Evidence to *Action*

Equity in California Adult Education

Abstract

At both the state and program levels, California adult education has made significant strides in supporting equity for adult learners. This evidence-to-action brief reviews the relevant literature on implicit bias and provides examples from agencies in Los Angeles that are working to address equity. This brief also provides research-based examples of the influence of bias on both teacher expectations and student outcomes using both a historic and a contemporary lens. Although equity can be viewed from many areas, the focus of this brief is on racial and ethnic equity. Throughout this brief, the definition of equity within the educational ecosystem used by CALPRO is "educational equity is achieved when all students receive the resources, opportunities, skills, and knowledge they need to succeed in our democratic society" (American Institutes for Research [AIR] 2019, 1).

> **Take Action!**
>
> Take a moment to visualize who comes to mind when thinking about equity. Is it all students or does a specific population come to mind?

Review of Literature

Examining the Concept of Implicit Bias

Current equity-focused efforts—including taking an unbiased approach to curriculum, assessment, and student engagement—are grounded in concepts that have existed for decades, including the work of Gordon Allport with the 1954 publication of The Nature of Prejudice, which remains a touchstone for understanding implicit bias and its associated psychology (Brownstein and Zalta 2019). Although Allport focused on the automaticity of bias, the understanding that racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes also play a role in demonstrations of bias was not widely understood until later. Patricia Devine's three studies in "Stereotypes and Prejudice" (1989) were later reaffirmed in a study titled "Implicit Stereotyping in Person Judgment" (Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman 1993). The terms "implicit bias," "unconscious bias," and "implicit social cognition" are widely used in today's lexicon. These terms refer "to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity 2012). Thus, implicit bias, or our unconscious attitudes and beliefs, play a role in the ability of educators to provide effective services and instruction when bias and stereotypical assumptions go unchecked.

We all have implicit biases. This universal concept spares no one regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, educational level, or any other dimension of diversity. As social beings, we order our lives to manage things, based on the value systems we have been taught, the experiences we have had, and the beliefs we have learned. We classify things, people, and ideas to understand our world in manageable doses. These classifications often rely on selective perception and stereotypes, attributing certain characteristics to all members of a group. In Overcoming Bias (2016), Jana and Freeman pointed out that stereotypes lead to bias. As Douglas Yeung stated, "This attribution can affect one's perceptions or judgments of that individual even though most are unaware that this bias or linkage exists" (Yeung 2021, 47). Given these generalizations and associations, errors in judgment can impact sound decision making.

> **Take Action!**
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> Consider taking an Implicit Association Test through the Project Implicit website. This exercise will give you a practical understanding on how implicit bias is measured and works. Several test versions are at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html. You can take one or more than one.

Gershenson and Papageorge (2022) conducted an analysis of the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002. They found that

> *teacher expectations matter. College completion rates are systematically higher for students whose teachers had higher expectations for them. More troublingly, we also find that white teachers, who comprise the vast majority of American educators, have far lower expectations for black students than they do for similarly situated white students. This evidence suggests that to raise student attainment, particularly among students of color, elevating teacher expectations, eliminating racial bias, and hiring a more diverse teaching force are worthy goals. (Gershenson and Papageorge 2022, 65–66).*

To systematically address issues of implicit bias to improve education outcomes, we explore the effects of inequity on learners and the impact of an intentional agenda to increase equity in education in practice. The question then becomes, "How can we become more aware of the impact of stereotypes and biases on decision making?" Throughout this evidence-to-action brief, some activities are offered to guide learning.

The Impact of Implicit Bias on Teacher Expectations and Student Outcomes

As stated earlier, implicit bias often is based on stereotypes that can hinder teacher expectations and student outcomes. A 1973 study found that students' names and associated cultural stereotypes impacted teacher expectations (Harari and McDavid 1973); this was reinforced 45 years later in a study that identified grading as heavily impacted by implicit bias, when educators assumed students were immigrants based on their names and scored them lower 93.2 percent of the time (Bonefeld and Dickhäuser 2018). A 1988 study demonstrated that Asian students experienced difficulty related to teacher expectations because of the "model minority" stereotype commonly applied to Asian individuals (Divoky 1988). Later, a study published in 2021 also focused on the "model minority" stereotype; the researchers found that the stereotype can hinder Asian students from receiving the support they need after 36.4 percent of educators in the study held Asian students to higher expectations than their peers (Shi and Zhu 2021). A 1991 study found that Black teachers held higher expectations for Black students than White teachers (Beady and Hansell 1991). In a 2016 study, 16,000 educators were asked to predict future goal attainment and potential for college specific to Black students. The researchers found that White educators were 30 percent less likely than Black educators to predict that Black students would earn a college degree (Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge 2016). These studies demonstrated that implicit bias can impact educator expectations, and concerns raised three to four decades ago still persist today. This is important because teacher expectations influence outcomes (Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna 2014). Their study evaluated students and the Pygmalion Effect (i.e., people do what is expected of them); they found that students whose educators demonstrate high expectations and provide support to meet those expectations were more likely to reach their academic goals. Likewise, when students were not expected to do well, they were less likely to meet their academic goals. Unfortunately, the same study found that 36 percent of teachers believed that all of their students could achieve academic success. Only 13 percent believed all of their students were motivated to succeed academically, whereas 86 percent of these educators agreed there is a strong relationship between teacher expectations and student learning (Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna 2014). Thus, although educators may explicitly recognize the connection between expectations and achievement, their implicit bias may impact their ability to hold reasonable expectations for all students.

Impact of an Intentional Equity Agenda on Student Populations and Their Communities

An essential part of removing bias from education systems and moving forward on an equity agenda is simply developing an understanding of the adult learners served. Adult learners have diverse backgrounds with lived experiences that impact their participation in and completion of adult education programs. Therefore, equity agendas must center on the systemic issues that have discouraged adults and have left racial and ethnic groups underrepresented and underserved (Burch et al. 2019). If systemic issues are not centered, society runs the risk of deepening past injustices and increasing economic marginalization of people, populations, and communities of color.

The United States needs educated and skilled adults to meet growing industry and workforce demands. Lantos et al. (2021) posited that the majority of youth and young adults out of work in the United States are people of color. To support participants' involvement in the workforce, workforce development programs must include racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) in their job-skills training initiatives. Access to education improves an individual's quality of life and positively impacts society.

To increase adult learners' participation in educational institutions and the workforce, an equity agenda should include the following:

1. Identifying inequities rooted in policies such as attendance penalization for working students
2. Intentionally using inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction
3. Providing professional development to encourage culturally competent staff at all levels

> ### Take Action!
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> Are you a classroom teacher wondering if your classroom is inclusive? Take the inclusive classroom self-assessment at https://www.turnerconsultinggroup.ca/uploads/2/9/5/6/29562979/inclusive_classroom_self-assessment__1_.pdf.

Addressing systemic issues includes training staff to address interpersonal, implicit, and structural biases. The literature is limited in knowing the impact of staff participation in trainings addressing REEI and their outcomes for people of color. According to the available research, there is no negative effect of REEI on specific professional development; however, there is a need for ongoing support and policy changes to see increased positive outcomes (Lantos et al. 2021). To move REEI forward, it is important to develop an understanding of the population and various cultures served within adult education.

The Diversity of California Adult Learners

To understand adult learners in California, it is important to understand, at the very least, the demographic makeup of the population. The 2020 U.S. Census showed that California had a diversity index of 61.1 percent (Jensen et al. 2022), an increase from the previous census, which was 54.9 percent (America Counts Staff 2021). Although there has been a significant increase in diversity in California, it is important to note that the state's adult education population looks very little like the state population (figure 1). Thus, the population that educators may interact with in their local community may look vastly different from the population they engage with at their school sites.

Figure 1. California State Population and Adult Education Population
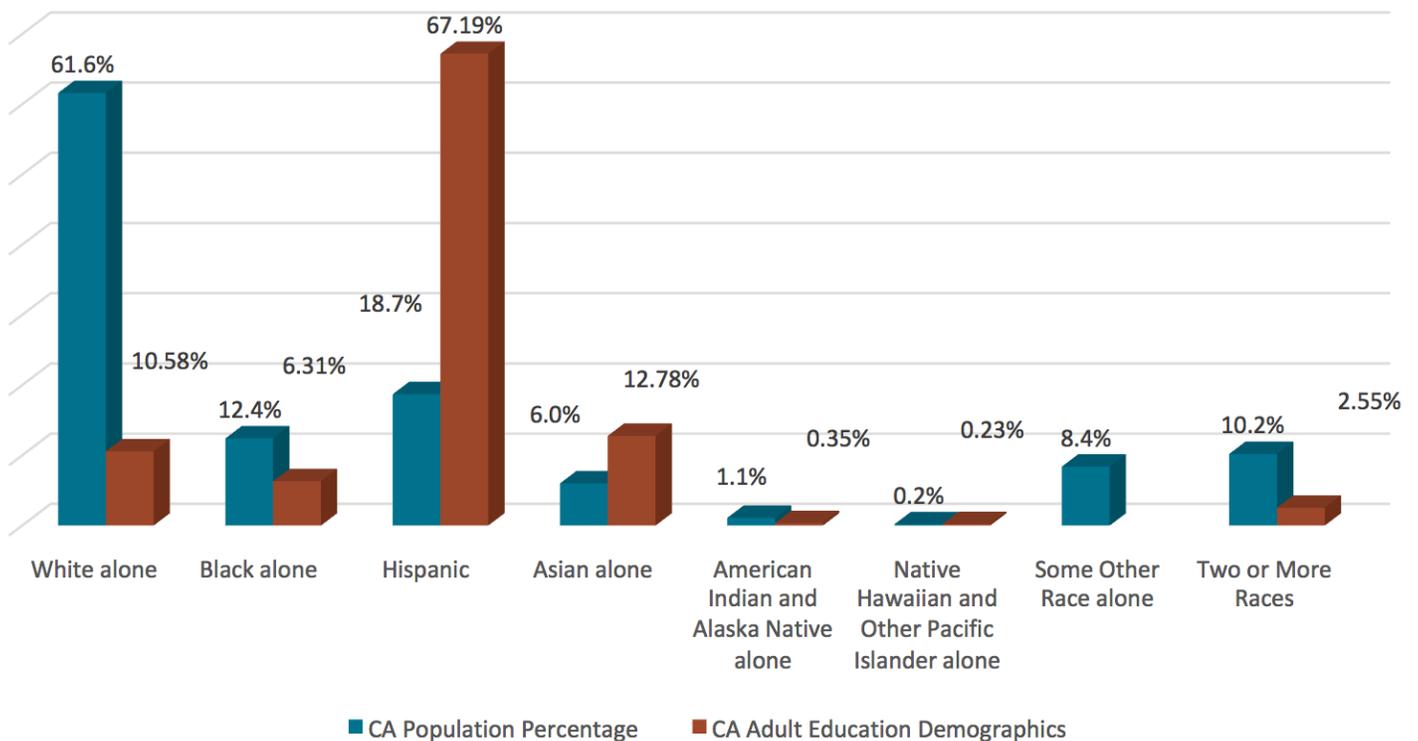
Note: "Some other race alone" is not captured in adult education population data.

What is the demographic makeup of California's population?

- The largest demographic population in the state is 61.6 percent White.
- The largest adult education population is 67.19 percent Hispanic or Latino.
- The racial breakdown of the remaining adult education population is as follows:
  - 6.31 percent Black
  - 12.78 percent Asian
  - 0.35 percent American Indian and Alaska Native
  - 0.23 percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander
  - 2.55 percent more than one race (National Reporting System for Adult Education 2020)

> ### *Take Action!*
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> Want to learn more about your student population? Visit the "Explore Census Data" website (https://data.census.gov/cedsci/), type in your ZIP code, click "advance search," and select the "populations and people" topic to investigate the demographics of your area. To learn more about education demographics, complete the same process, but select "education" as the topic.

- California is home to almost 11 million immigrants (Johnson and Sanchez 2019)
  - Twenty-seven percent of Californians are foreign born.
  - Fifty-three percent of California immigrants are documented.
  - Fifty percent of California immigrants were born in Latin America, and 39 percent were born in Asia,
  - Seventy percent of California's immigrant population are bilingual and speak English proficiently.
  - Ten percent of California's immigrant population does not speak English (approximately 1,100,000 individuals).
- The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation includes more than 50,000 adult education students annually. As of 2017, African Americans remained the most overrepresented group in California's prison population (Harris et al. 2019):
  - African Americans made up 28.5 percent of the male incarcerated population but represented only 5.6 percent of the state population.

- African Americans made up 25.9 percent of the female incarcerated population but represented only 5.7 percent of the state population.

Because California adult education students are primarily minority individuals, they have historically been impacted by the effects of inequity on society.

California Adult Education Actions Toward Equity

California State Context

California adult education has taken steps toward increasing equity.

- Beginning in 2014, adult learners could receive career licensing regardless of immigration status (SB-1159[1]), which increases equity of access to career opportunities.
- In 2016, the governor[2] appointed a director of immigrant integration to develop a comprehensive report on programs and services to immigrants; create a statewide plan for better implementation and coordination of programs that serve immigrants; and develop an online clearinghouse of immigrant services, programs, and resources.
- In 2018, new immigrant integration measures included a required data set for adult education programs (AB-2098[3]), which allows for the tracking of effective immigrant integration practices within adult education programs.

Also, both the California Department of Education and the California Community College Chancellor's Office sponsored the Immigrant Integration Framework (Allies 2017) to help address the perpetuation of marginalization of adult English learners.

CALPRO's work in equity seeks to build on such efforts. To understand this imperative requires looking at demographic data, the effects of inequity, and the effects of an intentional focus on equity at the program level.

The California Department of Education and its Adult Education Office understand the importance of an intentional focus on racial equity with not only words but also action. Superintendent Tony Thurmond stated in June 2020, "I believe that we have to have action and that action has to be focused on dealing with race and racism and implicit bias. We have to be courageous and honest about the racism that exists in this country" (Lambert 2020). In 2019, the Adult Education Office approved

developing a new CALPRO training: Success for All Learners Through Equity. The training was developed by CALPRO staff (with contributions from numerous adult education professionals) to be inclusive of adult education staff, including teachers, administrators, and front office personnel. By summer 2020, the training pilot was complete, and CALPRO offered the training to interested agencies. Many Los Angeles–based agencies took this opportunity to further the equity work they began prior to 2020.

Los Angeles Regional Adult Education Consortium: A Partnership Toward Equity

Equity is at the heart of adult education in Los Angeles. For more than 100 years, publicly funded educational programs and services for adults have played critical roles in supporting communities of need and increasing opportunities for historically underserved individuals. In recent years, the discourse of equity has provided a new language to tell the story of adult education in Los Angeles, highlighting powerful connections to key social issues, such as human rights and racial justice.

For the Los Angeles Regional Adult Education Consortium (LARAEC)—comprising Burbank Unified School District, Culver City Unified School District, Los Angeles Community College District, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and Montebello Unified School District—the focus and discourse of equity began to influence regional collaboration efforts during the 2018–19 school year. Early examples included leaders from LARAEC member districts contributing to the development of CALPRO's Success for All Learners Through Equity training module, facilitating statewide webinars and communities of practice on equity, and advocating for equity metrics to inform consortium funding formulas and agency measures of effectiveness.

Although these efforts introduced the concept of educational equity into the regional dialogue, events in 2020 shifted the topic. In spring 2020, student enrollment and persistence data analysis revealed that students with the highest barriers to education—including individuals with low levels of English proficiency and residents of historically underserved communities—were being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. At the same time, protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd were creating a sense of urgency about addressing issues related to equal access to the law and racial justice. Informed by the data and inspired by the political climate, the LARAEC executive board chose to move from equity-informed dialogue to equity-driven action.

Equity-Informed Dialogue Leads to Equity-Driven Action

In fall 2020, the LARAEC executive board partnered with CALPRO to implement a three-phase approach to systematizing practices that promote racial equity.

■ Phase 1: A high-level discussion of key concepts related to equity and racial justice. Facilitated by CALPRO and open to the public, this discussion provided LARAEC executive team members with the opportunity to engage with key ideas to develop a vision for supporting equity throughout the region.

■ Phase 2: LARAEC member districts were invited to participate in CALPRO's Success for All Learners Through Equity training. Teams of classified, certified, and administrative personnel attended the 15-hour training program, which focused on topics such as implicit bias, cultural competency, and disaggregated data analysis. Teams also developed plans for promoting and advancing equity at their school sites.

■ Phase 3: Build long-term capacity for supporting equity action and awareness throughout the region. During this phase, key stakeholders from all member districts were invited to participate in a "train the trainers" series designed and delivered by AIR, with 95.2 percent of the participants identifying that the content applies to their work. Participants received specialized guidance on facilitating dialogue about equity and racial justice in their respective districts.

Los Angeles Unified School District

In the 2019–20 school year, the LAUSD superintendent required that approximately 120 district administrators attend a semester-long training program to improve racial equity and diversity within LAUSD schools. The program, the Race and Equity Leadership Academy, was offered in partnership with the University of Southern California.

> ### Take Action!
> Are you curious about cultural competence? Take the cultural competence self-assessment at http://rapworkers.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/cultural-competence-selfassessment-checklist-1.pdf.

LAUSD expanded its equity focus to include building equity-driven partnerships that have become a key strategic plan goal, strengthening equity and cultural

competence as an explicit professional development plan objective, creating space for equity-related dialogue as a site priority for principals, and promoting equity and access for all students as a primary duty listed on all leadership job postings.

During the 2020–21 academic year, participants representing each of LAUSD's adult schools participated in LARAEC's three-phase approach to promoting racial equity within their schools.

East Los Angeles Occupational Center

East Los Angeles Occupational Center (ELAOC) leadership chose to learn more about racial equity, diversity, and inclusion because of building tensions about race in 2020. ELAOC's student population is predominantly Hispanic, but leadership at the agency wanted to ensure that the school was inclusive of all races, genders, religions, and disabilities. Also, ELAOC leadership wanted to improve the overall understanding by faculty and staff of cultural proficiency. As such, in addition to the mandated LAUSD race and equity training, ELAOC participated in the CALPRO Success for All Learners Through Equity training.

Additional duties related to the COVID-19 pandemic slowed ELAOC's deeper dive into racial equity and diversity following CALPRO's training. However, the school's leadership team reported that ELAOC reacted positively to the idea of creating a diverse and inclusive school culture. After the CALPRO training, ELAOC continued working with the school's leadership team to fully comprehend the information learned from CALPRO and the LAUSD's mandated employee training on diversity. ELAOC is currently strategizing to deliver the content to more faculty and staff through monthly department meetings. ELAOC intends to continue raising consciousness, addressing implicit biases, and working to identify microaggressive[4] behaviors in classrooms and offices.

ELAOC's short-term goal is to ensure that all personnel complete the planned training and professional development sessions focused on learning about racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. Despite the high anxiety of keeping everyone safe from COVID-19, teachers and staff persisted through the pandemic. For a more equitable future, ELAOC envisions that their school will transform into a cultural center in which diversity is both celebrated and normalized. Leadership has continued discussions about being more intentional about celebrating racial

and cultural differences by promoting and spotlighting students via the school's website, newsletters, social media accounts and hosting events.

Venice Skills Center

The Venice Skills Center (VSC) fully supported and advocated for passing the Equity Is Justice 2021 Resolution by the LAUSD Board of Education (Los Angeles Unified School District 2021). With the passing of the resolution, each adult education school site now has a "navigator." This position was created in partnership with the City of Los Angeles to assist individuals with navigating all the various agencies and resources. Each navigator is assigned a unique population (e.g., veterans, returning citizens, and the homeless) to better understand these populations' unique needs and to work with related community-based organizations. As much as possible with the available resources, VSC translates communications, materials, and social media posts and is offering a new Spanish in the Workplace class for staff to better serve their Spanish-speaking English as a second language (ESL) students and community.

Even before completing the CALPRO Success for All Learners Through Equity training in 2020, VSC acknowledged that some students arrive at school needing more academic and socioemotional support than others (e.g., devices to complete coursework and community-based resources). Also, VSC was helping ESL students understand instructions in an unfamiliar language by using the new ESL Student Tools for Education Pathways, which serve as a unique orientation for VSC's ESL students. In its newsletters and social media, VSC regularly recognizes all cultural holidays and dates of importance. The students', staffs', and community's participation in gatherings and presentations includes Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, National Women's History Month, Gender Equality History Month, Ethnic Equality Month, and many other events.

VSC leadership chose to participate in the Success for All Learners Through Equity training because the evidence-based, cultural competence framework focused on implicit bias as related to adult education. This focus was meaningful and important to them. The administrator

> **Take Action!**
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> Participate in CALPRO's Success for All Learners Through Equity Training. Email calpro@air.org to inquire about scheduling training sessions.

also openly welcomed the opportunity to have staff learn how to become more conscious employees and citizens. Learning about the six elements of the cultural competence continuum was eye-opening for both leadership and staff. They shared that although it is easy to assume one might be culturally competent, it is just as easy to mistake awareness for competence or proficiency. The discussion and exercises about the continuum were a deeper dive into implicit bias that exposed growth opportunities. One participating VSC educator found the exercises to be thought provoking and required honest reflection before putting anything down on paper: "I revisited experiences that I hadn't thought of for many years, and I was able to see where matters could've been handled differently by myself that would've given way to collective growth."

VSC staff continue to use what they learned and plan to implement schoolwide implicit bias training. This training will be facilitated by the teachers and advisers who attended the CALPRO training. In addition, teachers are weaving the training into their professional learning communities.

VSC plans to create more targeted approaches in its work toward equity, including responding to several requests to use students' preferred names, not simply what is easier for English speakers. VSC also will continue to collect and use data to identify inequitable practices and policies that can be revised to better support a culturally competent learning environment. As one VSC leader said, "Equity isn't just a onetime action but an ongoing process that should be integrated into our classrooms, procedures, and policies."

LARAEC's Next Steps

In general, LARAEC's three-phase approach to advancing equity throughout Los Angeles was well received by personnel and contributed to significant changes in policy and practice. Targeted recruitment efforts for Phases 2 and 3—including direct emails, newsletter postings, and board meeting announcements—were led by the LARAEC District Office and supported by key leaders from each member district. As noted earlier, all member districts appreciated the opportunity to engage with relevant issues and chose to participate in the initiative.

The impact of LARAEC's three-phase approach has been significant. At the regional level, equity and racial justice concepts have become essential to the three-year regional planning process, informing critical data analysis and resource allocation discussions. Similarly, the focus and

discourse of equity have become integral to each member district.

LARAEC's three-phase approach succeeded in building equity awareness and promoting equity action by adapting to significant challenges, including COVID-19–related operational challenges and district-specific political challenges. With COVID-19, the primary challenge was finding ways to offer the training sessions while adhering to local health and safety protocols and respecting the unprecedented levels of time and energy that school personnel needed to commit to return-to-school efforts. Fortunately, CALPRO and AIR could leverage their expertise in developing and delivering online training to offer virtual learning opportunities and design them in ways that aligned meaningfully with existing work responsibilities. Most participants completed all sessions, and more than 94 percent found the course content to be effective. The other challenge was reconciling regional equity plans and activities with those that already existed at the district level. Member districts that overcame this challenge found creative and constructive ways to embrace both levels and integrate them into a comprehensive learning experience.

Equity is not a "state" that is achieved; it is a constantly and intentionally facilitated process. Moving forward, LARAEC will organize and support the model of train the trainers so that they can catalyze changes in policy and practice in their respective member districts. In addition, LARAEC will ensure that equity and social justice are at the center of the current three-year planning process by articulating clear core values, including diverse voices, and enlisting equity-minded facilitators. The goal will be to strengthen the equity connections among people, programs, and resources so that adult education can continue to provide movement for social and economic transformation throughout Los Angeles.

> ### Take Action!
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> Do you want to investigate equity of access and usage at your agency? Try out https://calpro-online.org/documents/Practice%20Peeling%20Back%20the%20Wallpaper.pdf.

Conclusion

Agencies can prepare staff for actions toward equity by examining the equity-focused actions possible in adult education programs and take actions that impact systemic barriers. When engaging in equity work, it is essential

to center efforts on the student experience. Students may have quite different life experiences from those of the teachers and staff at any agency. Students may be immigrants or current or future citizens, experiencing issues related to poverty or food insecurity, dealing with physical or learning disabilities, and so much more. No one can assume to know a student's lived experiences, even if they are of the same race or ethnicity. It is important to refer to data and hear from the students themselves to develop a deeper understanding of who they are and what their needs are. To gather more information about student needs, agencies can conduct surveys with existing students. Agencies also can look closer at their policies and practices to identify which students are using services and resources and couple that information with student surveys to identify equity gaps and work toward filling them. It is imperative for educators, as a group, to consider their own school and identify where forms of bias and discrimination may exist. This means asking challenging questions, such as the following: "Do minority students receive access to services and use them at the same rate as White students?" "Why or why not?" As mentioned earlier, achieving equity is not done once and then never revisited; it is not something that is achieved but is something to constantly and continuously work toward. California adult educators have a unique opportunity to have a significant impact on adult education equity because "as California goes, so goes the nation" (Delgado and Stefancic 1999, 1525).

Endnotes

[1] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB1159

[2] https://www.ca.gov/archive/gov39/2016/03/11/news19340/index.html

[3] https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2098

[4] Microaggression: a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group, such as a racial or ethnic minority.

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