“Once a social change has begun it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”

CESAR CHAVEZ, Labor Leader
In 2013, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) School Board led the nation in passing a groundbreaking School Climate Bill of Rights. This resolution is in response to a simple demand from our students—they want safe and high-quality schools. Today, we are at a critical inflection point. Even with this momentous and vital policy on the books, we still have an enormous educational achievement and opportunity gap to address. In 2013, while 73.6% of white students graduated from high school in Los Angeles Unified, only 67.2% and 63.7% of Latino and African-American students, respectively, graduated. And once the data narrows down to male students of color, the outcomes are even more discouraging. In 2013, only 61.2% of male Latino students graduated, and only 57.5% of male African-American students.¹

In addition to a clear educational opportunity and access gap, data on schools in California—particularly those in LAUSD—reveals a clear gap in equity. Our boys of color are less likely to be college graduates and far more likely to be subjects of suspensions, expulsions and incarcerations. In fact, in LAUSD in 2011, black males made up almost 5% of enrollment but were only 3.8% of the graduating class² and over 25% of suspensions.³ This data shouldn’t depress educators and parents in California—it should serve as a wake-up call to address a growing crisis that undermines the promise of our schools, communities, economy and democracy.

To develop this paper, we dissected statistics, research and case studies from districts across the country; examined best practices at work in our schools; and interviewed colleagues, parents, leaders and, most importantly, our students. In addition, we polled over 330 of our colleagues. The polling data pushed our team to revise and rework policy recommendations to meet key needs and concerns among our peers. Where there was less than 75% teacher support for our initial policy ideas, our Teacher Policy Team reexamined and reworked our recommendations to address key concerns. The result of this rigorous process is a set of recommendations for how our state, district and schools can implement policy changes to improve how boys of color—and all students—experience school climate.

¹ http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest.
² Ibid.
³ ocrdata.ed.gov.
Improving school climate is a whole-team effort, and it cannot be a topdown mandate. When students cry out, as they have in Los Angeles, for higher-quality school climates, all levels of our education system must respond with the support, funding, information and accountability these efforts require.
STATE SOLUTIONS: EMPOWERING DISTRICTS WITH INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICES

THE STATE SHOULD INVEST IN DATA

Tackling this problem requires our state to prioritize and monitor the persistent performance gaps for our boys of color. In a recent and seismic budget reform, the governor and legislature of California made school climate one of its eight priorities for helping to determine how local districts should spend dollars. The state should signal its commitment to this priority by providing the necessary tools for districts to make data-based spending decisions. The state already has examples of these kinds of tools through its Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant program, which provided dollars for schools that proposed innovative plans or expansions on current practices to improve school climate. California should expand its S3 database to include more schools and make it searchable by demographic information. Making data searchable by school size, level or type would help schools more efficiently narrow their focus on the examples and tools that are most relevant to them and their context.

More than simply sharing statistics, this database should equip school and district leaders with an instant “menu” for improving school climate. As leaders find schools and districts with similar demographics seeing greater success, they can reach out to learn more about what practices are working best and implement similar strategies in their own communities or campuses.

THE STATE SHOULD INVEST IN RECOGNIZING EXCELLENCE

We need to very publicly highlight examples of schools that have transformed or consistently maintained strong school climates. Schools that effectively improve school climate measures for boys of color frequently employ significant resources and energy to lift culture, achievement and opportunity for students. These schools should be recognized for their success and given a platform for sharing their best practices. Given the state’s eight priority areas and the need to publicly highlight models of success, California should create a recognition program for school climate. This could build upon the federal Blue Ribbon program, which highlights schools that are making or maintaining significant academic gains, but focus in on school climate, which will elevate this often under-discussed element of high-quality schools.

DISTRICT SOLUTIONS: EMPOWERING SCHOOLS WITH INFORMATION, STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

THE DISTRICT SHOULD GIVE SCHOOLS A SCHOOL CLIMATE FLASHLIGHT

LAUSD already collects massive amounts of data on school climate. To make this data more integrated and usable, the district should revise the current school report card to include disaggregated school climate data in a parent-friendly format. In addition to the current year’s data, the previous year’s data as well as comparisons to district averages should be reported on the report card. This would allow teachers, administrators, families and even students to engage in data-grounded conversations on how to improve their school’s climate.

THE DISTRICT SHOULD INVEST IN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Knowing students’ cultural norms and frames of reference and leveraging them in the classroom makes “learning more relevant and effective.” With that in mind, the district should invest in providing training for and measuring the implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Here, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is defined as practices that acknowledge students’ culture and its relevance in the world. This pedagogy empowers students and fosters reflectiveness among practitioners to “eradicate racial and ethnic inequities in education opportunities.”

Investment in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy should come in three phases. First, the district will use the School Climate Bill of Rights to define Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as a strategy for meeting specified school climate and achievement goals. Second, the district should create professional development around Culturally Responsive Pedagogy that includes training, classes, observations and connections with a mentor teacher. Third and finally, the district should expand the framework for the teacher...
evaluation system, the Teacher Growth and Development Cycle (TGDC), to explicitly integrate Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

THE DISTRICT SHOULD INVEST IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

“Restorative Justice” (RJ) is an alternative discipline model that focuses on restoring the community when some form of wrongdoing or injustice has occurred. In addition to focusing on solutions rather than punishments that often involve removing students from instructional settings, this model forces communities to understand the root causes of student infractions by examining external and internal factors that influence student choices and behaviors, as well as the factors that influence how school staff and parents perceive and respond to student behavior.

The district should invest more widely in Restorative Justice by hiring RJ coordinators for every school with disproportionate rates of suspension for students of color, students with disabilities and English Language Learners, as defined by the School Climate Bill of Rights. Under the School Climate Bill of Rights, all schools are required to use Restorative Justice practices by 2020. By putting an RJ coordinator at each of these schools, the district would work toward that goal faster, with a concentration of resources for the students most adversely impacted by current school discipline models. Given the newness of this practice, RJ roles and strategies should be closely monitored for efficacy.

SCHOOL SOLUTIONS: EMPOWER PRACTITIONERS TO OWN SCHOOL CLIMATE PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

SCHOOLS SHOULD REIMAGINE SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENTS AS ACTION STATEMENTS

Too often, mission statements are mere soundbites instead of operating values for a school. When collectively set by a community, missions tend to be implemented more faithfully and consistently. Schools should align their mission statements with the School Climate Bill of Rights. Mission statements should codify clear values, systems and protocols to meet these school climate and achievement goals. Schools should set up or integrate in existing governing councils a committee of students, parents, teachers and administrators to serve as the monitor and evaluate how the school is implementing and “living” its mission.

SCHOOLS SHOULD DEVELOP A SCHOOL-BASED ACTION PLAN

School climate report cards should capture both qualitative and quantitative data and be actionable. The district should require schools with metrics marked as “failing” on the School Report Card to develop an action plan to address disproportionate rates of achievement, suspension, expulsion and/or citation. The action plan should include data-driven professional development and a plan to invest in teacher leaders on school climate. Clearly, our schools should aim to do more than simply avoid suspensions—success will be empowering students, particularly our black and brown youth, to be positive leaders of their academic futures, peers and schools. For this reason, the plans should also include systems for elevating student leadership on their campuses.

SCHOOLS SHOULD DEVELOP SCHOOL CLIMATE LEADERSHIP ROLES FOR TEACHERS

A key way to invest in lasting change is to invest in those who can lead that change. Schools should develop leadership roles for teachers that relate to improving school climate. Examples of these might include PD leaders, data analysts, Restorative Justice teacher-leaders, or parent and community liaisons. This strategy is integral to securing peer buy-in and support needed to truly transform problems with school climate into opportunities.

CONCLUSION

As teachers, we believe passionately in the constitutional right of every child, regardless of race, gender or zipcode, to a high-quality education. We also know that our students are watching and learning from our leadership. In violating this right for some of our children, we have fallen short for all of our future citizens. Our students are watching—let them be a witness to actions that show that fulfilling the constitutional right of every student is fulfilling the promise of public education.

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For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table—the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators 4 Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers.

E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers’ Principles and Beliefs. E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

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