

# MORE THAN A DREAM

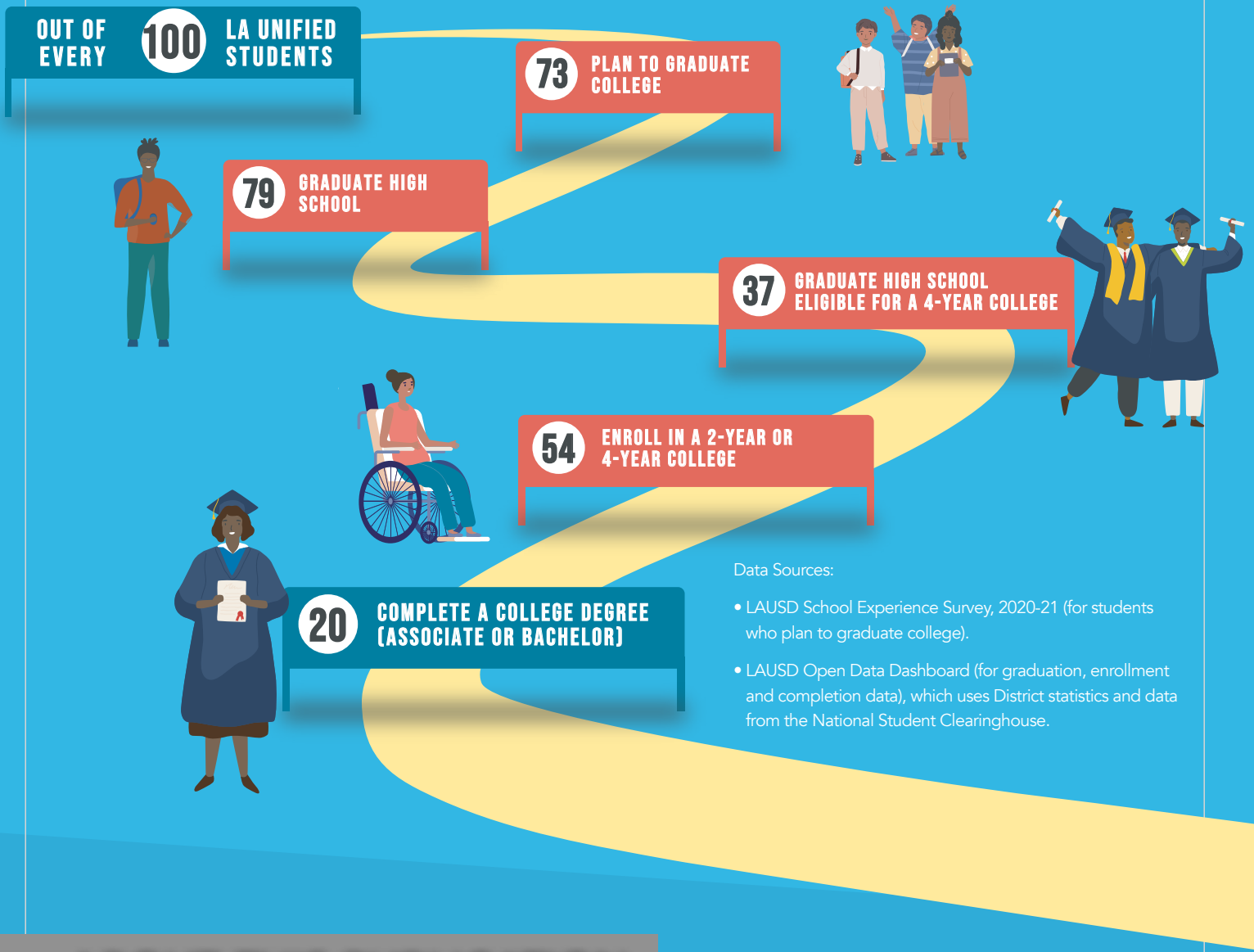
USING "BEST FIT" COLLEGE ADVISING  
TO HELP STUDENTS OF COLOR SUCCEED



**PARTNERSHIP**  
FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS


# NAVIGATING THE PATH TO COLLEGE COMPLETION FOR LA STUDENTS

Despite significant progress, LA Unified students continue to experience a troubling gap between college aspiration and college completion: 73% of high school students aspire to complete a 4-year college degree, but only 20% complete a post-secondary degree of any kind. We must clear the path to college completion, including investing in resource equity, improving instructional practice, and deepening partnerships with families and communities. For more information, visit [partnershipla.org/news/more-than-a-dream](https://partnershipla.org/news/more-than-a-dream)



## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This policy brief is the first in a series of publications designed to uncover the challenges and opportunities related to college access and success for students in the 19 Partnership for LA Schools, in all Los Angeles Unified Schools, and in schools throughout California and beyond. Our goal is to raise awareness and identify opportunities where LA Unified leaders, educators, partners and families can collaborate to achieve college success for more Los Angeles students. The Partnership thanks all those who partner with us in this work, most particularly the LA Unified Division of Instruction, National College Attainment Network, the Gates Foundation, and our many college partners serving students at our schools.



# THREE OUT OF FOUR LA UNIFIED STUDENTS PLAN TO GRADUATE FROM A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE

Let's start with a basic fact: the overwhelming majority of Los Angeles students want to graduate from a four-year college.<sup>1</sup> And with good reason. College graduates have far greater options when it comes to employment,<sup>2</sup> and a college degree is a major engine of socio-economic mobility, particularly for low-income students.<sup>3</sup> Californians with a four-year degree earn approximately \$40,000 more each year than their peers who have only earned a high school diploma. Over the course of a lifetime, this translates to over a million additional dollars.<sup>4</sup>

The pandemic has raised the stakes for higher education. Individuals with less than a college degree were much more vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 on health and employment.<sup>5</sup> We've also seen a 7% reduction nationally in the number of students enrolling in college immediately after high school graduation.<sup>6</sup> Students from historically under-resourced communities were hit especially hard, showing college matriculation declining at double the rate of their more affluent peers.

Not everyone needs to -- or wants to -- go to college, and students should be able to make their own choices once they graduate from high school. However, our education system often makes a de facto choice to exclude the majority of low-income students of color from the benefits of a college diploma. There is a vast disconnect between aspiration and attainment: **3 out of 4 Los Angeles students aspire to complete a 4-year college degree, but only 1 in 5 complete a post-secondary degree of any kind.**<sup>7</sup>

“  
I'M GOING TO FOLLOW MY DREAMS. I'M GOING TO GO TO USC, GRADUATE, AND MOVE ON. PEOPLE WILL TRY TO BRING ME DOWN, BUT I'M GONNA KEEP ON FIGHTING AND STAY UP AND ACCOMPLISH MY DREAMS.

— Jayce, 5th Grader in Boyle Heights

For students like Jayce who dream of completing college, education systems and supporting institutions must address these barriers with a fierce sense of urgency. LA Unified has made great strides in improving access to college eligibility and enrollment. But we must pay equal attention to the fact that **over half of the LA Unified students who enroll in college do not complete any degree or certificate within six years.**<sup>8</sup> The statistics are even more troubling for students of color from under-resourced communities.

While colleges and universities must own these data and work hard to better support all students towards graduation, the K-12 system also must clear the path to support students for their post-secondary success. In this policy brief, which is the first in a series, we focus on one critical area of needed change: college advising. Advisors must support students in identifying and choosing the “best fit” colleges that will give them the greatest chance of reaching their goals.



# THE COLLEGE STUDENTS CHOOSE TO ATTEND HAS A HUGE IMPACT ON WHETHER THEY GRADUATE

If the goal is to increase the number of LA Unified students who make it to their college graduation, then we need to examine data for LA Unified's post-secondary options. Using data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), we can identify the top 20 destination colleges for LA Unified students from the class of 2019. For each of the colleges, we include the overall graduation rate along with the graduation rate for Black and Latinx students. For community colleges, we also include their transfer rate to other colleges, which includes transfers to 4-year colleges. Finally, we include the average yearly net price for students whose families make under \$30,000 per year (see table on next page).

These data suggest several important conclusions about postsecondary outcomes:

- Most colleges that LA Unified students attend graduate and transfer fewer than half of their full-time, first-time degree- or certificate seeking students within 150% of normal time. For Black students, Latinx students, and students who enroll part-time, the rates are even lower.
- The college a student chooses to attend can have a huge impact on whether they graduate. Depending on which of the top destination colleges a student chooses, their likely graduation rate can vary from 44% to 92% for 4-year schools, and from 21% to 38% for 2-year schools.
- Particular student groups experience even more variance. We've listed here the graduation rates for Latinx and Black students, but data is easily available for other student populations, which is important to scrutinize because of ongoing disparities. For example, Black students' graduation rate exceeds the overall average at three community colleges, but is less than a third of the overall rate at another college.

- Since cost is a key factor in college decision making, it is important to look at college graduation rates and net cost side by side to see how each one could impact student matriculation choice. Unfortunately, the net cost of college is complicated to comprehend and depends on specific family circumstances. Even colleges within the same system (e.g., California State Universities, Los Angeles Community Colleges) can have significantly different net costs for students with similar family incomes, making it difficult to generalize about which types of colleges are the most affordable. However, recent studies, including one from the Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), found that community colleges often have a higher net price for low-income students than the California public four-year universities in their same region, sometimes by as much as 136%.<sup>9</sup>



GOING TO COLLEGE AND GETTING A DEGREE, IT'S GOING TO HELP ME BE INDEPENDENT. I DON'T COME FROM A FAMILY WITH A LOT OF MONEY, SO MY GOAL IS TO BE INDEPENDENT.

— Daveon, 11th grader in South Los Angeles

## 20 COLLEGES THAT ENROLL THE MOST LA UNIFIED STUDENTS

COMMUNITY COLLEGES	GRADUATION RATE*			TRANSFER RATE**	NET PRICE***
	OVERALL	BLACK STUDENTS*	LATINX STUDENTS*		
East Los Angeles College	38%	46%	28%	5%	\$9,000
College of the Canyons	38%	21%	33%	13%	\$3,392
Pasadena City College	37%	18%	25%	8%	\$2,158
Glendale Community College	36%	17%	22%	12%	\$2,006
El Camino Community College District	35%	17%	28%	10%	\$8,625
Los Angeles Pierce College	32%	19%	29%	9%	\$9,387
Santa Monica College	29%	11%	19%	18%	\$2,752
Los Angeles Valley College	26%	13%	22%	10%	\$9,073
Los Angeles Harbor College	26%	21%	19%	11%	\$8,646
Los Angeles Trade Technical College	25%	26%	25%	9%	\$6,716
Los Angeles City College	22%	6%	19%	7%	\$6,439
Los Angeles Mission College	21%	30%	20%	9%	\$9,278
Long Beach City College	20%	12%	20%	11%	\$2,529

4-YEAR COLLEGES	GRADUATION RATE*			NET PRICE***
	OVERALL	BLACK STUDENTS*	LATINX STUDENTS*	
University of California-Los Angeles	92%	80%	87%	\$8,553
University of California-Irvine	84%	81%	79%	\$9,558
University of California-Riverside	76%	75%	75%	\$8,366
California State University-Long Beach	74%	70%	72%	\$6,364
California State University-Northridge	55%	42%	51%	\$5,945
California State University-Los Angeles	52%	43%	49%	\$1,379
California State University-Dominguez Hills	44%	38%	44%	\$2,455

\*The overall graduation rate is also known as the "Student Right to Know" or the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) graduation rate. It tracks the progress of students who began their studies as full-time, first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students to see if they complete a degree or other award such as a certificate within 150% of "normal time" for completing the program in which they are enrolled. Here we are reporting the rate for students who began their studies in 2016 at 2-year colleges, or in 2013 at 4-year colleges, the most recent years for which data is available. <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

\*\*Transfer rate is the percentage of the full-time, first-time students who transferred to another institution, including both 4-year colleges and other community colleges. Here we are reporting the rate for students who began their studies in 2016, the most recent year for which data is available. <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

\*\*\* Net price is the cost of attendance (including room and board) minus gift aid (grants and scholarships) that a student will pay at that school. It represents what a family in that income bracket can expect to pay through a combination of loans, family contribution, and student contribution. We report here the average net price for full-time beginning students with family income between \$0-30,000 in 2018-19, the most recent year for which data is available. <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>. The actual cost for families depends on a range of factors that are better estimated with cost calculators, for example: <https://collegecost.ed.gov/net-price>.



**"BEST FIT"  
COLLEGE ADVISING  
CAN HELP STUDENTS  
OF COLOR SUCCEED**

If we are going to increase the college graduation rate for LA Unified students, we need to do things differently. Research shows that students face significant hurdles on the path to college completion. They often think college will be unaffordable for them, often lack the knowledge to navigate the admissions systems, and often experience low expectations from the adults around them.<sup>10</sup> However, many of these hurdles can be overcome with strong college advising.

The message communicated to all LA Unified students must be firm and consistent: we want you to choose a college that will give you the best chance of graduating. Given that the destination college impacts the likelihood of student success, K-12 districts and schools have an obligation to advise students -- especially students of color from historically under-resourced communities -- during the college application process to consider colleges through four important lenses that are critical to identifying schools that will be the "best fit" for the students' goals and long-term success:

1. Does the school match their interests and preferences?
2. Are they likely to be admitted?
3. Are they likely to graduate close to on-time?<sup>11</sup>
4. Are they likely to receive the financial aid needed to pay for both school tuition and living expenses without taking on unsustainable loans?

The research behind these four lenses of "best fit" college advising is compelling. Research dating back over a decade has found that students are most likely to succeed if they attend the most academically competitive colleges to which they are admitted.<sup>12</sup> And the students who are most likely to "undermatch" -- by selecting and gaining admission to a college that is not the most academically competitive -- are those from historically under-resourced communities and first in their family to attend college.<sup>13</sup>

COLLEGE FOR ME IS VERY IMPORTANT, BECAUSE MY PARENTS IMMIGRATED TO THIS COUNTRY FOR A BETTER FUTURE. THIS IS A BIG ROLE FOR ME, BECAUSE I WOULD BE THE FIRST CHILD IN MY FAMILY TO GO TO COLLEGE AND TO HOPEFULLY GRADUATE. IT'S ALSO PAYING BACK EVERYTHING TO MY PARENTS, THANKING THEM FOR ALL OF THEIR HARD WORK AND FOR GIVING ME THIS OPPORTUNITY. I MOSTLY DO THIS BECAUSE I WANT TO BE A BETTER ROLE MODEL FOR MY SISTER WHO'S 11 YEARS OLD.

— Jovanni, 12th grader in South Los Angeles

We realize, however, that there are multiple factors that students should consider when deciding on their destination college and that sometimes attending colleges that are less selective might be a better choice for an individual student.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, our "best fit" college model incorporates a plethora of data, including student interests and preference. By incorporating "best fit" college advising into their college counseling programs, districts, school systems, and college access organizations across the nation can better help students and families navigate the college application and selection process and pick the right school.

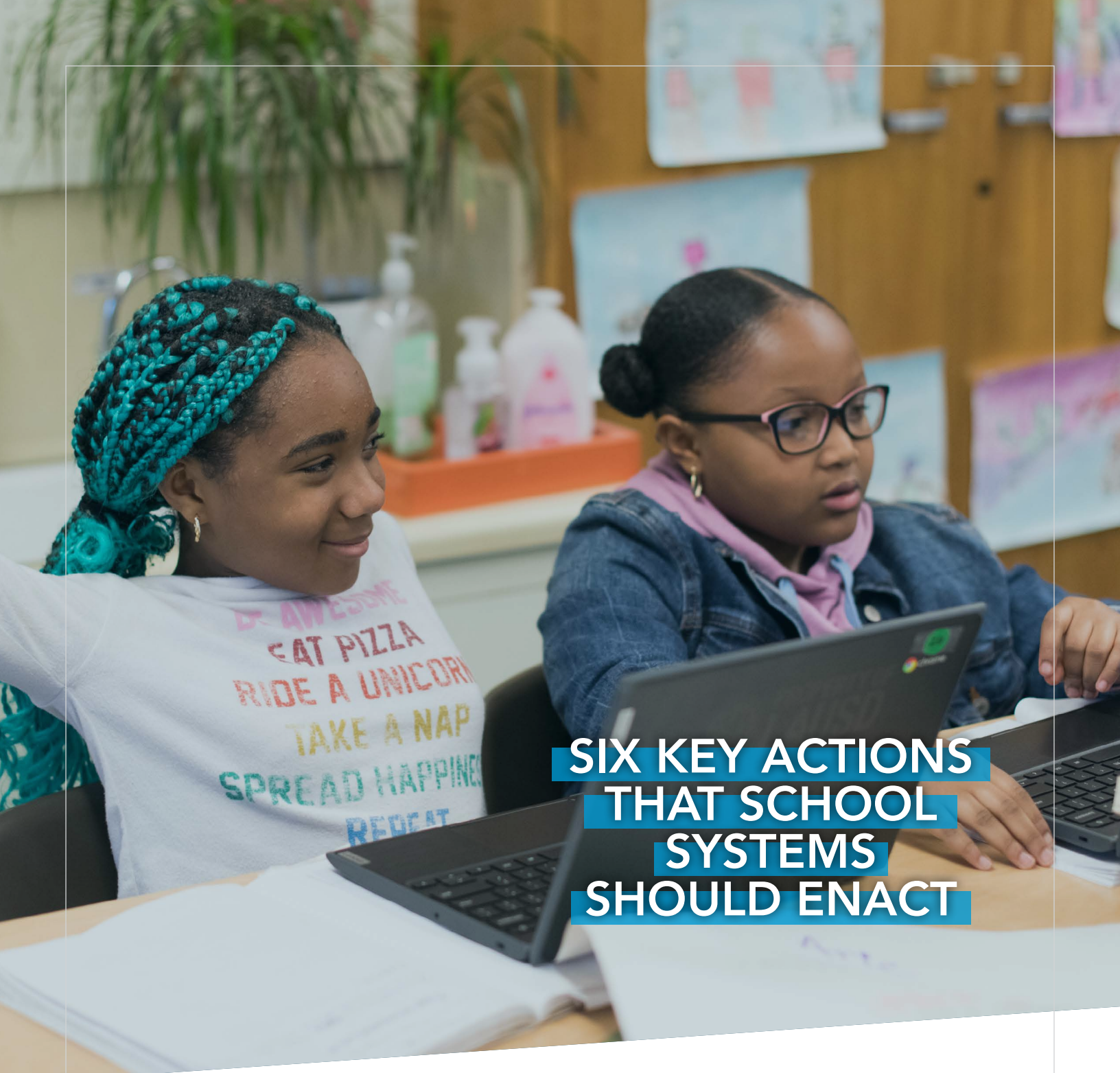
NONE OF MY FAMILY WENT TO COLLEGE. SO I WANT TO GO SO I CAN BE SUCCESSFUL AND COME BACK AND HELP THEM.

— Kamari, 8th grader in Watts

At the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, we identify schools that meet all four criteria as "best fit" colleges and recommend them to students and families. Historically, college counselors have focused primarily on the first two criteria, helping students identify destination schools that are accessible and meet student preferences. However, the additional "best fit" college lenses that address the likelihood of graduation and meeting student financial needs are critical to student success. As stated previously, most colleges attended by LA Unified students graduate and transfer fewer than half of their full-time, first-time degree or certificate seeking students within 150% of normal time. Many of the LA Unified students who choose these schools are eligible for other universities with significantly higher graduation rates, but they are not often advised to compare colleges through a "best fit" lens.

Financial aid availability is also a key factor in student success, since it allows students to focus on school work without worrying about working more hours. Additionally, financial aid and graduation are intricately connected since students who don't graduate are more likely to default on their loans and rarely get the financial payoff from future employment that justifies the monetary sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

As the Partnership for LA Schools has developed and implemented our "Best Fit" college advising system, we have come across a number of potential barriers including adult mindsets, limited college counseling staff, and misinformation about the cost of college. We have spent a great deal of time over the last two years sharing college success data by campus, educating adults in our network about this model, and creating lists of colleges that adhere to the "Best Fit" college criteria. While our work internally is still very much in progress, we have found that changing our approach to college advising systems to include all four "best fit" college lenses (including analysis of student success data and financial aid data) can be a powerful lever for increasing college completion.



## SIX KEY ACTIONS THAT SCHOOL SYSTEMS SHOULD ENACT

In order to increase the college graduation rate amongst alumni, districts and partners should immediately prioritize six key actions. For each action, school systems should include families as key college partners so that the adults who surround our students at home and at school communicate with a similar message of promoting “best fit” colleges:

### 1 Adopt a “Best Fit” College Advising Model

All students and families should receive college advising that incorporates all four “best fit” college criteria so that students make decisions about where they apply and where they matriculate with all four in mind. In order to do that, all counselor professional development should include the “best fit” college advising model and information about using it with their students. Administrators, teachers, and college access partners also should receive similar information.



## 2 Integrate “Best Fit” College Advising into Existing Tools and Resources

Since the ratio of counselors to students is far too low, information on “best fit” colleges needs to be integrated into existing tools and resources shared with students and families. LA Unified has made important investments into programs like Naviance and currently sends all juniors and seniors a College Book with many valuable resources to help them through the college process. These resources should be utilized to prominently share information about college success rates and “best fit” colleges.

## 3 Start Advising Students Earlier

Schools should educate students and families about the “best fit” college advising model early in their schooling and well before their senior year. Researching schools from across the country, identifying schools that match your interests and preferences, and understanding the complexities of college finance will take more time and will need to start earlier. LA Unified has signaled a commitment to this principle by investing in Naviance access for all students in grades 6-12. To increase its effectiveness, they should focus more on ensuring equitable Naviance usage across the district and re-write Naviance curriculum to highlight the research tools that help students better understand college success data.

## 4 Promote “Best Fit” Colleges

Refrain from promoting colleges with low graduation rates and/or those which offer low financial aid (or at least accompany the promotion with contextualization). Partnerships with local colleges can help bridge the matriculation gap, but if LA Unified promotes local colleges to students and families without considering their student success data, they may be inadvertently contributing to students choosing schools less likely to support them to graduation, even if they are eligible elsewhere.

## 5 Advise Students on Pathways to Success Within Colleges

Beyond choosing a college to enroll in, students also need advising on choices they can make to increase their likelihood of success within a college. Most critically, for students enrolling in community college, enrolling full-time in a pathway with better outcomes can make a critical difference. For example, the Associate Degree for Transfer Pathway at California community colleges makes it easier for students to transfer between a California community college and Cal State (CSU), University of California (UC), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and other participating universities.

## 6 Collect and Review College Success Data

In order to monitor progress and refine strategies, LA Unified counselors, administrators, and college access partners should spend more time reviewing data on how many of their students applied and were accepted to college, matriculated successfully, and graduated within 150% of normal time. LA Unified already receives reports from the National Student Clearinghouse detailing the success of district graduates. Using those reports, we can calculate the Estimated Postsecondary Completion (EPSC) rate that will help set goals towards better advising and higher college graduation rates.

Boyle Heights fifth-grader Jayce and all LA Unified students deserve an opportunity to follow their dreams. But for more students to get there, they will need to be part of a system that prioritizes college success and advises them to find their “best fit.” Especially during a time of economic and educational uncertainty, enacting stronger advising systems that help LA Unified students matriculate to a college where they are more likely to be successful will help our system clear the path between student aspirations and student success.



I WANT TO GO TO COLLEGE TO MAKE A BETTER LIFE FOR MYSELF AND THEN TO MAKE MORE MONEY SO I CAN GIVE BACK TO MY FAMILY.

— Sade, 6th grader in Watts



I SEE MYSELF BEING A DOCTOR OR A LAWYER. I WANT TO BE A DOCTOR TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE BE HEALTHY AND A LAWYER TO HELP PEOPLE THROUGH THEIR FAMILY OR MONEY PROBLEMS.

— Chloe, 4th grader in Boyle Heights



## ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS

Launched in 2007, the Partnership is a nonprofit organization that serves 14,200 students across 19 K-12 campuses in Watts, Boyle Heights and South Los Angeles, California. The Partnership is a non-profit, in-district partner to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified), not a charter network. The Partnership is one of the largest, in-district public school transformation organizations in the U.S., and its model combines the rigor and innovation of instructional leadership programs with authentic community partnerships and family engagement to transform district public schools and lead system-wide reforms. As an in-district partner, the Partnership works within the LA Unified context, which includes honoring all collective bargaining agreements for its teachers and school staff. The Partnership's mission is to transform schools to revolutionize school systems, empowering all students with a high-quality education.



## Endnotes

- 1 According to LAUSD School Experience Survey data, 73% of high school students intend to graduate with a 4-year degree (2020-21) and 83% of elementary school parents expect their children to complete at least a 4-year college degree (2016-17).
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- 4 "The Personal Payoff of a College Education in California's Colleges and Universities," Campaign for College Opportunity analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2017 Public Use Microdata Sample.
- 5 "The Unequal Impact of COVID-19: Why Education Matters." Mary C. Daly, Shelby R. Buckman, and Lily M. Seitelman. Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, June 2020.
- 6 "High School Benchmarks 2020: COVID-19 Special Analysis - Update & Correction." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, March 2021.
- 7 LAUSD Open Data Dashboard.
- 8 LAUSD Open Data Dashboard.
- 9 "What College Costs for Low-income Californians: 2020." The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), July 2020.
- 10 "Realizing Potential: A white paper on college student undermatching." Tennessee College Access & Success Network.  
"The Missing 'One-Offs': The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students." Caroline Hoxby & Christopher Avery. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Spring 2013.  
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"Who believes in me? The effect of student-teacher demographic match on teacher expectations." Seth Gershenson, Stephen B. Holt & Nicholas W. Papageorge. *Economics of Education Review*, 2016.
- 11 The "Student Right to Know" graduation rate calculated by IPEDS uses the timeframe of 150% of "normal time" for completing the program in which they are enrolled. For bachelor's degrees at 4-year colleges, this is within 6 years. At community colleges, this is within 3 years for associate's degrees or transfers to a 4-year college.
- 12 Kang, C., & García Torres, D. (2019). College undermatching, bachelor's degree attainment, and minority students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.
- 13 "In Search of a Match." MDRC. 2016.
- 14 "Selectivity and the College Experience: How Undermatching Shapes the College Experience among High-Achieving Students." Kevin Fosnacht. 2014.
- 15 "Want More Students To Pay Down Their Loans? Help Them Graduate." Michael Itzkowitz. Third Way Report, 2018.



We transform schools to revolutionize school systems, empowering all students with a high-quality education.

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