



Orange County
Black Futures Initiative

↑
**STEP
UP**

*OC Schools are
leaving our Black
students
behind*



Ashe

None of the following work would be possible without the contributions of our community of researchers, activists, educators, organizers, institutional centers, elders, and perpetual students. Each of these individuals committed their time and energy to aid in this report, recognizing that doing so confronts the persistent anti-Blackness pervasive in education and risks engaging and enraging a growing movement seeking to restrict the lives, bodies, and aspirations of our Black students. As a thank you, we name them below and affirm them with our collective Ashe.

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Letter from our Director

In August 2012 I enrolled for the first time as a student in the Buena Park Elementary School District. Though attending middle school marked a new atmosphere for all students, it was especially so for me as it marked the first time I was enrolled in Orange County's public school system. I was immediately confronted with a realization that I was one of only a handful of Black students in my school, often the only Black student in my classes. Like many of our Black students, I too experienced academic isolation, racist administrators and students, and undue academic retribution.

From that experience, I quickly found the endeavor to understand the educational experiences of our Black students in Orange County was just as much a personal pursuit as it was educational. Beyond excavating data outlining the realities of the thousands of our Black students who call Orange County home, this work was equally about uncovering empirical evidence of the persistent narrative shared by so many of our Black students.

In consideration of the disparate outcomes for our Black students, our research goal became increasingly about myth-busting in addition to educating. The data challenged the perception of Orange County's schools as strong college preparatory institutions and holistically supportive schools for all students. Our research instead found numeric evidence of a more concerning narrative looming over our Black students : Orange County's Black students have too often been failed both by their institutions who deem their experiences not critical enough to address and by state advocates who deem their enrollment too minimal to investigate.

This report aims to testify to the educational experiences of the Black students who call Orange County home, to highlight the persistent academic segregation, and to engage and rally the community at large to better foster the holistic success of our Black students.

Isaac Alferos
Director
Liberative Research Lab

Guidelines for Engaging Data on Black students

in recognition of the implicit bias many people have towards our Black students, we encourage readers to engage data with these key values in mind:

1	Black students are our students. They are our children, our siblings, our cousins, and our neighbors. Just like every other student, they require love, support, guidance, encouragement, and empathy as they actively navigate the education system, oftentimes doing so without the same support as their peers. As such, their educational experiences and outcomes are under our stewardship.
2	Educational Institutions are responsible for fostering the success of all students, including our Black students. Our Black students do not become responsible for educational deficits simply because they experience them. The onus of supporting Black student success, like that of all students, is the responsibility of the educational, political, and familial institutions surrounding them.
3	Black students are entering into a historically and presently racist education system. From funding inequities, to pedagogical design, the education system is rooted and grows in a deeply anti-Black structure. As a result, Black students experience racism constantly in the classroom and, therefore, need not prove the presence of racism within their experiences.

In this brief, and all future work, you will see Orange County's Black student population labeled as "our Black students". When considering the common deficit framing surrounding our Black students and the anti-Black racism that informs the common implicit bias against Black students across the state, using language that reminds us to look beyond the numbers to see each metric as our Black students is even more critical. This language change is done with love; our Black students deserve to know that we see them, we care about them, we love them, and we want them to succeed. By claiming them as our Black students, we agree to be responsible to and serve them in the research we conduct. They are our students and, as their stewards, let us all work to build a system worthy of their success.

Introduction

Unlocking the academic potential of our Black students in Orange County demands an urgent reevaluation of the systems that currently hold them back. Despite their inherent talent and resilience, our Black students in the region consistently face significant obstacles that prevent them from achieving their full potential. These challenges, rooted in systemic inequities, manifest in lower graduation rates, reduced access to college-preparatory courses, and consistently lower standardized test scores compared to their peers. This report seeks to bring these issues to the forefront, emphasizing the need for immediate and sustained action to ensure that all students are provided with equitable opportunities to succeed.

Despite representing a small percentage of the overall student population, the academic outcomes of our Black students lag behind their peers in key educational metrics, including graduation rates, A-G course completion, and standardized test performance. These disparities are not merely statistical anomalies but are symptomatic of deeper systemic failures within the county's education system. Discipline data provides little reprieve either as Orange County districts continue to disproportionately target and suspend our Black students. The data reveals that our Black students are frequently under-supported, facing a range of barriers that widen the academic gap between them and their peers, and are over-disciplined, keeping them out of the classroom and disengaged.

This report delves into the data, examining the various dimensions of academic segregation and over-disciplining that our Black students endure in Orange County. By analyzing graduation rates, A-G course completion, CAASPP scores, and suspension rates, this report aims to uncover and name a persistent and pervasive phenomenon that keeps our Black students divided from equal opportunity. The data suggests that without targeted interventions, these inequities will grow, with institutions leaving our Black students behind. This investigation seeks to understand not only the scale of the problem but also provide recommendations for how school districts can take corrective action to ensure our Black students aren't ignored.

As we explore these findings, this report also seeks to ignite a broader conversation about the urgent need for change in Orange County schools. Addressing the academic segregation of Black students requires more than just recognizing the problem—it demands a comprehensive and sustained effort to redesign the systems and practices that have allowed these inequities to persist. Through this analysis, we aim to provide a clear, data-driven understanding of the challenges facing our Black students and to propose actionable steps that can be taken to build a more equitable educational environment for all.

Glossary of Common Language

This report is intended to reach a broad audience, including district and school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Because of this broad audience, below is an outline defining some language commonly used within education and a rationale for why these different data points are used.

Term	Definition	Rationale for Usage
CAASPP	California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress	CAASPP tests are a classification of standardized tests California's Department of Education uses to assess a student's academic level. The ELA and Math assessments used in this report are part of the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments used between 3rd through 8th grade and 11th grade.
ELA	English Language Arts	ELA, in the context it is used in this report, refers to the English Language Arts test as part of the CAASPP assessments analyzed.
A-G courses	The courses a high school student needs to take to be eligible to apply to a UC or CSU after graduation.	This report does not analyze graduate rate data, as the requirements needed to graduate vary by school or district. Instead, A-G courses are used both because they are a standardized metric and because they highlight a student's ability to equally access a post-secondary degree within the CSU, UC, and most private institutions.

Report Roadmap

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Who's Responsible for the Equity Gaps

What do we do when leaders ignore the “equity gaps” between our Black students and their peers? Well, we can start by changing the language.

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Academic Report

Academic outcomes are a key metric for understanding the educational opportunities accessible to our Black students.

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Discipline Report

Academics are only half of the puzzle. On the other side, who is keeping our Black students in the classroom and why are our Black students over-disciplined?



Who's Responsible for the Equity Gaps?

In the Southern California region, Orange County continues to boast some of the strongest educational outcomes for most of its students. As an aggregate, Orange County averages higher standardized test scores, college-going rates, and A-G completion rates than the state average and hosts many award-winning schools ranking some of the best in the country. However, looking at outcomes for our Black students shows a stark contrast. Black students have the lowest graduation rate and are the least likely to meet state English and Math standards.

In 2022:

43%

of OC Black students completed A-G courses

30%

of graduating OC Black students didn't enroll in college

These diverging outcomes for our Black students compared to their non-Black peers are not exclusive to Orange County, this trend is present in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties as well. This educational trend is often described as the educational equity gap, a term that refers to the disparate difference in educational outcomes for different student groups. As common as this term is within education work, it fails to evoke the severity and scale of these gaps while simultaneously minimizing institutional accountability. When schools across the country continue to report on and monitor equity gaps but no impactful policies are implemented nor do these gaps close, it becomes clear that the language is not evoking the severity of the issue as it is impacting our students.

In fact, in Orange County we see a concerning narrative emerge from the data: our Black students have persisted in educational institutions that have allowed worse and worse outcomes for them for years. As a result, this report will refer to these educational opportunity gaps with a term that reflects both the severity and scale of these gaps as well as the length of time these gaps have been maintained under institutional leadership: **academic segregation**

This report defines academic segregation as an indictable term that describes persistent gaps in academic outcomes of a minoritized student group, particularly Black students, compared to their peers, within the same educational institution, that persists for years as a result of institutional or otherwise systemic policies and practices. This definition focuses on gaps maintained within similar educational institutions, in turn naming the present phenomena where two student groups may be in the same environment, learning in the same courses, but are achieving at vastly different rates. Notably, this definition excludes one-off cases, instead naming that this practice must be a trend over multiple years, highlighting institutional neglect of, in the case of Orange County, our black students.

Academic Segregation Checklist:

- ☐ *Persistent gaps in the academic outcomes of a minoritized student group*
- ☐ *Occurs within the same educational institution*
- ☐ *The gaps persists for years*



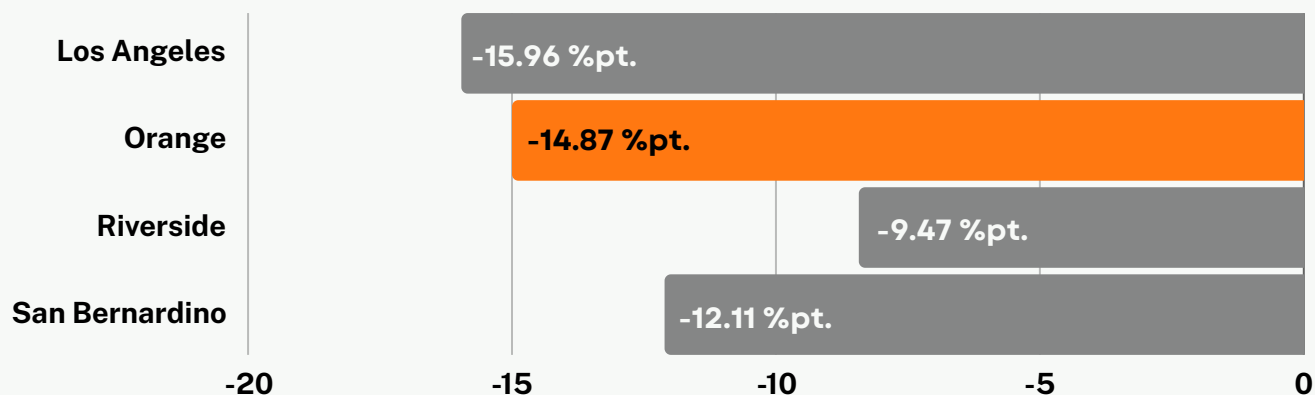
Academic Report

Regional Analysis

Though Orange County is not unique in persisting academic segregation, it does lead the Southern California region in the scale of this segregation. To assess the extent of academic segregation, the charts below outline the percentage-point difference between Black student achievement and the average within the county using the most updated 2023 data.

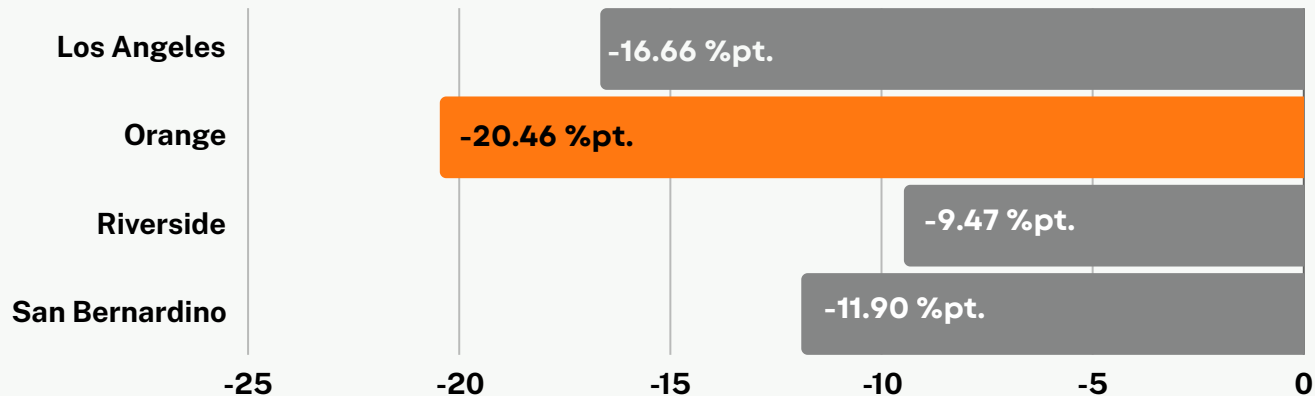
CAASPP ELA Segregation

Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students meeting or exceeding CAASPP ELA standards within the county and the county average.



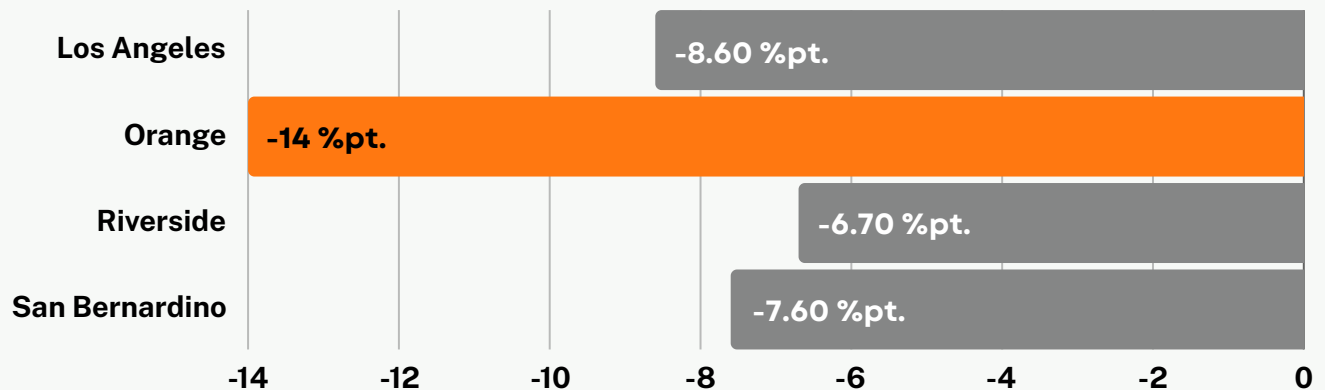
CAASPP Math Segregation

Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students meeting or exceeding CAASPP Math standards within the county and the county average.



A-G Segregation

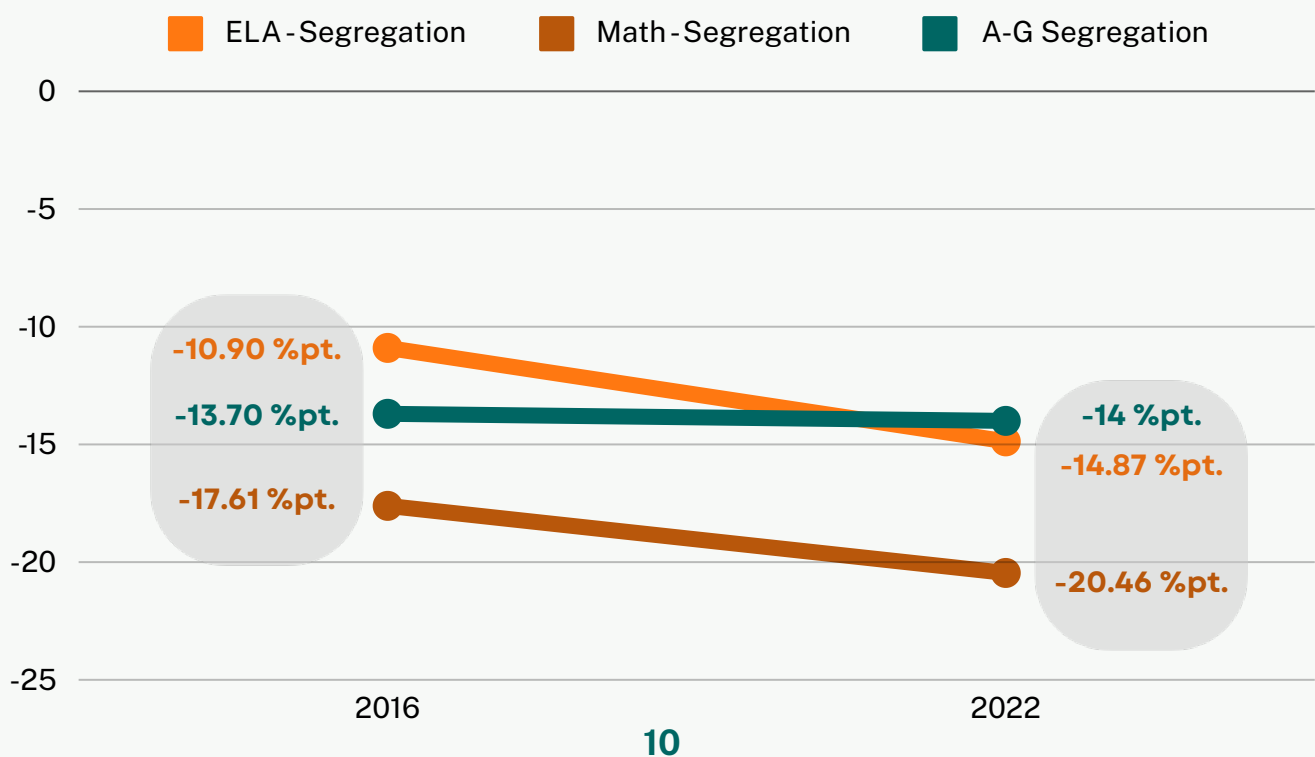
Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students completing A-G courses within the county and the county average.



These charts highlight concerning results, showing Orange County as having the highest rates of academic segregation for almost every outcome. As a result, Orange County leads the region in both academic achievement for non-Black students and the largest gap between Black students and their peers for almost every outcome measure. Additionally, to assess for academic segregation as previously defined, we also compared segregation rates to those of 2016.

Segregation over time

Academic segregation for each metric in 2016 compared to 2022

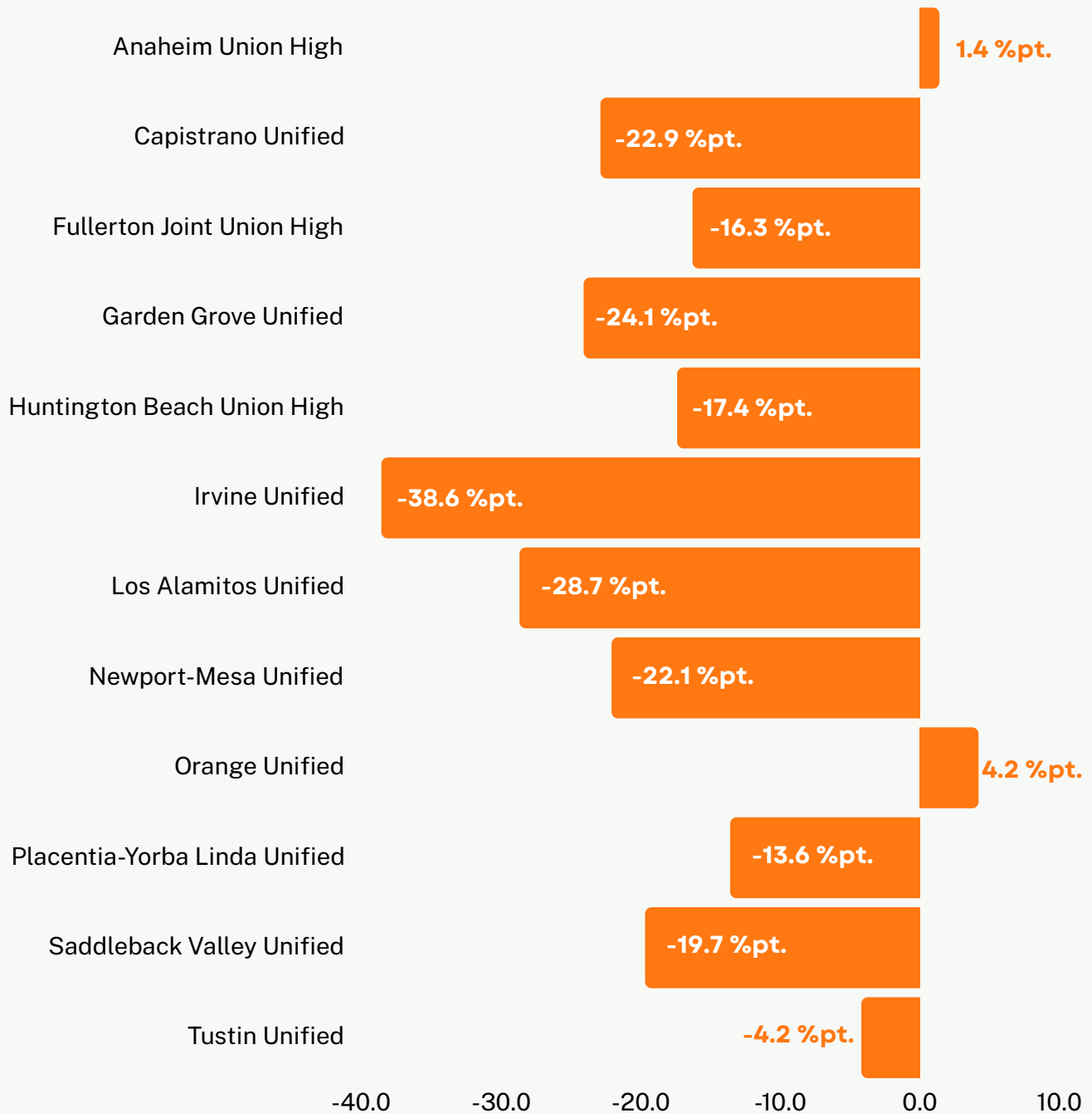


District Analysis

With Orange County as an aggregate shows concerning results, it becomes even more important to compare institutions within Orange County. Due to the distribution of our Black students across the county, the institutional analysis compares school districts, as school populations were often too small to measure.

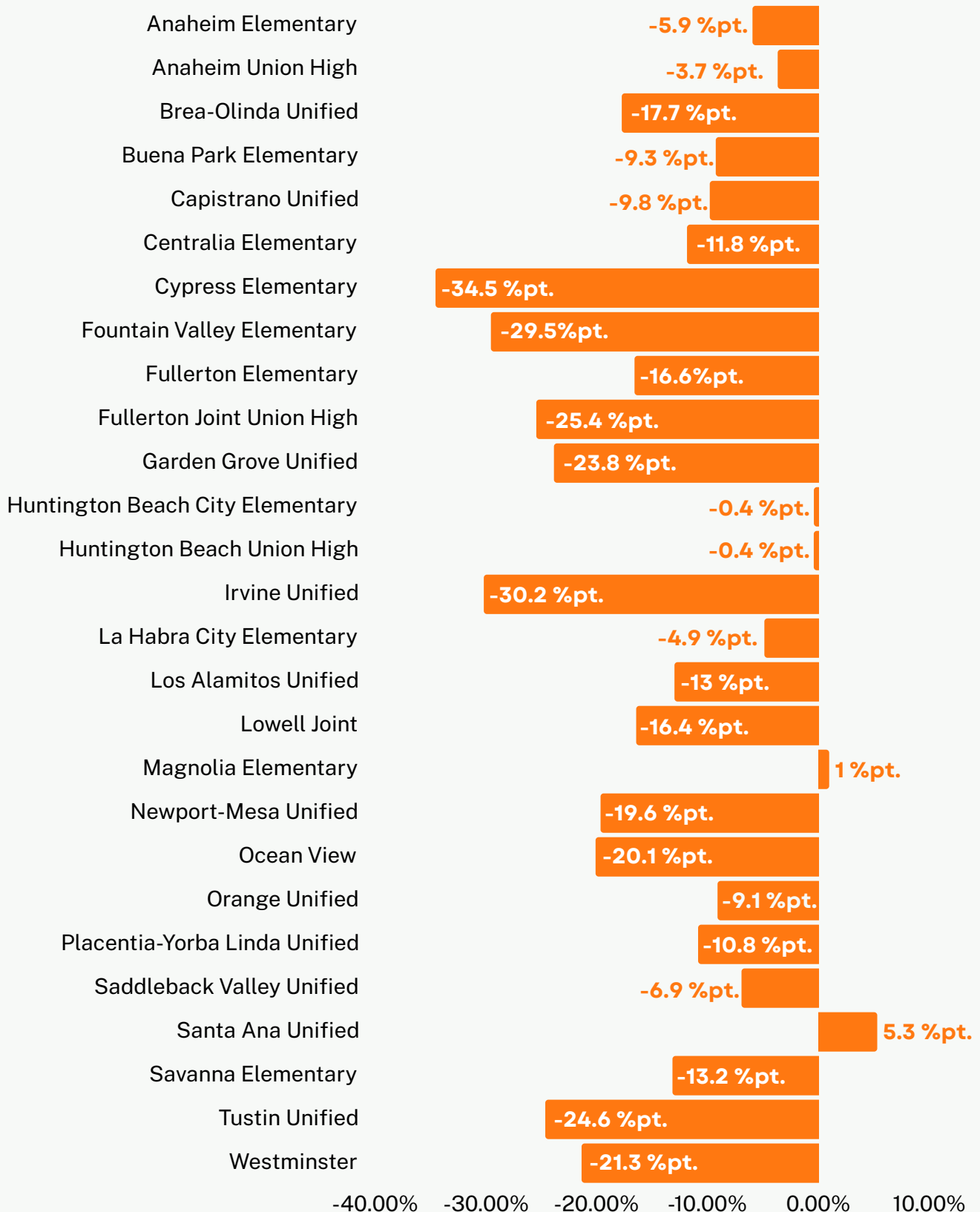
A-G Segregation

Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students completing A-G courses within each district and the district average.



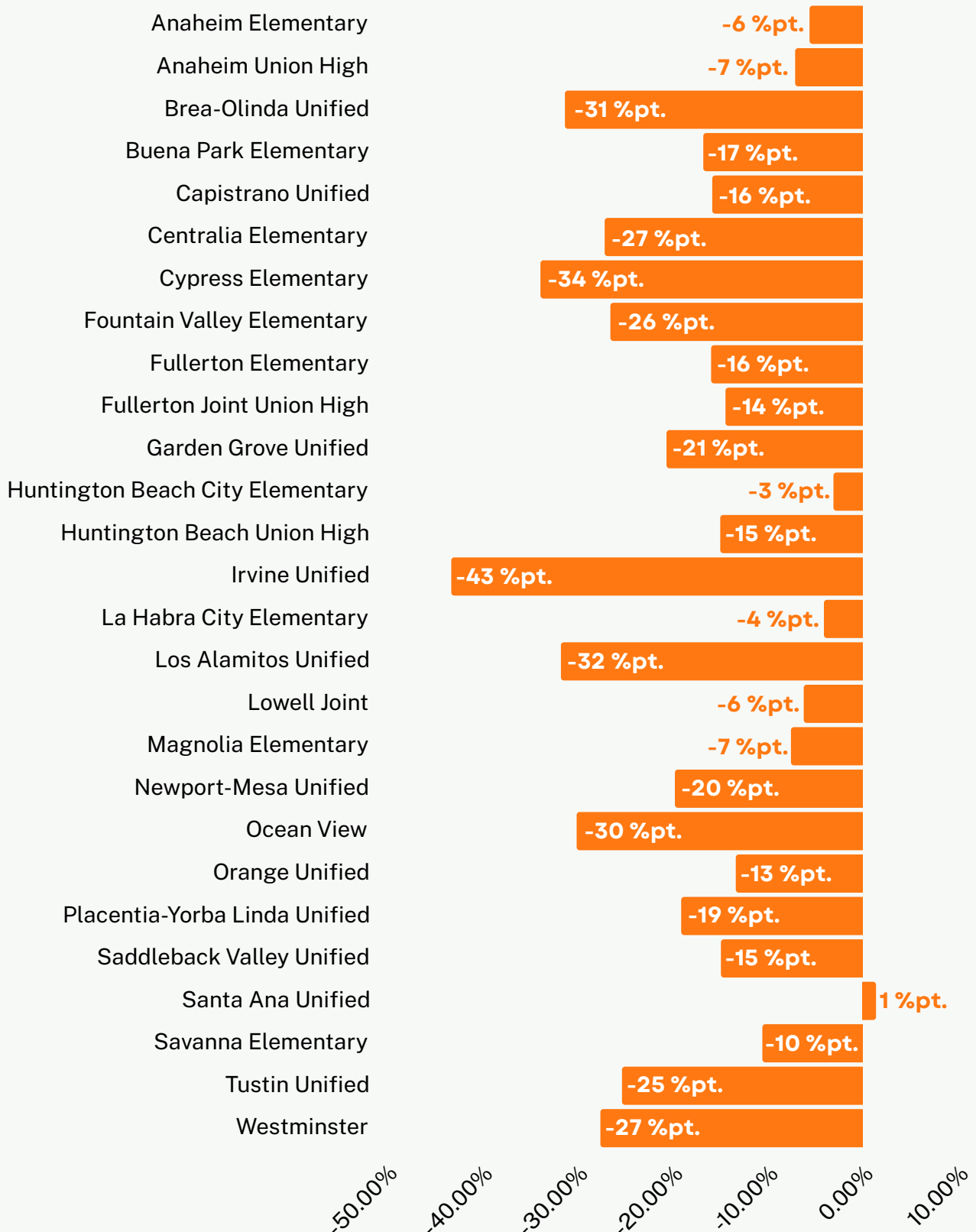
CAASPP ELA Segregation

Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students meeting or exceeding CAASPP ELA standards within the district and the district average.



CAASPP Math Segregation

Percentage point difference between the proportion of our Black students meeting or exceeding CAASPP Math standards within the district and the district average.



What Does This Mean?

The above data highlights the glaring rates of academic segregation that our Black students have persisted through for years. This data shows that Orange County schools have enabled the gap between our Black students and their peers to widen, leaving our Black students academically behind. But these numbers alone can be difficult to contextualize. This data does not allow us to understand both the gravity of this academic segregation nor if Orange County is on the track towards eradicating these gaps.

In our **Data Snapshot**, our research team pulled from the last 5 years of data to develop a model to assess, at the present rate of progress, how long it would take for the first cohort of students within each student group to graduate with a 100% A-G completion rate. Below is that model.

Race/ Ethnicity	Years until 100% A-G Completion	Year it will be when 100% of student group completes A-G
Asian	30	2053
White	57	2079
Latinx	126	2148
Black	142	2164

This projection shows a dangerous reality: Black students will not reach a fair educational outcome for over 140 years. This data is alarming and underscores that the current rate of change for Orange County is insufficient as, in those 142 years, an estimated 39,000 students will be undersupported and may be unable to enroll in a 4-year institution out of high school.

142 years

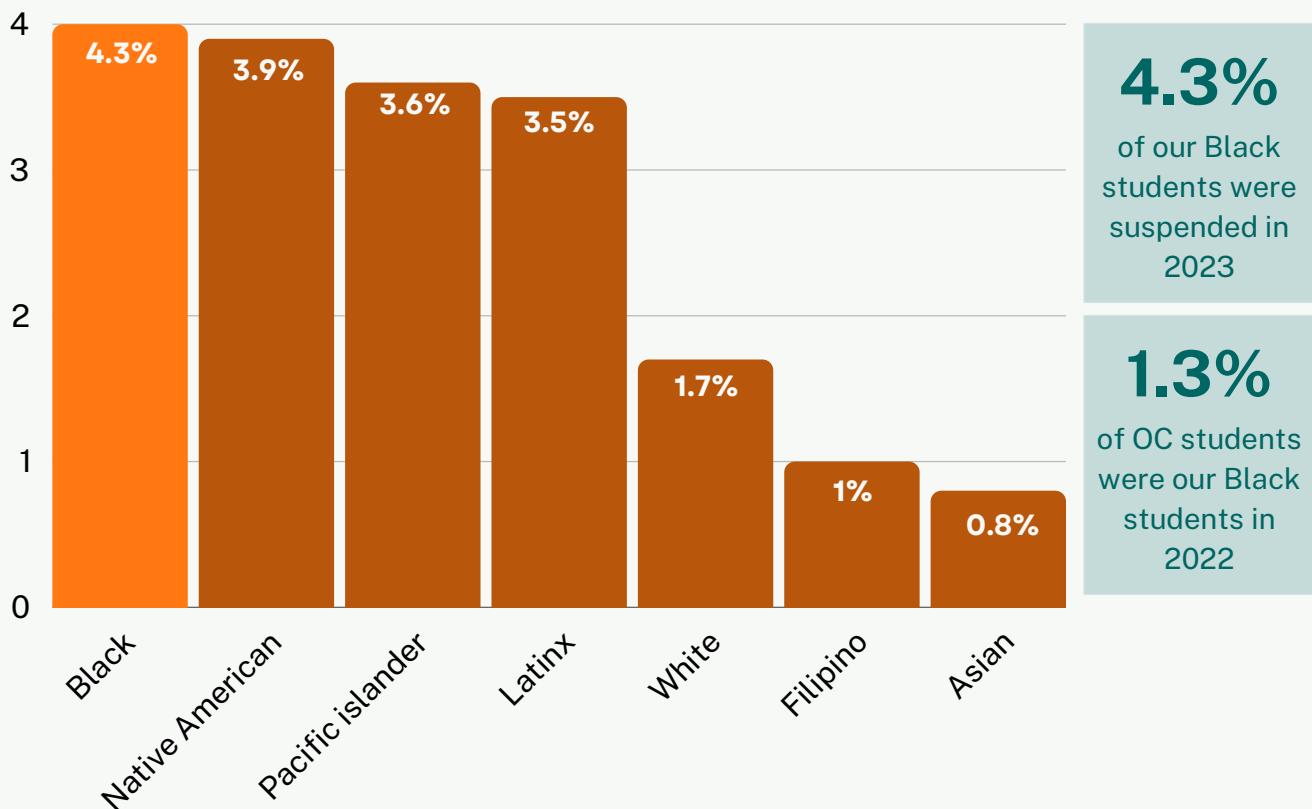
How long it will take until our
Black students have the same
educational outcomes as their
peers

Discipline Report

Crucial to understanding the educational environment surrounding our Black students is discipline data, namely suspension rates. Concerningly, the usage of suspensions to push Black students out of the classroom is well documented. National data from the Hechinger Report highlights that Black students are disproportionately suspended for vague infractions or for behavior that was otherwise deemed acceptable for their white peers. California is no different, as Black students across the state are also over-suspended, losing critical time in the classroom every year.

Suspension Rates

Percentage of labeled population suspended across Orange County



The data above shows that our Black students are suspended more than any other student group in the county they are also suspended at a rate higher than the proportion of Black students in the county. As a result, our Black students are over-disciplined and disproportionately impacted by suspension in their classrooms, resulting in decreased instructional time in the classroom.

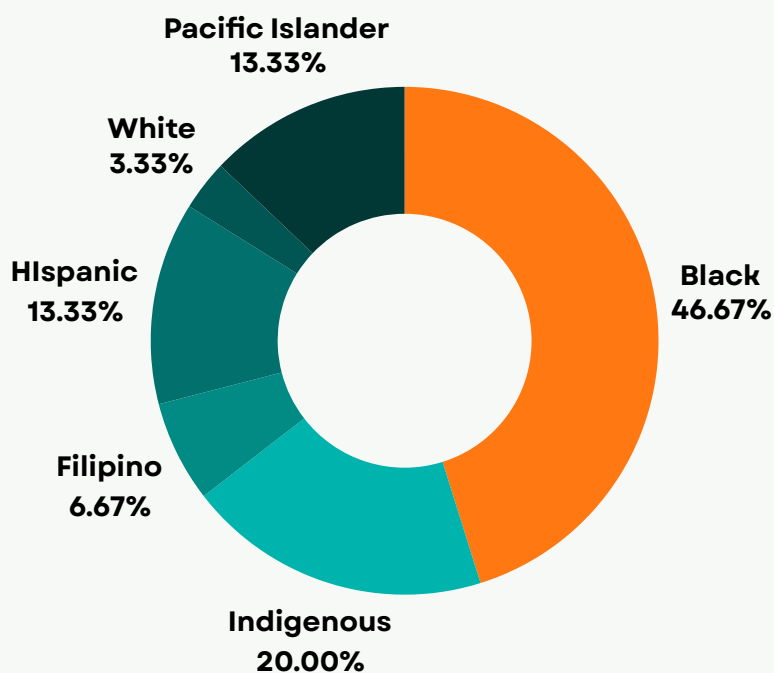
The district-level data shows even more concerning inequities. In addition to our Black students being over-suspended as an aggregate across Orange County, they are also over-disciplined at a majority of districts. Our research found that our Black students were over-suspended at 80% of districts across the county. In essence, at each of these districts, our Black students were suspended at a rate higher than the proportion of Black students in their district.

80%

of districts in Orange County over-suspended our Black students in 2023

District Over-Suspension Focus

Percentage of districts in Orange County with labeled race/ethnic group as the most suspended student population



Who's Suspended the Most?

Looking deeper, the rate that Black students are targeted in suspension rates extends beyond their over-suspension. When assessing what student population each district suspends most, a glaring result emerges. The data shows that, despite our Black students making up one of the smallest ethnic groups in the county, nearly half of all districts suspended Black students more than any other population.

In essence, our Black students make up 1.3% of the county student population, are suspended at a rate of 4.3%, and nearly half of all districts suspend Black students more than any other student group.

The discipline data leaves little to the imagination. Instead, it tells a concerning story of an education system in which our Black students are seemingly targeted, suspended, and removed from the same classroom where they are academically left behind.

Now What?

The data is clear: across Orange County, our Black students are chronically academically left behind and over-suspended at rates that showcase a tale of environments. For a majority of students in the county, excelling academically may not be easy, but it is attainable. Our Black students, on the other hand, must fight against the education system just to keep up, that is if they can fight to stay in the classroom long enough to do so.

So what do we do knowing this? Based on the data above, below is a list of recommendations to begin righting this wrong, uncover the drivers of academic segregation, eliminate the over-suspension of our Black students, and create a truly equal opportunity environment for all the scholars who call our county home.

Recommendations

1

Orange County district leaders should investigate the practices creating the academic segregation and over-disciplining of our Black students and report their findings to the broader community of parents, students, educators, and community members.

2

Orange County district administrators should convene an advisory group of Black parents, students, educators, and community members to advise on the development an action plan that promotes institutional accountability to eliminate the academic segregation of our Black students.

Though educational leaders and institutions bear the accountability for the persistence and growth of the academic segregation of our Black students, the holistic development of our Black students is only possible through community engagement. By engaging the broader community, especially the many mission-driven, religious, and cultural organizations that actively support Orange County's Black community, institutions can develop the tools necessary to eliminate this segregation. In doing so, this collaboration must be rooted in the ultimate goal of this work: to tear down barriers to our Black students' success and to create, in its wake, a transformative and enriching education.