

**How Do You Serve Clients You Don't Know Well or
What Does a Climate Survey Have to Do With It?**
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When Nordstrom first opened its store at Valley Fair Mall years ago, I became one of its immediate fans because its emphasis on customer service set it apart from most stores that I had previously frequented. Knowing its customers and catering to their needs is a business strategy that continues to pay huge dividends for the chain.

Having worked in the East Side Union High School District for the past thirty years as a teacher, counselor and project coordinator, I am painfully aware of what school experiences are like for many students, primarily black and brown, who are strangers to those who teach them and whose needs are far from catered to. While there are many outstanding and dedicated teachers in my district who embrace all students, I have witnessed a damaging disconnect that causes students to feel alienated from the very system that is supposed to engage and educate them. As president of the California Alliance of African American Educators (CAAEE) for the past six years, I have also seen this awful trend state-wide and across the country.

Because of my own positive experience having only white teachers from K-12 and because I have seen teachers of all ethnicities hurt their students, I know it is not only about race. I also know it is not intentional. I have never met a teacher of any race who woke up one morning and decided to see how many black and brown students he or she could damage that day.

When State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell appointed me to his P-16 Council last June, I was thrilled that there was a subcommittee on Culture and Climate and immediately decided to work on that one. One of the 14 recommendations that O'Connell announced in his State of Education address last month was that every school in California would have to conduct a climate survey to assess its "organizational health." How would such a survey help increase student achievement? It will identify and allow for the elimination of school policies and practices that may disaffect certain groups of students and parents. In 2006 and 2007, the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) conducted two surveys—*Where We Learn* and

Where We Teach. After surveying 30,000 students and many of the teachers and administrators who work with them, the conclusion was that “school climate—impressions, beliefs, and expectations about a school learning environment—plays a critical role in the academic development of the student learners, and administrators and teachers clearly strongly influence that impression.”

Just this week, I attended the Education Trust – West conference entitled *Closing California’s Achievement and Opportunity Gaps*. One of the most outstanding presentations was done by Superintendent Christine Lim and members of her management team from the San Leandro Unified School District in the Bay Area. Because they started this journey of self-examination four years ago, they now have powerful data that shows how knowing your customers and making adjustments to address their specific needs can increase how well students perform in a school. Just one example lies in their expulsion records. In 2005-2006, they had 82 expulsions. In 2006-2007, they only had 27. Suspensions fell by 46% in that same time period. If students are not in school, they cannot learn. If they are in school and are disengaged, they tend to get in trouble and/or have bad grades. Assessing the “organizational health” and acting on the findings has proven beneficial to students, teachers and administrators.

While those of us in education who have labored to close the pernicious achievement gap for decades realize there is no silver bullet for fixing our schools and that many strategies are needed to deal with the multiple factors that impinge on student success, I am heartened that a State Superintendent of Public Instruction has finally been bold enough to call it a racial gap and require deep assessment and dismantling of those practices that continue to prevent all children from realizing their true potential.