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Journal

NA

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Publication Date

2026-04-06

Spring 2026

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Developing the Equity Leadership of California Assistant Principals and Other Site Administrators

Introduction

There is broad consensus that school leadership is both complex and central to educational improvement (e.g., Grissom et al., 2021). School leaders face continually evolving responsibilities and challenges, requiring ongoing and meaningful opportunities to learn (Grissom et al., 2026). Leading for equity—transforming education systems to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved—is particularly critical in California. The state’s student population is highly diverse across race, ethnicity, home language, socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, gender expression, and other characteristics (Ed-Data, n.d.). In the current political climate, California’s school leaders need explicit, localized, and sustained support to lead equity-centered improvement efforts in their communities.

Although scholarly and professional attention to principals’ learning has increased (e.g., Grissom et al., 2026), far less focus has been placed on the professional learning of site leaders who work alongside principals, such as assistant principals, deans, and teacher leaders. These leaders hold roles that are

distinct from principals and face different sets of responsibilities and challenges (Oleszewski et al., 2012), particularly with respect to leading for equity. This brief presents survey and interview findings that examine the nature of equity-centered professional learning opportunities available to California site leaders who work with principals, their perceptions of those opportunities, and their desires for additional equity-focused professional learning.

The findings presented here are drawn from a larger study examining professional learning opportunities for California school site leaders who work with principals. The study unfolded in three phases. First, we conducted hour-long interviews with 16 leaders across the state to explore (a) the nature of their work and (b) their learning opportunities related to their roles, including preservice preparation, current professional learning, and perceptions of their effectiveness. Second, we used themes from these interviews to develop a statewide survey focused on the core leadership activities respondents identified as central to their daily work. We organized reported responsibilities into four categories: instructional leadership, student and family support, organizational leadership, and leading for equity. The survey was distributed through 21CSLA's professional learning network, including listservs, social media, and Regional Academies, and remained open from June to August 2025. Of 230 total respondents, 30 were ineligible and removed because their role was not part of our intended sample and 28 were eligible but did not complete the survey, resulting in a final analytic sample of 172 participants. In the third phase, we returned to the interview data and recoded the data using the four categories of leadership work, along with categories related to the form and content of professional learning. Using Dedoose, we analyzed the data to deepen and contextualize the survey findings.

Four key themes emerged from our mixed-methods analyses. First, assistant principals and other site administrators who work with principals (hereafter referred to as APs) hold wide-ranging roles and responsibilities, yet nearly all reported engaging in leading for equity. The remaining three themes concern the professional learning that APs described as most effective and most desired: collaborative, role-alike professional learning is especially powerful; effective professional learning engages leaders' social identities, assets, and prior experiences, including their funds of knowledge; and leaders benefit from choice and agency in selecting professional learning topics and structures, as their needs are shaped by personal growth goals and local context.

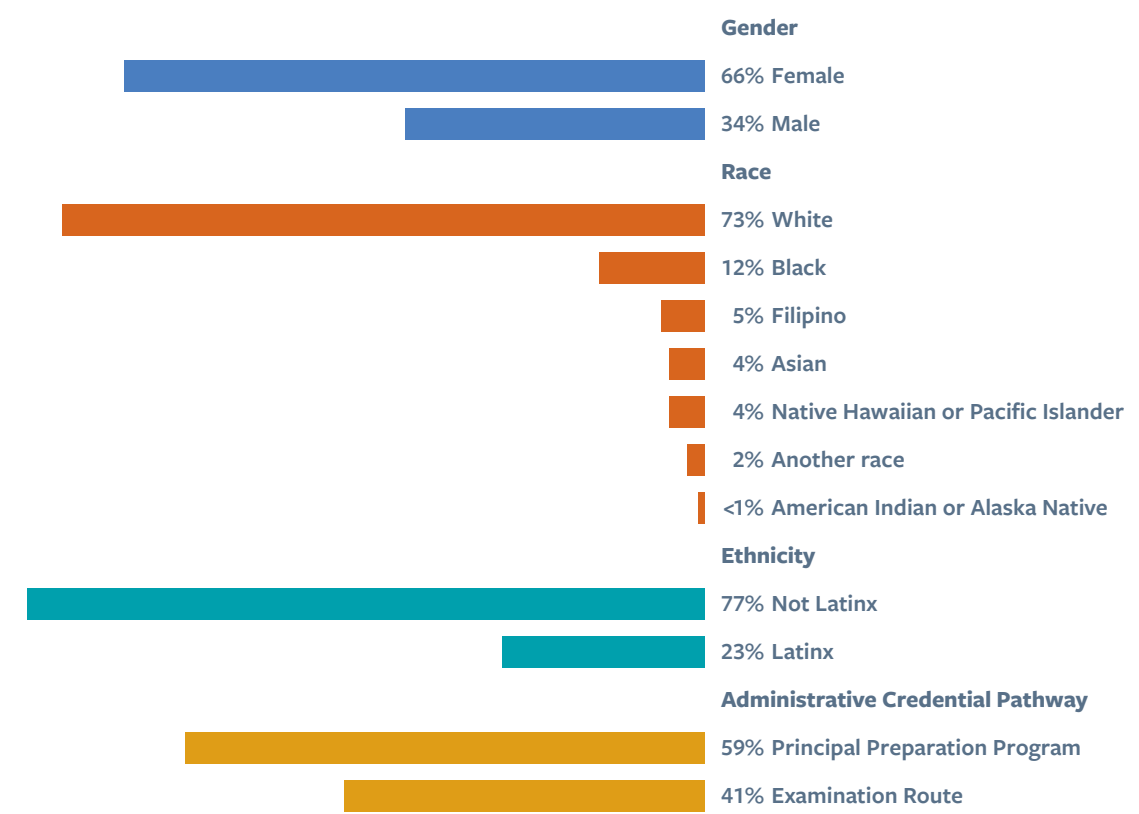
In the next section, we briefly synthesize overall survey findings from the broader study to situate leading for equity within the full scope of APs' work. We then elaborate on the four themes, drawing on both survey and interview data to support our claims.

Survey Data: Who Are California's Assistant Principals and School Administrators Who Work With Principals?

Demographics

The majority of respondents identified as Assistant Principals or Deans (82.5%). The remaining participants held roles such as Director of Early Childhood Education, School Counselor, Academic Coordinator, Curriculum Specialist, Literacy Coach, and other administrative positions that involved working closely with principals. **Figure 1** illustrates the other demographic characteristics of our survey sample. Note that our sample closely mirrors the demographics of California's principals.

Figure 1
Survey Participants by Demographics



Nature of Their Work

In interviews, APs described highly varied and extensive responsibilities. Many referenced official job descriptions and listed between 5 and 20 distinct duties. These included supporting instruction and teacher evaluation for specific grade levels or departments; managing student discipline; overseeing special education; administering state testing; supervising facilities and operations; supporting student groups; creating the master schedule; supervising students during the school day; overseeing athletics; organizing assemblies and programs; and managing state and federal compliance requirements (e.g., Williams Act, Title programs).

In the survey, respondents selected their top three responsibilities within each of four leadership categories—or indicated that the category was not part of their role.

- **Instructional Leadership:** 96.5% identified instructional leadership as central to their role. The most frequently selected responsibilities were supporting curriculum and instruction (57.5%), facilitating teacher collaboration (51.7%), and overseeing academic support programs (45.3%).
- **Student and Family Support:** 97.7% selected student and family support as part of their role. The top responsibilities were discipline

and school culture (58.7%), mental health and wellness (46.5%), and attendance (40.1%).

- ▶ **Organizational Leadership:** A smaller percentage, 85.5%, identified organizational leadership as central to their role. The most frequently selected responsibilities were shared governance (52.3%), cross-organizational coordination (48.8%), and facilities management (46.5%).
- ▶ **Leading for Equity:** Nearly all respondents identified leading for equity as part of their work (all but two participants). The distribution of responsibilities in this category was more varied than in the others, resulting in lower percentages for any single item. The most frequently selected responsibilities were data-informed decision-making to address participation and outcomes (39%), providing tailored supports for students (37.8%), and centering students as agents of change (27.3%).

Professional Learning

Across all leadership domains, respondents most frequently reported participating in communities of practice and self-initiated professional learning. However, coaching—followed by communities of practice—was rated as the most useful form of professional learning.

Because all interview participants and nearly all survey respondents identified leading for equity as central to their role—and because equity-focused leadership is increasingly contested in the current political climate—the remainder of this brief examines this dimension of their learning in greater depth.

Examining Learning to Lead for Equity

In the survey, APs were asked to select up to three primary ways they lead for equity in their work (or the three that occupy most of their time if they

engage in more than three). Based on both current scholarship (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis & Tredway, 2024) and interview findings, response options included:

- ▶ Providing tailored supports for students based on academic, emotional, or cultural context
- ▶ Differentiating resource allocation
- ▶ Using data to inform participation and outcomes
- ▶ Implementing alternative discipline approaches (e.g., restorative practices)
- ▶ Naming race, identity, and systemic oppression in professional conversations
- ▶ Challenging deficit-based assumptions or performative equity efforts
- ▶ Cultivating inclusive dialogue among staff and students
- ▶ Centering students as agents of change
- ▶ Engaging in ongoing self-reflection and personal learning
- ▶ Leading for equity is not part of my role

Figure 2 presents the distribution of these responses.

We also asked respondents to rate both the frequency and usefulness of five forms of professional learning related to leading for equity:

1. Stand-alone workshops, conferences, or one-time trainings
2. Ongoing workshop or training series that build cumulatively
3. Learning networks or communities of practice organized around shared goals (e.g., role-alike groups)
4. Formal coaching or mentoring (e.g., observation and feedback cycles, mentoring relationships)
5. Self-directed independent learning (e.g., webinars, books, podcasts, YouTube)

Frequency was measured on a 4-point scale (never; once per year; about once a month; once

Figure 2

Assistant Principals' Primary Approaches to Leading for Equity



a week or more). Usefulness was measured on a 6-point scale (not at all useful to extremely useful). **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** display reported frequency and usefulness of professional learning focused on the three most frequently reported approaches to leading for equity.

Looking across the three most reported approaches to leading for equity, APs who listed centering students as agents of change (n=47) tended to report relatively frequent professional learning across forms, with the majority of the professional learning happening at least once a month (see **Figure 3**). There was more variability in the frequency of professional learning across the other two approaches to leading for equity. However, looking across approaches, APs tended to report that the most frequent professional learning was self-directed independent learning, and the next most frequent was participation in communities of practice.

Across the top three approaches to leading for equity, over 80% of APs who identified these approaches to leading for equity as part of their role found the professional learning that they participated in useful. In fact, over 50% selected very useful or extremely useful. There was not one approach to leading for equity for which the related professional learning was deemed most useful. There are similar patterns when we compare the different forms of professional learning across approaches to leading for equity. Self-directed was the highest ranked learning form when looking at the very useful and extremely useful rankings. This is particularly true for data-informed decision-making and centering students as agents of change. If we include “useful” (as seen in **Figure 4**), coaching is ranked as the most useful form. Generally speaking, APs found the professional learning opportunities focused on equity to be useful to improve their leadership practice.

Figure 3
Frequency of Participation in Equity-Focused Professional Learning Forms by Approach

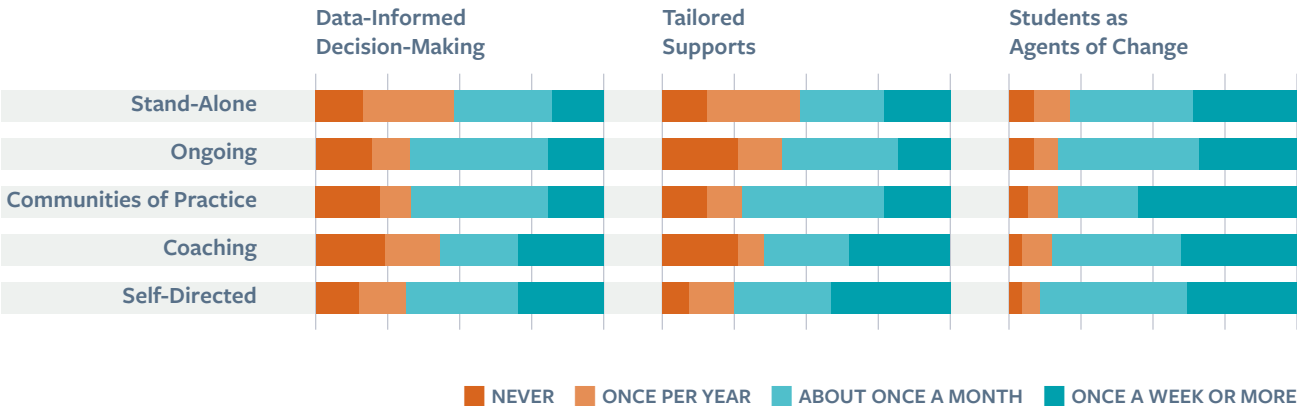
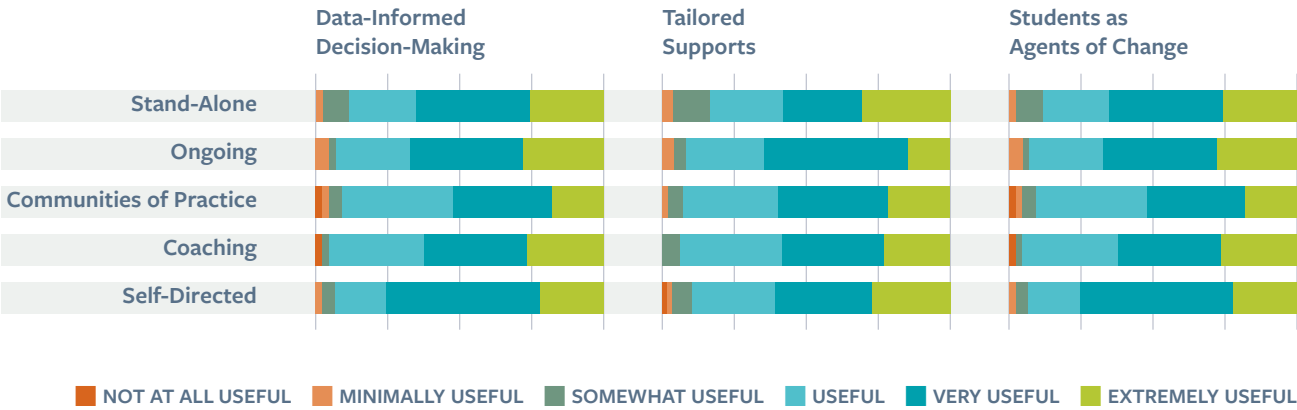


Figure 4
Perceived Usefulness of Equity-Focused Professional Learning Forms by Approach



The Interviews With APs

While the survey data are helpful in that they indicate which forms of professional learning APs engaged in frequently and which they found useful, the interviews provide insight into what these learning opportunities looked like. Our interview participants included ten women and six men; seven identified as White, four as Latinx, two as Filipino, one as Black, and one as Asian (one did not racially identify). The interview data illuminated three main findings about APs' professional learning to lead for equity:

1. Collaboration and role-alike professional learning was powerful.
2. Professional learning needs to engage leaders' social identities and assets, including personal funds of knowledge and prior experiences.
3. Leaders desired personal choice and agency when selecting professional learning and learning structures as they had self-interest and self-assessed improvement areas and context-driven needs.

Collaboration and Role-Alike Professional Learning Were Powerful

School leadership is often an isolating job. While surrounded by people, school leaders have the responsibility for school outcomes and typically make many key decisions in isolation (Bauer et al., 2019). Most of the existing research on school leadership and isolation is focused on principals, but APs face similar circumstances. In concert with either being new to a school or new to the role (nearly 65% of our survey participants are in their first five years in their current role) and tasked with a multitude of responsibilities, APs are faced with making key decisions quickly and on their own. It is not a surprise, then, that nearly all of the APs we interviewed described helpful professional

learning that was done in collaboration with others like an outside organization and role-alike peers.

Five of the interviewees described learning from outside organizations, including 21CSLA, the National Equity Project, Northern California Educational Leadership Consortium (NorCal ELC) through Chico State, and two local organizations (Mosaic and Soul Shop). These organizations functioned differently; some provided ongoing workshops, others conferences, and others brought resources into schools. For example, 21CSLA ran a Coaching for Equity session using an Elena Aguilar book as its core text. The group met weekly over the summer. An AP reported:

“Our goal was to meet and practice some of the questioning [Aguilar presents in her book].”

Another AP described their peer group: **“21CSLA helps prepare me as an administrator, and also being amongst educators who know their why, and they’re not giving up on students.”** A NorCal ELC participant described the process using an Aguilar coaching book: **“We meet with our coach, the coach team, and we talk about how we lead with equity, how we coach with equity.”**

An AP mentioned a conference they attended by the National Equity Project, and the two local organizations came into another AP's school to provide programming.

Three APs explained how their principal preparation program, UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute (PLI), provided a strong network as they entered the field. One described how they got a job in a school that was led by a principal and had an instructional coach who also went to PLI, so they were **“leading with that lens.”** Another described knowing that when the equity work gets hard, they knew they were a part of a larger community: **“[There is a] sense of responsibility in being an actor in places that are**

sometimes uncomfortable, or being an actor in spaces that could be isolating, but it is part of this larger PLI network.” The third connected with the formal PLI alumni coaching group and, once in the job, that collective space **“helped my definition and operationalization of equity and equity stance to be strengthened.”**

Another AP described a district-sponsored **“equity cohort,”** a group of school leaders who met monthly to **“identify and explore solutions when there are missing structures or systems working towards equitable outcomes in order to facilitate student power.”** These learning opportunities focused on equity were in collaboration with others—other school leaders who centered their practice on equity, those across the region connected by their preparation program—and facilitated by organizations that focus on equity as the core of their professional learning work.

Professional Learning Must Engage Leaders’ Social Identities and Assets

Research has long shown that engaging students’ lived experiences supports engagement, motivation, and learning (e.g., Paris & Alim, 2017). However, less attention has been paid to how professional learning for adults acknowledges and builds on leaders’ social identities—particularly for leaders of color. Salisbury and Cummings (2025) argue that often the opposite happens: White leaders maintain their power rather than engage in deep, practice-changing equity work.

The interviewees in this study present perspectives that also press the field to account for and value their intersectional social identities when addressing equity-centered professional learning. Eleven of the interviewees explicitly described their social identities as a source of knowledge and strength for their learning about leading for equity.

For example:

“Experiences with my identities, being a female, being a person of color, being an English learner, those experiences have taught me a lot on how to navigate certain situations within my role and being a representation for the families that we serve here.”

“I’m a woman of color. So my dad and my personal experiences shaped my equity definition without even calling it equity before. At the end of the day, it’s the experiences that you, that any person, goes through that defines who they are and how they see the world.”

“I’m from southeast San Diego. I love working with ‘ghetto, bad kids.’ And I never treated them [like that], because I was that ‘ghetto bad kid’ that they’re talking about. And I think that’s what prepared me for working at at-risk, Title I schools, because that’s all I’ve known. I’m from the community where it is considered, you know, disadvantaged.”

One White AP described how her racial identity played a role in how she learned about and enacted equity-focused leadership: **“I think particularly the identity work that’s part of the [PLI] program really helped me to understand how my identity as a White woman would be affecting my work, my leadership, how I’m perceived, and how I work with adults as well as kids. So that was a big part of preparing specifically for equity work.”**

Given that most school leaders in California are White while the student population is far more diverse, engaging racial identity and lived experience in professional learning is essential. Equity-centered professional learning cannot be race-neutral; it must intentionally engage leaders’ identities as assets in their practice.

Prioritizing the retention and support of leaders of color in Assistant Principal roles is a critical strategy for diversifying the leader workforce.

Leaders Value Agency in Selecting Professional Learning

Given that APs' jobs are so diverse and time sensitive, respondents valued the ability to select professional learning aligned with their immediate needs and interests. This finding parallels research on principals' learning (Grissom et al., 2026). Grissom and colleagues interviewed district leaders who both supervised and provided professional learning opportunities, and they raised concerns about the prevalence of self-directed learning. District leaders worried about consistency across school leaders' learning and the quality of self-directed learning, and that it "might distract principals from engaging more deeply in matters that were more relevant to their leadership growth or germane to district priorities" (p. 27). Yet the descriptions of the APs' equity-centered self-directed learning in this study point to rich and content-specific learning opportunities. Further, across the entire survey, APs selected self-directed professional learning about equity as one of their most frequent professional learning opportunities. The interviews give texture to what the APs did as their self-directed learning.

About one quarter of the interviewees described self-directed approaches to learning about leading for equity. Some of these were solo, like reading books or analyzing data. Others were in collaboration with others, like the school community.

For example, one AP described codesigning goals with the community he served: **"Being able to collaborate, advocate, and think about outcomes not just by myself, but to work with the marginalized communities, to learn about them, and what their needs are, and what their desires are, and what outcomes they want for their families, and then codeveloping that with them, and with other allies on your school campus, in order to help them produce the outcomes that they want right and being able to advocate for that unapologetically and being able to use data and evidence to back up."** The process this AP describes, engaging deeply with families and communities to codesign the work of the school, has been theorized and described by several scholars (e.g., Green, 2017; Ishimaru, 2019), and is far from what could be described as a distraction.

Three APs described using data (and data protocols) to learn about the inequities present in their schools. One AP described his process: **"You gotta use data, that's the first thing I do. You gotta have something to go off. So for me, the first step is looking at the data not just by myself, but with the team and developing some sort of data protocol to see where we are. Are you all seeing and discussing with one of the teams around what we're seeing and where we think the areas of growth, the areas of need**

are? And then you launch from there in order to address where we see the inequities in the data.”

Another AP described looking at **“beautiful data about academic achievement,”** but then looking closer at which students were not represented in those data in order to understand who the school was not serving well. A third AP described his **“data analysis hobby”** of searching school data for what’s working in order to know how to build on those positive practices.

Implications

Given that nearly all survey respondents and all interviewees identified leading for equity as central to their role, there are important implications for policymakers and leaders including:

Formalizing Principal Expectations to Support AP Learning

Principals were largely absent from APs’ descriptions of professional learning experiences. This was surprising—one would imagine that the person closest to the daily work of the AP would be the principal, and they would therefore have both the most access to provide ongoing and embedded learning opportunities as well as the context-driven expertise to do so.

Much of the existing literature that addresses the relationship between the principal and assistant principal critiques principals in that they assign APs to management-heavy roles (including discipline) rather than supporting them into the principalship (Mitchell et al., 2017; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun, 2018). That wasn’t the message we heard from the interviewees nor from the survey; many of our participants described leadership activities that were community-engaged, supporting instruction, and working with students in ways that felt meaningful. Yet, most of their learning was either with someone from outside of their school,

like a coach, or situated outside of the school building—in communities of practice, with outside support organizations, sponsored by the district, or on their own. There is value in the expertise and perspectives of these sources of professional learning. And we see the lack of principals’ direct engagement in the learning of the APs on their campus as a missed opportunity.

Concurrently, we recognize that principals’ workdays are already overloaded and their opportunities to learn are sparse (Grissom et al., 2026). Instead of parsing out individual responsibilities across roles and associated professional learning, leadership and leaders’ learning could instead be designed to build collective responsibility and effort (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). This work is already being done—as seen by the AP who codesigned goals with families and other organizations that focus on learning for school teams.

Principals can support AP professional learning by setting learning goals during their formal evaluation processes, supporting release time to attend professional learning, and through specific team assignments. It can also be supported through the establishment of cultures of learning. For example, administrative team meeting agendas are often prioritized with problem-solving and complex logistical tasks. Principals can choose to integrate learning topics into those agendas.

Prioritize Professional Learning as a Retention Strategy for Leaders of Color

Researchers have established the benefits of diversifying the leader workforce, and principal preparation programs like PLI at both UC Berkeley and UCLA largely train leaders of color. Yet graduates of color often enter into schools that are not designed to see and value their lived

experiences and knowledge (e.g., Bristol, 2020; Irby, 2022). Instead, leaders of color often have to prove their value to a school community in ways that are not asked of White people (i.e., Krull & Robicheau, 2020).

Prioritizing the retention and support of leaders of color in Assistant Principal roles is a critical strategy for diversifying the leader workforce. Our data highlight the significant equity expertise that APs of color bring through lived experience and community knowledge. Organizations and individuals providing professional learning need to design around and center Black and Brown knowledges and ways of being (e.g., Paris & Alim, 2017). One AP of color commented, **“All of a sudden equity became a kind of bad word, like people began to pick it apart and act like there was an agenda that, to me, never existed.”** Another said that the word **“repels people.”** To culturally sustain leaders of color, districts must move beyond representation alone. Much like the AP who described codesigning school goals with students and families, professional learning should be codesigned with leaders of color, amplifying their expertise while addressing their specific needs.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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