

## Research Brief

Prepared by Fran  
Kipnis, California  
Education Partners

# Summary of Findings: The Impact of Mastering Cultural Identity (MCI) in the San Francisco Unified School District by Thomas S. Dee & Jaymes Pine.

This brief highlights findings and implications from a study investigating the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), specifically the Mastering Cultural Identity (MCI) program, on student retention in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD).<sup>1,2</sup> MCI began in the context of unprecedented gentrification and displacement of low-income communities in San Francisco. The loss of African-American students during the exodus of students from public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified interest in educational practices that encourage families to maintain enrollment in their local school district.

The MCI program, part of SFUSD's African American Achievement and Leadership Initiative, (AAALI) offers culturally sustaining coursework for African American students in middle school. The unique features of MCI courses include:

1. Courses designed for Black male adolescents, ideally taught by Black male teachers, who:
2. Implement culturally-relevant teaching practices that also emphasize social-emotional learning, through;
3. Lessons on African and African American history and culture, supplemented with;
4. An academic mentoring system that approaches teaching and learning in a caring, non-punitive process.

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<sup>1</sup> Dee, T.S., & Pyne, J. (November 2, 2023). *Culturally Relevant Education Keeps Students in SFUSD* [Confidential Slideshow]. Stanford University.

<sup>2</sup> Dee, T.S., & Pyne, J. (2023). *Culturally Relevant Education Discourages Enrollment Loss*. Draft Report. Stanford University.

MCI was offered in four SFUSD middle schools during the study period. The original research question focused on the impact of MCI on academic achievement and engagement, however, early descriptive findings suggested differential attrition between those who did and did not attend MCI at some point in middle school.

Using SFUSD administrative data, the analytic sample included 468 African American male sixth-grade students attending school from 2014 to 2017. The students were followed from the 3rd grade fall semester through the 8th grade spring semester. Using a quasi-experimental "difference-in-differences" (DID) design, the study compared enrollment changes among students who participated in MCI courses to those who did not.

## Findings

**The results indicated that enrollment in MCI coursework increased the probability of remaining in SFUSD compared to non-enrolled students.** The study findings highlight the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy, such as the MCI program, to positively influence student retention in urban school districts, particularly for historically underserved populations.

- **Pre-treatment estimates suggest no significant differences in enrollment between MCI and non-MCI students.** Prior to MCI enrollment, MCI students were just as likely to remain in the school district as their peers who did not participate in MCI courses.
- **Post-treatment estimates show a positive impact of MCI coursework on student retention.**
  - There was a notable increase, approximately 14 percentage points, in the probability of students remaining in the district, due to enrolling in MCI.
  - Approximately 23% of the boys in the analytic sample who never enrolled in an MCI course left the district between sixth and eighth grade, while only 7% of MCI enrollees (11 MCI-enrolled boys) left the district during middle school.
  - African American boys who left the district at some point in middle school were much more likely to attend a school not offering MCI coursework in the fall of their sixth-grade year.
  - Robustness checks confirm the stability of results across different models and criteria.
- **Students who left school (whether attending MCI or not) had similar characteristics.** They were more likely than those who stayed:
  - To be chronically absent or experience a suspension from school in their sixth grade, fall semester.
  - To have parents who were less likely to share information with the district on their highest level of education attained.
  - To have similar sixth grade test scores, and be designated as foster youth or in a special education program.

The authors suggest that successful programs like MCI could be a compelling tactic for SFUSD in the post-pandemic context of enrollment declines. In addition, retention could be considered an “educational outcome”. “A long intellectual tradition views choosing to stay in an area as uniquely compelling evidence of program impact (i.e., “voting with their feet”; “revealed preferences”). Staying implies student engagement and thriving that is visible to their families”.