

**Policy Brief**  
*Policy Lessons from Schools Where Low-Income Students of Color Thrive*

**Required information**

**Organizations submitting this brief:** Justice Matters and the School Redesign Network at Stanford University

**Topics covered:** personnel and leadership, school finance

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**Problem Statement**

Public high schools that provide low-income students of color with an education that enables them to thrive are possible. A considerable body of research has shown that these schools provide students with an education that is academically rigorous while also relevant, responsive and connected to students' cultures. The practices of such schools as well as their structure and organization have been documented many times so that other schools may follow in their footsteps. However, the number of such high schools remains extremely low.

The good intentions and dedication of people working in schools and the body of knowledge about best equitable practices are just not enough to withstand a policy environment that undermines these practices at every turn. Our research study, *High Schools for Equity: Policy Supports for Student Learning in Communities of Color*, identifies policy areas that have major influences on the ability of high schools to carry out the practices that enable our most underserved students to succeed. Among these areas are: personnel and leadership and school finance.

Current policies in these areas are either inadequate or sorely lacking, specifically in terms of policies that:

- ensure a supply of teachers and leaders with the skill set needed to carry out the practices in question,
- provide the flexibility and support for schools to supply ongoing learning opportunities and support for teachers to enable the kinds of pedagogical strategies and personalized student attention identified by the research as crucial for low-income students of color,
- provide school leaders with the professional learning opportunities and support to develop the skills of instructional leadership and organizational change,
- provide sufficient funding with the flexibility to be allocated to the resources most strategic to providing a high quality rigorous, relevant, and responsive learning environment, and
- provide the resources that students will need in order to have true access to higher education.

## **Personnel and Leadership**

Policies must strengthen and build the human capital of teachers and principals.

### Teacher Preparation

We found that the schools that are successfully providing a rigorous, relevant and responsive education work hard to recruit the limited supply of teachers with the knowledge and skill base necessary to provide this type of education. Teachers need deep knowledge of the content they teach, understanding of how students learn as individuals and as members of cultural groups and communities, the capacity to develop strong relationships with students and parents, knowledge of practices for providing a range of supports to students who are struggling, and methods for teaching English learners. While some pre-service programs provide a strong start on these skills, many prospective teachers do not have access to these programs because of cost and availability. California has periodically enacted programs to subsidize the preparation of teachers for high-need schools; however, most of these programs have been cancelled or reduced in scale over recent years.

### *Policy Recommendations:*

- Provide financial support for high quality pre-service preparation for candidates who will teach in high-need schools.
- Provide support for improving the quality of teacher education programs and their capacity to provide a foundation in the skills that teachers most need to provide rigorous, relevant, and responsive education to low-income students of color.

### Professional Development and Support

Once teachers are working in schools, they need ongoing high quality professional development. High quality professional development includes multiple layers of support for new teachers as well as ongoing support for experienced teachers including opportunities to collaborate, plan and reflect on practice as well as observe each other teach, methods for reflecting on one's practice with administrators or outstanding teachers, and frequent feedback and support from administrators and outstanding teachers.

Currently, school schedules do not provide sufficient time for collaboration or professional development. And school principals do not have the knowledge or time to act as instructional leaders. The state program to support new teachers, Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA), operates through providers who often do not have a strong knowledge base about the teaching skills most important for low-income students of color.

The schools that are successfully creating rigorous, relevant, and responsive learning environments do so in part through raising additional funds to provide the time and professional learning experiences not supported through state or district policies. They also have the autonomy to develop professional learning opportunities that correspond to their instructional mission and program. Other schools need similar opportunities. In addition, state sponsorship of high quality professional development on many of the

topics most needed by teachers is urgent in a context where schools and districts lack the resources to otherwise access such training. California already has an infrastructure for providing some of the professional development that is needed—its high quality system of professional development focused on the academic content areas called the Subject Matter Projects. Unfortunately, funding for the Subject Matter Projects has been greatly reduced.

*Policy Recommendations:*

- Provide support for at least 10 days of professional development time each year. Schools and districts should have the flexibility to determine when in the year this time is used and whether several days or grouped together or partial days are spread throughout the year.
- Provide more time for teacher planning and collaboration.
- Provide more direction to the training of providers of the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) to make sure that they are covering the skills discussed above that are most important for strong learning environments for low-income students of color.
- Provide high quality professional development on key topics by increasing support for the Subject Matter Projects as well as sponsoring high quality professional development for teaching English language learners.

School leadership

Principals are strong instructional leaders in the schools that are successfully providing rigorous, relevant, and responsive learning experiences. They need not only to model strong instructional practice, but they also need to know how to plan professional development, re-design school organizations, and manage a change process. They need to know how to reorganize their schools to focus resources on core academic instruction—for example, how to organize staffing and teacher time to reduce class size, create teams, develop systems of support for each student, and provide time for collaboration and professional learning opportunities. There has been little investment in development of school leaders in California over recent years. Leadership preparation programs that exist generally provide little guidance for principals with regard to leading schools that are organized differently from traditional schools so as to better enable learning environments that can combine rigor, relevance, and responsiveness. Most programs also do not provide funded internships, a very important component of effective principal preparation.

After the preparation phase, California’s principals are much less likely than principals in other states to have access to mentoring, coaching, and high quality professional development. For twenty years, California did have an infrastructure for principal professional development through the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA). CSLA was nationally recognized and served as a model for other states. CSLA was cut from the budget in 2003. Finally, there is not a statewide system for developing the pipeline of future principals that have the right capacities for the job and who are from demographic backgrounds that reflect the diversity of their students.

### *Policy Recommendations:*

- Restore the California School Leadership Academy. The Academy's offerings should include mentoring and coaching specific to beginning principals and training about the specific learning needs of students of color and English learners.
- Provide support for systematically improving principal preparation programs, specifically providing funded internships and content that prepare principals to lead in schools that are organized very differently from traditional schools.
- Aggressively recruit teachers into the principal pipeline who reflect students' demographic backgrounds and have strong instructional and leadership capacities.

### **School Finance**

California public schools that successfully provide a rigorous, relevant, and responsive education to low-income students of color can only do so by raising additional funds. Not only do schools not have enough funds to provide what they know their students need, but they also lack flexibility in using the funds that they do have to direct the resources so as to best serve their students.

#### Level of Funding for Schools

The schools in our study raise considerable additional funds (\$500-\$1,200 per student) to increase staffing, so they can lower class size and support professional learning and collaboration time. Strong, experienced teachers are given reduced teaching loads, so they can work with new teachers. More staffing also enables teachers to provide responsive support to each student in the context of caring relationships; additional staff translate into smaller class sizes and time for teachers to teach classes such as advisory that are designed to provide students with individualized academic and emotional support. Furthermore, additional staff make it possible for principals to distribute some of their duties and free up time, so that they can be in classrooms and provide instructional leadership. Raised funds also provide lead teachers with time and/or stipends to engage in an annual analysis of student data and student work to set instructional goals for the subsequent year, and to develop curriculum.

Additional funds also enable each school to carry out its unique vision that makes learning come alive for its students. A clear vision that is widely held by the school community has been found in study after study to be one of the key factors in providing a high quality and equitable education. But lack of funds often prevents schools from effectively actualizing their vision. A school with a construction focus uses funds to buy building materials. Another school hires a staff person to develop high quality service learning internships. These funds do not go to frills or extras, but to features that are integral to the school's work.

Finally, there is one item that schools successfully providing a rigorous, relevant, and responsive education rarely pay for, but this resource must be funded if the work of such schools is to be sustainable or widespread. Staffing that eases the crushing workload of serving students well. Teachers and administrators at exemplary schools have a work week that far exceeds that of the great majority of the workforce. There is so much to do

to make sure that no student falls through the cracks. These schools show what activities and practices need to be carried out, but increased funding is necessary to enable normal hardworking, dedicated educators to carry out these activities, or these will never become the norm.

*Policy Recommendation:*

- Increase resources going to schools so that they are sufficient to pay for the most important resources for enabling schools to provide a rigorous, relevant, and responsive education for all students. The level of resources should factor in the costs of staffing necessary for professional development and collaboration time, teacher mentoring, small class sizes, manageable workloads, and materials and activities specific to school focus and vision.
- Use a weighted student formula to achieve this leveling-up of resources. In a weighted student formula, funds follow the child, and additional funding is allocated to populations of students that schools have a poor track record of supporting. This approach ensures that new funds are distributed equitably.

Funding Streams

A number of the schools in our study have more flexibility in the ability to use their funds than most California schools, either because they are charter schools or because they have other unique situations. These schools use this flexibility to provide better quality support to students by allocating resources to reduce pupil load and class sizes and instituting an advisory program and strong counseling support so that support can be based on strong continuous relationships between teachers and students and personalized to meet the individual needs of the student. However, in spite of more flexibility than most schools, the schools in the study are still hindered in their work by the state's fragmented funding streams. This fragmentation gets in the way of schools carrying out their vision and in turn creates a fragmented experience for students with less access to supports. They struggle to overcome hurdles to giving all students access to important experiences during the school day because the funding stream for the activity in question requires it be offered only before or after school. Or, funding is only available if instruction is delivered in a school classroom, but the school wants to cover the content through an internship or a community college class. The schools in the study that are not charter schools have additional problems such as finding themselves forced to pay for textbooks that do not correspond to their pedagogical approach.

*Policy Recommendations:*

- Aside from major categorical programs intended to address specific population needs (e.g., special education, English language learner funding), reduce the number of small categorical programs and roll funds into core funding through a weighted student formula, so that schools have more flexibility to align funding to their instructional mission.

Funding for System Infrastructure and Higher Education

Beyond funds that go directly to schools, funding is needed in a number of areas that support an overall system of rigorous, relevant, and responsive schools. As was

described in the Personnel and Leadership section, there must be support for preparation programs that consistently produce teachers and principals that can carry out the practices of rigorous, relevant, and responsive schools. Subsidies are needed so the best candidates, often from students' communities, are able to participate in these programs. And funding is needed for a state-level infrastructure that supports the quality of teacher induction, professional development, and evaluation that are needed for rigorous, relevant, and responsive schools to flourish.

Once students graduate from a rigorous, relevant, and responsive school system, they are of course ready for college. But too often, higher education is not ready for them. Tuitions have been rising while state support for college has been declining in real dollar terms. Even less funds are available for scholarships, and the Dream Act, which would provide aid for undocumented students, was vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger last year, forcing undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition. Many students in the schools in the study who qualify for the California State and University system, have to attend the community college system because of a lack of financial resources.

*Policy Recommendation:*

- Provide the funding necessary to carry out the recommendations described in the Personnel and Leadership section.
- Pass the Dream Act, increase financial aid, and reinvest in higher education to keep it affordable as well as supportive and high-quality.

**Summary of Research Supporting Recommendations**

The School Redesign Network at Stanford University (SRN LEADS) and Justice Matters recently completed a study that draws policy lessons from exemplary schools. This contribution to the current California policy conversation looks at policy from the vantage point of schools that are successfully doing what all California public schools should do.

The study — *High Schools for Equity: Policy Supports for Student Learning in Communities of Color* — draws on cases of five California public high schools that serve students of color, low-income students, and English learners. These schools successfully provide students with an education that is academically rigorous, relevant, responsive, and connected to students' cultures.

The five high schools in the study — all urban, public, non-selective schools serving predominantly low income, African American and Latino student populations — are located across California, in Sacramento, San Francisco, Inglewood and San Diego.

The questions that the study takes up are: How do district and state policies support the practices of these schools? How do district and state policies hinder the practices of these schools? What policies would be needed to enable all California schools to carry out the practices of the schools in the study? The study's findings in the areas of personnel and leadership and school finance are summarized in this brief.