

Action Plan for a Successful Culturally-Diverse School Climate:

Santa Ana High School

Kamdon Bailey

School of Education: Concordia University Irvine

EDUA 557 Human Resources

Prof. Miller

12/7/2025

Creating a Successful Culturally-Diverse School Climate

School climate is the natural product of a school culture that is reflected in how a person feels and perceives their environment when on campus. Creating a Culturally-Diverse School Climate requires stakeholders to assess the physical environment, the social environment, and the educational environment on campus (Townley & Schmieder-Ramirez, 2019, p.83). This paper will discuss the current perception of the Santa Ana High School Climate, and ways that school administrators can partner with district Human Resources personnel to address areas of need within the campus culture and learning environment. Utilizing interview and survey data from a broad group of stakeholders, an action plan will be designed with measurable goals and specific progress monitoring steps.

School Profile

Santa Ana High School (SAHS), the largest in the Santa Ana Unified School District, serves 2,500 students in a diverse, urban setting. Established in 1889, SAHS is committed to equity and inclusion, with a 99.1% Hispanic student population and 84.9% economically disadvantaged students. The school maintains a 94% graduation rate and offers 12 Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways, dual enrollment courses, and specialized academies in law and film.

SAHS emphasizes literacy, numeracy, student engagement, and social-emotional learning while expanding Ethnic Studies courses in core classes. Recent facility upgrades have improved classrooms and student services. To enhance learning, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) focuses on professional development, equitable grading, and data-driven interventions. Currently, the leadership team is working on promoting literacy skills schoolwide and supporting English learners to address the large number of LTEL students entering high school.

Identified Growth Area

Our campus is interesting in the fact that it is “diverse” in the sense of having a heavy minority population, but homogenous because one minority group is so heavily represented. For this reason, it is hard for me to call our campus culturally-diverse. Additionally, there is very little diversity in the socio-economic backgrounds of our students. The location of our school, in the heart of Santa Ana, results in essentially all of our students falling below the poverty line. After speaking with students, parents, and colleagues, one identified area of growth was the need to increase the rigor and accountability for our students so that they are not shocked by the difficulty of the real world. Even with all of the effort to embrace cultural diversity and create a positive school climate, it is hard to call the climate successful if our students are not finding success after graduation.

Hypothetical Cause

Virtually all of the students at our school look the same and come from similar backgrounds. Our staff and administration have worked very hard to make our campus a safe place for our students, especially considering the high immigrant population that has become even more fearful of exposure due to current events. There has been significant effort put into hiring a diverse group of teachers to work with students, who look like them and have similar experiences to them. We’ve spent countless hours discussing equitable grading practices and were one the first districts to implement Ethnic Studies in core classes for all Freshmen and Sophomores. However, creating this safe place has also come at a cost. Patricia Alex (2022), in her article, “Time to Pull the Plug on Traditional Grading? Supporters of mastery-based grading say it could promote equity,” explains that many initial attempts at equitable grading have been done in a “patchwork fashion” that has lowered expectations (p. 39). Many of our students

graduate high school without being exposed to true diversity or academic adversity. Our compassion shields our students from the reality and rigor of the world and we are doing our students a disservice in this regard.

Data and Analysis

Our district administers the Panorama survey annually to assess the perceived environment of each school site according to staff and students. This year we were able to achieve a 90% completion rate among students and staff. In some regards the school performed well. Students and staff felt that the campus was safe and well maintained and there was a positive school culture. Students felt that they were respected and there was an adult on campus that they were comfortable talking to.

However, in interviews with parents of current and former students, they repeatedly mentioned that our school was not preparing students for the challenges of life after high school. While we have a very high graduation rate, many of our students are struggling and failing once they reach college. This sentiment was reiterated by our Higher Ed Coordinator and Counselors. Teachers and certificated staff point to the lack of accountability for students as a root cause. The heavy use of APEX for credit recovery encourages students to undervalue classroom instruction. Compassionate grading and homework policies do not force students to embrace positive work habits and grow. Alumni express frustration that they were able to pass AP classes (but not tests) and when they enter college there is an assumption from college professors that they will be underprepared for even basic college work. In conversations with former students many of them shared the embarrassment that our school has a reputation for producing graduates who are not ready for college.

Action Plan

Based on the data and analysis there are two key steps that need to be taken to create a challenging culturally-diverse instructional environment at Santa Ana High School. We need to stop incentivising APEX as a means to replace core classes. Administration and Human Resources need to work together to make sure that teachers supervising the completion of APEX are trained properly and understand the expectations of the program. The district also needs to remove the ability for students to test out of classes without completing the modules with fidelity. Recent studies have shown no statistical difference in the completion rate or testing performance of a student who completes credit recovery through an online LMS or in person, but less than 10% of students who completed the online course spent the expected 40hrs in the program and less than 35% of students completed at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the modules (Rickles et. al., 2024, p.478). If we reduce the incentive of allowing students to complete a semester's worth of work in a single week, then they will be more likely to give adequate effort in their core classes. This is especially important for 9th and 10th grade students, who are at a significantly higher risk of failing classes and whose classes primarily in English and Algebra 1 are essential to their continued progression (Heppen et. al., 2017).

Meanwhile, if we are going to encourage students to remain in their core classes, we need to make sure that teachers are providing a rigorous learning environment. Equitable grading is not synonymous with lowering standards and making endless accommodations and exceptions. While making these changes is aimed at assessing only knowledge, some of these actions have had the unintended consequence of encouraging unwanted behaviors and inflating grades (Tyner, 2024). Mastery needs to be a major focus that accompanies the shift from compliance grading of homework and classwork. Human resources personnel can work with administration to provide

professional development and training on equitable grading practices that shift emphasis from compliance grading to mastery grading. When teachers focus on making sure students are learning foundational skills and not passing classes just for showing up and completing work, then students will graduate with the tools necessary to be successful in college. It is possible to find a balance between compassion and competence.

Progress Monitoring

An ideal follow-up to these steps would be to see each subject matter and grade level cohort complete a training on grading for mastery by the end of the school year. Working collaboratively, teachers could submit common summative assessments that align foundational skills mastery and grading norms. Over the last two years, the Algebra 1 team has created a mastery grading model that bases their semester grade solely on assessment of foundational skills. The English 9 team is interested in creating a similar model for the fall of 2026. Utilizing a pre-assessment on the foundational skills at the beginning of the semester, counselors are able to assign students to teachers based on their ability and students are able to transfer classes once they have reached a predetermined skill level. While skill mastery is easier to determine in a math class, grouping students based on a growth area informs students of their current knowledge and allows teachers to offer targeted intervention instead of teaching to a classroom of students with a wide variety of understanding.

Focusing on first best instruction we would hope to see a decline in the failure rate in English 9 and Algebra 1, which would result in a decline in students taking APEX for credit recovery. For students who are enrolled in APEX, we would like to see that tests are locked on APEX modules until students have completed the module course work for the given class being recovered. Supervising teachers would grade module work with fidelity and require students to

review course work if unable to pass the test. Making these changes should result in a successful culturally-diverse school climate that is both equitable and academically challenging.

References

- Alex, P. (2022). Time to Pull the Plug on Traditional Grading? Supporters of mastery-based grading say it could promote equity. *Education Next*, 22(4), 38–43.
- Chism, D., & Brookhart, S. M. (2025). Three Principles for Fairer, More Relevant Grading: Key questions can help educators design assessments and grading systems that accurately reflect student progress and honor diverse experiences. *Educational Leadership*, 82(8), 34–39.
- Heppen, J. B., Sorensen, N., Allensworth, E., Walters, K., Rickles, J., Taylor, S. S., & Michelman, V. (2017). The Struggle to Pass Algebra: Online vs. Face-to-Face Credit Recovery for At-Risk Urban Students. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 10(2), 272–296.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2016.1168500>
- Rickles, J., Clements, M., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., Lachowicz, M., Lin, S., & Heppen, J. (2024). A Multisite Randomized Study of an Online Learning Approach to High School Credit Recovery: Effects on Student Experiences and Proximal Outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 17(3), 467–490.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2023.2198524>
- Townley, A. J., & Schmieder-Ramirez, J. H. (2019). *School Personnel Administration/Human Resources: A California Perspective*. Kendall Hunt Publishing.
- Tyner, A. B. (2024). Unintended Effects of “Equitable” Grading: Reforms aimed at levelling playing fields may lead instead to lowered expectations for student performance. *School Administrator*, 81(11), 38–41.