



Will \$4 Billion in New Spending Make a Difference? Narrowing Achievement Gaps in Los Angeles

Progress and Inequality as LAUSD Implements Local Control Funding



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Summary

Students in Los Angeles learn more today than did their peers almost a generation ago. But huge disparities in achievement persist – whether gauged among ethnic, linguistic, or social-class groups. This report unpacks the various forces that explain this steady progress, along with dynamics that render inequities across kids so difficult to budge.

Inequality has long preoccupied civic leaders, educators, and families. In 1909, the Civic Association of Los Angeles pressed for penny lunches after teachers complained of hungry children, many coming from the city's "foreign section," populated by Asian and European immigrants. The chief of public health pointed to Mexican youngsters as "very prone... to a severe form of tuberculosis, and this usually attacks the child with poor nutrition."¹

Fast forward to 2014, we see students achieving at higher levels – at least in terms of basic reading and math skills – than pupils 15 years earlier. Yet wide disparities in learning persist between students of color and their better-off White peers. And pupils differ among social classes within ethnic groups. To address this pattern of uneven achievement, the L.A. Unified School District (LAUSD) Board approved in 2014 a measure targeting fresh resources to the low-achieving students who generated this new funding from Sacramento. Four years into Governor Jerry Brown's effort to narrow disparities – and \$4 billion later in the case of Los Angeles – the District has mounted over 40 separate programs to lift these pupils, while only a small slice of these new dollars carefully flow to intended pupils.

Why is progress on reducing disparities so slow to arrive? Why does the political will and institutional capacity to articulate effective strategies remain so scarce? How might LAUSD better focus on fairly distributing these new resources? These questions motivate this report.

Reasons for Optimism

LAUSD has enjoyed discernible gains in pupil achievement over the past generation. Low-performing students have shown the most progress, while average test scores and

gains for peers in better-off parts of the district have climbed as well. Gains in learning have been stronger when gauged by state tests, compared with the more rigorous federal assessment. But along multiple benchmarks, we detail how student learning curves in reading and mathematics are steeper on average than 15 years ago. Yet sharp disparities across racial and social-class groups persist.

LAUSD's leadership has displayed recurring interest in narrowing these inequities in who benefits from schooling. And resources arrived from Sacramento to address the problem, beginning in the fall of 2013, with Gov. Brown's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). This program brings

almost \$1.1 billion in new funding to LAUSD each year, generated by the District's count of children who come from poor families, qualify as English learners, reside in foster care settings or remain homeless.

We estimate that this new funding pushes per pupil spending in LAUSD well above levels observed prior to the 2008 Great Recession. Yet our analysis reveals that, alone, the District's episod-

ic commitment to lifting poor students, along with new dollops of ample funding remain insufficient for getting the job done. About four in five students fall under the state's types of low-achieving students, generating new funding, while LAUSD's ameliorative strategy remains blurry, scarcely informed by evidence on what programs work.

Economic and Demographic Drivers of Inequality

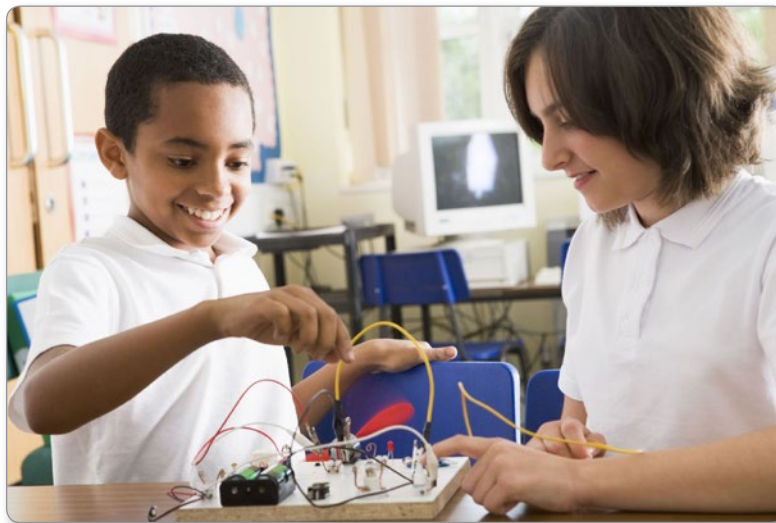
Schools cannot do it alone. It's a common refrain from educators, who rightfully point to family poverty and class disparities as factors contributing to the academic performance of children. Yet as socioeconomic forces complicate educators' efforts to lift achievement, recent trends show how schools play an important role in promoting upward mobility across L.A.



¹ Raftery, J. (1992, p.39). Land of fair promise: Politics and reform in Los Angeles schools, 1885-1941. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

In examining the overarching forces that constrain or enhance the efficacy of schools, we discovered good news and a pair of worrisome trends:

- ▶ The education levels of Latina women – who inhabit a rising share of neighborhoods in LAUSD – have soared over the past quarter-century. This highlights how the long-term provision of quality schooling can ease a so-called “structural” constraint.
- ▶ With rising levels of education and acculturation, birth rates of women have declined dramatically in many parts of the District. This likely contributes to the climbing levels of literacy observed among their children over the past generation.
- ▶ Differing layers of social classes – marked by huge gaps in wages and housing costs for the working poor and true middle class – have remained largely stable over the past generation. Many young Latinos have experienced upward mobility, but the distribution of income and jobs has failed to become more equitable.
- ▶ Education interest groups – from small nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to well-heeled foundations – grow more fractured in their strategies for lifting schools. The good news is that a widening count of civic leaders, community organizations, reform groups, and funders express a deep commitment to addressing inequities. Still, after the late 1990s key civic leaders and foundations largely gave up on improving schools from within LAUSD’s bureaucratic apparatus.



These telling forces may be considered “structural” – enduring and difficult to alter in the short run. At the same time, long-term gains in Latino attainment stem from the steady work of educators over the past two generations. The disunity of education interest groups is not inevitable. Fresh funding from Sacramento aids a fluid period that could spur greater unity – if LAUSD squarely tackles its structural deficit and conserves resources to attack inequality.

Institutional Capacity – Can LAUSD Focus on Narrowing Achievement Gaps?

These stiff forces do constrain the District’s capacity to narrow achievement gaps. At the same time, LAUSD leaders –

along with the interest groups that push them – offer just episodic interest or capacity to reduce inequities. Important yet distracting pressures arise each day, from covering downstream pension costs to negotiating teacher salaries. It’s proven difficult for the LAUSD Board and superintendent to pursue a pro-equity agenda with a steady hand.

This report – following a review of the economic, political and demographic forces at play – argues that LAUSD could rekindle progress in reducing disparities by focusing on three strategies:

- ▶ *Define fungible dollars, focus on reducing disparities in school spending.* Despite the Board’s own Equity Is Justice

Resolution, they have approved three budgets (beginning in 2013-14) that earmark just 6% of the District’s total resources to lift low-performing students via a disparate array of initiatives.

One recent superintendent, Ray Cortines, argued that rehiring staff lost in the Great Recession’s wake should be the highest priority. The bulk of the District’s \$1.1

billion in fresh annual funding (generated by low-achieving pupils) now supports this restoration, along with covering the rising costs of special education. While more adults on campuses may help, it doesn’t make for an incisive set of carefully tracked programs, pinpointing what’s working to boost achievement.

- ▶ *Identify school-level programs that improve teaching and learning inside schools.* The District’s identified “investment in the targeted student population” (TSP), the 6% slice of the entire budget, is allocated to over 40 program initiatives or new staff. These range from pro-equity efforts, such as new counselor posts, greater access to UC-eligible “A-to-G courses” and restorative justice efforts, to refilling assistant principal positions and dollars for additional custodians.

What’s lacking are core initiatives that aim to improve teaching, school climate, and student learning. The causal reasoning between many of these spending categories and raising achievement seems tenuous. Nor could we identify any unit within LAUSD that holds the authority and technical capacity to track the effects of these many programs inside schools, either to improve instruction and teacher relationships, or to lift student achievement.

► *Carve out common ground* among education interests and reform advocates. It's not surprising that District leaders head off in varying directions when pro-equity groups, labor unions, and foundation officials pursue their own disparate strategies to attack inequality.

That said, encouraging cases of cooperative strategies have unfolded over the past generation. This includes the Belmont Zone of Choice, which united pro-charter school advocates with equity-minded community groups. Setting a higher minimum wage for support staff came about after labor unions, equity advocates, and former superintendent John Deasy rallied behind the idea. But other policy debates, including the radical expansion of charter schools, illustrate a parting of the ways that may diffuse political energy behind fair public schools.

Overall, Gov. Brown's infusion of fresh resources offers an unprecedented opportunity to carefully experiment and identify effective strategies inside schools. We are halfway toward the governor's \$8 billion in fresh aid for LAUSD, explicitly aimed at narrowing disparities in learning.

We show that structural constraints are slow to move, but they are not immutable. What's most pressing, it seems to us, is strengthening LAUSD's internal capacity and determination. Educators have demonstrated they can raise the literacy and math skills of their students, gains that have accumulated over time to boost the upward mobility of young graduates. Greater progress in narrowing gaps now requires focus determination and organizational leadership to track what's working inside schools. Otherwise, educators risk wasting at least \$8 billion in once-hopeful public support.

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1. Tempered Optimism: The Context for Narrowing Achievement Gaps

Reasons abound for renewed optimism across the vast Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Student achievement has inched upward over the past 12 years, even when pegged to rigorous federal standards. More pupils take challenging courses, a rising share graduate from high school. A growing set of small, largely autonomous pilot schools fosters cohesive relationships among students, teachers, and many parents.¹ A vibrant network of charter



schools sparks pedagogical innovation and, while evidence remains mixed, it appears that many charter students outperform their peers attending traditional public schools.²

Despite these upbeat trends, gaps in learning have barely budged in L.A. over the past generation, separating pupils defined by ethnic, linguistic, or social-class differences. The District's lowest achieving youngsters displayed the most robust growth about a decade ago, as we detail below. But this progress towards equity has stalled in recent years, revealed by the biennial federal assessment of student learning within LAUSD.

disparities across California. This effort, initiated in the 2013-14 school year, will pump a fresh \$67 billion into California's schools over eight years, and specifically aims to lift children raised in poor or non-English speaking families.³

LAUSD will spend about \$4 billion in new LCFF funding by the end of the coming school year (2016-17) – dollars generated by the District's count of pupils falling under the so-called target student population (TSP).⁴ State budget statutes require that educational services be expanded for

these “weighted” students in proportion to the additional revenue they generate for their local district.⁵ About four in five LAUSD students fall under one or more of these categories, generating additional state revenue for the District.

Yet it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, fresh LCFF dollars will shape student achievement across the District. Can LAUSD – building from its recent momentum – continue to raise student achievement overall and begin to narrow sharp disparities in children's learning?

We argue that the \$1.1 billion in new yearly funding offers a rare opportunity for LAUSD to address persisting disparities. But to make real progress, stakeholders must tackle the challenges that constrain the District's capacity to design and implement a pro-equity agenda. This report examines major forces – demographic, economic, and institutional – that operate across L.A. in ways that complicate the District's efforts to lift students, strategies backed by hard evidence.

This report unfolds in four sections. First, we detail LAUSD trends in student achievement over the past decade and a half. Second, we outline three key cornerstones for what a durable pro-equity agenda might include – if District leaders can rise to the challenge. Third, we discuss the demographic, economic, and institutional constraints that impinge on efforts to advance fairness across schools. Fourth, we conclude with a short set of pragmatic next steps that might be taken by District leaders and key stakeholders.



1 Fuller, Waite, Chao, & Benedicto (2014).

2 Shin, Fuller, & Dauter (2015).

3 The Legislative Analyst's Office (2014) provides a detailed description of how Local Control Funding works, including its focus on narrowing student achievement gaps.

4 Four categories of students are weighted to raise state allocations to local school districts under Gov. Brown's LCFF program: pupils from low-income families, those with limited English proficiency, children who are homeless or reside in foster homes.

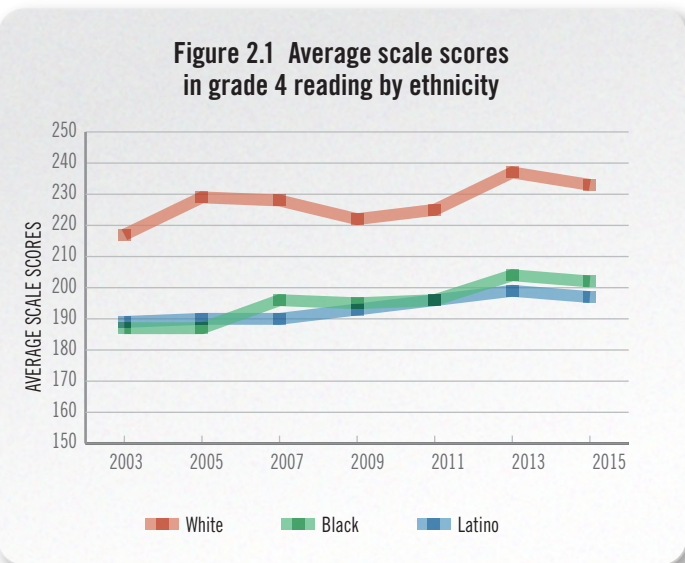
5 See California state education code section 42238.07, effective July 1, 2013, and subsequent regulations approved by the state Board of Education.

2. Learning Climbs, while Disparities Persist

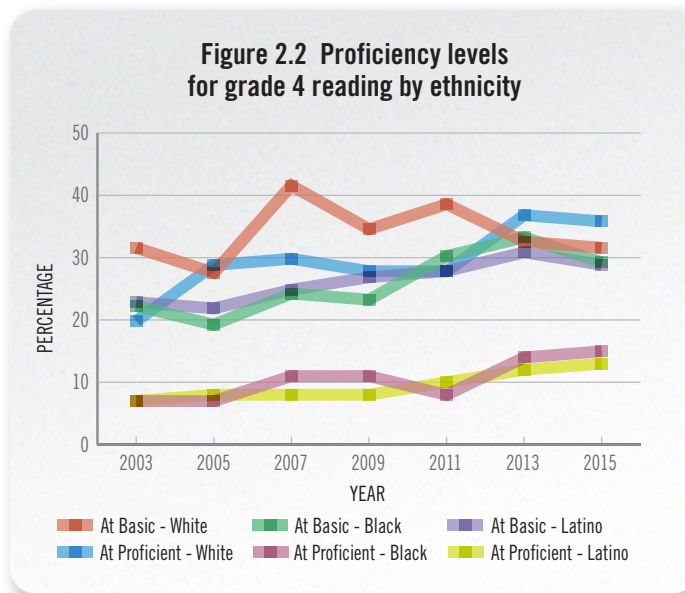
First the good news: Learning among LAUSD students, at least among fourth- and eighth-graders, has climbed on average for nearly a generation, going back to 2003 when tracked by the federal government's rigorous National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This section focuses on these achievement trends in reading and mathematics. Similar, yet more modest, gains have been observed among middle-school students districtwide.

Figure 2.1 displays the upward trend of scale scores in reading for White, Black, and Latino fourth graders, although slip-page did occur in 2015. The magnitude of these gains is modest, given the uneven progress seen when NAEP cut-points are applied that define a basic or proficient level of reading skills (Figure 2.2). Still, gains remain discernible for more than a decade.

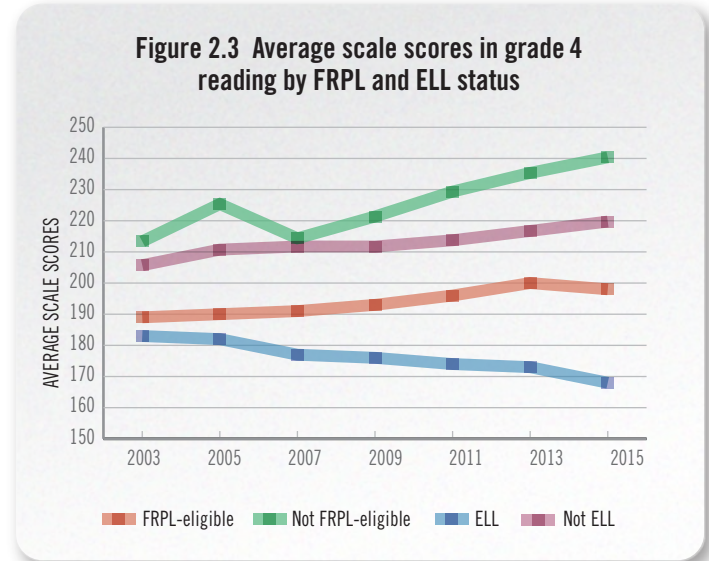
What's worrisome is that little progress occurred in narrowing wide disparities in reading performance among social-class or language groups (Figure 2.3). We see that scale scores actually fell for English language learners (ELLs) between 2003 and 2015. A portion of this may be due to changes in how ELLs were classified by the District. But similar disparities exist between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (FRPL), compared with more advantaged peers, whose family income makes them ineligible for these lunch subsidies.



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).

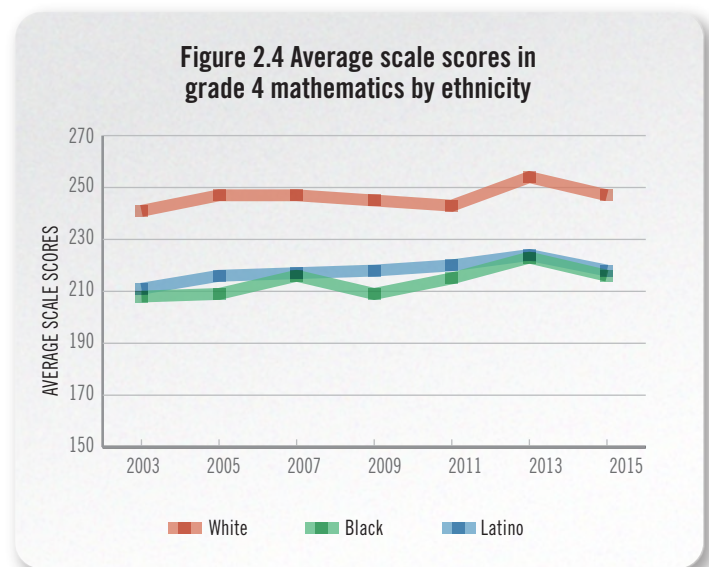


Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).



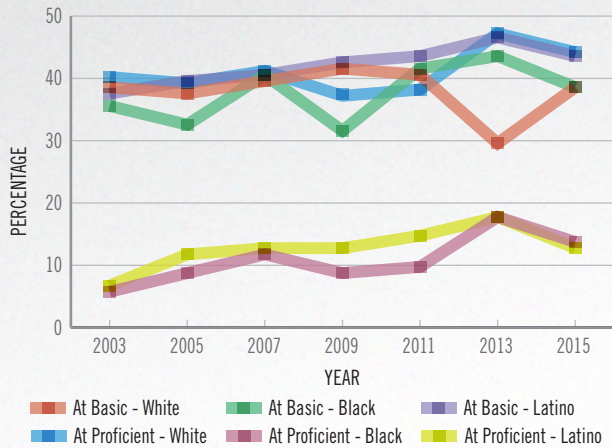
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).

Basic patterns for mathematics look similar when gauged by NAEP scores over 2003 to 2015. As shown in Figure 2.4, average scale scores for White students were consistently higher than those for Black and Latino students. Similar to reading results, only small fractions of Black and Latino students scored at "proficient" levels in math (Figure 2.5).



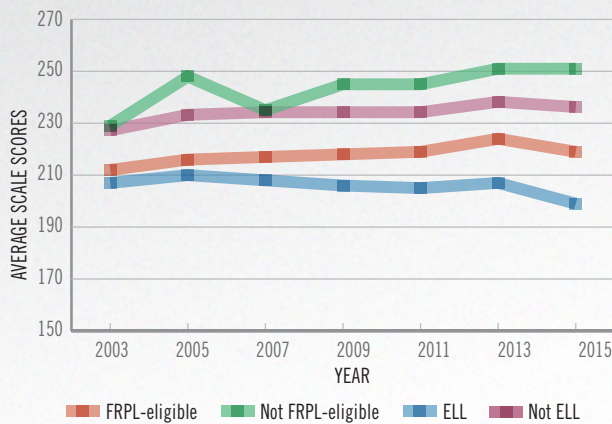
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).

Figure 2.5 Proficiency levels in grade 4 mathematics by ethnicity



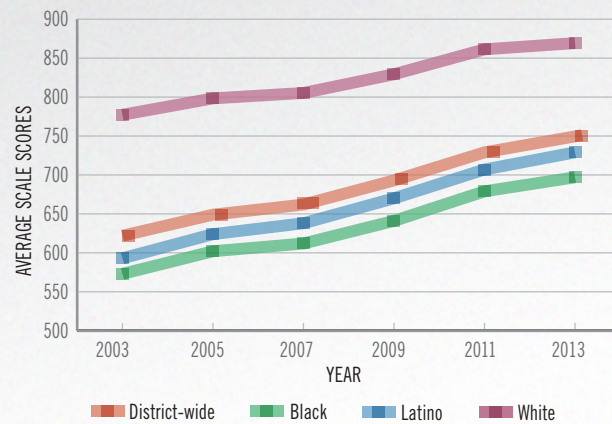
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).

Figure 2.6 Average scale scores in grade 4 mathematics by FRPL and ELL status



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (2015).

Figure 2.7 California Academic Performance Index (API) scores by student ethnicity

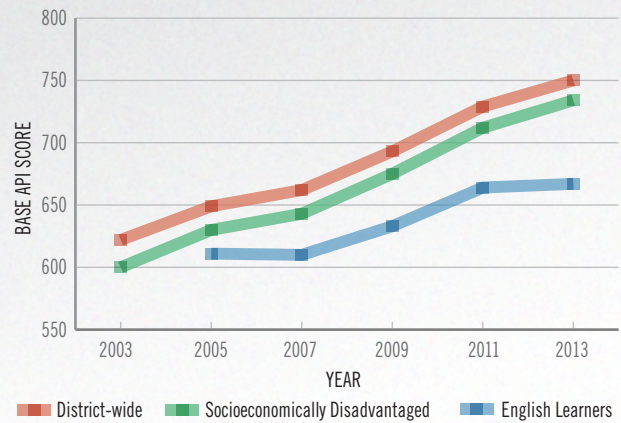


Source: Berkeley analysis of data from the California State Department of Education (2015).

Again, we see that average scale scores in mathematics for English language learners and those eligible for free and reduced-price lunches are consistently lower than scores for both native-English speakers and economically better-off students (Figure 2.6).

More buoyant trends appear when gauging progress along California's earlier Academic Performance Index (API). Figures 2.7 and 2.8 display similar gains in scores, combining learning in math and English language arts (ELA), under the old API. Discernible progress does appear over the period, although White students in LAUSD continue to far outperform their Black and Latino peers. And White students have consistently scored at higher levels than the District average.

Figure 2.8 API scores by socioeconomic and english learner status



Source: Berkeley analysis of data from the California Department of Education (2015).

Scores were persistently higher, on average, than scores for poor students and English language learners (Figure 2.8). In addition, the API system awarded incentive points to students deemed basic or below basic. Unlike the federal NAEP exam, teachers and District leaders considered the states tests tied to a school's API as high-stakes assessments, since districts were held accountable on this gauge. Thus, the API was likely more sensitive to "teaching to the test," one reason why many place more faith in federal NAEP scores to track progress in learning over time.

We report below how LAUSD schools serving the lowest achieving students displayed the strongest progress in the early 2000s, although this momentum toward equity faded and never appeared in sustained fashion when gauged by the NAEP barometer.

Differences and Disparities – Pupil Composition, Achievement, and Teacher Qualities

We know that family background and certain qualities of schools conspire to drive variation in pupil achievement.

What's so encouraging is how student performance has climbed overall within LAUSD despite high rates of child poverty and non-English home languages. At the same time, trends in family demographics, student composition, and economic change may help to explain steady progress or the persistence of stubborn disparities in learning.

Figure 2.9A Percentage of elementary students whose parents attained some college or more by API quintile, 2002-03 to 2012-13

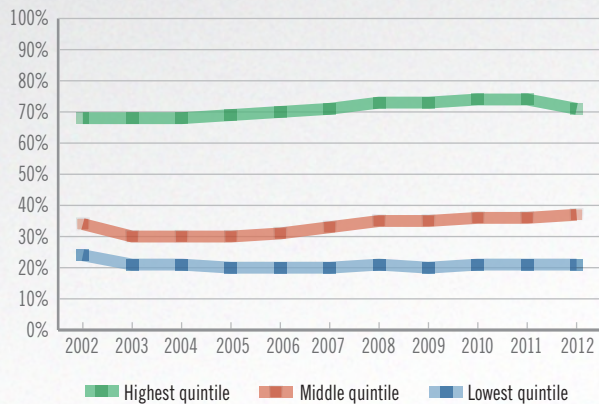
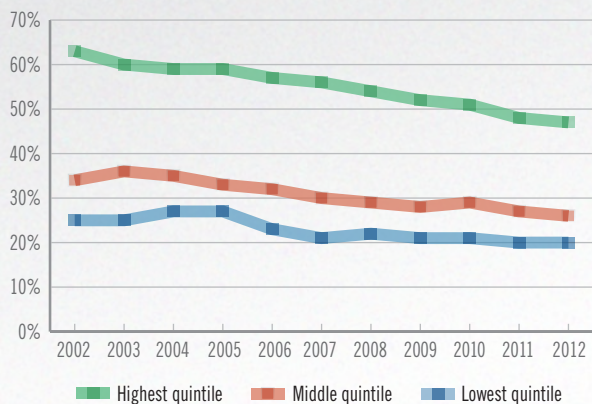


Figure 2.9B Percentage of high school students whose parents attained some college or more by API quintile, 2002-03 to 2012-13



To better identify the underlying causes of pupil progress, along with wide variation in achievement levels, we can ask, What characterizes schools where student achievement dips lower or climbs to higher levels? Does the teaching force look different in schools that host higher achieving students? In other words, have particular kinds of teachers and schools sparked more robust growth?

Variation in Student Demographics and Achievement

Let's turn first to how student composition has varied between schools that show historically low versus high

performance. We can also observe change in student composition over the period 2002-03 to 2012-13 based on data shared by the District. Then, we turn to teacher attributes, again splitting schools by how well their students did on standardized tests (the core driver of the API), comparing schools with low versus high achievers. Our analysis pertains to traditional public schools and excludes early learning centers, continuation high schools, and charter schools.

We begin by splitting elementary and high schools into quintiles based on their API scores in 2002-03, the baseline year for this analysis. That is, all elementary schools were ranked from the lowest to the highest API, then split into five groups, each with an equal number of schools.

Let's begin by looking at how pupil characteristics vary across these groups of schools. Panel A of Figure 2.9 displays differing levels of parent education for elementary pupils, comparing those in schools that fall in the lowest one-fifth in terms of API scores at baseline (2002-03) relative to schools located in the middle one-fifth and top one-fifth of LAUSD elementary schools. Just one-fourth (24%) of the parents of children attending schools in the lowest quintile in 2002-03 had completed some college, compared with 68% of parents in the highest performing quintile of schools. These gaps in parental attainment remained quite stable through 2012-13.

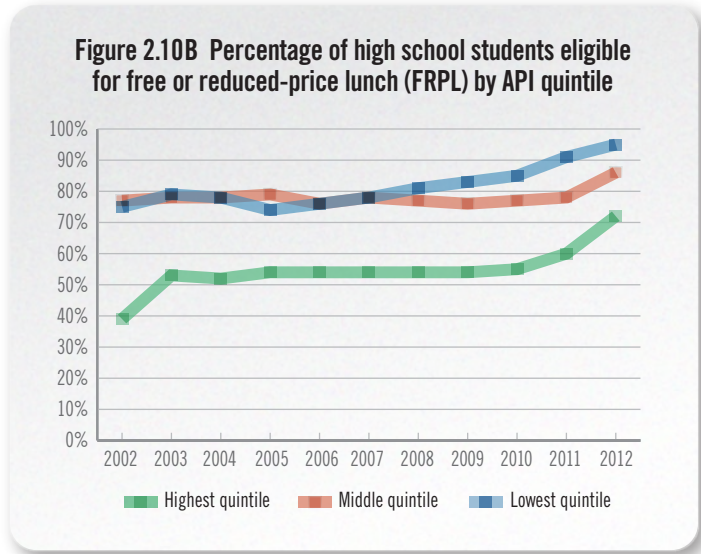
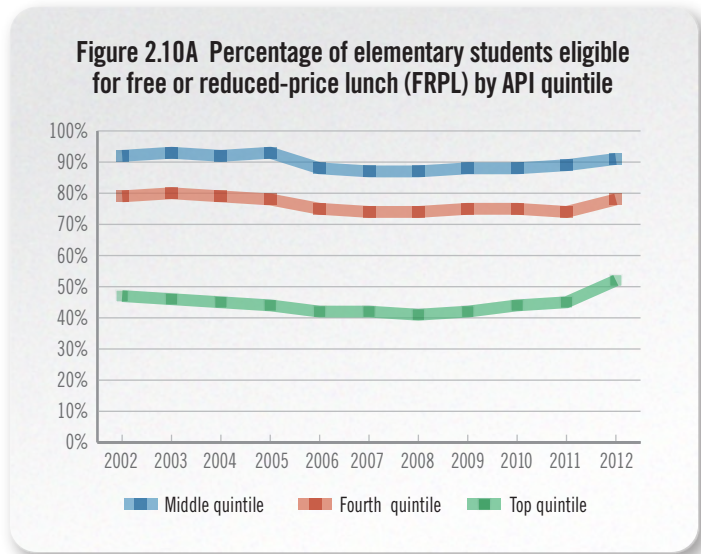
The same plot appears for high school students in panel B. The wide differences in parental education remain quite vivid. In addition, parental education declined on average over the time period. The share of parents with some college for the top quintile of high schools fell from 63% to 47% between 2002-03 and 2012-13. Among parents whose children attended schools in the middle API quintile, 34% reported some college in 2002-03, falling to 26% in 2013-14. Overall, the family composition of LAUSD high schools became less well-off, at least for this marker of social class. This suggests that the upward mobility of many Latino parents, detailed below, may coincide with moving out of LAUSD.

The declining social-class status of families can be seen when tracking the share of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, at least among high schools. Let's first look at elementary students split by their school's API performance (Figure 2.10, panel A). We display the middle, fourth, and top quintiles in terms of API level, given that shares of students who are FRPL eligible is quite similar for the lower three quintiles.

Ninety-two percent (92%) of middle-quintile students were eligible for lunch subsidies in 2002-03, a share that

remains constant through 2012-13. About three-fourths of all elementary students in the fourth quintile were FRPL-eligible across the period. But pupils attending schools in the top quintile come from somewhat better-off families: about half are not FRPL-eligible across the time-series.

The pattern for high schools differs, as we again see rising shares of pupils from low-income families populating campuses over time (panel B). We do see increasing shares of pupils becoming FRPL-eligible in the lowest quintile, rising from three-fourths in 2002-03 to 91% in 2012-13. Pupils in middle-quintile schools remain steady in terms of eligibility for subsidized lunches. But the share of youths eligible in the top quintile climbs markedly, from two in five students in 2002-03 (39%) to three in five (60%) by 2012-13.

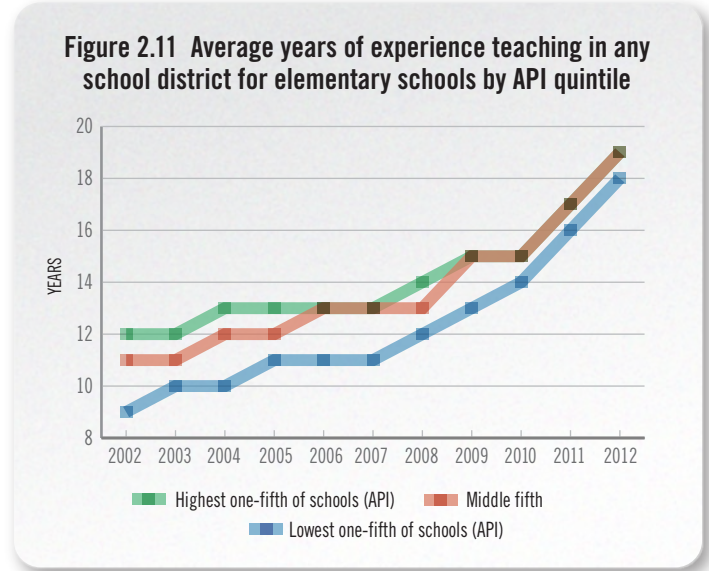


Differences in Teacher Characteristics

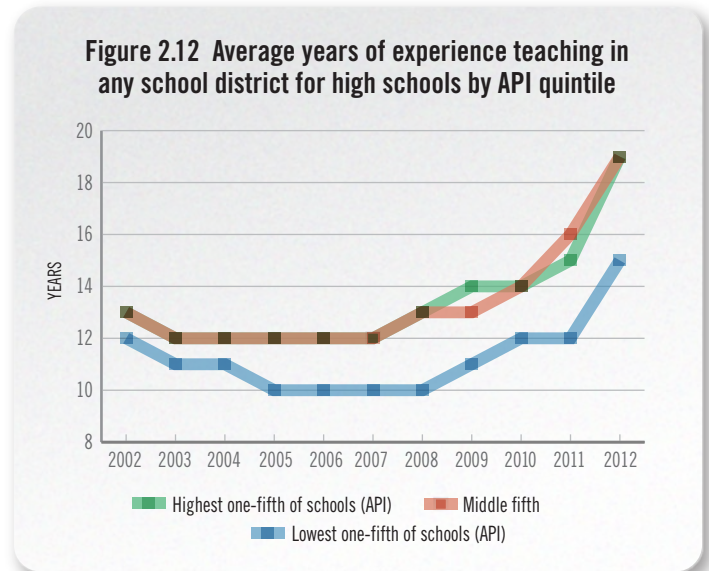
Beyond the effect of family background, the attributes and practices of teachers further contribute to student achievement. We begin by displaying basic characteristics

of teachers for each baseline API quintile. Remember that correlation does not necessarily imply causation.

We see that teacher experience has been historically greater in elementary schools that serve higher performing students (Figure 2.11). Teachers in the lowest API-performing schools had nine years of experience in 2002-03, compared with 12 years of experience in the highest performing one-fifth of District schools. But this gap largely closed by 2012-13.



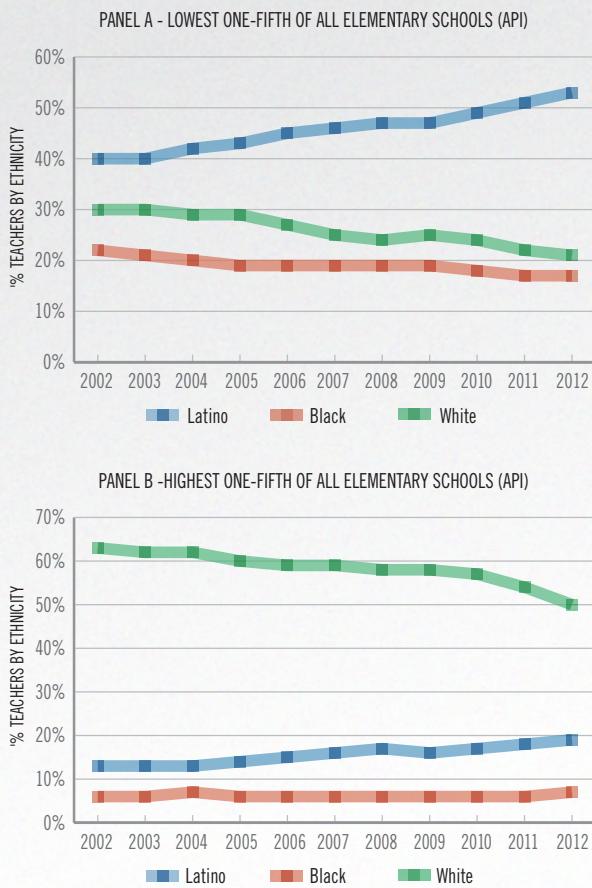
In contrast, the gap in teacher experience has grown wider at the high school level when splitting schools into quintiles based on their API performance. Figure 2.12 shows that average levels of experience were quite similar in 2002-03 among the first, third, and fifth quintiles (lowest, middle, and highest API scores). But by 2012-13, teachers working in the lowest quintile of schools reported 15 years of teaching experience, compared with 19 years in the middling and highest API schools.



Next, we report on variation in the ethnic composition of teachers within low-to-high API schools. Figure 2.13 displays these breakdowns for the lowest one-fifth of schools (panel A), compared with the highest quintile of schools. The share of teachers, Latino, in the lowest fifth of all elementary schools climbed from 40% to 53% between 2002-03 and 2012-13; shares of White and Black teachers fell in corresponding fashion.

In contrast, White teachers continue to predominate in elementary schools that serve high-achieving students. This share fell – from 62% to 50% – as the District’s workforce became more Latino overall (panel B). Yet White teachers, who may enjoy greater seniority, appear to be migrating out to schools with higher-achieving students. The ethnic composition of high school teachers offers a differing picture. Figure 2.14 shows movement toward a quite diverse workforce in schools that serve low-achieving students (the lowest quintile). The share of teachers, White, in these schools has declined from 38% to 25% over the period (panel A). Meanwhile, the District has lost Black teachers and recruited a rising share of Latino teachers. The percentage of all teachers who are of Asian heritage has remained quite steady at about 10%.

Figure 2.13 Ethnic composition of teachers in elementary schools with lowest and highest API scores

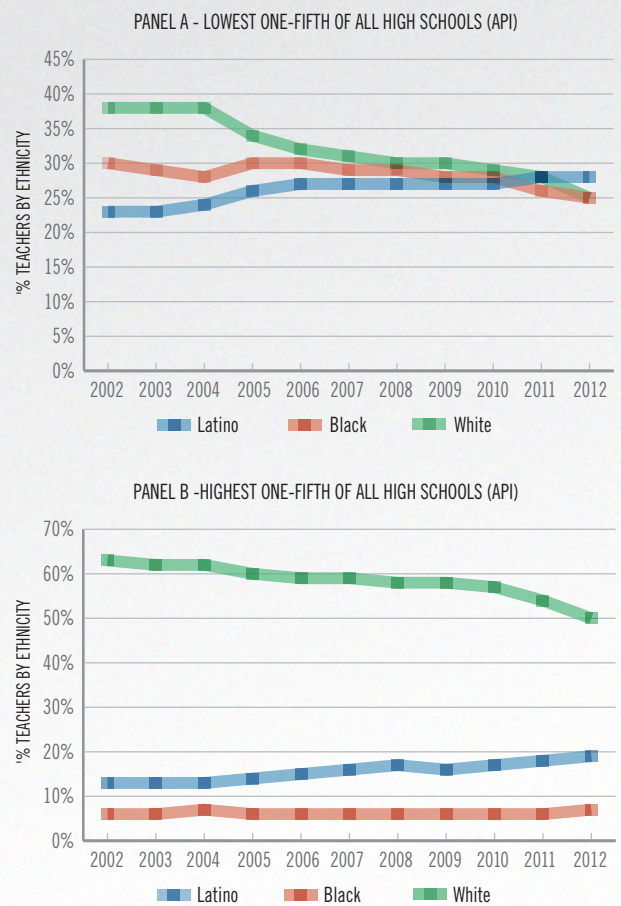


Yet schools falling in the top one-fifth of the API distribution remain mainly staffed by White teachers (panel B). The share of teachers, White, had declined slightly, from 65% in 2003-02 to 58% in 2012-13. But the percentage of teachers, Latino, remained at 18% in 2012-13, and just 8% Black.

Family Background and Teacher Attributes Explain Growth in Achievement

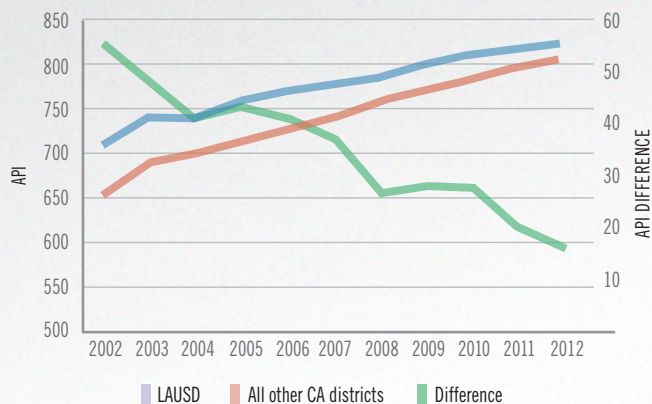
Do these differences between schools hosting low versus high-performing students help to explain variation in achievement growth over time, especially after taking into account pupils’ family background?

Figure 2.14 Ethnic composition of teachers in high schools with lowest and highest API scores



We discovered that achievement climbed most quickly in LAUSD soon after Sacramento established a statewide accountability system, approved by Gov. Gray Davis in 1999. Figure 2.15 shows that LAUSD elementary students started out low, compared with peers in other parts of California, but quickly moved toward the statewide API average. This early bump occurred at the same time that former Supt. Roy Romer pressed to simplify the curriculum around Open Court, encouraging teachers to methodically address competencies appearing on standardized tests.

Figure 2.15 Strongest gains in elementary school API scores appeared in early years



We can statistically associate the steep or flat character of API change among schools to a variety of student and teacher characteristics over the 2002-2013 period. This analysis shows that the rank-ordering of schools in their API scores, from one year to the next, is quite stable. Most schools do not experience big jumps or declines over time relative to other LAUSD schools.

But we did discover that *elementary schools* with high shares of Asian students and fewer students drawing subsidized lunches (less poor) at baseline (2002-03) showed higher rates of API growth than other schools over the 12 years. When looking at changing student and teacher composition over these years, we find rising API scores for schools that attracted larger shares of Asian and White

students. Elementary schools that recruited more Latino teachers, or teachers holding a master’s degree, also experienced stronger gains in school performance.⁶

Patterns were somewhat different when estimating change in API scores among *high schools* over time. Campuses that attracted larger shares of female or Latino pupils displayed stronger gains in API scores. High schools that lost male teachers experienced smaller or no gains in API scores. More work remains to examine other school and community factors that help to explain change in school performance. New data that include the state’s Smarter Balanced assessment will be informative as well.

In summary, while student achievement has climbed on average over time, large disparities in learning persist among students from low-income or non-English speaking families. The District’s teaching force remains segregated, with White teachers migrating to schools that serve higher achieving students. Younger, less experienced, and often Latino teachers remain in schools that host lower achieving pupils.

In this context, few doubt the importance of a clear strategy to rekindle progress toward equity. Let’s turn next to the broad forces that open new horizons for students or constrain future possibilities across L.A. We show that these underlying dynamics can be sticky and difficult to move, yet remain alterable by the steady work of educators.

⁶ Ordinary least-squares regression was used to estimate change in API scores among schools. To examine the effects of year-to-year change in student or teacher composition, we built fixed-effects models that control on the constant effect of each school, then estimate the extent to which change in achievement corresponds to change in the explanatory factors. Detailed findings available from the authors.

3. Forces that Shape Opportunity or Inequality

Civic activists and educators recurrently express concern over how public schools variably benefit L.A.’s differing ethnic and social-class groups. Success in lifting achievement has been enjoyed for nearly a generation, as detailed above, at least in terms of raising the average pupil’s reading and math skills. What’s proven harder to accomplish is narrowing disparities in learning across groups.

LAUSD’s long-term capacity to reduce disparities remains constrained by broad economic and institutional forces. These constraints must be firmly understood within the District’s rekindled focus on inequality. We next turn to three, long-term forces:

- Demographic trends will continue to *reduce pupil enrollment* in traditional schools across LAUSD, while lifting the average *educational attainment of parents*.

- Economic trends show remarkable stability among L.A.’s *disparate social classes*, with two key exceptions: steady upward mobility among many Latino families, and rising housing costs for low-income families. LAUSD students may increasingly come from less educated households.
- Institutional trends, notably a shift toward *decentralized school management* will likely persist, blending distinct curricular missions with direct accountability, evident in the spread of charter and pilot schools.

The first pair of forces evolves largely outside of the District’s control. This includes long-term demographic shifts and the structure of jobs and income. We show, however, that rising educational attainment across generations likely contributes to declining birth rates, upward mobility for young Latinos, and out-migration to less urban parts of Southern California. In this way, the steady work of educators – both

within LAUSD and neighboring districts – may adjust these telling demographic and economic trends.

The District does shape the third force, the ongoing move to site-run schools, more firmly rooting schools in their neighborhoods. The challenge from charter schools offers an independent force, although LAUSD is charged with monitoring the District's expanding network of charters. This section also reviews the spread of pilot schools, one popular experiment in governance reform.

Demographic Forces: Fewer Children, Falling Enrollments, and Rising School Attainment

Enrollment continues to shrink in traditional schools across many parts of LAUSD, a downward trend that began over a decade ago. This decline on conventional campuses is partially attributable to the steady growth of independent charter schools. But L.A. County's falling fertility rate, going back to the early 1990s, offers a parallel force that further suppresses enrollment.

Declining Fertility Rates

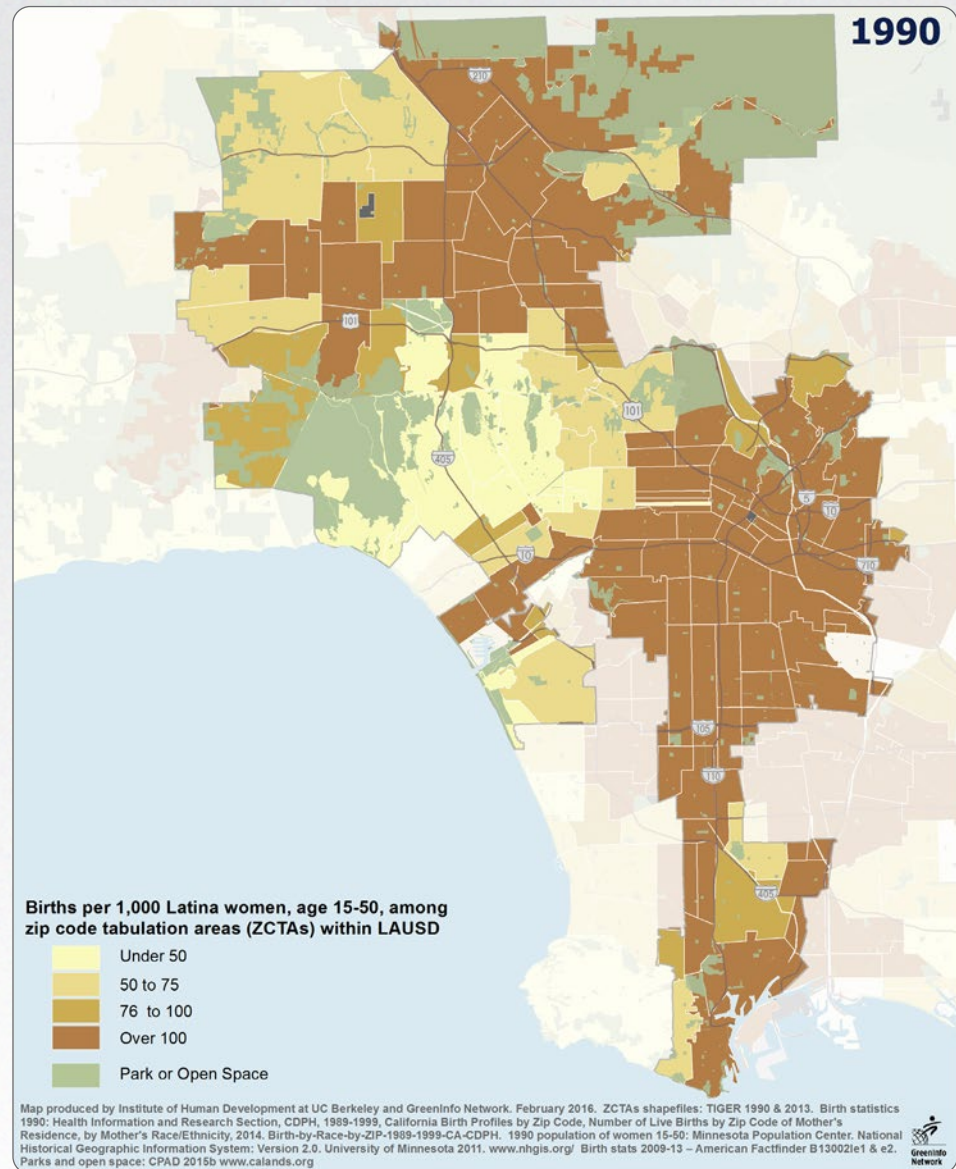
The count of births across the county fell from just over 200,000 in 1990 to about 130,000 in 2010.⁷ L.A.'s total fertility rate has fallen below the statewide rate, declining from 2.7 in 1990 to 1.7 in 2014.⁸ Without additional in-migration the county experienced an overall population decline.

Women also now postpone their first birth, relative to the age at which they initially gave birth a quarter-century ago. Sharp

7 For details, see Rollin-Alamillo (2015) and tables provided by California Department of Finance, "Historical and projected state and county births, 1970-2022." Sacramento, December 2014.

8 The total fertility rate equals the average count of children born to a hypothetical woman who passes through her normal child-bearing years at current age-specific fertility rates.

Figure 3.1 Birth rates of Latina women in LAUSD communities, 1990

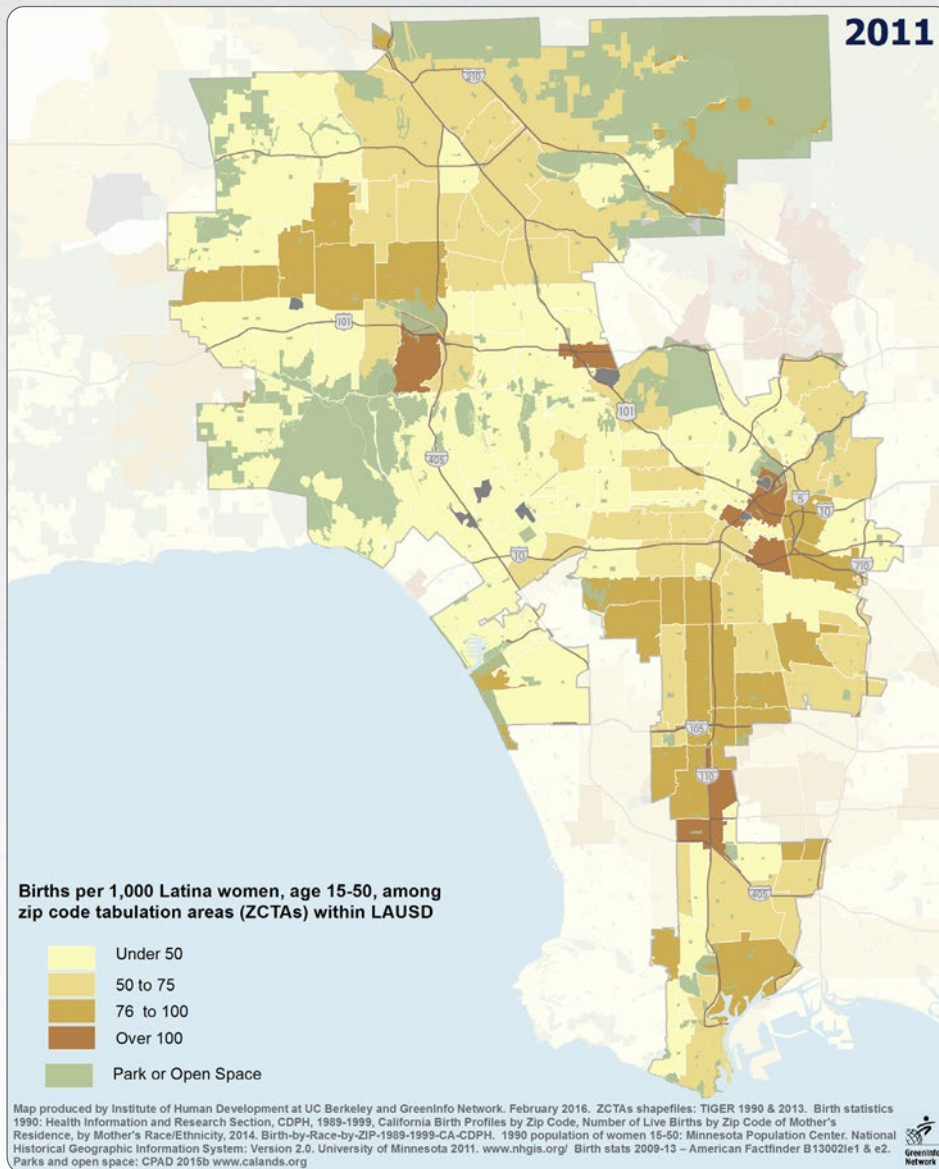


declines in birth rates among Latina women by neighborhood can be seen by comparing Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

The average Latina woman first gave birth at just under 23 years of age in 1990, rising to 25 years by 2012. A similar pattern unfolded for Black mothers over the same period. White women have postponed their first birth to just over 31 years of age, up from 28 years in 1990.

About one-half of Latinas of childbearing age were foreign born in 2010. They have displayed a much higher fertility rate (2.9), compared with native-born Latinas (1.8) in the County of Los Angeles. These levels compare with a fertility rate of 1.3 among native-born Whites.

Figure 3.2 Birth rates of Latina women in LAUSD communities, 2011



for the Latino middle class, may play a role as well. For Latinos, moving into the middle class is typically accompanied with stronger fluency in English. And enjoying wider access to higher education and upward mobility, young adults tend to start families later in life and give birth to fewer children.

Rising School Attainment of Mothers

Education levels of young parents continue to climb across Los Angeles on average. Most relevant for LAUSD, rising school attainment helps to power upward mobility for shares of Latinos and Blacks, one bright spot within an otherwise unequal layering of social classes – signaled by stratified jobs and income – over the past two generations. And these long-term gains in school attainment for young Latinos likely advance the early literacy of their own children.

Take the percentage of women, age 18-44, who had completed some college by 1990 (Figure 3.3). We see that less than one-fourth of all women in LAUSD's heavily

Latino tracts had attained this level of education, including many Black women and those living in South L.A. and parts of the San Fernando Valley.

Yet college attainment increased markedly among most women by 2011. By then, the modal level for Latinas equaled between 25% and 75% of all women (attending some college) across the majority of census tracts, seen in Figure 3.4. Female education levels remained quite low in remaining parts of East L.A. and the far north of the Valley.

Taken together, contemporary young Latinos are better educated, have smaller families, achieve fluency in English, and move into middle-class jobs more frequently than even a generation ago. Offspring in turn benefit from smaller

The birth rate for Latinas will likely decline further as the share, foreign-born, continues to fall. The Great Recession and reverse migration to Latin America accelerated this downward trend. Overall, the county lost about 620,000 residents between 2000-2010.⁹ The secular decline in family size may be explained by several trends among Latino families. Fewer births are likely driven by the rising educational attainment of Latino parents and acculturation to middle-class norms when it comes to fertility behavior. The share of resident Latinos who have graduated from high school climbed from 52% in 1974 to 76% in 2014 nationwide.¹⁰ The growth of service sector jobs, offering scaffolds

9 Rollin-Alamillo (2015), page 3.

10 U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

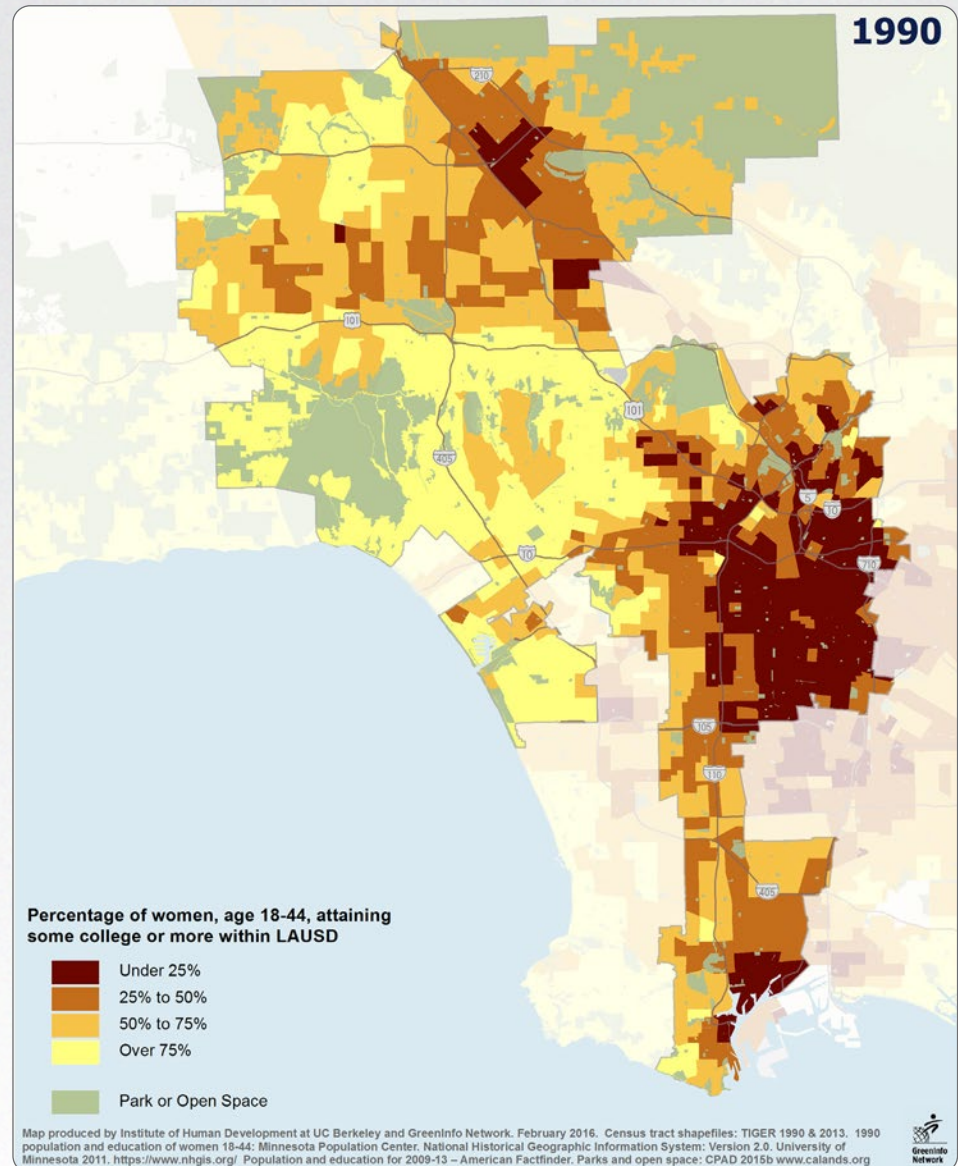
family size and their parents' reading skills, which likely lift early learning and downstream achievement.¹¹

Black Out-Migration to the Suburbs

The exit of many Black families from central Los Angeles also contributed to the early period of enrollment decline. Rapidly growing metropolitan areas, such as Atlanta, attracted Black families from around the nation in the 1990s, including from the L.A. area. Net out-migration from Southern California to the South reached almost 50,000 Blacks between 1995 and 2000.¹² The share of the county's population made up of Black households fell by almost two-thirds to about 8% between 1970 and 2010.¹³

A variety of factors have nudged Black families out to nearby suburban areas like Culver City, Hawthorne, and Long Beach (often leaving LAUSD). These forces include concerns with safety in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, rising property values in parts of South L.A., and affordable housing in the suburbs. Black populations have swelled across parts of the Inland Empire, such as Lancaster, Riverside, and Antelope Valley. The net migration of African Americans out to the inland region equaled over 130,000 residents between 1980 and the late 2000s.¹⁴ What's consequential is how middle-class populations of most ethnicities have searched for greener pastures outside LAUSD.

Figure 3.3 Educational attainment among women in LAUSD census tracts, 1990



Upward Mobility for Latinos, while Disparities Persist

Even as many young Black or Latino parents benefit from upward mobility, well-paying jobs and family income continue to be unevenly distributed across ethnic groups, and within racial groups across social classes.

Let's take a closer look at disparities among L.A.'s class groups, a stratified layer cake that's sufficiently porous to allow for some upward mobility as school attainment improves. At the same time, we show how the true middle class appears to be shrinking in Los Angeles as rising housing costs erode its economic vitality. Overall, disparities in jobs and income remain wide, contributing to gaps in children's literacy and achievement levels.

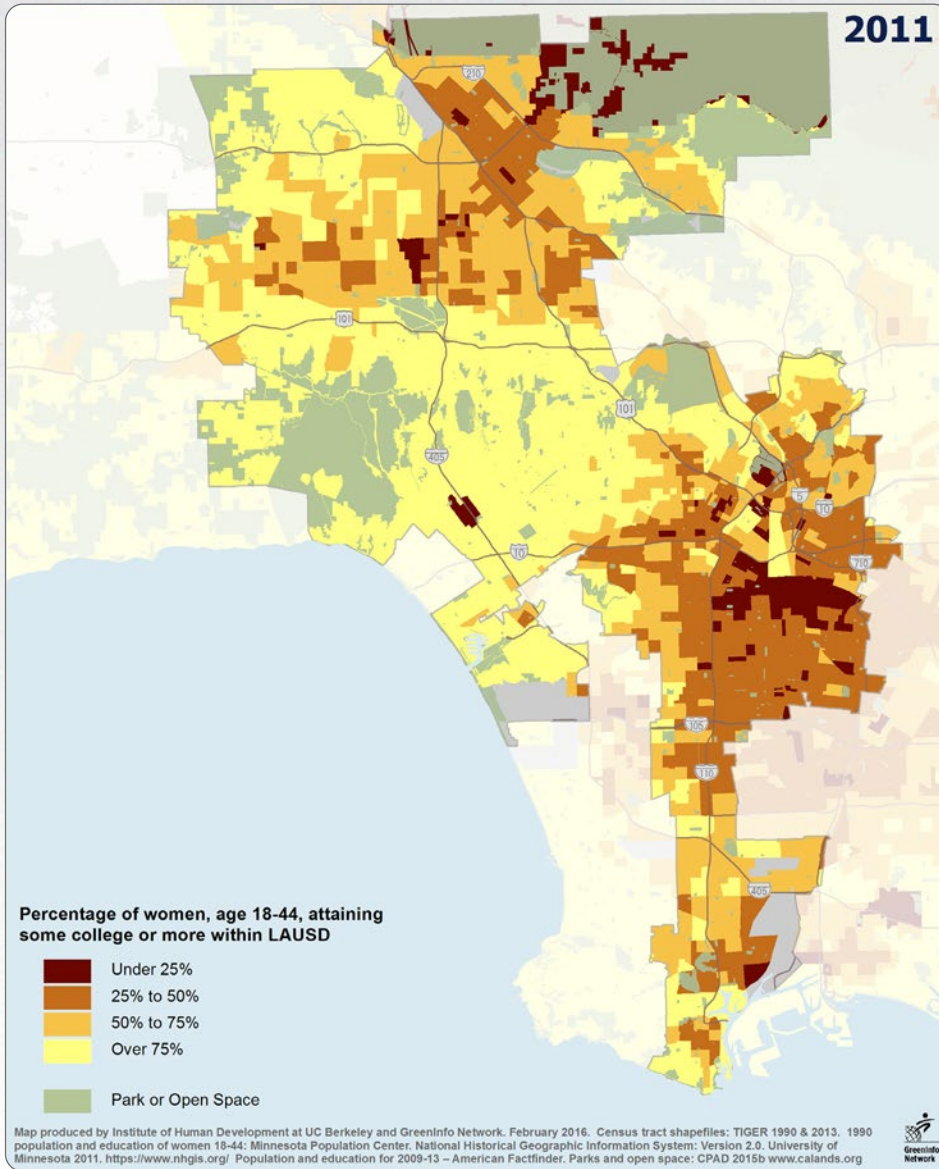
11 For reviews and evidence, see Garcia (2007), Guerrero et al. (2013), Shonkoff & Phillips (2000).

12 Frey (2004).

13 L.A. Urban League (2011), *Our Weekly* (2014).

14 Migration estimates are reviewed by Pfeiffer (2012).

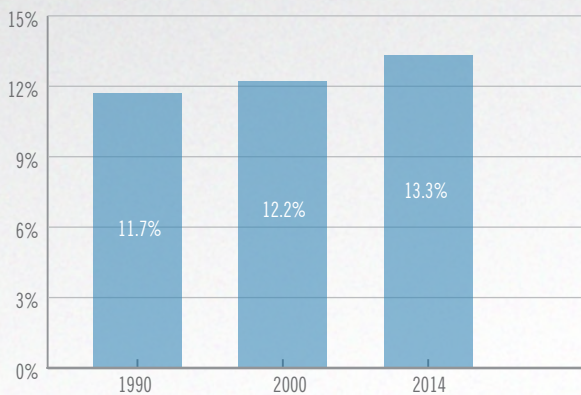
Figure 3.4 Educational attainment among women in LAUSD census tracts, 2011



Since 1990, we have seen a slight increase in the percentage of L.A. families whose income falls below the federal poverty line. Census data indicate that, in 1990, 11.7% of all families lived in poverty, as displayed in Figure 3.5 (1989 dollars). This percentage climbed gradually to 12.2% in 2000. More recent data from 2014 show a higher share, 13.3% below the line.¹⁵

We observe persistent gaps in income since 1990, as seen in Figure 3.6. Average income for Black and Latino households has dropped since 2000, after enjoying some growth between 1990 and 2000. At the same time, average income for White and Asian households remains consistently higher. In 2014, the most recent year with complete data, White and Asian households earned on average about \$98,000 and \$94,000 each year, respectively. Meanwhile, Latino households earned about \$62,000 annually, and African American households earned about \$59,000 each year on average.

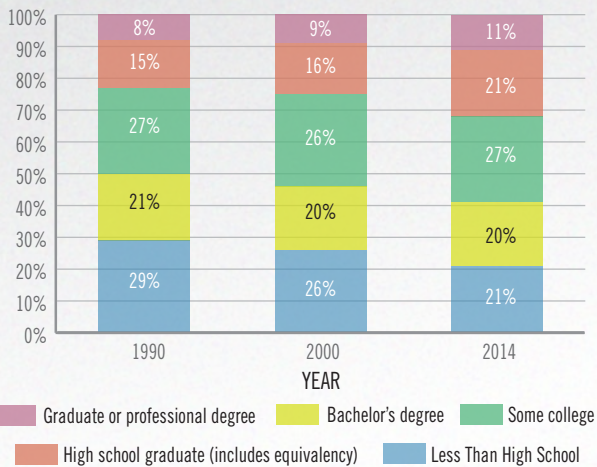
Figure 3.5 Rising percentage of L.A. families living beneath the federal poverty line



The school attainment of adults offers another indicator of middle-class status. Even as poverty levels have inched upward since 1990, many L.A. residents have become more highly educated. Figure 3.7 below shows that just under one-third of all adults in L.A. (at least 25 years of age) in 1990 had not completed high school. By 2014, this figure had dropped to 21%. In contrast, in 1990, 14% of Angelenos had obtained a bachelor's degree and 8% had a graduate or professional degree. By 2014, 21% held a bachelor's degree, 11% a graduate or professional degree.

¹⁵ Data for 1990 and 2000 were drawn from the U.S. Census. Data from 2010 and 2014 were taken from the American Community Survey's one-year estimates. Important to note is that the geographic designations for L.A. by the Census Bureau have shifted over time. In 1990 we use data for Los Angeles County. In 2000 we use data for the Los Angeles-Riverside-Orange County Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area. In 2010 we use the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). And in 2014, we use the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim MSA.

Figure 3.7 Educational attainment for persons 25 years and older



The distribution of household income among ethnic groups further illuminates sharp inequalities among social classes. Annual income varies dramatically between and within ethnic groups for the City of L.A., ranging from about \$70,000 in median income for White households to \$34,300 for Black households in 2014 (Figure 3.8). Median income equaled \$38,900 among Latino households.

10% headed by Latinos. In contrast, the ethnic composition of households earning between \$20,000 and \$25,000 is 33% White and 27% Latino.

Figure 3.9 Distribution of household income shares by ethnic or racial group

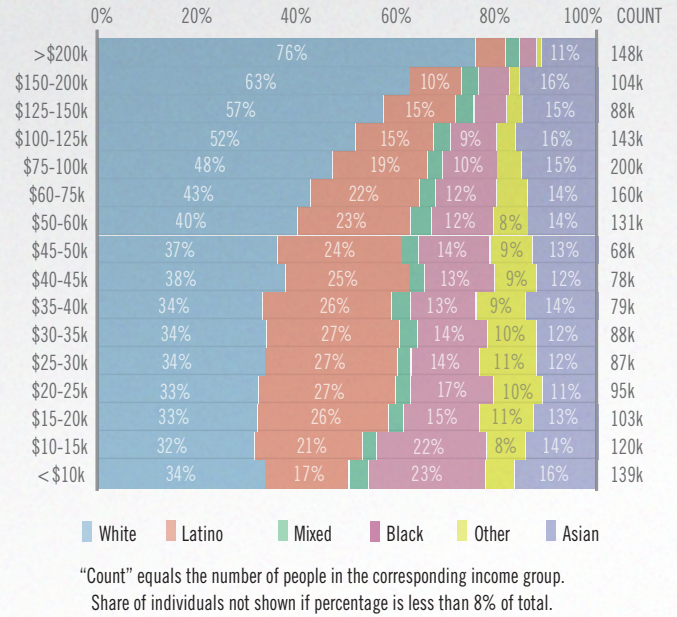
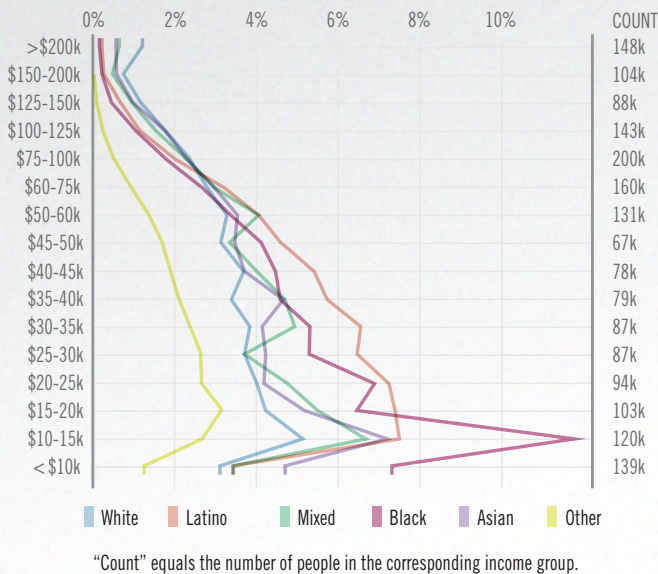
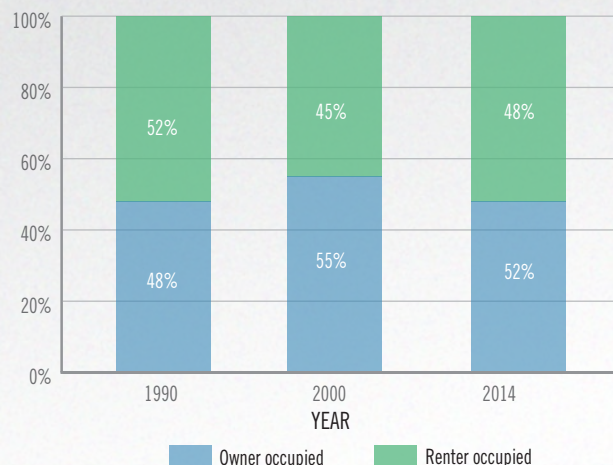


Figure 3.8 Distribution of household income by ethnic or racial group



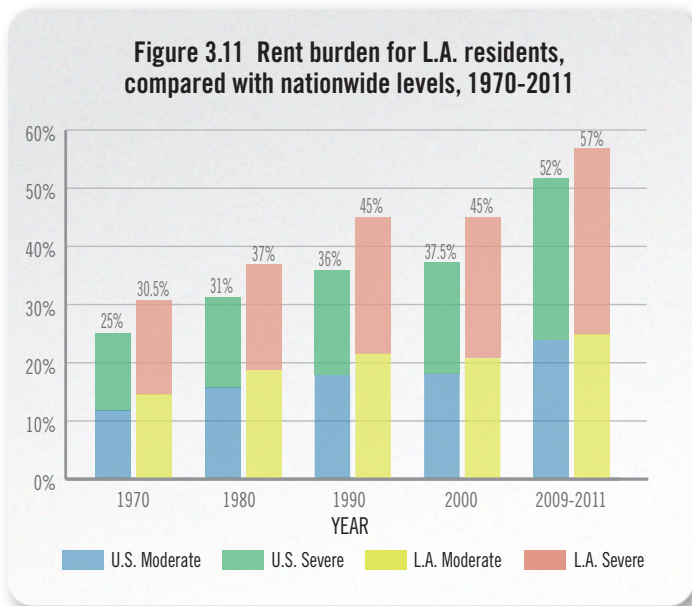
The incidence of home ownership offers a final indicator of middle-class status. The relative shares of renters and home owners has remained evenly split in recent decades, as depicted in Figure 3.10. Home ownership peaked in 2000, with 55% of housing units owner-occupied. The most recent data, for 2014, show that renter-occupied units increased to 48%, while 52% of housing units were owner-occupied.

Figure 3.10 Shares of housing units rented or owned



The distributional display in Figure 3.9 further details inequality among ethnic groups for the City of Los Angeles. It shows, for example, that among households with yearly earnings between \$150,000 and \$200,000, just under two-thirds (63%) are headed by White adults, compared with

At the same time, the *rent burden* has grown heavier for low-income and middle-class Angelenos.¹⁶ Rent burden is defined as the proportion of income directed towards housing. Those spending between 30-50% of income



Source: US Census and ACS PUMS. Reproduced from Ray, Ong, & Jimenez, 2014, p. 8.

experience a moderate rent burden, while those spending over 50% of income experience a severe rent burden, according to housing analysts.

One recent study finds that rent increases have outpaced gains in income – placing a greater burden on the bottom and middle fifths (quintiles) of the distribution of households across L.A. This research shows that 54% of those in the bottom income quintile in 1970 experienced a severe rent burden.¹⁷ By 2009-11, this figure grew to 78%. While less than 1% of those in the middle-income quintile experienced a severe rent burden in 1970, this share climbed to almost 15% by 2009-11.

Overall, growing shares of L.A. residents experience moderate or severe rent burdens, and at rates outpacing most other parts of the nation. Rents have risen faster than average increases seen nationwide. This growing rent burden, along with the scarcity of affordable rental housing, contribute to widening inequality across Los Angeles.

Upward Mobility for Latinos

Women are not only nurturing smaller families across Los Angeles – they also display rising levels of school attainment, as introduced above. Indeed, the steady rise of children’s achievement over the past generation is likely rooted in the cumulative gains in education enjoyed by their parents.

¹⁶ Ray, Ong, & Jimenez, (2014).

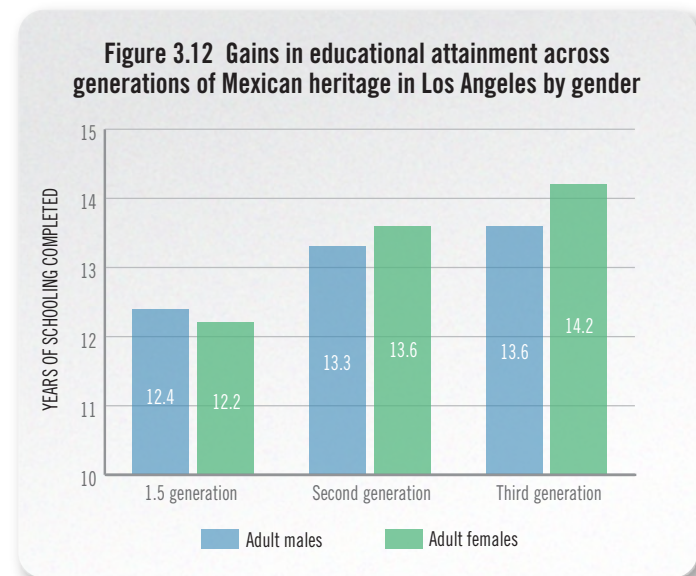
¹⁷ Ray, Ong, & Jimenez, (2014).

We next detail these gains in maternal education since 1990, especially in heavily Latino parts of L.A. We also review emerging evidence on how rising school attainment among young Latinos corresponds with upward mobility for many.

While the layering of social classes has remained quite stable over time, Latinos and some Blacks increasingly occupy L.A.’s middle rungs of social and occupational status. This holds true for many children, especially the grandchildren of Latino immigrants, over the past quarter-century. We can gauge upward mobility in terms of rising income and school attainment.

Figure 3.12, for instance, displays rising attainment for 1.5, second, and third generation Mexican descendants, reported from a large L.A. sample drawn in 2004.¹⁸ Mexican-born males who arrived to the U.S. before turning 14 years of age (the 1.5 generation) completed 12.4 years of schooling on average, 12.2 years for females of Mexican heritage. By the third generation – grandchildren with all grandparents Mexican-born – women had attained 14.2 years of schooling, and males, 13.6 years of formal education.

These gains in schooling are tied to rising income levels among Mexican American families, mainly enjoyed by the third generation. Figure 3.13 shows fairly constant yearly incomes between 1.5 and second generations. Meanwhile, the third generation experienced income gains, corresponding with rising levels of educational attainment.

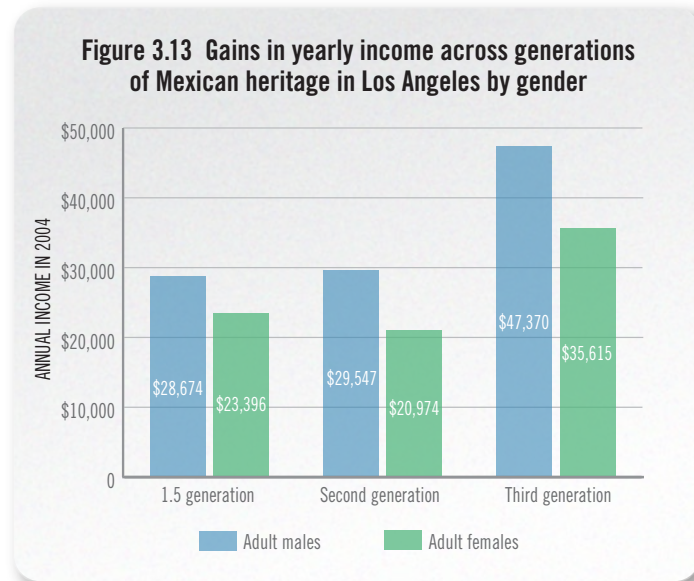


Note: Data from a cross-generational survey completed in 2004 (Bean, Brown, & Bachmeier, 2015).

In summary, we see a fairly static structure of jobs and income, making for unequal layers of social class across Los Angeles. This largely immovable structure of social classes – at least unchanged since the 1990s – contributes to, and

¹⁸ Detailed by UC Irvine sociologist Frank Bean and colleagues (Bean, Brown, & Bachmeier (2015).

may reinforce, the disparate gaps in achievement displayed by LAUSD's diverse students. Rising rents and housing costs have hit poor and middle-class families hard, eating away at economic security and perhaps quality time with children.



Source: Bean, Brown, & Bachmeier (2015).

At the same time, a rising share of Latino parents shift into middle-class neighborhoods, buoyed by gains in school attainment. Many African Americans have moved to the Inland Empire or outlying school districts. This, along with declining fertility rates, leads to home environs with fewer children, headed by parents with more formal education, relative to a generation ago.

Declining Enrollment among Diverse School Organizations

These demographic forces – especially the drop in Latina fertility rates – have conspired to reduce enrollments across LAUSD. The steady rise of charter schools, most operating independent of the District, further erodes demand for traditional public schools. On the one hand, this now constrains the budget capacity of District leaders to address persisting gaps in achievement. Yet the spread of charter and site-run schools (including pilot schools) may help lift low-performing kids, a claim that's received empirical support in recent years.

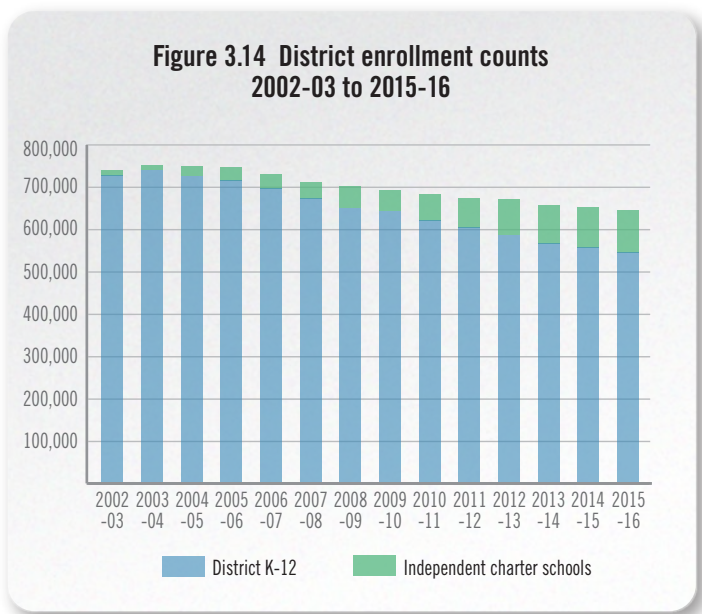
Charter Schools Claim a Rising Share of Enrollments

The secular decline in District enrollments continues to unfold, in part, independent of the expanding charter sector. Figure 3.14 shows enrollment trends since 2002, separating the charter portion from the overall contraction of child population.¹⁹

Total enrollment in LAUSD fell from about 740,000 young-

sters in 2003-04 to some 635,000 in 2015-16. Meanwhile, enrollments in independent charters climbed from about 35,000 students in 2006-07 to 110,000 in 2015-16.²⁰

This downward trend in enrollments may ease somewhat by 2017-18, when the count of children born within L.A. County, lagged by five years, begins to increase slightly. Still, the District's fiscal strength – driven largely by enrollment levels – will continue to be shaped by family demand for charter schools.



Diversifying Forms of Schooling – Contributing to Achievement Gains?

Advocates backing a diverse array of nontraditional schools argue that site-based management will spur innovation, recruitment of stronger teachers, and greater collaboration among staff. This argument fueled the growth of magnet schools in the 1970, along with a commitment to racial integration, an option that remains popular among parents.

The steady spread of charter schools offers another alternative, along with continuing demand for pilot schools, numbering 51 by 2015-16. This latter model, imported from Boston, allows campuses significant freedom from the downtown bureaucracy, while teachers enjoy regular fringe benefits and remain in the union.²¹

The LAUSD Board advanced parental choice and a colorful range of site-run schools in 2009 with its Public School Choice initiative, handing off scores of campuses to charter management firms, pilot school leaders, and similar site-run models of administration. This spread of diverse forms of schooling

19 Charter enrollments pertain to independent "start-ups", excluding LAUSD schools that converted to charter status but remain affiliated with the District administration.

20 Detailed enrollment breakdowns appear in Cortines (2015), pages 129-133.
21 Debate has arisen recently over District officials pressing pilot schools to accept assigned principals, along with "must hire" teachers, who often display low performance but documentation remains insufficient for termination.

likely shifts norms and expectations held by parents regarding their freedom to “shop around” for schools. Whether these diverse forms of schooling contribute to the overall rise in student achievement remains an open empirical question.

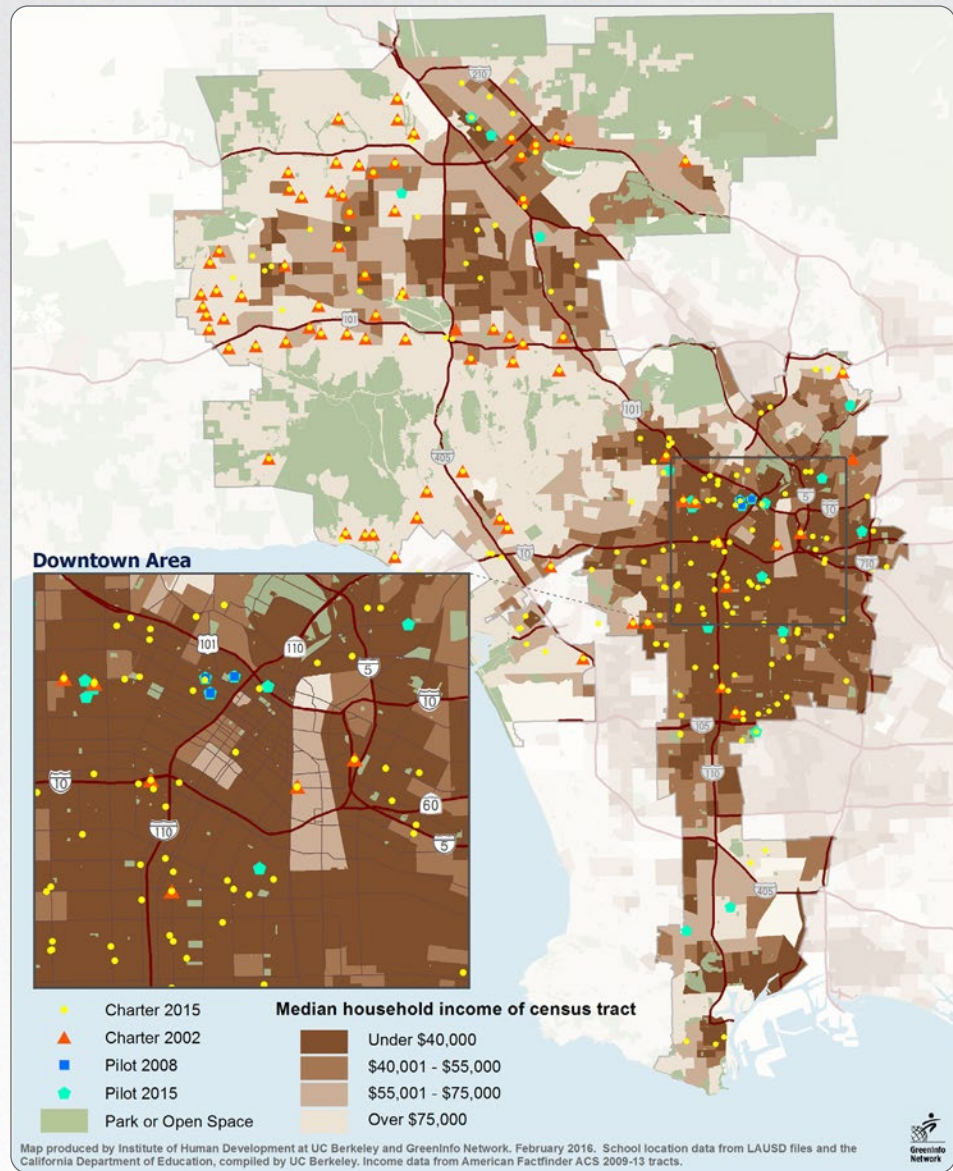
The rise of diverse forms of schools and liberal parental choice may create competitive pressure on conventional schools to do better, a line of research pursued by scholars. The other causal pathway emphasizes how charters, pilots, or other alternative forms of schooling may directly lift low-achieving students.

Former Supt. Ray Cortines trumpeted the “stellar performance” of magnet programs, as one alternative to expanding charter schools.²² But District analysts failed to account for the family background or perhaps stronger motivation of families that push to enroll their children in magnet schools.

The District also has granted some autonomies to a small count of schools in middle-class areas under the Expanded School-Based Management Model (ESBMM), yet another site-run experiment in governance on which empirical evidence remains scarce.

Debate persists over the comparative efficacy of charter schools, relative to traditional public schools in L.A. The charter movement has evolved in consequential ways over the past 15 years. Petitions originally came from traditional schools that sought charter freedoms from the District and the state education code. These conversion charter schools, displayed in Figure 3.15, include those that remain *affiliated* with the LAUSD administration and those that prefer to be *unaffiliated*. The former subset tend to be located in middle-class parts of the District, attracting higher achieving students, relative to traditional and start-up charters.²³

Figure 3.15 Spread of charter and pilot schools in LAUSD, 2002-2015



In contrast, start-up charters – new organizations at times operated by management groups – have spread rapidly. Over 250 charter schools currently serve the 110,000 charter students within the bounds of LAUSD.

We see in Figure 3.15 how conversion charters made up the initial population of schools in this novel sector. But since 2002 the accelerating growth of charter campuses has unfolded mainly in central parts of Los Angeles, south along the Harbor Freeway, and in lower-income parts of the Valley. The map also displays pilot schools, more heavily concentrated in poorer communities of Pico-Union, Boyle Heights, and East L.A.

22 Clough (2015).

23 Shin, Fuller, & Dauter (2015).

Charter schools may contribute to rising levels of achievement overall, as a growing share of pupils attend these alternative campuses. Margaret Raymond and her colleagues at Stanford University estimated achievement levels for LAUSD students attending a blend of charter schools, relative to peers in traditional schools after matching pupils on observed facets of family background.²⁴ She found small test-score advantages enjoyed by charter pupils over the period, 2009-2012, relative to peers in traditional schools. Achievement advantages were small to moderate in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

Latino pupils from low-income families experienced the strongest gains in charter schools, although magnitudes remained small. White and middle-class students in charters realized little difference in their rates of learning relative to peers in traditional public schools. The strongest gains enjoyed by charter students occurred in middle schools. Math scores ranged higher for those attending a charter for three years, rather than for one or two years. But no dosage effect was observed for kids' ELA performance.



Our Berkeley team also estimated achievement advantages for charter students, utilizing differing methods, for the period 2008 to 2012. We moved beyond Raymond's design by first distinguishing between conversion and start-up charter schools, then asking whether each type may draw varying kinds of students and families. Given differing organizational histories in L.A., we can't assume that conversions and start-ups attract the same kinds of teachers or students, which in turn may affect their capacity to lift learning.

Overall, we found that charter schools tend to select higher achieving students at baseline among their elementary

24 CREDO (2014).

and high school campuses. Middle school charters offer a notable exception, which selected a wide distribution of students that resembled the spread of traditional pupils District-wide. We replicated Raymond's earlier finding that charter middle schools outperform traditional campuses in terms of achievement growth, net the prior effects of family background. Students moving through charter elementary schools outperformed peers attending traditional schools, although these advantages were small and less consistent than the marked benefits of charter middle schools.

As we look forward to a District strategy for narrowing achievement gaps, it's important to learn how the mix of students served may be changing, and how the diversifying range of schools that compete for families and students may

differentially contribute to achievement. Enrollment growth among independent charters implies falling demand for traditional schools. But declining birth rates largely explain LAUSD's enrollment over the past generation, a trend that may begin to level off.

Despite all the enthusiasm for parental choice and the colorful variety of schools that now

populate the District (many site-run), we know surprisingly little about their discrete effects on learning. Early results suggest that charter schools – especially at the middle-school level – did contribute to average gains in test scores over the past decade and a half.

At the same time, the widening differentiation of magnet, charter, pilot, and other decentralized schools may exacerbate the separation of pupils along lines of ethnicity and social class. This may contribute to the District's gaping disparities in pupil achievement. Hard evidence is only beginning to inform these benefits and risks.

4. Building a Clear and Measureable Equity Agenda

Against this backdrop, how might District leaders construct a focused strategy for lifting low-achieving kids? Why is the crafting of a coherent equity agenda, complete with measures of school-level change, proving so difficult for LAUSD officials? These are the institutional challenges that we next address. Our analysis emphasizes how District leaders, in part, face

political and ideological divides. A wide panoply of interest groups holds differing beliefs (or policy logics) for how to lift schools. This ranges from governance fixes, like site-based management, to in-school strategies for enriching student engagement, to curricular reforms like the Common Core.

Some advocates seek to bolster the institutional foundations that support educators, such as backstopping pension benefits and negotiating more favorable salaries. Other reform groups aim to enrich pro-learning relationships and the social climate found inside schools.

That said, the LAUSD bureaucracy itself appears to pursue a long menu of well-meaning efforts to advance more coherent and supportive schools. But this begins to distract from a crisp and compelling effort – tied to the \$1.1 billion in fresh annual funding – that directly aims to reduce achievement gaps among and within schools. When you flip through the superintendent’s two most recent budgets, looking for a program focused on the low-achieving pupils that generate the new dollars from Sacramento, one finds a list of over 40 staffing categories, coverage for traditional cost items (like special education), and modest new activities – disparate spokes disconnected from any core approach or strategic axle.

We first detail the difficulty in defining a coherent pro-equity strategy. Second, we describe the disparate policy approaches pursued by education stakeholders in L.A., challenging how District leaders might lead on fairness. Third, we sketch how to build – from solid cornerstones – a coherent strategy for narrowing achievement gaps.



Distracted from the Imperative of Fairness?

As our research proceeds with civic leaders and local nonprofits – along with open conversations inside LAUSD – it seems difficult for District leaders to remain focused on how to lift low-performing students.

When United Way in L.A. asked Berkeley to help analyze the District budget last year, we found that just 6% of spending (2014-15) focused on identified efforts to lift the “targeted student population” (TSP), those pupils who generate these new dollars. Part of these “investments” went for restoring status quo staffing patterns, hiring back assistant principals and librarians lost during the recession, even for campuses that serve higher-achieving youngsters.²⁵

The District’s current budget (2015-16) has shifted additional dollars to schools based on their concentrations of poor pupils and English learners. Still, about two-fifths of the new Local Control funding for low achievers goes to special education services, long contained in the base budget, serving students who are not intended beneficiaries of Gov. Brown’s finance reform.

Nor have we found any core District staff who systematically track the 40-plus programs focused on TSP pupils, determining what’s working to narrow achievement gaps. We have found that schools enjoy stronger administrative and student supports (such as counselors) when they serve greater concentrations of students from poor neighborhoods. At the same time, teacher salary costs range higher in middle-class parts of the District, as White and other instructors with longer seniority leave poor-performing schools.

Why does it remain so difficult to focus even new dollars on a coherent strategy for narrowing disparities? We find two possible reasons: The widening array of education interest groups and actors pursuing disparate policy strategies for addressing inequities. And District leaders inside headquarters have yet to establish key cornerstones of a pro-equity strategy.

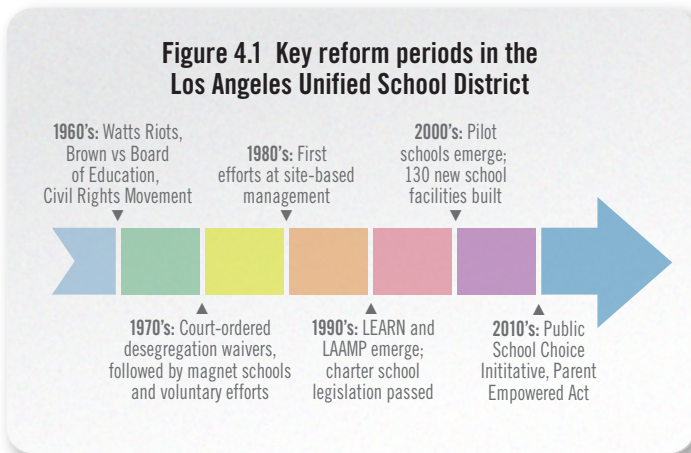
Fractured Politics, Varying Logics for Lifting Students

A variety of actors have grown dissatisfied with the uneven pace of student learning across LAUSD, along with the District’s uneven efficacy in tackling disparities. Some argue that the bureaucratic structure of the District, along with long-term budget commitments to the adults (such as pension costs), distract from the core task of reducing achievement gaps.

Our interviews with civic leaders and local community groups reveal a deep divide between those who retain hope that LAUSD can effectively steer toward fairness, versus a range of activists who have concluded that an assault from the outside holds the best chance for success. This makes it more difficult for District leaders to devise a simple and coherent strategy for equity.

25 United Way of Greater Los Angeles / CLASS (2015).

For its part, LAUSD has experimented with different models of school-based management, struggled over effective services for pupils with limited English, expanded access to rigorous high school courses, and desperately tried to cover the burgeoning costs of special education (mandated yet not fully reimbursed by government). The Board has approved more petitions to create charter schools, or convert traditional schools, than any other district nationwide. All this comes in the wake of building 130 new school facilities since the late 1990s, then reeling from severe cuts following the Great Recession of 2008.



Contemporary reform efforts stem from a distinct local history, as well as national conversations over how to best lift schools. Figure 4.1 offers a simple timeline of reform efforts in L.A. The severity of overcrowded schools, centered in poor neighborhoods, would spur the District's \$19 billion school construction program, expanding early learning centers and small high schools. We know that this effort did help to explain achievement gains since the early 2000s, especially for pupils moving from severely overcrowded to new facilities.²⁶

Differing Logics for Advancing Equity

District leaders receive plenty of criticism for failing to narrow achievement gaps. Yet part of the problem is that L.A.'s kaleidoscopic array of reform groups, civic activists, and private funders can't always agree on the pieces of a coherent strategy for equity.

Equity Logic 1 – Decentralize School Management and Innovation

Advocates of site-run schools – free of state rules and bureaucratic strings – argue that schools managed by educators themselves will attract stronger teachers and seed inventive practices. Schools then become more responsive to student needs and deeply rooted in their communities. Proponents of locally autonomous schools further argue

that small schools will better engage students and spur higher achievement.²⁷

When efforts to improve educational access in the 1960s and 1970s, including the federal desegregation efforts, suffered a political backlash, momentum diminished. Support for these efforts waned further when evidence illustrated that these initiatives did little to improve academic outcomes for poor students.²⁸

By the 1980s, "site-based management" became a preferred strategy. Spurred by research suggesting that school-level decision-making was related to improved effectiveness, site-run schools became popular in Chicago, New York City, and eventually Los Angeles.²⁹

LAUSD's Board approved in 1993 a renewed effort to decentralize control down to principals and teacher leaders, dubbed, the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN), which enjoyed widespread support from a broad coalition of civic groups.

As LEARN got off the ground, Walter Annenberg awarded a five-year grant to the District to form school networks or "families" – small organizational units intended to help build educators' professional capacity. An intermediary organization, the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), was established to help implement the Annenberg Challenge Grant. UCLA began to train principals on how to manage their own budgets, hire stronger staff, to set their own educational strategy.

But District leaders, originally signing onto site-based management, began to pull back on campus freedom and staff flexibility. Incoming Supt. Roy Romer also sought to regularize classroom teaching via a standard curriculum tied to discrete learning proficiencies. By 2000, the loss of key civic leaders and wavering support among established interests – notably District leaders and teachers – led to the demise of the LEARN and LAAMP initiatives.³⁰

Still, efforts to decentralize school governance continued. In 2007, the District's first pilot schools opened within the attendance zone anchored to Belmont High School in the Pico-Union community downtown. Pilot schools resulted from over six years of collaborative efforts among District leaders and neighborhood activists seeking to combat severe overcrowding at Belmont and its feeder schools, as well as persistently low achievement.³¹ The Belmont Zone of Choice aimed to liberalize parental options, implementing

27 Fuller (2009)

28 Kantor & Lowe (2013).

29 Wohlstetter & Buffett (1992).

30 Kerchner, Menefee-Libey, Mulfinger, & Clayton (2008).

31 Martinez & Quartz (2012).

26 Welsh, Coghlan, Fuller, & Dauter (2012).

“choice, small schools, and autonomy,” eventually rooted in 10 pilot schools.³²

Pilot schools were originally small and focused on curricular themes, from digital technology to theater arts; they remain tied to the District, yet principals came to hold flexibility over budgets and hiring (with some backsliding reported by pilot advocates).³³

Pilot schools offer autonomy through a “thin labor contract,” balancing principals’ authority to hire and fire staff with protections for teachers and granting them discretion to commit to flexible roles inside their schools. The small size of pilots intends to foster more nurturing relationships among teachers and students, in turn facilitating achievement gains.³⁴ Pilot schools continue to grow in number throughout the District, currently hosting 51 pilot campuses, mostly high schools.³⁵

Advocates of smaller, site-run campuses argue that District schools can become more efficient, higher quality, and equitable in their benefits for students – when allowed to innovate and make decisions on-site. Yet those who embrace a differing theory of action argue that decentralized school governance offers one front on a wider attack on the downtown LAUSD bureaucracy, the external challenge to which we next turn.

Equity Logic 2 – Create a Diverse Portfolio of School Options

This second theory of reform emerges from a market-oriented logic: a lively marketplace of schools managed by diverse organizations will induce schools to compete for “clients” or families. These competitive effects will improve the overall quality and efficiency of all schools across the District, these advocates contend.

Furthermore, a marketplace of schools offers families a choice of where to send their children to school, which

enables parents to look beyond their neighborhood school, to pursue a school that best meets the preferences of parents and their children.³⁶

Charter schools epitomize a market-oriented theory of action around decentralized school governance. Publicly funded but private-like in daily operations, charter schools are free from most state and District regulations. In turn, they must meet state accountability measures, along with commitments included in their charter.³⁷ Following the passage of California’s charter law in 1992, the first charters in Los Angeles were mostly traditional schools that petitioned the Board to become site-run charter schools.



Charter management organizations (CMOs), such as Aspire and Green Dot, began to expand operations across L.A. by the early 2000s.³⁸ By 2014, about two-fifths of all charter students in LAUSD attended a school affiliated with a management organization among the District’s 250-some charter schools.³⁹

Equity Logic 3 – Tinker with School Options, Retain Central Regulation

Some stakeholders align with the market-based logic while seeking to preserve the District’s centralized apparatus – in part to better distribute resources in more equitable fashion. This approach, embodying a third theory of reform, offers a hybrid approach.

In particular, advocates blend the logics of working both within and outside the District in order to “turn around” low-performing schools. Proponents of the third approach share the market-logic – pressing growth of a diverse portfolio of school organizations and governance models, as alternatives to traditional District-operated schools. At the same time, this logic, like the first theory of action, calls for preserving the central District bureaucracy while infusing the institution with new, innovative approaches to education governance and service provision.

³² Ibid, p. 17.

³³ Fuller (2010).

³⁴ Martinez & Quartz (2012).

³⁵ Fuller, Waite, Chao, & Benedicto (2014).

³⁶ Chubb & Moe (1990).

³⁷ National Center for Education Statistics (2015).

³⁸ Reckhow (2013).

³⁹ CREDO (2014).

Several reform experiments stem from this third model. The Board, for example, approved the Public School Choice initiative in 2009, as introduced above. It allowed teams of stakeholders to create plans for turning around the District's lowest-performing schools and replacing them with new schools, including pilot and charter management groups.

One of the intended outcomes of the choice initiative was to generate a diverse "portfolio" of engaging schools in order to widen options for families.⁴⁰ A similar effort to turn around low-performing schools emerged in 2010, when California passed the Parent Empowerment Act. Colloquially known as the "Parent Trigger" law, this legislation enables districts to close, reconstitute, or turn around schools if at least 51% of the school's parents sign a petition to do so. The legislation allows for charter school conversion.⁴¹

How to Build A Coherent Equity Strategy?

The coherence of LAUSD's own leadership is, of course, interwoven with these competing logics for how to lift students. District leaders are pushed and pulled by advocates of these reform models. Yet LAUSD chiefs could establish core principles of a pro-equity strategy.

The Board's *Equity Is Justice Resolution*, approved in 2014, appeared to be a solid start. But only recently has the District's budget plan begun to follow its own stated policy – notably, to distribute pre-K dollars and fresh funding for high schools along the Board's own legislation. This includes expanding access to counselors and rigorous (UC eligible) "A-G courses".



How might District leaders establish solid cornerstones to undergird a pro-equity agenda? How could these principles guide the \$1.1 billion coming from the state each year, generated by low-performing students?

Cornerstone 1 – Define and Focus Fungible Dollars on Equity

District leaders continue to set aside a small fraction – about \$318 million in the current school year – of the \$1.1 billion in fresh funding received from the state. Rather than widening efforts to narrow achievement gaps in proportion

to these new dollars, LAUSD has folded most into old fiscal commitments or financed a return to old staffing patterns. As these fresh dollars from Sacramento are distributed – totaling over \$4 billion by the end of 2016-17 – it remains unclear how they support new staff or programs that empirically reduce disparities in student learning.

LAUSD leaders initially argued that additional dollars coming from the state served to recover support lost in the wake of the Great Recession. Former Supt. Ray Cortines urged Sacramento to increase the "base grant" contained in the LCFF legislation – pushing to raise the per-pupil allocation awarded to districts for all students, regardless of their level of disadvantage.⁴² He also faced stiff pressure to cover the cost of special education, services mandated by the federal government. But it appears that LAUSD now receives significantly more resources from the state per pupil than it did prior to the recession.

Debate persists over whether the \$1.1 billion in "supplemental and concentration grants" received each year by LAUSD from Sacramento should be defined as new or discretionary in character. The post-2008 recession, along with subsequent

cuts in state funding, hit LAUSD very hard. Education spending fell statewide by about one-fifth in the subsequent years. Mr. Cortines's budget message in June 2015 stressed the importance of rebuilding school staff, bolstering the base budget as opposed to rethinking how to narrow educational disparities.⁴³

But our analysis of District spending reveals that LAUSD spent \$6.3 billion in 2006-07, just prior to

the recession, to serve about 712,000 students (inflation-adjusted 2015 dollars, excluding independent charter schools). LAUSD expects to spend \$6.4 billion in the current fiscal year to serve 495,000 students. This translates to a gain in spending per pupil from \$9,361 per pupil in 2006-07 to \$12,144 in 2015-16 (in constant dollars).⁴⁴

In this light, it's difficult to argue that rising levels of LCFF funding – especially supplemental and concentration grants – serve only to restore financing to pre-recession levels. Steady gains in state funding do far more than that.

⁴² Cortines (2015).

⁴³ Cover letter to the school Board, contained in Superintendent Cortines's (2015) budget for 2015-2016.

⁴⁴ The 2006-07 spending level is adjusted for inflation, using the Bureau of Labor Statistics consumer price index (<http://www.bls.gov/cpi/cpid1509.pdf>).

⁴⁰ Marsh (in press).

⁴¹ Medina (2011).

The District faces daunting fixed costs, such as pension obligations, facilities maintenance, and the special education cost burden. Yet per pupil spending within the current operating budget appears to have climbed by 28% above pre-recession levels.

The District, from its first year of LCFF implementation (2013-14), folded supplemental and concentration grant revenues into the base budget. The governor's finance reform awards local districts across California greater control over their budgets. At the same time, the \$1.1 billion in supplemental and concentration grants stem from the presence of disadvantaged students that populate LAUSD schools. State rules require that districts increase programs or services for students in proportion to the new revenues that these youngsters generate. Our earlier analysis, conducted with United Way of L.A., detailed how much of this funding was distributed to elementary schools independent of relative concentrations of disadvantaged students, or TSP pupils.⁴⁵

Some District officials argue that a blurred focus on equity stems from the pressing priority of restoring staff eliminated post-recession, along with the fact that four-fifths of LAUSD students fall under at least one of the TSP pupil categories. So, why target new dollars on schools that serve larger concentrations of poor students?

Yet this runs counter to the fact that achievement varies widely among schools, as detailed in section 1. And by largely ignoring schools with high concentrations of TSP pupils, the District seems to set aside Sacramento's requirement that services be expanded in proportion to the new revenues that TSP students generate.

Cornerstone 2 – Identify School-Level Programs that Work

Once District leaders identify significant resources, one second task is to track what programs better motivate and lift low-achieving students inside schools. We have found no unit within LAUSD that is charged with and holds the technical capacity to accomplish this task. Who will make sense of the 40-plus initiatives listed in the budget, aimed at TSP pupils? Who's gathering data inside schools on

measurable effects on teachers and pupils? Is the Board systematically funding programs that work, or cutting back on ineffective efforts?

We agree with the District's logic that efforts may be widely applied to many schools, given that four-fifths of LAUSD students fall under one of the "weighted student" (TSP) categories. And remember that NAEP scores show that just over one-third of all LAUSD fourth-graders are deemed proficient readers.

But the scattering of modest dollars over 40 disparate efforts – blended with a return to status quo staffing – does not make for a focused pro-equity strategy that can be monitored over time. Disparities remain wide both among and within schools. LAUSD offices do episodically identify promising or floundering programs, including research on pre-K efforts, early reading, and widening access to rigorous A-G courses. But the Board's diffuse effort to lift TSP pupils involves many additional programs for which little evidence exists. And over \$4 billion will have been spent by the end of the coming school year – purportedly aimed at narrowing disparities in learning.



Cornerstone 3 – Define Common Ground among Education Stakeholders

Finally, the District could lead in devising a coherent pro-equity strategy. The good news is that a widening variety of education activists, community groups, and funders have come to focus on social justice over the past generation – aiming to more fairly distribute the benefits of schooling. The less

productive news is that L.A.'s feisty array of stakeholders rarely agrees upon a clear strategy, then empirically tracks progress on what's working and what's not.

Education interests have split badly across the policy logics sketched above. Bridging these divides will not be easy. The identities and funding pressed by influential players have become tied to how aggressively they challenge, or defend, the dominant structure of schooling.

A nascent yet encouraging conversation has surfaced over whether pro-charter advocates might help build effective schools within the District. This could, for example, blend the advantages of site-level management and flexibility in recruiting strong teachers – visible among pilot schools –

⁴⁵ United Way of Greater Los Angeles / CLASS (2015).

to systematically innovate and evaluate results over time. This could involve the expansion of charter schools, alongside investments in District-monitored experiments.

The key point is that divisiveness among stakeholders makes it even more difficult to find effective strategies for narrowing inequalities. Initiatives cooperatively led by District leaders and inventive insurgents could move

beyond political haggling and toward identifying what works inside schools.

Still, this would require that District leaders define a larger slice of discretionary dollars, carefully design promising school-level efforts, and weave together a unified approach with disparate interest groups. A coherent pro-equity strategy, led by LAUSD yet formulated with a variety of stakeholders, could make for a hopeful start.

5. Build from What Works – Next Steps Toward a Pro-Equity Agenda

Ideally, LAUSD would build a coherent agenda – operationalized through a simple cluster of programs inside schools – to reduce wide disparities in student learning among and within schools. District leaders, along with their analysts, may hold the capacity to draft this blueprint and carefully track school-level implementation. They could build from evolving knowledge of what works.

Pieces of the Pro-Equity Puzzle

We have described the wide and ever-lively terrain in which LAUSD's pro-fairness efforts are unfolding. This analysis offers good news on two fronts. First, something has been working over the past generation, as student test scores and graduation rates have inched upward. The most buoyant lift was enjoyed by low-achieving kids about a decade ago, while this progress has slowed in recent years. The still-climbing educational attainment of many Latino and Black parents aids their own upward mobility, along with the early literacy skills of their children.

Second, we find that LAUSD has set in place firm pieces of a coherent pro-fairness strategy. But District leaders – nudged by a variety of stakeholders – seem more enthused about creating new programs or funding fresh staff positions than methodically tracking which efforts yield stronger pupil engagement, teacher motivation, and learning.

L.A. has become the nation's largest laboratory for the most colorful variety of publicly funded schools, including charter, magnet, pilot, and other site-run campuses. District analysts do cooperate with university researchers to study the effects of these diverse initiatives, including USC's joint evaluation of the Board's Public School Choice initiative. But data provided by charter schools remain uneven, and procedures for sharing public data, cumbersome.

The District has mounted a variety of programs inside traditional and alternative schools in hopes of lifting student engagement and achievement: more posts for EL specialists, putting the Common Core curriculum in place, advancing more rigorous courses for high school students, and instituting restorative justice efforts to reach many youths. The District's expansion and recent consolidation of its pre-k programs may help to sustain gains in the learning curves of elementary students. Yet absent a system for evaluating such programs, we cannot be certain which strategies are most effective and under what conditions.

District leaders have moved slightly higher shares of new LCFF dollars to schools with larger concentrations of the targeted student population (TSP). The Board committed to this progressive distribution in 2014, although the systematic distribution still only applies to 6% of the District's annual budget. The bulk of the \$4 billion in pro-equity state funding – spent by the end of the coming school year – will go for backstopping the costs of special education, along with administrative and librarian posts in elementary schools. How exactly this serves to lift achievement among poor kids remains unclear.

Another huge unknown is how principals choose to use a variety of new posts and fungible dollars that arrive with LCFF funding. Schools remain places for compliance in many cases, not organizations that consciously try to learn about what's working, through what human processes. Focus groups and conversations conducted for the CLASS Coalition's LCFF Report Card reveal that some principals see LCFF dollars as simply another categorical aid program. And when District leaders fail to articulate a simple blueprint for fairness – with a coherent cluster of program efforts – it's not surprising that principals and teacher leaders remain in a reactive mode.

Pro-Equity Cornerstones within Budget Constraints

This report aimed to illuminate the wide landscape that conditions LAUSD's long-term success and persisting short-falls when it comes to reducing disparities in student learning. We invite education stakeholders to study these results and devise policy options.

This analysis suggests that the District has the capacity to develop a pro-equity agenda built around the three cornerstones discussed above, despite budget constraints. We understand why LAUSD has grown increasingly concerned with the overall budget picture in light of declining enrollments, pension obligations, and rising costs of special education. However, we detailed above how LAUSD now receives significantly more resources from the state per pupil than it did prior to the recession.

The policy question is not only whether society offers sufficient resources to the L.A. school system. It's also whether this vast institution can effectively apply these resources toward better lifting kids and equalizing the benefits of education. Failing to regain its momentum in raising achievement, or devising more attractive forms of schooling in the eyes of parents, District leaders will further soften family demand for public schools.

Section 4 delineated basic cornerstones for a simple pro-equity agenda:

- *Define and focus fungible dollars on fairness.* Allocating 6% of the District's budget for reducing achievement gaps seems unambitious at best, as argued by United Way and the CLASS Coalition of nonprofit groups. LAUSD could undertake an effort to map per-pupil spending among schools located in varying neighborhoods, better understanding the assignment of experienced teachers and program dollars that flow in nontransparent ways.

- *Identify school-level programs that work.* Even within the modest budget aimed at TSP kids, the District spreads the 6% across more than 40 differing categories of staff and program efforts. Which of these funding streams are yielding richer teacher morale or student engagement? A scatter-gun approach yields unknown effects inside schools.

- *Establish common ground with stakeholders.* The District earnestly tries to respond to a variety of interest groups, many of whom press particular fixes – which may inadvertently move LAUSD away from a cohesive strategy for fairness. Yet a steady hand on the tiller inside the District could help to synchronize various efforts – English-learner initiatives, A-G course sequences, Common Core, restorative justice – and build a coherent agenda.

LAUSD leaders have reason to be proud. The learning curves of students have climbed markedly over the past



generation, even as the District served many non-English speaking families and neighborhoods in decline economically. This steady work of determined educators has contributed to the upward mobility of many young parents – smaller families that now lift their own children to new heights.

Remaining proactive will be key in coming years. Regaining enroll-

ment growth – as birth rates stabilize – may depend upon creating attractive options for families and youths alike. The spread of pilot schools and quality magnet programs offer two examples. Meaningfully engaging parents and further boosting graduation rates serve the interests of all education stakeholders, helping to stabilize the resource base from which LAUSD can adapt and innovate.

Advancing fairness would further spark enthusiasm for LAUSD schools. When neighborhoods and their schools feel unsafe or uninspiring, parents have voted with their feet, moving to other school districts. A network of schools that's diverse, enticing, and yields fairness for all students just might rekindle the District's recent history of success.

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