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Prioritizing Individual and Collective Self-Care as an Essential Practice for Equity-Focused Leaders

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## Prioritizing Individual and Collective Self-Care as an Essential Practice for Equity-Focused Leaders

### Introduction

The high rates of principal turnover coupled with the increasing levels of isolation and burnout in the profession exemplify the urgent need for cultivating self-care as an essential practice for equity-focused educational leaders. The national attrition rate for school principals reached a staggering 11% between the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, and despite a slight stabilization, the 8% turnover rate in the 2023–2024 school year remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic benchmarks.<sup>1</sup> This instability is most acute in high-poverty and rural schools, where the loss of experienced leaders further marginalizes vulnerable student populations.<sup>2</sup> The high turnover rate coincides with continuously increasing demands on school leaders, including expectations that they address needs not otherwise met in the school system, and the superhero principal narrative persists.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, recent upheavals including the COVID-19 pandemic, immigration enforcement, a youth mental health crisis, and attacks on public education continue to have a significant impact on leaders. For example, about 72% of principals nationally identified burnout as a moderate or major job concern during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Principals reported more than double the stress levels of other working adults (85% vs. 35%) and significantly higher rates of depressive symptoms and burnout.<sup>5</sup>

School principals listed school reopening, meeting the needs of the school community, and technology-related issues as the top three stressors that they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Current immigration enforcement challenges also pose significant stressors for principals as they work to balance professional and moral obligations to meet the safety needs of the school community while simultaneously working to ensure that all students are receiving a quality education.<sup>7</sup> In one study, 77% of high school principals surveyed nationally reported having created school plans to respond to visits from federal agents and nearly half reported creating school plans in the event of parent or guardian deportation. In another national survey of 682 public school principals, more than two thirds reported significant political conflict in their communities, with the study noting that “political conflicts have made the already hard work of public education more difficult, undermining school management, negatively impacting staff, and heightening student stress and anxiety.”<sup>8</sup>

The above data illustrate the well-established professional and personal impacts of the profession on leader well-being, mental health, and sustainability in light of the current expectations of school leaders. These impacts continue to be exacerbated as principals work to meet the intensive leadership needs of the current moment, which highlights the need to provide actionable and sustainable support for school leaders through approaches that include prioritization of individual and collective self-care.<sup>9</sup> The well-documented impacts of current leadership challenges are further intensified for equity-focused leaders as they work to improve access and opportunities for historically underserved students and communities in the current political and educational climate. As such, attending to self-care as an avenue for well-being and sustainability for leaders who are focused on equity is critical as they continue to engage in efforts to transform systems so that all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, can thrive.

Mainstream conceptualizations of self-care are often individualistic and neglect the systemic barriers that continue to replicate negative mental health and well-being outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly true for leaders from historically marginalized backgrounds, who report higher levels of stress and burnout than their counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Given the equity implications of the school leader’s role, continuously increasing demands, and the rates at which school leaders are experiencing burnout, individual and collective self-care are essential for equity-focused school leadership.

In this brief, we:

- ▶ Provide a brief overview of the literature defining well-being, self-care, and related practices
- ▶ Reconceptualize self-care for leaders through discussion of decommodification and collective approaches
- ▶ Provide actionable insights for individual and collective self-care practices that support leader wellness, sustainability, and equity-focused leadership

## **Importance of School Leader Subjective Well-Being and Self-Care**

Cheung and colleagues suggest that there is a need to “understand principal well-being not just by the individual’s inner workings, but also by how the individual principal engages with a synergistic web of interconnected factors including stressors, contexts, interactions, and various resilience tools.”<sup>12</sup> As such, it is important to understand how school leaders’ well-being is impacted by and has implications for the systems in which they lead. School leaders’ subjective well-being encompasses their psychological, emotional, and physical health,<sup>13</sup> typically measured through variables such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and job satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> Recent scholarship underscores the systemic importance of leaders’ well-

being. For instance, Mahfouz and colleagues’ prosocial leader model posits a bidirectional link between leader wellness and effective leadership, healthy community partnerships, and robust social-emotional learning implementation.<sup>15</sup> These factors collectively cultivate a school climate that drives students’ social, emotional, and academic success. Moreover, principal well-being, specifically job satisfaction, serves as a critical predictor of turnover, which has documented downstream effects on graduation rates, teacher retention, and overall student achievement.<sup>16</sup>

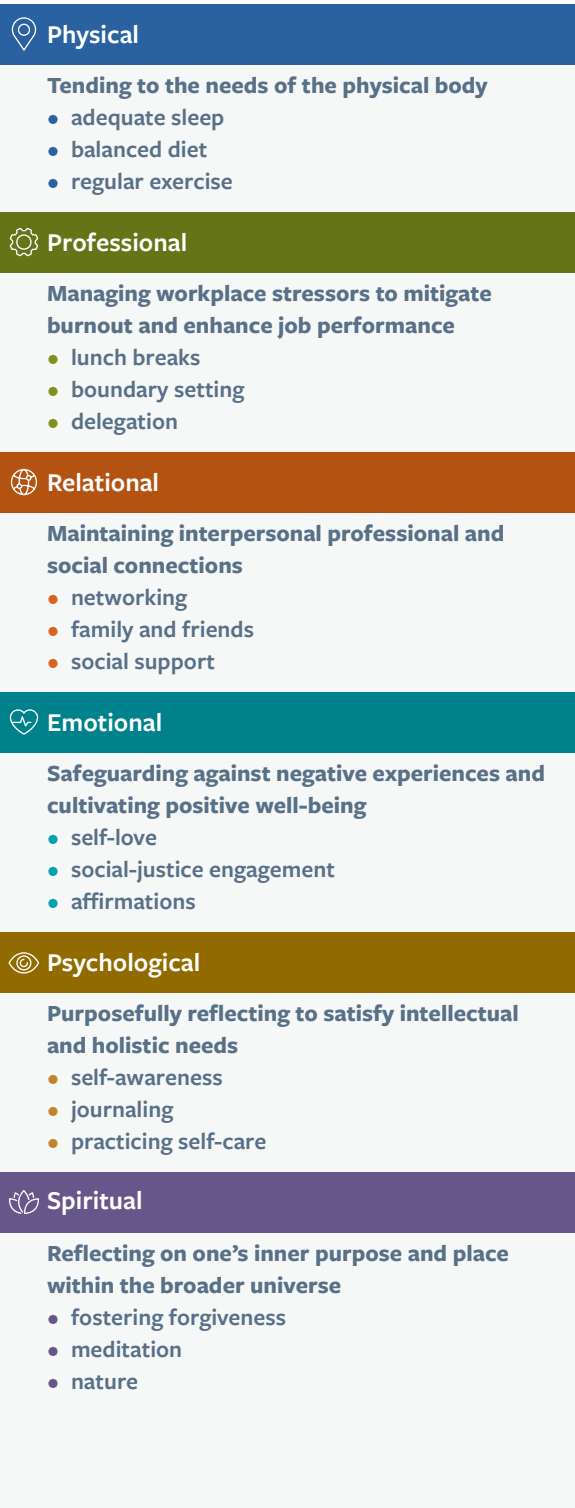
**Traditional Models and Definitions of Self-Care**

Understanding the various definitions of self-care as well as different models for its conceptualization is a critical component of leader self-care. Beyond this, it is important to understand the relationship between self-care, stress, and stress management, as well as how specific actions align with authentic self-care or simply serve as distractions.<sup>17</sup> While the concept of self-care has gained significant public attention over the last several decades, particularly in the post-pandemic era, its definition remains imprecise due to varying interpretations across disciplines.<sup>18</sup> Despite this ambiguity, one extensive literature review defines self-care as an individual’s “ability to care for oneself through awareness, self-control, and self-reliance in order to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health and well-being.”<sup>19</sup> Self-care practices can be leveraged by educational leaders to navigate the high levels of stress inherent to their daily responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

One prominent model of a multidimensional self-care framework for helping professionals is the six domain model of self-care, which includes: (1) physical, (2) professional, (3) relational, (4) emotional, (5) psychological, and (6) spiritual dimensions.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 1 displays the definitions and examples of these six dimensions.

**Figure 1**  
*Six Domains of Self-Care With Examples*



## Decommodifying and Reconceptualizing Self-Care for Leaders

While definitions of self-care and frameworks like the six domains of self-care provide structured pathways for school leaders, the practice of self-care has been increasingly individualized and commercialized.<sup>22</sup> Modern self-care is frequently reduced to materialistic excess or consumption, such as luxury goods acquisition or excessive media use, which function as momentary distractions rather than true restoration.<sup>23</sup> This commercialization hinders an individual's capacity to use self-care as a genuine well-being tool, often leading individuals to mistake self-optimization for the deep recovery required to mitigate chronic stress.<sup>24</sup> Because dominant self-care narratives are often rooted in capitalism and White supremacy, they can inadvertently prioritize individual productivity over collective health.<sup>25</sup>

“Delinking” self-care from capitalist mandates for constant production and decoupling self-care from commodified, materialistic definitions can counter mainstream conceptualizations.<sup>26</sup> A decolonial and decommodified approach encourages school leaders to cultivate critical consciousness by questioning whether their rituals serve the individual, the community, or merely the status quo. By shifting from a logic of “exchange value” (reproducing the self for work) to “use value” (maintaining life for its own sake), self-care becomes a restorative practice that builds capacity for collective resistance and social change. This also includes reengaging with the authentic cultural and spiritual histories of wellness practices to foster genuine community healing.

Current definitions of self-care also overemphasize individualistic strategies or activities in place of collective and community care that is practiced and sustained over time. Collective approaches to self-care in service of social justice and

transformation in school communities are essential for equity leadership. Acknowledging the systemic and community-level factors that contribute to leaders' ability to engage in or sustain effective self-care practices is essential, given that school leaders are embedded within systems and communities challenged by oppression and educational inequities.<sup>27</sup> For leaders of color, resulting stressors include racialized experiences such as microaggressions, bias, and other forms of marginalization.<sup>28</sup> While individual self-care practices can be effective to tend to certain individual needs, collective care and relational support are required in order to address the stressors, isolation, and systemic factors contributing to burnout.

Reconceptualization of self-care for equity-focused leaders requires praxis that enables transformation of the systems in which they lead and work. Rooted in critical feminist perspectives from Black and Latinx scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa, this approach conceptualizes care as necessary for liberation, resistance, and healing.<sup>29</sup> This conceptualization of self-care acknowledges the physical, material, and psychological impacts of oppressive systems on marginalized communities, and the toll on individuals engaged in the work of social change.<sup>30</sup> For leaders of color, in particular, approaches to care that promote belonging in the form of visibility, validation, and affirmation are central to sustainability and wellness.<sup>31</sup> Engaging in collective forms of self-care when faced with structural challenges is an effective way for leaders who are historically marginalized to experience support in caring, interdependent networks.<sup>32</sup> For equity-focused leaders, self-care engagement in community supports sustainability, resilience, and wellness. Following, we discuss individual practices and relational approaches to self-care that can support school leaders in caring for themselves and, in doing so, sustaining their capacity to lead for equity.

## Individual Self-Care Practices for Leaders

Individual self-care practices for leaders can be effective when coupled with acknowledging and addressing leader burnout as a symptom of broader, systemic challenges. Specifically, active engagement across cognitive, emotional, occupational, spiritual, and physical dimensions of self-care has proven effective in mitigating stress, a trend particularly notable among female school leaders and leaders of color.<sup>33</sup> The practices outlined in Figure 2 are recommendations from the literature that leaders may consider in addition to social support and collective care approaches outlined in the sections that follow.

### Relational Approaches to Self-Care: Principal Supervision, Coaching, and Communities of Practice

Systems-level approaches to foster leader well-being are essential bridges to self-care. Research stresses the importance of building a supportive environment for educational leaders by investing in professional development that builds self-care practices.<sup>37</sup> In addition to investment in the supports listed above, districts must address structural issues that may impede a principal's capacity to cultivate a self-care practice. This may include reenvisioning principal-supervisor expectations, critically examining workloads, and considering district policies that may address systemic barriers to principal wellness. Districts can also include self-care practices in principal supervision by discussing overcommitment, emotional exhaustion, and the degree of emotional investment that comes with the job during supervision.<sup>38</sup> Districts and principal supervisors can also work to create confidential spaces for peer support—during the workday and beyond—for leaders to engage in conversations with peers that provide opportunities for support, affirmation, and collective learning. Providing confidential, safe

**Figure 2**

### *Self-Care Practices for Leaders*

- ▶ **Positive psychological interventions**  
(implementing strategies designed specifically to amplify positive emotions rather than just managing negative ones)<sup>34</sup>
  - **The practice of savoring: RECOGNITION**  
Identifying specific stimuli that elicit positive feelings. **DIFFERENTIATION**  
Unlike mindfulness (which accepts all stimuli), savoring focuses exclusively on positive experiences. **ACTION**  
Consciously remembering positive events and revisiting them through daily journaling. **CULTIVATING “SACRED MOMENTS”**  
Prioritizing self-compassion as a core component of self-care.
- ▶ **Stressor and task management**
  - Utilizing preservice education and ongoing professional development to improve task management.<sup>35</sup>
  - Engaging in evidence-based stress management programs.
- ▶ **Proactive planning and education**<sup>36</sup>
  - **Self-education:** Learning the signs of burnout and well-being via various resources.
  - **Structural changes:** Working with supervisors to create leadership delegation plans.
  - **Time blocking:** Using a calendar to designate specific work hours for addressing job-related stress.
  - **Life-work balance:** Engaging in annual planning for proactive coping strategies.

spaces for principals to process their stress and express emotions typically suppressed in leadership roles is also very important.<sup>39</sup>

Relational approaches to collective care are vital to the transformation of systems and sustainability of leading for social change. Relational support that includes peer networks and social support can help foster feelings of efficacy and agency for leaders. For leaders from marginalized backgrounds, validation, visibility, and affirmation through relational approaches to collective care is critical for navigating resistance.<sup>40</sup> Communities of practice can be an effective means through which leaders can learn about self-care and engage in a collaborative network with supportive colleagues. A powerful example of communities of practice in service of collective care are racial affinity groups for leaders. Through opportunities to engage in collective professional learning experiences in affinity groups, leaders can experience an increased sense of belonging and community, which can mitigate the isolation many

leaders experience, support sustainability in the role, and cultivate critical resilience.<sup>41</sup>

Leadership coaching can also serve as a form of self-care and confidential social support. Coaches can help reduce or mitigate isolation by providing professional partnership and bridging leaders to other social connections. Additionally, leadership coaches can model work-life balance, provide feedback, and validate the challenges and successes of school leaders.<sup>42</sup> Equity-focused coaching can further help affirm and validate transformational leaders in their practice by relaying the critical nature of their work, the systemic challenges that hinder it, and the equity implications of self-care for sustainability. In addition to supporting reflective self-care related to technical tasks, coaches can also support deeper reflection connected to assessing one's emotions, suggesting or engaging a leader in self-regulation techniques. Additional support coaches can provide to leaders includes interrupting superhero narratives and helping destigmatize

### Affinity Groups as Collective Care in the 21CSLA Bay Area Regional Academy

In the 21CSLA Bay Area Regional Academy, affinity groups leverage professional learning spaces to provide identity-alike groups for leaders of color as spaces for healing, connection, and rejuvenation. Facilitators engage intentional practices to cultivate trust and empowerment, as well as space for connection and vulnerability. Participants, in turn, report that these professional learning spaces are deeply relevant to their context as leaders and foster a sense of connection and belonging. They also report validation of their experiences as leaders of color and a sense of visibility associated with being able to enter a space with transparency and authenticity not generally experienced in other professional settings.

*Current rates of principal turnover and their subsequent impacts on school communities merit attention and responses grounded in systemic responses that cultivate self-care for leaders.*

#### Coaching as a Bridge to Leader Wellness: Examples from the 21CSLA SoCal Regional Academy— Los Angeles Education Partnership Evaluation Report Insights<sup>43</sup>

In 21CSLA's Southern California Regional Academy, leadership coaching exemplifies the impact of coaching on leader well-being. Participating leaders have reported key changes in occupational, emotional, and physical wellness. Occupational wellness is defined as "the ability to contribute unique skills and formal education to personally meaningful work." Emotional wellness relates to "awareness, acceptance, expression, and management of emotions," and physical wellness relates to "functional operation of the body...and conventional aspects of healthy living."<sup>44</sup> Coaching influenced occupational wellness by strengthening leaders' ability to refine skills in time management, workload management, balanced goal setting, and by allowing leaders to reconnect with their values. As one leader explained, "[Coaching helped me to be] more realistic with my goals, be kinder to myself, and [to focus on] my own wellness." Coaching supported emotional wellness by providing space for leaders to recognize, express, and process their stress and feelings with a trusted coach who was not their supervisor or evaluator, allowing leaders to be more present and engaged with their students and work. One leader noted, "My coach helped me with taking time for myself each day, so that I would be less stressed and more available for my students and my department." Leaders also experienced impacts related to physical wellness, reporting decreased stress levels, and one leader even noted more stable, regulated blood pressure after participating in coaching. She shared, "I needed vulnerability. I needed someone I could talk to about what was going on in my life, so [my coach] was that person for me. As far as my health, my blood pressure has gone down tremendously... just having an outlet that was concerned about me [helped]." In the 21CSLA Southern California Regional Academy, coaching has served as a bridge to occupational, emotional, and physical wellness for leaders and exemplifies key connections between relational self-care, localized professional learning, and school leadership.<sup>45</sup>



## Reflection Questions

- **Professional Context** What systems exist in your school or district to provide spaces and opportunities for leaders to engage in collective self-care practices? Where are the strengths and where are the opportunities for growth?
- **Leadership Capacities** Where might collective and individual self-care practices and their connection to equity leadership be integrated in current professional learning opportunities for leaders in your context?
- **Equity in Schools** How might the connections between self-care and leader sustainability be shared with professional development leaders and leaders charged with supervision and support of principals and other leaders in your district?

displays of emotion. Coaches can also support leaders in seeking help in the context of their work through encouraging or destigmatizing accessing mental health resources when needed.

## Implications and Conclusion

Leader self-care has far-reaching implications for schools and educational communities. Current rates of principal turnover and their subsequent impacts on school communities merit attention and responses grounded in systemic approaches that cultivate self-care for leaders. This is particularly true when considering the equity implications

and disparate impacts of turnover on historically marginalized communities. At present, mounting pressure on principals and school leaders in the current educational and political climate makes it essential to reconceptualize self-care beyond individual strategies, commodified practices, and intrinsically motivated actions. Yet, self-care has not been systematically incorporated into the preparation of leaders, nor has it consistently been discussed as central to preparation that supports leader sustainability. Effective leadership preparation with a focus on individual and collective approaches to care, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration, can be a powerful foundation for leaders to understand the importance of remaining resilient and engaged in their roles as equity-focused leaders. For example, preparation that includes interprofessional collaboration between leadership and school psychology students highlights the potential to deconstruct silos, integrate expertise, and inform practice in ways that support these roles to build resilience in service of equity-focused change in schools.<sup>46</sup>

Professional learning leaders can play an essential role in systematically creating spaces that integrate individual self-care practice within learning communities that prioritize self-care as a habit of equity leadership, validate lived experiences, and provide confidential settings for leaders to engage with each other. 21CSLA's efforts in providing spaces that accomplish these goals are exemplified through equity-focused leadership coaching, affinity groups, and communities of practice that are grounded in local contexts and provide essential spaces for collaboration. Professional learning that reframes and expands traditional notions of self-care to collective and relational conceptualizations is essential to supporting the sustainability, efficacy, and well-being of leaders and their ability to enact equity-oriented change.

In addition to providing professional learning spaces that facilitate collective care, school systems should interrogate current practices, identify systemic barriers that result in isolation and burnout for leaders, and respond with action. Research indicates that leaders' wellness and self-care are essential to the transformation of school systems and outcomes of students. However, further research is needed on practices such as affinity groups and other forms of collective care in order to understand what most effectively enables and sustains equity leadership. From a policy standpoint, continued investment in professional learning that addresses the holistic needs of school leaders in ways that are grounded in equity is imperative. As the demands on school leaders increase, it is critical to actionably address issues of principal turnover by providing high quality opportunities for professional learning, connection, and collaboration that are sustainably designed and integrated into education systems. Additionally, it is essential to continue the provision of resources and frameworks that support the overall wellness of school systems, such as transformative social and emotional learning, including dissemination of resources specific to the self-care of school leaders charged with their implementation.<sup>47</sup> Beyond this, there are also implications for leadership standards that include collective notions of care for school leaders and prioritize leader sustainability and self-care as essential foundations for leadership preparation and subsequent practice to transform school systems. Engaging in the reconceptualization of self-care and enacting collective, relational approaches to research, policy, and practice in service of self-care for leaders is key to creating more equitable outcomes across school systems and sustaining transformative leadership in education.

## Additional Resources

### Association of California School Administrators (ACSA)

<https://acsa.org/>

#### ACSA—The Importance of Self-Reflection and Self-Care for School and District Administrators During the Summer

<https://content.acsa.org/the-importance-of-self-reflection-and-self-care-for-school-and-district-administrators-during-the-summer/>

#### ACSA—Changing How We Think About Self-Care

<https://content.acsa.org/changing-how-we-think-about-self-care/>

#### Book Excerpt—How to Be Well: Navigating Our Self-Care Epidemic, One Dubious Cure at a Time

<https://www.porchlightbooks.com/blogs/changethis/how-to-be-well>

### California School Boards Association (CSBA)

<https://www.csba.org/>

#### CSBA—New report highlights ways to focus on SEL during tumultuous year

<https://blog.csba.org/sel-reopening-report/>

#### Educator Self-Care: Time to Focus on You, Too

<https://www.cta.org/educator/posts/trauma-selfcare>

#### Feminist Joy Toolkit

[https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/COFEM\\_Feminist-Joy-Toolkit-1.pdf](https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/COFEM_Feminist-Joy-Toolkit-1.pdf)

#### Greater Good Science Center: Keys to Well-Being

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/key>

## Notes

1. National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2025
2. Bartanen, Grissom, & Rogers, 2019
3. Sablo Sutton & Gong, 2021
4. Kaufman et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2025
5. Steiner et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2025
6. Cheung et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2025
7. Rogers & Kahne, 2025
8. Rogers et al., 2022, p. ix
9. Wells & Klocko, 2018
10. Hobart & Kneese, 2025
11. Miller et al., 2018
12. Cheung et al., 2024, p. 518
13. Doyle Fosco, 2022
14. Rogers et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2023; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Rangel, 2018
15. Mahfouz et al., 2025
16. Rangel, 2018
17. Tiayon, 2025
18. Butler et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2021
19. Martinez et al., 2021, p. 19
20. Doyle Fosco et al., 2025
21. Butler et al., 2019
22. Butler et al., 2019
23. Miller & Tran, 2024
24. Tiayon, 2025
25. Miller & Tran, 2024
26. Miller & Tran, 2024; Tiayon, 2025
27. Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022
28. Cyr et al., 2021
29. Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021
30. Hobart & Kneese, 2020
31. Solorzano et al., 2020
32. hooks, 2018
33. Doyle Fosco et al., 2025 & Robicheau & Krull, 2016
34. Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022
35. Doyle Fosco, 2022
36. DeMatthews et al., 2021
37. Doyle Fosco, 2022
38. DeMatthews et al., 2021
39. Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Nelson et al., 2018
40. Miller et al, 2018
41. Dong, 2025
42. Marsh et al., 2022
43. Portillo et al., 2025
44. Montoya & Summers, 2021, p.51
45. Montoya & Summers, 2021
46. Cheung et al, 2026
47. California Department of Education, n.d.

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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](https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research).

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