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CALIFORNIA ADULT EDUCATION’S COMMITMENT AND ACTIONS TO INCREASE EQUITY

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ABSTRACT
California leads the nation in advancing equity and integration initiatives. Through the creation and dissemination of professional development specific to equity in California, adult educators are encouraged to work with state and local governments to advocate for policies, regulations, and laws that support immigrant and social justice initiatives. The California Department of Education (CDE) Adult Education Office (AEO), and its contractor, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), are proud to be a part of current efforts to seek a more just society. Their work in this area is highlighted by several significant efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent events exposing systemic violence toward people of color and the cruelty of xenophobia have led to global protests and calls to action to eliminate racism and bias and to increase social and economic equity and justice (Fisher, 2020). Adult education addresses equity in some ways through its fundamental purpose, but more work remains to be done. Adult education has a long history of seeking to equalize conditions and elevate the voices of the marginalized and oppressed. The contemporary adult basic education system has a foundation that includes Freirean and participatory education approaches, which strongly emphasize engaging adult learners problem-solving around contemporary social issues (Campbell & Burnaby, 2001; Freire, 1970; Spener, 1992).

California has a long history of supporting efforts to achieve greater equity in society and efforts to integrate immigrants into the promise of America (California Department of Education, 2005). When California created an adult education system in 1856, the state sought to provide avenues for greater engagement among immigrant communities and to support the advancement of all Californians (California Department of Education, 2005). These adult education classes helped students to succeed and integrate into a diverse culture, even in 1856 San Francisco. Today, California continues to lead the nation in advancing equity and integration initiatives. Through the creation and dissemination of professional development specific to equity in California, adult educators are encouraged to work in conjunction with state and local governments to advocate for policies, regulations, and laws that support immigrant and social justice initiatives. The California Department of Education (CDE) Adult Education Office (AEO), and its contractor, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), are proud to be a part of current efforts to seek a more just society. Their work in this area is highlighted by several significant efforts.

The AEO recognizes that the strength of California as a state and of America as a nation comes from a diverse population and from recognition of a shared humanity. We know that
public education plays an important and unique role in shaping the trajectories of immigrant communities. We believe that all cultures and identities should be recognized and valued equally. We strongly believe that an individual's resources and opportunities should not be determined or predicted by immigration status, race, class, or gender. We are committed to dismantling the false narratives that negatively affect the trajectories of immigrant communities and to helping families and individuals to thrive and flourish in the intersections of all aspects of their identities.

Through the 2018 Assembly Bill 2098 (AB 2098), the California State Legislature added immigrant integration measures as a required data set for adult education programs. To support this cause, the AEO has implemented an immigrant integration initiative, which includes a number of efforts that seek to elevate equity as a core value of our daily work. For example, since 2016, we have worked closely with Mexican Consulates across the state to further expand “Plazas Comunitarias,” an educational program that seeks to provide Mexican immigrants with basic education to encourage their continuing education and facilitate their integration into the United States. The AEO has also partnered with the California governor's office and other state agencies to develop the California Immigrant Guide, a web page that features services to help immigrants thrive and succeed in their paths toward integration. Additionally, our commitment to provide effective immigrant integration services to support immigrants in becoming part of the social, economic, and civic fabric of our state is best highlighted in the recommendations made through the AEO's Immigrant Integration Work Group report to the state legislature. This report highlights the role of adult education in California's effort to provide effective immigrant integration services. These services include the following:

- Promoting California's civic and economic health by developing coordinated, statewide immigrant integration policies and initiatives, including providing adult literacy instruction to immigrants and creating consistent and mutually supportive state policies in the areas of adult education, workforce development, and social services. These policies will ultimately help to streamline collaboration between California Adult Education Program (CAEP) consortia and their local partners.
- Adopting a definition of immigrant integration and documenting California's needs for immigrant integration in each of the seven program areas of the CAEP.
- Implementing the work group's recommended immigrant integration metrics and implementation toolkit, which identifies areas of knowledge and skills and outcomes that
immigrants can achieve to realize their educational and career goals, and ultimately integrate fully into U.S. society. These goals include economic security, English proficiency, civic and community participation, health and well-being, and digital literacy, among others.

- Piloting innovative integration approaches. In other words, using intentional and supported prototyping of innovative strategies through the use of pilot tests and specific innovation projects.
- Sustaining innovation in immigrant integration metrics and practices, including a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the metrics process every 3 years in order to continue improving overall immigrant integration efforts.

Although the AEO recognizes the powerful role of public education in shaping the trajectories of immigrants, we also acknowledge the important and ever-changing role immigrants have played in the culture and economy of the United States, and thus believe it is imperative that we incorporate an equity lens into every aspect of our work to ensure that individuals are able to thrive and flourish in this country. After all, how immigrants fare determines how we all fare as a nation.
In response to the issue and cause of increasing equity (with a specific eye on racial inequity), the AEO following the lead of California's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond, is developing a racial equity initiative. This initiative will reimagine adult education by cultivating diversity, equity, access, and inclusion. Students in adult education programs should be able to see themselves reflected in the teachers and administrators of those programs. The AEO, through its contractor, AIR, and the professional development center it runs, the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO), is also conducting a large-scale professional development initiative to raise the issue of equity. CALPRO developed two tools to help adult educators understand, reflect on, and act on issues of equity. First, for education program staff (including administrators, teachers, and front office staff), CALPRO developed the Success for All Learners Through Equity Institute and the Management Competencies Self-Assessment.

SUCCESS FOR ALL LEARNERS THROUGH EQUITY INSTITUTE

The Success for All Learners Through Equity Institute focuses on a cultural competence framework and the role of implicit bias (also known as unconscious bias). Implicit bias and stereotypes can affect many aspects of life, including education (Steele, 2010). The expectations educators place on students, along with the student's self-efficacy, play a significant role in how students perform and persist. Thus, if educators assume low standards are appropriate for some students and the students assume the same of themselves, they are less likely to persist. However, as the Adult Education Teacher Competencies explicitly state (Literacy Information and Communication System [LINCS], n.d.), part of a teacher's role is to communicate high expectations to learners and to also model an understanding of diversity. That diversity can involve students' cultures, abilities or disabilities, races or ethnicities, genders, and more. To fully understand what it means to embrace...
diversity and provide equity of opportunity, educators must be culturally competent (University of California San Diego, n.d.).

The institute was intentionally developed (by CALPRO staff with the contributions of numerous adult education professionals in the state of California) to be inclusive of various adult education staff, including teachers, administrators, and front office personnel. The institute introduces the Cultural Competence Continuum, as defined by the University of California San Diego, to help guide participants toward an understanding of why acknowledging and taking steps toward embracing varying cultures can affect student learning and persistence. The elements of the continuum are as follows:

1. Cultural destructiveness: The dehumanization of cultures or individuals signifying an underlying bias toward the superiority of the dominant or majority group.
2. Cultural incapacity: The inability to work with diverse populations.
3. Cultural blindness: The assumption that approaches used by and for the majority are relevant for all others.
4. Cultural precompetence: The awareness of differences in cross-cultural communication and outreach. Individuals within an agency desire to provide fair and equitable treatment with appropriate cultural sensitivity but may not know how to proceed.
5. Cultural competence: The demonstrated commitment to diverse populations in all aspects of the structure and functions of the agency.
6. Cultural proficiency: The demonstrated centrality of an agency’s commitment to diversity along with external expertise, leadership, and advocacy in promoting appropriate services for diverse populations.

While developing an understanding of the continuum, participants also investigate their own biases and what microaggressions look like for students and use data to identify inequitable practices and policies that can be revised to better support a culturally competent learning environment. This institute is available to all California adult education programs that want to develop and support educators in increasing cultural competence and work toward overcoming bias and improving the overall equity of adult education services in the state.
In addition to training sessions, this institute uses a virtual community of practice model, which, according to McLoughlin and colleagues (McLoughlin et al., 2018, p. 139) “can decrease social and professional isolation”—something that is important when trying to develop cultural competence. Communities of practice allow participants to think together and support one another as they are guided through an understanding of the same issues and concepts (Pyrko et al., 2016). When it comes to understanding cultural competence, participants should have a sense of connectedness to both the content and each other. In an evaluation of cultural competency training, researchers found that “connections to colleagues could assist in motivating participants along their cultural competence journey” (McHugh- Cole et al., 2020, p. 16). Thus, CALPRO staff intentionally created opportunities for participants to connect with each other throughout the learning process.

MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES SELF-ASSESSMENT

To support adult education administrators in their role as leaders concerned with issues of equity, CALPRO developed a Management Competencies Self-Assessment (MCSA), based on a nationally validated instrument developed in 2000 and updated in 2008. This self-assessment is described at http://www.calpro-online.org/competencies.aspx, the nationally validated Adult Education Teacher Competencies can be accessed at https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/te/competencies.pdf.
Administrators may log in and rate themselves in up to seven different domains, determining the areas of greatest relevance to their programs and abilities, and identifying professional learning goals for the year. The seven domains span 21 competencies and include:

1. Leadership Skills
2. Instructional Leadership
3. Resource Management and Allocation
4. Staff Supervision
5. Program Monitoring and Reporting
6. Professional Development Practices
7. Community Collaboration

In 2017–2018, CALPRO engaged California adult education administrators to examine the current relevance of the management competencies. Although the existing MCSA competencies were endorsed by administrators as relevant, administrators offered ideas for additional competencies. The CALPRO Professional Advisory Board (PAB) convened several meetings with AIR researchers to discuss adding additional competencies. The CALPRO PAB established an ad hoc committee to further refine the suggestions and to identify resources to support the suggested recommendations. Following a thorough review of extant research, 15 new field-recommended competencies and one additional field-recommended domain—equity—were identified. CALPRO staff with subject matter experts then created an Addendum to Management Competencies Self-Assessment (http://www.calpro-online.org/competencies/managementselfassessment/2018addendum.pdf) for the Equity domain. The addendum includes supplemental resources to increase equity knowledge and skills. The five new equity competencies are as follows:

1. Promotes an environment that values and appreciates linguistic differences (moved from existing Leadership Skills domain).
2. Promotes organization-wide, culturally responsive policies and practices.
3. Establishes systemic supports for historically underserved students, nontraditional students, students with disabilities (SWDs), English learners (ELs), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) people to achieve access and success.
4. Upholds and communicates an organizational belief that all students are capable of success and that their individual identity and agency is affirmed and valued.
5. Analyzes structural aspects of curricula and identifies barriers to learning and opportunities to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences.

The AEO and CALPRO are committed to increasing equity and creating avenues for social justice, integration, and empowerment for immigrants. We are proud to be part of a state and national community that holds these shared values and commitments, and we hope that other states will be encouraged to replicate this systemic approach to increasing equity.

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REFERENCES


