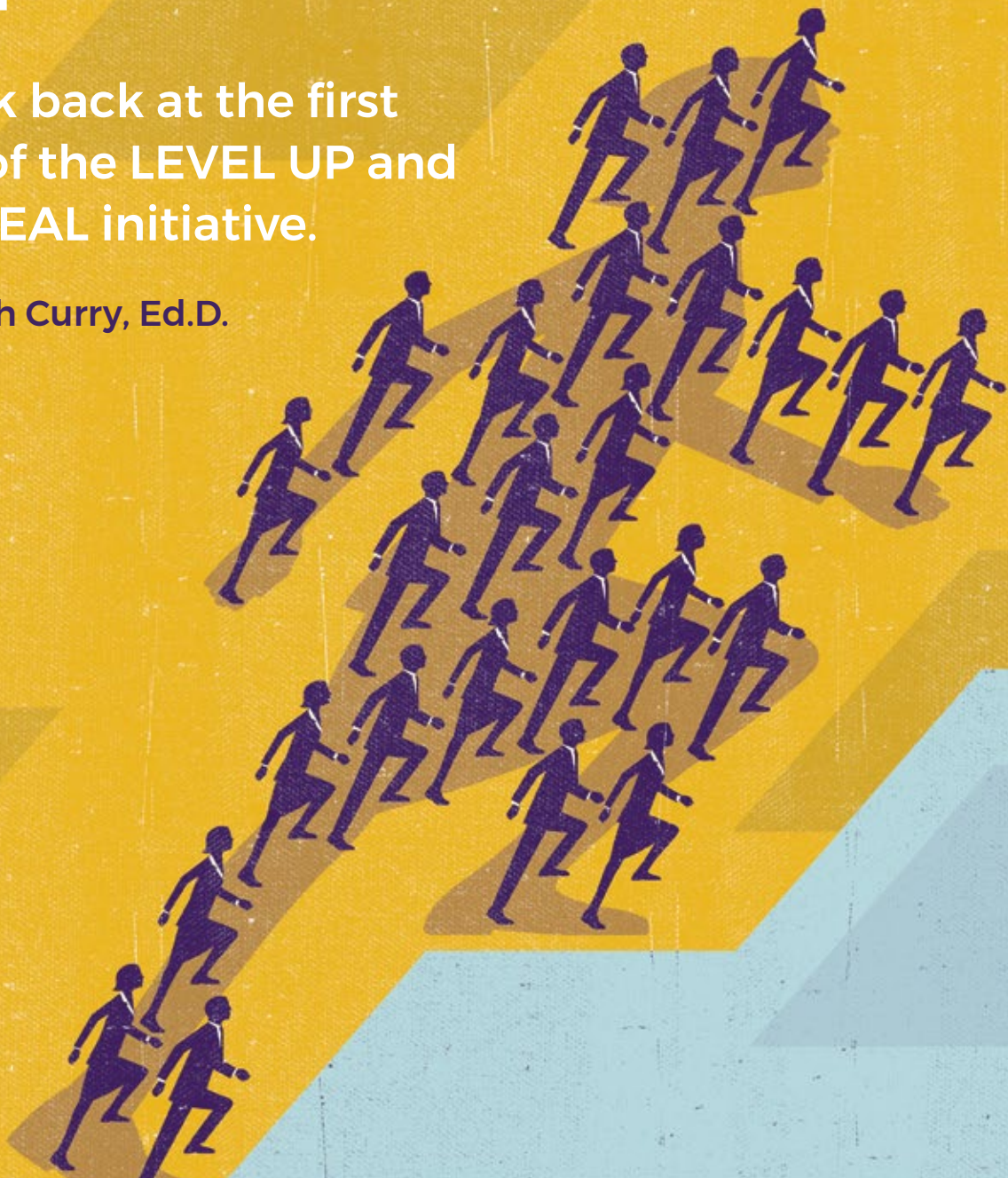


# Unapologetically Working Together for Black Learner Excellence

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A look back at the first  
year of the LEVEL UP and  
Get REAL initiative.

By Keith Curry, Ed.D.



## Grounded in data, research, and policy solutions, the impact of LEVEL UP – Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically – continues to grow.

**T**HE PAST YEAR HAS BEEN AN UNAPOLOGETIC YEAR FOR Black learner excellence and success! Through intentional advocacy efforts with stakeholders at the community, institutional, state, and federal levels, we have continued to build a movement around advocating for policies that address the staggering loss of Black learners from higher education over the last 20 years. Grounded in data, research, and policy solutions, the impact of LEVEL UP – *Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Black Learner, Unapologetically* – continues to grow. Through a variety of engagements, including Black Learner Excellence Community Summits, higher education symposiums, stakeholder dinners, the formation of the Black Learner Alliance, and the LEVEL UP and Get REAL Policy Playbook, we continue to advance actionable policy solutions and improved institutional practices to create more equitable systems of learning. The onus is not on Black learners – it is on all of us to create this change.

But this work, for me, isn't new. I've been involved with educational equity efforts since I was 19, when I started a program called "Destination Higher Education" (DHE) for admitted Black and African American students at the University of California Santa Cruz. This program was designed to help us create a stronger sense of belonging on campus. Seeing the impact that I had there, I knew I had to continue this work for the rest of my life.

Those who know me know what I always say when I look at any institution or organization: Budgets are a statement of values. You put your money where your values lie. If you're really about this life, then you'll find a way to fund it. That is what we did at Compton College. Students know they can always get a meal every day they come to school. They know they can always count on our farmer's market for \$20 worth of fresh groceries and free blue books, scantrons, and pencils.

We're doing the work at both the micro and the macro levels. We need to ensure students have equitable access in these tangible ways, and we need to ensure we're getting in front of policymakers and practitioners to tell the story of the work. That's where LEVEL UP comes in.

The intention of LEVEL UP has always been to engage directly with a variety of stakeholders and Black learners to drive action. The *LEVEL UP: Leveraging Explicit Value for Every Learner, Unapologetically* case-making report was informed by both quantitative and qualitative research and included the expertise of a distinguished expert advisory committee of researchers and practitioners. This committee, chaired by

me, informed the report's recommendations, honoring ongoing efforts and validating the recommendations specified for systemic change within higher education. Again moving toward action, I then convened the National Advisory Panel to create a Call to Action, committing bipartisan support from 26 higher education, policy, and business leaders who publicly signed on to LEVEL UP and Get REAL.

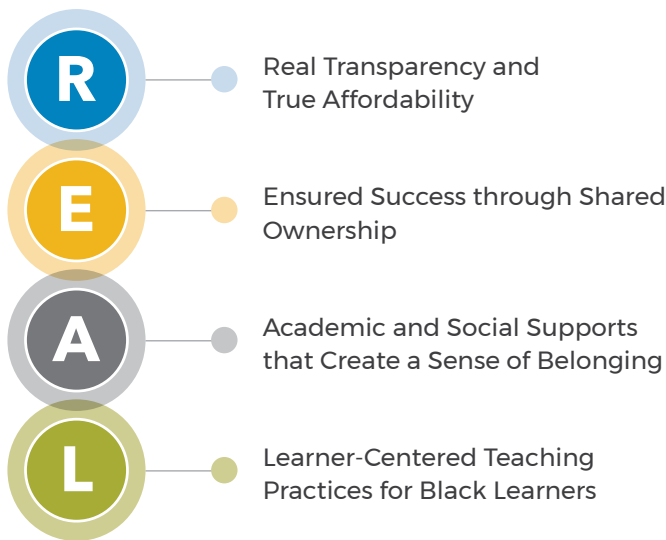
Both the LEVEL UP report and Call to Action were released in March 2023. Borne from these, in partnership with Achieving the Dream, the launch of The Alliance for Black Learner Excellence was announced at the 2023 ACCT Annual Leadership Congress. The Leveling Up: Realizing Black Learner Excellence at Community Colleges Symposium convened over 100 community college leaders and advocates to discuss the role of institutions and others in Black learner access and success. This new Alliance – led by Achieving the Dream's Dr. Karen Stout and Monica Parrish Trent, Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL), and me, with funding from the ECMC Foundation – will launch a cohort of community colleges focused on building institutional capacity, peer support, and learning for leaders in the field interested in joining the Alliance. By investigating the roots of educational inequity and identifying promising approaches for institutional transformation, the Alliance seeks to serve Black learners better. At Achieving the Dream's February 2024 DREAM conference, there was a standing-room-only session for LEVEL UP, demonstrating the demand and interest in advancing Black learner excellence. Such efforts continue to provide community colleges and policymakers with the evidence they need to make decisions that change the value proposition for minoritized learners and thus drive improvements in access and success.

Another important layer of this work is to coalesce local community leaders working on the ground every day for equity around the LEVEL UP initiative. Doing so builds momentum and support around this movement, which I continue to elevate with examples from my own experience (leadership successes and mistakes). Disseminating tools and resources for community leaders grounded in both research and lived experiences create a groundswell of momentum and support to enact systemic change for Black learners and communities.

The first of these community engagements was the Atlanta Black Learner Excellence Summit held in July 2023. Leaders from the Institute of Education Leadership and Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education convened to co-create shared commitments for Black learners in the Metro Atlanta area to enroll and persist in postsecondary

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education. The diverse stakeholders included policymakers, institutional leaders, community and business leaders. Participants discussed salient observations from a data walk of local and state data to inform their initial working groups on action plans in the R, E, A, L areas of:



A federally focused dinner was held in Washington, D.C., in October 2023 to gain insights on the national landscape to inform the LEVEL UP and Get REAL Policy Playbook. This Lumina-funded tool highlights what's working to support Black learner success and considerations to drive impact for federal and state policymakers, higher education institutions, and community and business leaders. Ongoing LEVEL UP summits and dinners, graciously funded by the ECMC Foundation, provide opportunities for direct feedback from the field, including from Black learners themselves. Higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, convened to illuminate the impact on the students they serve. I recently met with a summit of SUNY institutional leaders in New York, including Chancellor John King Jr. and Dr. Stout, discussing their commitment to advancing Black learner excellence. I also recently gave the keynote address at the Missouri Community College Association (MCCA) annual convention in November 2023. We continue to find opportunities for synergy as the momentum grows to elevate and support Black learners.

In February, Jee Hang Lee, Dr. Stout, and I joined three Black learners from California, Florida, and Maryland on Capitol Hill to discuss this work with Congressman Burgess Owens (R-Utah), chair of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and the Workforce, and Congressional staff in conjunction with the ACCT Community College National Legislative Summit.

Additional LEVEL UP summits include convenings in Los Angeles in conjunction with the A2MEND annual conference (March 2024); Chicago with support from Chancellor Juan Salgado, City Colleges of Chicago, and Jim Reed from the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (April 2024); and Detroit in partnership with Dr. Mike Gavin, President of Delta College and the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA). Institutions and key stakeholders continue to express energy and commitment to diving into LEVEL UP data, recommendations, and, most importantly, what can be done to impact Black learner excellence in their local communities. The commitment to realizing access and success for Black learners is strong – and overdue. We continue to engage unapologetically with others in these efforts.

We are utilizing these continued engagements to inform additional resources, create collaborative policies, and identify other supports accessible on a continually updated, dynamic digital platform. This is just the beginning – this isn't a one-off or another initiative that we're going to forget about six months down the line. Join the movement here and stay connected as we realize Black learner excellence and success.



*The LEVEL UP & Get REAL initiative is a research, policy, and advocacy initiative supported by Lumina Foundation and ECMC Foundation and managed by HCM Strategists in partnership with Achieving the Dream and Equity Avengers. Dr. Keith Curry, President & CEO of Compton College and Equity Avengers, leads this work as our public-facing lead advocate for Black learner excellence and success in higher education.*