

## **Toward Black Student Thriving in SFUSD: Understanding Racial Disparities and System Design**

### **Implementation Brief**

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**Spring 2024**

In September 2023 a group of SFUSD leaders and researchers from across the country came together to examine what was originally termed the “production of racial and ability stratification” in SFUSD with the purpose of ultimately co-designing solutions. Building on six months of preparation and funding received from a prestigious Spencer Foundation Vision Grant, the researchers and leaders initiated a full year of design-based work, digging deep into the system and the experiences of Black students to understand the district’s persistent racial disparities in discipline and special education placements. Jean Robertson, SFUSD’s Head of Special Education, and Stanford Professor Alfredo J. Artiles, have led the work, gathering SFUSD leaders from across the system and an interdisciplinary group of researchers with expertise on academic and behavioral supports, literacy/biliteracy, learning sciences, linguistic anthropology, technology and digital tools, systems transformation, design-based research, school psychology, racial disproportionality, and inclusive education. In this brief, we summarize the activities and content of this planning work. Broadly, early work generated a set of four focal themes, which included Black family partnerships, the precursors of racial disparities, district policies and procedures upholding anti-Blackness and whiteness, educational opportunity, and cultural responsiveness exemplified in bright spots around the district. By early winter 2024, the team prioritized two themes for deeper work:

- Black family partnerships
- Systems producing the precursors to racial disparities for Black students

### **Activities and Content Explored**

From September 2023 through January 2024, the team of SFUSD leaders and researchers (see Appendix A) met monthly, online and in two, 2-day in-person meetings. From the in-person launch meeting in September to the January 2024 online convening, the team explored [the original four themes](#). The group explored these themes by examining internal documentation; relevant research conducted to date in SFUSD ([summarized in a briefing packet](#)); group consultations and discussions comparing documentation with the experiences of district leaders and strategic focus groups, panels, and one-on-one consultations with Black leaders and other stakeholders (i.e., principals, teachers, other leaders).

The group convened in a second in-person meeting, over two days in February 2024. Building on the work done thus far, the team agreed to focus on two themes to generate a vision for Black students thriving in SFUSD: (a) Black family partnerships and (b) systems producing precursors to racial disparities for Black students. Through in-depth focus on these areas, our goal is to reduce racial disparities through the design of systems for Black students thriving. We subsequently detail each focal theme.

### ***Theme 1: Black Family Partnerships***

As described in [this document](#), Black parents are eager and engaged in building partnerships to support their children's education. However, families have reported feeling that there are insufficient meaningful opportunities to build sustainable partnerships centering their students. Black families have experienced a gap between district efforts to learn about their challenges and the lack of follow-up efforts to address them. This is reflected in past efforts that have stressed "fixing students" with little attention to staff's and district's anti-Black mindsets, actions, and systems. These experiences have led to involvement fatigue.

In addition, Black families feel that school and district personnel do not recognize their full humanity. Relatedly, these families feel their knowledge and expertise about their own children is regularly disregarded. Black families sense a lack of urgency to address racial disparities and other issues negatively impacting Black families. For instance, Black families see their children as disconnected from school and presumed as unsophisticated learners. Overall, Black families are stretched thin to continually represent Black family voices in various district structures. In brief, Black parents—the group most affected by racial disparities and other educational opportunity issues—have not experienced meaningful participation and shared governance in the district.

### ***Theme 2: Precursors to Racial Disparities for Black Students***

SFUSD has invested substantial resources, policies, and procedures to support students. For instance, SWPBIS, Restorative Practices, and CCTs have promised to address student learning and behavioral needs early and holistically. However, challenges and limitations have been identified that suggest substantial transformations are required beyond staff- and even school-level uptake. For instance, inconsistent implementation of CCT and SST procedures has been identified. Various documentation has foregrounded potential barriers, including limited understanding or knowledge of policies and procedures among general education staff and limited knowledge of special education referral procedures. Similarly, administrators, teachers, and staff often have limited command of the district's non-discrimination and equity policies and practices, resulting in Black students being found eligible for special education without evidence of SST involvement.

Data systems have also been identified as problematic. Existing systems provide minimal documentation of interventions and a lack of follow-up for recommendations. Because of limited data systems and standardized procedures, district-wide files are not consistently reflective of the staff efforts on behalf of the students and lack structures for supporting responsive, school-based work that draws on accurate, up-to-date student data.

### ***Next Steps***

Between now and June 2024, our team will engage in six workgroups composed of SFUSD leaders and researchers. Three workgroups target Black family partnerships: (1) Design of a shared governance system, (2) design of a partnership model grounded in the research evidence and positive experiences in SFUSD, and (3) design support systems for effective partnerships (e.g., capacity building mechanisms). The remaining three workgroups are concentrating on the precursors of racial disparities: (1) identification of principles/features of

effective systems of support/programs for Black students, grounded in both the research evidence and bright spots in SFUSD; (2) redesigning interventions and supports for students in general education to address the limitations identified in current systems (e.g., SSTs, CCTs); and (3) design data systems that offer timely feedback on support systems and school effectiveness to facilitate continuous improvement.

The project team is also producing descriptive analyses about aspects and dimensions covered in the workgroups. These analyses (e.g., contextual descriptions of schools with high racial disparities) will be distributed to all workgroups to enrich and inform their work. Ultimately, workgroups will produce memos with specific designs and recommendations. The memos will be curated and used to craft a larger, subsequent research grant through the Spencer Foundation that integrates the workgroups' input to test the designs in the district.

### **Appendix A** **Project Team**

- Alfredo J. Artiles, Stanford University
- Aydin Bal, University of Wisconsin, Madison
- Ja'Nya Banks, U.C. Berkeley
- Mildred Browne, Independent Consultant
- Miguel De Loza, SFUSD
- Margaret Farruggio, SFUSD
- Edward "Eddie" Fergus, Rutgers University
- Allison Firestone, SFUSD
- Lauren Katzman, Arizona State University
- Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez, Vanderbilt University
- Patricia Martinez-Alvarez, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Rebecca Neri, WestEd
- Mariana Pacheco, University of Wisconsin, Madison
- Luci Parker, Stanford University
- Thomas Philip, U.C. Berkeley
- Edward "Eddie" Rivero, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Jean Robertson, SFUSD
- Carlos Sandoval, WestEd
- Tesha Sengupta-Irving, U.C. Berkeley
- Laura Sterponi, U.C. Berkeley
- Amanda Sullivan, University of Minnesota
- Sepehr Vakil, Northwestern University
- Laura Wentworth, California Education Partners
- Michelle Wilkerson, U.C. Berkeley
- Shameeka Wilson, Stanford University