Stanford Law School | Stanford Center for Racial Justice

REPORT
February 2026

Roses Talk San José Unified:

Rethinking Education Policy Through At-Promise Student Voices

Hoang Pham, Subini Annamma, Andrea Akinola, Chaélyn Anderson, Zoe Edelman, Ev Gilbert, Sara Sarmiento

Authors and Contributors

AUTHORS

Hoang Pham is the Director of Education and Opportunity at the Stanford Center for Racial Justice, where he leads research and policy initiatives on education inequality, economic mobility, and emerging technologies. A two-time national award-winning educator, he taught for six years in South Los Angeles and later trained educators in culturally responsive pedagogy. He previously clerked at the National Center for Youth Law and Public Advocates, supporting K–12 and higher education civil rights litigation and policy reform. He holds a JD from UC Davis School of Law, an MA in Urban Education from Loyola Marymount University, and a BS in Political Science and Ethnic Studies from the University of Oregon.

Subini Annamma is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University. A former special education teacher in public schools and youth prisons, her research critically examines the ways students are criminalized and resist that criminalization through the mutually constitutive nature of racism and ableism, how they interlock with other marginalizing oppressions, and how these intersections impact youth education trajectories. She positions students as knowledge generators, exploring how their narratives can inform teacher and special education. She is the author of *The Pedagogy of Pathologization*, an award-winning book on incarcerated disabled girls of color, and her research appears in leading education journals.

Andrea Akinola (JD `27) is a 2L at Stanford Law School from Irvine, California, with interests in civil rights law, plaintiffs' law, and education policy. She currently serves as a board member of the Stanford Law School Youth & Education Advocates. Before law school, she was a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain. Andrea graduated cum laude from Columbia University with a BA in Political Science and a minor in Education Studies. During her college years, Andrea interned with the Alliance for Quality Education New York and with the Columbia Double Discovery Center, where she served as a teaching assistant and mentor to first-generation high school students navigating the college application process.

Chaélyn Anderson (BA `25) is from Berkeley, California and graduated from Stanford University, where she earned a degree in Sociology. Her academic interests focused on eviction and housing policy, education reform, and legal representation, and she completed an honors thesis on how gentrification affects public school education. She gained research experience in Stanford's Sociology department and participated in Alternative Spring Break, exploring housing affordability and the Alaskan legal system. Chaélyn was a member of Stanford's Black Student Union and served as executive director of Stanford Concert Network. She plans to attend law school to advance service for underrepresented communities.

Zoe Edelman (BA `25) is from Washington, D.C. and graduated from Stanford University, where she studied History with a minor in Political Science. She was interested in Black history and education and sought to use her academic background to support decolonial and radically supportive learning experiences for students. Over the past year, she worked at public charter schools in New York City and D.C., assisting students in English and math. She currently teaches high school full-time in her hometown of D.C. On campus, she was involved in journalism, student organizing, and history research projects.

AUTHORS (CONT'D)

Ev Gilbert (MA `25) is a community organizer and qualitative researcher from Brookline, Massachusetts, whose work centers on uplifting the voices of multiply marginalized youth in K–12 education policy. They are currently a Research Associate with the Stanford Accelerator for Learning's SCALE Initiative, where they previously served as a Graduate Research Assistant. Ev holds an MEd in Policy, Organization, and Leadership Studies from the Stanford Graduate School of Education and a BA in Sociology with a minor in Public Health from Boston University. Their background as a youth worker with the MA Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students informs their ongoing commitment to transformative justice and educational equity.

Sara Sarmiento (JD `27) is a 2L at Stanford Law School. Originally from Bogotá, Colombia, and growing up in Miami, FL, she is a proud first-generation immigrant and first-generation college/law student. Their academic interests are broadly within the intersections of race, immigration, law, youth and education and they previously interned at the Santa Clara County Alternate Defender Office. They were a Posse Foundation Scholar at Mount Holyoke College, graduating in 2021 with BA degrees in International Relations and Critical Social Thought. Prior to SLS, Sara was an elementary school ELA teacher in her hometown, Miami, FL, working primarily with English as a Second Language (ESL) and special education students.

CONTRIBUTORS

Kimberly González-Zelaya (BA `25) is from the San Ysidro/Tijuana borderlands and graduated from Stanford University, where she double majored in Urban Studies and Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity with a minor in Education. She studied how critical geographies of capital, incarceration, and race shape the experiences of marginalized communities in urban and rural America. At Stanford, she was a member of the Central American Student Association and a two-year Ethnic Theme Associate of Casa Zapata. Kimberly is committed to community engagement and educational equity and is currently a master's candidate in the Stanford Teacher Education Program in the Graduate School of Education.

Rebecca Han (JD `26) is a 3L from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She was a co-president of APILSA, Stanford Law's AAPI affinity group, has held various research positions, and is also involved with the Law School Musical and the Women of Color Collective. Before law school, she taught English in Taiwan through Fulbright, through which she developed an interest in education advocacy. Her legal interests include civil-side plaintiffs' law as well as the intersection of criminal defense, immigration, and family law. She also hopes to be an art teacher somewhere down the line.

Antonio Preciado (BA `25) is from Inglewood, California and graduated from Stanford University, where he majored in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity with a double minor in Human Rights and Education. He studied how incarceration and educational inequities shape the experiences of systems-impacted youth. At Stanford, he was involved in initiatives that supported youth access to education and justice reform. Antonio is committed to advancing educational equity and plans to attend law school to work on prevention and reintegration programs that expand higher education opportunities for systems-impacted youth. Last summer he worked as a Human Rights Fellow at Congreso del Estado de Jalisco in Mexico.

About the Stanford Center for Racial Justice

The Stanford Center for Racial Justice works to counter racial division and political polarization through research and conversations exploring racial dimensions of contentious issues in America. We envision a society free from race-driven polarization and inequality, where people recognize racism's far-reaching effects and understand that addressing such challenges requires diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and ideologies. Functioning as a research and dissemination engine, we produce analyses and facilitate discussions on pressing controversies, aiming to provide trustworthy insights on racial dimensions of divisive issues, particularly where they intersect with economic inequality, educational opportunity, and safety.

Acknowledgements

The Roses Talk Project is an initiative at the Stanford Center for Racial Justice that seeks to elevate the voices of marginalized young people in education policymaking. The project and this report were made possible through the support of many individuals to whom the authors and contributors are deeply grateful.

We first want to thank leadership in the San José Unified School District for their invaluable partnership and recognition of the importance of listening to the voices of at-promise students, including **Nancy Albarrán, Jodi Lax, Melitta Nerhood, Seth Reddy, J. Dominic Bejarano, Esmé Bautista, and Serena Khahera**. We would also like to thank staff, teachers, and administrators at Gunderson High School for their steadfast support of our research team and undeniable commitment to advancing educational outcomes for Gunderson students, including **Anisha Dalal, Brian Walton, Terry Chou, Tracy Rivas, Gerson Castro, Steve Davis, Griselda Luna Hernandez, and Francisco Valle**. This work is simply not possible without the San José Unified and Gunderson community.

We are grateful to **Luciana Herman and Paul Brest** from the Stanford Law and Policy Lab for their support of the project—which was executed as part of a Policy Lab practicum taught in Winter and Spring 2025 by Subini Annamma, Ralph Richard Banks, and Hoang Pham at Stanford Law School. We thank **Jodi Lax, Anisha Dalal, Brian Walton, Gerson Castro, and Steve Davis** for serving as guest speakers during our research development phase of the course. We thank **Dr. Daniella Cook Sumpter**, Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of South Carolina, for serving as a guest speaker during our qualitative data analysis phase of the course, and **Brian Wheatley**, Trustee of the San José Unified Board of Education, and **Rigel Massaro**, Deputy Legal Counsel and Deputy Policy Director for the California State Board of Education, for serving as guest speakers during our policy development phase.

The project is generously supported by Community Engagement Impact Project funding from the Stanford Office of Community Engagement, from which we would like to thank **Megan Swezey Fogarty, Beth McKeown, and Merry Pham** for their continued guidance. We also received critical funding from the Haas Center for Public Service through their Cardinal Course program, and would like to thank **Paitra Houts and Luke Terra** for their leadership on community-engaged research and learning.

The authors and contributors thank **Ralph Richard Banks and Dan Sutton** at the Stanford Center for Racial Justice for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this report, **Isabelle Coloma and Angelee Kidd** for their background research, and **Ria Ellendula** for their editing support. We would also like to thank **Amy Hu, Monica Schreiber, and Bhabna Banerjee** for their multimedia support, **Christine Baker** for project convening photography, and **Michi Turner** for their help preparing the publication.

On June 3, 2025, we convened a group of interdisciplinary education stakeholders—San José Unified and Gunderson leadership, policymakers, civil society leaders, community partners, and Stanford faculty, staff, and students—to engage in dialogue, build community, and review and provide critical feedback on this report. This final version is a reflection of the many conversations, thoughts, and ideas generated throughout the day. Joining the Stanford Policy Lab team, participants included:

Nancy Albarrán, Superintendent, San José Unified School District

Kevin Anderson, PhD Candidate, Stanford Graduate School of Education

Esmé Bautista, Public Information Officer, San José Unified School District

Meghan Bedi, District Representative, California State Senate, Office of Senator Dave Cortese

Irene Bernardino, President, San José Council Parent-Teacher Association

Gerson Castro, Teacher, Gunderson High School

Anisha Dalal, Principal, Gunderson High School

Catherine Duarte, Assistant Professor of Epidemiology and Population Health, Stanford University School of Medicine

Megan Swezey Fogarty, Associate Vice President for Community Engagement, Stanford Office of Community Engagement

Mary Louise Frampton, Professor of Law Emerita, UC Davis School of Law

Paitra Houts, Director of Community Engaged Learning–Education, Haas Center for Public Service

Serena Khahera, Communications Manager, San José Unified School District

Bill Koski, Professor of Law, Stanford Law School

Jodi Lax, Associate Superintendent of Instruction, San José Unified School District

José Magaña, Trustee, Vice President, San José Unified Board of Education

Beth McKeown, Assistant Vice President for Community Engagement, Stanford Office of Community Engagement

Diana Mercado-Garcia, Director, Stanford-Sequoia Research Collaborative, California Education Partners

Tammy Moriarty, Associate Director, Center to Support Excellence in Teaching, Stanford Graduate School of Education

Melitta Nerhood, Director of Secondary Curriculum and Instruction, San José Unified School District

Imani Nokuri, Research Assistant, Stanford Center for Racial Justice, Stanford Law School, JD `25

Jennifer Osuna, Associate Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Education

Megan Pacheco, Executive Director, Challenge Success

Eujin Park, Assistant Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Education

Sam Seidel, Director of K12 Strategy, and Director of Products + Publications, Stanford d.school

Brooke Stafford-Brizard, Vice President, Innovation and Impact, Carnegie Foundation

Jory Steele, Executive Director, Stanford Institute for Advancing Just Societies

Daniella Cook Sumpter, Professor, University of South Carolina

Luke Terra, Deputy Director, Haas Center for Public Service

Abigail Trillin, Clinical Supervising Attorney, Youth and Education Law Project, Stanford Law School

Lydia Wallace, Booster President and Parent, Teacher, and Student Association Secretary, Gunderson High School

Brian Wheatley, Trustee, San José Unified School District

Finally, we want to extend our sincere gratitude to the 16 students at Gunderson who were willing to share their school experiences and entrusted us to translate their powerful ideas into tangible policy solutions for decision-makers: **Angel, Andrew, Baaj, Britney, Bruce, El, Fiona, James, John, LeBron, Minerva, Opal, Patrick, Robert, Tulip, and Violet** (pseudonyms). We hope this report accurately captures and does justice to their brilliance.

How to Cite This Report

Pham, H., Annamma, S., Akinola, A., Anderson, C., Edelman, Z., Gilbert, E., & Sarmiento, S. (2026, February). *Roses Talk San José Unified: Rethinking Education Policy Through At-Promise Student Voices*. Stanford Center for Racial Justice.

Cover Photo: Antonio, a student researcher in the Roses Talk Policy Lab who also identifies as an at-promise student.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Efforts to elevate student voice in education decision-making have grown over the past decade—through state legislation, district governance structures, and school-based student groups.[1] Leaders increasingly recognize that student perspectives are critical to improving outcomes amid persistent challenges in K–12 education. Yet existing student feedback mechanisms rarely capture the voices of students most impacted by education inequality—those whose experiences most clearly reveal where systems are failing. These "marginalized" or "at-promise"[2] (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020) students are often low-income, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities who commonly struggle academically, have been suspended, and are chronically absent. However, despite this broad range of experiences, they are routinely excluded from conversations about how schools can better support their success.

The Roses Talk Project, a partnership between the Stanford Center for Racial Justice and the San José Unified School District (SJUSD), seeks to remedy this exclusion by deliberately elevating these students' voices in education policymaking—translating their experiences into actionable, evidence-based recommendations for school and district leaders. Through interviews and focus groups with at-promise students at Gunderson High School, this project identified persistent challenges faced by marginalized young people and ideas for policy change that could meaningfully improve their educational trajectories.

Our analysis is grounded in the concept of opportunity infrastructure—a system of resources, supports, and practices that shape students' educational outcomes. This report describes two pressing issues that at-promise youth identified: (1) barriers to adequate and accessible opportunity infrastructure; and (2) a need for new forms of opportunity infrastructure. Their insights underscore a central truth: while many factors affecting young people lie outside the control of schools, school administrators and district leaders still have significant power to redesign education systems to meet the unique needs of historically underserved students.

In response, this report outlines a set of ambitious yet feasible recommendations for SJUSD and Gunderson designed to expand opportunity infrastructure across four key areas: (1) post-secondary support; (2) teaching and learning; (3) discipline, relationships, and school climate; and (4) facilities and athletics. Together, these recommendations aim to reduce longstanding disparities in student outcomes, strengthen trust between youth and adults, and create school environments where every student can thrive.

Post-Secondary Support: Students emphasized the need for structured, accessible guidance on navigating college, career, and financial aid pathways. We recommend streamlining access to existing resources, integrating mandatory grade-level college and career readiness sessions into the school schedule, and developing near-peer mentoring programs that expand advising capacity and social capital—particularly for those who lack information and support outside of school.

Teaching and Learning: Students reported disengagement from passive instructional methods and called for classrooms that are more active, collaborative, and connected to their

1 For example, under California Education Code section 52060(g) (2020), "The governing board of a school district shall consult with teachers, principals, administrators, other school personnel, local bargaining units of the school district, parents, and *pupils* in developing a local control and accountability plan" (emphasis added). Many school districts also have student members on the school board and high schools typically offer a "Leadership" class where students are involved in various activities, including sharing their perspectives on issues pertaining to the student body.

2 California AB 413 (2019) deleted the term "at-risk" and replaced it with the term "at-promise" for purposes of various sections of the Education and Penal Codes. Bill analysis from the Senate Committee on Public Safety refers to "at-promise" as the "extraordinary raw potential every young person possesses. The term views youth through a strength-based perspective. It also helps to fill in some of the details missing in the former labels, reminding us that youth have natural gifts and innate potential for greatness."

lives. We recommend adopting instructional practices that make learning active and dynamic in each classroom, and developing a culturally sustaining, career-connected curriculum that validates students' identities while preparing them with real-world skills in areas such as financial literacy and entrepreneurship.

Discipline, Relationships, and School Climate: Many at-promise students described strained relationships with adults and a discipline system that feels punitive rather than supportive. We recommend co-creating a school discipline system with students and families, potentially shifting toward restorative approaches, and establishing a schoolwide relationship-building strategy that emphasizes care, consistency, and shared power. Additionally, restructuring Gunderson's advisory period to prioritize mentorship can deepen trusting relationships and foster belonging.

Facilities and Athletics: Students repeatedly identified the physical environment as a barrier to a sense of belonging and motivation. We recommend targeted investments in clean, functional bathrooms; upgraded water infrastructure; and cosmetic improvements that make the campus more welcoming. Additionally, restructuring athletics scheduling—particularly late-evening practices—can help student-athletes balance academic and personal responsibilities while preserving the benefits of sports participation.

Build and Sustain Opportunity Infrastructure: To ensure long-term impact, we recommend formalizing the roles of at-promise students as partners in school and district decision-making, such as incorporating them into existing advisory boards or establishing new committees focused on their needs. We also encourage SJUSD and Gunderson to expand partnerships with local institutions to build capacity for implementing new programs that are responsive to the recommendations in this report.

The Roses Talk Project highlights the importance of listening to and learning from students who are most impacted by systemic inequalities in education. Their insights point to concrete ways schools and districts can create more supportive, responsive, and equitable learning environments. While at-promise students face complex challenges, these recommendations offer clear starting points for change.

The project also embodies the principle that higher education institutions can and should play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of K–12 public education. By bridging research, policy, and practice, our collaboration with SJUSD and Gunderson demonstrates how community-engaged scholarship can advance educational equity. We hope these findings inspire district leaders, educators, and policymakers to more actively include marginalized student voices in their decision-making to promote better outcomes for all students.

Introduction

Introduction

Coined by Tupac Shakur (1999/1989–1991, p. 3), the "rose that grew from concrete" is a metaphor for young people who often experience the most challenging environments but nonetheless show unmatched determination to meet their educational goals (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). If these "roses" were given opportunities to talk, what would they tell us about what they need from school to succeed?

Efforts to elevate student voice in education decision-making have grown over the past decade—through state legislation, district governance structures, and school-based student groups. Leaders increasingly recognize that student perspectives are critical to improving outcomes amid persistent challenges in K–12 education. Yet existing student feedback mechanisms rarely capture the voices of students most impacted by education inequality—those whose experiences most clearly reveal where systems are failing. The Roses Talk Project seeks to remedy this exclusion by deliberately elevating these at-promise student voices in education policymaking—translating their experiences into actionable, evidence-based recommendations for school and district leaders.

Students considered "at-promise" are those who may not earn a high school diploma for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to low scores on standardized tests, disengagement from school, being an English language learner, previous suspension or expulsion, involvement in the foster care system, houselessness, and special education. At-promise students offer a unique perspective that is deeply valuable and too often missing from education policy. Our research works to refine and translate their ideas into tangible policy recommendations while retaining their original intent. Integrating these recommendations and their voices into existing policymaking processes can bring about educational innovations that are responsive to student experiences while ensuring these changes are co-created with leadership, consistent with existing laws and policies, and actionable.

If these "roses" were given opportunities to talk, what would they tell us about what they need from school to succeed?

Indeed, this project exists because San José Unified School District (SJUSD) identified a need for the inclusion of student voices in their decision-making and Gunderson High School (Gunderson) leaders wanted feedback on how they could better serve their most vulnerable student populations. This desire to listen to at-promise students is atypical for district and school leadership, but was critical to the project's success. Supported by a 2025 Community Engagement Impact Project award[3] from the Stanford Office of Community Engagement and a Cardinal Course grant from the Haas Center for Public Service, we launched the Roses Talk Project as a Stanford Law and Policy Lab[4] with a multidisciplinary group of Stanford student researchers. Our team conducted interviews and focus groups with at-promise students from Gunderson to learn about their educational experiences and suggestions for improvements. Using this data, we developed policy recommendations to inform school and district decision-making, particularly on how to improve outcomes for at-promise students across SJUSD.

3 For more information about the 2025 Community Engagement Impact Project funding award from the Stanford Office of Community Engagement, see: https://law.stanford.edu/press/stanford-center-for-racial-justice-project-chosen-as-stanford-community-engagement-project/.

4 For more information about the Stanford Law and Policy Lab, see: https://law.stanford.edu/education/only-at-sls/law-policy-lab/practicums-2024-2025/roses-talk-elevating-at-promise-student-voices-in-san-jose-unified-809x/.

We are mindful that these students are considered "at-promise" because their needs, strengths, and identities are often ignored or misunderstood in educational settings. Concurrently, multiple institutions bear responsibility for supporting young people beyond schools. Our report focuses on what school systems can do to improve their outcomes because while we cannot control the myriad of factors that impact young people, education leaders can leverage their organizational powers to support our most vulnerable students. Understanding these youth as at-promise and recognizing them as roses who are persisting in school despite being ignored or punished in "the concrete" shifts the questions we ask and the narratives we create about them. Instead of asking what is wrong with students, we ask what can the school system do to better serve at-promise students?

To protect the confidentiality of students who generously shared their experiences, we use pseudonyms throughout this report. Each quote reflects the voice of a real student, drawn directly from individual interviews or focus groups, but names and identifying details have been altered. Britney, a Gunderson student, illuminates why this work is critical in addressing the vast and complex issues in education. When asked about the challenges she faced in school, she said:

> I think I'm not that good. I'm not that smart academically. Yeah, I'm not that good academically, so that's probably a big part of it. But I feel like there's not really anything you can do *because nobody really helps you when you're not doing well.*

Britney's reflection is consistent with many other students we spoke with. Across those interviewed, students felt that school was not built to adequately support their struggles—raising several important questions. What opportunities and resources exist and what can be created to support the academic success of at-promise students? How do schools, districts, and the adults within show students like Britney that their education goals are valuable and achievable?

Although it is difficult to hear a young person talk about themselves in this way, it should not come as a surprise. Despite decades of efforts to remediate racial disparities in education, schools serving predominantly low-income students of color continue to face persistent challenges that, as data now show, have worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. At-promise students have been harmed the most—a trend that is reflected across education metrics. Academically, recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that average math and reading scores for high school seniors fell to their lowest levels in two decades, driven largely by sharp declines among the lowest-performing students (Betts, 2025). While chronic absenteeism in California has slightly declined over the last few years, rates overall are significantly higher than they were pre-pandemic—especially for Native American, Black, and Pacific Islander students (Chang et al., 2025). Recent data also indicate that Black and Latino students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately suspended—that is, at rates higher than their share of the student population—though White boys now experience disproportionate discipline as well (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

A herculean, all-hands-on-deck effort has been made to support at-promise students in recent years. For example, in 2021 California launched the California Community Schools Partnership Program, a $4.1 billion initiative to advance schools that "partner with education, county, and nonprofit entities to provide integrated health, mental health, and social services alongside high-quality, supportive instruction with a strong focus on community, family, and student engagement" (California Department of Education, 2025, para. 2). While it is still unclear what impact this initiative will have, implementation data suggest grants for community schools are going to California's students and schools who are most in need (Saucedo, 2024).

Solutions like community schools are promising, however, student voice can serve as an equally valuable strategy to building a more equitable education system (Challenge Success, 2024; XQ Institute, n.d.). Specifically, the voices of students who experience the greatest disparities in education should be elevated in education decision-making (Pham, 2021). This

is because students who experience negative outcomes (e.g., discipline) in education have expertise on how the system did not work for them and others (Annamma, 2018).[5]

This report takes that assumption seriously and presents our findings and recommendations for the consideration of SJUSD and Gunderson leaders—and by extension education researchers, advocates, and policymakers across the U.S. Based on rigorous research methods and data analysis, our report is intended to achieve two goals:

- First, we aim to elevate the voices of at-promise students in education policy and practice—providing direct feedback for education leaders to inform their decision-making.
- Second, our report should serve as a guide for SJUSD and Gunderson leaders to determine how they may improve educational outcomes for marginalized students—and thereby all students, at Gunderson and across the district.

To that end, it is important to note that our research intentionally focused on the perspectives of at-promise students—both because this was a need identified by the district and because we recognize the potential for student voice to positively impact education policymaking. Although we did not interview teachers, administrators, or other adults, this limitation was a deliberate methodological choice to highlight underrepresented experiences. Nonetheless, the student voices driving our findings and recommendations should not be considered in isolation, but rather as a critical component of a broader, collaborative dialogue among educational leaders in shaping policies and practices. As stated above, when policymaking integrates the expertise of at-promise students with that of other stakeholders, it fosters a more comprehensive and responsive approach to systems change. This inclusive process has the potential to generate nuanced, effective policies capable of addressing some of the most complex challenges in education.

We begin this report with a brief background on SJUSD and Gunderson, including an overview of relevant data. Next we discuss our theoretical framework, which grounded our approach to research and policy development. The methodology section clarifies steps taken throughout our research process, followed by findings and recommendations for SJUSD and Gunderson.

5 Often we focus on adult perspectives in education reform, where we hear from them what is intended, and what *they* think the impacts of policies and practices are on students. When we do include youth, it is often high-achieving students who tell us what works for them. However, rarely do we ask young people who have struggled in school in part because the education system finds those students hardest to reach. Yet that is exactly why we need to center them, because they can tell us how policies and practices intended to support all students impact the hardest to reach students.

Background

Background: San José Unified School District & Gunderson High School

With over 25,000 students, SJUSD is the largest school district in Santa Clara County, where Stanford University is located. Like districts across the nation, SJUSD is experiencing a decline in student enrollment, having lost over 4,700 students since the 2019–20 school year (Education Data Partnership [EDP], 2025a).[6] The number of low-income students, as measured by those who qualify for free and reduced-price meals, has steadily increased since 2020, with 44% of students identified in this category in 2024–25. English learners also make up 23% of the student population. SJUSD is a racially diverse school district, scoring 47 on Education Data Partnership's Ethnic Diversity Index, which reflects the district's distribution of students based on race/ethnicity categories (a school with an equal distribution of all eight weighted categories would have an index score of 100, and one where all students are the same race/ethnicity would score 0) (EDP, 2025b).

Gunderson's demographic data largely reflect the district's trends, making it an ideal partner for the study. Enrollment was down to 744 students in the 2024–25 school year from 1,099 just five years prior (EDP, 2025c). The percentage of low-income students has also steadily increased over the years, with a small decline to 54% in 2024-25. 20% of the student population are students with disabilities and 21% are English learners. A majority of students identify as Latino, at 67%—White students make up 10%, Asian 7.8%, Black 4.6%, and Filipino 2.6%.

An exceptional bright spot at Gunderson was a 10-percentage-point increase in the number of students meeting or exceeding English Language Arts (ELA) standards between the 2020–21[7] and 2023–24 academic years, rising from 39% to 49% (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2025). Although those numbers dipped back down to 37% in 2024–25, it should be clear that progress in the prior year speaks volumes about how dedicated and committed Gunderson educators are to supporting their students (Table 1).

Metrics in college and career readiness and chronic absenteeism (defined as missing at least 10% of the school year) also show the significant challenges that students face across the district and at Gunderson (Table 2).

Table 1. Percentage of SJUSD/Gunderson Students Met or Exceeded ELA/Math Standards: SY 2020–21 vs. SY 2024–25

ELA/Math/Income	SJUSD 2020–21	SJUSD 2024–25	Gunderson 2020–21	Gunderson 2024–25
ELA	62%	55%	39%	37%
Math	44%	35%	25%	15%
ELA Low-Income	47%	37%	33%	30%
Math Low-Income	22%	14%	22%	13%

6 Based on Census Day enrollment data, including charter and non-charter schools.

7 Data from 2019–20 are not available due to the suspension of testing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Rates for SJUSD/Gunderson Student Wellbeing Metrics: SY 2020–21 vs. SY 2023–24

Wellbeing Metric	SJUSD 2020–21	SJUSD 2023–24	Gunderson 2020–21	Gunderson 2023–24
Graduation Rate	91%	92%	92%	91%
Dropout Rate	7%	7%	3.8%	8.1%
Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Course Requirements	60%	48%	47%	38%
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	10%	25%	9.2%	31%

In almost all categories at the district and school level, disparities are further magnified when data is disaggregated by race. For example, while 8% of Asian students at Gunderson were chronically absent in 2023–24, 35% of Black students were chronically absent—a difference of 4.5 times. SJUSD and Gunderson data largely mirror national trends. While gains in academic performance have been made in some areas, academic achievement overall has declined since 2020. And while graduation and dropout rates have generally remained the same, there is a dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism rates.

Finally, while suspension rates expectedly went down during remote learning, a return to in-person classes also brought back exclusionary discipline (Table 3).[8] Black students, Latino students, and students with disabilities, for example, continue to be suspended at higher rates than their peers—both at Gunderson and across the district. Black students are disproportionately suspended, with rates consistently higher than their overall population.

While the educational challenges faced by SJUSD and Gunderson are not unique in the national landscape, what sets them apart is their recognition of the need to hear directly from at-promise students to inform and refine their policies and practices—a clear commitment to improving outcomes for their most vulnerable learners.

Table 3. SJUSD/Gunderson Suspension Rates: SY 2021–22 vs. SY 2023–24

Category	SJUSD				Gunderson			
	2021–22		2023–24		2021–22		2023–24	
	% of All Students	Suspension Rate	% of All Students	Suspension Rate	% of All Students	Suspension Rate	% of All Students	Suspension Rate
Black	2.5%	5.9%	2.1%	7.9%	5.1%	7.8%	4.5%	11%
Latino	52%	5.2%	55%	6.4%	62%	4.9%	67%	7.8%
White	22%	2.4%	20%	2.7%	12%	1.6%	9.8%	4.6%
Asian	13%	1%	13%	1.7%	11%	0.8%	10%	3.4%
Two or More Races	5.8%	2.6%	6.6%	2.9%	4.2%	6.8%	5.3%	8.7%
Students with Disabilities	N/A	7.3%	13%	8.5%	N/A	7.7%	19%	7.9%

8 2021–22 was the first full in-person year following the COVID-19 pandemic and is compared with 2023–24, the most recent year for which suspension data is available from the Education Data Partnership (as of November 13, 2025).

Framing Educational Opportunity

Framing Educational Opportunity

We draw on "opportunity infrastructure" as a lens to frame this report, which we define as a system of resources, supports, and practices within and across classrooms, schools, and the district that creates equitable opportunities for educational growth and upward mobility (Lemar, 2019). Though the concept of "infrastructure" has historically been used in fields like city planning, we see the value of bringing it to education, illustrating how we can better support marginalized students by infusing opportunities for growth and success into the complex systems that shape their schooling experiences.

Key to opportunity infrastructure are community-based partnerships, which our research team built with at-promise students at Gunderson. In our interviews, we found that at-promise students identified two key issues: (1) barriers to adequate and accessible opportunity infrastructure; and (2) a need for new forms of opportunity infrastructure. Below, we describe the distinction between each.

Barriers to Opportunity Infrastructure: At-promise students shared what obstacles limited them from accessing opportunities to improve their education. For example, poor relationships with teachers may make it more difficult for students to engage in class, resulting in lower academic achievement. Ensuring relationships with students are prioritized and repaired can lower these types of barriers and improve student outcomes. Additionally, students acknowledged the wealth of resources that Gunderson already provides and generated innovative ideas for how to ensure greater access. For example, if a FAFSA session is only available during after-school hours when some youth have other responsibilities (e.g., maintaining after-school jobs, taking care of siblings, or commuting via public transit to get home), this resource may not be accessible to everyone. Offering the FAFSA session during the school day to ensure everyone has a chance to attend may be a simple solution.

New Forms of Opportunity Infrastructure: At-promise students imagined and described new forms of opportunity infrastructure that could better support them in meeting their educational goals. For example, students may be interested in more non-traditional subjects, such as financial literacy and entrepreneurship. Developing new electives or integrating these subjects into existing courses could increase their engagement in tangible ways. Insights like these are especially important when considering where to invest school and district personnel time, skills, and resources.

While we focus on the school and district in this report, there is a role for everyone to invest in opportunity infrastructure.

We want to underscore that schools do not operate in a vacuum—the educational landscape at the national and state levels can create barriers or access through policy and practice mandates. Nonetheless, policy reports can be vague as to who holds the responsibility for carrying out identified recommendations. There is no one entity responsible for investing in removing systemic barriers, creating equal access, and inventing new types of opportunity infrastructure. And while we focus on the school and district in this report, there is a role for everyone—including state and federal governments, institutional and community partners, families, and adults within each school and around each child—to invest in opportunity infrastructure. Our "scales of opportunity infrastructure" highlight how to do so collaboratively.

TYPES AND SCALES OF OPPORTUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

In public transportation, multiple types of infrastructure are needed to maintain a robust system: the physical infrastructure (e.g., transit stations) relies on operational (e.g., payment systems) and policy (e.g., funding mechanisms) infrastructure. For each type of infrastructure, different entities hold an investment responsibility to make them function at different scales (e.g., neighborhood, city, state). Similarly, investing in opportunity infrastructure in education relies on: (1) identifying the types of infrastructure required for a thriving system, such as academic supports, social practices, and the built environment; and (2) recognizing the scales of infrastructure where different stakeholders hold power to intervene and invest in the education system. Table 4 outlines these types and scales of opportunity infrastructure for consideration.

Table 4. Types and Scales of Opportunity Infrastructure

Types	Definition	Scales and Examples
Academic Supports (Academic Opportunity Infrastructure)	Resources to improve academic outcomes for young people (e.g., counselors, curriculum, post-graduate programs).	**Educators in School:** For example, counselors, teachers, and administrators can offer resources at varying levels to ensure *all* students have equal access. **Administrators:** Ensure no conflicts are scheduled and that student access to resources is not restricted due to discipline or other consequences. **District:** Support educators in providing resources needed (e.g., funds, materials, personnel, time).
Social Practices (Social Opportunity Infrastructure)	Practices that happen in the day-to-day interactions in school (e.g., discipline, student-adult relationships).	**Educators in School:** Focus on building positive relationships with students proactively; identify and connect with students who are struggling. **Administrators:** Identify students who may need a specific adult to connect with; provide teachers and staff time to build quality relationships; institute restorative justice by providing training, personnel, and time. **District:** Establish restorative justice culture as a district priority; provide personnel, funds, training, and time for administrators, teachers, and school staff to engage restorative practices. **State:** Provide the material support (e.g., funding) to holistically implement restorative justice as a culture (not just a practice) throughout schools in California.
Built Environment (Environmental Opportunity Infrastructure)	Facilities, buildings, and classrooms that make up the school system (e.g., bathrooms, water fountains, playing fields).	**Administrators:** Make requests to the district that align with what at-promise students say they need. **District:** Budget for built environment updates that can support at-promise students and request funding from state resources that align with these needs. **State:** Provide funding that is equitable based on the proportions of at-promise students served and that meets the needs of at-promise students.

These types and scales are addressed below in our findings and recommendations, but it is important to note that while the school and district can work in tandem to invest in all three, much can be done at the school level (i.e., academic, social), while others need district coordination and resources (i.e., environmental). Ultimately, investing in opportunity infrastructure requires an interconnected system aimed at supporting educational growth and mobility for at-promise students. This creates a landscape of possibilities for stakeholders—in the school, district, and beyond—to support the educational success of all youth.

Methodology

Methodology

Site Selection: In June 2024, our team met with SJUSD leaders to identify district needs that we could potentially support. Of several issues, student engagement and feedback—particularly from the district's most vulnerable students—was a top concern. Gunderson was chosen due to its Title I status and the school leaders' interest and commitment to listening to the voices of at-promise youth. Over the following months, the Stanford Center for Racial Justice worked with the district and leaders at Gunderson to co-create the Roses Talk Project. Based on the district- and school-identified need to better engage and obtain feedback from marginalized young people, we sought to answer the following research question: **How would at-promise students shape school and/or district policies and practices to improve their educational outcomes?**

Participant Sample: We used student GPA data to select the larger group from which the final sample was drawn. Gunderson leadership chose 48 students who had a 2.2 GPA or below, one of six metrics used to define "at-promise" in California Education Code.[9] Our team then employed a purposeful sampling method (Palinkas et al., 2015) to select 16 students and eight alternates based on a diverse set of criteria, including: GPA, low-income status, race, gender, attendance issues, missing credits, previous suspension, and English learner and special education status (see Appendix A for participant demographics data).[10] Purposeful sampling, rather than random sampling, allowed us to be responsive to metrics other than GPA that might influence a student's experience, providing a more representative sample of students considered at-promise. For example, in 2023–24, while Black students at Gunderson only made up 4.5% of the student population, they were 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than their White peers (EDP, 2025c). Because of this and other similar disproportionalities, we were purposeful in selecting Black students to ensure their experiences were represented in the research findings.

How would at-promise students shape school and/or district policies and practices to improve their educational outcomes?

Data Collection and Analysis for Interviews: We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with selected students (Siedman, 2006, Chapter 1, pp. 7–13) to better understand what afforded and constrained their success in school (see Appendix B for our interview and focus group protocols). Following data collection, we followed Bhattacharya's (2017b) four data analysis steps: (1) familiarize ourselves with data by cleaning, reading, and re-reading audio transcripts; (2) code data by chunking it into manageable units of analysis; (3) cluster the analytical units into categories; and (4) identify salient themes by looking within and across categories to determine patterns and relationships. In addition, our research team maintained researcher journals to clarify their thinking and consistently met with co-researchers to discuss their rationale for coding, categorizing, and applying themes in order to increase reliability and quality of coding.

9 Under California Education Code section 54690 (2023), "at-promise pupil" means a pupil "enrolled in high school who is at risk of dropping out of school, as indicated by at least three of the following criteria: (1) Past record of irregular attendance. For purposes of this section, "irregular attendance" means absence from school 20 percent or more of the school year. (2) Past record of underachievement in which the pupil is at least one-third of a year behind the coursework for the respective grade level, or as demonstrated by credits achieved. (3) Past record of low motivation or a disinterest in the regular school program. (4) Disadvantaged economically. (5) Scoring below basic or far below basic in mathematics or English language arts on the standardized test administered pursuant to Article 4 (commencing with Section 60640) of Chapter 5 of Part 33. (6) Maintaining a grade point average of 2.2 or below, or the equivalent of a C minus.
10 We originally asked that LGBTQ students be included in our sample but Gunderson and SJUSD did not have that data for privacy reasons.

Data Representation—Composite Stories: To capture preliminary findings based on identified themes, we wrote four composite stories (see Appendix C) that represented an amalgamation of the students interviewed (Cook Sumpter & Bryan, 2021). We chose composite stories to "provide empirical space for researchers to recount the stories and experiences of people in political vulnerable positions" (Cook Sumpter, 2013, p. 182). Although the composite characters are not real individual at-promise students, each composite narrative combines real scenarios from multiple students and includes direct student quotes to illuminate those experiences. Given our small sample size and the close-knit community at Gunderson, these stories allowed us to proactively protect student confidentiality while still ensuring their voices were central in our analysis. Concurrently, many students we interviewed frequently experienced punitive discipline in school. Using composite stories as an analytical tool ensured they were not targeted for additional consequences for sharing their perspectives. Additionally, composite stories offered a creative avenue for communicating the experiences of students and their ideas for change. The development of these stories represented a significant step in our analysis. Researchers had to be deeply familiar with the findings themes to then create characters and scenarios that rigorously represented student experiences. In April 2025, these composite stories were used to present preliminary findings to SJUSD and Gunderson leadership for feedback that later informed our research, policy development, and final report.

Trustworthiness: Multiple steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness. First, using in vivo coding, we remained close to the data by using students' words to guide our analyses (Saldaña, 2013). Second, we sustained consistent engagement with at-promise young people throughout the research process, including during: (1) interviews; (2) focus groups; (3) tours of Gunderson led by at-promise students; and (4) a tour of Stanford University led by our research team. Third, we used data triangulation to ensure themes were evident across sources. Finally, we conducted member checking focus groups (Bhattacharya, 2007) with students who participated in individual interviews to ensure our analysis and recommendations were consistent with their voices, financially compensating each participant for their time and expertise. Member checks included two activities: (1) a photography-based elicitation technique enabling students to communicate the theme of their education journey by taking a picture of something representing that theme (e.g., one student who had been suspended multiple times took a photo of the front office); and (2) reviewing, voting for, and suggesting recommendations for this report. Focus group data was analyzed using Bhattacharya's (2017b) four steps of data analysis listed above and integrated into policy development.

Our findings and recommendations flow from each phase of our research methodology and aim to center the voices of the young people we worked with at Gunderson.

Translating Findings into Policy Recommendations: A rigorous analytical process was used to develop policy recommendations. We began by confirming final themes with at-promise students and selecting recommendations based on preliminary findings and data from member checking focus groups. For each theme and recommendation, we developed a theory of action and identified an appropriate policy instrument to achieve the intended policy outcomes (Dawson-Amoah, 2023). Policy research for each recommendation was conducted to ensure the recommendation is consistent with relevant evidence from primary and/or secondary sources. The findings and recommendations below flow from each phase of our research methodology and aim to center the voices of the young people we worked with at Gunderson.

Findings

Findings: Identifying Barriers to Opportunity Infrastructure

The following section presents key findings from our interviews and focus groups with Gunderson students. Based on our data analysis, at-promise students identified four themes that illuminated educational barriers or a need for equitable access to existing opportunity infrastructure, including: (1) post-secondary support; (2) teaching and learning; (3) discipline, relationships, and school climate; and (4) facilities and athletics. They also shared ideas for how to design new opportunity infrastructure across these four themes. Each is discussed below and forms the foundation for the recommendations that follow.

POST-SECONDARY SUPPORT

Programming and Access to Post-Secondary Resources

At Gunderson there are already many resources that help students navigate the college application process. Students shared that resources like their school counselors and the Destination College Advising Corps (DCAC) advisors were invaluable resources on their college application journey. Fiona said, "I go to the DCAC people and my counselor a lot because I was struggling with my FAFSA, so I would stay after school. . . . They themselves are helpful. They'll sit down with you and they'll pull up your transcript and help you fill out everything." Though these resources are essential to their success, students expressed that they were being provided with critical information too late and that they faced barriers to accessing their school counselors and the DCAC advisors (i.e., academic opportunity infrastructure).

Resource Delivery Timing and Awareness

Students we interviewed expressed that they were not receiving important information about college early enough, leading them to misunderstand financial aid and tuition costs and discount their abilities before the application process even began. LeBron said, "You can go to any college you want. You just got to put in the work. I was never really told that. I always thought you had to pay crazy money for college. Nobody ever really told me, if you put in the work, you can go to college, whatever college you want. I feel like my school could have done a better job at getting that message to their students." Minerva underscored this point, saying:

> I haven't done anything because I don't know where to go for help. . . . You really have to go and find the resources for yourself. They're not really coming to people. And especially the kids that are more troubled, they usually go to the kids that have 4.0s and do extracurriculars. . . . I feel like they explain things more to them, more in depth than they do to kids that aren't the ideal student.

For students like Minerva, the availability of resources may not be enough. She expressed a lack of knowledge about those resources and a sense that students who are already doing well often receive more support—underscoring the inequity in access to academic opportunity infrastructure.

Upperclassmen students felt particularly frustrated by the lack of timely information. LeBron said:

> I just feel like [during my time] here, I feel like I would have been in a better position if I was told that, like what I've been told this year. . . . I very much understand it now. I understand how school shapes my life. But senior year, there's things you can do, but I wish I would have had a 4.0 my whole classroom career, so I could have got into like UCLA or something like Penn State or something like that. Penn State, I always wanted to go to Penn State.

There are significant benefits to beginning college preparation earlier in high school, particularly for first-generation students

(Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). Many schools have created initiatives to give at-promise students exposure to college preparation early on, including processes that center student autonomy and research. For example, at the ACORN Community High School in New York, all 9th graders are required to develop and present a college information poster, where they tell their classmates about admission requirements, academic programs, and extra-curricular opportunities (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). ACORN also requires all students to meet with guidance counselors who help them identify short- and long-term goals—which can help them stay on track to graduate and pursue a variety of post-graduate plans (Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). SJUSD and Gunderson students may benefit from programs like these that both start earlier in their high school careers and are mandatory for all students.

Accessing School Counselors and DCAC Advisors

Students also identified barriers that made it difficult to access school counselors and DCAC advisors—limiting their ability to benefit from existing academic opportunity infrastructure. Fiona shared, "We have DCAC people, but we just don't have the time to go to them. Because it's either you go, the library's closed during lunch . . . that's 10 minutes, not including passing period, and you can't go during class." After failing to track down an advisor during the day, students must juggle multiple responsibilities in their busy home lives while trying to access information alone: "I feel like I could have used that time because when I got home, I was doing my homework and then I babysat . . . so I just didn't have time to go and try to figure it out by myself. And I got lucky, my cousins ended up helping me, but there's people who don't have people to help them, so I feel like they should give that." Providing dedicated time to access these resources within the school day could be greatly beneficial to students' educational success.

What was overwhelmingly clear from conversations with Gunderson at-promise students was they deeply value the college preparation resources that already exist at Gunderson. School counselors and DCAC advisors have been a tremendous help in navigating the college application process for many students. However, the young people we spoke with identified difficulties in accessing school counselors and the DCAC advisors because of the limited times during the school day when they are allowed to meet with them. This limited availability presents significant challenges for at-promise students who are juggling multiple responsibilities outside of school. Furthermore, at-promise juniors and seniors expressed frustration that they did not receive critical information about college until they felt it was too late. Early interventions—like the ones discussed above at ACORN—may create equitable access to already existing academic opportunity infrastructure for Gunderson and SJUSD students to more adequately prepare for life after high school.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teacher Pedagogical Approaches

Many at-promise students in the study had a deep curiosity for relevant, diverse, and joyful learning opportunities. They frequently mentioned that one of the best parts about being at Gunderson is the positive experiences they have with teachers, particularly teachers that make the content they teach relevant to students' lives and make their classroom environment a joyful place students want to be in.

Infusing Joy in Learning

In an increasingly overstimulating world, traditional classroom routines like note-taking, worksheets, and putting on educational videos are failing to reach students—particularly those who already experience marginalization in school. Students shared that they felt "disengaged" when repeatedly met with passive learning activities. John noted that this culture of disengagement among students seems to spread throughout a class that eventually "doesn't care to do [a packet], since it's just a packet, [and] they can just do it later. So they go on their phone and they're bored." Teaching and learning environments that lead to disengagement serve as a barrier to the types of academic opportunity infrastructure that students otherwise identified.

For example, in contrast, other students shared that they felt especially stimulated by a classroom led by a teacher

who provided opportunities for active, fun, relevant, and collaborative engagement. Describing some of their favorite learning experiences, students shared past lessons where they were able to literally grapple with the content: whether physically, like touching plants or animals in science class; visually, through complex passages with supplemental drawings; or interactively, as teachers "relate" lessons to everyday life without just "reading [off] notes." Relevance is key, and just as students want to learn about finances and other daily realities of post-high school life, they wish to understand how the required content relates to their life. Citing the example of a classroom discussion tying content to recent news about whether TikTok should be banned in the U.S., Fiona affirmed, "When the teacher kind of catered the assignments to the students, that really made me feel encouraged to learn."

Relationships as Central to Pedagogy

Positive relationships between students and teachers serve as both academic and social opportunity infrastructure that allow students to feel comfortable in classroom settings and excited to learn. These bonds are fostered not just through how teachers teach, but through how teachers connect with students (Stafford-Brizard, 2024). Britney described this balance: "I feel like her teaching, it makes you want to engage. She doesn't act like a child, but she's . . . down-to-earth with us. But she makes it clear that, like, 'No, I'm your teacher. I'm not your best friend. I'm your teacher.'" Britney's reflection aptly describes a "warm demander," a teacher who ties the positions of caregiver and authority figure, while holding students to deservedly high standards (Ware, 2006). In classrooms helmed by teachers like this, students feel comfortable expressing their opinions, asking questions, and talking about academic and non-academic topics that are important to them. Once the personal connection is established and regularly practiced, students feel "involved" in their learning experiences, and excited to be challenged by rigorous content.

Regarding the same teacher, Britney elaborated, "She tries really hard to push you. She's like, 'If you want to learn, I'm here to teach you.' She really does do her [best] trying to help you learn." In their teaching, these model teachers described by students clearly established their classrooms as spaces of vulnerability, where students feel valued and welcome to express their needs. Some teachers, Angel shared, "don't explain it right, and they expect everyone to get it right." In the classes where she is able to learn the most, the teacher "goes on your limit" (i.e., challenges you) and makes space for curiosity and opportunities for growth.

"She tries really hard to push you. She's like, 'If you want to learn, I'm here to teach you.' She really does do her [best] trying to help you learn."

Teachers who practice "humanizing pedagogy"—described by scholars as when "students are coinvestigators in dialogue" throughout the learning process—create a greater potential for student connection and learning (Salazar, 2013, p. 127). Borrowing further from Salazar's research (2013, pp. 139, 141), the most engaging classroom experiences reflected two key tenets: (1) "content is meaningful and relevant to students' lives;" and (2) "students will achieve through their academic, intellectual, and social abilities." Based on the literature, teachers who practice the former build a "bridge" between student knowledge and their own, continuously soliciting student feedback, honoring varying forms of expression and code-switching, and connecting content to students' lives. In practicing the latter, teachers uphold faith in at-promise students' abilities by setting rigorous expectations, an approach that inherently calls for the valuing of curiosity and consciousness-building education. This is what a "warm demander" looks like: "teach[ing] with authority" and "insist[ing] on a culture of mutual respect" to guide students to success (Bondy et al., 2012, p. 442). Many teachers at

Gunderson already approach their practice in this way, but more could be done to ensure all students have access to this type of academic/social opportunity infrastructure.

It is essential to note that none of the at-promise students we interviewed wanted easy work or no rules, as is often implied of marginalized youth. Instead, students expressed needing a teaching disposition that commits to blending care with authority, vulnerability with rigor, and responsiveness to their lives with learning about others as well.

Relevant and Responsive Curriculum

Multiple students shared they are excited to learn, especially when introduced to content they feel "connected" and "seen through," but they communicated that there's a lack of exposure to skills and opportunities relevant to "get[ting] you through in the real world." Within this topic, at-promise students we spoke with particularly leaned into ways new academic opportunity infrastructure could be designed to respond to current student needs.

Student Culture

Students feel seen and inspired by ethnic studies curriculum grounded in a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives. John described a Black History Month lesson where he participated in a gallery walk to learn about historical figures as an opportunity "to learn about things I never knew before." Exposure is inspiring to students, as Tulip explained: "America was built off of immigration and different cultures coming in here and shaping [the country], but we don't really learn about those cultures that helped, literally, build this place."

Moving beyond rote delivery of this history and including underrecognized voices is key. For instance, Black studies is about more than just stories about Martin Luther King, Jr., and those involved in the non-violent struggle. As Tulip put it: "They're great people, they made a big difference. It's just that there's so many other people that we don't learn about, like Malcolm X and other people, other controversial people. Why do you have to wait until college to learn about that [kind of] thing?" Additionally, Minerva expressed feeling "motivated to pay attention" when given the chance to "choose a book" that she "felt connected to" in Latino literature class.

Gunderson's effort to center ethnic studies in their history courses is a testament to the staff and administration's commitment to honoring the diverse backgrounds represented within the school community. However, students noted that these courses sometimes offer a narrow focus, lacking more nuanced and comprehensive perspectives. One way for at-promise students to see this explicit valuing and investment in *them* is through targeted curriculum and pedagogical practices made available in each classroom. For example, Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2015, p. 120) note, "It is not enough to adopt an Ethnic Studies curriculum without attending to pedagogy. Ethnic Studies pedagogy must be rigorous, culturally and community responsive, and reflective for it to be effective." Beyond just exploring the history and present conditions of students' backgrounds and identities, promoting a culturally sustaining curriculum—that is, building new academic opportunity infrastructure—could invite a more responsive type of learning in which students can better situate themselves and their communities within their learning regardless of subject (Paris, 2012).

Real-World and Career Connection

At-promise students are excited to engage with relevant information about the future, along with other exciting learning opportunities across content areas. John shared that he wanted his classroom experience to relate to current times: "Since time has evolved, I want to work on new stuff and learn . . . stuff that might get you through in the real world." Some at-promise students expressed feeling disconnected from the current curriculum at-times. For example, Tulip shared that "there's not a lot of classes that prepare kids for the future." Students noted a specific lack of financial literacy and career-training opportunities, called for additional language offerings, and indicated interest in opportunities to try "creative" and more hands-on courses like home economics and wood shopping.

Although vocational training has historically been used to track low-income students and students of color into less rigorous academic tracks, more recently, career technical education (CTE)—a program that SJUSD offers through a partnership with Silicon Valley Career Technical Education—has revamped vocational education and seen significant investments in states like California (Jones, 2024). Nonetheless, while CTE programs aim to offer students more hands-on training and respond to a growing demand for skilled workers in a changing labor market (Boochever et al., 2023), marginalized communities have also used the trades and technology industries to carve a space of autonomy and creative collaboration. The key to successful CTE is to offer it to all students instead of tracking only certain students into it based on test scores or ability grouping. Might there be new academic opportunity infrastructure built upon the existing CTE framework to support all students and their evolving interests?

Consider the rich history of Black barbershops, which provide a specific service and common good in equal doses with "cultural knowledge transfer, social and political gathering spaces, and entrepreneurial opportunities" (Kuyenga et al., 2023, p. 448). There are many examples of these forebears in Black history, from Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute to self-made billionaire Madam C. J. Walker's hair care empire. Rooted in a race-positive curriculum that "bridge[s] the divide between what is traditionally considered liberal education," students throughout our research called for greater exposure and commitment to these tactile, stimulating, and novel opportunities (Kuyenga et al., 2023, p. 453). For example, Angel expressed interest in becoming a hair braider, inspired by a cousin who had cultivated a rotation of clients to build her own successful business. When asked if she would feel comfortable telling an adult at school, she replied: "No, because some people don't like to do that." Even though she wishes to explore this interest, she does not feel comfortable vocalizing her desire, concerned it will be judged or looked down upon. How can these types of interests be normalized when building new academic opportunity infrastructure—not only at Gunderson but across SJUSD?

DISCIPLINE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

Rethinking PBIS and Reaching for Restorative Discipline[11]

Many at-promise students shared a sense of frustration with discipline (i.e., social opportunity infrastructure) at Gunderson, believing discipline is both excessive and targeted under the current Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. Of the at-promise students sampled, 50% had been suspended at least once during their time at Gunderson, which aligns with national trends showing that marginalized student groups are overrepresented in school suspensions (Leung-Gagné, 2023). Students voiced that the "unfair" implementation of Gunderson's discipline system makes them feel "picked on" and "punished," revealing how a PBIS approach to discipline may fail to reduce discipline disparities for at-promise students in practice. How might new forms of social opportunity infrastructure be built to create the positive school climate that students and adults desire?

PBIS Challenges

In the 2023–24 Gunderson School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA), PBIS is highlighted as "a systematic approach to creating a positive climate for students by incorporating a progressive discipline system" meant to foster open communication and trusting relationships between school staff and students. Many students recognize positive intentions behind the PBIS framework, especially in proactive efforts to prevent behavioral issues. As Fiona noted, "They do take steps

11 Discipline is a complex and multifaceted issue that could not be fully addressed within the scope of this report. As our primary aim was to understand the experiences of at-promise students, our analysis focuses on their perspectives. However, we acknowledge that a more complete understanding of each incident described in this section would benefit from including the viewpoints of teachers and administrators. The restorative process discussed here offers a potential opportunity for the Gunderson and broader SJUSD community to engage in that deeper, more holistic dialogue—particularly with the most vulnerable students.

to prevent things from happening. . . . They'll accommodate to you [and] they'll listen to you with that kind of stuff." This reflects an appreciation for administrators' willingness to listen and intervene before problems escalate.

However, when discipline does occur, students overwhelmingly describe the process as overly strict, top-down, and lacking in transparency or restorative options. Detailing an incident that resulted in his suspension, LeBron shared, "They give you a form and you write what happened, but they didn't even give me that . . . I should have got a chance to speak, being that it wasn't me who initiated the problem. . . . It's just something that makes me angry [that] they didn't listen to me." When reflecting on how disciplinary processes could be improved, he said: "Let me talk to them. Let me tell them my side of the story. Let me tell them why I did what I did, why I felt how I felt in that situation."

Britney, who has experienced multiple suspensions, echoed this frustration: "When I've gotten in trouble, I've never gotten an explanation for why I'm in trouble. I just see on the referral paper what it says that I'm in trouble for and I've never actually known exactly what I was in trouble for. And every single time I do ask a question about it . . . there's never a clear answer. It's just a lot of back and forth and kind of avoiding it and then belittling me." At-promise students consistently reported feeling unheard, confused, and unfairly treated during disciplinary proceedings. The students' reports align with findings on PBIS that while it reduces discipline overall, PBIS does not consistently reduce racial disparities in discipline (Cruz et al., 2021).

Desire for Restorative Practices

Students also highlighted the lack of restorative practices and open communication in disciplinary proceedings, with Tulip observing, "It's very often that you'll see a student and a teacher get into silly arguments, and then it ends up getting way over-escalated, and then the student ends up going into some sort of punishment—whether that be a referral or a suspension—for just speaking out their opinion. . . . When it's just a student speaking out on how they feel, it shouldn't feel like you should be punished for that." Andrew's referral experience supports Tulip's observation: "They just tell you to write the problem, the situation, on paper. They don't really talk to you first. Then they just grab the paper. . . . Most of the time they'll talk to you, but don't let you talk back. That's the thing: it's more like you're in trouble, this is what you did, and that's it. You're suspended." This points to a gap between the intended collaborative spirit behind PBIS policy and its application at Gunderson—and perhaps elsewhere in SJUSD—revealing how punitive discipline practices continue to negatively impact the social opportunity infrastructure needed to support at-promise students.

Violet explained that her disengagement from class resulted from feeling persistently targeted: "I just didn't want to go back to that class because I knew that [the teacher] was just always going to want to pick on me or something." She lamented: "[We're] the ones that are always getting in trouble instead of the 'good kids' . . . that's not okay." Instead of academics, many students we interviewed credited their friends for motivating them to attend and engage in school. Britney reflected, "My friends used to come here before they got transferred and expelled. Then I was happy. And now I'm back to . . . I don't really got nothing here, really." Similarly, when asked about what makes them feel engaged at school, Angel exclaimed, "Friends! Because I don't like school. I'm tired. I don't want to come. But my friends make me come, not make me, but they tell me, 'Girl, come.' They don't like coming either, but we all try our best to come." What these quotes illustrate is a remarkable commitment to education by students who feel unwelcome at school but still attend. However, the loss of social connections facilitated by exclusionary discipline practices further decreases at-promise students' sense of belonging and engagement in school—the type of social opportunity infrastructure students expressed needing but did not always have access to.

In the Gunderson SPSA, school leadership recognized that, "We need to learn about and incorporate more restorative practices." At-promise students agree, with one saying: "[Administrators and teachers] don't know how to communicate and they don't know how to approach situations well. . . . If we're getting in trouble, at least talk to us about

it so we know how to talk to you about it." Consistent and compassionate communication between students and administrators through the disciplinary process must be a baseline social opportunity infrastructure norm, especially as research suggests that standard PBIS implementation alone does not reduce racial disparities in office discipline referrals or academic outcomes for underserved students (Brown et al., 2019; McIntosh et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2023). Without addressing the broader social and cultural factors contributing to discipline disparities, standard PBIS frameworks may inadvertently reinforce existing inequities (Wilson, 2015). Culturally responsive, collaborative, and equity-centered restorative discipline practices are likely to offer effective and sustainable solutions for addressing discipline disparities and improving the school climate for the entire Gunderson community—as well as other school communities in SJUSD (Adukia et al., 2025; Frampton, 2023; González, 2015).

For example, in Denver Public Schools, a systemic approach to implementing restorative justice practices—including stakeholder circles and conferences, shifting away from zero-tolerance approaches, and aligning district policy reforms with long-term goals for equity—reduced racial disparities in suspensions for Black and Latino students while boosting academic outcomes (González, 2015). Given Gunderson leadership's strong commitment to remediating the educational disparities faced by at-promise students, Gunderson could play a pivotal role in a similar pilot-to-districtwide rollout of restorative justice discipline policy reform in SJUSD.

Building Culturally Responsive Relationships

At-promise students expressed a desire to feel free to be themselves and to know that teachers and administrators will not only respect them for who they are, but will be eager to develop meaningful relationships with them. Many teachers and administrators already operate at this level of social opportunity infrastructure, with Tulip sharing: "I have a few teachers that I know that I can really talk about important things, not just like in an academic sense, but on like a personal level sometimes as well. . . . One thing I really like is how they ask me questions on things that I'm obviously comfortable with, but wanting to know how I feel about certain things, and how they allow me to make my own choices for certain things that we're doing."

"I have a few teachers that I know that I can really talk about important things, not just like in an academic sense, but on like a personal level sometimes as well."

Students recognize that these relationships foster more positive school climates. Baaj shared, "It makes the classroom a more friendly environment when a teacher asks, 'Oh, how was the weekend?' Or how they're doing, stuff like that. Because some teachers do it and it really makes you feel included and able to talk about stuff and just ask something that's nice." When thinking of a specific teacher, Baaj reflected, "He shows the most respect to the students. He's sweet with students, he's funny with the students. . . . A teacher without a personality not being funny or sweet or stuff like that, I feel like that disengages a student. A teacher has to put their heart into a class."

However, many students also expressed that more work is needed to build these types of relationships. Minerva said, "The only reason I think [the administrators] would talk to anyone is because they'd be in trouble." While the work of school leadership is complex and brings new challenges each day, it is concerning that at-promise students reported rarely experiencing interactions with administration that were not about discipline. How might more opportunities be created to build positive relationships between administration and at-promise students?

When students interact with teachers and administrators, they also feel they are not always being met with the same respect they are expected to show the adults. As Minerva shared, "I think that's a big thing here. Students, they do talk back a lot, but they'll respect you if you're kind to us. But some of the staff here are not that kind." Fiona echoed this desire for mutually-respectful relationships:

> I feel like little issues, I feel like students' voices just should be heard and appreciated a little bit more. Like when students bring things to admin, it should be taken seriously. And the fact that we all deserve a basic level of respect, so we should contribute as such. Even though we're younger, we are still humans at the end of the day and you need to acknowledge someone's voice. You can't just, we're not sheep and you're not a shepherd, you know? You can't just tell kids certain things . . . and expect them to listen or expect there not to be backlash from that. So I feel like students should be heard more.

"I feel like students' voices just should be heard and appreciated a little bit more. Like when students bring things to admin, it should be taken seriously."

Students identified two specific barriers to social opportunity infrastructure that are currently stifling the development of culturally responsive relationships: (1) stereotyping; and (2) labeling.

Stereotyping

Students felt that they were being judged and targeted based on the way they present. Violet shared, "If you're dressed a certain way and you look like you associate yourself with these type of people, you're bound to get in trouble." Britney supported this sentiment, saying that "Some teachers are quite uncomfortable if they see a bunch of ghetto people. You know what I mean? People that they think are ghetto. . . . You can sense some of [the teachers] will feel uncomfortable. It could be like they think you won't listen or something like that." Fiona expressed hearing negative comments related to her identity: "Of course, I feel like especially being a minority, especially here, you hear a lot of offhand comments always. And I've had it from teachers in every grade at every school I've been to." Again, Britney echoed this perspective, sharing: "Like the way you dress, the way we look, the way you sound, yeah, there's a lot of stereotyping." Even if teachers don't act on these assumptions, students still feel the weight of being stereotyped—a phenomenon that Steele and Aronson (1995) refers to as "stereotype threat." This fear of being stereotyped can lead to "distraction, narrowed attention, anxiety, self-consciousness, withdrawal of effort, over-effort . . . [and an] inefficiency of processing" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 809).

Labeling

Students who had previously been disciplined felt that teachers and administrators were unwilling to see past their disciplinary record, judging students based on prior incidents. As Britney explained, "I know I messed up pretty bad last year, but I don't think I did anything to them in the beginning for them to act like the way they acted. But after that, it's like now everybody knows my name apparently. That's what they always tell me." Once students have been labeled, they feel more likely to be targeted for additional surveillance and punishment, sometimes to a near-taunting degree. Britney recounted, "They're like, 'Oh, you're known. You're known. Yeah. But they won't let it go, or they still look at me weird, or they treat me weird." Fiona shared, "It's very clear to see that people aren't even doing anything, you know, you just have the assumption that they're going to do something based off the things that they've done before and then you get on them for that."

Research has reinforced that this cycle of pathologization is real—once a student is labeled, they are then more likely to be

surveilled and punished (Annamma, 2018). Yet, at-promise students, especially those who have disciplinary records, are in even greater need of social opportunity infrastructure that facilitates positive relationships with teachers and administrators (Hopper, 2022). Studies have shown time and again that there is a connection between strong relationships with adults and positive student outcomes in academics and attendance (Craven, 2024; Quin, 2017). This is especially pertinent for students from low-income backgrounds and students of color (Roorda et al., 2011).

Building social opportunity infrastructure through culturally responsive relationships can have a powerful impact. For example, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) partnered with Californians for Justice on their Relationship Centered Schools Campaign—which "breaks down the cycles of racial bias and inequity in our schools by supporting educators and students to build relationships that embrace and empower all students to pursue their dreams" (Californians for Justice, n.d.). One measure that LBUSD implemented was including student voice in professional development training, where students, teachers, and administrators participated in student-led training on topics such as implicit bias (Hernández & Rivero, 2023). Students and teachers also engaged in "empathy interviews," one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences (Hernández & Rivero, 2023). An administrator who engaged in an empathy interview reflected, "There was a level of respect that [students and teachers] had for one another when they got in the room and started grappling with what would work and what wouldn't work at our school. Everybody came away and said, 'I have a different respect for our students' perspective' or 'I have a different respect for teachers'" (Hernández & Rivero, 2023, p. 16). Gunderson could implement similar programs to help foster culturally responsive relationships between at-promise students, teachers, and administrators.

Students want to have meaningful connections with adults. And for these relationships to blossom, students need to feel safe showing up in school as their authentic selves. When students, teachers, and administrators have mutually respectful relationships, there is a greater chance that academic performance and attendance outcomes will improve. In order to foster these relationships, social opportunity infrastructure can be designed and renewed with culturally responsive relationships—those that validate and affirm students' cultural identities as assets within the school community—at the center (Turner, 2023).

Mentorship-Driven Engagement for Relationship Building

Positive relationships between students and their teachers significantly impact educational outcomes and students' behavioral and emotional engagement (Barile et al., 2012; Göktaş & Kaya, 2023; Lee, 2012). Our conversations with students suggest that existing practices can be reimagined to build social opportunity infrastructure that supports meaningful relationship building between students and adults. More specifically, research indicates that the advisory period can act as a key site for relationship building (Gambone, 2024). In the "advisory model, advisors play a critical role in guiding students through their academic journey. . . . The advisory model's influence extends far beyond academic advice; it plays a critical role in guiding students in their personal growth and development" (Roe, 2024).

Baaj shared a powerful story of feeling that his mindset towards school and his academic trajectory changed through a mentorship engagement with his teacher for the Grizzly Learning Center block (GLC)—Gunderson's advisory/study hall equivalent. He said, "I used to have [a teacher] for GLC. We just talk the whole GLC, talking about college or opportunities or business and stuff like that. We would have those conversations, just talking about that stuff. I feel like he also influenced a lot of my future plans." Baaj was able to connect more with this teacher through GLC. This consistent point of contact with the teacher allowed Baaj to find a trusted adult whom he could turn to for advice, which later shaped how he viewed his future. Baaj's experience highlights the potential of GLC—existing social opportunity infrastructure—not just as a space for academic catch-up, but as a meaningful site for connection if intentionally structured that way.

However, for a lot of students GLC was not necessarily used as a time to connect with their teachers. Fiona shared, "You can do homework and then you can get passes to go to different teachers to do your work and stuff. . . . [but] because it's required, everybody has to stay for seventh period, GLC. That's literally just an hour and a half of you in study hall when you could go home." While Baaj illustrates GLC's potential, the experiences of other students like Fiona demonstrate that it can be underutilized. Indeed, research finds that many advisory periods fail because there is no established community-wide expectation on the purpose of advisory—advisors themselves are not given adequate support to lead advisory, there is often nothing for students to do during the period, and students are not involved "in the planning or facilitating" of advisory (Mellone, 2023). Our findings suggest that reimagining adult-student interactions through a mentorship model could foster the kind of relational trust (i.e., social opportunity infrastructure) that students are seeking.

Many schools throughout the U.S. have revamped their advisory programs, creating programming that allows students to connect with teachers and their peers while also giving them some autonomy over the period. For example, Saint Mary's College High School in Berkeley, California, implemented "Community Block," or "C-Block." In C-Block, students are assigned to one teacher and peer group that will follow them throughout their four years in high school. Meeting about one to two times a month, students engage in social emotional learning activities with their teacher, plan bonding activities such as potlucks, and participate in structured discussions around identity, community, and personal development. When asked about their time spent in C-Block, a former Saint Mary's student expressed their enjoyment participating in the program: "I liked my C-Block, I was cool with [my teacher] and we got really close" (C. Anderson, personal communication, May 20, 2025). Models like Saint Mary's demonstrate the potential of a reimagined advisory period—one that creates the social opportunity infrastructure to support a young person's social-emotional and academic growth. Implementing a similar program at Gunderson and/or in SJUSD could be a key step toward bridging the relational gaps and alleviating the emphasis on discipline that many students experienced in the traditional school setting.

FACILITIES AND ATHLETICS

Understanding the Impact of Facilities

The at-promise students we interviewed expressed a widespread frustration with the limited number of available bathrooms and restrictive usage policies—environmental opportunity infrastructure that can often be overlooked when developing strategies to improve student outcomes. Britney described how "the one open girl's bathroom in the entire school only has three stalls," leading to long lines and inadequate time to use the restroom during short breaks. Violet echoed these concerns, stating, "There's only one bathroom open in the whole school," and questioned, "And they wonder why the lines stack up?"

Beyond bathroom availability, students expressed frustration with the usage policy. Britney continued, "But it's not even just that. During the breaks, you can't really get into the bathrooms because of how long the line is and it's only three people at a time, and the break is only about five minutes. . . . When you're in class, the first 15 minutes you can't leave to go to the bathroom and then you can't leave for the last 15 minutes. . . . It's not enough time to use the restroom." It should be clear that Gunderson' bathroom usage policy could have resulted from a multitude of factors, some of which may be important for student well-being and academic success. Nonetheless, these insights from at-promise students highlight how the practice has limited usefulness for students. This feedback raises an opportunity for Gunderson to reconsider the bathroom policy to balance its current purpose with student needs—creating the type of environmental opportunity infrastructure that is responsive to student feedback.

Students also highlighted the poor condition and cleanliness of bathrooms and water fountains. Andrew remarked, "They do need a major improvement in the bathrooms and in the water fountains. The water fountain, it's always nasty. . . . The bathroom

is, let's never talk about it. It's bad." The lack of accessible clean water was a recurring complaint, with Violet expressing, "I want them to at least give us the ability or let us have some water bottles." She described how visibly dirty most of the water fountains at Gunderson are, reiterating, "There's webs on the water fountains from how much nobody uses them."

Several students also voiced concerns about the appearance of the Gunderson building. Bruce reflected, "When I first came here for the orientation, I thought it was a prison for the first time because . . . it looks like that." John echoed, "Gunderson could be more welcoming because, when I come here every day, I look at how it's built and it just doesn't feel welcome. It looks weird, like they're trying to keep you trapped here." Overall, at-promise students agreed that the unwelcoming appearance of the building—a barrier to environmental opportunity infrastructure—decreases their motivation to attend and engage in school.

Student concerns about facilities are strongly supported by educational research indicating that the quality of school facilities—the built environment—directly impacts student achievement, motivation, and well-being. For example, research from the Texas Association of School Boards (2024) highlights that "students perform better in newer or recently renovated buildings than they do in older buildings," with disparities in facility quality contributing to achievement gaps. The U.S. Department of Education has also noted that poor conditions—such as overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, and lack of bathroom access—negatively affect both students and teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). A study on student satisfaction found a strong positive correlation between the quality of facilities and learning motivation (Claveria et al., 2023). Case studies from districts such as Fresno Unified School District and Mesa Public Schools demonstrate that strategic facility planning, community engagement, and targeted investment can transform outdated or inadequate spaces into environments that support academic and social success (MGT, 2024). Upgrades to water systems, lighting, HVAC, and restroom facilities have been shown to improve not only student outcomes but also staff morale and community pride (DeMatteo, 2019; Superville, 2023).

"Gunderson could be more welcoming because, when I come here every day, I look at how it's built and it just doesn't feel welcome. It looks weird, like they're trying to keep you trapped here."

Students make clear that Gunderson and SJUSD need renewed investments in environmental opportunity infrastructure. Dissatisfaction with bathroom access, water quality, and buildings undermines their daily experience and learning motivation. Research and real-world examples confirm that investing in facilities yield salient improvements in student achievement, health, and school culture. Addressing built environment needs is fundamental to creating a learning environment where all students can thrive, as Violet summarizes: "Access to water. Access to bathrooms. That's the fundamentals of the human body."

Restructuring Athletic Programs

Gunderson offers a robust sports culture—social opportunity infrastructure—with 32 teams across 15 sports and approximately 297 students participating in athletics during the 2024–2025 school year (Gunderson High School [Gunderson], n.d.). Of the at-promise students sampled, 37% identified as current or former student athletes.

For many at-promise student athletes, their participation in team sports motivates them to attend and engage in school. At Gunderson, students must maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA to participate in athletics (Gunderson, n.d.). Considering the participation requirements, Robert said, "I think it affected

it positively because it helped me get my grades up, so I can [play]. Because if they were bad, I wouldn't be able to." Opal, who hopes to join a Gunderson team next year, echoed, "I think it was not the classes, but I think it was [the sport] that motivated me." Research suggests that participation in high school athletics is associated with higher GPAs among low-income students at Title I schools, like Gunderson, presenting athletic participation as a potential strategy for narrowing the achievement gap for at-promise students (Ebert, 2022).

A key barrier for at-promise student athletes at Gunderson is the incompatible scheduling of school classes, sports practices, and student commutes. Boys teams, in particular, are scheduled to practice from 6 to 8 p.m., which many male-identifying athletes found challenging. Andrew described his daily routine as a student athlete: "When I have practice from 6 til 8, I'd mostly leave [school], hang down at the mall, maybe get some food, but that's it and then come back to practice. Then go home, then take a shower, then eat before I start doing my homework . . . Go to bed and wake up for school the next day." John described a similar routine, "We get out [from class] at 3:20, I go home for an hour. I have to come back at 6 and then leave around 8 . . . I do sports and then I come home, do homework I have to do, and I go to eat, shower, and then sleep. That's very much my day." When asked what time he typically goes to bed, John responded, "Probably 12 a.m. to 1 a.m." With practice scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m., at-promise student athletes—many of whom rely on public transportation to commute to Gunderson—experience significant time constraints in their daily schedules that impede their ability to manage their academic workloads alongside their athletic requirements.

While participation in sports serves as social opportunity infrastructure that motivates at-promise students to attend and engage in school, barriers such as inconvenient scheduling undermine students' sense of success. These findings suggest a need for more flexible athletic structures that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by at-promise student athletes, especially those who share LeBron's wish that "they put more into our athletics teams as a whole, all of our athletics."

Recommendations

Recommendations: Investing in Opportunity Infrastructure

The following recommendations are grounded in our key findings and aim to respond directly to what at-promise students shared, while integrating feedback from school and district leaders to offer ambitious yet practical and feasible ideas to improve educational outcomes for all students. The recommendations also seek to build on existing efforts at Gunderson and in SJUSD, helping decision-makers translate student insights into meaningful, systemic change.

POST-SECONDARY SUPPORT

Streamline access to existing college and career resources.

To ensure all students are prepared to thrive after graduation, SJUSD and Gunderson can better streamline college and career resources in ways that intentionally build students' social and cultural capital. While a number of college and career resources already exist across the district, the responsibility for identifying and accessing them often falls solely on students. This model particularly disadvantages students who come from low-income communities that do not have access to social and cultural capital to navigate complex college applications, financial aid systems, and workforce opportunities like well-paying apprenticeship programs.

Streamlined access, however, could create the type of academic support infrastructure that high-income students likely already get—where students not only have access to information but are also guided through the various steps for different post-secondary pathways. Gunderson and SJUSD could ensure streamlined access to post-secondary resources by creating new and/or improving existing college and career programs with a focus on accessibility for at-promise students. Whether they are workshops, networking and mentorship opportunities, family engagement initiatives, or one-on-one counseling, programs developed by centering students who need them most can help remove barriers and make resources more accessible and effective for all students.

Integrate mandatory college and career readiness sessions into the school schedule.

One way to ensure students have greater access to existing post-secondary resources is to integrate mandatory, grade-specific college and career readiness sessions into the school schedule. For example, Gunderson could require school counselors and DCAC advisors to offer mandatory info sessions during the GLC advisory period. These sessions should be scaffolded for each grade to ensure they are appropriate and relevant, but most critically, making them required and part of the school day is likely to reduce the accessibility barriers at-promise students identified.[12]

Schools in SJUSD can also require mandatory meetings with counselors that are built into student schedules. While several factors can influence the impact of this policy—such as frequency, counselor capacity, and the effectiveness of each meeting—it addresses students' concerns about the lack of post-secondary information, especially earlier on in their high school careers. For example, mandatory meetings with a counselor at least once per semester can ensure every student has access to information that will support them throughout high school and beyond. A potential implementation pathway for this recommendation is included in Appendix D.

12 In response to our recommendations, Gunderson has already begun to reimagine the GLC advisory period for the 2025–26 academic year. For example, the "GOLD GLC Program" that has been implemented includes sessions led by college representatives, school counselors and DCAC advisors, alumni, and peers about topics ranging from transcript review to vision boarding. Gunderson should build on this excellent work while continuously seeking and responding to student feedback based on their experiences.

Develop "near-peer" programs for older peers to mentor younger students.

Gunderson and SJUSD should consider developing near-peer mentoring programs that rely on older students and/or alumni to mentor younger students (Akinla et al., 2018). Ample research has shown that these programs can be highly effective in reaching and engaging young people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (Fisher, 2023), and especially if the near-peers are trained and compensated sufficiently. Near-peer programs can also supplement existing counseling programs to provide counselors with added capacity and students with more opportunities to check-in regarding post-secondary plans. For example, if a school requires every student to meet with their school counselor at least twice per semester, some of those meetings could be with a near-peer mentor as part of the counseling team.

Gunderson and SJUSD should consider how to build near-peer programs in feasible and sustainable ways. Institutional partners with established initiatives—such as the Stanford Haas Center for Public Service's High School Support Initiative—may help lower the barrier for program development and implementation. Additionally, Gunderson should consider leveraging current structures, like the DCAC program or GLC period, to support near-peer models that maximize time and resources.

Many existing near-peer programs have shown success and can serve as models. For example, the City University of New York's College and Career Bridge for All (Bridge) program is the largest near-peer mentoring model nationwide, where high school seniors in NYC Public Schools all "receive college and career planning assistance from a bridge coach who is typically a currently enrolled CUNY student" (Smith, 2024).

CUNY's data suggest that underrepresented high school students that participate in Bridge are 7% more likely to enroll in college and 82% of college-intending high school graduates served by Bridge successfully enroll following graduation (CUNY, n.d.).

Programs like these can be adapted so that the near-peer mentor can reflect a wide range of post-secondary pathways (e.g., university or community college, career technical training, workforce development and/or apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, etc.).

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Adopt instructional practices that make learning active and dynamic in each classroom.

SJUSD and Gunderson should consider adopting instructional practices that use varied, engaging activities to make learning more active and dynamic in each classroom. Throughout our interviews, at-promise students not only emphasized their disengagement from passive learning activities—such as note-taking and worksheets—but also pointed to when they felt most engaged: in active and dynamic learning environments, particularly with teachers who had strong relationships with them. Although there are many ways to describe active learning, it is "most commonly associated with learning strategies such as experiential learning, learning by doing and service learning, peer tutoring, laboratory work, role-playing . . . [the use of] technology . . . [and] interpersonal interaction between students and others" (Carr et al., 2015, p. 174).

It may be valuable to build on the engaged learning experiences that students are already creating for themselves and with their teachers. For example, in response to feeling overlooked in traditional classroom settings, many students reported relying on peer collaboration to support their learning—a reflection of their resourcefulness and desire for connection. Classrooms

could leverage this instinct by intentionally fostering peer-to-peer collaboration (making learning more active) and offering creative, hands-on projects that vary in format and presentation (making learning more dynamic). One potential approach is to integrate student-led lessons, allowing groups to design and teach content to their peers. Research has shown that this not only deepens their own understanding of the content but also builds confidence and increases engagement (Hefel, 2021).

Develop a culturally sustaining, career-connected curriculum that affirms identities and builds real-world skills.

SJUSD and Gunderson should consider developing a culturally sustaining, career-connected curriculum that not only affirms students' identities but also prepares them with real-world skills. At-promise students are more likely to thrive when curriculum reflects their identities and equips them for life beyond the classroom. Students expressed deep engagement when exposed to literature that made them feel "seen" and "connected," yet many noted that outside of ethnic studies courses these moments were rare or narrowly framed. They called for content that moves beyond surface-level inclusion, incorporating voices often excluded from traditional narratives and providing space for students to explore personal, cultural, and professional interests. At the same time, students were interested in real-world challenges, citing a desire to learn more about financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and alternative career pathways.

A culturally sustaining and career-oriented curriculum—grounded in both identity and opportunity—could validate students' lived experiences and expand their sense of possibility. For example, teachers can be encouraged and supported to explore how to revamp their curriculum to make deeper connections to the outside world, including inviting local speakers, having students conduct oral histories with their neighbors, or hosting a variety of career exploration workshops to see what students are drawn to. This effort could provide students with exposure to local leaders and entrepreneurs who can offer insight into their professions and contribute to the broader Gunderson and SJUSD community.

DISCIPLINE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

Co-create a school discipline system alongside at-promise students.

Gunderson and SJUSD should consider taking a collaborative approach to revising school discipline policy, co-creating a system not only with at-promise students but also families, teachers, and administrators. This approach creates an opportunity for school discipline policy to be more responsive to community needs and encourages shared ownership and buy-in. For example, Gunderson can draw from SJUSD's successful collaborative development of its district cell phone policy, where students played a key role in shaping guidelines. Applying a similar process to school discipline not only supports equitable decision-making but may also serve as a "reset" that helps rebuild trust between students, teachers, and school leadership.

Co-creation may ultimately lead Gunderson—and SJUSD more broadly—toward adopting a restorative discipline model, which would align closely with what students we interviewed have called for. This model should center student voice and transparency, including implementing practices such as community circles and mediation, establishing clear and open communication, and fostering two-way dialogue between students and staff. It also requires intentional staff development in bias awareness and restorative methods, along with consistent engagement of students and families as active partners in shaping and sustaining the system.

Nonetheless, we note that adopting a restorative discipline policy—just like any discipline policy—can be complex and challenging. Successful implementation often requires more than a policy change; ideally, it involves a foundational shift in school systems toward a restorative culture (Koon et al., 2021). This includes providing staff with adequate training—both in how they think about discipline (i.e., mindset) and what they do to discipline (i.e., skillset)—opportunities for practice and reflection, and the institutional support necessary to sustain the

culture. Local and state-level investments in restorative culture building across districts, schools, and classrooms can serve as the backbone for more equitable and supportive discipline practices that allow all students to thrive.

Create a school-wide relationship-building strategy that repairs and strengthens trust between staff and students.[13]

To foster a climate of mutual respect and belonging, Gunderson should consider creating a school-wide relationship-building strategy that centers identity affirmation and trust, especially for at-promise students. Research has long confirmed that strong student-teacher relationships are key to academic success and social-emotional development, particularly for students who have historically felt undervalued in school settings. For example, students in our study described thriving especially when teachers bring personality, humor, and empathy into the classroom. Creating a relationship-building strategy may begin with a reflective practice focused on mindset shifting—with adults being encouraged to interrogate their own biases and how they can engage with students from a place of care, humility, and curiosity.

Beyond mindset shifting, Gunderson could develop structural support for deepening relationships school-wide. For example, many students only experience relationships with their assigned teachers, but an activity at the beginning of the year—even focused just on incoming 9th graders—where all students have opportunities to meet all teachers, could have a positive impact. Additionally, teacher-led welcome routines that start each class with warmth and consistency, youth-led trainings on implicit bias and adultism, and voluntary staff-student interviews during training days that promote reciprocal storytelling and shared understanding can all further repair and strengthen trusting relationships between students and adults at Gunderson.

Restructure the GLC advisory period to focus more on mentorship-based relationships.

Gunderson should consider restructuring the GLC advisory period to focus more on mentorship, creating space for students and teachers to build authentic relationships, strengthen students' sense of belonging, and expand access to post-secondary pathways—all within an existing block of the school day. In our interviews, students revealed an inconsistency in how they engaged with GLC, with some finding meaningful opportunities to connect with teachers while others felt the time was unstructured. Rethinking the advisory period with a more intentional mentorship model could create space for teachers to know students beyond academic performance and for students to see their teachers as advocates rather than enforcers of

One promising model to guide relationship building work is the Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework, which is grounded in decades of research on strengthening student-adult relationships in schools. SJUSD and Gunderson already have expertise across several dimensions of this framework, which includes five key elements: Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities (Search Institute, n.d.). These elements offer a clear and rigorous structure for deepening relationships in ways that reflect the respectful, asset-based culture students are calling for. By applying some or all elements of this framework, Gunderson and SJUSD can develop a coherent, school- or district-wide relationship-building strategy—one that repairs and strengthens trust between students and staff. Ultimately, this work supports a more humanizing school culture, emphasizing values like reliability (i.e., can you count on me?) and authenticity (i.e., do you know that I care about you?).

13 Although this recommendation focuses on trust between staff and students, we note that fostering trust among all adults in the building—including teachers, administrators, and support staff—is equally vital to both improving student outcomes and successfully implementing new policies.

discipline. Leveraging existing social opportunity infrastructure like GLC to support mentorship and closer relationships can improve well-being for all students at Gunderson.

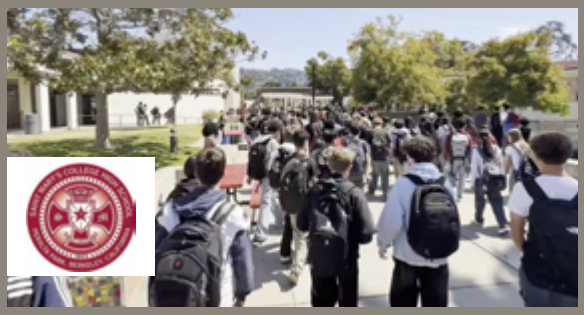
One way to support restructuring the GLC advisory period could be to adopt a new bell schedule. While it is most important to improve what happens during GLC, the bell schedule can play a vital role, including how long the GLC period is and when during the school day it is scheduled. Bell schedule changes should be co-developed alongside administrators, teachers, students, staff, and parents to ensure ample stakeholder input prior to decision-making.

FACILITIES AND ATHLETICS

Invest in upgrading facilities to increase students' sense of belonging and motivation.

SJUSD and Gunderson should consider investing in upgrading Gunderson's facilities to increase students' sense of belonging and motivation. A healthy, motivating school environment begins with the basics: access to clean water, functional and sufficient bathrooms, and a physical space that feels safe and welcoming. However, over 60% of at-promise students interviewed reported frustration with limited bathroom access and unsanitary conditions. Some students described how the shortage of open bathrooms and short breaks make it nearly impossible to meet basic needs, while others highlighted the persistent lack of clean water and poorly maintained water fountains. The building's unwelcoming appearance further erodes students' sense of belonging and motivation, with some students likening the school to a prison.

While recognizing the multitude of challenges a district may face in improving built environment infrastructure, we propose several ideas that can shape a comprehensive facilities improvement plan. This includes increasing the availability of clean, well-maintained bathrooms and upgrading water infrastructure by repairing existing fountains, installing filtered bottle-filling stations, and allowing students to purchase water. Additionally, cosmetic improvements like fresh paint, student artwork, and improved lighting can help create a more welcoming atmosphere. As seen in other districts, such targeted investments support stronger school culture, better health outcomes, and improved academic performance—laying a foundation where students have "the fundamentals of the human body" taken care of and the conditions necessary for learning (MGT, 2024).



At Saint Mary's College High School in Berkeley, CA, Community Block (C-Block) is an advisory period in which students and their peer group, along with their assigned teacher, plan and engage in various social emotional learning and bonding activities. One key component to the initiative that Gunderson can replicate is assigning small groups of students to teachers from different subjects and grade levels during students' freshman year, allowing cohorts of students and teachers to forge close relationships throughout the four years of high school. Forming this "C-Block family" has the potential to disrupt patterns of harsh discipline because students develop a greater sense of belonging within the school and can find advocates in their peer group and C-Block teacher.

Redesign the athletics program to better support student academic and personal success.

Gunderson could benefit from redesigning the athletics program to better support students beyond sports—creating stronger connections between athletics, academics, and personal growth. While many at-promise students report that sports motivate them to attend school and maintain their grades, current practice times for boys—scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m.—pose major logistical and time management challenges. These late schedules limit time for studying and rest, with several student athletes describing daily routines that extend into the early hours of the morning.

Research has shown that sports participation boosts GPAs for low-income students, but only when structures allow students to thrive in both the athletic and academic domains (Ebert, 2022). It is important to explicitly say that girls should not be the ones who stay late for practice either. Aligning practices closer to the end of the school day, providing academic support between school and practice, or offering more flexible scheduling can help ensure athletics remains a pathway to success for all students. Gunderson can work with coaches, transportation coordinators, and families to develop practice schedules that minimize long gaps between school dismissal and practice start times, and can consider earlier practices or rotating schedules to accommodate student obligations, especially for those who rely on public transportation.

BUILD AND SUSTAIN OPPORTUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Formalize the role of at-promise students as collaborative partners in decision-making.

To build and sustain the opportunity infrastructure that Gunderson and SJUSD implement, it is essential to formalize the role of at-promise students as collaborative partners in school and district decision-making. There are several ways to do this. At Gunderson, we recommend working with students we interviewed to launch an At-Promise Youth Advisory Board. The student board would be tasked and supported with obtaining, synthesizing, and delivering feedback to school administration on a regular basis. While we suggest the student board engage in Youth Participatory Action Research (University of California Berkeley YPAR Hub, n.d.) to support school decision-making, Gunderson leadership should collaborate with students, teachers, and staff to determine a process that best fits the needs of the school community. Regardless of the model, we emphasize that at-promise students should be compensated for their time (e.g., count time towards class credit or provide financial compensation). That is, if Gunderson asks for the time and support of at-promise young people to improve their school, the school should compensate them for their expertise and labor in some way.

At the district level, SJUSD could also consider developing an advisory board—though potentially one that includes not only at-promise students but also teachers, administrators, parents, and other school and district staff. This type of advisory board combines the knowledge of at-promise students with the perspectives of other adults within the system. The group would bring together a variety of viewpoints, which would strengthen decision-making and provide opportunities for collaborative brainstorming on policies and practices for the district to consider. We note that an advisory board composed of multiple stakeholders—but centered on at-promise students—could also be implemented at Gunderson. Likewise, a district-level board made up solely of at-promise students could also be established.

Furthermore, there already exists a student position on the SJUSD Board of Trustees. The district should work with school leaders to determine how to ensure at-promise students are represented in a similar capacity. Regardless of however Gunderson and SJUSD decide to formalize at-promise student feedback, we emphasize that students in our interviews frequently reported never having been asked their opinions about school, and specifically what works or is not working and why. This type of institutionalized engagement fosters empowerment and growth for at-promise students and ensures that their voices are continually heard.

Engage local institutions to build capacity for change.

SJUSD and Gunderson should consider engaging local institutions—such as colleges, universities, churches, and nonprofits—to build capacity for implementing new policies and practices. Building reciprocal relationships to invest in opportunity infrastructure is a central focus of the Roses Talk Project. We recognize that the responsibility for change should not rest solely on Gunderson or SJUSD. Instead, it should be shared across a broad network of stakeholders—especially those positioned to expand a school's capacity to serve its most marginalized students. Through this collective approach, we can improve educational conditions for at-promise students at Gunderson—and ultimately, for all students across SJUSD and beyond.

Conclusion

The Roses Talk Project highlights the importance of listening to and learning from students who are most impacted by systemic inequalities in education. Their insights point to concrete ways schools and districts can create more supportive, responsive, and equitable learning environments. While at-promise students face complex challenges, these recommendations offer clear starting points for change.

The project also embodies the principle that higher education institutions can and should play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of K–12 public education. By bridging research, policy, and practice, our collaboration with SJUSD and Gunderson demonstrates how community-engaged scholarship can advance educational equity. We hope these findings inspire district leaders, educators, and policymakers to more actively include marginalized student voices in their decision-making to promote better outcomes for all students.

References

Adukia, A., Feigenberg, B., & Momeni, F. (2025, February 10). From retributive to restorative: An alternative approach to justice in schools. *Brookings Institution*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-restorative-approach-to-student-discipline-shows-promise-in-reducing-suspensions-and-arrests/

Akinla, O., Hagan, P., & Atiomo, W. (2018, July 13). *A systematic review of the literature describing the outcomes of near-peer mentoring programs for first year medical students*. BMC Medical Education. https://bmcmededuc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-018-1195-1

Annamma, S. A. (2018). *The pedagogy of pathologization: Dis/abled girls of color in the school-prison nexus*. Routledge.

Barile, J. P., Donohue, D. K., Anthony, E. R., Baker, A. M., Weaver, S. R., & Henrich, C. C. (2012). Teacher–student relationship climate and school outcomes: Implications for educational policy initiatives. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *41*(3), 256–267. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-011-9652-8

Betts, A. (2025, September 20). 'These results are sobering': US high school seniors' reading and math scores plummet. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/sep/20/high-school-students-scores

Bhattacharya, K. (2007). Consenting to the consent form: What are the fixed and fluid understandings between the researcher and the researched? *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*(8), 1095–1115. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800407304421

Bhattacharya, K. (2017b). Unit 7: Data analysis, interpretation, and re-presentation. In *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Bondy, E., Ross, D. D., Hambacher, E., & Acosta, M. (2012). Becoming warm demanders: Perspectives and practices of first-year teachers. *Urban Education*, *48*(3), 420–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912456846

Boochever, A., Bennett, S. R., & Kurlaender, M. (2023, November). *Career technical education among California high school graduates*. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/career-technical-education-among-california-high-school-graduates

Brown, K. M., Roney, K., & Hill, D. J. (2019). Achievement & behavioral impact of PBIS (Positive behavior intervention and support) on African American students. *Psychology and Behavioral Science International Journal*, *10*(4). https://juniperpublishers.com/pbsij/pdf/PBSIJ.MS.ID.555794.pdf

California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress. (2025). *English language arts/literacy and mathematics Smarter Balanced summative assessments, results for Gunderson High, San Jose Unified, and state of California*. https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/CompareReportSB?ps=true&lstTestYear=2025&lstTestType=B&lstGrade=11&lstGroup=1&lstSchoolType=A&lstCds1=43696664330080&lstCds2=43696660000000&lstCds3=00000000000000&lstFocus=a

California Department of Education. (2025, May 7). *State Superintendent Thurmond and Governor Newsom announce over $618 million to support another 458 community schools* [Press release]. https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr25/yr25rel25.asp

California Education Code § 52060(g) (2020). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=52060&lawCode=EDC

California Education Code § 54690 (2023). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=54690&lawCode=EDC

Californians for Justice. (n.d.). *Relationship centered schools.* https://caljustice.org/our-work/rcs/

Carr, R., Palmer, S., & Hagel, P. (2015). Active learning: The importance of developing a comprehensive measure. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *16*(3), 173–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787415589529

Challenge Success. (2024, June 3). *2024 Student Voice report*. https://challengesuccess.org/resources/2024-student-voice-report/

Chang, H. N.-L., Chavez, B., & Hough, H. J. (2025, January). *Unpacking California's chronic absence crisis through 2023–24: Seven key facts*. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/unpacking-californias-chronic-absence-crisis-through-2023-24

Claveria, J. L. S., Leal, P. S. P., Paclibar, D. K., Page, A. V. A. L., & Sandigan, S. C. B. (2023). Student's satisfaction and perceptions: Quality of school facilities and its influence on students' learning motivation in a private school. In *5th DLSU Senior High School Research Congress*. De La Salle University. https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1742&context=conf_shsrescon

Cook Sumpter, D. A. (2013). Blurring the boundaries: The mechanics of creating composite characters. In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 181–194). Routledge.

Cook Sumpter, D. A. & Bryan, M. L. (2021). Blurring boundaries: The creation of composite characters in critical race storytelling. In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 251–267). Routledge.

Craven, M. (2024). *Welcoming and safe schools require authentic relationship building*. Intercultural Development Research Association. https://www.idra.org/resource-center/welcoming-and-safe-schools-require-authentic-relationship-building/

Cruz, R. A., Firestone, A. R., & Rodl, J. E. (2021). Disproportionality reduction in exclusionary school discipline: A best-evidence synthesis. *Review of educational research*, *91*(3), 397–431. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654321995255

CUNY. (n.d.). *College & career bridge for all*. The City University of New York. https://www.cuny.edu/academics/current-initiatives/k16/college-career-bridge-for-all/

Dawson-Amoah, M., Smith, S. L., O'Neal, D., Clay, I., Alonso-Morris, E. A., & Kho, A. (2023). Understanding the education policymaking process in the United States. *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, 4*(1), 46–59. https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia4010005

DeMatteo, M. (2019, December 12). *How one school district revolutionized its facilities on a small-town budget.* We Are Teachers. https://www.weareteachers.com/update-school-facilities/

Duncan-Andrade, J. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(2), 181–194. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.2.nu3436017730384w

Fisher, J. F. (2023, March 10). *The far reach of near peers*. Christensen Institute. https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/the-far-reach-of-near-peers/

Ebert, R. (2022). *An evaluation of the effects of student participation in high school athletics and grade point averages in a rural Title I school district* [Doctoral dissertation, Southeastern University]. FireScholars. https://firescholars.seu.edu/coe/126

Education Data Partnership. (2025a). *San José Unified School District*. https://ed-data.org/district/Santa-Clara/San-Jose-Unified

Education Data Partnership. (2025b). *Ethnic diversity index*. https://www.ed-data.org/article/Ethnic-Diversity-Index

Education Data Partnership. (2025c). *Gunderson High School*. https://ed-data.org/school/Santa-Clara/San-Jose-Unified/Gunderson-High

Frampton, M. L. (2023). Can restorative justice transform school culture in California? Qualitative research shines a little light. *Hastings Journal on Gender and the Law*, *34*(2), 75–100. https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1498&context=hwlj

Gambone, M. (2024, February 5). The advisory program: A space for nurturing student-teacher relationships to strengthen student advocacy in a progressive secondary school. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, *20*(1), 48–62. https://doi.org/10.29329/ijpe.2024.646.4

Göktaş, E. & Kaya, M. (2023). The effects of teacher relationships on student academic achievement: A second order meta-analysis. *Participatory Educational Research*, *10*(1), 275–289. https://doi.org/10.17275/per.23.15.10.1

González, T. (2015). Socializing schools: Addressing racial disparities in discipline through restorative justice. In D. J. Losen, A. J. Artiles, & E. B. Kozleski (Eds.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*. Teachers College Press.

Gunderson High School (n.d.). *Athletics*. https://gunderson.sjusd.org/extracurriculuar/athletics

Hefel, S. (2021). Impact of student-led discussions on student engagement and involvement [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina.] Scholar Commons. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/6710

Hernández, L. H., & Rivero, E. (2023). Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign. *Learning Policy Institute*. https://doi.org/10.54300/621.856

Hopper, B. (2022). *The perception of at-risk students on caring student-teacher relationships and its impact on their productive disposition* [Master's thesis, Brigham Young University.] ScholarsArchive. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/9476

Jones, C. (2024, April 29). *More California high school students want career training. How the state is helping*. CalMatters. https://calmatters.org/education/k-12-education/2024/04/career-pathways/

Koon, D. S.-V., Chong, S., Frampton, M. L., Winn, L., Jordan, C., Haro, B., Prim, J., Huddlestun, D., Pham, H., & Harris, J. (2021). *Beyond suspension decline: Transforming school discipline in California.* The California Endowment. https://beyondsuspensiondecline.org/Transforming-School-Discipline-in-California

Kuyenga, M. C. A., Lachney, M., & Green, B. (2023). Race-positive career and technical education: Techno-social agency beyond the vocational-liberal divide. *TechTrends*, *67*, 446–455. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-022-00806-w

Laing, T. & Villavicencio, A. (2016). *Early exposure to & preparation for college: A guide for educators.* Research Alliance for New York City Schools. https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research-alliance/early-exposure-preparation-college-guide-educators

Lee, J.-S. (2012). The effects of the teacher–student relationship and academic press on student engagement and academic performance. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *53*, 330–340. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.04.006

Lemar, A. S. (2019). Access to justice requires access to opportunity infrastructure. *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law*, *27*(3), 487–490. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26741641

Leung-Gagné, M., McCombs, J., Scott, C., & Losen, D. J. (2023). *Pushed out: Trends and disparities in out-of-school suspension*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/crdc-school-suspension-report

McIntosh, K., Girvan, E. J., Fairbanks Falcon, S., Bastable, E., & McDaniel, S. (2021). Equity-focused PBIS approach reduces racial inequities in school discipline: A randomized controlled trial. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *65*(4), 354–361. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000466

McIntosh, K., Girvan, E. J., McDaniel, S., & Fairbanks Falcon, S. (2023). Schoolwide positive behavioural interventions and supports and equity: A review of current evidence. *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy*, *18*(1), 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2022.2116223

Mellone, S. (2023, March 21). *What is advisory and why does it matter?* One Trusted Adult. https://www.onetrustedadult.com/blogs/news/what-is-advisory-and-why-does-it-matter

MGT. (2024, August 12). *Building for success: Case studies in strategic facility planning.* https://www.mgt.us/case-studies/building-for-success-case-studies-in-strategic-facility-planning/

Mireles-Rios, R., Rios, V. M., Auldridge-Reveles, T., Monroy, M., & Castro, I. (2020). "I was pushed out of school": Social and emotional approaches to a youth promotion program. *Journal of Leadership, Equity, and Research*, *6*(1), 1–21. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1293284

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, February 15). *Nearly one-third of public schools have one or more portable buildings in use* [Press release]. https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/2_15_2024.asp

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, *42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Pham, H. (2021, May 13). *Opinion: We should not leave Black students out of any debate to reinvent schools.* The Hechinger Report. https://hechingerreport.org/opinion-we-should-not-leave-black-students-out-of-any-debate-to-reinvent-schools/

Quin, D. (2017). Longitudinal and contextual associations between teacher-student relationships and student engagement: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, *87*(2), 345–387. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669434

Roe, A. (2024, May 29). *How advisory periods help build relationships.* Enriching Students. https://www.enrichingstudents.com/how-advisory-periods-help-build-relationships/

Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, *81*(4), 493–529. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793

Salazar, M. (2013). A humanizing pedagogy: Reinventing the principles and practice of education as a journey toward liberation. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*(1), 121–148. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12464032

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

San José Unified School District. (2023). *Gunderson High School: School plan for student achievement (SPSA), 2023–24*. https://gunderson.sjusd.org/about/school-performance

Saucedo, E. (2024, December 17). *California's community schools initiative: Progress and impact.* California Budget & Policy Center. https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/californias-community-schools-initiative-progress-and-impact/

Search Institute. (n.d.). *Developmental relationships: Relationships to help young people thrive.* https://searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships/

Shakur, T. (1999). *The rose that grew from concrete.* Pocket Books. (Original work published 1989–1991).

Siedman, I. (2006). Chapter 1: Why interview? In *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Smith, H. (2024). *Effective strategies for scaling near-peer mentoring programs*. AccelerateEd. https://www.accelerate-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Effective-Strategies-for-Scaling-Near-Peer-Mentoring-Programs_Final.pdf

Stafford-Brizard, B. (2024, March 1). The power of educator EQ. *ASCD*. https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-power-of-educator-eq

Steele, C. M. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(5), 797–811. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797

Superville, D. R. (2023, October 10). *These school building improvements are most likely to boost test scores*. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/these-school-building-improvements-are-most-likely- to-boost-test-scores/2023/10

Texas Association of School Boards. (2024, February 14). *5 ways your school facilities impact student achievement.* https://www.tasb.org/news-insights/school-facilities-impact-student-achievement

Tintiangco-Cubales, A., Kohli, R., Sacramento, J., Henning, N., Agarwal-Rangnath, R., & Sleeter, C. (2015). Toward an ethnic studies pedagogy: Implications for K–12 schools from the research. *The Urban Review*, *47*(1), 104–125. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0280-y

Turner, S. (2023, February 15). *Developing culturally responsive relationships with your students.* Social Studies School Service. https://www.socialstudies.com/blog/developing-culturally-responsive-relationships-with-your-students/

University of California, Berkeley YPAR Hub. (n.d.). *Youth participatory action research (YPAR) hub*. https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/home

U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights. (2025, January). *2021–22 Civil Rights Data Collection - A first look: Students' access to educational opportunities in U.S. public schools*. https://www.ed.gov/media/document/2021-22-crdc-first-look-report-109194.pdf

Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports a culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education*, *41*(4), 427–456. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906289710

Wilson, A. N. (2015). A critique of sociocultural values in PBIS. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, *8*(1), 92–94. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-015-0052-5

XQ Institute. (2025, July 17). *Elizabethton High School: A vision for the future of high school—designed by students, for students*. XQ Super School. https://xqsuperschool.org/where-we-work/elizabethton-high-school/

Appendix A: Participant Demographic Data

Table A1. Individual Participant Demographic Data

Student Number	GPA	Free or Reduced-Price Meal	Race / Ethnicity	Gender (Male / Female)	Attendance Issues?	Missing Credits?	Previously Suspended?	English Language Learner?	Individualized Education / 504 Plan?
S1	1.84	N/A	Black	M	Y	Y	Y	N	N
S2	1.82	Free	Hispanic	M	N	Y	Y	N	Y, IEP
S3	1.57	Free	Black	F	Y	Y	N	N	N
S4	1.56	Free	Hispanic	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y, 504
S5	2.24	Free	Black	F	N	Y	N	N	N
S6	0.92	N/A	Black	F	Y	Y	Y	N	N
S7	1.84	N/A	Hispanic	M	N	Y	Y	Y	Y, IEP
S8	1.83	N/A	Black	M	Y	Y	Y	N	N
S9	1.62	Free	Hispanic	F	Y	Y	N	Y	N
S10	1.80	N/A	Hispanic	F	Y	Y	N	Y	Y, IEP
S11	1.77	Free	White	M	Y	Y	Y	N	Y, 504
S12	1.53	Reduced	Black	M	Y	N	Y	Y	N
S13	2.20	N/A	Hispanic	F	Y	Y	Y	N	Y, 504
S14	1.62	N/A	Asian	M	Y	Y	Y	N	N
S15	2.17	Free	Black	M	Y	Y	Y	N	N
S16	1.83	N/A	Black	F	Y	Y	N	N	N

Table A2. Summary of Participant Demographic Data

Summary Metric	GPA	Free or Reduced-Price Meal	Race / Ethnicity	Gender (Male / Female)	Attendance Issues?	Missing Credits?	Previously Suspended?	English Language Learner?	Individualized Education / 504 Plan?
Average Score or Overall Percentage	1.76	50%	Black: 50% Hispanic: 37.5% Asian: 6.25% White: 6.25%	Male: 50% Female: 50%	Y: 81.25% N: 18.75%	Y: 93.75% N: 6.25%	Y: 68.75% N: 31.25%	Y: 25% N: 75%	Y: 37.5% N: 62.5%

Appendix B: Interview and Focus Group Protocols

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thanks so much for interviewing with us. We're here to learn about your education experiences, including what has worked and what hasn't worked for you in school. We're here because your voice matters and you have unique knowledge and expertise to help improve education for students not only at Gunderson but across San José Unified. Based on your ideas, we'll make recommendations for what policies and practices your school or school district should adopt to better support all students. Please remember you can skip questions that make you uncomfortable, or ask for more time to think. Also, at any time, you can leave and return to class if you decide you no longer want to participate. Do you have any questions?

Please know that everything you say here is confidential—meaning your identity will remain private. When we begin analyzing data, your responses will be combined with other student responses and a fake name or "pseudonym" will be used to maintain confidentiality. The only time we are required to report something to your school is if you tell us that you are going to hurt someone, hurt yourself, or that you're being hurt by someone else. That is the only time we would report; for everything else, we will protect your confidentiality. Remember, if you need more time to think about a question or if there are any questions you want to skip or just don't want to share, please let us know. Thanks again for talking with us.

To make sure we accurately capture what you share, we'll record our conversation together. We'll be the only people with access to the recording and eventually it will be deleted. Is it okay if we start recording? Do you have any final questions before we get started?

School Engagement

- Think of a time when you felt engaged at school, like when you were really interested in what you were learning or even when you felt motivated to learn.
    - Can you tell us more about this moment?
    - What made you feel interested or motivated to learn?
    - What did your teacher or school do well in this moment?
- Give an example of a time you felt *disengaged* at school, like when you didn't feel like being there or even got in trouble—for example, if a teacher yelled at you, sent you out of the room, or maybe the school sent you home.
    - What did you need in this moment?
    - What did the school do well in handling the situation?
    - What is something you wish your school did better or differently?
    - What do you feel when you share this story with us?

School Resource Officers

- Tell us more about the police officers on campus.
    - What are your interactions like with them? Have your experiences been positive, negative, or have you not interacted with them at all?
    - How does having police officers on campus make you feel?

Challenges and Personal Motivations

- What are some of the biggest challenges you face in school?
- Given the challenges you've shared, what motivates you to keep going in school?

Recommendations for Change

- If you could change 1-2 things about your school experience, what would it be and why?
    - Curriculum: Would you change the types of things you learn in school, like what electives are available? If so, what would you want to learn more about?
    - Teaching: Would you change how teachers teach? If so, what are some things teachers can do to make school more engaging?
    - Programming: Would you want more extracurricular, academic or mental health support programs? If so, what types of programs would you participate in?
    - Climate: Would you want the school to feel more welcoming? How do you think the school can create a space where all students feel comfortable and valued?
    - Discipline: Would you change how or why students get disciplined? If so, what would you change?
    - Scheduling: Would you change the scheduling and timing of your school, like the block schedule or when school starts/ends? If so, why?
- What do you hope for your future after high school, and how can your school or school district help you prepare for that future?

Additional Questions *if Time Allows*

- What successes in your life are you proud of?
- What classes/teachers do you enjoy? Why?
- Are there any classes/teachers that make school harder for you? Why?
- What role does your family or community play in your school experiences?

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thanks so much for joining this focus group with us. As you probably remember, we're here to learn about your education experiences, including what has worked and what hasn't worked for you in school. We're here because your voice matters and you have unique knowledge and expertise to help improve education for students at Gunderson and across San José Unified. Based on your ideas, we'll make recommendations for what your school or school district should do to better support all students.

Over the past several weeks we've listened to your interviews and started to develop an understanding of *what we think* you want to change about school. But before we share our recommendations with your principal and the superintendent, we want to make sure these recommendations are *actually things you want to change*—so we're going to do a couple activities in our focus group today to double check. Please remember you can skip questions that make you uncomfortable, or ask for more time to think. Also, at any time, you can leave and return to class if you decide you no longer want to participate, or request to answer questions in private. Do you have any questions?

Remember that everything you say and our focus group conversation is confidential—meaning your identity and what is said here will remain private. Please do not share anything you hear in this group or who attended. *Please answer yes that you will not share anything you hear in the group or who attended.*

Just like before, when we begin analyzing data, your responses will be combined with other student responses and we will use your fake name or "pseudonym" to maintain confidentiality. The only time we are required to report something to your school is if you tell us that you are going to hurt someone, hurt yourself, or that you're being hurt by someone else. That is the only time we would report; for everything else, we will protect your confidentiality.

To make sure we accurately capture what you share, we'll record parts of our conversation together. We'll be the only people with access to the recording and eventually it will be deleted. We will confirm with you before we start recording. Do you have any final questions before we get started? Thanks again for talking with us.

EDUCATION JOURNEY THEME (40 min)

Directions (5 min): We want to make sure we have learned the most important themes from your education journey at Gunderson. So we want you to *tell us* what you think your education journey theme is. For example, your theme might be "overcoming challenges" or "finding my own resources." To do that, we're going to give you this camera and you're going to take a max of 5 pictures around your school—pictures that capture your theme. Afterwards, you'll get a chance to explain your theme and 1–2 pictures to the group. To protect people's confidentiality, please do not take any pictures of a person.

Pre-Walk Activity (5 min): Before we get started we wanted to share examples of our own pictures to help you with this process [show your picture/explain your education theme]. Take a couple minutes to think about what in your school you want to take a picture of and then we'll walk around with you. If it's helpful, feel free to write ideas down. Do you have any questions?

Taking Pictures (10 min): [Remind students to take a maximum of 5 pictures that describe their education journey theme at Gunderson. Return to the room in ~10 minutes.]

Discussion (20 min): **Is it okay if we start recording now?** Please pick 1-2 pictures and describe why these pictures represent the theme of your education journey at Gunderson. [Each student gets up to 5 minutes to share.]

[Collect their pictures and tape them to chart paper to create a photo collage.]

Thank you for sharing your education journey themes with us. Now we'll share some of the recommendations we developed based on our conversations with you in February.

RECOMMENDATIONS (40 min)

Directions (5 min): With this activity, we want to make sure the recommendations we've come up with reflect what you actually want to change. Your input will help us revise our recommendations so that they accurately reflect your experiences, thoughts, and ideas.

Posted on the walls are the recommendations we've heard from you. Here's also the recommendations sheet with specific recommendations for each category [pass out to students].

Discuss Recommendations (10 min): Before we get started, we'll quickly explain some of these recommendations. Highlight the ones that you agree with [pass highlighters out to students].

- **Prioritizing Student Relationships:** A lot of students talked about the importance of trusting, caring, and mutually respectful relationships with adults at Gunderson. Some of the recommendations in this category include:
    - Build bonds between students and teachers through mutual respect shown in daily engagement and dedicated time in class.
    - Ensure all students feel recognized and respected in their efforts at balancing academics, leadership, and personal growth.
    - Develop a system of infrequent check-ins with students that are not based on conflicts or disciplinary action.
    - Foster improved counselor and student relationships by implementing a more consistent meeting schedule.
    - Do you have any questions about these?

- **Responsive Curriculum & Programming:** A lot of students also talked about the need for what you learn in school or the types of programs your school offers to be more responsive to your interests. Some of these recommendations include:
    - Use existing tools (like Destination College Advising Corps or DCAC) to create more programming for college-preparedness and use Gunderson Live to advertise the programs.
    - Offer additional classes and extracurricular opportunities in financial literacy, business, and alternative career pathways.
    - Integrate fun activities into curriculum delivery.
    - Cover relevant content like racial and ethnic studies not just in an ethnic studies course but across the curriculum.
    - Provide post-high school counseling on a variety of options early on and in accessible formats, not just waiting until junior or senior year.
    - Do you have any questions about these?

- **Resource Reallocation for Staff & Infrastructure:** Some students mentioned needing additional staff to support them or Gunderson needing an update to some of their facilities. We titled this category a "resource reallocation" because we think the school and district can likely move resources being used elsewhere to possibly support some of these ideas, which include:
    - Invest in improved student facilities, such as bathrooms and water fountains.
    - Reassign existing guidance counselors or social workers to specifically support student athletes, including facilitating clear communication between student athletes' teachers and their coaches when they have scheduling conflicts.
    - Ensure all sports teams have a consistent practice time and space from 4–6 pm after school, which can include sharing fields or developing transportation systems for student athletes to get to and from school and practice.
    - Do you have any questions about these?

- **Celebrating Student Success:** Some students talked about wanting the school to do more to celebrate their successes, which would help students feel greater pride in being at Gunderson. These recommendations include:
    - Celebrate student growth, including athletes but generally all students, and their achievements during pep rallies.
    - Improve recognition, mentorship, and resource support for students with athletic or extracurricular responsibilities outside of school.
    - Do you have any questions about these?

- **Space of Possibility:** We're including one more category where you can add ideas that we didn't capture or new ideas that you have.

Elicitation Technique (10 min): Take some time to review the recommendations you highlighted on the paper [~3 min]. What we want you to do is write your name down on a sticky note and stick it on as many recommendations as you'd like. If you have some ideas that we missed, feel free to write those down as well and add to the space that says "space of possibility."

Discuss Selected Recommendations (15 min): Once you have put your name by all recommendations you support, please pick the top three.

- Which three recommendations did you choose? Why did you choose those?
- Is there any one recommendation you feel particularly strong about? Why?
- Are there any recommendations you'd like to make that are missing from our list?

Appendix C: Composite Stories

Based on identified themes and to capture preliminary findings, we wrote four composite stories that represented an amalgamation of the students interviewed (Cook Sumpter & Bryan, 2021). We chose composite stories to "provide empirical space for researchers to recount the stories and experiences of people in political vulnerable positions" (Cook Sumpter, 2013, p. 182). Although the composite stories are not real at-promise student accounts—which means all the people, including adults and students, are *not real*—they tell a narrative that combines real scenarios from multiple students and includes direct student quotes. These quotes are italicized in the text to illuminate student experiences. Composite stories also offered a creative avenue for communicating the experiences of students and their ideas for change. In April 2025, these stories were used to present preliminary findings to SJUSD and Gunderson leadership for feedback that later informed our research, policy development, and final report. Please note that because our study was focused on understanding the experiences of at-promise students, quotes included below represent their perspectives and might not represent the perspectives of adults who interacted with them.

"JAZMINE"

By Chaélyn Anderson and Antonio Preciado

Setting 1: Break time in the cafeteria before sixth period

Jazmine sat on top of the cafeteria table, her hands wrapped around a bottle of Gatorade. The cafeteria was filled with students milling around and the buzz of constant chatter filled the room as students tried to get a few more moments of gossip in before the bell rang for sixth period. Across from her, the School Resource Officer (SRO) stood with their hands on their utility belt, listening to her talk while surveying the room.

"It was so cool seeing you at the Spring Festival downtown over the weekend!" Jazmine said smiling. "I didn't know you were, like, *an actual cop*."

The SRO chuckled. "Being here at Gunderson watching you kids is only a small part of my job, Jazmine."

Jazmine laughed. The SRO was cool—one of the few adults who didn't talk down to her. She liked that they were always friendly whenever they saw her. *They treated the kids at Gunderson like they were humans. They and the other officers just talk to us just as regular people.* She also felt like she could relate to them, because they were also a *minority and she knew that a lot of police officers in schools have, you know, prejudices and stuff. So she felt like the SRO being a minority helped them connect to the students on a different level. She honestly wished there were more officers like them on Gunderson's campus*.

The bell rang, ending her train of thought. "Alright Jazmine, don't be late to class now," they said, giving her a nod as they moved to the center of the cafeteria.

"Bye, SRO!" Jazmine got up to toss her empty Gatorade bottle in the trash and exhaled heavily. Her sixth period class was hard—she could never seem to remember anything and felt her heart beat faster with each step she took towards the classroom. *Maybe I should just skip today*. The thought crept in as she slowed her walking. It wasn't like she didn't try in the class. She just had such a hard time

focusing and because of that, she felt lost every time her teacher would call on her. She let out another heavy sigh.

As she turned the corner, she spotted Admin A standing outside a classroom door with another staff member. Just keep walking. Keep your head down. Speed up your steps. Too late.

"Jazmine!" Admin A's voice could be heard through the crowd of students in the hallway.

She rolled her eyes, stopping in her tracks, and turned towards them.

Admin A gestured for her to come over and crossed their arms, "Come here for a second."

Jazmine dragged her feet as she approached. "Yes, Admin A?"

"Somebody wrote on the lockers," Admin A said. "Do you know anything about that?"

Jazmine blinked slowly. Huh?

"I don't know anything about that," she said, shaking her head.

"Are you sure? Nobody mentioned anything to you and you didn't see anything?"

"I just told you—no."

Admin A paused for a moment and tilted their head. From the way their eyes narrowed slightly and posture straightened up, Jazmine could tell they already made up their mind. Frustration bubbled up in her chest. She didn't understand it. Admin A *could be so cool sometimes*. Jazmine remembered when she had issues with a girl in one of her classes at the beginning of the year. She told Admin A about it and they personally made sure to help her to transfer into another class to avoid any further issues. She had really appreciated them at that moment.

"I. Don't. Know. I was talking to the SRO the whole time during break! You can go ask them." Jazmine wasn't usually loud, but in this moment she felt she needed to be. She had to make Admin A actually listen.

Finally, they let her go. Jazmine turned on her heels and walked away. Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest. This wasn't the first time she experienced this, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Her mind raced as she walked to class: *getting stopped in the hallway every time that they see you is irritating. . . . Discipline. I know it's a fine line, but I feel like it's very clear. You can do it without excessiveness*.

By the time she got to her class, she was already five minutes late. She was already exhausted and she hadn't even entered the room yet. Taking a deep breath, Jazmine opened the classroom door.

Setting 2: Attending sixth period class before lunch

Jazmine slipped quietly into her sixth period class, five minutes late and still feeling the weight of her hallway run-in with Admin A. Her chest felt tight. She found her seat near the back and tried to steady her breathing, pretending she hadn't just been accused of something she didn't do.

Teacher A's voice echoed in the background, but the words didn't stick. Jazmine stared at her open workbook, the pages blurring together. She tried to focus, but her mind wandered. "*It's mostly when I really get the subject, I really understand it, and I have fun*," she'd told her counselor once. "*When I don't understand it, I push it away*."

And that's exactly what was happening now.

She glanced around. Everyone else seemed to be locked in, following the lesson, heads down, pencils moving. *Why can't I just be like them?* she wondered. Her thoughts drifted to earlier in the semester when she'd told a teacher, "*If they had more hands-on stuff, I'd probably pay attention more*." This class, like so many others, was just lectures and worksheets.

Teacher A's voice snapped her out of her daze.

"Jazmine, what page are we on?"

She froze. A boy near her chuckled under his breath. Jazmine looked down quickly, flipping pages in panic. Teacher A sighed and turned away, moving on. Embarrassed, Jazmine leaned toward a classmate and whispered, "Hey, what page are we supposed to be on?"

She hated this feeling—like she was always catching up, always out of sync. Teachers didn't ask if she needed help. She remembered saying once, "*I don't think they really came up to us and asked if we needed help*." It wasn't that she didn't want to do well. She just didn't know how to ask.

Trying to focus again, Jazmine gripped her pencil and forced her eyes back on the page. She wanted to do well. She really did. But right now, she just felt tired—tired of being behind, tired of not being heard, tired of being treated like a problem instead of a student.

<u>Setting 3: Being pulled from class to the office, missing a college resource event</u>

Jazmine was finally starting to settle into her sixth period class. After zoning out earlier, she'd managed to write a few notes, quietly asking the girl next to her for help. Her focus wasn't perfect, but she was trying—and for Jazmine, that was a win.

Just as she flipped to the next workbook page, the classroom phone rang. Teacher A answered, nodded, then looked right at her. "Jazmine, the office needs you."

The words hit like a weight. She closed her eyes for a second, then stood up without saying a word. She already knew what this was about. Again.

Out in the hallway, she could feel eyes on her. Her fists curled in her hoodie sleeves. *It's so embarrassing getting dragged around with admin. Like, leave me alone*, she thought bitterly, echoing what she'd said just last week.

In the office, Admin B stood near the counter with a folder in hand. "We just need a quick statement from you about what happened in the quad yesterday," they said flatly.

Jazmine's heart dropped. She had already said she wasn't involved. She had already told someone. Twice. Now they wanted it again?

They said, "Oh, we just want to hear your story," but obviously it was like they want me to . . . because they had me write two statements on what happened, she recalled thinking.

"I already told Admin A what happened," she said, her voice tight.

"Well, we need it again," Admin B replied.

Jazmine sat down with a form and a pen. She stared at the lines, not even knowing what to write anymore. She didn't even care about the incident—they didn't believe her anyway. *I swear it's because they wanted it to match up, to make sure I wasn't lying*, she reflected to herself.

As she handed the form back, she glanced at the clock—and froze.

The college info session. It was happening right now. Her counselor had finally scheduled something during school hours for students interested in community college programs. Jazmine had signed up. This was her one shot to ask questions, to see what her next step might look like.

No one in the office mentioned it. No one said sorry.

As she walked back to class, her eyes stung. The halls were empty now. She was late. Again. "*They never told me anything about any programs*," she muttered under her breath. "*I think they might when I'm a junior or senior, but right now it's literally nothing*."

This was supposed to be her time. Her future. But once again, someone else had decided what was more important.

"RENZO"

By Ev Gilbert and Sara Sarmiento

Setting 1: Sports practice on a Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. in early September

I gotta get home. Practice should have ended 10 minutes ago and I'm gonna miss the light rail. How am I expected to finish all of my homework for tomorrow? thought Renzo as he started his second lap around the field, running alongside his teammates in two orderly lines. Sweat dripped down his forehead and into his eyes. Wiping it away with the back of his hand, he thought, *Man, as soon as I get home I need to shower. But then I'll have even less time to do my homework . . . I'm so tired, this is so unfair*.

Renzo checked his watch again and saw that it was now 8:15 p.m. "Bro," he called to his friend running in front of him. "I'm gonna miss my train unless I leave right now—ya think Coach'll let me leave early?" His friend shrugged his shoulders in response, out of breath and too tired to respond fully. Renzo glanced down at his watch one more time as they rounded the next corner, approaching Coach and the sideline with all their gear and stuff stored on it. Making a decision, he broke out of his line as they passed, jogging over to grab his stuff. The rest of his teammates continued running in silence, too exhausted for small talk.

"RENZO! What do you think you're doing, kid? You still have two laps to go!" shouted Coach. As he continued to pack his bag and change out of his shoes he mumbled, "I gotta catch my 8:30 train."

"Which station? Ohlone-Chynoweth?"

"Yes, Coach."

"That station's right next to the school, you have time. Looks to me like someone just doesn't wanna do the work to be a Grizzly. Now show your team spirit and catch up with the others. NOW!"

"But Coach, practice is only scheduled from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. I gotta get home and can't miss my train," replied Renzo. *If we're talking about team spirit, then why don't all sports get more recognition at school, like during morning announcements or pep rallies. Putting more money into sports and stuff would actually raise the spirit. Just feeling recognized can change our days as student athletes, honestly*—he thought.

"They run every 15 minutes, you'll be fine. Now go catch up with your team or I'll make the whole team run double tomorrow, and it'll be your fault. If you wanna be part of this team, you gotta prove that you're committed to putting in the work!"

And with that, Renzo swung his backpack and sports bag up and over his shoulders and took off towards the train station. As he stumbled onto the platform, breathing heavily, he saw the familiar Blue Line train approach. He had just barely made it. Relieved, he unloaded his bags and waited to board. *¡Dios mío! I'm gonna make it home by 9:00 p.m. Then I gotta shower, eat, and do my homework before I go to bed. Then I gotta do this all over again tomorrow. I wish I could just fall asleep when I get home*, he thought as he put on his headphones to listen to music during the 30-minute commute.

Settling into his seat, Renzo looked out the window and watched as the fancy houses with their perfect lawns slowly disappeared from sight. Closing his eyes, he tuned out and waited for the familiar voice of the operator to announce that he had reached his stop.

<u>Setting 2: Renzo's home on the same Tuesday at 9:00 p.m.</u>

As he burst through the front door, he threw down his sports bag, kicked off his shoes, and beelined for the fridge to find the leftover dinner that his mother always saved for him. Too hungry to wait to heat it up, he plopped down at the kitchen table, dropped his backpack on the floor next to him, and started scarfing down the cold chicken enchiladas.

"Lorenzo, ¿Qué pasó?" his mother asked as she walked into the kitchen. His mother knew him better than anyone, and she could always tell when something was wrong. She was also the only person who called him by his full name, claiming that it was an important reminder of his Mexican heritage.

"Mami, Coach kept us over time *again* to run laps tonight. I had to leave before we finished to catch the train, but then they got all condescending and criticized my work ethic for not being a team player and staying late."

"Hm. Lorenzo. Remind me why you joined the team sophomore year?"

"*I just wanted to play with my friends*."

"And do you feel like you're getting that experience now?"

"No. Having practice or games six days a week, two hours a day, minimum, is so tiring that we don't even have energy to catch up or talk to each other."

"Do you feel like you've fallen out of love with the sport?"

"I mean, I still like playing the sport with my friends. But not like this. *Right now, I don't want to get an injury that could impact my future. At the rate they're working us, combined with the loads of homework my teachers assign, I feel like I'm so tired all of the time that I'm bound to get injured.*"

"Mijo, it takes a lot of strength to recognize when something that you love stops working for you. If playing varsity sports your senior year isn't working, then you're allowed to stop at any time. No matter what, your father and I support you and love you. You make us proud just by being our Lorenzo."

"Gracias, Mami. *I think it's better for me to just stop now and focus on getting good grades.*"

"Te quiero mucho, mijo. Now, you'd better shower and get started on that homework."

After taking a quick shower, Lorenzo stayed up until 1:00 a.m. working on his various homework assignments. When he realized the time, he said to himself, "Shoot, I still haven't finished my homework for tomorrow. But it's so late and I have to wake up at 6:00 a.m. to catch the train for school." Deciding to take the loss so he could get some sleep, Lorenzo headed to his bedroom and promptly fell into bed, too exhausted to dream.

Setting 3: Class at Gunderson on Wednesday morning, first period of the day

His alarm clock rang at 6:00 a.m., and Renzo told himself he'd do everything he could to get out the door at light speed that morning, treating it like a new challenge. The bell at Gunderson would ring at 8:25 a.m. like it does every day, and class would begin at 8:30 a.m. He just needed to be in a seat by that time, so surely a five-minute snooze wouldn't hurt anyone. After all, last night's homework took forever after getting home from such a late practice. He felt like he'd need five more minutes of energy to make it through this Wednesday.

Five minutes turned into fifteen minutes and that's when the rest of the day went awry. His daily routine requires a precise account for every minute in order to make the light rail on time. Oversleeping that morning made Renzo arrive at the station *just* as his usual train departed the station—he swears he would have made it on time if only he'd stuck to his five-minute snooze plan. He caught the next one, which arrived fifteen minutes later, but by that time he knew he would be adding to his collection of unintended tardies, all collateral from his goals to succeed both academically *and* athletically. A guy can dream.

Renzo ran down the hallway at 8:43 a.m. Luckily, he'd grown about a foot a couple of years ago, so each stride got him much closer to the classroom. He sees one of the SROs and briefly greets them good morning. They exchange their daily fist bump, and Renzo rushes on to class.

He entered class late and tried to slip into his seat without drawing too much attention from Teacher B, but as he sat down, the connected chair and desk slid diagonally out of the previously orderly grid of desks. Renzo didn't intend to ruin Teacher B's desk formation. He had simply needed more leg room after that eighth-grade growth spurt, but the desks just stayed the same size. He had always thought that if the chairs were *maybe a little softer and had more leg room*, he wouldn't mind sitting in them for hours at a time. Unfortunately, his desk was hurting, pinching, and making him sore.

Teacher B, who was standing at the front of the classroom, noticed Renzo's desk struggle and late arrival, but did not have the bandwidth to address it right away as they were busy writing the daily learning objectives on the board. Teacher B took attendance, collected homework, but stopped at Renzo's desk. Renzo was cold and panicky, realizing he left the incomplete homework on his desk at home. Teacher B reprimanded him and questioned whether this would become a pattern for the rest of the sports season, walking past him before he could answer. Feeling beaten down, Renzo plopped his head into his hands on the crooked desk and closed his eyes. "There goes my good day," thought Renzo.

Renzo felt frustrated that his efforts to get to school on time—despite the demanding practice, unanticipated snooze, and late train—were going completely unrecognized. Renzo held his tongue to the roof of his mouth to keep himself from blurting out how he really felt. He hadn't even missed the lesson; he just missed the learning objectives. Despite his best intentions, he felt like a failure, and it felt so unfair. Even when he was trying his best.

"TATI"

By Andrea Akinola and Zoe Edelman

"Girl, go to class," Grace whispers to me for the third time, "you know I love spending time with you in these hallways and avoiding Teacher C but you can't miss another period."

I roll my eyes at Grace, who tells me things like this often. She and I both know Teacher C never listens and always seems to find a reason to get mad at me—coincidentally the only Black girl in the class—for just sitting there. I guess doodling is illegal in their mind. "I'm always so bored there," I tell Grace, "I just wanna have fun outside."

She nods. "I know. We're almost there, and this afternoon we can go play with Buster."

I smile. Grace knows my weakness is her miniature poodle, Buster, whose company I much prefer to anyone's at Gunderson. Grace also isn't trying to force me to class—she knows I don't like school. It's tiring, I don't want to come, but Grace and my other friends always encourage me. It means a lot to me that, in this weird school, I have close friends with me, people I can trust around me who are reliable. In fact, these people are the most reliable ones in a school building where I always feel trapped. I don't mean this as an insult or to say that the school is bad, but when I first came here for orientation, I thought it was a prison. The grey walls, the concrete, the dull colors. I'm not convinced it's not one yet.

Feeling a sudden chill that has nothing to do with the San José breeze, I wave goodbye to Grace and we promise to meet up at lunch to trade snacks (her mom always buys too many fruit snacks, which she hates; I trade them for my brother's spicy chips).

I walk into the classroom as Teacher C is placing a paper on my desk. "Tati, you're basically late. Again," they tell me, without even saying hello. I mutter a sorry and sit down sullenly. I shouldn't be considered late; the door is still open and barely half the class is here yet. Teacher C's favorite student, Kenny, walks in with his blonde curls peeking out from under his beanie. "Hello Kenny!" Teacher C smiles at him, even though Kenny barely responds. I'm not sure what Kenny did to make Teacher C like him, because he hardly ever talks and everyone but Teacher C seems to know that he wears Airpods under his beanie. I suspect it has to do with the fact that he never seems to need help. I wish my brain worked the same way his does. Then Teacher C would probably like me more.

But I also don't like the way Teacher C teaches. *They just give us a packet or something and don't really explain how to do it. Sometimes*

they put up a video, and we just have to write like three or five sentences about what the video is talking about. It's funny. Sometimes the videos feel so stupid and easy I'm not even sure what we're supposed to be learning from them. *I can see how it can help other students who have a different learning level. Those students might still be at a middle school level, so the videos are probably helpful for them.* I wonder if Teacher C just gives us these to waste time or because they really think we're still middle schoolers. Probably both. *In my opinion, the videos and packets are totally useless, and when Teacher C actually decides to teach, they never teach at my speed limit,* always zooming ahead to the end of the lesson at top speed.

It's scary sometimes because I don't really understand what we learn in class, and I don't want to end up having to take an extra year at school just because I didn't pass a few classes. Sometimes I have nightmares about staying at Gunderson an extra year or getting sent to Broadway, the continuing school for seniors who can't graduate. Just thinking about it makes me shudder in my seat. I rub my arms to calm the goose bumps all over me. I guess I'll ask Grace for help when I go over to her house after school. Last time when I was confused, Grace taught me how to do it, so that's how I'm getting the hang of it. I make a mental note to bring her an extra bag of spicy chips to thank her.

I refuse to stay trapped at Gunderson or Broadway for another year past graduation. And honestly, I can't bear to stay trapped in this class for another moment. After Teacher C finishes going through the drills, they hand us our packets to fill out for the rest of class. I steel my nerves as I walk up to her desk.

"Teacher C, can I please go to the bathroom?"

"Tati, you know you can only go one at a time. You can leave once Kenny comes back." 20 minutes pass, and Kenny is still taking his sweet time walking around the halls. I don't even blame him. He probably needed a break from this boring class too. But this one-at-a-time bathroom system makes no sense. I get that the teachers need to be aware of who's out and stuff, but there's gotta be a better way. Maybe they should start by asking why all their students are desperately trying to escape their classes. *If they'd care to ask, we'd probably tell.*

Back in my seat, I take a peek at the packet. All I see are rows and rows of fill-in-the-blank questions. With all of these stupid drills, it feels like this school is trying to teach us how to work in a factory mill. But times have evolved. I just wish we were *learning things that could actually help prepare us to transition into reality*. We don't all need to be straight-A students who can repeat information back to teachers. *I want to work on new stuff and learn how to work on new things and everything. Like a business class, stuff that might get you through in the real world.*

My cousin does braids and she's been teaching me on the weekends. She gets to choose her own hours, her own clients, and work on a job that she actually likes. After I leave here, I want to be like her—I'm going to start my own hair business. I know that I could never ask the leadership at Gunderson to offer a class that would actually prepare me to be a braider. I would honestly be embarrassed to bring it up. I don't think they'd like that kind of thing. They'd probably think it's not really a good career path. But I wish there was at least an option to learn entrepreneurial skills.

Finally, the door swings open, and Kenny walks in. I jump out of my seat to grab the bathroom pass before someone else beats me to it. After I use the bathroom, I start my slow walk back to Teacher C's class. I kill time by putting one foot directly in front of the other, heel to toe. When I make it back to my seat, I look at the clock. Oh my god. There's still 30 minutes left in the period. I want to scream.

Somehow I survive the period by doodling in my journal. Teacher C side-eyes me, "This isn't art class, Tati." I know that obviously, but *it's easier for me to understand when I can draw something*. I really wish there were more visual aids in this class. Maybe then, I wouldn't be so lost all the time. Sometimes, I'll be reading an explanation with a picture beside it that relates to it, and everything clicks. I go from being confused to feeling like, "*Oh, that's probably what they mean*." With my learning disability, I know teachers assume I'm still at a middle school level, but it's not the stereotypical experience they think it is. My brain just works in different ways, and I've found different methods, like drawing, that make it easier on my end to learn. But they say that's not a real way to learn. Apparently the copy and paste packets are.

BEEEEEEEEP. Finally, the bell rings. I quickly pack up my journal and pens and rush out the door. As I walk down the hall to my next class, I can feel the tightness in my chest going away. It's like a weight is lifting off my shoulders. Teacher D is stationed outside their classroom, waiting to welcome us. They give each of us a handshake and say "what's up" as we walk in the door. I hear a burst of laughter coming from the kids in front of me. As I look at the screen, I see a GIF of Bad Bunny smiling widely. Usually, *the memes they put up are pretty cheesy, but that's what makes them so funny. I appreciate that they're at least putting in the effort and showing us they care*.

"Ok guys, time to get started. Today's quote is 'I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.' Does anyone know who said that?"

"LeBron James!" Eric yells from the back of the classroom without missing a beat.

Everyone bursts out laughing. Teacher D does too.

"Noooo, it was *not* LeBron James, though he may be the GOAT. This quote is from Angela Davis, an original GOAT who was fighting for our people, even when everyone tried to stop her. Today, you guys are going to learn all about her and other inspiring Black Americans who fought and continue to fight for freedom."

Throughout Black History Month, Teacher D has been keeping us engaged with new topics through different activities every day. For today's gallery walk activity, there are different Black artists and different people's stories on a board. I drink in the information like water, actually learning about my people. Grace, Eric, and I partner up, working our way around the room. After what feels like only 20 minutes, Teacher D calls us back together. "Okay guys, class is almost over. For homework you're going to work on a group essay and write about what you learned." Even though I usually groan whenever I hear the word "essay," I'm actually kinda excited about this assignment. *I just got to learn about parts of Black history that I never knew before, like the legacy of people who died and how they changed the world*.

It'll be cool to do some more research and write this essay, especially since I get to work with Eric and Grace. We're a great team—each of us has our own strengths when it comes to a project. Plus, they never make fun of me for asking questions or being confused. I'm not nervous about this project, since it's actually on something interesting and relevant: we get to choose a Black figure to write about who shaped California's history. *Teachers usually have pictures of Black people, like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., but they don't really go into more details on Black history*. It's cool that Teacher D is raising the bar.

They're also one of the few teachers here who actually cares about us. *I get that it's a hard job, but I wish the teachers would have more energy and show they cared more. Little things like welcoming us into the classroom or playing music or adding more games to the lesson plan would go a long way*. Even though I already feel lost at Gunderson, *I'm scared that, after high school, it just gets worse. I've just been*

in the mindset that, after high school, no one cares. Besides your family and friends, I guess no one cares about you when you're an adult. I really don't know what's to come for me after graduation. I want to maybe start braiding or maybe even try to go to college and build my business knowledge but it all feels very far away, and I have no idea how to get there. Here at Gunderson, it feels like if you're not excelling, they don't expect you to amount to much. They have career fairs once in a while but the only people there are usually military-affiliated. I guess that's always an option for me, but *a lot of my friends have older siblings who joined and I don't think they liked it very much.* Grace's sister, Ally, told me she always *felt super uncomfortable with her leaders or whatever, so she decided to leave after a couple of years but they didn't even help her pay for college, which was the whole reason she joined in the first place*.

Eric, Grace, and I wave goodbye to Teacher D before we leave for our next and—thank God—final class of the day. Eric sullenly waves goodbye to Grace and me as he heads to Teacher C's class, lolling his head to the side and sticking his tongue out to mime dying.

"Boy, you're so dramatic!" I laugh at him. "But stay strong. Teacher C seemed to hate me extra today."

"Not possible—they save that for me," he said. Grace and I laugh, waving back at him as he trudges down the hallway to Teacher C's classroom.

I loop arms with Grace, walking over to the gym with her. Gym isn't so bad. We usually just sorta stand around and at least I can gossip with Grace in between exercises. "You still wanna come over today?" Grace asks.

I smile and nod, as usual. "Duh," I say. "Plus, Teacher C assigned us like five pages of homework and I don't get it so I need you to help me."

We walk into the gym and without even intending, my internal clock begins to count down the time until we're out of here. One hour and 20 minutes, one hour and 19 minutes . . .

"ALEJANDRO"

By Kimberly González-Zelaya and Rebecca Han

T-minus two months until graduation. I can't wait until the day I finally get to walk across that stage and make my parents proud. Think I'll strut like this . . . but on the stage, of course, not into the cafeteria like I'm doing now. Man . . . I can see the flash of the cameras and hear my name boom across the auditorium now. *To think that two years ago Teacher E was kicking me out of class for doing nothing to nobody, and my counselor was telling me about how I needed this and that class to graduate. I guess I'm Exhibit A that you can lock in at high school during the last two years and still secure that diploma. Not that I'd recommend that strategy to any of the younger kids. I just wished I had known or thought about all of this stuff*—credits, graduation, a job—*a little bit sooner. I wish someone had told me*.

"What's going on today, young man?" I look up and away from my future moment of glory. It's Staff Sergeant Martínez in his usual cafeteria spot. He posts up here on the 15th of every month like clockwork since I've been here. Behind him, the dude on his USA Army banner gazes at me sternly—today, he looks a little bit warmer, probably implicitly knowing that the big day is drawing near.

"Not too much, Sarge, not too much," I respond. He daps me up. "I'm outta here in two months from today."

"Nice work, bud, nice work." All of my friends say I look like him, but I think they're just profiling two Mexican dudes (with no relation). *I guess I am tryna be like him, though, particularly when I actually join up with the Army Reserves. He's been telling me about all of that since I was a freshman, how you like, serve a few weekends out of the month or something. That wouldn't be too bad—and I can't go to college right now because of my grades and money, so they'd help with the tuition part. And to be honest, I need army discipline. Right now, I don't have a routine and don't take anyone seriously.* I'm about to say something to Sergeant Martínez when the SRO pulls up and grabs his attention. Lots of people in uniform today in one spot, huh. I make my way over to my usual seat.

"What's up, man?" James is probably my best friend at Gunderson. "I'll walk with you," he gets up—"oop, let's go the other way"—and shoulders me to the other side of the lunch table onto a different path, out of the way of Admin C, who's speaking into their walkie-talkie a few steps away from us. Our new route takes us by Teacher F who's calling someone—probably a parent—on the phone. *Lowkey-highkey, between Teacher F and James, they've both helped me a lot in figuring out what to do with my life after graduation, probably as much as or more than any administrative figures. Last year or so, the Black Student Union (BSU) took James on this tour of the community colleges, like De Anza, San José City College (SJCC), and the like. The BSU told James that you can do two years somewhere like that, then transfer out. Since Teacher F put me on sports therapy, given how much I like sports, I've been reading up on the Athletics and Kinesiology program at SJCC. So that's the game plan for now. That and the Army Reserves. It would be nice to go on a tour like that with my counselors and the school*. James had told me about the BSU tour and my first reaction was . . . hey, I'm Black too! Can I come?

One day Teacher F did a lesson with us on personal finances—things like how your interest can go up and what credit is. He told us, "Oh, you need to watch your credit because certain things can lead to good credit, but other things can ruin your credit." *It was useful because not a lot of people do that. No one really talks to you about how you need to use your money in the future. It feels like they're just sending us out to be an adult and you learn about it as you go. On that day, I took a whole notebook page of notes. It's those teachers that I love, the ones where you really feel the information sticking after*. They use activities—group activities, game activities, things that liven up and make the class fun, and I think we all benefit from it.

Not all of the teachers here are chill like Teacher F. I remember almost getting into a shouting match with Teacher G that one time two years ago. What were the events leading up to it again? *I had finished my work and was talking to some friends but mostly checking my phone. I went up and asked them if I could go use the restroom. Teacher G said no and then asked me to leave the room. They accused me of disturbing everybody, just because I was on my phone and talking with my friends.* I told them, "*No, other people are talking too. I'm not playing anything out loud, and I've finished my work*." *There was no need for any of that. In that moment, I didn't care that they were a teacher or purportedly an authority figure. If anyone is acting disrespectfully, especially in a way that a teacher shouldn't be acting, I'll call them out on it. My friends and my teammates also know this: I'll have their backs and my own*.

Speaking of, a few of them are sitting now at the table that James and I pass. *I only joined the team this year as a senior. I guess I was pretty checked out beforehand, and it wasn't really on my radar to play for the school team. I had originally found myself playing mostly with friends in the neighborhood. But, hey, in my defense, we're never playing in front of, like, a sold-out crowd or anything. I mean, we do things like spirit days and spirit weeks, but there's really not a lot of school spirit here. When I run into students or players from other schools, they're excited to tell us where they're from. You don't really hear that about Gunderson because of our reputation for having a lot of fights. Every time I tell people I go to Gunderson, they're like, "Oh, isn't it hella ghetto over there? Isn't it ghetto?" I always tell them, "not really." There's been, what, maybe four fights in the time that I've been here? I wouldn't call that hella fights*. It's certainly exaggerated.

James and I approach the one clean water fountain in this wing of the school, to my relief. But then to my immediate chagrin, I

notice that the reason there's no line . . . is because it still hasn't been fixed.

"They haven't fixed that one yet?" James pats my back sympathetically. I'm thirsty, but the closest water fountain besides this one is the one with all the mud (or God knows what else) caked on the spout, and I'm not drinking from that. *They need to do something about these fountains—or at least let us carry around water bottles or something. You know what, that's something I'll give to the people who say we have a bad reputation*. We need some updated facilities around here, like working water fountains, fixed bathrooms (the boys' one near science is notorious all-around for always smelling bad), and such.

But for now, I just keep walking. I don't have time to dwell on the broken stuff. I've got credit recovery assignments waiting in the library, a final paper due, and an appointment with the college advisor my friend finally put me onto. *I don't know if any of it will lead to where I want to be yet—but I'm starting to ask more questions and starting to speak up. And if I can pull it off, maybe there's still a shot at something bigger. No one really told me what these programs were until I needed them.* No one sat me down freshman year and said, "Hey, here's how many credits you need, here's what happens if you fall behind, here's how you can explore real careers you might actually like." Instead, I kind of pieced it together from friends and Teacher F and the army guys. But imagine if that information had just been part of the deal from day one?

The bell rings. Students start flooding the hallway, some rushing, some strolling like they've got all the time in the world. I'm halfway toward my next class when I spot an SRO leaning against the wall by the trophy case.

"Yo, Alejandro!" they call out. I nod and give them a quick dap.

"What's up, SRO? You chillin'?"

"Always," they grin. "Keepin' the peace. You headed to class?"

"Yeah, last one of the day. Almost there."

We exchange a few more words—small talk, like always. *They're not bad. Actually, they are probably one of the better ones. They talk to us like we're people. They don't come down hard unless something's really happening*. Still, as I walk away, I feel my shoulders tense up a little. It's not them, really—it's the badge. That reminder that if I mess up, it might not be a hallway talk next time.

I head toward room 215. My last period. As I get closer, I feel it again—that tension I always get walking into some classrooms. Like I gotta prove I belong there.

I step in. A few students are already at their seats, but our teacher hasn't arrived yet. I head to my usual desk near the side wall and drop my bag. That's when I notice Marcus, sitting in the back, headphones in, hood up. He looks tired. Or maybe just over it. I've been there. *Some teachers act like it's personal when you're not engaged—like you're trying to make their life harder, when really, half the time, you just don't know where to start*.

Teacher H walks in, clipboard in hand. They don't greet us. Just starts calling out names for attendance. "Alejandro?" I raise my hand. They nod, barely looking up. When they get to Marcus, it's the same routine. Except this time, they pause. "Marcus, take your hood off and put the headphones away."

Marcus doesn't move right away. Teacher H keeps staring. "Now."

There's a beat of silence. Then Marcus sits up and pulls his hood down. "I'm not even playing anything."

"You heard me," Teacher H says. Their tone is flat, but sharp underneath. You can feel it. *I've been there before too. I wish Gunderson had more teachers that would care enough to ask how we're doing than to always assume bad intentions behind every way we move. It feels like every little move might set someone off. It feels like no matter what you do, you're walking into a room already labeled. I'm not trying to make it deeper than it is, but moments like that remind me of all the times I felt like I was in trouble just for existing. Like when I used to walk into class and teachers looked at me like I was already a problem*. I used to think maybe it was just me—but now I know it's bigger than that. It's the system, the labels, the assumptions. And honestly, that stuff lingers. Even when you're doing your best to turn it around.

When the bell rings, I sling my backpack over my shoulder as quickly as I can. Practice is soon and I have to stop by my advisors' office real quick to confirm my grades are good enough for the season. I know I've been grinding enough to lock in the GPA but I'm always nervous. Feels like it was just yesterday I was told I needed to retake half my freshman year.

The counseling office is kind of dim, with those fake plants in the corners and the clock that ticks too loud. I knock once and walk in.

I sit and glance at the dry-erase board behind their desk, where some new college flyer is pinned half-crooked. Something about FAFSA deadlines. I already know mine's late.

"Okay, Alejandro. Let's see where you're at." They pull up my grades. "Looks like you're just about there. One more Edgenuity module and that math final—you're good for graduation and good for the season."

I nod. "Cool. That's what I was hoping."

They close their laptop and lean back. "So what's your plan after this? You said military, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "Army Reserve, and maybe SJCC after that. Still kinda figuring it out."

They nod, too quickly. "Okay, sounds good."

Silence for a second. I clear my throat. "I was also looking into sports medicine. One of my teachers told me SJCC has a good program."

"Oh?" they say. "That's great." Another pause. "But if the military's solid, that's a good path too. They'll help with college later on."

I wait for something else—some suggestions, maybe. Maybe a flyer. Maybe a "you could also try this" or "have you thought about that program?" Nothing.

And I don't know—maybe they don't have the time, or maybe they think I've already decided. But it feels like one more door that closes without anyone saying it was open in the first place.

I stand. "Thanks, Counselor."

"Of course. Let me know if you need anything."

Appendix D: Brainstorming Implementation Pathways

Below are "implementation pathways" developed during the 2025 Roses Talk Project Convening, where stakeholders collaboratively reviewed a working draft of this report to offer critical feedback and support SJUSD and Gunderson in strategizing around our recommendations. In the final session of the day, attendees were invited to co-create opportunity infrastructure across key domains identified in the report—including post-secondary support, teaching and learning, discipline and school climate, and facilities. Each group was tasked with selecting a recommendation and producing tangible next steps based on the day's conversations. They documented their ideas on chart paper detailing what, who, how, and when implementation could occur, and presented their proposal to close out the convening. These implementation pathways reflect the collective ideation and expertise generated during the convening and are intended to guide district and school leaders as they move from insight to action. Please note that pathways are captured verbatim from chart paper submitted by each group with minor edits for clarity.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Group: Post-Secondary Support
Recommendation: Require Meetings with School Counselors</th></tr>
<tr><td>WHAT
• Assign each student to same counselor for grades 9–12
• Hold 1–2 1-on-1 meetings per year
• Create a 4-year academic and extracurricular plan
• Communicate College and Career Options Inventory (CCOI)
• Develop yearly expectations modules
• Integrate Canvas with IC-TDS for streamlined planning</td><td>WHO
• School counselors
• High school students
• School administrators</td></tr>
<tr><td>HOW
• Use scheduling tools for yearly check-ins
• Communicate regularly with families and students
• Train counselors in pathway advising (college, trade school, etc.)
• Create a system for assignment tracking
• Create a Canvas page for college readiness</td><td>WHEN
<u>Grade 9</u>
• Start counselor meetings
• Create 4-year planning
• CCOI training
• System integration

<u>Grade 10</u>
• Continue meetings
• Deliver grade-specific lessons
• Update modules annually</td></tr>
</table>

Group: Teaching and Learning **Recommendation: Maximize Existing Professional Development Time**	
WHAT • Encourage the creation of engaging, cross-content information • Find strategies to increase student agency • Set up a consistent feedback loop • Determine ways that teachers can be supportive • Setting up repeated meetings and benchmarks between teachers and students • Integrate layered curriculum for active learning • Continuous professional learning	**WHO** • Experts • Teachers • Department chairs
HOW • Leverage after-school time (everyone but athletes depart) • Use pre-established times • Leaderboard of implementation and accountability with reward	**WHEN** • Convene department chairs for learning on a monthly basis

Group: Discipline and School Climate **Recommendation: Build Restorative Culture**	
WHAT <u>Unpack What a Trust Mindset Is</u> • Start with interested stakeholders • Educate families on restorative justice and get input • Start listening sessions with at-promise student advisory group • Share progress on social media	**WHO** • Interwoven, interconnected group of families, students, teachers, and administrators
HOW <u>Ensure Ongoing Feedback and Response</u> • Develop an at-promise student advisory board + family engagement workshops	**WHEN** • Building new school discipline culture takes time, but can begin immediately

Group: Facilities **Recommendation: Build on Existing Approaches to Improving Facilities**	
WHAT • Updating the district's "facilities master plan" and safety plan to identify where to best allocate resources • Classifying facilities under "school safety" • Bringing in outside experts to source all stakeholder perspectives • Determining community needs through community outreach • Clarifying and updating accessibility standards • Lack of trust in students → inaccessible bathroom policies	**WHO** District and California State Legislature • Allocate adequate funds towards improving facilities • Adequately legislating to incorporate responsive education policies • Work with Senator Dave Cortese (California Senate District 15, San José) Others • Enlist parents to advocate to the school • Repurpose school resource officers as bathroom monitors to increase capacity for opening all functioning bathrooms
HOW • Invest in portable water-filling stations to set up outside (funded by PTA) • Funding for staff support and facilities • Unlock unused bathrooms for student use • Update Gunderson's bathroom/hall pass policy; increase the number of available passes for use • Decrease usage limitation from the first and last 15 minutes of class to 5 minutes	**WHEN** • Annually in May: California Governor's budget is revised ("May Revision") • Short-Term Goal: Set up portable water-filling station • Long-Term Goal: $1.15 billion bond with anticipated 12-year implementation

Stanford Law School | Stanford Center for Racial Justice

559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, CA 94305
Contact: Hoang Pham, hgpham@law.stanford.edu