

**The Current State of Equity and Opportunities to Learn in the  
Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District: Findings and Recommendations**

Pedro A. Noguera, Ph.D., Isis Delgado and Joaquin Noguera

## **Executive Summary**

Schools in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD) are widely regarded as being among the best public schools in the state of California. Yet, despite its excellent track record, SMMUSD schools are characterized by wide and persistent disparities in academic achievement and long-term academic outcomes. Specifically, while White and Asian American students have on average performed at relatively high levels, African American and Latino students have historically performed at much lower levels. The persistence and pervasive nature of these disparities suggests that schools in SMMUSD are unclear about how to meet the educational needs of minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students. Finding ways to reduce and hopefully eliminate these persistent disparities, and providing clear guidance on what can be done, is the purpose of this report.

For over twenty years, SMMUSD has undertaken a number of initiatives to address and reduce racial and socio-economic disparities in student achievement. However, for a variety of reasons, none of these efforts have reduced disparities in student achievement or produced significant or sustainable improvements in academic outcomes for African American and Latino students, English language learners, children with learning disabilities and low-income students generally, in the school district.

This report identifies some of the factors that have contributed to the lack of progress. It presents findings and recommendations from an equity-based review of schools in SMMUSD that was carried out from August 2015 – February 2016 for the purpose of identifying the school-based factors that may be contributing to the persistence of gaps in academic achievement. PAN Ltd. (Pedro A. Noguera and Associates) was contracted by the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD) to conduct with the review with the expectation that once it was complete, strategies for addressing areas where improvements and interventions were needed would be undertaken with the support of PAN Ltd.

The equity review of SMMUSD revealed that though the central leadership of the district is knowledgeable and aware of district-wide needs, many of the promising initiatives that have been undertaken have not been well implemented, nor have they been systematically evaluated. Most new initiatives, including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Response to Intervention (RTI), the use of literacy coaches, etc., are not clearly understood, and in many cases, are being implemented unevenly. As a result, the impact of these initiatives on the effort to reduce disparities and improve student learning generally, have largely not been realized.

Frequent changes in leadership, at both the district and site level, have contributed to a lack of follow-through and incomplete implementation of promising initiatives. There is also a high degree of cynicism among staff about many reform efforts due to a lack of follow through on many improvement efforts.

This combination of factors has resulted in the following:

- Lack of consistent implementation of systems, structures, processes and practices aimed at eliminating academic disparities, contributing to inconsistent and varied expectations for teaching and learning.
- Failure of previous initiatives to build capacity in support of equity because they have typically been abandoned when leadership has changed.
- Isolation and fragmentation across and within school sites, fostering divergent approaches to the implementation of key initiatives, and contributing to a lack of buy-in.
- The district lacks a coherent and cohesive focus related teaching and learning and its desire to advance equity at all schools.
- At many of the sites there is a *culture of opposition* among staff toward district-led change and improvement efforts.

The report concludes that the effort to further equity and reduce academic disparities must be led by a clear and unequivocal commitment of the SMMUSD Board. The Board must establish clear priorities and goals related to equity and stick to them. It must not allow other concerns to distract the central administration and site leaders from implementing strategies to improve learning and teaching. The Board must be willing to hold itself accountable for following through and maintaining the focus on its own goals.

1. There must be a clear directive from the board enabling the district's central staff to carry out their plans without distraction. This should include a specific requirement that *principals devote a significant portion of their time to being present in classrooms and to the development and implementation of strategies to improve learning and teaching.*
2. Central leadership must devise mechanisms to improve communication, support, and accountability for district priorities, and they must be present in schools on a consistent basis to assess and support the implementation of district initiatives.
3. Initiate trainings for all central office and site leaders on how to implement equity-based strategies and obtain commitment and buy-in from staff throughout the district.

Although this will take time and concerted effort, there must be a cultural shift throughout the district in the following areas:

- From focus on adults to clear focus on students
- From professional isolation and a distorted sense of professional autonomy, to cohesion, collaboration and accountability
- From leaders as managers to collaborative problem solvers focused on improving learning and teaching
- From reactive planning to a vision-driven cycle of development and improvement with clear focus on priorities, strengths and needs

This report is not intended to cast blame on particular constituents or schools for the presence and perpetuation of the achievement gap in SMMUSD. All stakeholders in the district – students, parents, teachers, administrators, and Board Members - bear some degree of responsibility for addressing these issues. There is no reason why a district with the resources of talents of SMMUSD should not be able to make more progress than it has. If the recommendations contained in this report are acted upon, there is no reason why steady, incremental progress in reducing disparities in academic performance cannot be realized. The fact that there are school districts with similar demographics that are making more progress in reducing the predictable ways in which race, SED and language are implicated in patterns of student achievement is the clearest indication that it can be done in SMMUSD as well.

### **Author Bios**

Pedro Noguera is the Distinguished Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. He is the author of twelve books and over 200 articles and monographs on a broad variety of topics related to education, race and ethnicity in American society, and social policy and. Prior to joining the faculty at UCLA he served as a tenured professor and holder of endowed chairs at New York University (2003 – 2015) Harvard University (2000 – 2003) and the University of California, Berkeley (1990 – 2000). From 2009 - 2012 he served as a Trustee for the State University of New York (SUNY) as an appointee of the Governor. In 2014 he was elected to the National Academy of Education. Noguera has received awards from the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, from the National Association of Secondary Principals, and from the McSilver Institute at NYU for his research and advocacy efforts aimed at fighting poverty.

Isis Delgado is experienced in K-12, after-school, and non-profit program design, management, evaluation and policy-making. Delgado previously served as Chief of Staff for the Division of Teaching and Learning and the Division of Community Engagement at NYC Department of Education where she oversaw the development of the Empowering Boys of Color initiative and managed the revision of the Promotion Policy, which ended social promotion in NYC. Previously, Delgado served as Program/Policy Director for the Quality Review, one of three major accountability initiatives for NYC DOE, and was the Founding Director of an afterschool program in Pasadena, CA. She holds a bachelor's degree in Social Welfare from University of California, Berkeley and is pursuing a master's degree from New School University.

Joaquin Noguera is currently a PhD student in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and a member of the education faculty at Bard College's Masters in Teaching program. Prior to beginning his doctoral studies, Joaquin worked as a K-12 teacher and school leader in New York City, and as an education consultant where he coached and mentored teachers and school leaders, supported developmental evaluation and strategic planning for schools and district, and provided training in lesson and curriculum design, culturally responsive learning and teaching strategies, and improving collaborative processes.