

Equity before Equality:

A Focus on African-American
Student Achievement

Best Practices,
Lessons Learned,
& Next Steps



WE BELIEVE
MADERA UNIFIED

2020/2021



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Our Kids
deserve
Better!

Why is African-American Student Achievement a priority?

In the Spring of 2018, the Madera Unified School Board and the superintendent made the decision to take on a nationwide problem – African-American Student Achievement. Unfortunately, at Madera Unified, close to 20% of all African-American students have been suspended one-or-more times. Additionally, 64% of African-American students felt they were not being treated fairly by adults.

20%

of African-American students have been suspended one-or-more times

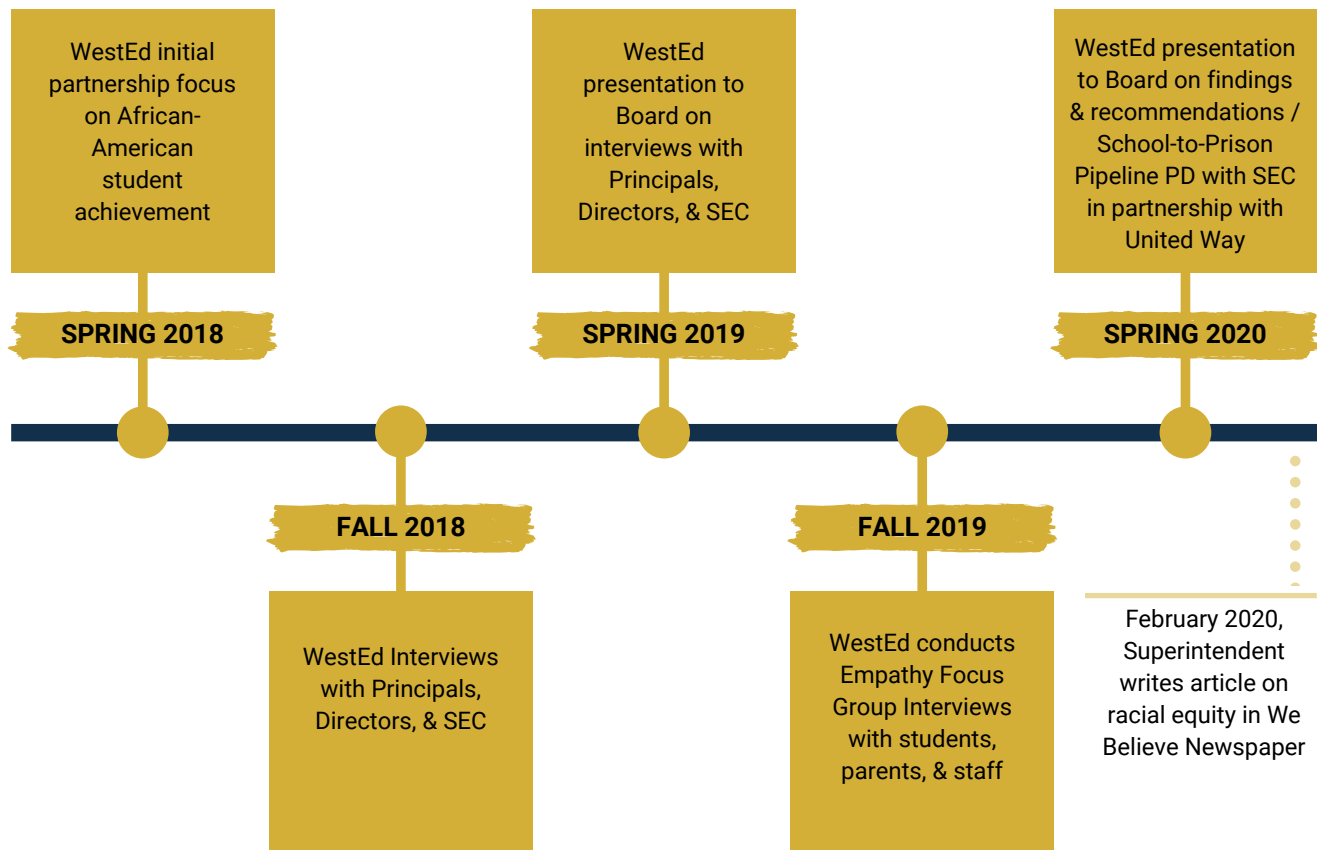
To learn more about how our students felt, our District partnered with WestEd, a high-quality educational research institution, to assist us with developing an improvement plan. WestEd conducted empathy interviews with our students and found a striking difference between the way African-American students perceive their experiences in the district compared to all other student groups. We know that deep-down our staff and administration care – and want all students to achieve at high levels, including African-American students. But if equity within our district is truly important to us, if we believe in Love over Hate, then the only way to achieve it is to look in places within ourselves that are sometimes difficult and painful to confront. Doing this is the only way to determine if our intentions actually match our actions. It matters how our students perceive our actions as educators. Quickly casting off their perceptions as incomplete or invalid only leads to our own blindspots continuing. If a student's perception of our actions is incorrect, then it means we have to do a better job of communicating our intentions with them. The WestEd report revealed to us that our blindspots and ability to communicate and empathize with African-American students is considerably high.

The work described and documented in this report provides a summary of the ways Madera Unified leadership are beginning to build better awareness and understanding of complex issues blocking our ability to educate all students, including our African-American students at high levels. Our primary goal in taking on this work is to help us as staff identify ways we can grow and improve to promote positive change for African-American student achievement.



TIMELINE

The timeline below outlines the actions Madera Unified has made in the journey toward helping African-American students achieve at higher levels.



In the Spring of 2018, WestEd partnered with Madera Unified to begin focusing on African-American student achievement.

In 2019, the California Department of Education released the results from the California Dashboard which identified the need for differentiated assistance for African-American students and students with disabilities.

On March 13, 2020, Madera Unified announced school closures which remained through the end of the 2019/20 school year. On May 26, 2020, protests began across the nation when an African-American man was killed during a police arrest.

March 2020, protests begin across the nation when an African-American man was killed during a police arrest.

March 2020, Madera Unified announces school closures

Love Over Hate student-led protest in partnership with Madera Police Department held in Lions Town & Country Park

SUMMER 2020

African-American student listening session with district & school leaders

FALL 2020

SPRING 2020

Meeting with African-American students at high schools in partnership with FCOE & United Way

FALL 2020

Part I & II School-to-Prison Pipeline PD with school leaders / 1st & 2nd Anti-racist Collaborative meetings

FALL 2020

Panorama Education school climate survey sent to students & staff

"THERE IS
NOTHING HERE
FOR US."



WestEd Report

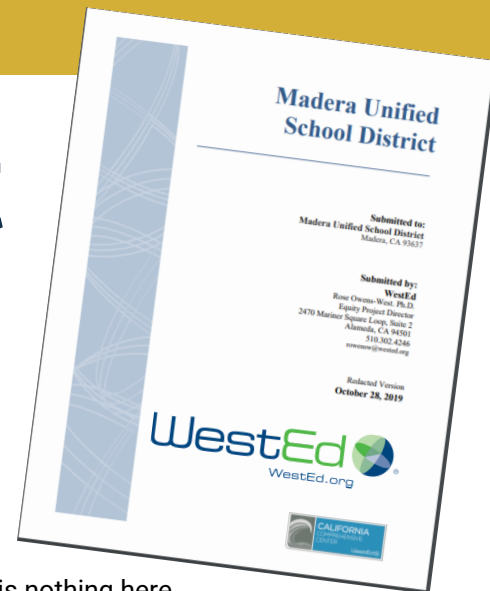


Dr. Rose Owens-West,
Director for Equity Projects,
is the lead with WestEd
who has been working with
our district since 2018.

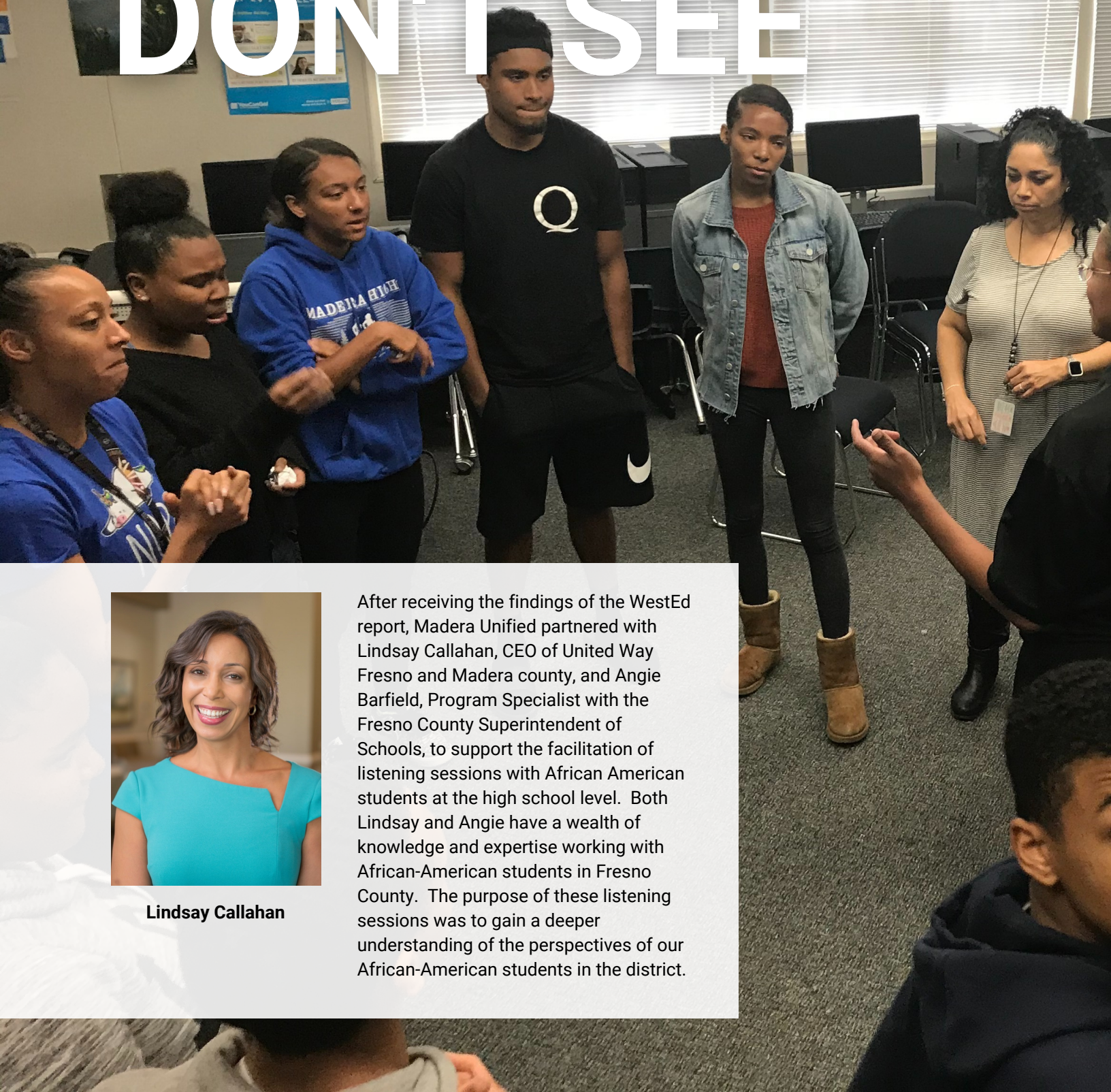
The WestEd report revealed that African-American students feel as though no one sees them or hears them. Now that we are aware of this, are we willing to look deeper even if it hurts?

African-American students feel there is nothing here for them in Madera Unified. They know if they bring a concern up, they will not be given the benefit of the doubt and justice will not be served.

We currently have limited staff who are actively advocating for African-American students. Everyone should be given the benefit of the doubt and the majority of our staff want the best for our students. However, we also recognized that our staff have severe detrimental blind spots and do not currently have the capacity to see why our African-American students have such a different experience in our schools.

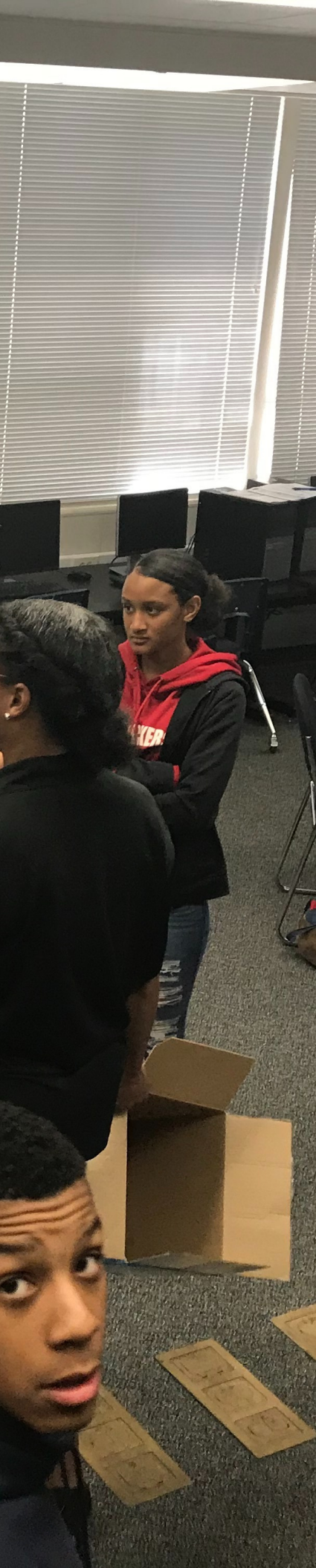


WHAT YOU DON'T SEE



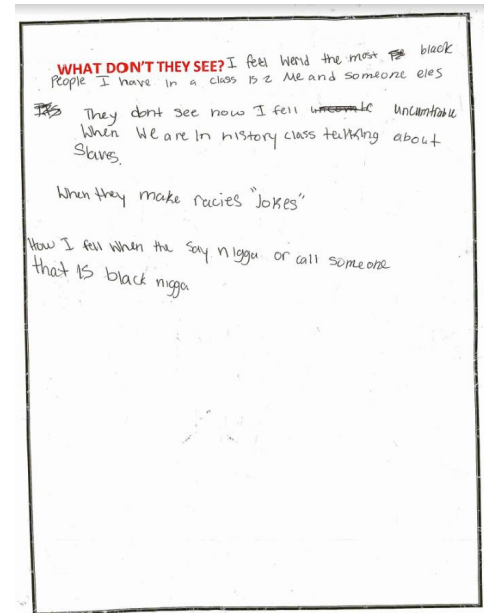
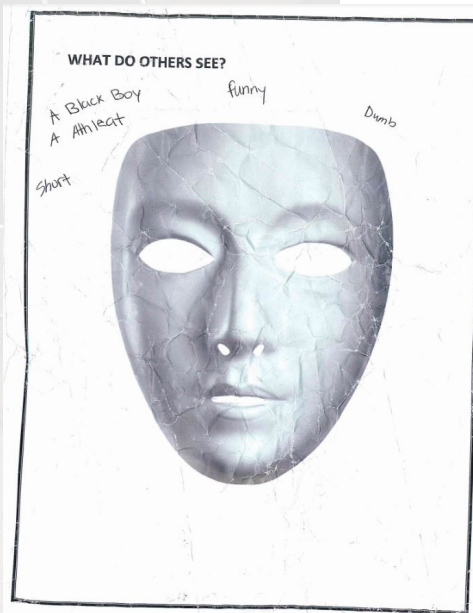
Lindsay Callahan

After receiving the findings of the WestEd report, Madera Unified partnered with Lindsay Callahan, CEO of United Way Fresno and Madera county, and Angie Barfield, Program Specialist with the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, to support the facilitation of listening sessions with African American students at the high school level. Both Lindsay and Angie have a wealth of knowledge and expertise working with African-American students in Fresno County. The purpose of these listening sessions was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of our African-American students in the district.



Angie Barfield

Angie Barfield led the facilitation of multiple meetings with African-American students at our high school campuses. During the meetings, Angie asked students to complete the "Mask" activity, "What do others see and what don't they see." This activity asked students to write on one side of the paper what people see in them and on the other side of the paper what people don't see. Angie then asked all the students to crumble the piece of paper and throw it on the floor. Angie mixed the crumbled pieces of paper up and handed a random paper to each student. She then asked each student to take turns reading the paper she gave them aloud. Hearing students say out loud things like, "ugly", "ghetto", "criminal", "dumb", was an incredibly emotional and impactful experience. This activity along with other sharing exercises helped students be more prepared to share their experiences in our school system.



What you see and what you don't see activity - led by Angie Barfield



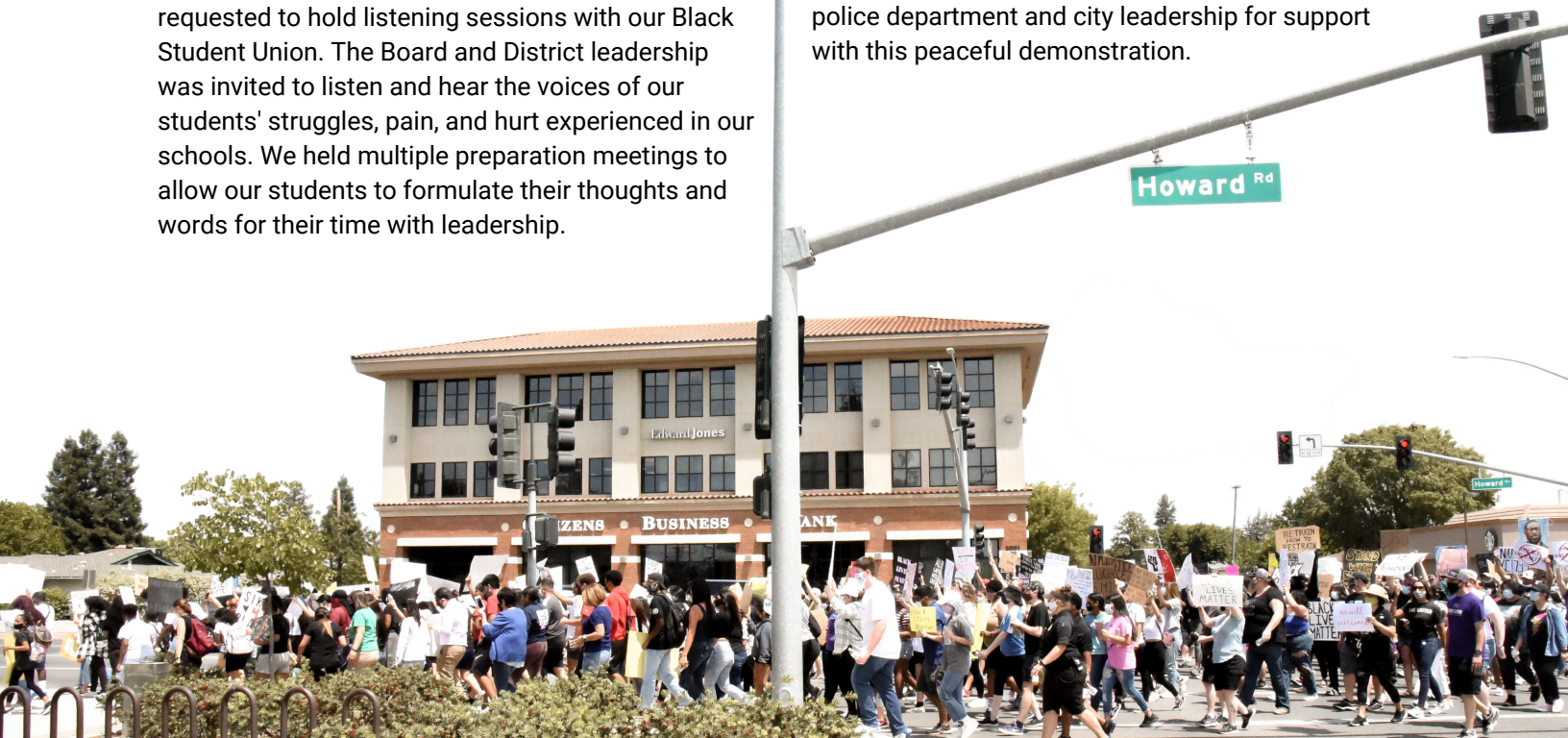
LOVE OVER HATE



The following is an excerpt from a We Believe Newspaper article written by Babatunde Ilori.

"In early June 2020, a week after George Floyd's death, I received a text that changed the way I see my role as an employee of Madera Unified and what it means to be truly Anti-Racist. Two MUSD students, Mary Idowu and Jeremiah Goodman, asked for help to organize a peaceful protest in Madera. I had the pleasure of having already met them pre-COVID-19 pandemic. After the WestEd African American Student achievement report was presented in January 2020, the Superintendent requested to hold listening sessions with our Black Student Union. The Board and District leadership was invited to listen and hear the voices of our students' struggles, pain, and hurt experienced in our schools. We held multiple preparation meetings to allow our students to formulate their thoughts and words for their time with leadership.

On Friday, March 13, schools closed across the state of California and, unfortunately, we did not end up holding the scheduled listening sessions. However, months later our students contacted us for support with organizing a protest in response to George Floyd's May 25th death. I initially tried to convince them to do something else due to safety concerns. Some protest over George Floyd's death had turned violent. As a staff member for Madera Unified, we always prioritize student safety, and this was no different. Our students were deeply passionate about doing this and reassured us it would be safe, and they already had plans to contact the madera police department and city leadership for support with this peaceful demonstration.





Our students were able to bring together law enforcement, city leaders, and the school district to support the planning and event management of the peaceful protest called, Unify Madera, Love Over Hate. I was, and continue to be, impressed with the leadership our students exhibited while organizing the peaceful protest. The students led many planning meetings that went long into the night, talking through all the details to make the event safe and successful. The Madera Police Department was fully supportive of our students and developed a stronger community bond through the work. The students even invited Police Chief Lawson and Mayor Medellin to speak at the event, an invitation they both enthusiastically accepted. Over 600 community members came in support of our students, including city and county leaders.

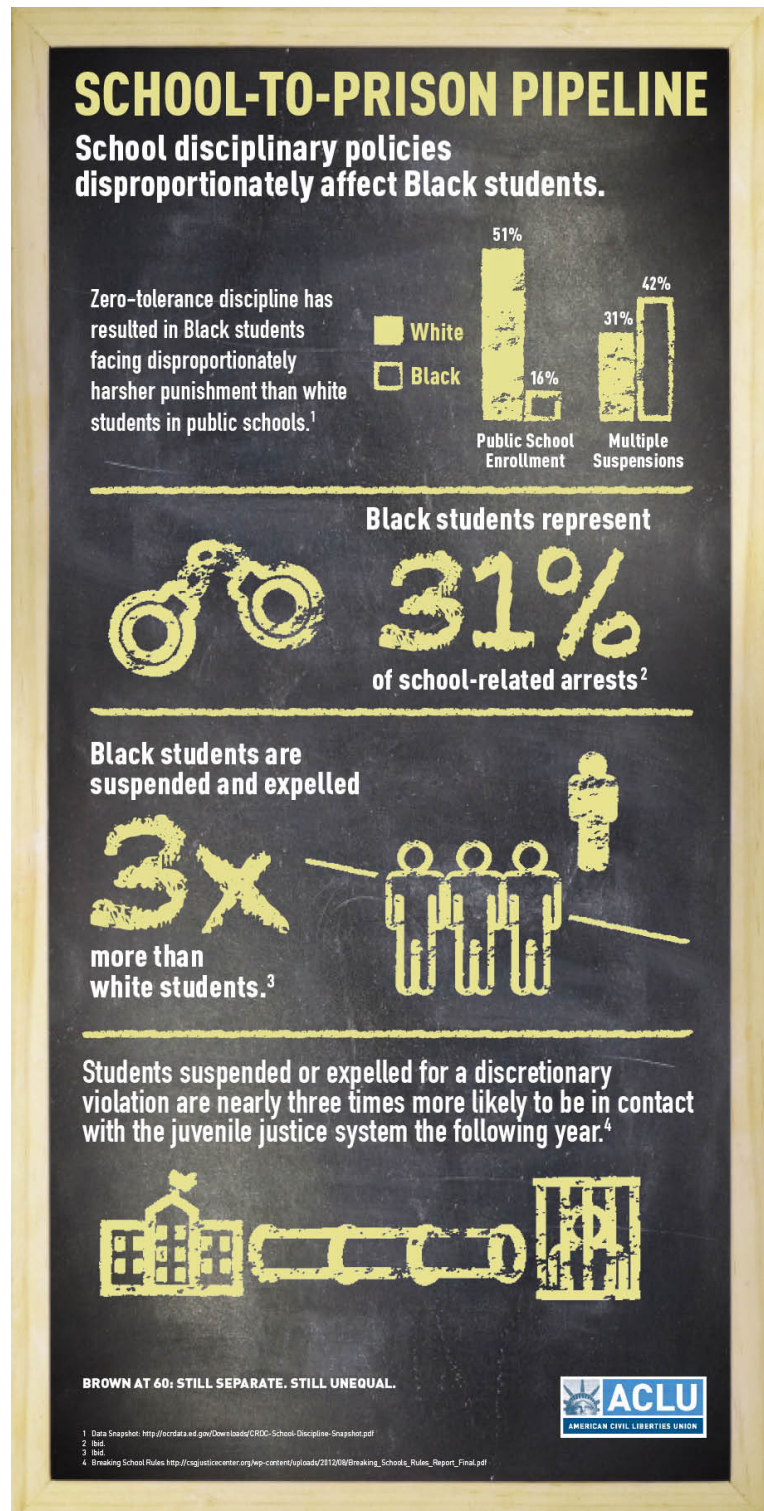
The event was truly a unifying, blessed experience for all in attendance. We are grateful that Mary and Jeremiah contacted us for support, and our district, along with the Madera police department and the City, made the right decision to fully back our students and stand in solidarity with them as they led. This is what it means for a community to become Anti-Racist: to speak out when you see racism in action, to unequivocally yield positions of power to those otherwise marginalized. One of our district's core values is Equity before Equality. Equity before Equality means ensuring every student has what they need to succeed in our district. This may mean that certain students do require significantly more resources to get educated at high levels, feel like they matter, and are seen and heard in our district."



SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The “school-to-prison” pipeline is an alarming trend across the United States where significant numbers of students living in poverty, with disabilities, foster or homeless students end up going from the public school system to the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

While this should cause concern on its own accord, there are also significant numbers of students of color following the disturbing trend of the school-to-prison pipeline as well. Across the State of California, 3% of students have been suspended 1-or-more times compared to a staggering 9% of African-American students across the state. Locally in Madera Unified, our numbers are even more sobering. Six percent of students across the district have been suspended 1-or-more times, compared to almost 20% of African-American students. This means that African-American students are four times more likely to be suspended in our district when compared to all other student groups. Furthermore, the number of African-American students suspended 1-or-more times is two times greater than the state's number of African-American students who have been suspended. When doing a deeper dive on the reasons why African-American students are suspended, you will find that African-American students are two times more likely to be suspended for defiance or disruption than any other student group in the district.



MUSD Data

Madera Unified
6% School District

of all students have been
suspended 1 or more times



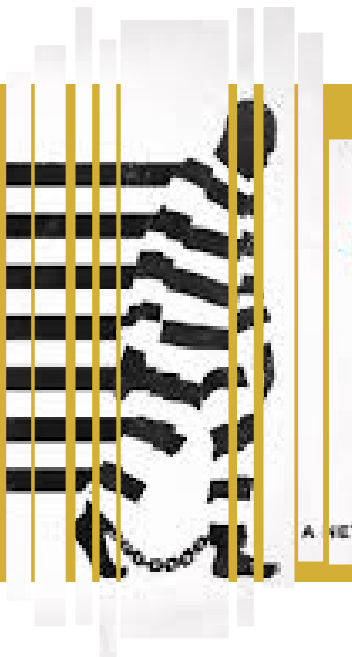
Prison System
33%

of African American males are
serving prison sentences, **50%**
of people in prison are there
for non-violent crimes

PARALLELS BETWEEN ZERO-TOLERANCE AND LAW AND ORDER POLICIES

Zero-Tolerance policies have striking parallels to criminal justice “law and order” policies such as “3-strikes and you’re out”. Students of color, specifically African American and Hispanic students have and still are disciplined at disproportionate rates. As stated earlier, 20% of African-American students in our district have been suspended one or more times, compared to all students at 6%. Close to 50% of all suspensions are due to willful defiance. This datapoint parallels 33% of African-American males serving prison sentences. Fifty percent of people in prison are there for non-violent crimes.

Other striking parallels include the effectiveness of interventions such as school suspensions, expulsions and prison sentences. According to research conducted by the “Everyone Graduates Center” students are twice as likely to drop out of school if they have been suspended one or more times. Furthermore, a report conducted by the Prison Policy Initiative found that during 2008, formerly incarcerated people had a 27% unemployment rate compared to 5.6% unemployment rate for all residents in the United States.



13TH SCREENING DISCUSSION

Shortly after the WestEd report was presented, the Superintendent's Executive Cabinet held a 13th Screening film discussion facilitated by Lindsay Callahan, United Way CEO. 13th is an award-winning film that explores the intersection of race, justice, and the mass incarceration system in the United States. During the film discussion, we discussed the following:

- What is the purpose of prison?
- What biases does our culture have that perpetuate/comply with the criminalization of namely men of color in education?
- Where do we see the manifestation of the prison industrial complex in our education system?
- How does this impact our work?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PRISON?

The film discussion was rich and informative and the Executive Cabinet saw major connections to education, specifically the school-to-prison pipeline. After completing the session, the Executive Cabinet felt it would be critically important for school site leadership to have this film discussion as well. Two different 13th screening discussions with site leadership occurred between September and November. Prior to the second session, site leaders completed a writing assignment where they shared how they can apply what they learned into their work at their school site.

Site leaders got the opportunity to discuss their assignments in small groups. The following themes emerged from the discussions: Importance of Building Strong Relationships, Cultural Competency, Student Voice, High Standards and Expectations, and Courageous Conversations.



Themes and Next Steps from 13th Connections Assignment



Student Voice

A common theme expressed by site leaders during the session is the importance of student voice. Site leaders discussed different ways they can obtain feedback from students through listening sessions to gain a better understanding of their students' perspectives and challenges.

High Standards and Expectations

Site leaders discussed what former President George Bush described as the soft bigotry of low expectations. Staff needs to have high expectations for all students, including African-American students. Lowering the bar causes more damage and creates more inequities within the system.

Courageous Conversations

In order to have courageous conversations, we have to discuss things that might be awkward, painful or difficult to talk about. Site leaders felt that they needed to have these courageous conversations but wanted support with how to do this with their staff.

Building Strong Relationships

Site leaders clearly felt that very intentional work would need to be done in order to build staff capacity to significantly improve their relationships with African-American students. This would involve high-quality implementation of restorative practices and positive behavior intervention and supports. This would include speaking out when racism, discrimination or other dehumanizing behaviors happen to students or staff.

Cultural Competency

Site leaders discussed ways to improve the cultural competency of staff and students at their school site through different activities such as having staff complete cultural competency training and completing the privilege indicator test. Site leaders felt that they would have to model the behavior they want to see in their staff and that behavior would then be modeled to our students.

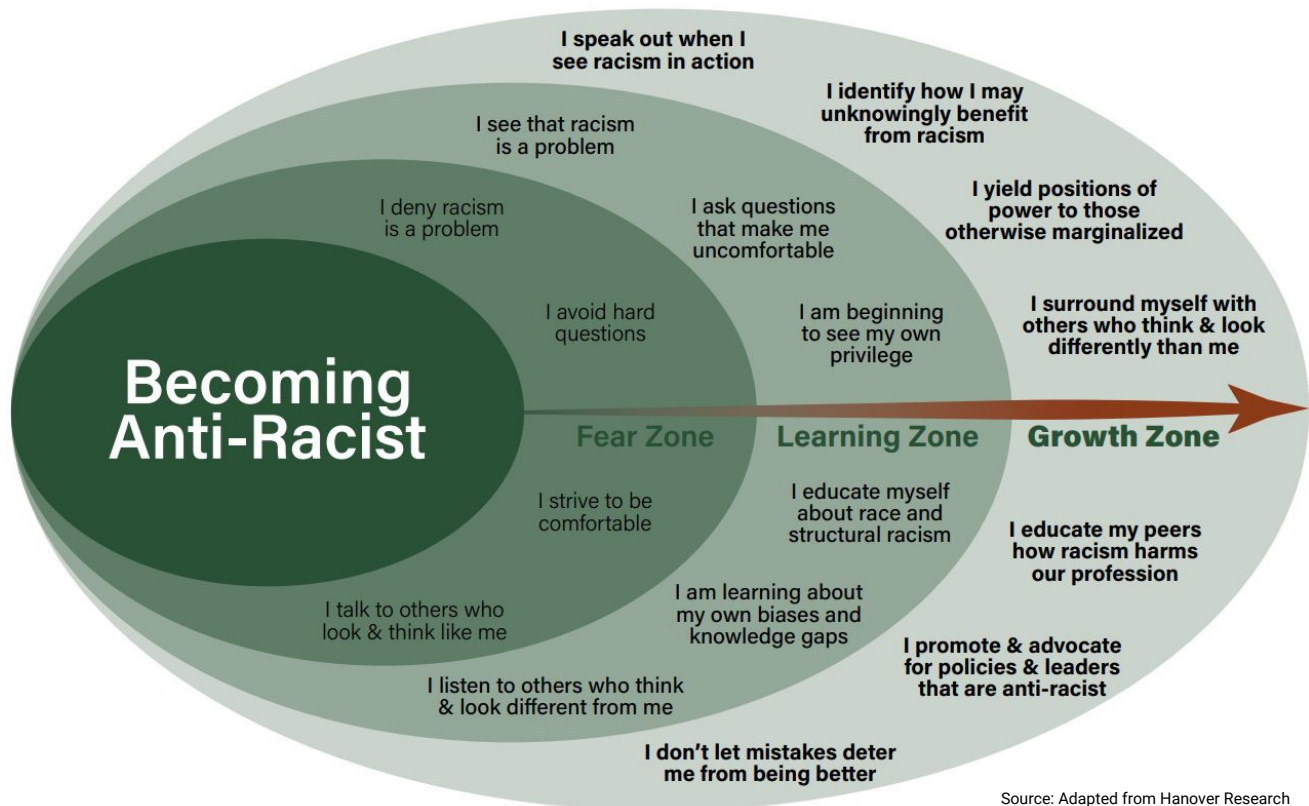


The Work Ahead

Beverly Daniel Tatum stated the following to describe what it means to be Antiracist.

"I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt...Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around...But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt – unless they are actively antiracist – they will find themselves carried along with the others."





What if...

we were able to create a culture in which all staff, students, and our community at large are not just saying they are not racist but are actively Anti-Racist?

We would move from a posture of the following:

- I deny racism is a problem
- I avoid hard questions
- I strive to be comfortable
- I talk to others who look & think like me

To a posture that looks like this:

- I speak out when I see racism in action
- I identify how I may unknowingly benefit from racism
- I yield positions of power to those otherwise marginalized
- I surround myself with others who think & look differently than me
- I educate my peers on how racism harms our profession
- I promote & advocate for policies & leaders that are anti-racist
- I do not let mistakes deter me from being better

It starts with us, as leaders and as a community, intentionally having conversations about how we can better honor, respect, and love each other as fellow human beings made in the image of God. For far too long we have been divided, based on things like race, ethnicity, income levels, primary language spoken at home, where we live, or if we have a disability.

We Believe that we can become a district that embraces our differences as human beings, as amazing assets rather than deficits. This all starts with all of us continually having what Glenn Singleton would call, "Courageous Conversations". We work for a district that is willing to take on challenging subjects such as racism head on. We are taking the road less traveled and, rather than trying to ignore the problem, we are pouring our hearts, energy, compassion, and love into this work. We Believe that one day we will be able to say with confidence that Madera Unified is a place where all students will experience an unparalleled educational journey that is intellectually, socially, and personally transformative.

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