

Black students and families need more support — and they need it now. An unprecedented coalition dives in with a new LAUSD task force.

Mike Szymanski | October 9, 2017



A new LAUSD task force has formed to help close achievement gaps for black youths.
(Courtesy: LAUSD)

An unprecedented coalition of community members, educators, parents, and students at LA Unified have convened a new task force to urgently address why African-American youth continue to have the lowest test scores and why black students and families continue to feel ignored by the education system.

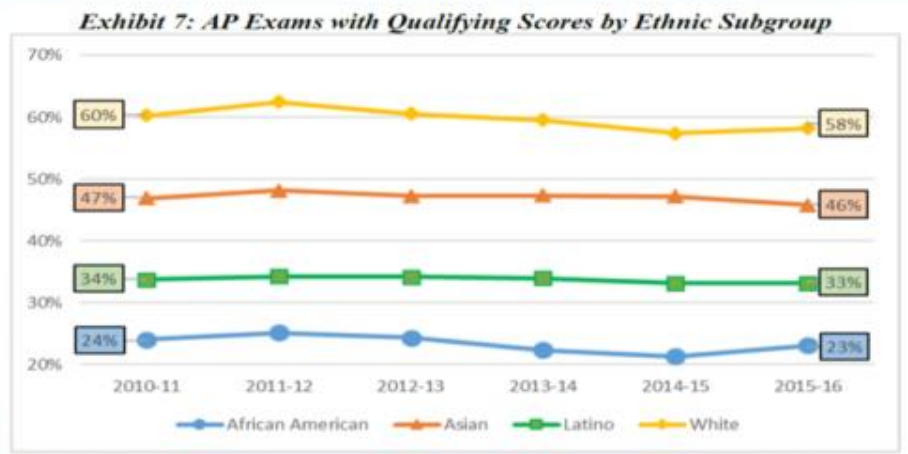
Black students persist in having LA Unified's highest rates of dropouts and suspensions. They are most likely to be identified as needing special education services, and they are least likely to be identified as gifted, district administrators reported at the task force's first meeting.

"This group has been the most underserved, and we need to be audacious when we take on this challenge," said Robert Whitman, special projects director of the district's Access, Equity, and

Acceleration Department, who convened the new Advisory for African American Students task force last month.

Whitman said that while it may be widely known that economically disadvantaged black youth are not achieving high scores, it is not limited to just the poor. “What stands out to me is that even the non-economically disadvantaged black students are not achieving in English and math. And there is a disproportionate amount of discretionary suspension among black youth, and black students and their families do not view themselves as valued stakeholders.”

AP Exams with Qualifying Scores by Ethnicity



As of June, 2015-16

Of the 21,801 black students in the district today, 17,445 students — 80 percent — are identified as economically disadvantaged.

Black students have been declining as a percentage of LA Unified’s population for years. In 1980, they made up 23 percent of the district’s students. A decade ago in 2007, it was 11 percent, and this year it is 8.4 percent. Latinos make up nearly three-quarters of LA Unified, at 74 percent this year, compared to 9.8 percent white and 6 percent Asian.

“You don’t need to tell me the test scores. I know who performed at the bottom, and I know what schools they came from. It’s been the same for 35 years,” said the only black member of the school board, George McKenna, who kicked off the meeting. He noted that if schools don’t improve, students and families will flee from their neighborhood schools and seek alternatives such as private schools or independent charters — or just drop out. “If our people don’t like something, they will avoid it, and that goes for the schools.”

About 50 mostly African-American educators attended the Sept. 28 meeting on the 19th floor of LA Unified’s Beaudry headquarters, including from UCLA, the Black Community Clergy and Labor Alliance, the teachers and administrators unions, the Gathering of Great Minds, school board members’ staff, and members of six different LA Unified departments.

- ***Read the entire report presented at the first meeting.***

Despite this renewed effort, some parent representatives remain skeptical.

Jacquelyn Smith Conkleton, a foster child advocate who has six foster children and served as vice chair of the Community Advisory Committee, said that she served on past committees and nothing ended up being done. “We have had reports and plans that have not been implemented,” Conkleton said. “There are a lot of smart black people in this room, and I hope we can get things done this time.”

Connectedness to School

Exhibit 32. Percentage of Students Who Agreed with Questions about Being Treated with Respect by Teachers in 2015-16

By Grade Level ■ = Most Negative ■ = Most Positive

Grade Levels By Ethnicity	African Amer.		Asian		Latino		White		All	
	2014-15	2015-16	2014-15	2015-16	2014-15	2015-16	2014-15	2015-16	2014-15	2015-16
Elementary	80	81	90	91	88	89	89	90	88	89
Middle	65	70	83	87	82	86	78	82	80	85
High	64	68	81	84	84	87	73	77	82	85

The task force identified nine board resolutions and policy bulletins that date back to 2001 that are still in the works and aimed at helping the lowest achieving students — some that highlight blacks specifically, and some that don’t.

That was one frustration of a parent representative on the task force. In the past, the district has only approved projects “with a wider focus, so that every time we bring forth an idea (to help black students) we have to include and carry other groups,” said Zella Knight, who has worked with the district for more than two decades.

Angela Hewlett-Bloch, administrator for the Access, Equity, and Acceleration Unit, said the district is highly motivated to implement the task force’s recommendations when they present them to the school board by January or February.

“We are as frustrated as you, and we need to put ourselves out there and see if there are things we can replicate and move forward,” Hewlett-Bloch said. “There are no guarantees, but we have great support if we are focused and realistic in what we put forth.”

Chief Academic Officer Frances Gipson also reflected the commitment from Superintendent Michelle King’s office. “We are talking about innovation in how to change the lives of African-American students, not to change one month from now, not one year from now, but today. Let’s be thinking what we can change today.”

The 2017 test scores released last month showed that while African-Americans made the largest gains, they still fall far behind all other ethnic groups. Of the eight racial and ethnic categories on the tests, African-Americans scored the lowest.

Civil rights activist and columnist for the Los Angeles Sentinel Larry Aubry, who is on the task force, reflected some of the data brought up at the meeting in a column he posted last week. “Schools with substantially Black student population in the Los Angeles Unified School District are, without question, first among those most in need; Black parents and their local school communities must constantly demand equitable funding for their schools.”

As a sub-group, blacks improved 2 percentage points in English language arts and 1 percentage point in math in this year’s test scores. But the numbers are still low.



(Courtesy: LAUSD)

In math, 18.91 percent of the black students tested met or exceeded standards — that’s half the district’s average — compared to 23.65 of Latino or Hispanic students, 70.29 percent of Asians, 57.28 percent of whites, and 56.25 percent of students with two or more races. For economically disadvantaged black students, 15.94 percent met or exceeded standards.

In the English language arts tests, 29.53 percent of the black students met or exceeded standards, compared to 33.66 for Latinos, 73.46 percent for Asians, 66.13 percent for whites, and 65.14 percent for students with two or more races. Among economically disadvantaged black youths, 25.63 percent met or exceeded standards.

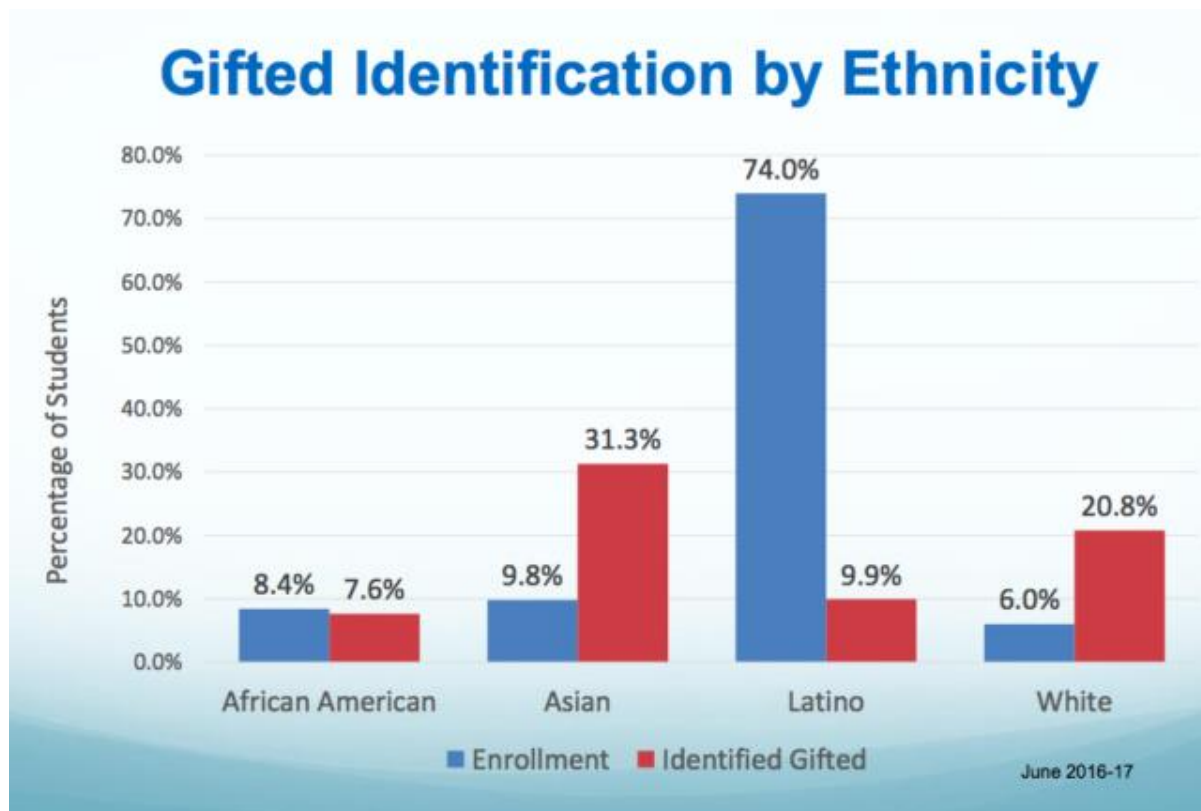
Overall, LA Unified’s scores crept up so minimally that this is the first year they reported the scores in decimals. In English language arts, 39.55 percent of LA Unified students tested proficient, while 29.86 percent did in math.

The statistics were generally the same in independent charter schools, where African-Americans posted the lowest scores in the 2017 data of all ethnic groups. For example, at ICEF Inglewood Middle Charter Academy, where 90 percent of students are black, 5 percent met math standards.

The task force stressed that education needs to start early, pointing out low attendance for blacks in pre-K classes. Younger black students lost ground in this year’s test scores. For example, a year ago 22 percent of economically disadvantaged black students in third grade were proficient in math, but this year in fourth grade, only 17.59 met the same criteria.

McKenna said the district has yet to figure out how to replicate successful school models, and he doesn’t think the federal government will help in the effort. “The country doesn’t care, if they cared then the White House wouldn’t be what it is now,” McKenna said. “But if we do something right this time, with this group of people, then the state and country will take notice.”

Tyrone Howard, the associate dean for Equity and Inclusion at UCLA, said the low achievement among black youth is “a stubborn and unrelenting problem” and he suggested that there are mindsets in the country that show bias even among educators that black children cannot learn. “Black children do have the willingness to learn, and we need to call out anti-black racism,” Howard said.



He said the district needs to “have a serious conversation about equity” and that the students may “need something a little bit more.” He also said the district must consider trauma among the community and consider mental health issues.

“I have had many parents and grandparents say that all they have to do is go to church,” said Howard, noting that some families are reluctant to consider mental health solutions to help with learning.

Whitman identified 13 things lacking for support of black students, including higher-quality instruction, lack of early interventions, progress monitoring, cultural proficiency, and adequate professional development.

Allan Kakassy, who is on the task force and a member of the district’s Commission on Human Relations, Diversity, & Equity, said he sees this group as a major positive step in helping the most disenfranchised students in the district. At previous school board meetings, he has spoken

during public comments and urged all board members to attend. Four board members had representatives at the task force's first meeting.



Allan Kakassy encourages board members to attend the meeting.

“This is using data to target special attention to those district students who are underserved and underperforming and underachieving, not limited to African-African students but including English Learners, foster care, homeless, American Indian and special education. The goal is to provide these students with an improved educational experience, hopefully leading to high school graduation and successful achievement of a college degree or some other additional education or training required for their career choice,” he said in an interview.

Kakassy added, “It is our ethical and moral imperative that these students deserve and need this additional attention from our district and provide full, equal access to a quality education.”

The task force's next meeting is Oct. 26 when they plan to diagnose causes and develop what they called “a theory of action.”