"NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US"

A Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Case Study on East Side Union High School District

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Contents

Timeline: Student Organizing in East Side Union High School District

1998		California Proposition 227 passes, **ending bilingual educational programs** across the state
2003		**CFJ began organizing** in San Jose
2003		ESUHSD formally adopts a **Bilingual Certification program,** the first school district in the state of California to do so
2004		***Williams v. State of California* settlement** results in new state legislation that establishes funding for instructional materials, school repairs and resource quality monitoring, reduced school overcrowding, and establishes minimum standards and qualifications for teachers
2010		***A-G Graduate with Me!* is established,** a student-led initiative ensuring that all students have access to "high quality courses and have a chance to work towards four-year university eligibility"
2013		**Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)** is signed into law
2014		Californians for Justice launches the ***Student Voice Campaign***
2017		William C. Overfelt High School's ***Participatory Budgeting*** begins
2017		***Relationship-Centered Schools*** resolution passes in ESUHSD
2018		**First student representative appointed** to the ESUHSD Board of Trustees
2018		ESUHSD approves the formation of the first **Student Governing Board**
2020		Resolutions pass **defunding school police** & making Ethnic Studies a graduation course requirement

Introduction

In 2013, after more than a decade of student and parent organizing across the state, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was signed into California law, marking an important development in the fight for equity in educational funding.

In a departure from California's long-standing method of resource allocation from categorical funding to a block grant, LCFF utilizes a weighted formula to allocate resources to districts based on the number of low-income students, foster youth and English Learners they serve. LCFF was designed to provide districts with more flexibility, and, consequently, increased opportunities to conduct transformational and equity-oriented work. Another goal of LCFF was to ensure that the voices of the district's stakeholders, including students, guided the strategic use of state resources in the development of Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP), a three-year plan that describes the goals, actions, services, and expenditures to support positive student outcomes that address state and local priorities (California Department of Education, 2013).

Almost 9 years after its implementation, numerous studies have examined the impact of the LCFF (Humphrey et al., 2017), LCAP (Olsen et al., 2017), and the multiple lessons about educational policy and practice derived from LCFF (Koppich & Humphrey, 2018). Simultaneously, we have seen a rise in the visibility and presence of youth leadership in mainstream educational discourse. Phrases like youth empowerment, youth voice, and youth participation have quickly gathered momentum and have become more popular in the discourse around educational change and the implementation of LCFF and LCAP. However, too little is known about how LCFF has shifted cultures, everyday practices, structures, and educational outcomes across the state, especially whether it has empowered young people to take more active roles in influencing and contributing to educational policies and practices.

A student sits on a bench at William C. Overfelt High School in ESUHSD.

Most educational stakeholders believe that youth voice and leadership is generally a good idea. However, the character, quality, understanding, and degree of engagement vary significantly across the state. Often muddled by concerns over the value and purpose of including youth voices, educators and policymakers continue to grapple with several questions:

Will student voice improve outcomes?

How can we gauge if efforts to support youth voice, power, and participation are successful?

Will engaging students engender practical and innovative solutions?

Is strengthening youth participation an effective use of our time and resources?

How will this work change the educational experiences of students and adults?

How can student voice and power work in unison and support broader educational and racial justice efforts?

This case study explores these questions and offers a detailed account of how one California school district, East Side Union High School District (ESHUSD or "The District") in San Jose, CA, in partnership with Californians for Justice (CFJ), a youth-led educational justice organization, developed student voice, power, and participation to drive more equitable outcomes to achieve the goals of LCFF. To do so, we explore the complexities of implementing system-wide change and shifting cultures and structures of participation in decision making, which in this case, presented important and consequential challenges and opportunities. In addition, by including the voices and the perspectives of students, families, organizers, teachers, principals, staff members, and school district leaders, we seek to highlight the successes, strengths, impacts, and the challenges that arise from efforts to create systemic and sustainable change.

This research is part of a larger set of case studies conducted by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools highlighting the work of five districts in California that have sought to improve outcomes for students through LCFF. This effort seeks to understand how school districts are seizing the equity opportunities afforded by LCFF to deepen our understanding of how educational policy is interpreted, enacted, implemented, negotiated, and contested, particularly when young people are meaningfully involved in these processes. Through this work, we aim to inform educators, practitioners, leaders, and policymakers, thus contributing to our understanding of how educational policies, along with their guiding principles and intended impact, can be more successful.

Most of the data collection for this study was conducted in 2019. However, due to the profound impact of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Uprisings on school communities across the country in 2020, another set of interviews and analysis was added to complete the study.

Principal Vito Chiala greets students at William C. Overfelt High School in ESUHSD.

Organization of Study

The case study begins with a brief section that explores the local and broader context in which youth voice and organizing began in ESUHSD, highlighting the instrumental role that CFJ had in organizing youth and working with school leaders at the early stages of this effort.

Next, the study explores how the LCAP represented an opportunity for the district to advance and disseminate this work.

We then explore three major themes that arose in our analysis and during our visit and conversations with District stakeholders:

1. **The centrality of addressing both district and school structure and culture in implementing educational change**
2. **The relationship between this work and the civic identities and civic literacies of students**
3. **The generative nature of youth empowerment, emphasizing how The District has moved along a continuum towards more authentic collaboration with students**

Following, this case study documents the specific impact that these efforts have had on district practices based on youth voice, power, and participation. This section is organized around three key areas of impact in terms of district practices:

1. **Reinforcing existing district priorities and practices**
2. **Refining the work of The District by adding additional perspectives, relevancy, and nuance**
3. **Generating new and creative ideas, initiatives, and practices**

We then outline enduring challenges along with a set of recommendations to further The District's efforts to attain more equitable outcomes for students and families based on youth expertise and experience.

The study concludes by drawing connections with efforts to build student voice, power and participation as a key influence in how The District is responding to COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter uprisings.

Students in an Ethnic Studies course at William C. Overfelt High School in ESUHSD.

Youth Power:
Past and Present

CFJ student leaders and community allies march around the State Board of Education building to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (July 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

Rapid Change, Growing Disparities, and Early Organizing Efforts for Educational Justice in San Jose

Silicon Valley, facing southward towards Downtown San Jose (2014)

During the early 2000s, the city of San Jose was experiencing rapidly growing educational, economic, and racial inequities due to the exponential growth of the technology industry.

San Jose had long been home to an economically and ethnically diverse population, including the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam, and an immigrant population that composed 70% of the city's residents (Californians for Justice, 2021). However, San Jose was changing quickly, and mimicking wider patterns of disparity that were negatively impacting the most marginalized. Between 2000 and 2012, median home values in San Jose rose 46% and median rent rose 28%; however, median income rose only 16% and the divide between top earners and middle- and lower- income households widened dramatically (City of San Jose, 2020). Housing burden in the city was unequally distributed by race/ethnicity: 30% of Latino households and 24% of Black households experienced severe housing burden (with 50% or more of their income going to housing costs), compared to 16% of white households (City of San Jose, 2020). Among public school students, the percentage qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch in the San Jose Unified School District rose steadily from 40% in 2004-05 to 46% in 2011-12 (California Department of Education, 2012).

Alongside these growing socioeconomic and material disparities, California was also emerging from a highly consequential anti-immigrant period that had produced a legacy of educational policies and practices that continued to negatively impact the educational experiences of youth of color. Less than a decade before, California Proposition 187 passed with 58.93% of the votes, prohibiting undocumented immigrants from using public healthcare, schools, and social services and requiring state and local agencies to report suspected undocumented immigrants to state and federal authorities. Two years later, in 1996, California Proposition 209, called the California Civil Rights Initiative, ended most public affirmative action programs in California. Building on previous policies, partisan ideological forces, and rising conservative anti-immigrant rhetoric, California Proposition 227 (Ballotopedia, 1998) was passed in 1998, requiring English instruction in public schools and ending bilingual educational programs across the state.

As these disparities, injustices, and attacks on the most marginalized expanded across the state, groups, movements, and communities committed to resisting, fighting, and working towards just and equitable schools and communities began to proliferate. One of these organizations was Californians for Justice.

Between 2000-2012, **median home values in San Jose rose 46% and median rent rose 28%;** however, **median income rose only 16%** (City of San Jose, 2020).

Californians for Justice:
A History of Statewide Organizing & the Partnership with ESUHSD

"We believe that young people are the leaders we need to create the healthy, just and vibrant schools all of our communities deserve."

CALIFORNIANS FOR JUSTICE

Californians for Justice (CFJ) had been fighting for racial and educational justice across the state and recognized the growing inequities in San Jose. It clearly understood the political context in which these were taking place, and began organizing youth and families in the community, and working towards educational and racial justice. In 2003, as part of an effort to challenge deficit notions of San Jose's diverse and multilingual student body, CFJ and its student and community leaders partnered with California Tomorrow, an organization whose mission is "to create a fair and inclusive multicultural society" (Applied Research Center, 2002) to push for The District to develop a Bilingual Certification program that would celebrate, affirm, and recognize students' home languages and cultural wealth. These efforts led to the District's board formally adopting a Bilingual Certification program on April 17, 2003. Since its inception, the program has served an increasing number of students in ESUHSD, from 137 graduates earning a Seal of Biliteracy in the 2004-05 school year to 791 graduates in the 2019-20 school year (Dinh, 2009).

Meanwhile, CFJ was organizing in The District, holding press conferences, leading rallies, and facilitating student and teacher testimony to support the landmark court case *Williams v. State of California:* a class-action lawsuit asserting that schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods had limited access to acceptable facilities, resources, and experienced teachers, failing to provide them with education on equal terms (Oulahan, 2005). The Williams case was settled in 2004 and the nearly one-billion-dollar settlement included the signing of four legislative bills providing substantial resources for instructional materials, school repairs and resource quality monitoring, reducing school overcrowding, establishing minimum standards and qualifications for teachers, and introducing transparency into the process of completing these initiatives. During the year of the settlement, ESUHSD agreed to fully implement these initiatives within The District and, more importantly, inform the community of their progress.

THE FORGING OF A PARTNERSHIP WITH ESUHSD: FROM CONFRONTATION TO COLLABORATION

From the beginning, CFJ in San Jose employed a broad-based strategy consisting of building a base, developing student and community leadership and power, and building partnerships to strengthen its impact. CFJ, like many other organizations, researchers, and civil rights leaders recognized that making schools more equitable requires more than technical school improvement strategies. Instead, CFJ recognized that equity and educational justice require strategies that deliberately address the norms, power dynamics, and politics of the institutions of schooling and of the society from which they emanate

(Oakes et al., 2007). As their work with students and families continued to deepen, the beginnings of a more "informed and energized public" (Dewey, 2015) began to emerge, especially among those who had been previously disenfranchised and underserved by existing school systems.

Initially, as explained by various district leaders and community organizers, CFJ's role was to 'hold The District accountable', a role which at times proved contentious. CFJ leaders (including student leaders) understood the deep educational disparities that persisted in The District, and their strategy required both ensuring that these disparities were recognized and shared publicly and demanding that The District take responsibility for addressing these disparities and ensuring a quality and equitable education for all students. However, as CFJ's work progressed and their presence in The District grew, several district and school leaders who resonated with CFJ's vision and valued the work that CFJ was doing alongside students began to emerge. New relationships were forged and new opportunities to collaborate arose. In 2015, for example, CFJ youth leaders worked with Principal Vito Chiala of William C. Overfelt (WCO) High School to develop and run the first school-based participatory budgeting process in the state. As part of this collaboration, students, parents and Overfelt staff decided how to spend $50,000 tied to LCFF through an annual democratic decision-making process (see page 32).

Remembering the early days of the work, Rosa de Leon, Strategy Director for CFJ, spoke about the many district leaders that organizers and student leaders saw 'come-and-go' for a long time:

"They knew about our work, but we were a group that was ***more focused on holding The District and the schools accountable."***

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

However, as more of these initiatives and opportunities for collaboration began to grow, the relationship between CFJ and the school district began to shift. The arrival of Superintendent Chris Funk brought stability to The District's leadership. A growing familiarity of district leaders with CFJ's work alongside students contributed to a broader recognition of the potential and importance of student voice, power, and participation. CFJ also recognized the strategic and beneficial potential of the partnership: a productive and powerful relationship that is uncommon between educational justice organizations and school districts.

"When we passed A through G (a district-wide policy to ensure all graduates met the minimum requirements to be eligible for any University of California or a California State University campus) ***we were co-leading the process to write the language of the policy—we were leading that process together.*** *Since he's [Superintendent Funk] been here, we have been working with the district more in a partnership. And there has been accountability, too."*

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

In addition, as the leadership of The District committed to supporting student voice, power, and participation, they quickly recognized that CFJ not only held important and valuable theory, strategy, and experience about how to empower youth and to effectively create spaces for meaningful and powerful participation; but had also developed youth leaders that could help The District pilot and jump-start initiatives. Consequently, with both the willingness and commitment of the school district, and with the help of CFJ, ESUHSD worked to create a system in which The District could move from "compliance-oriented engagement" to meaningful and productive voice, power, and participation.

ESUHSD Superintendent Glenn Vander Zee, speaking about CFJ's role and the knowledge it has contributed to the work, shared:

"Californians for Justice have been great. When participating as individuals, they have brought a lot of value, and when participating as facilitators and as a group working with students; ***they are strong, trained, focused facilitators that are eliciting voices,*** *with the goal of representative participation."*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Teresa Marquez, Associate Superintendent of Educational Services at ESUHSD, describes this partnership as both collaborative and collegial: "in authentically bringing in the student voices; we see them as the experts in this area." As she described, this partnership has moved CFJ from being on the 'outside' to 'sitting next to us [The District]', having a direct impact on the educational practices of ESUHSD. These practices include, amongst others: writing and developing strategic policies including the A-G requirement and the Relationship Centered Schools; helping plan agendas and facilitate meetings so that they are equitable for youth participation; planning and conducting joint professional development around unconscious biases, racial justice, and teacher-student relationships (including youth input in hiring and staffing, scheduling,

and other relevant educational practice decisions); and supporting and planning The District's implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) work.

MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Educational research has found that most often, policy-making institutions invite youth to speak, participate, and share their opinions, pushing discourses that portray the voices of youth as important and central to how they make decisions. However, when youth are "called" to participate, they are often placed in spaces and structures that further marginalize and silence their voices. These experiences only lead to further disempowerment.

"When you have student voice, you have voices from people who are experiencing education firsthand. The problem is not whether you have their voices or not, but ***whether you listen and value their voices enough to really consider and act on what they're saying.*** *If you don't, now you've made it worse."*

LUPE NAVARRO, STUDENT LEADER

"If students are asked to participate in something with ***unclear outcomes, devoid of mission, and unclear about the 'how to make it meaningful',*** *we will make students feel like they gave their time and it wasn't valued or accounted for."*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

A growing body of research demonstrates that when youth are brought to the table to collaborate with adults in decision making in meaningful ways, the results are mutually beneficial: it enhances the social-emotional and academic development of young people, in addition to promoting their civic and community engagement, while simultaneously bringing important new perspectives to institutions that help to guide policies and practices (Shah et al., 2018).

A key component of this partnership has been CFJ's role in lifting the importance of creating spaces for authentic youth participation and voice. Supporting The District in engaging youth beyond performative and symbolic engagement has been one of the multiple roles that CFJ has played.

"CFJ teaches us how to take space, *how to participate in spaces that were not designed for us."*

STUDENT LEADER

Borrowing from the language developed by CFJ in their Student Voice Continuum, student power is moving away from "students as bystanders" to "student governance", from "reproducing inequities in participation" to "shared ownership" (Californians for Justice, 2020).

The District sought youth participation during a budget committee meeting to decide on district budget cuts. However, recognizing that the budget committee meeting would not be a "youth-friendly space", The District worked with CFJ to help prepare youth for the meeting by sending them information beforehand, scheduling a pre-meeting between student leaders and board members, and ensuring there were deliberate opportunities during the meeting for students to voice their thoughts. The District worked with CFJ staff and youth to create these meeting agendas, giving weight and importance in the conversation to issues related to budget cuts that were of concern to The District's number one stakeholder: students.

Together, these efforts have become part of a broader collective effort to reshape The District's culture and decision-making processes, and consequently its outcomes. As explained by Albert Tobias, a former CFJ youth organizer within ESUHSD and now Statewide Campaign Manager for CFJ:

"I hope everyone gets that the change that happens here is happening as part of a larger culture movement right within our schools. That's emulated through what our students need, through what the district is pushing, what our students are saying... ***The work that we're doing here is to move a culture, one that addresses its biases by meeting and feeling the needs of the students."***

ALBERT TOBIAS, CFJ STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN MANAGER

CFJ TEACHES US HOW TO TAKE SPACE, HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN SPACES THAT WERE NOT DESIGNED FOR US.

STUDENT ORGANIZER

The LCAP as Opportunity

When the State of California required Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs) as part of adoption of LCFF in 2013, the local commitment to student voice, leadership, and participation already existed within ESUHSD in large part due to its work with CFJ.

Therefore, at ESUHSD, the LCFF's stipulation that districts engage their stakeholders as key contributors when constructing their local plans (California Department of Education, 2021) was not perceived as a new "requirement" to be implemented. Instead, it was seen as an opportunity to deepen their commitment to the work they had already begun.

Californians for Justice, already actively involved in the larger struggle for stakeholder engagement long before LCFF, had already been organizing in San Jose to ensure the voices of diverse stakeholders were considered once the law was passed. As exemplified by one of the student statements shared by CFJ's briefs during those early years:

*"We want districts to take our voices into account when developing the LCAP, because **who knows more about students' problems than the students themselves?"***

KARANVIR SADHU, FORMER STUDENT LEADER

The results of this work were clearly reflected in The District's priorities. "A long time before LCFF, we were already talking about empowering students", shared Teresa Marquez. The District's efforts were not motivated by the establishment of new policy, but to improve educational outcomes for students. As Glenn Van Der Zee shared, ESUHSD had long been striving to include student voices in decision-making processes:

*"We have been intentional about including student voice, not just for the compliance part... but because we believe that in the [effort to] achieve the outcomes schools and districts have been trying to achieve for years and decades, we were missing the input from that group, and **when speaking to [students] we discovered they had meaningful, measured, and purposeful things to say.** That voice needed to be valued as a participant in this process."*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Students and families with CFJ, PACT, and Somos Mayfair review and grade their district's first LCAP (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

After years of struggling to find effective solutions to long-standing educational issues, including deep inequities in outcomes and experiences, the positive impacts of centering student voice, power, and participation were beginning to pay off. In addition, the LCAP emerged as a mechanism that could augment the authentic engagement and voices of The District's most important stakeholders: students.

The ability to affect this change was furthered by the shift from Economic Impact Aid (EIA) funds (California Department of Education, 2020) to LCAP funds, and the increased focus that the LCAP places on outcomes for certain groups of students, particularly foster youth, English learners, and low-income students. With the statewide implementation of LCFF and the LCAP process, stakeholder engagement shifted from a possibility to an expectation, giving district leadership further leverage in implementing systemic change while centering student voice, power, and participation at multiple levels. However, for youth to become effective participants within mainstream institutional spheres like the school system requires both a system of comprehensive and mutual accountability and support (Bishop & Noguera, 2019), as well as supportive ties to institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Furthermore, achieving long-term sustainable change would require a shift in both culture and structure (Schilling, 1992).

Changing Structure and Culture
by Centering on Students

"If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed."

PAULO FREIRE

"Students are just as capable, just as responsible *as any adult in reshaping our education system."*

KARLA RODRIGUEZ, FORMER STUDENT LEADER

Above all else, this process is beneficial because it has not forced students into pre-existing structures that are often unfriendly to and unprepared for student participation, but has evolved the culture in tandem with structures, so that student voice carries the weight it can and should. When we asked students how prepared they felt to contribute meaningfully to meetings, one of the student leaders explained:

"Before we were often equipped just before the meetings*... it is as if I was to go to court tomorrow, I would not be ready, but that's what happened before."*

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

Another student leader added:

"We would be in class on a normal day and then our teacher would say: 'oh, yeah, Miss Ramirez wants to see you,' and [I thought], 'oh, okay cool, did I do something wrong?' [I] walk in and they say, 'there's a meeting tomorrow.' [I would say] 'Oh, interesting, so what are we doing at this meeting?' and they say ***'taking charge of the school's money and make sure not to mess up.'"***

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

This interrelatedness between structure and culture was also reflected in Overfelt's participatory budgeting initiative.

"As a principal, you can create a structure like small learning communities to better enable relationships between adults and students, and students with each other, therefore changing culture. Then, through that culture and the conversations, the need for instructional shifts comes up. For example, those instructional shifts necessitate that we shift to a block period, because we don't have time to do the kind of instruction we want, so ***we make a structural shift that makes another cultural shift, and so on and so on."***

VITO CHIALA, PRINCIPAL, WILLIAM C. OVERFELT HIGH SCHOOL

Partly informed by the lessons learned from various initiatives, including the example set by Overfelt, The District and CFJ began a 'center-out' strategy, making space and piloting initiatives for student voice, power, and participation at the central office, and proactively expanding these models and lessons to other school sites. At the beginning, it was critical for CFJ to build a trusting relationship with The District.

"[We were] literally having weekly meetings and conversations with The District. ***It was really important to be honest with them, to build trust and relationships,*** *because we recognized that there was so much that needed to be changed to reflect what students were telling us that needed to change".*

ANGELES ROJAS, FORMER ORGANIZER, CFJ CAPACITY BUILDING MANAGER

As Vander Zee highlights, this work would ultimately require district and school leaders "to retrofit the culture and structure [everywhere] from student-staff interactions to rules and procedures, to the beliefs that guided our organization." Through a trusting partnership with CFJ, The District has continued to learn and improve its own processes. "We have to be honest with ourselves because it took a few years of relationship building and conversations to get to a place where The District would be willing to go through a reflective process that recognized a lot had to change," said Rojas. Rojas' reflections were echoed by Vander Zee:

"We started by saying, 'We will do something that we have never done: *develop an understanding of what that interaction [between adults and youth] can be, come up with processes for these interactions, and then expand to other school sites once we have modeled it as a district.'*

"STUDENTS ARE JUST AS CAPABLE, JUST AS RESPONSIBLE AS ANY ADULT IN RESHAPING OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM."

KARLA RODRIGUEZ, FORMER STUDENT LEADER

Student volunteers pose after supporting CFJ's "My Voice Matters" community town hall in ESUHSD (2014. *Image credit: CFJ*

Four years later, there's a student sitting on the board, we have a Student Governing Board, a high school that was built with participation from families and students, multiple policy wins that have come as a result of student voice and participation and our partnership with CFJ, and ***we have learned and continue to learn countless lessons from students."***

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

While making space for and centering student voice, power, and participation at the district level, staff members throughout ESUHSD began to recognize that, to accommodate for and amplify student participation, they didn't necessarily have to overhaul the whole system or create whole new structures, but rather they could change the ways in which beliefs and normalized practices, especially those related to power and legitimacy, operated within existing structures.

"One of the key lessons for many of the adults at The District was that they actually had to trust students, give the power to students. *It wasn't about what we (CFJ) wanted as an organization, it was about helping create a space and modeling what these meaningful interactions with students could look like so that district staff actually believed that students could lead."*

ANGELES ROJAS , FORMER ORGANIZER, CFJ CAPACITY BUILDING MANAGER

A key cultural shift that was required: to challenge conventional assumptions about whose voice carries legitimacy and about who holds knowledge within The District. This shift, thoroughly documented in research, is antithetical to existing cultural norms that have guided schools in the past, which hold that it is only the adults in power who "know" and whose voices carry legitimacy, both inside and outside of classrooms.

STRATEGIZING CULTURAL SHIFTS; RETHINKING YOUTH

It is through the interdependence between structure and culture that certain ideas about youth voice are produced and reproduced. Dominant paradigms about development often treat children and youth as semi-empty vessels or unfinished "subjects to change" rather than "agents of change" themselves—a mentality justifying the need for adults to constantly step in and act for students rather than with them. Moreover, research around youth voice and power has demonstrated how hollow student voice efforts that do not address adults' deeply-held beliefs about students, especially beliefs about Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized students, consistently fail, often reproducing the same exclusionary policies and practices adults set out to address in the first place (Cook-Sather, 2006).

CFJ San Jose student leaders speaking about the LCAP at ESUHSD Board Meeting (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

This culture and set of beliefs about youth were just as dominant. Therefore, meaningful participation by students required a new paradigm in which teachers and district staff could ally with students as agents of change to build a community and culture which respects and empowers student voice and participation at every level of decision-making, from the classroom to the district office.

> NOT ONLY DO STUDENTS HAVE TO HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE, THEY ACTUALLY HAVE TO BE HEARD.
>
> LUPE NAVARRO, STUDENT LEADER

*"**Not only do students have to have a seat at the table, they actually have to be heard.** And when they're heard, then there has to be some action to support that."*

LUPE, STUDENT LEADER

*"Making space for student voice in your program is not just about inviting young people to participate. It's about **creating the tools, support, and systemic approach that is welcoming to young people,** acknowledges their input through action, and is consistently working towards ending adult bias in the room."*

LUCILA ORTIZ, CFJ ORGANIZING DIRECTOR

*"You're not going to agree on everything, but if all you're asking is for input, and that input just goes on a sheet of paper and doesn't translate to action, then it's not true, honest dialogue. Students out there have a seat at the table, but **there has to be action that supports the dialogue that took place."***

CHRIS FUNK, FORMER DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Both students and adults who participated in and led this work understood that beliefs about young people and their knowledge varied greatly, and that producing a cultural shift would require time and continuous effort. In a context where adults still held, and continue to hold, many of these dominant beliefs, CFJ, student leaders, and district leaders recognized that to build a space with open communication and reciprocal learning, students needed the tools to participate with authority. Consequently, one of the approaches to change toxic cultural beliefs about student voice, power, and participation was to establish dedicated structures throughout The District that supported both student access to information and student action.

TOOLS FOR MEANINGFUL STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Scholars have consistently shown that the primary culprits in perpetuating achievement gaps are contemporary and historical structural disparities in access to resources, capital, and importantly, opportunities—such as real decision-making power (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bowles et al., 1976; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). For that reason, action for equity must confront the complex web of structural and cultural factors that schools and their communities embody (Wilson, 2010). Efforts to address systemic inequities within or outside of schools cannot only address culture as a "collective agreement"; they must also think about structure in explicit terms, accounting for the fact that many students, especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized students have been systematically disenfranchised and distanced from control over their own learning and school experience for their whole lives.

Without intentionality, students and teachers do not work as equal partners "in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together" (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004).

*"Our democracy is based on representation of the people by the people, right? But **as a school board member, I'm not elected by the people I represent: the students.** I'm elected by their parents. So, one of the things I asked our superintendent early-on was, "Can we have a student board member?" Our board, at the time, said 'We tried that before. It didn't really work.'"*

PATTIE CORTESE, ESUHSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT

Beyond adding one student board member, both students and adults recognized that authentic student participation beyond the district level required explicit efforts to build dialogue between students and administrators in their own schools. ESUHSD found some success by creating independent committees for youth to build and exercise voice and leadership within their individual schools. The Student Assembly—a group of students from various schools designed to build student

power and participation—is one example of this dialogue-building process.

"I didn't want one elected student to somehow try to represent 23,000 students. ***I want two-way channels of communication between that student and every student at the school site.*** *So, we came up with something we call The Student Assembly, comprised of one student from each grade level at every school site. And then, out of that body of four, one representative attends a monthly meeting at the district office."*

PATTIE CORTESE, ESUHSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT

The Student Assembly quickly demonstrated how students, as agents of change, represent a key partner and crucial stakeholder in The District's efforts towards creating more robust, responsive, and equitable school communities. Once given a space to voice and organize, student leaders quickly defied dominant and prevalent beliefs about youth.

"An obstacle that turned out to be non-existent was the worry that many adults shared: student voice meant discord, a pitting of students versus staff. ***Would students demand four-day weekends and soda in the water fountains?"***

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Moreover, Chiala, one of the first principals to spearhead these efforts shared that as soon as they began to give power to students, " not only did they begin to live up to their potential, but they were able to better align school resources and efforts to what was most important to them and their education."

The importance of equipping students with tools for meaningful participation was evidenced further when student leaders gained access to discipline and survey data: a critical tool that helped legitimize their experiences and perspectives. As one student, Alexis, recalls, when students were able to review ESUHSD's disciplinary statistics, they revealed that Black and Latinx youth were suspended at far higher rates than their peers, confirming the prevalence of structural racism within their school:

"We knew this stuff, but ***now that we're seeing the statistics, it was a wake-up call:*** *now we're speaking up about it."*

ALEXIS, STUDENT LEADER

To affect the changes they envision, students also needed to learn how to wield the power available to them now that they are participants in decision-making. Providing students with both the tools and the training of how to wield real power was identified in interviews as a critical component for uplifting student voice, power, and participation. According to Vander Zee, part of wielding that power is understanding its limitations:

"The key is being upfront about what the real role is, because ***telling students they have power when it's not real is disingenuous and deadly.*** *Dropping them initially into a situation, where you say, 'Here's the mechanism of power, and we're dropping you into it,' as a first thing? No thank you. We created environments where they have the power in the room. We want to teach them: you have all this power and this is how it will express itself within the system. We are really clear with that up front."*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

While sustaining this new level of student engagement and participation is something that requires constant attention, providing students with both the tools and training to wield real power in district and school decision-making structures helped students meaningfully engage with adults in arenas of change. To this end, ESUHSD exemplifies how student voice, power, and participation can be so much more than a "feel-good" symbolic leadership program; it teaches us that a culture of collaboration and partnership, paired with a dedicated set of structures that empower students is not only beneficial for a school district in terms of its ability to serve students and achieve its goals, but also can be transformational for the students involved.

CFJ student leaders rally outside of their state legislators' local offices, calling on them to pass the Local Control Funding Formula (May 2013). *Image credit: CFJ*

Not Only What, but Who:
The Civic Identities of Students

We don't want to only look at what our students know when they graduate, but we want to put a stake in the ground and say who our students are. Ontologically. At their being. Who are they when they leave?

PATTIE CORTESE, ESUHSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT

While the purpose and role of schools in society is multidimensional and complex, schools are universally accepted as much more than places where students "learn." Schools are spaces, places, and communities in which students become. However, as we acknowledge this charge, schools and districts find themselves juggling various, and often contradictory, visions. One dominant paradigm involves becoming a "productive" adult and developing "human capital" (Gillies, 2015). This paradigm promotes the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are important and useful to students, both as individuals and to the broader economy. Another perspective views schools as a force for public good meant to create a responsible citizenry and a more democratic society. In this paradigm, students are constantly developing civic identities as members of a shared society (Labaree, 1997).

If we delve deeper into how schooling contributes to the development of civic identities and of sociopolitical development (Kirshner, 2015), it is clear that the majority of schools in the US typically endorse a vision of education for democracy where students are prepared for their future participation in the democratic life of their society (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). However, this vision often confines this work to "civics classrooms and lessons" and focuses more on the what (skills and knowledge about how government works and what is our civic duty) than the how (sets of practices about how to do and live democracy as part of daily life). In addition, most schools and school districts embody undemocratic practices, especially in classrooms.

For this case study and its analysis, we have deliberately chosen an understanding of civic identity and development that focused on opportunities for democratic action and "learning-in-action" (Biesta, 2007). Most importantly within ESUHSD, it was in these opportunities to practice democracy, rather than learn about it, that we observed a clear shift in how students saw themselves and understood their role as civic actors.

Moreover, we found that opportunities for youth voice, power, and participation were not only beneficial to The District and to educational policies and practices; but that these also fostered a shift in students' civic identities and how they saw themselves in relationship with schools and the broader contexts in which they live.

Our findings are consistent with research that shows civic identities are not only crucial to the health and improvement of our democracy, but also to the learning, development, and agency of students, especially for students of color (Kirshner, 2009). Multiple examples from ESUHSD demonstrate that participation in youth leadership spaces had reconnected students with school, given them purpose, and had profound implications for their careers and futures. Not only did many students share how their own trajectories had changed, but both adults and students could name examples of many cases in which that had happened. Engaging in spaces where staff and students could collaborate towards shared goals helped forge new student-staff relationships, which in turn forged new conceptions of their identities as students, civic participants, and agents of change.

"I'm actually letting my voice and my thoughts be heard, rather than just keeping them in and silently observing. *It's good to be able to let them out because there might be other kids that feel the same way but are scared to speak up for themselves. I'm doing myself and them a favor by showing them it's okay to speak out and voice your opinion. LCAP has also helped us gain power to take back our schools. I know there's a lot of focus at our school on academics without really seeing other things.* ***We are much more than only academics."***

GABY, STUDENT LEADER

CFJ San Jose student leaders Hector and Michelle lead a conversation on the State of Education in ESUHSD (2016). *Image credit: CFJ*

Like Gaby, many other students shared that they had changed significantly as they had taken various roles in leadership, advocacy, and through their participation in some of the youth-led committees.

CENTERING SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD

"With me being part of this stuff, I'm able to retain knowledge and tell my friends, for them to understand what's going on in our district, because no one really knows what's going on in The District. Many students don't care, but it's really something that we should be more knowledgeable about. It's very important. ***It is our future. It is our next generation's future."***

ZOE, STUDENT LEADER

A final theme that emerged when capturing the development and change in the civic identities and civic engagement of students was how centering issues of educational and social justice played a key role in fostering relevance, enthusiasm and commitment in regard to their own education and of broader issues of social justice. Consistent with research that shows that civic identity flourishes when youth are empowered to confront unjust institutions and practices within their schools and beyond, we found that students thrived when they felt that they were working alongside The District to tackle important and real challenges. Students spoke about the relevance and importance of their work with passion, directly illustrating their sense of civic empowerment and responsibility, and the nurturing of what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) call a justice-oriented citizen.. Moreover, through critical engagement with the world around them, students can come to feel "like masters of their thinking" (Freire, 1970).

"We [students] feel more like a school, that we're doing shit. We're not far away from what is happening and the decisions that are being made. ***We're actually there, and we're going to meetings, and we're seeing what's really going on and taking action."***

BRIAN, STUDENT LEADER

Freire points out that "authentic thinking that is concerned about reality can only take place in communication" (Freire, 1970). When students engage critically with their peers and teachers in a shared mission to discover the world and to uncover knowledge, "the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible" (Freire, 1970). By fostering and creating these spaces for youth voice, power, and participation, students and teachers become allies.

Reflecting a clear shift in values and perceptions of schooling, as student leaders engaged with each other (including engagement across schools, which was previously not present), they continuously sought to both center the voices of those who are most marginalized, and actively look to include those who are often not included in their committees, leadership bodies, and meetings. Jana shared what she thought her role as a student leader entailed:

"To figure what needs to be done, so that the underdogs and ***the ones without voices or are being unheard have a say*** *in what should be changed."*

JANA, STUDENT LEADER

"I'M ACTUALLY LETTING MY VOICE AND MY THOUGHTS BE HEARD, **RATHER THAN JUST KEEPING THEM IN AND SILENTLY OBSERVING...** WE ARE MUCH MORE THAN ONLY ACADEMICS."

GABY, STUDENT LEADER

Student leader Ruth with CFJ San Jose leading a social media campaign to change negative perceptions of youth of color (2015). *Image credit: CFJ*

Lupe echoed the sentiment:

"The District always recruits students from the leadership class for meetings, and we need to expand recruiting to other students because I think every student has something valuable to say, like shy students. I always tell them, 'You need to be in this space; ***we really need to expand the voices that we're hearing from.'"***

LUPE NAVARRO, STUDENT LEADER

Regarding their ability to discuss challenging topics about educational equity with their peers from different schools, we found students were clear and critical about educational disparities, inequities in access to opportunities, and the importance of centering the needs of those most marginalized.

"Because our school is for people who are left out, ***we feel like we are lower or we feel like we're treated less than they [students at schools in high socioeconomic status areas] are.*** *Their campus is humongous and they have so many opportunities. We lost the Physics class, we lost Photography, we lost this other class, and then you notice students want to go to the other school because they have that class. It's little things we don't think about that nudge students one way or another. Then colleges look at your application and they see iMentor instead of Photography, or Drama, or an AP (advanced placement) class, and they would probably choose the student who has the photography class, right? It is a cycle."*

KRYSTAL, STUDENT LEADER

"Because the students don't feel like [the opportunities] they have are good, they don't try hard enough [to excel in the opportunities] they do have, *and because they don't try hard enough, more opportunities aren't provided. It's like a loop."*

JANA, STUDENT LEADER

In addition to highlighting the differences between schools, students also pointed out the racial dynamics and disparities inside of schools, which became clearer as they engaged in conversation with students from other high schools in The District. One student, referring to a conversation with student leaders from another school, shared:

"They [student leaders] were the minorities at the school... they spoke a lot about how their school is [full of] upper-class rich people, and ***African-Americans and Spanish-speaking students are put down because their voices aren't heard."***

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

Another student continued to build:

"When you think of Independence [High School], what do you think of? Asians, right? When you think of our school, it is like, you [students] speak Spanish, right? And then you think of Evergreen, and you think of white students, and rich successful people. It makes you feel like we need to go there to be like them."

"Without these meetings, we would just live our lives, and just feel like this is normal. But it's not normal, ***it's not okay for teachers to target students because of their race.*** *If I wasn't in this meeting, I wouldn't really care, because I thought it would be normal, but it's not. And in AP classes, there's no diversity. And students are talking about how* ***the counselors don't motivate BIPOC students to take rigorous classes, because they think that BIPOC students are not capable of doing so.*** *I was looking around my three AP classes, and it's all students who are either Asian or white. And I talked to my BIPOC friends, and they were like, "Oh, yeah, they [counselors] feel that we're probably not able to be in that class." I'm like, "Excuse me?" And they're like, "Yeah, they don't encourage us to be in those classes." And it really hurts that we live in a society in which we still have to deal with this type of situation."*

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

IT'S NOT OKAY FOR TEACHERS TO TARGET STUDENTS BECAUSE OF THEIR RACE.

STUDENT LEADER

This activation of a civic identity directly informed their engagement at school, in their classes, and in their communities. Research shows that students involved in youth organizing and leadership are more likely to volunteer, participate in civic organizations, believe in social change and understand what actions they can take to improve their local community and make the world a better place (Rogers et al., 2012). This has been clearly borne out in the case of ESUHSD

and the work of CFJ. Rosa de Leon shared how she has witnessed how youth leadership and youth organizing fosters a lifelong commitment to civic engagement:

"A good number of our alumni are organizing or teaching. I was chatting with an alum who's teaching here at Independence High School across the street, and he said ***being a student with CFJ gave him a different perspective now that he's in the classroom as a teacher."***

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

In one of our focus groups with students, a student leader pushed back against dominant understandings of success as she shared:

"I think that we all have different types of success... for me personally, it's being able to live a life in which I feel accomplished somewhere doing something. ***For me, [accomplishment] has always come from helping others and being able to advocate for something. I was so lucky to be able to establish my values in high school and not after.*** *I'm so thankful that CFJ is at my school, because CFJ is not at every school."*

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

When we heard this statement, we asked the group whether they felt being a part of this process had changed them or what they wanted to do. Aric reflected:

"In my freshman and sophomore years, I wasn't really involved. When I was choosing my classes for this [junior] year, I chose Leadership, but I didn't really know what it was about. I thought it was just a bunch of popular kids just doing what they want with the school and trying to run it. I went into [the class] this year and my perspective changed. I was invited to the district meetings, and I found all this information about the schools, and The District. It was mind blowing, because ***I never thought it [leadership] was like this and of these injustices, you don't really look at it, but then after those meetings, I started to look at the minorities, and think, 'what are the opportunities for them, what do they want?'*** *That's how I changed."*

ARIC, STUDENT LEADER

"I've always wanted to become a biochemical engineer. Because of this [organizing experience], now I want to go into political science. ***It has changed my outlook of life, who I want to be in my future and how I want to have an impact.*** *Even though I might still choose a science major, now it is going to be very different."*

ZOE, STUDENT LEADER

Students and families with CFJ, PACT, and Somos Mayfair review and grade their district's first LCAP (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

As we begin to observe how that civic spirit continues beyond the school walls, we also recognize the importance of these shifts in civic identities as pillars to improve our democracy as we practice it collectively in our daily lives, from our relationships and our classrooms to the halls of governments. When we asked Brian what he would share with his peers as they prepared to be leaders next year, he responded:

"For students next year that join this [leadership program], they shouldn't be afraid of what to say. This year, we didn't know what to say because it was our first time. I would have tried to say something. If things are bad, they are bad. ***Nothing is going to change if you don't bring it up."***

BRIAN, STUDENT LEADER

From Youth "Inclusion" to **Authentic Power and Collaboration**

As these initiatives have expanded, and more people begin to recognize the value of youth voice, power, and participation, perceptions of youth have progressively moved away from 'solely adults in the making' (Graham & Bruce, 2006).

"While the original goal of bringing student voice here was to just get a collective central sense of where students are, establish their voice, and bring that to the LCAP Advisory Board and our board, ***the original goal has changed significantly."***

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Instead, more stakeholders have begun to engage with youth as knowledgeable, competent, able to construct their own perspectives of daily lived experiences (James et al., 1998), and key partners in improving educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

When we asked Vander Zee how far along they were as a district, he described a continuum in which on one side, "there are adults making decisions disregarding or not including student voice, which doesn't necessarily mean that those adults haven't been totally zeroing in on student data and outcomes or that they are not making decisions with the best interests of students in mind," and on the other side, a district in which adults and students are making decisions together, each with a valued perspective. He believes The District is still somewhere in the middle.

For CFJ, which has decades of experience working to build student power, this movement from "students as bystanders" to "student governance" is both clear and strategic. Alongside youth and partners, they have worked hard to develop tools that help schools and districts understand their progress towards more authentic youth partnerships, among them their "student voice continuum" composed of five key domains of progression towards student governance: Impact, Goal, Message, Racial Equity, and Activities. For each of these domains, they have developed specific examples of how each domain can move from "bystanders" towards "student governance." Some of these include:

reproducing inequities → **shared ownership**

'we will keep you informed' → **'we cannot lock transformative solutions without you'**

no targeted outreach → **BIYOC (Black and Indigenous Youth of Color) and underrepresented, intersectional youth have significant or full leadership and decision-making power**

When describing a similar continuum, Albert Tobias shares a vision of building and developing "civic actors and students who are instrumental in the design of their education."

"It's something we want to fight for. ***Students are more than learners; they're more than receptacles for information. They are democratic actors in the world, and they will shape the world they live in."***

ALBERT TOBIAS, CFJ STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN MANAGER

As Rosa de Leon explained, The District has come a long way from "[this work] was the right thing to do," to the work being "transformative for students and adults". In addition, as we asked students, parents, school staff, District staff, and leaders across The District what they believed was the biggest impact or win, one resounding theme continued to surface:

"It is not so much of, 'look at this particular story or these particular wins'; we certainly have had big wins for students and families. The biggest impact has been creating spaces where ***students are influencing decisions to come, spaces where students are beginning to influence the fabric of and practices in schools, and spaces that are changing both the adults and the students."***

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

"STUDENTS ARE MORE THAN LEARNERS; THEY'RE MORE THAN RECEPTACLES FOR INFORMATION. THEY ARE DEMOCRATIC ACTORS IN THE WORLD, AND THEY WILL SHAPE THE WORLD THEY LIVE IN."

ALBERT TOBIAS, CFJ STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN MANAGER

CFJ student leaders hold a silent protest inside the State Board of Education building to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (May 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

Documenting **Impact**

While most stakeholders we interviewed believed that the "real impact" of the work was connected to a broader, long-term struggle for educational justice, the ways in which this work is impacting the district already are clear.

For the following section, we have organized our findings in three main categories: 1) how this work has affirmed and supported efforts and initiatives that were already happening across the district, 2) how this work has helped refine the practices and decisions of the district, and 3) how this work has brought new and creative ideas.

CONTRARY TO WHAT MANY EXPECTED: AFFIRMING AND SUPPORTING THE WORK OF THE DISTRICT

"The mind shift is the hardest thing to change in adults. *The kids, you raise the bar, they're going to jump for it."*

CHRIS FUNK, FORMER DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Across the history of schooling, youth (especially marginalized youth) have been characterized as beings that, if "uneducated," will not only become useless, but harmful members of the community, unavoidably contracting habits of idleness, mischief, and wickedness (Kaestle & Foner, 1983). These histories, alongside the theories that informed them, were all institutionalized and continue to be a large part of contemporary schooling, which includes adults' beliefs about the role of children and youth. These beliefs are not only paradoxical to the principles behind the importance of youth empowerment, but also a huge impediment to the success of this work.

In the case of ESUHSD, as has been illustrated in multiple cases across the country (Noguera et al., 2006), efforts to empower youth have had to grapple with commonly held assumptions about what youth would want, and whether this would be different to what adults believed should happen.

"One of our fears in all of this was that if you lift up student voice, somehow it's going to be anti- what you're about as a district: anti-adult, anti-educator. What we've learned from this is that it's completely not true... ***you can lift up student voice, and our students will grab on to the mission, and vision, and where we want to go.*** *'We're in! We want that too.'"*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Once again contesting a pervasive assumption about what youth will value, students consistently prioritized their educational futures and that of their peers. Moreover, in another direct challenge to the presumptions of those who hold deficit notions of students, student leaders continued to prioritize and push for the importance of equity, repeatedly centering and prioritizing the success and the educational experiences of those currently marginalized by schools and the broader society.

Across our conversations with students, it was evident that the opportunity to engage in dialogue and collaboration with their peers from other schools had shed ample light on the large inequities across the district. Interactions like these, alongside spaces that allow for students to interrogate their contexts and engage in meaningful conversations, help to build spaces for them to become allies to a district's work towards equity and educational justice. Similarly,

THE MIND SHIFT IS THE HARDEST THING TO CHANGE IN ADULTS. THE KIDS, YOU RAISE THE BAR, THEY'RE GOING TO JUMP FOR IT.

CHRIS FUNK, FORMER DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

and contrary to what many expected, student leaders echoed the district's priorities and intentions, often carrying messages of solidarity, endorsing the broader vision and mission of The District and recognizing the complex nature of the work.

*"The students didn't say, 'You guys are way off in terms of what you want for us, or what you think we want.' **Instead, students spoke as allies,** repeatedly sharing that change 'is a tough job and they [the district] needed help with that.'"*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

*"I didn't really notice how hard it was until **I actually started trying to explore how teachers try."***

RANDY, STUDENT

Students constantly recognized the efforts of adults who worked hard and held students as their priority; at the same time, students brought a great degree of mutual accountability, constantly shifting the conversation back to how policies and practices would impact students, and they reminded the adults of the "why" of educational policies and practices. In effect, students and teachers became co-conspirators in the mutual quest to establish equity and educational justice within The District (Love, 2019).

Lastly, once again departing from what adults expected students would prioritize (special programs), students continuously shifted the conversation back to what was happening in the classrooms.

*"They told us, the answer is in Tier 1: **it's in our classrooms, it's in our actions with the adults on our first touch with them".***

JENNER PEREZ, DISTRICT MTSS COORDINATOR

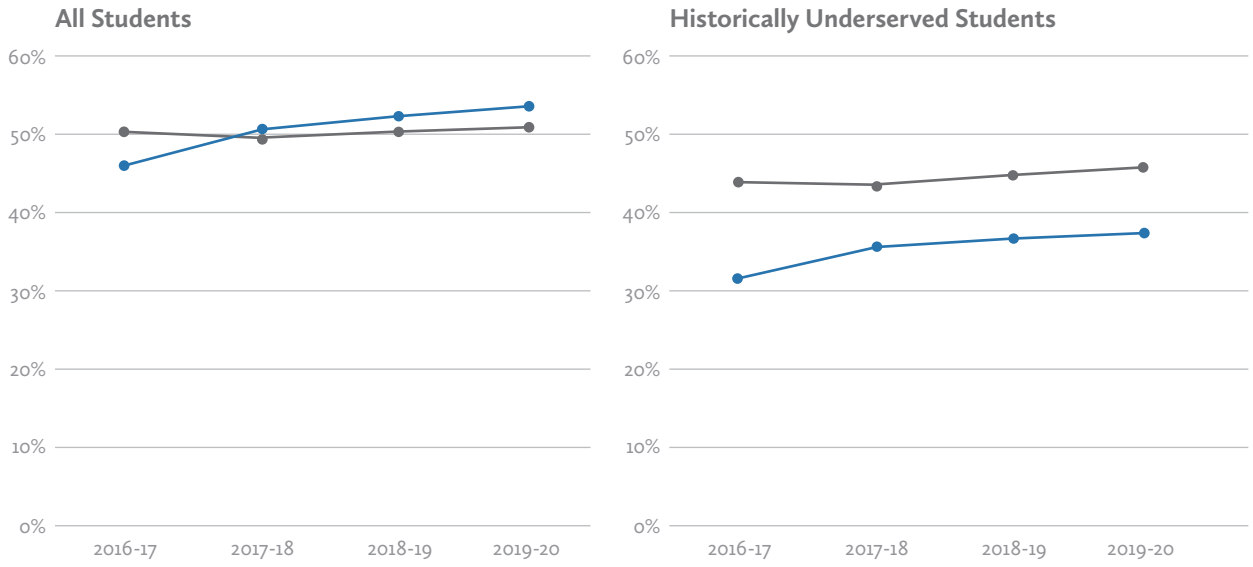
Honoring Lessons Learned and Best Practices

There are multiple examples of concrete policies and practices that have been both led by and supported by students, which have also worked to support existing district priorities and practices. *A-G Graduate with Me!* and the *Relationship-Centered Schools Initiative* are two such examples of successful implementation that demonstrate positive results, bared out both in our interviews with students and district administrators and quantitatively through recent data.

The *A-G Graduate with Me!* is a student-led initiative, concurrently accordant to district goals and passed in 2010, ensuring that all students have access to "high quality courses and have a chance to work towards four-year university eligibility" (Californians for Justice, 2020). Since the district's adoption of universal A-G requirements for high school completion, A-G completion rates among all district graduates have increased from 47% in 2016-17 to 53% in 2019-20 (EdData). There has been a similar increase among students from historically underserved ethnic/racial groups. Concurrent with these increases in ESUHSD, state-wide rates remained stable (see Figure 1).

The *Relationship-Centered Schools Initiative* is described in more detail on the next page.

Figure 1. Percent Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements (California Department of Education, 2020)



Note. Historically underserved students include students identifying as African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Filipino, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander, or Two or More Races. Students excluded from this group include those identifying as Asian and White.

Relationship-Centered Schools Initiative

Developed by student leaders and organizers at Californians for Justice, with the goal of "break[ing] down the cycles of racial bias and inequity in our schools by supporting educators and students to build relationships that embrace and empower all students" (Californians for Justice, 2020).

Relationship-Centered Schools center caring relationships with educators to ensure students experience belonging, are believed in, and are supported to succeed in high school and beyond — college, career, and community life. Consequently, organizers and student leaders developed a set of recommendations that prioritize the creation of district-wide policies, to "value student voice, invest in staff, and create spaces for relationship building" (Californians for Justice, 2020).

These recommendations have directly informed and complemented the district goals for the Local Control Accountability Plan (Goal 4) which states: "The District will establish and sustain healthy school cultures through relationship-centered practices to keep students engaged in their learning environment".

In addition, this goal specifies funding to:

- Create Student Leadership and Advisory groups to create a school culture of belonging and relationship centered programs
- Support programmatic efforts targeting needs identified by the Panorama Survey (see page 30) to develop a school wide culture that encourages success

The importance of this win cannot be understated, as the new structures delineated above were implemented to support the emotional and academic development of youth throughout the district, as well as offering a venue for student civic and community engagement. The Relationship Centered-School model further established a foundation for youth to bring new perspectives to guide school and district policies and practices, which over time validated and affirmed student experiences and perspectives, and later helped facilitate the adoption of subsequent CFJ initiatives, such as the elimination of school police in 2020 in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.

While this initiative is a district-wide commitment, there are currently four early adopter high schools: Independence, Foothill, James Lick, and Evergreen Valley. At each of these, students are working with admin and teachers through design teams to identify ways they can create a culture of positive relationships on campus.

Examples of changes include master schedule changes, professional development, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and site-based committees, school policies, hiring, etc.

When students sat down with a principal and heard his rationale for why he did what he did, Rosa de Leon shared, "[It] really provided student leaders with a different perspective about what a principal does from campus, who they are, and humanizes them [principals and school leaders] more in that role."

Principal Vito Chiala (right) joins a community gathering to launch Relationship-Centered Schools campaign in San Jose (2015). *Image credit: CFJ*

REFINING EXISTING WORK

In addition to supporting the work of the district, students have also helped to refine district efforts by bringing nuance, specificity, and a set of experiences that were absent from a lot of conversations and decisions. Eventually, the culture of relationships began to change and adults began to engage with young people more critically.

"It changed our dialogue. *By adding a greater degree of student voice at various levels, students added nuance to where we should direct our efforts to meet certain outcomes."*

CHRIS FUNK, FORMER DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Both students and adults in these spaces replaced simplified negative or positive framing of issues with more productive and critical framings. Vander Zee shared how after youth joined these conversations, their [district and adults] approach changed; it not only "changed the questions that were being asked, but made the nature of the conversation more authentic, and richer."

Currently, there is multi-leveled youth voice representation within the district—from schools to the district board. Beyond that, we can pinpoint how student voice resulted in concrete changes in both policy and practice. Student voice is about more than students sitting on the board or various other committees; this shift in culture has begun to create space for the voices of all students.

"There are students that didn't participate in this committee, ***but their data influenced what the student leaders recommended*** *going forward."*

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

These efforts, coupled with multi-level youth engagement and participation, have radically enriched the quantity and quality of decision-informing "data".

"It's a circular culture: *students help us design better ways to collect information, they connect the district to the schools, and as we shift to capture meaningful data, we review it together and give recommendations that can be seen in practice."*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

As stakeholders reflected on the multiple decisions that are made every day across the district, they were able to share how students had shaped multiple spaces with adults, from committees like the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Committee, the District Equity Committee, the Student Governing Committee and the LCAP Student Advisory Board, to smaller, sometimes temporarily bound initiatives that students have begun to change although they had been a part of the district for a long time. Examples of these are how students have informed decisions around professional development, urging the district to center unconscious biases, relationship building, and social emotional development, to the work around the Panorama Survey.

CFJ San Jose student leader Karla speaks about the LCAP at ESUHSD Board Meeting alongside other student leaders (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

Panorama Survey

A district-wide survey to identify priorities, areas for growth, and other ways to improve the school community.

This student-led initiative was birthed out of LCAP-incentivized participatory structures, along with the student council. Students were key in creating the questions, analyzing the data, and synthesizing recommendations for the ESUHSD's Local Control and Accountability Plan. Through the survey, a greater understanding of the student body arose; this understanding greatly informed a district-wide push for more democratic schooling.

Due to this student-led action, the Panorama Survey has become more representative of the broad swath of stakeholders in ESUHSD. Superintendent Funk highlighted the change: before students led the Panorama Survey, the district had about 3,500 respondents. The next year, that number increased to 18,000 responses. That ties directly into the way framing has changed following student involvement; Vander Zee clarifies the process with students: "Here's the survey that your student leaders developed last year; what changes would you want to make to it?"

Students designed, distributed, collected the data, and analyzed the results of the survey.

"The opportunity for the students themselves to create the questions was important. We didn't just give them a survey and say 'here, respond'. ***Students were empowered to make decisions:*** *the student committee decided: 'this is what you should ask students, this is what's important to ask students.'"*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

An example that fully captures the mechanics of this process sprung out of a question, initially crafted by student leaders, and later answered by students across the district during the first time the survey was distributed: **"Do you believe expectations of a teacher change based on your race or ethnicity?".**

"The responses of students were startling for many, a clear yes. As a district, coming to terms with students' experiences, whilst perhaps difficult for some to acknowledge, was important. The question became ***'how do we take that information and use it to inform teachers and say, hey, what do we do with this? What growth do we have to do to do that?'*** *And I think that was instrumental in our initiative around putting forth the implicit bias training that we did across the district and continue to do until this year."*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

With direct access to power and decision-making apparatuses, students worked, unhampered and efficiently:

"Talking directly to the district as opposed to talking to your teachers and then maybe going to the principal and maybe, unlikely, getting through to the district. *Here, we created a survey that got sent out that had questions that we had, and we were able to get to many other students' opinions."*

BRIAN, STUDENT LEADER

In this case statistics, often far removed from students' daily experiences, empowered students with information that they felt was important, relevant, and could inform their work as leaders and also inform the work of The District. Consequently, their inclusion brought an urgent perspective to the table:

"Being able to see the statistics now, ***we have actual evidence to back up what we [already] believed [to be true].*** *Now there's no way of [the district] shutting us down."*

ALEXIS, STUDENT LEADER

"We saw through actual statistics and facts, for example, that African-American and Latinx suspension rates were extremely high compared to those of Pacific Islanders or Asian-Americans. We knew this stuff, but now that we're seeing the statistics, it's like 'wow, seriously'. I feel like, in a way, ***it was a wake-up call that there's a problem at our school, and our voices are speaking up about it."***

GABY, STUDENT LEADER

BRINGING NEW AND CREATIVE IDEAS

Students changed the answers to issues that we've had for years, just by asking [questions].

GLENN VANDER ZEE, DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Besides supporting the work and adding nuance and specificity to the work of the district, students have brought new, innovative, and impactful ideas; ideas which, without creating spaces for youth to participate, the district would not have come up with, let alone prioritized.

Teresa Marquez argued that often, it was important to give students space to come up with their own ideas and questions. Commonly, when youth are invited to participate in educational policy and practice conversations, we ask them to participate or comment within certain "bounds", on certain topics, and in certain ways. We asked student leaders and students who were a part of these efforts whether they felt heard. Several times, students shared that despite feeling that they were being heard, it often felt as if what they really wanted to share or what they really wanted to talk about was not what they were "supposed to be talking about." Conversely, when students are given space to shift the conversation, powerful things can happen. In the case of the Panorama Survey, Jenner Perez shared that it was important that district staff "didn't just give [students] a survey and say 'here, respond' but for students to have a say on whether the actual questions were meaningful, and it turned out that they had questions of their own." Not only did students suggest questions from their experience, providing much needed insight, but they were creative and resourceful in thinking about the distribution of the survey and the interpretation of the results.

Principal Chiala and CFJ student leaders at Overfelt High School in ESUHSD present at a Participatory Budgeting event (2015). *Image credit: CFJ*

Throughout this process within ESUHSD, students have already offered novel perspectives. These have changed the nature of the conversations, brought new and creative visions for supporting the district's vision, and often, brought the educational practices closer to the needs, realities, and aspirations of youth. Whether through bringing new ideas for professional development at the school and the district levels, articulating new and creative ways to use LCFF funds, informing the design of the district's new high schools, or changing school-specific efforts and decisions around curriculum, students' contributions have begun to have a concrete impact throughout The District. Lupe Navarro explains student-led efforts for the creation of Connections, a biweekly homeroom class focused on social emotional development and other changes to "classes" at her school.

"I think that the students didn't quite like it or didn't quite agree with how it was happening, and were bored, and it was evident because kids were ditching class... we [student leaders] were able to discuss how we wanted to change that. ***There was a cultural shift...it entirely changed everything. The students had choices in what classes they wanted to take, what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to apply it to their life."***

LUPE NAVARRO, STUDENT LEADER

Participatory Budgeting

In 2015, CFJ youth leaders worked with Principal Chiala to run the first school-based participatory budgeting process in the state. Through this model, students, parents and Overfelt staff decided how to spend $50,000 of the school's budget through a democratic decision-making process. The process increased student and community engagement and created a stronger school climate built on trust and relationships.

Chiala lays out who created the budget:

"80% of the participants were students, but community members, students, parents, faculty could develop project ideas. *The steering committee would take these ideas and decide which ones were most viable. This was not me, this was students and community members. CFJ and others would come up with ways they could spend the $50,000. Some were big ideas that would take the whole $50,000 and some were little ideas. The community would vote and whatever they voted on is what we would spend that $50,000 on."*

VITO CHIALA, PRINCIPAL, WILLIAM C. OVERFELT HIGH SCHOOL

Examples:

- Driver's Education Initiative

  "Some of the things the steering committee chose to spend the money on I never would have considered. *They said: 'We want to spend $25,000 on Drivers Education for students who can't afford it. Students couldn't afford the behind-the-wheel training. It's $380 per student.' That was our biggest vote-getter all three years."*

  VITO CHIALA, PRINCIPAL, WILLIAM C. OVERFELT HIGH SCHOOL

- Field trips to colleges, new athletic gear, career centers, etc.

  "There were things that the money went to that were completely in line with our goals, and ***things that were complete needs for kids that I might not have thought of."***

  VITO CHIALA, PRINCIPAL, WILLIAM C. OVERFELT HIGH SCHOOL

Results of the student Participatory Budgeting vote at Overfelt High School (2015). *Image credit: CFJ*

The Road Ahead:
New Challenges

Community gathering to launch Relationship Centered Schools campaign in San Jose (2015). *Image credit: CFJ*

Consistent with social theories, which suggest that action to transform the nature of relationships, and to empower those most marginalized by school systems will inherently re-inform social analyses and bring forth new possibilities, identities, and futurities (Horton et al., 1990), **the work of developing youth voice has begun to change youth, adults, and the possibilities for educational change within ESUHSD.**

This work, consistent with a broader vision of schooling, calls for schools to be places where democracy is practiced; places where citizens and students critically examine and collaboratively solve their shared problems, especially among those student and citizen populations who suffer most from the structural inequalities and everyday injustices related to education. Moreover, given San Jose's rapid change and growing levels of economic and social inequities, this call is especially important within ESUHSD.

If something was clear within ESUHSD, it is that students are up for the challenge and that the beginning steps have been taken. However, a commitment to this vision of schooling also means that there is much work to be done in moving towards schools and school systems as places where democracy is practiced. This vision also requires that school systems be willing to face long standing and deep-seated structures, practices, and cultures.

CHALLENGE: SYSTEM COHERENCY

As schools empower students and they begin to participate more fully, the contradictions and inconsistencies across the system become more apparent. As a student shared during a council meeting,

"We come to the district or to our school's leadership meetings and they tell us that our voices matter, then ***we go back to the classroom and our voices do not matter at all."***

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

Principal Chiala, one of the original advocates for youth leadership at his school and in the district, echoed the same idea when talking about student dissent and how it is interpreted in classrooms:

"At a board meeting, you can tell students their voices matter, but ***often they go back to the classroom, and they're told to shut up and sit down."***

VITO CHIALA, PRINCIPAL, WILLIAM C. OVERFELT HIGH SCHOOL

Educational stakeholders and educators often focus on "what" to teach, the programs we implement, the "things" that we bring, prioritizing these over the "how". Consequently, as students pointed out, we fail to "practice what we preach." We often forget that the building blocks, the fundamental DNA of a school's character, are in its daily interactions, in the way things are implemented, in how content is taught, how relationships are built, and in this case, how these values and commitment to youth voice, power and participation are practiced across different spaces, not preached or taught. While this raises important and consequential challenges to those seeking to build up youth voice, power, and participation, it is also an opportunity to bring about change across the system.

"When you look at the goal of bringing in student voice, culture has to shift. District wide, we're bringing it in. ***But, is it translating into the classroom? Do [students] have their voice there? I don't think we're there yet.*** *I think we've done a good job. We have a student who now sits on the Governing Board. We do have the Student Governing Committee and we have our district demographics represented in the LCAP student Advisory Committee. We're asking the kids, 'What do you want to see district-wide'? But the work to be done needs to hit the classroom with teachers and in other spaces.* ***Teachers and adults across the board valuing student voice and students having a say in how they demonstrate their mastery? I think that's the key piece that's missing for us."***

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

CHALLENGE: VALUING STUDENT VOICE AND ADDRESSING INEQUITIES IN PARTICIPATION

Creating schools where students can participate also requires deep changes to culture, beliefs, and power dynamics. Moving towards a schoolwide system of youth voice, power, and participation hinges on recognition of the interdependency between culture and structure. For structures to be effective, a comprehensive culture shift from antagonism to allyship is necessary.

"In some spaces, we are encouraged to disagree because there is a lot that is wrong, but then ***in other spaces we are punished if we disagree."***

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

These tensions are complex and tied to the long and convoluted history of schools. To be effective, change must come from a collective effort to interrogate who, when, and how power is distributed in the classroom. As allies, students and teachers can work in dialogue to further learning. Stigmatization or negative labeling, however, impedes this process.

"The three underpinnings of a program I worked in before, one that informs my current work with the district, are: one, there are no bad kids. That's the first, foremost underpinning. Two, youth do as we do, not as we say to do. And three, youth take action based on the future they see for themselves. So, if we're going to bring those underpinnings into our classrooms, ***it's all contingent on adults being willing to do the hard work of recognizing, 'When am I labeling a kid as a bad kid?'"***

PATTIE CORTESE, ESUHSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT

Pattie's perspective reflects the cornerstone of critical pedagogy: dialogical learning cannot occur between two antagonists (Freire, 1970). Lupe points out that though "involvement is difficult, and we have controversial topics," student-staff dialogue has led to an increased consciousness of school-wide shortcomings. Teresa Marquez gives an example of how listening to students informed an initiative to reduce racial bias.

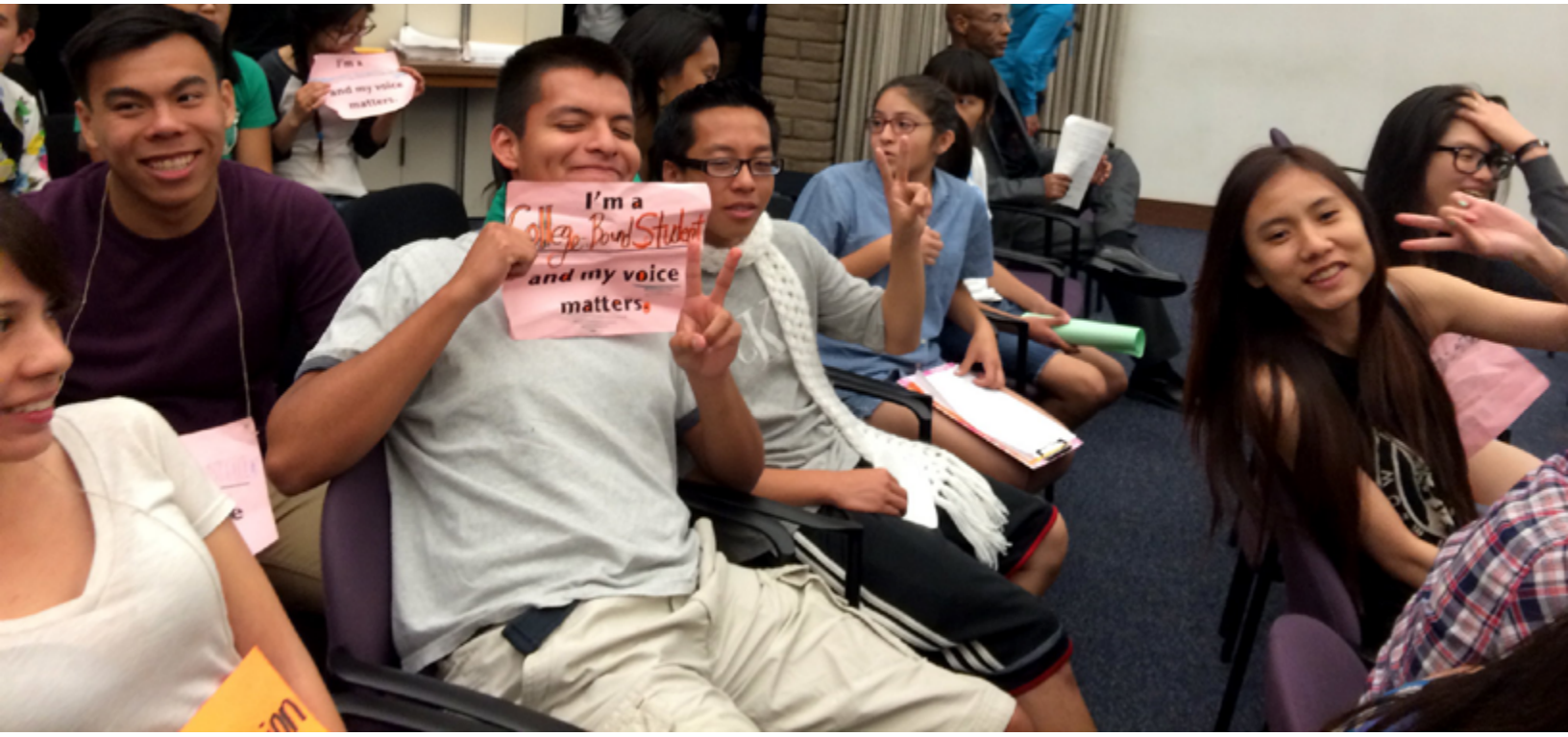
"One of the most impactful questions that they posed to students was ***whether they believe a teacher's expectations change based on a student's race or ethnicity. I saw the number of kids that responded, "Yes, it does. They have lower expectations of me."*** *How do we use that information to inform teachers? What growth do we have to do? It was instrumental in putting forth the implicit bias training that we did across the district and continue to do."*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

This captures what we found to be another important challenge and opportunity: the need to address assumptions and biases about young people, especially Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. As we do this work, we respond to Winn's call to "excavate the stubborn walls of generalizations and stereotypes" (Winn, 2011) that have long contributed to the silencing, dismissal, and criminalization of marginalized students.

"We mustn't only elevate student voice; ***we have to value it."***

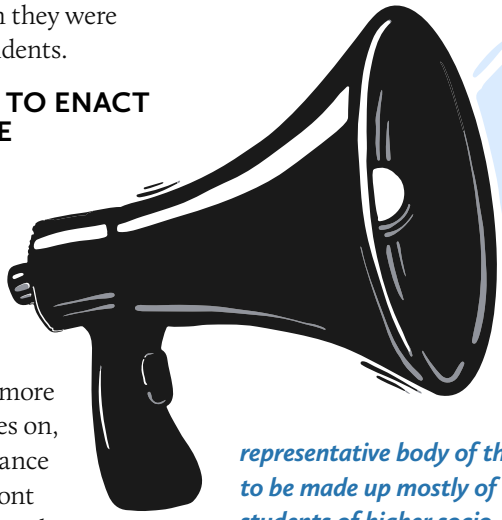
ANA, STUDENT LEADER



CFJ San Jose student leaders waiting to testify at ESUHSD Board Meeting (May 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

Students consistently resonated with this idea, sharing that they found lots of resistance to having certain conversations, even though they were relevant to their experiences as students.

CHALLENGE: RELUCTANCE TO ENACT TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE



Lastly, a major challenge and opportunity lies in the reluctance of large school systems to enact transformative change. As students were exposed to the inequities and challenges within their schools, they became more empowered to take these challenges on, but were often met with the reluctance of adults to engage with and confront these issues, and a system with limited capacity, short policy lifecycles, high attrition rates, and little infrastructure to sustain and cultivate their efforts.

Consistent with research that shows that bringing forth spaces for critical civic agency breeds resistance and the tendency to avoid "political" topics that upset relations of power (Kirshner, 2015), youth and stakeholders at ESUHSD expressed the challenge of having to address difficult topics like race, power, and privilege.

"Teachers have been getting implicit bias training and some teachers are like, 'Oh, this is stupid. Why are we doing this?' *I've had teachers who went on a whole 30-minute rant about these trainings. And I, as a student, who have encouraged the district to implement these trainings, am sitting there like, "Wow. This is why you need these trainings."*

STUDENT LEADER

However, it is through these difficult conversations where we can begin to address some of the biggest problems facing our schools and our broader society. However, these conversations need initiation and there is a tendency to avoid these discussions and to dismiss the voices of those often excluded from "leadership" spaces in school settings. CFJ's organizing motto, "nothing about us without us", raises this as a broader challenge: to ensure the voices and experiences of those most impacted by educational injustices are centered, valued, and taken into account in decision-making and practice.

"We want students to feel there's spaces where they can share, but sometimes these spaces have the same students. ***The student leadership is supposed to be the representative body of the school, but it continues to be made up mostly of especially high achievers, students of higher socio-economic status than average for our district*** *and is widely under-representative of our Latinx students in a school that is mostly Latinx."*

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

> ADULTS MUST BE WILLING TO DO THE HARD WORK OF RECOGNIZING, 'WHEN AM I LABELING A KID AS A BAD KID?'
>
> **PATTIE CORTESE, ESUHSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES PRESIDENT**

Students reflected that even though their time spent at board meetings and in leadership positions had encouraged them to more critically engage with the school environment, it had also been debilitating and difficult at times.

"When student reps first went to LCAP meetings, we were 'blindsided,' as we had no idea what the subject would be. *If someone would have told us earlier what [the meeting] was about, we would've been a little bit more on track."*

GABY, STUDENT LEADER

"Sometimes we are asked, 'can you nominate students to be in this space?' But there is a huge burden placed on students to be able to effectively use the opportunity to make change, because there'll be a group of 30 adults and two students who don't have any of the tools, background information, or training that any of these adults do, like how to create or execute policy. Which raises an important question: ***Are students there to be tokens? Just for the show? We feel [like] this sometimes."***

NHADA AHMED, CFJ ORGANIZER

If and when students that have been absent from these conversations are taken seriously, it often leads to difficult conversations about disparities and injustices that school systems have long normalized.

"Once students are empowered, they want to find what things really mean and then engage. Take disproportionality across educational opportunities,

experiences and outcomes. ***Creating better schools requires confronting biases and inequities, and this requires multiple hard and honest conversations. That is where the hard work begins."***

TERESA MARQUEZ, DISTRICT ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Recognizing the challenges of sustaining and nurturing this work, most stakeholders expressed the importance of disseminating the knowledge and lessons it has generataed to stakeholders at different levels. Many students, sharing 'I wish I knew then what I know now', emphasized the importance of knowledge transfer and of continuing to build upon previous work.

"We need to help students become more aware of what they're getting themselves into, and also spread awareness [of the program] around school. Not just giving students that are going to be here next year information about the program, but ***reaching out to them to see what they actually need help with."***

ALEXIS, STUDENT LEADER

In Pattie Cortese's words, students feel "empowered and inspired," but "it's all so new." Much of the work that ESUHSD has done is tenuous; it's "a gentle seedling, at risk of dying."

CFJ student leaders gather outside the State Board of Education building after their silent protest to demand that students be included in decisions as part of the Local Control Funding Formula (May 2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

“WE MUSTN’T ONLY ELEVATE STUDENT VOICE; WE HAVE TO VALUE IT.”

STUDENT LEADER

CFJ student leaders and staff at the State Board of Education building during the first regulatory hearing on the Local Control Funding Formula (Nov 2013). *Image credit: CFJ*

Conclusion & Recommendations

CFJ San Jose student leaders explain the concept of "equity" during their "My Voice Matters" community town hall in ESUHSD (2014). *Image credit: CFJ*

This case study is a clear and illustrative example of how the leadership, knowledge, and determination of students have improved the educational policies, practices, and experiences of students at ESUHSD, and created new paths and possibilities for what education can look like.

Just as importantly, this case study found that unlike predominant schooling cultures and structures, honoring the right of youth to participate meaningfully and nurturing the practice of democracy in schools and school districts has also brought a profound change in students themselves, reigniting a passion for learning, civic engagement, and a deeper sense of agency. These, we believe, are all critical within the current context of profound injustices which are being gravely exacerbated by what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls the convergence of four pandemics: COVID-19, racism, the threat of economic collapse and impending environmental catastrophe (NC State University College of Education, 2021).

Those interested in promoting the role of youth voice, power, and participation in the pursuit of educational justice must recognize that current models of schooling exist in deep contradiction to the principles and values that guided the work and story captured in this case study. Most students that we interviewed, while empowered, inspired, and motivated by their experiences as leaders and organizers, had to return to classrooms where their questions, identities, potential contributions, and lived experiences were constantly disregarded in exchange for the "educational program." For the work that we have documented in this case study to occur, organizers, youth leaders, coalitions, and other allies spent countless hours challenging and pushing a system whose structure and culture does not center the possibilities that can be gifted to our world and our systems by students. Rather, that systems promote the overarching logics of standards, tests, uniformity, assimilation, coercion, and the transferring of knowledge from those that know to those who do not. Just as importantly, this work will require a profound change in adult beliefs and assumptions about youth and their role in reshaping education, especially historically persistent and prevalent ideologies that disproportionately impact Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized youth.

CFJ student leader Marisol wearing an "LCAP" cape with the eight state priorities and student leader Maria holding a sign at the State Board of Education building during the first regulatory hearing on the Local Control Funding Formula (Nov 2013). *Image credit: CFJ*

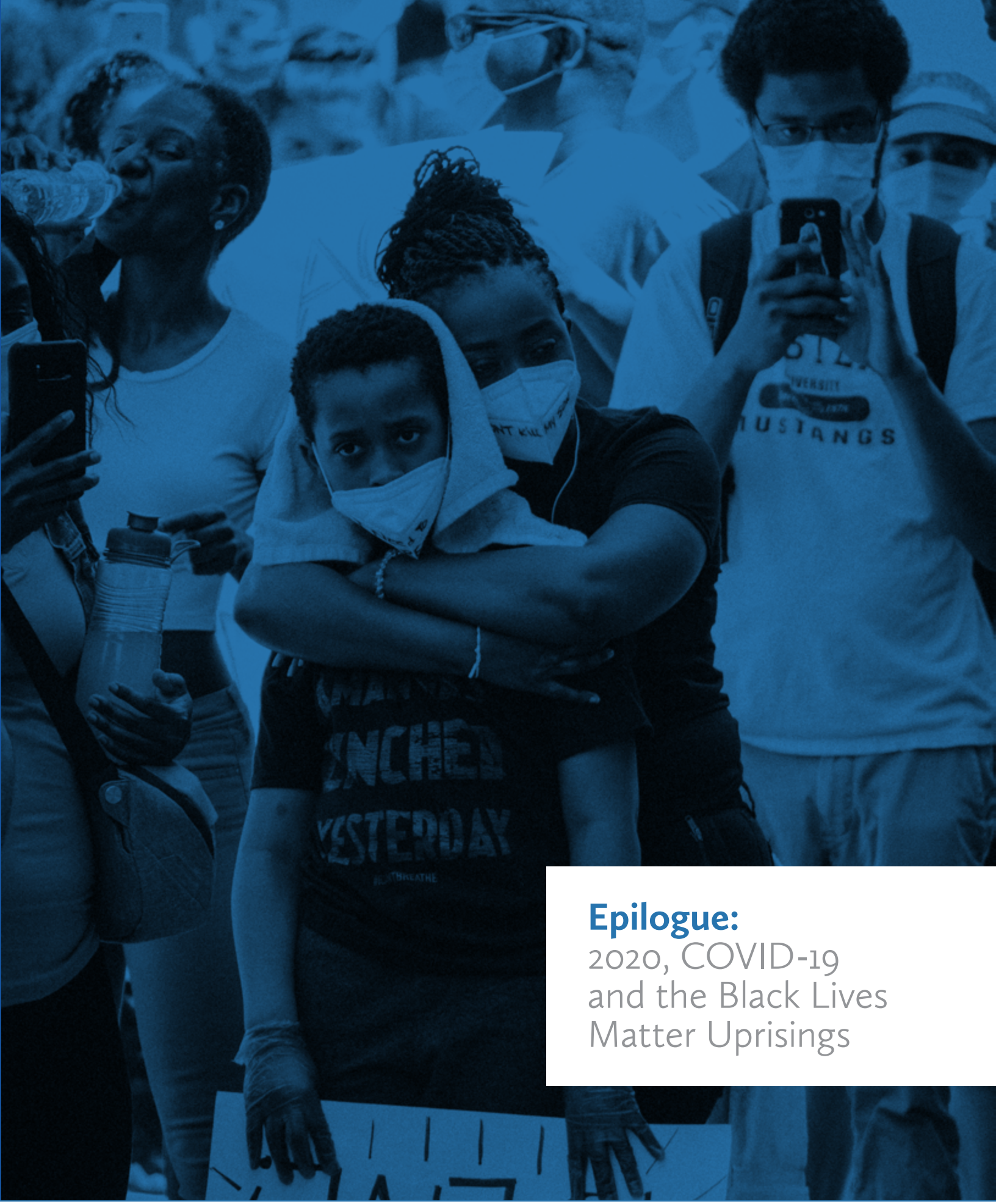
Lastly, we are not alone in this work and for it to be successful we need to engage in this work together. Consequently, we must center this work in relationality, learn from those that have struggled before us, and continue to root our work in a belief in the possibilities that lie ahead of us.

"Many understood it (youth voice, power, and participation) was the right thing to do, but they often said 'this is not going to work' or 'let's not go there'. ***Now, they've recognized that student voice is not only 'not that scary', but it is actually transformative for students and adults."***

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

District-Level Recommendations
for Youth-Led Change

- **Ensure structures created for youth and stakeholder participation in educational leadership, governance, and policymaking address equity and parity in participation.** Existing arrangements of power and the cultures of participation and deliberation often run counter to the goals of such structures.
- **Design student empowerment and democratic governance efforts and policies that encourage systemwide structural and cultural transformation,** as opposed to mere compliance.
- **Prioritize efforts and policies aimed at nurturing youth voice, power and participation as a way to dismantle deficit-oriented beliefs about students,** especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized young people.
- **Develop a clear set of goals and indicators to track progress** towards set policy and program goals with student leaders and partner organizations.
- **Honor the work, knowledge, and experience that community organizations and social movements hold** and develop partnerships grounded in a shared pursuit of educational justice and equity.
- **Emphasize and build deliberate mechanisms so that policy initiatives center the importance of knowledge transfer** and continuing to build upon, sustain, and cultivate existing efforts.



Epilogue:
2020, COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Uprisings

As we were about to publish our findings, the contexts in which students were experiencing schools and education rapidly shifted. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter uprisings, and the long-overdue growth in momentum around the movement for racial justice in schools all brought a new series of challenges and opportunities to school systems.

This section further explores how the youth justice work of The District, its partners, and its school communities had changed, supported, or facilitated their ability to respond to the rapidly changing world. Our guiding question was:

How did ESUHSD's work around youth voice, power and participation inform the district's responses to the radical changes, challenges, and opportunities brought by 2020?

"With the onset of the pandemic, everyone found themselves in a totally new environment that they did not imagine they'd be learning or living in. There was a lot of anxiety from students around what this would look like. So, one of the requests that was made right away, to which students got a pretty timely response, was ***a meeting with the superintendent and assistant superintendent of the district, in which the students shared with them, 'these are our challenges, our questions, and these are some of the solutions that we have.'"***

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

As in most places around the country, there were a myriad of questions about the future and context of schooling from students, families, teachers, and other stakeholders. For many families, especially families of color and low-income households, the pandemic brought an onslaught of additional challenges including loss of income, housing, and childcare. Moreover, the pandemic widened pre-existing disparities in access to basic needs ranging from food to digital and technological tools that families needed to continue schooling. Despite high levels of uncertainty, according to student leaders and organizers, the district was agile and responsive in figuring out how to leverage existing structures for youth voice and participation when responding to the pandemic. Starting with understanding what the students and families were going through, district leaders shared that the voices of youth and the spaces and relationships that had been built were instrumental.

"Different needs came up: among them, ***one of the largest ones was mental health."***

NHADA AHMED, CFJ ORGANIZER

Additionally, high school seniors began to reflect on how the pandemic would impact their graduation from high school and their transitions into higher education. Other needs also came up, from access to housing to food, and with each of these needs came a conversation as to how the district could support students and their families.

"It wasn't only about how to restructure schooling, but about ***the needs that came up as priorities.*** *And then, the Black Lives Matter uprisings began."*

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

BLACK LIVES MATTER, RACIAL JUSTICE, AND REDEFINING SAFETY IN SCHOOLS

The egregious killing of George Floyd moved a long and enduring movement against racial violence into the national spotlight. As the country grappled with the ramifications of this struggle and its rise to the center stage, student leaders, organizers, and district allies at ESUHSD were ready and able to take quick and effective action, advocating for and responding in the moment to student needs and grievances.

A testament to the power of an organized and energized public, shortly after the BLM movement took center stage in the national conversation, a coalition of parents, students, teachers, and community-based organizations organized and published the *Police Out of East Side Schools!* petition demanding the following:

- The immediate termination of School Resource Officer (SRO) agreements with local law enforcement agencies
- The immediate removal of any law enforcement personnel from school property during regular school hours and any school/run events and activities
- Limiting the cases for which school staff can engage law enforcement
- Investing in positive approaches to building a safe school climate including: "working with school stakeholders to create a safety plan", "promoting youth and parent leadership to evaluate and advise the district efforts in school safety", and implementation of restorative and trauma-informed justice practices

Thanks to the remarkable work of youth leadership and organizing that centered the voices of those actively marginalized by mainstream educational institutions within ESUHSD, the petition garnered more than 2,500 signatures. During the same time, youth leaders and district leaders began shaping and crafting what would become another important step in the district's path towards educational equity and justice.

RESOLUTION #2019/2020-42 DECLARING THAT BLACK STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND STAFF MATTER

Less than one month after the murder of George Floyd, ESUHSD became one of the first school districts in California to pass a resolution to remove police officers from their campuses and to terminate their contract with the San Jose Police Department (Angst, 2020).

For the youth, organizers, and stakeholders who had been doing this work, this did not come as a surprise. In fact, the district had already taken a prior step to diminish the role of officers in school at the beginning of 2018, when they updated their agreements to ensure police officers would not administer punishments to 'rowdy' students (Angst, 2020).

"It was really a quick turnaround from the district, but ***this was also the result of all the work that young leaders have been doing for a long time in the district.*** *And they ended up winning, having the district not only vote to take SROs out of campuses, but vote on a lot of other important demands."*

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

When we asked how much this was a result of the work around youth voice and power, de Leon shared:

"Yes, the presence of young leaders in the district for this whole year has been key to make this happen in East Side, but also the Black Lives Matter Movement created the conditions for it to happen. ***If the BLM uprising hadn't happened, it would not have created the pressure on the district to respond to [these demands]."***

ROSA DE LEON, CFJ STRATEGY DIRECTOR

Just as importantly, the resolution was not only about the presence of police in schools, but about redefining what safety and care looked like, felt like, and meant in schools.

"A big part of the resolution was to engage young leaders, especially Black and Brown youth in the district, to ***redesign what safety looks like, particularly for Black and Brown youth."***

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD MEMBER

On the June 15, 2020, the district board signed what was titled "Next Steps—Unpacking Systemic Racism in our Schools." Following a clear statement about "responding to the injustice and inequalities that have been further magnified in our educational system" (East Side Union High School District, 2020), the resolution included the following issues/actions:

- eliminating police resource officers from campuses during the day
- creating a task force to implement new policies of supervision and safety
- increasing student voice (in particular the voices of Black and Latinx students)
- developing a clear process for the implementation of Ethnic Studies frameworks and graduation requirement
- investigating the process for implementing student feedback regarding student experience
- reviewing the curriculum and training for students regarding sexual harassment and dating violence

These statements, written almost a year and a half after we had begun our research, carry the footprint of many of the conversations that we had heard in our original research. As a research team, it took us back to our conversations with students who at the time already understood the importance and the challenges of this work. Most importantly, these statements, alongside the work that is taking place, are reflective of the power of what had been built already.

"There's a weight lifted off the students' chests, because police at school really impacted us very negatively. And it was very intimidating for people of color, how school police would target us. ***We will now go to school without being scared that we're going to be targeted."***

ZOE, STUDENT LEADER

Long before this resolution, students were aware of the challenges of talking about racial justice with adults in the system. With the passing of this resolution, it is no longer optional. As Nhada explains, a lot of the conversations that CFJ, youth leaders, and district leaders have been having for years created a framework so that now,

"It is not only just about police in schools, but about many other things. *Now, one of their commitments is that from the beginning, they're going to create some sort of task force to engage young folks in designing what that safety looks like... Also, there was a lot in that resolution including incorporating ethnic studies into the school culture and learning so that students [of color] see themselves reflected in their learning."*

NHADA AHMED, CFJ ORGANIZER

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Appendix A: **Methods**

East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD), alongside the six other districts that were selected for these LCFF case studies, were selected through purposeful sampling, which calls for a sample from which most can be learned (Patton et al., 2015). In this case, we engaged in a process through which we identified a diverse set of school districts we should consider for this study. This included reaching out to several professional organizations that included the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), California Teachers Association (CTA), California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, The California Endowment, and the CORE districts, among others. We then engaged in an initial research process to ensure diversity in contexts and initiatives. Some of the variables considered were district size, geography, implementation of LCFF, feasibility, potential to contribute to the field, and diversity in both the scope and theme of the district initiative to be studied.

The research team analyzed a variety of district-produced documents including the LCAP, several board documents and resolutions, the district's budget, student outcome data and a pre-visit survey completed by the district. The research team then conducted a two-day site visit to the district and various school sites within ESUHSD. We interviewed 72 stakeholders, including students, teachers, principals, district officials, union representatives, school board trustees and community members. Additionally, we attended and interviewed youth leaders at a district-held youth leadership event. The research team transcribed and analyzed all interviews, analyzed notes, and produced an in-depth case study, focused on youth leadership and LCFF.

Table 1: Sample of Interviewees by Role

Education Stakeholders	Totals (n=72)
Students	37
Central District Office Staff	12
Community Organization/ District Partner Members	10
Parents	6
Principals/School Site Administrators	6
Board Members	1

Appendix B:
District Profile

Table 2. District Schools by Type (EdData)

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Elementary School	0	0	N/A
Middle School	0	0	N/A
High School	11	11	N/A
Alternative	1	1	N/A
Continuation	4	4	N/A
Charter	10	10	N/A
Total	**26**	**26**	**N/A**

Note. School type data for 2019-20 were not available at time of writing.

Table 3. District Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity during Study Years (California Department of Education, 2020)

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
African American	2.3%	2.1%	1.8%
	627	558	478
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.3%	0.2%	0.2%
	82	53	53
Asian	32.4%	32.7%	32.7%
	8,833	8,688	8,678
Filipino	6.9%	6.8%	6.5%
	1,881	1,807	1,725
Hispanic or Latinx	50.8%	50.5%	51.2%
	13,850	13,417	13,587
Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%
	136	133	159
White	4.9%	4.9%	4.8%
	1,336	1,302	1,274
Two or More Races	1.9%	2.1%	2.3%
	518	558	610
Not Reported	0.1%	0.2%	0.1%
	27	53	27
Total	**27,263**	**26,568**	**26,537**

Note. Values represent counts and percentages of all students from the respective academic year.

Table 4. District Student Enrollment by Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL)-Eligibility, English Learner Status, and Foster Student Status during Study Years (California Department of Education, 2020)

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
FRPL-Eligible	53.4%	49.7%	47.8%
	14,560	13,212	12,686
English Learner	20.8%	20.7%	20.1%
	5,658	5,288	5,339
Foster Student	0.7%	0.5%	N/A
	180	125	

Note. Values represent counts and percentages of all students from the respective academic year. Foster Youth data for 2019-20 were not available at time of writing.

Table 5. District Teachers by Race/Ethnicity during Study Years (EdData)

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Black or African American	3.8%	3.5%	N/A
	47	43	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.6%	0.6%	N/A
	8	7	
Asian	15.5%	15.1%	N/A
	191	185	
Filipino	5.9%	5.9%	N/A
	73	72	
Hispanic or Latinx	23.1%	24.3%	N/A
	286	297	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.3%	N/A
	6	4	
White	47.9%	47.8%	N/A
	592	585	
Two or More Races	0.8%	1.0%	N/A
	10	12	
Not Reported	1.9%	1.5%	N/A
	23	18	
Total	**1,236**	**1,223**	**N/A**

Note. Values represent counts and percentages of all teachers from the respective academic year. Data were not available for 2019-20 at time of writing.

Table 6. District General Fund Revenues by Category (EdData)

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
LCFF Sources	$224,061,119	$238,525,405	N/A
Federal Revenue	$10,848,246	$11,562,572	N/A
Other State Revenue	$26,077,181	$38,131,201	N/A
Other Local Revenue	$11,188,962	$10,399,550	N/A
Total Revenues	**$272,175,508**	**$298,618,729**	**N/A**

Appendix C:
Californians For Justice
Student Voice Continuum

Student Voice Continuum

STUDENT POWER

STUDENTS AS BYSTANDERS → STUDENT GOVERNANCE

Stance Towards Youth	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Lead Together
Impact	Reproduce Inequities	Tokenization	Voice	Delegated Power	(Shared) Ownership
Goal	Provide youth with relevant information.	Gather input from youth.	Ensure youth needs and priorities are part of the process & solution.	Ensure youth capacity to play a leadership role in design and implementation of decisions.	Democratic participation and equity through shared leadership, & decision-making.
Message	*"We will keep you informed."*	*"We care what you think."*	*"You are making us think (and therefore act) differently about the issue.."*	*"Youth leadership and expertise are critical to how we address the issue."*	*"We cannot unlock transformative solutions without you."*
Racial Equity BIYOC = Black, indigenous, youth of color Underrepresented, intersectional youth = immigrant, Queer and Trans, foster, systems-impacted, unhoused youth, and youth with disabilities	Communication materials are distributed widespread without targeted outreach to BIYOC.	Multiple rounds of widespread BIYOC engagement events and activities are conducted through a variety of methods (such as surveys, focus groups, and town halls).	Targeted engagement of BIYOC and underrepresented, intersectional youth engage in events to share their unique needs and priorities.	BIYOC and underrepresented, intersectional youth co-lead with adults to engage other BIYOC and others in the decision-making process and have some decision-making power. Training and support is provided for youth to participate meaningfully.	BIYOC and underrepresented, intersectional youth have significant or full leadership and decision-making power. They collaborate with adults as equals. Training, supports and financial resources are provided for youth to lead meaningfully.
Activities	Online information postings, fact sheets, presentations, open houses	Focus Groups/Surveys, Community Forums, Public Comment	Youth Advisory Committees, Students on Hiring Committees	Youth on school wide decision making committees or as members on boards or school site councils, youth task force, partnering with a community organization to engage and support youth	Participatory Budgeting, youth-led funding decisions, youth-led initiatives or campaigns, partnering with a community organization to have youth lead

Adapted from:
Youth Voice adaptation of "Spectrum of Community Engagement" by Rosa González of Facilitating Power, in collaboration with Movement Strategy Center and the Building Healthy Communities Initiative.
Tosholis, Eric & Michael Nakkula. 2012. Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice: The Students at the Center Series. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. http://www.studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice.

Californians for Justice

Appendix D:
District Student Governing Board

East Side Union High School District

Student Governing Board

What is the ESUHSD Student Governing Board?

Created in June 2018 by the Student Voice Task Force, The **Student Governing Board (SGB)** is a district-wide student governing body that will work with the ESUHSD Board of Trustees to voice student concerns and influence district policy. It is comprised of 16 members, one ambassador from each campus in the district. The Student Governing Board will meet prior to each board meeting with a liaison from the Board of Trustees and the Superintendent, generally twice a month.

The ambassadors from each school site will be selected by the **Student Assembly**, which is comprised of one representative from each grade level in the school. The Student Assembly will meet regularly to discuss issues on their campus, and will proactively seek input and dialogue with other students through periodic attendance at ASB meetings, School Site Council, PTSA, and other campus events. Student Assembly members are encouraged to host occasional Town Hall meetings or other gatherings to engage other students on campus. The Student Assembly on each school site will select among themselves whom to appoint to the district Student Governing Board. (See page two for a diagram of how it works.) Student Assembly members are encouraged to attend Student Governing Board meetings and participate in discussions although each school can only have one vote.

The Student Assembly as a whole will elect the officers of the Student Governing Board. The Executive Board of the SGB consists of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a secretary and a public relations officer. The chairperson will run the SGB meetings and will also represent the SGB at ESUHSD district Board meetings.

The purpose of the ESUHSD Student Governing Board is to:

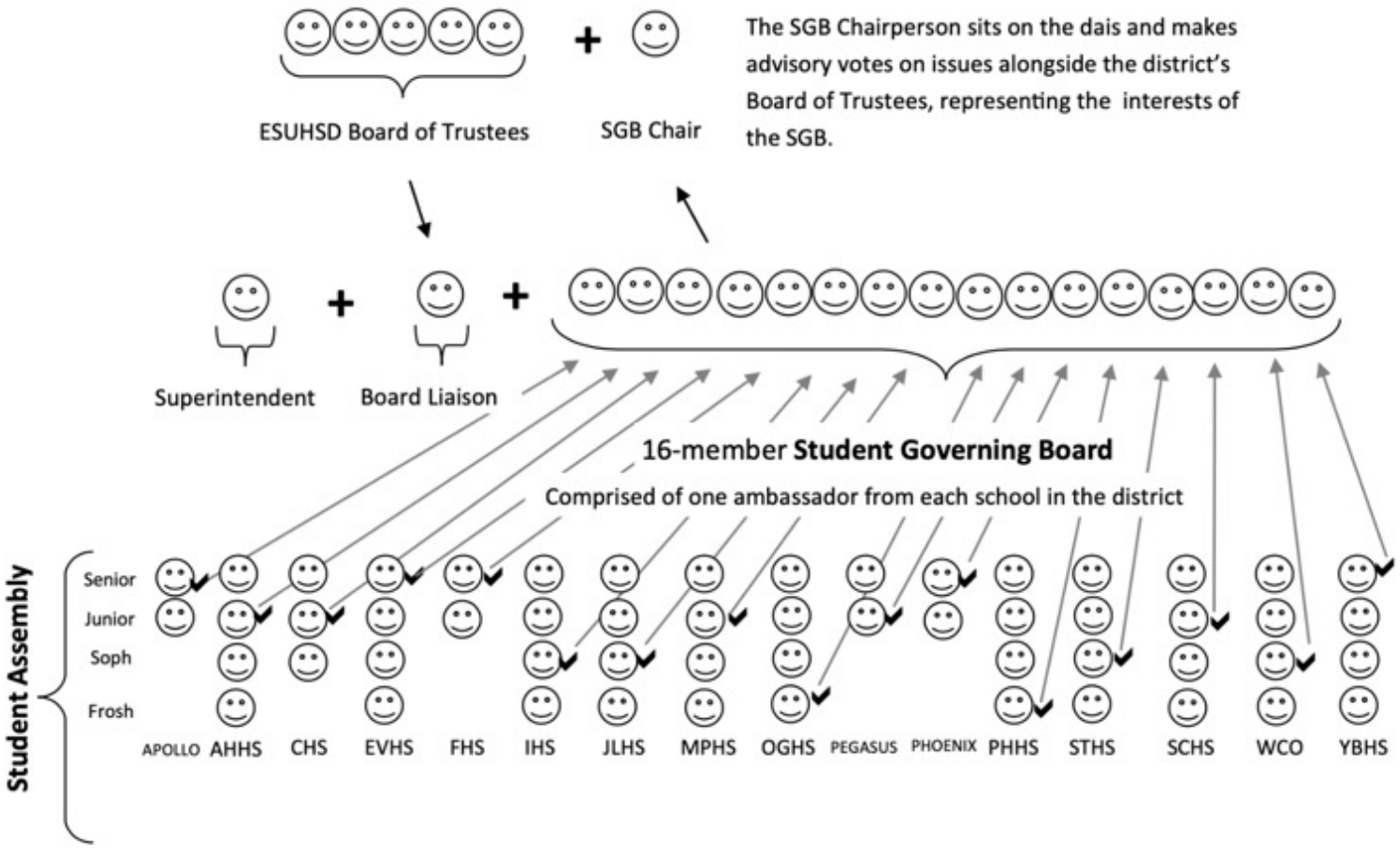
- Review and discuss upcoming agendas for the East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD) Board of Trustees meetings with the Student Governing Board and designated ESUHSD board liaisons.
- Advise the ESUHSD Board of Trustees on items such as, but not limited to, district policies, community/school wide initiatives, and student activities.
- Provide student input and opinions on upcoming points of business and/or issues.
- Develop an informed relationship between the ESUHSD board and its student body.

Terms:

Student Assembly/Student Governing Board members are elected into office by their peers, ideally in the same election cycle as the Associated Student Body (ASB). The terms will be one year for Freshmen, and Sophomores. Terms for Juniors will be two years.

STUDENT GOVERNING BOARD (SGB)

How It Works



The Student Assembly at each school site, comprised of a representative from each grade level, meets regularly to discuss issues to take to and from the Student Governing Board. Student Assembly Members are encouraged to hold Town Hall meetings and attend other meetings on campus such as School Site Council, ASB, PTSA, clubs, etc. Each Student Assembly will select one of its members to serve as its ambassador on the Student Governing Board. Ambassadors can be from any grade level.

(The check boxes noted above are randomly placed to demonstrate that any Student Assembly Member, regardless of grade level, can be selected to represent the school on the SGB.)

Questions?

Contact Superintendent Glenn VanderZee at vanderzeeg@esuhsd.org or
Board Member Pattie Cortese at cortesep@eushsd.org or 408-218-3963