding, centering, and advocating for the needs of marginalized students became my life’s work. Fittingly, I now serve a community of gifted students in Los Angeles.

While it is unassailable that all children (and adults) have gifts, the educational term “gifted” refers to a specific neurotype that demands a unique blend of academic acceleration, enrichment, and empathy. Not better, not worse, just different. Providing everyone with the same thing regardless of their circumstances or needs is inherently inequitable—California Department of Education, I’m talking to you.

In this work, I’ve met elementary school students who debate World War II military strategy at the lunch table and read tax law books ...for fun. I’ve encountered others who demonstrate immense creativity, ideating original comic book worlds, companies, and games with their friends (often as their teachers attempt to deliver instruction). I’ve supported some whose drive for autonomy is so strong it rankles traditional educators and challenges day-to-day classroom order.

Other gifted students demonstrate a deep-seated sense of justice that leads to emotional meltdowns in the face of rules, outcomes, or experiences they perceive to be unfair. These are the children who often

inappropriately receive labels in spaces in which they are misdiagnosed, misunderstood, or given busy work.

The professional accomplishments I’m most proud of these days include supporting students like one I’ll call Will because, although they haven’t slapped anyone on stage like Will Smith, they are a multi-talented and gregarious human who I am confident will succeed at whatever they put their mind and heart to. Will is from South LA and has been dropped into a prestigious private school in Bel Air. They contend with beliefs that their enrollment is the result of lowered admission standards, and they might not be the right “fit.” Tragically, Will has even lamented the possibility that they are a “diversity” enrollee.

Trusted team members and I have advocated for Will, offering safe spaces to check in, be seen, and be heard. We’ve sought to empower them on our campus, facilitating opportunities to showcase their gifts and passions. Over several school years, Will has gained confidence in showing up authentically, from their vocal inflection, to their hairstyle, to the touches of swag they sprinkle on the school uniform, a la Fresh Prince. We’ve permitted Will to be themselves. (CUE: M2 – blank black screen) This full-circle experience has redoubled my commitment to advocating for the needs of a population of students whose perceived privilege is often met with apathy or disdain. It is an honor, pleasure, and immense responsibility to nurture gifted learners from diverse races, ethnicities, genders, and rungs of the economic ladder.

Supporting an underrepresented subgroup, Black gifted children, is an especially personal opportunity. I’ve taken on this mantle through affinity space facilitation, advocacy, and family outreach. Differences demand differentiation, a central tenet of my equity philosophy. So, the next time you encounter a quirky child who fails to conform to the neat and rigid rules and expectations the adult world so copiously provides, of all the adjectives, nouns, and labels you might apply, consider this one: gifted.

“RETURNING TO MY ROOTS”

By Kimberly Tsai Cawkwell

I grew up in Marrero, Louisiana, a town that sits within Jefferson Parish across the Mississippi River from bustling New Orleans. For the first 7.5 years of my life, my family and I lived in a motel off the busy Westbank 90 Expressway. Siesta Motel, a two story, 68-room, exterior-corridor building, with gray walls and turquoise blue railings. We lived in an upstairs unit. My fondest memories (CUE: A2 - *vending machines*) were when my brother and I would help stock the vending machines. I played with ant hills and (CUE: A3 - *me riding bicycle with my brother*) learned how to ride my bike in the parking lot. (CUE: A4 - *Siesta Motel w/ brother*) We did not have neighbors in the traditional sense. There weren't any other children that I could remember who lived there. Most neighbors I met were "single-serving" adults checking in and checking out before heading on their way. ***

(CUE: B1 - *_my mother*) My mother, Li-Hua Chang Tsai, was born in Yuanlin, Taiwan. (CUE: B2 - *_yuanlinah-gong*) Her father, my ah-gong, (CUE: B3 - *_fruit canning factory*) ran a fruit canning factory where my mother and her six siblings would work after school canning delicious treats to send to the world, including lychee, pineapple, and fried gluten and peanuts.

(CUE: B4 - *_my father*) My father, Yu-Tai Tsai, was born in Taichung, Taiwan, a large industrial city. (CUE: B5 - *_Taichungahgong*) His father, my other ah-gong, grew up very poor. (CUE: B6 - *_rope as tires*) With rope as tires, my ah-gong spent hours riding his bike selling bags of rice, eventually saving up enough money to purchase a (CUE: B7 - *_old printing machine*) printing machine and then eventually starting the 1st printing press in Taichung. My grandparent's success allowed them to purchase properties and they desperately needed help managing these assets.

(CUE: B8 - *_marriage photo*) After being paired to be lifelong partners through an arranged marriage, my mother was forced to immigrate to the United States to manage one of these properties, (CUE: C1 - *_Siesta Motel (2)*) the Siesta Motel. My mother, alone, afraid, and pregnant with me, tells the story of carrying an English dictionary in her pocket and venturing alone to a foreign country. (CUE: C2 - *_kimbaby*) On July 30, 1986 she gave birth to me in New Orleans. I later learned I am called by some as an "anchor baby,"***

My mother raised me and managed the business until my father was granted a visa and able to join us with my 2 year old brother.

This shadow story was one no one ever talked about out loud and certainly not at the dinner table. And during the first few years of my life, (CUE: C3 - *_phone cord*) as I watched my mother cry over long distance calls to her mother, and told bedtime stories of missing her home, I internalized the truth that love, sorrow, sacrifice and obedience were necessities for improving conditions in our lives. (CUE: C4 - *_mother/child*) I deeply cared for my mother's wellness and wanted her to feel joy. As a child I thought by listening and obeying I could bring her this. I unknowingly carried an intergenerational transition of emotions and values into my educational journey.

(CUE: D1 - *_Isidore Newman School*) I started Kindergarten at Isidore Newman Elementary. My mother would wake me up before the sun rose to drive 45 minutes from our rat-infested motel to this grand establishment. (CUE: D2 - *_mississippiriver*) Everyday we would drive over the Mississippi River, and navigate into the most expensive part of the city, (CUE: D3 - *_image of homes on St. Charles*) St. Charles Avenue. The school I attended was surrounded by what I saw as giant white mansions with sidewalks and manicured lawns; (CUE: D4 - *_cement parking lot*) a stark difference from the cement parking lot where I spent hours playing and finding lost treasures from guests. Each time I drove to Isidore, I was reminded of my differences; a poor outsider, from the other side of the river, who did not fit in. ***

Having a lack of a childhood community, I was hopeful to find other girls who wanted to play with me. (CUE: E1 - *_friends*) Before I entered the classroom, I remember feeling scared but excited. And soon, my excitement turned to trepidation. (CUE: E2 - *_alone*) I swiftly grasped that no one else in the room looked like me. I was the only student with straight black hair and not speaking English. In a quick instant, at age 5, I had a heightened awareness of my differences. Though I didn't have the words at the time, the unease I felt in my body communicated to me that my race, culture, socio-economic status and language set me apart from other children in school.

(CUE: E3 – playground) Despite this, I tried making friends. One day, I asked a girl a question. She ran away from me. The next thing I remember, a teacher is taking me off the playground and had me sit in the corner. I was confused. I obeyed directions from my elders as I was told by my parents to do. But I was in shock. What did I say? Why was I being taken away from play? I sat alone in the corner and cried.

(CUE: F1 – car) When my mother drove us home that day, I remember thinking to myself that everyone is picking on me. I decided from then, that I would change who I was to be more like my classmates so that I could make friends. (CUE: F2 – caterpillars) I could no longer be the girl who lived in a motel, who brought caterpillars into the lobby to save them from hot Louisiana summer pavements. (CUE: F3 – upset Kim) I started to lie. *** I made up stories about my life to connect with other kids. I did not share that I lived in a motel. I did not divulge that I sat crisscrossed on my dining chair in fear that the rats, who lived behind our kitchen counter, would jump out to grab fallen crumbs by my feet. I began refusing to speak my home language in front of peers. I started requesting an (CUE: F4 – sandwiches) American lunch, with sandwiches, instead of (CUE: F5 – _ji pai fan_) a Taiwanese biàn d ng, with my favorites like j pái fan. I started listening to English music (CUE: F6 – _Amy Grant_) like Amy Grant, instead of (CUE: F7 – _A-Mei_) A-Mei . (CUE: F8 – _alone (2)_) I wanted to shed who I was so I didn't feel the pain of being misunderstood, of being othered, of sitting alone in the corner.

At age eight, my family moved in with my grandparents (CUE: G1 – _Monterey Park_) in a two bedroom house in Monterey Park, California, which at the time was called "Little Taiwan." This was a stark contrast to where I was raised. (CUE: G2 – _Strip Mall_) We lived across a busy strip mall. Even though I was now living in a community surrounded by people who looked like me, I still felt alone. I had spent the past few years of my life lying to myself and others, trying to be more White. And now, I was forced to be in a new space where the dominant culture was not that, ** it was Taiwanese. A culture that I had been running away from. (CUE: G3 – _isolated_) Because of this, I had trouble making friends at my predominantly Asian elementary school and often isolated myself.

In the summer before entering into a new school for 3rd grade, I realized I was not "fully Taiwanese" and also not "fully American."

(CUE: H1 – _banana) I was a "banana (yellow on the outside, white on the inside)";" labels given to me by my Aunts who said I was not Taiwanese because I was born in America. (CUE: H2 – _kim child) The culture of my dress and the way I spoke Taiwanese was different. In order to combat the feeling of being "the other," I chose to engage in what I thought was being "better than the other;" which in this space meant embracing my (CUE: H3 – _American Passport) American born nationality as more regal than being (CUE: H4 – _Taiwanese) born in Taiwan. Embracing this, I unknowingly became a Cultural Racist. (CUE: H5 – _Kendi's book) A Cultural Racist, as Ibram X. Kendi describes, is one who is imposing a cultural hierarchy among racial groups. (CUE: H6 – _Taiwanese culture) I devalued my Taiwanese heritage and culture. Embarrassed by my language, I did not speak Taiwanese to anyone other than my family. (CUE: H7 – _Kim posing) I refused to be called by my Taiwanese name, Tsai Min-Chuen. I distanced myself from my roots. ***

(CUE: I1 – _school) One day in 4th grade we had a student, George, join my class. He had just immigrated from China. Ms. Richardson thought it'd be smart to sit him next to me, the other Asian student in the class.

All I wanted was not to be seen as "the Asian kid." And yet, my teacher would ask me to help translate lessons and be a translator with his mother. This was extremely stressful to me because I was still learning Mandarin, it is not my home language. I also felt sad that I was missing out on my own learning opportunities. (CUE: I2 – _peace walk Taiwan) Plus, on the Taiwanese news channels, I was hearing about my community engaging in peace walks around our island and fearful of being (CUE: I3 – _missiles) bombed during election season. (CUE: I4 – _black slide) I immediately despised this young boy and his family. He symbolized the very thing that I was trying to get away from. I would say to myself, "I was born in the United States and I scored Proficient on my English Language Learner test." At age nine, I was already perpetuating harm onto others and myself.

I tried to embrace dominant culture to feel more belonging with my peers. A symbol of what I thought was my success was seeing that I had majority White friends. But my mother's words "They'll always see your Asian face" *** was a constant reminder that I could not escape my true identities.

It was not until I met my professor, Dr. Luz Chung, at the University of California - San Diego, did I realize the harm that I had done and the systemic traumas that I had endured. Dr. Chung, the first female bi-racial Asian teacher I ever had in my educational journey, created the space for our cohort to unpack the personal experiences and histories that had informed our beliefs. With only a blank piece of paper and a pen, I was asked to illustrate the journey of my life. As I reflected on the monumental moments that defined my values and shaped who I am, whiteness was everywhere. There was no Asian representation in the teachers that educated me, in the stories I read, the movies I watched, the music I listened to, and the idols I looked up to. I was immersed in a sea of whiteness. ***

As I wrote down each detail of my life, I could feel a surge of emotions. Dr. Chung pushed us to challenge and question the narratives we had created in our stories. It was through this activity that I realized in the years I sought to assimilate to “whiteness” I was, as Bettina Love describes, murdering my spirit. I broke down in tears. I felt shame. guilt. pain. but also clarity. purpose. and power.

(CUE: *K3-black background (2)*) I always thought it was on me, it was my fault that I was not feeling acceptance. But after this moment, I learned that my schools and white-centric society were causing me to feel a lack of belonging, and in turn devaluing my whole self. In addition to this realization, Dr. Chung, a woman of color speaking confidently and questioning dominant systems, challenged my understanding of how women were to be in the world; a contrast to the cultural norms and examples I was raised with.

This critical awakening brought me conviction to my purpose. I would become an educator to dismantle the unspoken and harmful practices that bar students from being their full selves, from sharing their truths, from feeling true liberation, from being able to, as Bréne Brown says, brave the wilderness. And I knew that in order to do this task, I had to start with myself, to reclaim my beautiful identities so that I could become the wilderness. I started to spend time learning more about my family story and familiarizing myself with Taiwanese culture. I began shifting my mindset from “I’m superior than” to “we are united. You are my sister.” I started to reclaim my last name “Tsai” (Chai) and helped others pronounce it correctly, instead of S-igh, which means feces in Taiwanese.***

The following summer I began my first year teaching at a public school in San Diego. I remember being the only Asian educator on the campus that served predominantly Filipino and LatinX students. I was nervous and naive to the beast that I would be taking on within myself and the educational system. It was imperative to me that I actively found ways to lift up assets in various cultures; that the books I chose to read had diverse representation, that I valued multilingualism, such as sharing new languages in our daily circle. And in the face of administrator’s demands to follow the curriculum and teach to test, I decided to close my door, and instead I created spaces for self-expression through poetry and art, and critical dialogue of the textbooks we were forced to read.

I did not shy away from my duty to represent my identity. As I was often the only Asian educator, Asian parents and children would seek my support. My representation mattered for those I served, as I knew it did for me.

I continue to advocate for culturally sustaining education; coaching practitioners to see assets in students’ cultures and proactively creating opportunities for diverse histories, traditions, and languages to be lifted up in their schools.

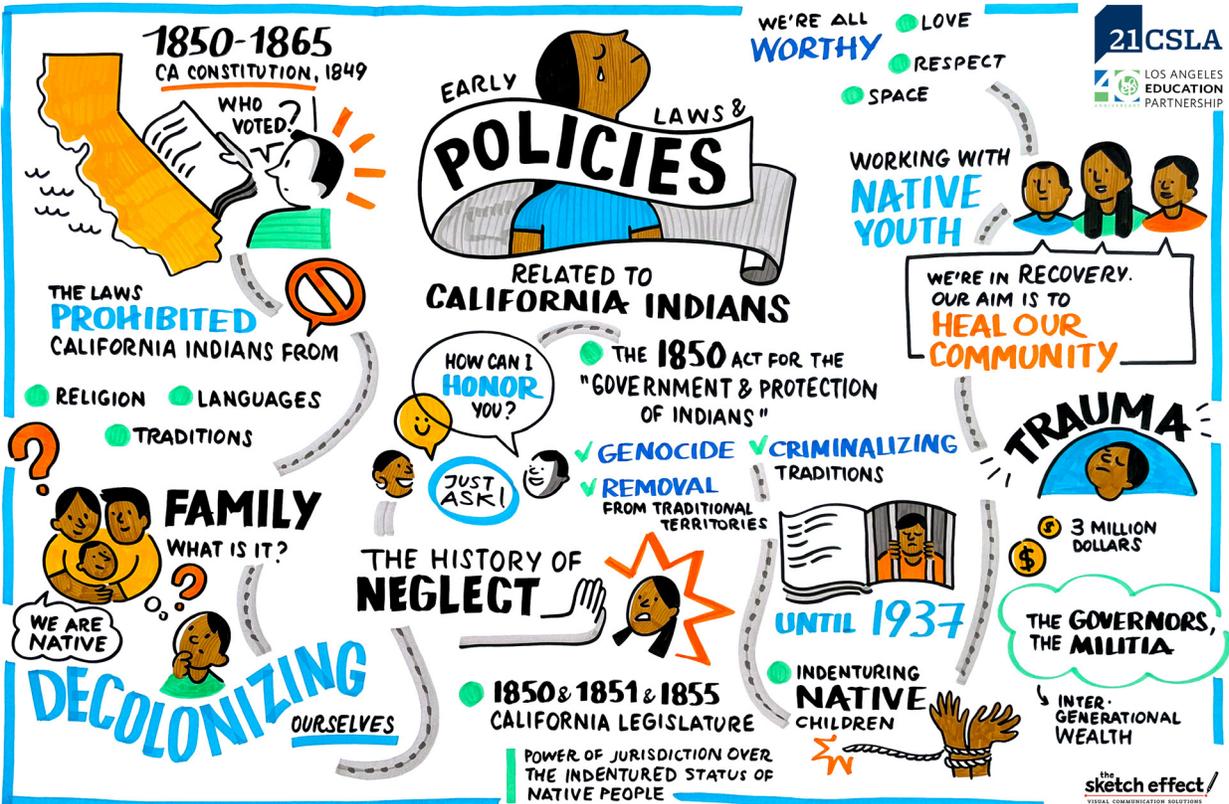
Creating classroom spaces where students are able to feel love and be their whole selves brings me back to the same care-free feeling I had as a young child growing up in that motel.

The child who would run joyfully across the exterior hallways lined with white doors, with shameless curiosity of who would be the next stranger to check into that one-bedroom, ...

- who felt pride in her parent’s immigration story,
- who frequented the lobby to grab a treat from the candy tray
- who would sneak by the bar to listen to the next soundtrack playing on the jukebox
- who felt whole and proud to be unapologetically herself.



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