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How is "Readiness" Met?:
The Case of Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, CA

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Abstract

Readiness, often defined as the level at which students meet the qualifications to succeed in college and career, has long been a metric of the success of K-12 education in preparing students for post-secondary lives. In Oakland, California, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has highlighted its top priority as "All students graduate college, career, and community ready.", implementing different goals and actions throughout the years to achieve this priority. However, what does it mean to be ready for college, career, and community? How does the district measure readiness and support initiatives to increase student readiness? The purpose of this study is to address the inconsistencies in how school districts identify and develop goals of readiness, while offering suggestions for how to improve the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), an important financial and planning document that funds initiatives and positions aimed at increasing student readiness. The findings indicate that districts must provide clearer definitions of readiness and improve the documentation of data and methods in order to improve student outcomes. The implications of this study call for increased student participation in the yearly planning of LCAPs as important stakeholders in understanding context-based definitions readiness.

Introduction

In an increasingly educated world, academic and career competence have become areas that school districts strive to achieve for their students. As graduates enter the workforce, post-secondary education, and other ventures, with many in pursuit of serving their communities in some shape or form, the concept of "readiness" is utilized in educational settings to describe how school districts can adequately prepare students for their futures. Defined as the ability for students to achieve college and career success through education that is relevant to their lives (OUSD, 2022), readiness conceptualizes education as the process of preparing future leaders by equipping them with knowledge, capacity, and skill sets that are necessary for navigating post-secondary experiences.

In California public school districts, for example, readiness is now used as an indicator to measure and shape how to best serve students, through topics of college and career (CDE, 2022). The California Department of Education defines career readiness as "completing rigorous coursework and engaging in learning experiences to prepare students for the workforce", while college readiness entails "completing rigorous coursework, passing challenging exams, or receiving a state seal" (CDE, 2021). However, few empirical studies exist examining how these definitions are enacted and implemented at the local school district level. This is a critical gap–how school districts make sense of readiness and develop strategic actions to meet such standards has direct impacts on student outcomes. To address this gap, this paper examines how readiness is enacted within important planning documents to justify funding for initiatives that affect student readiness.

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is a public school district located in Oakland, California and primarily serves BIPOC students. Beginning in 2014, OUSD has defined its number one priority as, "All students graduate college, career, and community ready", with an emphasis on readiness as the metric of success.

More specifically, this paper will examine the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), an important financial and policy document that determines how money from the California Department of Education is spent toward achieving set goals. How goals are determined is rooted in OUSD definitions of readiness, which, when unclear, do not provide a cohesive narrative on how actions and goals matter to the overall achievement of a student in the district. Currently, there is no research that systematically investigates how school districts make sense of readiness and develop strategic actions through the critical analysis of LCAP. Therefore, I will be scrutinizing the LCAP in the context of OUSD, an incredibly diverse and urban school district serving student populations from diverse backgrounds. Looking at OUSD as a case study can offer insights for other school districts nationwide that share similar demographics and characteristics. This study was guided by the two main questions:

- What does OUSD mean by being ready for college, career, and community?

- How does OUSD measure readiness and implement actions that increase student readiness?

Positionality Statement

I attended OUSD public schools from 4 years old to 17 years old. As an alum of Lincoln Elementary School, Westlake Middle School, and Oakland Technical High School, I have my own experiences and subjectivities regarding the quality of the education I received and how prepared I was for college, career, and helping my community. As a high-achieving, first-generation, and low-income student, I engaged in many of the topics that are mentioned in this following paper, such as internships, career pathways (being involved with the Computer Academy at my high school), and academic offerings. Heading into college, I did not feel prepared to write and read at a college level. However, I was able to leverage my internship experience on my resume to apply for and get jobs at my university. As a part of the McNair Scholars Program, I joined a lab as a research assistant and focused on learning how to conduct social science research from Winter 2022 to Summer 2023. In During this entire process, I felt unprepared and faced many learning curves to understand how to do research. I was not prepared for the academic rigor of UC San Diego through my education growing up in OUSD.

On the contrary, I found my internship/career experiences to be impactful. My first internship was at Intel and Laney College, where we learned about tech industry culture, new advancements in the field, and took classes for credit on coding and business. My second internship was with OUSD Nutrition, where at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, interns distributed meal bags to help the residents of Oakland while learning more about the importance of nutrition, especially in underserved communities. I valued these experiences and the opportunity to make an income. Because of my many experiences, my bias is rooted in the lived experiences of students in OUSD, and as such, my criticality comes from a place of wanting a better education for not only students like me, but all students in public education systems that aim to pursue college, career, or other post-secondary paths.

Literature Review

Literature conducted on concepts of readiness addresses the importance of identifying specific elements within definitions of readiness in order to improve decision-making, yet little, if any, literature attends to how this can be applied to school districts. In a search for literature behind "definition [of] readiness", I looked for applications of defining readiness within local school district contexts, of which I was unable to find. Rather, state, organizational, and government definitions were systematically scrutinized to suggest improved policies and practices for general student success. While ideas of college and career readiness extend past local, state, and international boundaries, having clear definitions at a local level is important in promoting specific efforts that are grounded within its context (de Wit et al., 2023). Whereas implications of readiness definitions primarily focus on reforming policy, there is no literature on how definitions of readiness can improve in-use planning materials that local actors such as school districts utilize in order to fund and enact actions based on readiness. As such, this paper aims to be one of the first to investigate how context-bound definitions of readiness impact local decision-making processes and implementation.
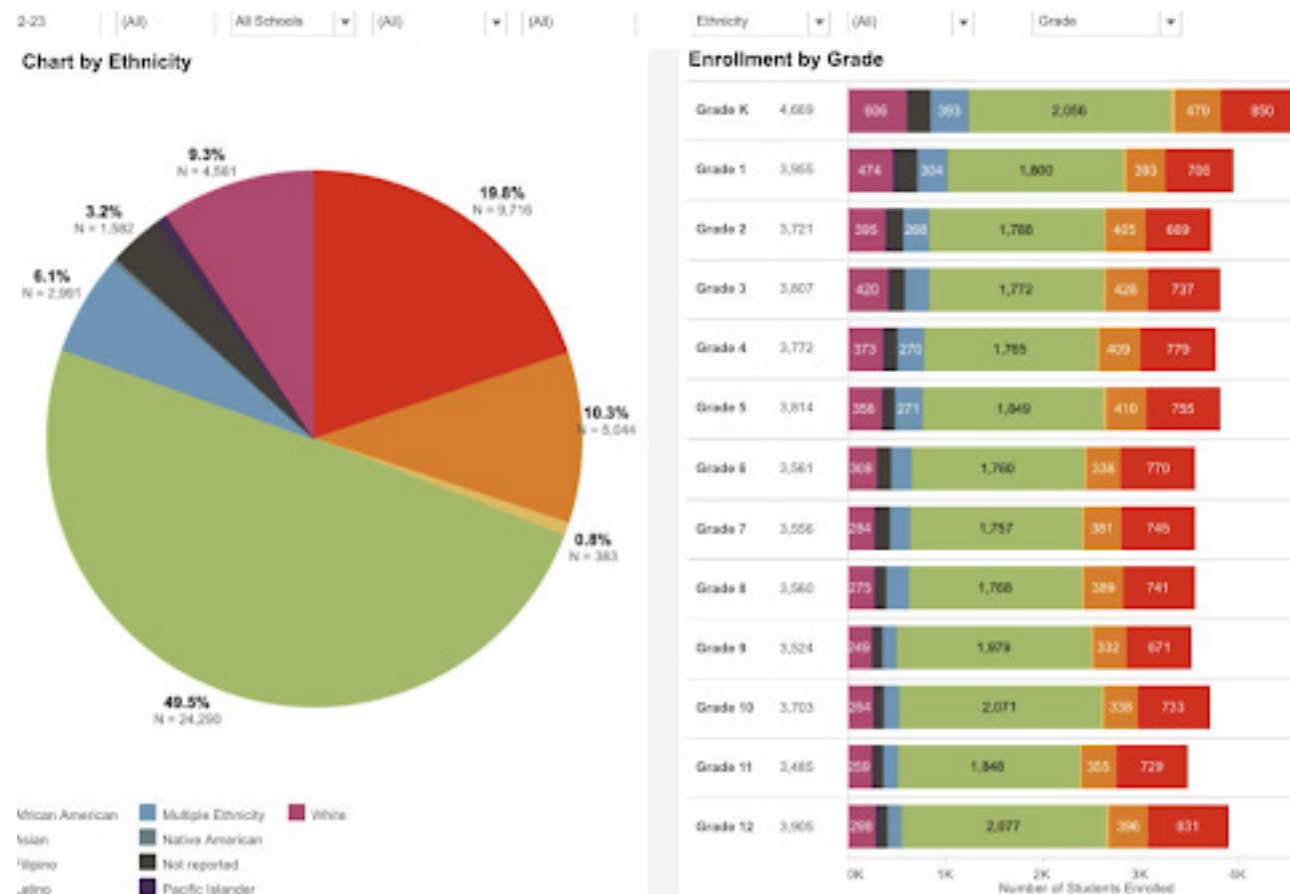
Methods

Case Study

Oakland, California is one of the most diverse cities in the world, and its local public school district, operating 76 K–12 schools across Alameda county, reflects such diversity, as reflected in Figure 1. Additionally, OUSD serves other populations such as foster youth, special education students, adult learners, and more. Operating under a model of a Full Service Community District, where the academic, social, and health well-being of students is supported through partnerships and collaboration, the mission of OUSD is to "forcibly eliminate inequities by ensuring those who we have historically most marginalized are provided expanded and enhanced real-world learning opportunities, addressing barriers to learning by creating safe, healthy and welcoming schools, and partnering with families and communities to create the education our students deserve" (OUSD, 2022). Throughout the past few years, over 50% of OUSD graduates consistently enroll in a 4-year or 2-year institution one year after their graduation, showing a desire to pursue college. Careers are important to OUSD; with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population, OUSD considers the diversity of students to be a strength and an asset to local and global economies. Lastly, with vibrant cultural communities scattered throughout Oakland, community plays a large role in shaping students' motivations and access to college and career opportunities. Situated within the intersection of race, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, foster status, and more, OUSD presents a unique case for developing solutions that may be modeled in other school districts with similar challenges.

Data Collection

In order to understand the development of OUSD's top priority, I collected and analyzed data from OUSD Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) ranging from 2014 to 2023. In total, I looked at 8 documents that ranged from 500-600 pages each, containing documents that detail goals, actions, and results of previous actions that were enacted the year before. These are publicly available planning documents that are mandated by California that empower local school districts to make decisions regarding their funding and be held accountable for those. In 2013, California created the Local Control Funding Formula, which developed a new relationship between local school districts and state funding. Local school districts in California are required to write a Local Control and Accountability Plan which considers different stakeholders in the district such as parents, teachers, and administration, to outline specific goals to increase student achievement. As the needs and goals of each school district are different, the LCAP aims to give local school districts control and accountability to ensure an element of responsibility over state funding.

Data Analysis

I conducted thematic analysis grounded in a critical paradigm to analyze the LCAP to examine and identify overarching themes as well as individual dimension themes. I analyzed the data through a critical lens that sought to challenge the assumptions of the education system that underlie the reasoning behind developing goals and actions; for example, despite the emphasis on standardized testing in education, test proficiencies do not equal interest and relevancy of subjects in students' lives. I also integrated my own experiences into analysis to explain how ready or prepared I was for college, career, and community, based on my experiences with some of the initiatives they listed in the LCAP.

In the LCAPs, specific priorities are broken into goals and actions. A goal is a description of what the LCAP aims to achieve, often on a specific topic with measurable qualities. An action looks to address a specific goal or improve an area of emphasis, with a description of how it will be implemented as well as desired outcomes, if any. These goals and actions were then disaggregated

into the three dimensions of college, career, and community. I looked for continuities throughout the LCAP data and grouped common goals into themes that connected those goals together. Then, each action was assigned a topic based on similarities in their intentions, outcomes, or implementation. The process of document analysis included looking for keywords that relate to some aspect of college, career, and/or community.

Dimension	Goal Theme	Action Topic
College	Graduation Rate	Credit Recovery
		Professional Development
	Dropout Rate	Counseling
		Intervision
	A–G Requirements	A–G Requirements
		Counseling
	Exam / Standardized Tests	CAHSEE (discontinued in 2015)
		Early Assessment Programs (SBAC)
		Advanced Placement (AP) Exam
	Other	Professional Development
		Technology
Career	Career Pathways	Career Pathways
		Internships
Community	Other	Social Emotional Learning
		Culturally Responsive

Dimension	Goal Theme	Action Topic
Cross–Cutting Categories	Other	Linked Learning
		Network
		Partnerships
		Data

Results

Based on the document analysis of LCAPs spanning from 2014 to 2023, the findings of this research will be organized into three main categories of college, career and community. Each section also includes a discussion of goals and actions.

College

GOALS · The goal themes that relate to this dimension are: graduation rate, dropout rate, A–G requirements, and exams/standardized tests. To apply to college, students must meet these standards of passing all of their A–G requirements (which are required for California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) admissions), which also allows them to graduate. Thus, OUSD goals are aimed at increasing graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and improving A–G completion rates.

Another aspect of college readiness is exams and standardized tests. As state requirements for standardized tests changed throughout the range of years that LCAPs have been created, goals have shifted from improving the CAHSEE (high school exit exam) pass rates, to increasing the SBAC (focusing on math and language arts) proficiency rates. OUSD also encourages increasing AP exam participation and pass rates

ACTIONS · To indirectly address these goals, proposed actions included topics such as credit recovery, professional development, counseling, intervention, A–G requirements, SBAC, Advanced Placement, and technology. Professional development is proposed in almost every LCAP, to assist in areas of monitoring students, improving curricula, increasing access and retention, and more. Another major focus is on addressing students who fall behind and are unable to complete their A–G requirements and at a risk of dropping out. To combat this, the district provides resources such as APEX learning–software that is A–G approved to assist with credit recovery–and increasing academic counseling at schools. In the initial years of the LCAPs (~2014–2016), improving data systems were priorities as those would collect student information and monitor student progress, making it easier to catch students before they dropped out..

Career

GOALS · In secondary schools, OUSD focuses heavily on enrolling students into career pathways–specialized plans of study that focus on a particular field or career, with options that differ from school to school. Students may use these classes to meet their A-G requirements. Related goals look like increasing career pathway participation and retention rates and improving the quality of internships.

ACTIONS · Related actions look to improve access to and quality of career pathways through expanding pathway electives, staff, and more, to support pathway participation rates. Pathway coaches were hired to support better enrollment practices to support marginalized student populations; there was a cap on the number of students that could be enrolled in a career pathway in a cohort. Professional development was mentioned again as well, in supporting teachers teaching in career pathways. Another major action was to continue the expansion of electives and pathway programs offered district-wide. Many LCAPs mentioned providing more stipends for internships.

Community

GOALS · Community readiness was first introduced in the 2021-2022 LCAP in Goal 1 (whereas previously only community and college readiness was mentioned), however since then, there have been no specifically tailored goals or actions for this concept.

ACTIONS · Related actions were placed into two categories: social emotional learning and culturally responsive education/programming. These actions were chosen as they did not address specific goals but related to the uplifting of (racial) communities. There is an active investment of social emotional learning in OUSD schools, as the district connects it to decreased dropout rates and increased academic achievement. Culturally responsive curriculum, programming, and support first only supported African American/Black male students under the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA), but later on (in 2016) expanded to include other underserved student groups, such as Latino males and Pacific Islander students.

Cross-Cutting Categories

GOALS · Goals and actions that cross-cut these categories of college, career, and community were placed in a separate section, as steps taken to meet these goals and actions could benefit students in holistic ways. Linked Learning, networks, partnerships, and data were four action topics that were identified in this category.

ACTIONS · Linked Learning is an office in OUSD that focuses on connecting the three dimensions of readiness through comprehensive student support, rigorous academics, work-based learning, and career-technical education (CTE). Linked Learning ties into all of the actions previously mentioned. However, to effectively implement Linked Learning and other goals, a high school network, middle school network, and PreK-5 network were developed in 2015. Establishing and supporting networks helps administrators with collaboration and coordination of actions and goals. Collaboration is seen through partnerships as well, with OUSD working with Oakland Promise and Oakland Athletics League to more directly support students, in their academics, applying to college, and in social emotional learning. Lastly, data, systems, and other data-related processes, are integral to keeping and maintaining records of students.

Discussion

Three major conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of LCAPs, including 1) the need for clearer definitions of readiness for college, career, and community, 2) how OUSD implements actions to increase readiness based on state standards, and 3) the importance of having better data practices in measuring readiness.

Clearer definition of readiness for college, career, and community

First, the definition of readiness for college, career, and community appears to be uneven. More specifically, readiness for the community is relatively undefined compared to readiness for college and career, which signifies what readiness is prioritized.

COLLEGE · College readiness is defined by the ability to graduate from high school and meet the requirements to apply for college. College readiness in this school district is aligned with state standards, ensuring students are meeting proficiency standards and graduating. This is also understood as the completion of A-G requirements, which is necessary for applying for admission to CSUs or UCs.

One important aspect of college readiness is proficiency in exams. These exams are especially important in the context of state funding, where better pass/proficiency rates equal more district funding. AP exams are also promoted as AP exams can be transferable credit at many colleges and universities.

COMMUNITY · OUSD does not define what community readiness is. No goals or actions are clearly defined as relating to this as well. This lack of definition is problematic as it becomes a virtue signaling statement with no implications of needing to create change. They can not effectively measure this readiness nor implement actions that increase student achievement in this category.

Measuring readiness and implementation of actions

Second, the overall findings show that OUSD aligns standards of readiness with state standards on education, where school districts are evaluated by how many students graduate and become eligible for college admissions. OUSD measures readiness through primarily focusing on A-G completion data, graduation rates, dropout rates, state exam data, AP exam data, and career pathway participation rate. While emphasizing a linked learning approach–in which actions supporting college, career, and community readiness are integrated with one another–throughout the LCAPs, OUSD favors actions that promote one or more benefits across the dimensions of college, career, and community. For example, expanding elective options through career pathways not only supports fulfilling the elective requirement of A-G requirements, but also supports career and/or community awareness. However, these notions of readiness de-incentivize alternative, local, and/or critical conceptions of what education has the ability to be. One example of an alternative measure of readiness could be political awareness and engagement, which directly impacts the local communities. OUSD strategies on increasing college, career, and community readiness are most often modeled after state and federal priorities.

COLLEGE · With the state and UC/CSU systems agreeing on A-G requirements as the minimum to qualify for college, it is unknown how ready students feel when matriculating to college and how effective the A-G requirements are in preparing students for college-level education. There is no data on if A-G requirements ensure that all students are on the same footing as their peers

in college, as the data serves as a checkmark rather than a benchmark for solid foundational knowledge needed in college and higher education. For example, A–G requirements require that a student take 4 years of math, but the level of math proficiency students enter college at is wildly dependent on at high schools and what they offer as their highest level of math (for example: Calculus I vs. AP Calculus BC).

The amount of time and effort placed into supplemental support, teacher quality, and additional counseling for students is incomparable with how much emphasis is placed on meeting state standards and pushing students to graduate. Professional development is conceived as an effective solution to improving the quality of education students receive, despite it not addressing the deeper-rooted systemic issues that public school systems face, as well as placing more burdens on teachers to fix the education system. Professional development is also proposed for administrative roles, but just as teacher professional development, there is no evidence provided in the LCAPs that justifies how effective these trainings will actually be in improving student experiences and education. Without discussing the data behind the effectiveness of professional development, it becomes a distraction from providing supplemental support to students. While teacher retention remains an issue in OUSD, professional development to improve the quality of the teacher in hopes that it will spillover to the students adds to the load that teachers must carry in addition to teaching. Professional development cannot address issues of overcrowding, large student to teacher ratios, differing foundation knowledge of core subjects, and more.

CAREER · OUSD does not have a system to measure career readiness as they do not provide tangible data that backs up the relevance of these pathway programs and internships in helping students feel career ready. OUSD has partnered with numerous organizations and departments to provide paid internships for students to increase career awareness and experience. Additionally, internships that are supported by OUSD often offer some sort of academic credit in addition to financial compensation. Despite this, the LCAP fails to mention the standards in which career pathways and internships are held, including highlighting what technical and soft skills are to

The supplementary support to students is not inclusive, especially to the populations that these OUSD-supported programs target. APEX learning is a digital platform students can access for credit recovery purposes that aligns with A–G requirements. Described as "a curriculum that will be used to support our Low Income, English Learners, and Foster Youth with credit recovery, remediation, and intervention, acceleration, and exam preparation" (OUSD, 2016), students who may struggle with English, struggle to learn through remote and online learning modalities, lack access to digital devices, or otherwise cannot emulate the same level of education in the classroom may find this option to be difficult. OUSD has implemented other supplemental support in the past such as Shmoop, an AP exam support app, and Success Mentors, yet these initiatives were only mentioned once throughout the many years spanning through the LCAPs, showing a lack of follow-through when it comes to supporting supplemental initiatives to enhance the quality of students' education.

Despite such emphasis on counseling, counselors are not supported by the district. Counseling–academic, college, and career– is necessary by OUSD standards to ensure student success yet the reality for counselors is that caseloads are too big. OUSD aimed to improve counseling, such as reducing student to counselor ratios to 500:1 (OUSD, 2017), yet it is unclear in the following years if this action was supported. Counselors would also be expected to participate in professional development and connect to counselor networks, in addition to supporting large caseloads. Without follow-up on this topic, it is unclear if counselors were actually supported by OUSD.

be gained from these programs. Because of this, there fails to be improvements on the systems other than to expand elective offerings and hire more support staff, which does not address the effectiveness of these programs.

COMMUNITY · As an extension of the benefits of college and career readiness, my definition of community readiness is social emotional skills and topics that are relevant to the local communities and the communities where students are from, which is how I organized actions into this category. However, the need for culturally responsive actions is linked to greater academic achievement, as students may feel more personal connection to the education they are receiving. This can also relate to community as students become more aware of their communities and be provided a level of connection to their academics that may be relevant to their lives. Therefore, a definition of community readiness would be needed to better support students through actionable goals.

Improving data practices for measuring readiness

As contemporary understandings of college and career readiness rely on state standards, there must be more transparency on the data behind how and why goals lead to readiness, and how specific actions correlate to such goals to improve research, policy, and practice. A common thread throughout all of the goals and actions that are highlighted in the LCAPs is the inconsistency behind data that proves how effective a goal or action is at addressing a certain issue. As highlighted in the results, while professional development is often proposed as a mechanism to improve teacher/counselor performance and thereby the quality of education, OUSD does not provide any evidence to show the impact that professional development actually has on student achievement. But as an example of an inconsistency, the district highlighted how there was a 1000% increase in the rate of computer science course enrollments, which presented two fallacies: first, the development of computer science pathways would lead to drastic increases in enrollment as schools did not have these options previously, and second, despite advertising these courses as more accessible for BIPOC, female, and non-binary students, OUSD did not provide any data behind how many students who identified in these groups actually enrolled in these courses. When data can back up how effective an action can be at addressing a goal, then OUSD can improve how it designs initiatives and programs that can lead to greater rates of readiness. This also relates to the point about community readiness, where it is not defined, which means that it is much harder to design goals and actions to address that component of readiness. Lack of data and transparency also hurt OUSD's goal of closing inequity gaps in student achievement, as actions are not tailored specifically to meet the needs of specific student populations. The only instances of where the opposite is seen is through actions relating to culturally responsive programming. Additionally, better data practices can further support the accurate measurement of readiness, because while A–G completion rates can show us who is eligible for college, it cannot show us how many students actually applied for, got accepted in, and matriculated to college.

Overall, school districts and OUSD must provide more transparency in the justi-fication behind why different actions were developed and how those would specifically meet stated goals.

Implications

This paper proposes that planning around metrics of readiness should center student perspectives rather than state standards to develop clearer definitions of readiness that are tailored to specific student needs. At the end of the day, students are ultimately impacted by how the school district defines readiness, as developed goals and actions directly correlate to their experiences within schools. To recognize my own motivations for developing this research, I wished I had more voice in the decision making behind how readiness was defined for me, rather than how I defined it for myself. Students should be prioritized in the development of these LCAPs as crucial stakeholders because there is a large disconnect between how students feel and how ready they seem to be on paper. The findings show that definitions of readiness are grounded in generalized contexts rather than tangible data, which neglects the local contexts in which students are developing, as well as their input when it comes to decisions that affect them. As the LCAPs promote local control and accountability, putting student perspectives at the forefront of defining readiness can allow school districts to be accountable to the students that they serve.

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Veronica Liu

Biography

Veronica Liu is a rising senior at the University of California, San Diego with a double major in Urban Studies & Planning and Education Sciences. As a first-generation college student born and raised in Oakland, California, her research through the McNair Scholars Program focused on how the Oakland Unified School District prepared students to be ready in college and career. At UC San Diego, Veronica is involved with the Students Promoted Access Center for Education and Services (SPACES) and TRIO Student Support Services. Her work primarily focuses on increasing access and retention for underrepresented students in education systems. In the future, she hopes to be an Education researcher and pursue a PhD and/or EdD.

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" *My time with the McNair Scholars Program and under the guidance of my mentor, Dr. Sherice Clarke and her lab has taught me a lot about why I want to pursue a career in Education and what factors shaped my educational upbringing.* "