



**21st Century California School Leadership Academy**

# **Coaching for Equity:**

*Sustaining Change and Impact in the  
21CSLA Valley to Coast Regional Academy*

*led by the  
Los Angeles County Office of Education*



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# 21CSLA

## **Abstract**

*This mixed-methods study examined whether school leaders continued to address a self-identified problem of practice using continuous improvement strategies twelve months after participating in leadership coaching through the 21CSLA ValCo Regional Academy. Survey data from 2024–2026 indicated patterns in sustained use of improvement tools and equity-focused decision-making. Semi-structured interviews with eight coaching participants and ten coaches further explored leaders’ application of continuous improvement routines, shifts in equitable practices, and the influence of coaching. Findings indicate that structured coaching supported the ongoing use of data-informed inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and reduced leader isolation, informing how systems can better prepare leaders to disrupt persistent TK–12 inequities.*

## **21CSLA ValCo Research-Practice Partnership Model Description**

The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), serving as the lead agency for the 21CSLA Valley to Coast (ValCo) Regional Academy, partnered with a Cal Poly San Luis Obispo Educational Leadership faculty researcher to study the degree to which the coaching participants’ leadership practices continued after completing one year of ValCo individualized leadership coaching, with particular attention to their sustained use of continuous improvement strategies to proceed with their work on a self-identified problem of practice. Designed as a Research-Practice Partnership, the collaboration leveraged LACOE’s Regional Academy Program leadership expertise and its access to participating in-service school and district leaders, as well as 21CSLA ValCo coaches. ValCo’s practitioner insight was coupled with the researcher’s methodological guidance and analytic rigor to ensure both relevance and quality in the study’s design and analysis. Together, the partners co-developed research questions, refined data collection tools, and interpreted findings to ensure both scholarly quality and practical relevance.

This mixed-methods study examined whether school leaders continued addressing a self-identified problem of practice using continuous improvement strategies twelve months after completing the 21CSLA ValCo coaching program. Survey data from 2024–2026 identified patterns in sustained use of improvement tools and equity-focused decision-making. Semi-structured interviews with coaching participants and coaches further explored leaders’ application of inquiry routines, shifts in equitable practices, and the influence of coaching.

Findings indicate that structured coaching supported ongoing data-informed inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and reduced leader isolation. The partnership yielded reciprocal benefits as the scholar-partner gained access to authentic field-based insights, while ValCo strengthened coaching leadership practices and contributed evidence to inform system-level efforts to disrupt persistent TK-12 inequities.

## **Recommended Citation for Full Research Brief**

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Leadership coaching for equity is a professional learning approach that empowers educational leaders to transform schools by promoting access, opportunity, and inclusion for all students, particularly those historically marginalized or underserved. Unlike traditional leadership mentoring or supervision, which often centers on performance, evaluations, or compliance, equity-centered coaching emphasizes reflection, inquiry, and systems thinking to dismantle inequities within educational institutions (Anderson & Davis, 2024). Through relational trust and structured problem-solving, coaches help leaders critically examine practices, policies, and mindsets that sustain equity, fostering meaningful and sustainable change (Collins, Murphy, & Brown, 2025).

The 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) and the Valley to Coast Regional Academy (ValCo) were established six years ago through a grant from the California Department of Education (CDE, 2025), is designed to strengthen leadership for equity across the state. This research brief highlights findings from a 2025 mixed-methods study of the Valley to Coast Regional Academy led by the Los Angeles County Office of Education to understand and assess the degree to which educational teacher leaders and administrators continue to apply continuous improvement strategies and tools one year after completing a 12 month coaching cycle. The objective is to inform all who are committed to strengthening school leaders' capacity to challenge systemic inequity through the coaching and preparation of equity-centered leaders.

Through the analysis of interviews, surveys, and document reviews, the research explored three focus areas:

## PROBLEM OF PRACTICE SUSTAINABILITY

Coaching participants demonstrated ongoing commitment to addressing inequities through targeted problems of practice such as closing achievement gaps for English learners and improving inclusion for students with disabilities. Many continued using continuous improvement tools like the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle to guide inquiry and reflection with their staff and professional learning communities. Artifacts such as revised agendas and school plans reflected the influence of coaching on data-driven decision-making. Over time, coaching participants deepened their equity mindsets, viewing equity as a moral and instructional imperative that shaped how they questioned, listened, and led.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING OR HINDERING EQUITY PRACTICES

Sustainability depended on context and culture. The most common barriers which participants shared included time constraints, competing priorities, and resistance to equity work within school systems. Participants described how success was strengthened by trusting coach-leader relationships, structured reflection time, and psychological safety. Coaches who modeled empathy, curiosity, and cultural responsiveness helped leaders engage in difficult conversations and reframe data as evidence for improvement rather than compliance. When coaching was aligned with districts' broader equity initiatives, a greater continuity and collective ownership of outcomes was seen.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## COACHING AND ITS EFFECTS ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Participants consistently described coaching as a “lifeline” that provided reflection, resilience, and connection. Many credited their coaches with helping them stay in leadership roles during challenging times. Coaching fostered communities of inquiry where equity was not a project but an ongoing practice. These relationships modeled the kind of human-centered leadership that extended to teachers, students, and families. Although impacts on student achievement were often indirect, leaders noted improved engagement, inclusion, and attention to marginalized voices.

Coaching for equity is most powerful when relational, reflective, and sustained. The 21CSLA ValCo model shows that when leadership development centers equity, data, continuous improvement, and humanity, it transforms not only individuals but also the systems that serve them.

## FINDINGS

1. Twelve months after participating in 21CSLA ValCo coaching, leaders sustained equity-centered continuous improvement practices to expand access and guide data-informed decision making.
2. Sustained equity-focused practice depended on organizational conditions, with time pressures and resistance to equity work limiting implementation; relational trust, structured reflection, and district alignment strengthened implementation.
3. The 21CSLA ValCo coaching model reduced leader isolation which led to strengthening equity-centered, relational leadership that extended into school-wide improvement efforts.



“The greatest strength of the CSLA Program is the individualized, equity-centered coaching that meaningfully elevates leadership practice, even for experienced principals. With nine years of experience, it was valuable to have a thought partner who could both affirm effective practices and push my thinking, helping me slow down, reflect, and strengthen systems-level decisions. ”

- Principal in LA County

The increasing complexity of educational leadership calls for school and district administrators to adopt dynamic, evidence-based approaches to improvement. One such approach is the application of improvement science, a methodology grounded in iterative inquiry, systems thinking, and disciplined use of data. When paired with coaching, improvement science offers a powerful framework for building leadership capacity, supporting equity-driven change, and enhancing student outcomes. Coaching has emerged as a key professional learning strategy for administrators. Research shows that effective coaching enhances leadership efficacy, promotes adaptive change, and fosters continuous improvement. According to Honig (2012), coaching that is embedded in organizational goals and focused on instructional leadership leads to more coherent school improvement. However, traditional coaching models, grounded in supervision and evaluation, may lack the structured inquiry and data discipline that improvement science offers.

A growing body of research indicates that embedding improvement science into coaching models strengthens both the technical and adaptive skills of administrators. Research by Bryk and colleagues (2015) underscores the importance of this disciplined approach, supported through coaching, in scaling effective practices. Coaches serve as facilitators of learning, helping leaders shift from traditional compliance-based improvement to inquiry-based transformation. This intersection of coaching and improvement science is at the heart of the ongoing work in the 21CSLA Valley to Coast Regional Academy led by the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

The 21CSLA initiative provides no-cost professional learning, coaching, and networked improvement opportunities for educational leaders serving California’s highest-need schools and districts (21CSLA Center, 2025). The Valley to Coast coaching program pairs leaders with trained equity focused coaches who guide them in addressing problems of practice through the lens of improvement science, which is an iterative process of planning, acting, studying, and refining to achieve equitable outcomes (Carnegie Foundation, 2025).

Across California there are seven Regional Academies which fall under the 21CSLA statewide grant. This research brief highlights findings from a study specifically designed for ValCo led by the Los Angeles County Office of Education with partners including six California counties; Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura. The ValCo Regional Academy offers no-cost professional learning to the coaches and participants, Equity and Leadership Development for District, Site, and Teacher Leaders also known as Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs). There are three professional learning strands for participants to join:

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STRANDS

### 1. Localized Professional Learning

for a mixed audience ranging from topics such as *The Educator’s Data Journey: Leading for Equity Through Meaningful Use*; *A Time for Change*; *Coaching for Equity*; *The Mindframes for Belonging*; *Identities, and Equity*; and *Courageous Leadership Conversations*.

### 2. Communities of Practice

for job-alike cohorts including the *Long-Term English Learner Support Network*; *Navigating Data: Empowering Principals to Drive Equity, Engagement, and Academic Achievement in Schools*; *The Coaching Habit* (Bungay Stanier, 2016); and *The Listening Leader* (Safir, 2017).

### 3. Individualized Leadership Coaching

offered to educators committed to growing a culture of deep reflection with a focus on equitable outcomes for students. Participants are matched with a leadership coach to develop professional and organizational goals to disrupt educational inequities that exist within their localized contexts.

During the 2025-26 academic year, ValCo offered 35 distinct professional learning opportunities for educators across the six counties. Sample topics addressed in professional learning workshops include *Using Improvement Science to Address Equity Problems of Practice* and *Coaching for Equity*.

Additional key components of the 21CSLA ValCo professional learning model include workshops on Improvement Science in Action led by Dr. Kristen Rohanna and Jo Ann Isken (Rohanna, 2021); communities of practice such as The Coaching Habit (Bungay Stanier, 2016) and The Listening Leader (Safir, 2017); and structured coaching conversations that cultivate reflective, equity-driven leadership.

This study examines how participants continue applying these tools and principles after completing 12 months or 25 hours of 21CSLA ValCo coaching, with the goal of understanding the sustainability and long-term impact of coaching for equity in transforming educational systems.

While coaching is widely recognized as a promising approach to leadership development, limited research has examined the long-term impact of equity-centered coaching once formal programs conclude (Anderson & Davis, 2024; de Haan et al., 2013). Much of the existing literature focuses on immediate outcomes or self-reported benefits during the coaching cycle, leaving a gap in understanding sustainability beyond the intervention period (Collins, et al., 2025).

This study focused on how the third learning strand, Individualized Leadership Coaching, addresses that gap by exploring how leaders continue, or struggle, to apply strategies and tools learned from their 21CSLA ValCo Coach one year later. Findings will contribute to the literature by clarifying the sustained influence of coaching on equity-focused leadership practice.

## DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

This research brief aims to understand the impact of the 21CSLA ValCo Coaching Program on educational leaders' ability to sustain equity-focused leadership and continuous improvement practices. To determine the extent to which coaching participants continued to address a problem of practice using continuous improvement strategies and tools twelve months after coaching, the study employed a mixed-methods design. Data sources included survey responses from all coaches and coaching participants from the ValCo Regional Academy from the 2024-2026 academic years. Qualitative data was collected through document reviews and exploratory semi-structured interviews of eight coaching participants and ten coaches.

Appendix 1 describes the methodology of the study in greater detail.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what degree do participants sustain equity-focused leadership and continuous improvement practices, particularly in addressing equity problems of practice, twelve months after completing the 21CSLA ValCo Coaching Program?
2. What factors support or hinder participants' continued use of equity-focused continuous improvement practices after 21CSLA ValCo coaching?
3. How do sustained practices from 21CSLA ValCo coaching influence access, opportunity, and inclusion for historically underserved students and adults?

**Finding 1: Twelve months after 21CSLA ValCo coaching, leaders sustained equity-centered continuous improvement practices to expand access to rigorous academic experiences and guide data-informed decision making.**

One year after completing the 21CSLA ValCo Coaching Program, participants demonstrated sustained engagement with equity-centered problems of practice, though the depth of implementation varied. Many coaching participants continued to apply continuous improvement tools such as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles and empathy interviews to target achievement gaps and improve instructional practices. Coaches described how leaders maintained a focus on specific student populations, particularly English learners and students with disabilities, using disaggregated data to inform decisions. One coaching participant shared, “My coach helps me really focus on our targeted student populations ... keeping them top of mind during every conversation.”

Similarly, a high school principal described how they regularly walked the campus with their coach discussing what equity looks like in terms of student makeup and representation in Advanced Placement courses such as history and calculus.

The principal shared,

*"I definitely liked the inquiry-based approach to it ... just a lot of good cognitive thinking. I like to walk around campus, and we would walk around campus together a lot. I can think of one instance specifically when we're just going to observe classrooms ... I happened to just check in with the teacher who taught Calculus BC. That class happened to have 6 students in the class, which is alarming. In fact, I had thought that it was almost like an inequitable use of resources to have such a small number of students who are achieving really well with one teacher who is a very strong teacher. Ethnically, we are about 95% Latino and 5% Asian, very diverse within the two groups. That classroom didn't happen to represent our school ... it was basically representing 100% of our Asian population ... I was already getting to know the culture and really starting to look into the school with an equity lens, and that's one thing that my coach really always kind of pushed ... and prodded around equity."*

The principal went on to describe how they worked with their coach and school faculty towards creating a systems approach in the math department to ensure more than 6 students are enrolled and successfully completing advanced math courses like Calculus BC.

*"So we started thinking about, how do we get there? How do we approach the math department in an inquiry-based manner to see how we can ... just expand the amount of students who are taking calculus, whether it's BC or AB. It just so happens that our AB class only had between 15 to 20 students ... So we started having those conversations, and little by little, we started making things a little bit more open enrollment, a little bit more robust, just by having conversations ... We were able to open up AP Precalculus, which didn't exist on our campus."*

While this kind of systemic and cultural shift takes time to determine correlation, the initial results of student enrollment in advanced math courses indicates a sustained equity practice resulting from coaching sessions and walking the campus with a ValCo coach.

Another school principal described how their coach supported them in using data to discuss distinct student populations and stated, “My coach helps me really focus on our targeted student population. ...Our ELs weren't making the progress that they should have been making. It was disheartening, to say the least ... being able to really, truly focus on them and our Hispanic students and ... keep them top of mind, during every conversation.” The same principal went on to state how their coach instilled a set of equity questions to keep in mind when making school-wide decisions and noted, “Who did this benefit? Who did this strategy benefit, and why did it benefit them? How can we better service these students? What else might these students need?” The principal who shared these questions stated they continue to pose these questions to staff and self while reflecting on decision making.

An assistant principal receiving 21CSLA ValCo coaching reflected on how they are using the improvement science method of inquiry with their staff:

*"We were talking about it [improving outcomes for ELs], from a UDL [universal design for learning] framework, and going through with teachers. Let's list out our barriers. Let's choose one or two biggest bangs for buck right at this moment and plan for it. And then do a PDSA cycle, Plan, Do, Study, Act, as with improvement science ... the inquiry cycle with grade levels. ... So that they hopefully will experience those small wins, because some of them are so resistant to UDL. Focus on one thing. And that's what we talked about ... one thing, one thing that was going to be our thing this year, just one thing for ELs. "*

Prior to having a 21CSLA ValCo coach and learning about improvement science, this assistant principal did not engage in conducting professional learning at their site in this systemic manner.

Evidence of sustainability also appeared in tangible artifacts such as revised school meeting agendas, inclusion of equity statements in planning documents, and the adoption of inquiry cycles within professional learning communities. Participants noted that coaching “permeates throughout the school,” influencing staff meetings, data reviews, and instructional priorities. Consistent with findings from the 21CSLA Equity-Centered School Leadership Coaching Brief (Esboldt et al., 2023), the sustained impact of coaching was linked to relational trust, critical reflection, and an understanding of equity as an ongoing practice rather than a single initiative.

Over time, participants demonstrated a *deep equity mindset*, reframing equity from a compliance obligation to a moral and instructional commitment. Through communities of practice and regional coach meetings led by the Los Angeles County Office Regional Academy leads, coaches engaged with texts such as *The Listening Leader* (Safir, 2017) and *The Coaching Habit* (Bungay Stanier, 2016). Through these communities of practice, coaches refined habits of questioning and listening that promoted culturally responsive dialogue. The goal of equity-centered leadership thus evolved from being solely student-centered to encompassing systemic practices including how meetings were structured, whose voices were heard, and how success was defined.



*"When we did break down our SBAC [Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium] data and we looked at our [student] group of ELs, the data was not good, just to put it plainly. So, that is another one of our focus areas this year."*

*-Principal in LA County*

*"Coaching has had an impact, because what I learn and what I get from it ... then makes an impact into basically all the areas of our school. ... It helps me be a catalyst at the school."*

*-Principal in Fresno County*

**Finding 2: Sustained equity-focused practice depended on organizational conditions, with time pressures and resistance to equity work limiting implementation; relational trust, structured reflection, and district alignment strengthened implementation.**

Coaching participants identified several factors that supported or hindered the sustained use of continuous improvement methods. Time emerged as the most significant barrier; the demands of crisis management, staffing shortages, and district mandates often interrupted reflective practices. Several leaders described “so many fires to put out on a daily basis,” which limited their ability to engage deeply with data or follow through on improvement cycles. Additionally, some reported “cultures of resistance,” where equity work was perceived by staff as threatening or politically sensitive.

Conversely, conditions that supported sustainability included structured reflection time, consistent coach availability, coaches' competency of improvement science methods, and psychologically safe spaces for vulnerability. Coaches' emphasis on empathy, curiosity, and relational trust aligned with 21CSLA's identified *coach competencies*: support, trust, reflective inquiry, and sustained engagement. One participant remembered a coaching session and shared, “She came in with this calmness ... it wasn't about the coaching cycle...it was about being curious about people.” This relational and culturally responsive approach helped leaders move from defensiveness to openness, a shift essential for authentic equity work.

Coaching also facilitated data-driven equity conversations that moved beyond compliance toward storytelling and accountability. Leaders learned to interpret data not just as performance metrics but as evidence of systemic inequities. One principal explained, “We looked at our [student] group data, and it was not good ... that's why we're focusing differently this year.” By using data as a reflective tool, coaching participants began to engage their teams in identifying barriers, setting goals such as identifying and using one to three English language development strategies across the grade level, and celebrating small wins.

At the organizational level, supportive district leadership and alignment between coaching and strategic goals amplified impact. District leaders participating in 21CSLA ValCo coaching that embedded coaching within broader improvement efforts (e.g., School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) revisions or equity task forces) demonstrated stronger continuity. Conversely, turnover in leadership or lack of institutional buy-in hindered progress, underscoring the need for sustained, multi-year investment in coaching.

### **Finding 3: The 21CSLA ValCo coaching model mitigated leader isolation and strengthened equity-centered, relational leadership, which informed schoolwide improvement efforts.**

The 21CSLA ValCo coaching model cultivated what participants described as “learning communities of equity.” School leaders noted that coaching relationships provided both professional guidance and emotional resilience, countering the isolation often experienced in leadership roles. One principal reflected, *“I felt very lonely ... what saved me from quitting was a coach.”* This sentiment aligns with national findings that leadership coaching enhances retention and morale, particularly among leaders working in high-need contexts. Coaching provides school leaders with essential skill building, emotional, and professional support reducing feelings of isolation, strengthening confidence, and increasing their likelihood of remaining in their roles. Huggins, Klar, and Andreoli (2020) found that leadership coaching offers affirmation, problem-solving partnership, and a sense of professional community that can buffer burnout and enhance retention, especially in high-need environments.

Participants consistently described coaching as a lifeline and a confidential, judgment-free space to think critically and re-center their purpose. Coaches were viewed as *“thought partners”* rather than evaluators, offering challenge and compassion in equal measure. These relationships modeled the kind of human-centered approach leaders sought to extend to their staff and students. The coaching stance of *“stay curious about people”* became a touchstone for how leaders approached conflict resolution, feedback, and team collaboration.

The ripple effects of coaching extended to student and staff outcomes, though often indirectly. Leaders reported greater intentionality in addressing equity gaps, revising curricula, and fostering inclusion in daily practices such as morning greetings, restorative circles, and celebrations of student growth. Artifacts, including school plans and meeting notes, reflected a shift toward continuous improvement and collective responsibility for student success. One principal who worked on updating their school vision shared,

*“There is a big difference in the agendas from last year. We did not have our school vision on top of our agenda. So now, on our agendas this year, the one thing at the top is our school vision, which wasn't there before.”*

*-Principal in LA County*

Finally, participants and coaches advocated for extending the coaching program beyond one year to strengthen continuity and deepen reflection. Many viewed the twelve-month structure as sufficient for initiating change *“but insufficient for sustaining change amid systemic pressures.”* As one coach observed, *“The sustained nature of coaching allows leaders to slow down ... go deeper with learning and acknowledge that change takes time.”*



# THE PREPARATION & DEVELOPMENT OF 21CSLA EQUITY-CENTERED COACHES

The preparation of 21CSLA ValCo coaches is a cornerstone of the program's effectiveness and sustainability. Coaches are not only experienced educators and leaders, but also self-reported lifelong learners who participate in continuous professional development designed to deepen their understanding of equity, identity, and improvement science. As several coaches emphasized, "the beauty of 21CSLA is that it allows the coaches to be learners as well," creating a reflective cycle where professional growth directly shapes how they support and challenge their coaching participants.

Professional learning sessions for coaches integrate practice-informed frameworks such as *The Listening Leader* (Safir, 2017), *The Coaching Habit* (Stanier, 2016), and improvement science methodologies. These training sessions ground coaching conversations in curiosity, empathy, continuous improvement, culturally responsive approaches, and data-informed reflection. Through learning communities and workshops led by experts like Dr. Melissa Krull (2020) and Elena Aguilar (2020), coaches engage in reflective discussions on positionality, implicit bias, and systems of oppression, aligning with the competencies identified by 21CSLA's Equity-Centered Coaching Guidance Document.

Over the past six years the ValCo coaches also received training in coaching techniques based on implicit biases, identity, evocative coaching, and improvement science, which emphasize leaders guiding their participants to uncover insights rather than providing directives. As one coach explained, "I've learned to step back ... to help them find the answers within themselves rather than feed it to them." This approach fosters autonomy, reflection, and confidence among leaders, reinforcing the coaching goal of developing sustainable equity practices.

Equity-centered coaches intentionally model relational leadership by creating psychologically safe spaces for vulnerability and growth. They engage participants in data dialogues that expose inequities, such as over-identification in special education or exclusion in advanced courses, helping leaders transform these insights into actionable strategies. Coaches also bring lived experience to their practice, often as BIPOC leaders themselves who understand the systemic barriers their participants navigate. The ValCo coaches emphasize inclusion, wellness, resilience, and retention as essential components of equity work.

*"I think when we sit with our coach, it gives us time to better process it and think about, like, what concrete next steps can we then take forward."*

*- Assistant Principal in LA County*

## SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS

Ultimately, 21CSLA ValCo's ongoing development model ensures that coaches are not just facilitators but catalysts for enduring change. By pairing theory with relational practice, and by building a network of critically reflective practitioners, 21CSLA ValCo prepares coaches to continue advancing equity-driven leadership long after the formal one-year coaching cycle ends.

Findings from this study reinforce that equity-centered coaching is most effective when it is relational, reflective, and sustained. The 21CSLA ValCo model exemplifies these principles by combining improvement science tools with human-centered inquiry. Coaching for equity transforms not only leadership practices but also the culture of schools by shifting focus from isolated interventions to continuous, collective efforts toward inclusion and opportunity. Overall, the evidence suggests that coaching acts as both a catalyst for professional learning and a stabilizing force for leadership retention. Equity work, when coupled with reflective coaching, becomes dynamic and contextual, embedded in relationships, data use, and decision making that center the humanity of every learner and educator.

## SELECT SURVEY RESPONSES

### 21CSLA VALCO COACHES WERE SURVEYED IN 2025 AND ASKED,

*What are some specific examples of how coaching participants are applying coaching strategies?*

The following are some of the open-ended survey responses:

- "Being more reflective in their ability to weigh items before allocating time and energy."
- "Using improvement science with their staff to use data to discuss strategies and monitor progress."
- "Paraphrasing, inquiry around equity, and listening deeply."
- "Analysis of data to make decisions."
- "Integrating topics including equity and access during professional learning community time."

*What are some challenges coaching participants face when trying to implement some of the strategies discussed in a coaching session?*

The following are some of the open-ended survey responses:

- "So many fires to put out on a daily basis."
- "Difficulty having time and/or energy to be reflective."
- "Time, and staffing! Many are working with fewer support staff and more demands from districts and schools which can often challenge the leader to remain focused on the problem of practice."
- "Old habits, history, and culture deeply steeped in suspicion and lack of trust."
- "Prioritizing the time is always a challenge."

*"One of the things that I think CSLA does really well is that professional development piece, because it really keeps us grounded in that equity work ... I have completely grown in, and it is now a mindset of mine. "*  
-LA County ValCo Coach

*“My coach was always on point. She knew exactly what I needed. She would ask me what I was working on, and then she'd pull out just a plethora of suggestions. ...but she really pushed me on the equity piece.”*

— Assistant Principal in LA County

*“I have noticed a greater emphasis in including the voices of students, staff, and community in understanding equity ‘problems of practice’ and in decision making about actions taken. They are also sharing data on the impact of actions.”*

— LA County 21CSLA ValCo Coach

*“I think the public needs to understand how important leadership is, number one, school leadership is. And then the only way that leaders can be great is if they're coached and helped to grow into that capacity.”*

— LA County 21CSLA ValCo Coach

## **PARTICIPANTS WERE SURVEYED ABOUT THEIR PROBLEM OF PRACTICE FOR THE YEAR THEY RECEIVED COACHING...**

**The following are some of the open-ended survey responses and reflect common themes:**

- Understanding and implementing Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) in our district
- Implementing instructional rounds to strengthen feedback and questioning
- Implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives district wide
- Equity in the master schedule
- Inclusion of students with special needs in school wide activities
- Improving student engagement across campus
- Conflict resolution around personnel issues
- Equity-based decision making and practices



# 21CSLA VALCO IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

## 2023-24

### # of Coaches

49 ValCo  
(25 LACOE)

### # of Coaching Participants

92

### Coaching Hours

1,779

### Top 3 Focus of Equity Problem of Practice

Leadership Development  
Continuous Improvement  
Educational Equity

## 2024-25

### # of Coaches

71 ValCo  
(37 LACOE)

### # of Coaching Participants

133

### Coaching Hours

2,679

### Top 3 Focus of Equity Problem of Practice

Educational Equity  
Leadership  
English Learners

## 2025-26

### # of Coaches

37 ValCo  
(27 LACOE)

### # of Coaching Participants

103

### Coaching Hours

1,100  
(at time of print)

### Top 3 Focus of Equity Problem of Practice

Educational Equity  
English Learner Support  
Leadership Development

The 21CSLA ValCo program positions equity as an evolving practice that extends beyond student outcomes to encompass relationships, collaboration, and leadership processes. Through high-quality and innovative professional learning, the program affirms leaders' existing skills while introducing new tools and perspectives that deepen their equity lens and strengthen coaching practice. Professional learning created a dedicated forum for dialogue about equity and decision making. Participants were encouraged to pause and consider who would be affected by their decisions, including who would benefit and who might be left out.

In addition, professional learning for both coaches and coaching participants provided shared language and structured opportunities to examine data through an equity lens, strengthening their capacity to make more informed and inclusive decisions. Coaching plays a central role in equity leadership by fostering resilience, helping leaders recognize and address equity issues, and consistently redirecting attention toward student-centered decision-making. Although the effects of coaching are often indirect, they are meaningful as seen in leaders' shifting mindsets, refined questioning habits, and more authentic, equity-informed use of planning documents such as agendas and school plans.

Importantly, coaching within 21CSLA ValCo is not evaluative; instead, it is supportive, relational, non-judgmental, and voluntary as participants are eager to address equity at their sites. Its external position to the school system provides leaders with a trusted thought partner and safe space for vulnerability, reflection, and growth which are critical conditions for sustaining equity-driven change.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study highlight the need to strengthen and extend equity-centered coaching. First, coaching cycles, based on coach and coaching participant voices, should be expanded to at least two years to deepen trust, reflection, and implementation of sustainable equity practices. Under current California grant funding restrictions only 12 months or 25 hours of coaching are permitted.

Ongoing professional learning for coaches should continue to emphasize continuous improvement, data literacy, and culturally responsive leadership. Building structured peer networks among coaches and coaching participants can foster shared learning, collaboration, and accountability.

Educational partners are encouraged to recognize coaching as essential infrastructure for leadership retention and school transformation, rather than as a temporary intervention or solely part of an evaluative or onboarding process. Coaching in educational leadership should be viewed much like coaching in athletics: even experienced leaders benefit from ongoing guidance, feedback, and reflection to refine their practice.

Rather than being limited to new administrators during the Clear Administrative Services Credential process, leadership coaching should be sustained and embedded throughout a leader’s career to support continuous professional growth and development.

Finally, a statewide systematic collection of longitudinal data on leadership practices and student outcomes would provide stronger evidence of the lasting impact of leadership coaching. Investing in sustained, equity-focused coaching ensures that school leaders are equipped to transform systems that expand access, opportunity, and inclusion for all students.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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By sharing their experiences, participants help educators and the larger community deepen their understanding of how equity-focused coaching supports sustained leadership practices, informs future program design, and ultimately enhances access, opportunity, and inclusion for historically underserved students and adults.

Coaching for equity is a practice that should be supported and further developed in an effort to retain school leaders and increase access, opportunity, and inclusion for TK-12 students to flourish.



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This mixed-methods study aims to understand the degree to which educational teacher leaders and administrators continue to use the strategies and tools learned through coaching one year after completing a coaching cycle. Interview data was transcribed, interpreted, and analyzed thematically using Dedoose qualitative analysis software to identify patterns related to sustainability, contextual support, and equity impact. Participant-provided artifacts such as school plans, meeting agendas, or student performance indicators were used to triangulate findings and strengthen validity.

Interviews with eight school and site leaders elicit examples of how coaching has influenced their ongoing work on problems of practice, the factors that support or hinder sustained implementation, and the ways these practices affect access, opportunity, and inclusion for historically underserved students. Interviews with ten ValCO coaches also provide insights into the preparation of equity-centered coaches and how they transfer experience and knowledge around continuous improvement and data-informed decision making.

This study is designed to explore the sustainability and impact of equity-focused leadership practices developed through participation in the 21CSLA Coaching Program. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 To what degree do participants sustain equity-focused leadership and continuous improvement practices, particularly in addressing problems of practice, twelve months after completing the 21CSLA Coaching Program?
- 2 What factors support or hinder participants' continued use of equity-focused continuous improvement practices after 21CSLA coaching?
- 3 How do sustained practices from 21CSLA coaching influence access, opportunity, and inclusion for historically underserved students and adults?

Annual 21CSLA ValCo feedback surveys were analyzed to understand the range of topics the coach participants identified as problems of practice as well as challenges and successes around implementation of coaching practices. The researcher conducted eighteen interviews, with ten coaches and eight coaching participants, representing a range of professional roles, across TK-12 including: teachers on special assignment, instructional coaches, assistant principals, and principals across seven school districts and two counties. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasted approximately 30-45 minutes each, and followed a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit how coaching session learning was or was not sustained in the workplace and what impact coaching might or might not have had on equity outcomes.

This work matters because it provides a deeper understanding of how equity-centered coaching translates into enduring leadership practices that can transform educational systems to be more inclusive and just.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was secured before initiating the study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained across all data collection and reporting processes.

# APPENDIX 2

## *ValCo Courageous Coaching Statement By Antonia Issa Lahera, Ed.D., ValCo Coach*

### **At ValCo, We Always Pull Our Chairs Closer.**

We breathe together deeply and intentionally.  
And in these louder, harsher times we do so not just with  
love, but with clarity.  
With boldness. With courage. With a strategy.

### **We Coach in the Cracks**

In the widening space between promise and practice.  
Between what's written in policy and what's whispered in pain.  
Between leaders told to be invincible and the people  
behind those roles who are tired, brilliant, and human.  
Adrienne Maree Brown reminds us,  
“Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered.”  
So we must not just hold each other, we must  
organize, act, and respond with precision and courage.

### **At ValCo, We Offer Not Just Comfort or Care—but a Compass.**

Our Measurement Markers are more than tools.  
They are acts of courage that have been codified.  
They are a strategic framework for action,  
and they are our lanterns for the long haul.  
They remind us to ask hard questions without flinching:  
Who benefits?  
Who bears the burden?  
Who is seen?  
Who is erased?

### **Coaching for Equity is Not Neutral**

It isn't weak or soft.  
It's radical work in a resistant system.  
It's a pedagogical insurgency.  
We don't just help people survive,  
We help them disrupt, dismantle, and rebuild.  
We coach in the cracks and we map the fissures.  
We trace where power is hoarded and help leaders redistribute it.  
We coach with care and with conviction.  
And in these political headwinds, let's be clear:  
We are not just here to bear witness.  
We are here to strategize, to fortify, to act.

### **So This Is Our Playbook**

Build trust at the speed of a relationship.  
Name the harm, even when the room goes silent.  
Coach both hearts and systems.  
Anchor decisions in values, not in comfort.  
Use data as a mirror, not as a weapon.  
Practice principled courage as we must choose what's right over what's easy.  
Plan for resistance. Expect backlash. Prepare anyway.  
Rest and renew strategically. Burnout is not an offering.  
Keep the long view. We are not just reacting, we are building.

### **Coaching Across Differences Requires Courage**

We will stumble.  
We will be called in.  
We will be asked to choose between safety and solidarity.  
And we will choose solidarity, again and again.  
Because we know policies protect power.  
Culture, if left unquestioned, becomes complicity.  
Tradition is no excuse for harm.  
So we sit with leaders when the air gets thick.  
We stay when the budget cuts come.  
We hold the line when the system closes ranks.  
  
Because at ValCo, we are not coaching for comfort.  
We are coaching for transformation.  
  
We are not just nurturing hope.  
We are building muscle.  
The kind of muscle that moves policy.  
That rewrites the curriculum.  
That rebuilds schools as sites of liberation.

### **With Courage, Love, and Fire**

We are the coaches who cultivate courageous leadership  
quiet or loud, messy or composed, but always grounded in justice.  
We are the ones who dare to stay human in dehumanizing systems.  
The ones who speak truth with tenderness and strategy.  
Who believe that justice is not a dream, it is a discipline.

And so, we will keep pulling our chairs closer.  
We will keep planting questions like seeds.  
And we will keep moving, even in the storm.  
Together, with love and skill.

# CONNECT WITH US!



## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

INSTAGRAM, FACEBOOK

@CSLA\_ValCo



## **LINKEDIN**

CSLA\_ValCo



## **WEBSITE**

21csla.lacoe.edu



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# EQUITY AND MISSION STATEMENTS

## 21CSLA Equity Statement:

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

## Valley to Coast Regional Academy Mission Statement:

The 21CSLA Valley to Coast Regional Academy is dedicated to innovative professional learning that strengthens leaders' capacity to challenge system inequities that exist within their local context.



**Los Angeles County  
Office of Education**

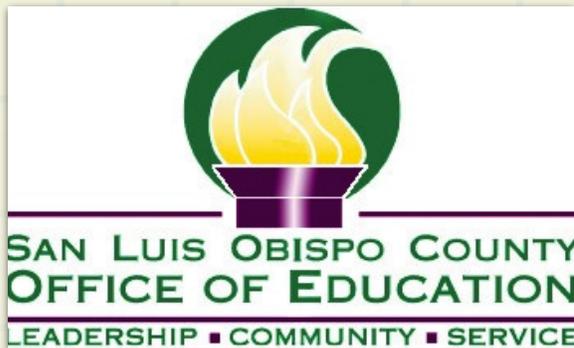
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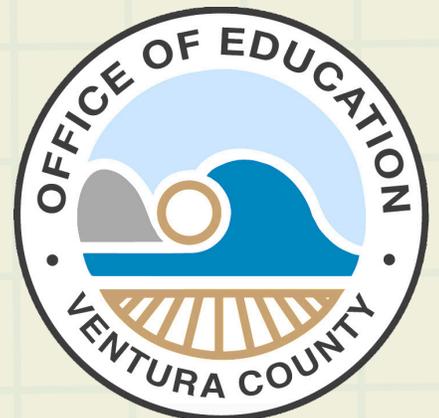
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# 21 CSLA

