



POSITIVE OUTLIERS SERIES

# Chula Vista Elementary School District

## Positive Outliers Case Study

Laura E. Hernández and Crystal A. Moore

# **Chula Vista Unified School District: Positive Outliers Case Study**

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## Executive Summary

Sitting just north of the U.S.-Mexico border, the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) supports teaching and learning in California's largest elementary school system. Across its 47 schools, CVESD educators serve over 30,000 students each day, 90% of whom are students of color and over one third of whom are English learners.

CVESD is one of seven districts studied by researchers at the Learning Policy Institute in a mixed-methods study that sought to learn from positive outlier districts in which African American, Latino/a, and White students did better than predicted on California's math and English language arts tests from 2015 through 2017, after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status. This in-depth case study describes the critical practices and policies within CVESD that have promoted student learning, especially among students of color, in the context of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the deeper learning they seek to foster.

Through an analysis of interview, documentary, and observational evidence, this case study describes key factors that enabled student success in CVESD:

### **1. CVESD established clear decision-making processes that provide schools with direction and cohesion while allowing those closest to students to tailor instruction to meet student needs.**

Decentralized decision-making is a long-standing policy in CVESD, but district leaders indicated that at times it has resulted in lack of clarity and cohesion among CVESD schools, which posed obstacles during the transition to CCSS. To address these challenges, the District Superintendent, Dr. Francisco Escobedo, introduced the concept of "interdependence," a philosophy and organizational structure that refined the district's decision-making approach by clearly demarcating district, school, and joint responsibilities. Through this interdependent approach, the district set pedagogical vision and policy while empowering school leaders to adapt teaching and learning to meet the communities' unique needs. Interdependence has thereby supported schools in implementing CCSS through a collaborative structure that leverages professional expertise to enable decentralized decision-making to be targeted, research based, and effective.

### **2. CVESD built a learning organization that emphasizes educator and leader development at all levels and is informed by the cycle of professional learning.**

CVESD created a system of professional learning supports that enable its decentralized system to foster rigorous teaching and learning. Its structures of cohort-based professional learning have allowed leaders and teachers to engage with problems of practice and enhance their ability to make informed decisions, often with the guidance of seasoned leaders and educators. Through these practices, CVESD has maintained its commitment to the ideas that those closest to students (e.g., principals and teachers) are best positioned to develop strategies that meet student learning needs and that the district should support professional learning that allows teachers and principals to succeed toward this end.

CVESD has also built an organization committed to ongoing learning and improvement. CVESD personnel at every level have participated in cycles of professional learning in ongoing, collaborative sessions focused on research-based strategies. These learning opportunities have



helped staff understand the expectations for student learning and elevated classroom practice. Through its Instructional Leadership Teams and teacher collaboration time, the district has also invested in ongoing opportunities for teachers and leaders to learn collaboratively. These professional learning forums have enabled teachers to engage in candid and ongoing discussions of pedagogical shifts, experiment with new instructional strategies, and reflect upon these practices without risk of poor evaluations.

**3. CVESD implemented CCSS deliberately to ensure all leaders and educators understood the standards and their impact on teaching and learning.**

Against the backdrop of their decision-making and professional learning systems, CVESD implemented CCSS in a deliberate and prolonged manner, enabling its teachers to develop a strong understanding of and belief in the power of deeper learning practices associated with the new standards. CVESD demonstrated its commitment to professional learning by dedicating ample time and resources to ensure that all personnel had rich professional development. In addition, stable leadership contributed to the successful and sustained implementation of the new standards and to the district's ability to adapt to emerging challenges.

**4. CVESD maintained a keen focus on struggling student groups, including English learners and students with special needs, and worked to provide teachers and students with targeted supports.**

To accelerate student learning, CVESD focused on its most vulnerable populations to minimize learning gaps and address student needs. The district's data practices have led to the implementation of instructional supports for its English learners and students with special needs, many of whom also are students of color and/or are from low-income families. In addition to academic interventions, the district has maintained a system of wraparound services that provide culturally responsive approaches; connect families and services; and include a growing number of counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Growing momentum in CVESD around social and emotional learning is also an ongoing effort that will further enable the district to provide holistic supports for all its students.

These investments in capacity building and continuous improvement have contributed to student learning in CVESD. When coupled with the district's attentiveness to marginalized students and groups, these investments have also supported teachers and leaders in enacting CCSS-aligned practices and holistic supports that improve learning environments and meet the unique academic needs of its student population.

## Introduction

You know, there are barriers that get in our way ... but if there's a barrier, we will find a way around it.

—Dr. Gloria Ciriza, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction

Since Dr. Francisco Escobedo took the helm of the Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) as superintendent in 2010, the district has made significant strides in increasing achievement for all students. During this time, the district implemented a range of complementary strategies that refined its organizational, instructional, and professional learning structures. Building on foundational district practices related to decision-making and data analysis, district leaders created a system with a coherent instructional vision and empowered the stakeholders closest to students to tailor approaches that meet the unique needs of its student population. All the while, CVESD maintained a keen focus on its most vulnerable communities and, in turn, centered equity in continuous improvement efforts.

In the midst of honing district practices and structures, CVESD officials successfully implemented the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These standards require students to master the “deeper learning” skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and teamwork. Acquiring these skills requires a shift in instructional practice for many teachers, away from those that emphasize memory and recall and toward activities such as small group discussions that ask students to engage in productive struggle, dialogue, and problem-solving. As an early adopter of CCSS, the district engaged in a prolonged and deliberate rollout so that teachers could develop a rich understanding of the standards and their implications for teaching and learning.

CVESD’s multifaceted approach to district improvement and CCSS implementation has contributed to student achievement on several fronts. Academically, CVESD students have met or exceeded standards in math and English language arts (ELA) at a rate higher than their peers across the state in each of the last 3 years. Moreover, its students of color have also met or exceeded standards at higher rates than their counterparts during that same 3-year period. (See Appendix A for achievement and climate data.) To illustrate, 43% of Latino/a students in CVESD met or exceeded standards in math in 2017, compared to 25% of all California students. ELA performance was equally impressive, with 56% of CVESD Latino/a students meeting or exceeding standards, compared to 37% across the state. The same trends hold true for CVESD’s African American and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (i.e., neither parent has a high school diploma and/or the student is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). Going beyond academics, CVESD students of all racial and income backgrounds were suspended from school at lower rates than their peers in other districts, and CVESD reported no expulsions over the last 3 years. (See Appendix A for more information.) Overall, these data points suggest that the district’s educators and leaders have been successful in supporting student learning under CCSS.

This case study investigated how CVESD practices and policies helped promote student learning, especially among students of color, in the context of CCSS. The case study is part of a larger mixed-methods project, which includes a quantitative study that identified positive outlier districts such as CVESD in which African American, Latino/a, and White students did better than predicted



on California’s math and ELA tests from 2015 through 2017, after accounting for difference in socioeconomic status.<sup>1</sup> The case study is also part of a series of qualitative studies that examine trends across seven case studies of positive outlier districts, including this study of CVESD.<sup>2</sup>

Through an analysis of interview, documentary, and observational evidence (see Appendix B for a complete description of the study’s methodology), this case study found four factors that contributed to CVESD’s strong performance in implementing the rigorous CCSS:

1. The CVESD organizational philosophy and structure of **interdependence** that establishes clear decision-making processes across the decentralized district;
2. A continuous emphasis on **educator and leader development** that occurs at all levels of the district and is informed by the cycle of professional learning;
3. A deliberate **implementation of CCSS**; and
4. A keen analytic **focus on student groups** and supports that could accelerate their learning.

Coupled with the support and vision of stable and knowledgeable district leadership, these four practices have coalesced to build CVESD into a strong organization that grows educator and leader capacity, attends to the inevitable challenges that accompany fundamental changes to teaching and learning, and ultimately contributes to strong student achievement.

## The Chula Vista Elementary School District

The city of Chula Vista, CA, is located in San Diego County and spans 103 square miles just north of the Mexico border. Interstate Highway 85 runs north-south through the city, creating a physical, economic, and social divide between the east and west sides. The west side consists of the more densely populated original downtown area. The school buildings are older, and the families tend to be lower income. By contrast, on the eastern side of the district, suburban sprawl has created new communities that are less densely populated and where school facilities are newer and family income higher.

CVESD spans this diverse landscape while managing the largest elementary school district in the state. The district comprises 47 schools, which include 5 dependent and 2 independent charter schools.<sup>3</sup> CVESD educates more than 30,000 students, primarily in kindergarten through 6th grade. It educates nearly 90% students of color, with 70% identifying as Latino/a and 4% identifying as African American. Half of its students are economically disadvantaged and more than one third are English learners. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1**  
**2016–17 District Demographics**

Demographic	Number enrolled	Percent enrolled
African American	1,073	4%
Latino/a	21,148	70%
White	3,268	11%
Other	4,564	15%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	15,121	50%
English Learners	10,323	34%
Total Enrollment	30,053	—

Data source: Education Data Partnership. (n.d.). Ed-Data district profile: Chula Vista Elementary. <https://www.ed-data.org/district/San-Diego/Chula-Vista-Elementary>.

More than 1,500 teachers enter CVESD classrooms each day, with an average tenure of 11 years with the district. Among its teacher workforce, first- and second-year educators make up about 10% each year,<sup>4</sup> and only about 1% of teachers in CVESD hold emergency credentials, making the vast majority of teachers in the district highly qualified.<sup>5</sup> Like most districts in California, CVESD provides a Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment (BTSA) program to provide formative and individualized support to its new or novice teachers. In addition to this professional learning support, 79 school leaders, 124 central office staff, and 9 senior cabinet members support their work on an ongoing basis. Central office roles are divided into six academic/administrative areas that are overseen by a senior cabinet member, who reports to Superintendent Escobedo.

CVESD’s operational budget of about \$260 million supports school programming. With these resources, the district maintains an average class size of 22 students or fewer in kindergarten through 3rd grade and 28 students or fewer in grades 4–6. CVESD also allocates resources for an array of learning experiences for students. Beyond the four core content areas (ELA, math, social studies, and science), CVESD offers a visual and performing arts (VAPA) program, 21 dual language immersion programs, 2 alternative bilingual schools, state-funded preschools, and transitional kindergarten classrooms for students who need additional preparation.

CVESD leadership has remained stable over the past 3 decades. In fact, since the early 1990s, it has had only three superintendents—each with a tenure of 7 or more years. While this stability has provided continuity and clarity to the design and implementation of district initiatives, the first of these superintendents, Dr. Libia (Libby) Gil, ushered in an era of reform that fundamentally restructured CVESD’s approach to school governance. When she was selected to serve as CVESD superintendent in 1993, Gil initiated the transformation. Her administration’s theory of change was that, “while the district would provide support, schools would have extensive autonomy to design and implement reforms appropriate for their students.”<sup>6</sup> This was the advent of decentralized decision-making that continues to be used in Chula Vista today. With decentralized decision-making as a foundation, in 1995 Gil developed a collective vision for CVESD that identified five strategic goals and eight shared values that would guide district practice and that remains policy today. Central in the district’s decades-long vision is a commitment to equity, literacy, collaboration, and technology use as well as the creation of safe and supportive learning environments. (See Figure 1.)

With these changes, CVESD shifted decision-making and resource allocation from the central office to school sites, which were closer to the students and could better determine their specific needs. Site-based decision-making—also deemed student-based decision-making among CVESD officials—gave principals greater discretion over resource allocation, school programming, and professional development in exchange for greater accountability, ultimately shifting the district’s expectations of the daily work of principals from organizational management to instructional leadership. The district set clear performance goals and held school leaders accountable for student achievement in line with its new focus. Because of the increased pressures and responsibilities of site leaders, the district also made leadership development—hiring, training, rewarding, and retaining high-quality principals—a priority. Resources at the district office were allocated to support principal efficacy, including weekly principal meetings, principal peer groups, and peer evaluations. Despite these leadership supports, CVESD saw 60% principal turnover rates during that period. Some leaders retired, others transferred to other districts, and some simply could not meet the higher expectations.<sup>7</sup>

Despite school leadership challenges, CVESD began to see improvement in student achievement as reform efforts progressed. By 2002, toward the end of Gil’s superintendency, more than 50% of 2nd-grade Latino/a students performed at or above the 50th percentile on the state-sanctioned Stanford 9 Math Test, a significant increase from earlier years. Similar gains were made by African American students; in 2002, more than half of 2nd-, 5th-, and 6th-grade students scored at or above the 50th percentile on the Stanford 9 Reading Test.<sup>8</sup>

Together, these changes in district structures and practices led to a new phase for CVESD that continues to the present—one characterized by “freedom with responsibility” for school leaders. Current CVESD officials refined and honed the structures and processes that were spurred by the district’s reform era to ensure even greater student success and to build teacher and leader capacity.

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**Figure 1**  
**Strategic Goals and Shared Values Statement (1995)**

**Chula Vista Elementary School District**  
**Strategic Goals and Shared Values**

**Strategic Goals**

1. **Literacy** — All students will exit elementary school as multi-literate, lifelong learners with a mastery of essential skills.
2. **Equity** — All students will have access to academic programs and resources that will enable each child to achieve his or her full potential.
3. **Collaboration** — With the school as the center, the entire community will become full partners in education, responsible for each child’s success.
4. **Technology** — All participants in the educational process will have the resources and knowledge to successfully participate in the information-based society of the twenty-first century.
5. **Safe and Supportive Environment** — All members of the school community will enjoy a safe, caring, and stimulating environment.

**Shared Values**

1. **Equality** — We believe each child is an individual of great worth entitled to develop to his or her full potential. All children can and will learn, and deserve equal access to a quality education.
2. **Equity** — We believe there is no significant difference in educational outcomes based on race, gender, or economic status. Solutions, resources, programs, services, and support are applied in a manner that develops the full potential of each child.
3. **Accountability** — We value and recognize individuals who assume responsibility for and demonstrate commitment and dedication to serving the interests of all children.
4. **Ethical Responsibility** — We value each individual who practices, teaches, and serves as a role model of dignity, respect, honesty, integrity, and trust.
5. **Diversity** — We seek, encourage, and respect each individual’s contributions and value a multicultural perspective.
6. **Teamwork** — We believe that families are the primary role models for our children. We are committed to teamwork and collaboration to provide maximum services for students, staff, and community. This partnership among families, community, and schools is the foundation of our children’s educational success.
7. **Innovation** — We are committed to challenging the status quo and embracing a technological world.
8. **Excellence** — We are committed to high standards of performance throughout the district and continuously seek and utilize new knowledge and skills.

Source: Togneri, W., & Lazarus, L. F. (2003). *Decentralization and systemwide reform: A case study of the Chula Vista Elementary School District*. Alexandria, VA: Learning First Alliance, p. 6.

## Findings

CVESD leaders and educators primarily attributed the academic success of Chula Vista’s students overall, as well as of its students of color, to strategic district decisions. In particular, data points to four factors vital to strong student performance and instructional improvement in the district:

1. Interdependence: CVESD’s organizational philosophy and structure
2. Building a learning organization
3. Implementing CCSS deliberately
4. Support and interventions for all students

These structures and systems, which were implemented under the guidance of stable district leaders, allowed school personnel to support students throughout the district.

### Interdependence: CVESD’s Organizational Philosophy and Structure

We know now that we are in a sandbox. There’s something that keeps us together and united. But there’s plenty of space within the sandbox to be able to ensure that you are connected and directly servicing the people that you work for.

—Dr. Ernesto Villanueva, Executive Director of Research, Accountability, Evaluation, Analysis, and Instruction

Interdependence—Chula Vista’s current organizational philosophy and structure—builds on the foundation previous administrations laid. Beginning with the tenure of Dr. Libby Gil in 1993, CVESD shifted to a decentralized decision-making approach that provided school leaders with significant autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. Subsequent administrations kept these decentralized practices in place while working to hone principals’ abilities to execute their jobs effectively. For example, during the tenure of Lowell Billings (2002–09), CVESD hosted principal training sessions on data analysis practices for developing instructional priorities and informing site-based decisions. Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), a collaborative group from each school site focused on instructional improvement, also emerged during Billings’s superintendency to support school improvement.

When Escobedo took the helm as superintendent in 2010, he sought additional improvements that could lead to even greater success and introduced the concept of interdependence to provide clarity to the district’s decentralized system. His vision of interdependence articulated the specific roles and responsibilities of district and school officials while identifying areas in which the two parties shared responsibilities for organizational operations. In doing so, interdependence has supported leaders in enacting CCSS and its related instructional shifts, which encourage a move away from traditional teacher-centered pedagogy to more student-centered and inquiry-based learning experiences that enhance problem-solving and collaboration skills.

## Interdependence: Decentralization Revisited

Escobedo decided early in his tenure as superintendent to hone the district’s long-standing system of decentralized decision-making. He explained that this decision stemmed from a perceived lack of clarity and cohesion among CVESD schools:

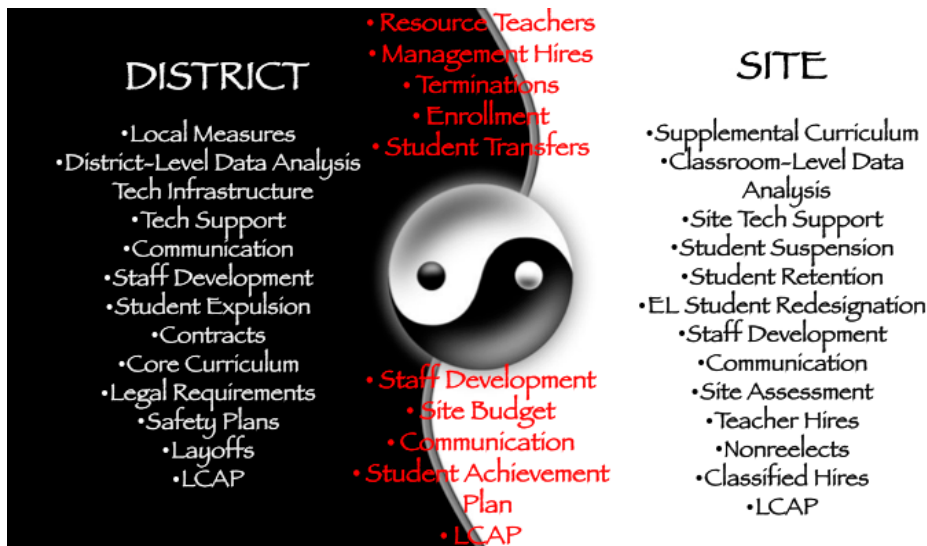
I think part of it was the isolation that I saw schools work under and how certain principals floundered, especially the new ones—the lack of support and connection they had in a district as large as ours. The principal turnover was pretty great because of that. I just said, “We need to retain our leaders. We need to also create a better support structure for our teachers as well.”

To better retain CVESD leaders, Escobedo developed interdependence as a vision for shared decision-making. John Kotter’s theory about dual operating systems informed Escobedo’s work.<sup>9</sup> This theory describes how organizations require both hierarchy and flexibility to accelerate changes and improvement. Escobedo provided a concise overview of Kotter’s theory:

It’s important for an organization to work as a hierarchy. You have to have roles and responsibilities in order to maximize efficiencies.... Yet [Kotter] also talked about the other side of the organization—for it to be networked, which would allow organizations to be free-thinking [and] free-flowing, have a team approach, and do things differently.

Escobedo used the theoretical tenets of dual operating systems to create his philosophy of interdependence. He codified it visually with the yin and yang symbol, illustrating how the district would work in collaboration with school sites to support student learning and success. (See Figure 2.) In this visual, the left-hand column delineates the responsibilities that fall under the purview of district leaders, including those related to collective bargaining agreements, safety, and other compliance-related procedures.

**Figure 2**  
**CVESD’s Model of Interdependence**



Source: PowerPoint slide provided to the Learning Policy Institute research team by Chula Vista Superintendent.



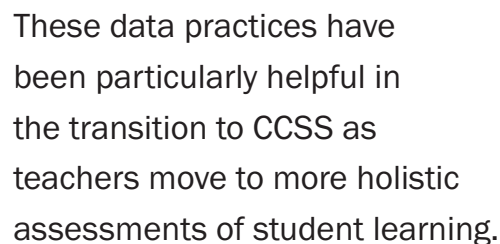
Responsibilities listed in the middle represent areas of shared responsibility that district and school stakeholders exercise—decisions that are to be reached through consultation and collaborative decision-making. Some of these joint responsibilities pertain to structural and logistical elements, such as accountability practices (e.g., the Local Control Accountability Plan [LCAP], student achievement plans, etc.), budgetary allocations, and student transfers. Staff development, which is described in more detail below, is another area of mutual responsibility.

The right-hand column of the yin and yang visual delineates site-based responsibilities. In CVESD, for example, hiring is one of the discretionary powers delegated to school sites. Teachers and classified staff are interviewed and selected by a committee of stakeholders at the school site. Once selected, district human resources officials provide logistical support (e.g., background checks, fingerprinting, physicals, etc.) to finalize the hiring process.

Other site-based decisions include those related to supplemental curriculum materials and site assessments. For example, the CVESD Board of Education recently adopted Benchmark, a literacy curriculum with a component for English language development, as its districtwide, core ELA curriculum. Although all schools were expected to use this district-provided resource, school leaders indicated that they still had discretion over how they implemented it. Some principals opted to implement the new curriculum with fidelity to assess its impact, while others allowed individual grade levels to determine how they would try out the program. In at least one historically high-performing CVESD school, leaders were permitted to forego the use of Benchmark completely in favor of their existing instructional programs that have resulted in a track record of success.

Similarly, school sites were empowered to develop formative and interim assessments that aligned with their curricular materials and CCSS. On one hand, all schools are mandated to implement the annual California assessments (e.g., Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and English Language Proficiency Assessments for California) and the district’s Local Measures assessments. These locally administered tests include running records assessments of students’ reading levels in grades 2–6 and assessments for reading, writing, and math in grades k–2.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, school sites are charged with creating and utilizing formative assessment tools (e.g., Benchmark tests, student projects, performance tasks, and student-teacher reading and writing conference notes) to gauge student progress and provide a more comprehensive picture of student performance.

Through this decentralized decision-making around assessment, school leaders establish academic goals based on multiple data sources and use these varied inputs to inform instructional improvement. District and school leaders noted that these data practices have been particularly helpful in the transition to CCSS as teachers move away from what John Nelson, former Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services, called “item and error analysis” to more holistic assessments of student learning.



These data practices have been particularly helpful in the transition to CCSS as teachers move to more holistic assessments of student learning.

Dr. Gloria Ciriza, the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, discussed how site discretion over assessment, curriculum, and hiring could facilitate student learning. She argued that school personnel were best positioned to determine the approaches that could support their student and teaching populations. She explained:

I think the most important part is that schools can make the decisions based on the needs of their kids. If I'm a teacher at Harbor Side versus a teacher at Arroyo Vista, who are literally on two separate ends of Chula Vista, the needs at one are very different from the needs of the other.... The [same] standards and expectations are still here, but how I get here with this group is very different from how I'm going to get there with that group.... These teachers may need to access resources and support differently.

Overall, interdependence in CVESD has created a decision-making system that allows school leaders to adapt their curricular materials, assessment resources, instructional approaches, and professional learning to meet the unique needs of their communities. District officials support site-based decision-making as they collaborate with principals in areas of shared responsibility and through leadership development efforts, described below. In doing so, CVESD has created a system that maintains key autonomies while providing clarity and cohesion to a system in which schools had previously operated in isolation. It has also created a structure of collaboration and support that builds and leverages professional expertise to enable decentralized decision-making to be targeted, research based, and effective.

## **Building a Learning Organization**

You can't expect teachers to embrace new research and practices without giving them the opportunity to develop a deep understanding. They need to really go through the whole process of new practice, practicing, coming back together, and seeing what's working. We've been doing that for a long time.

—Pat Roth, Arroyo Vista Principal

Within the district's interdependent system, Escobedo has emphasized the importance of building CVESD into a learning organization, one that seeks to reflect on and refine its approaches in an ongoing fashion.<sup>11</sup> During his nearly decadelong tenure, Escobedo has fostered a culture of continuous improvement and professional learning that has enabled student achievement. CVESD personnel at every level have participated in cycles of professional learning, which have helped staff understand the expectations for student learning and elevated classroom practice in ongoing, collaborative sessions focused on research-based strategies. In the following sections, we describe professional learning in CVESD and its use of learning cycles throughout the district. Before doing so, we address a key ingredient in CVESD's ability to create a learning organization—its ability to hire the right personnel.

## The role of hiring

District leaders said that hiring strong district and school leaders has been central to the success that CVESD has had in building a strong learning organization. Escobedo has maintained a hiring philosophy focused on two important concepts: (1) finding consensus on hiring decisions from the community and (2) cultivating a team of “A-players.”

When looking to fill leadership roles, Escobedo said he engages in an interdependent, collaborative process. Based on the nature of the role (e.g., central office, school principal, or leader positions), he invites a variety of stakeholders to participate in the hiring process to ensure selection of the best candidate to meet community needs. Escobedo explained how a panel of stakeholders is convened for hiring school leaders: “First, the [applicant] pool is vetted by a panel of teachers, parents, a classified district representative, and a principal representative. Typically, it’s a panel of eight to nine people from the school side, and they send me their top three [candidates].”

After the panel identifies top candidates for the position, senior cabinet members interview the applicants. In this process, district leaders use an interview protocol developed from the district’s Principal Profile. Escobedo explained: “We look at the major competencies of the principals and link those questions to what we call a Principal Scorecard. We ensure that there’s some alignment to the responsibilities and their background knowledge, experiences, and competencies.”

In the case of central office leaders, Escobedo explained that he meets with top candidates individually as a final step to develop a sense of their character beyond their qualifications. In particular, he looks for key traits, including emotional intelligence, equity commitment, and humility. When asked to discuss his hiring philosophy, Escobedo explained:

Another question [I ask] is, “Share with me a time where you failed—where you made a bad decision. What did you do? Tell me what your actions were. How did you resolve that failure?” If they can think of one, own it, and figure out a way to re-establish relationships ... that’s great. I’m keen on the emotional intelligence aspect. By the time they’re here, I know they have the technical stuff.

Throughout this collaborative process, Escobedo explained that he has hoped to build a team of A-players—a concept he drew from the work of executive recruiter Eric Herrenkohl.<sup>12</sup> Herrenkohl, who consults with small to midsized organizations to build effective teams, described an A-player as:

An employee who creates superior results compared to the vast majority of other people who hold the same position in your industry. If you want to build an A-player team, you need to stop trying to turn poor performers into top performers and commit more time to finding and hiring A-players. Then, invest the same leadership and coaching time with them that you used to spend trying to fix your poor performers.<sup>13</sup>

With this philosophy, Escobedo has filled district office vacancies with effective principals who have years of experiences and records of success.

Promotion of effective principals to the central office and senior cabinet has had the added benefit of greater stability across the district and allowed those with deep familiarity and professional expertise to support CVESD leaders. These cabinet members also have a deep understanding of CCSS. Since many were leading CVESD schools when CCSS was adopted, they developed valuable experience supporting teachers in implementing the standards. In their new district roles, these former principals now take the knowledge and experience gained during the CCSS rollout to support other principals, targeting their efforts toward those who are experiencing the most challenges.

Promotion of effective principals has added greater stability across the district and allowed those with deep familiarity and professional expertise to support CVESD leaders. These cabinet members also have a deep understanding of CCSS.

Through his central office hiring process, Escobedo has set the model for what hiring should look like at the school level. Cabinet members and central office staff explained how site leaders often used the language and characteristics of A-players when hiring for school-based roles and engaged in hiring processes that were equally collaborative and participatory with the community.

### **The professional learning cycle**

With the right people in place, CVESD leaders have built capacity through a cycle of professional learning. During interviews, personnel emphasized the importance of professional learning cycles in developing leader and teacher capacity and orienting staff toward the cognitive demand and the instructional shifts that CCSS requires. CVESD adopted its professional learning cycle model based on the work of Jeff Nelsen, Ph.D., and Amalia Cudeiro, Ed.D.<sup>14</sup> The two former school and district leaders, who founded a consulting firm to support districts in their improvement efforts, described the professional learning cycle as such:

The intent of this model is to create a professional learning plan that builds expertise in all staff through repeated cycles of high-quality learning, followed by opportunities for practicing, receiving feedback, observing colleagues, ongoing professional reading, and peer discussion about the practices, including examining the impact of these practices of students learning by looking at student work and reviewing student performance data.<sup>15</sup>

CVESD has used this definition to craft and institute its learning cycles—ones that include direct training, practice, additional study, feedback, and adjustments. First, CVESD professionals receive direct instruction on a topic or pedagogical strategy. Training is then followed by opportunities for educators and leaders to practice the approach in a non-evaluative context, to receive feedback, and to observe colleagues. Professional reading on the topic, analysis of interim data, and examination of student work also are ongoing and intended to inform implementation. During the final weeks of a learning cycle, instructional leaders monitor teacher use of the practice, measure effectiveness, and develop plans for future professional development. (See Figure 3.)

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**Figure 3**  
**Professional Learning Cycle Described**

**Professional Learning Cycle - Summary**

Create a professional learning plan that builds expertise in all staff through repeated cycles of: training - opportunities for practicing - receiving feedback - observing colleagues

**Repeated Cycles** refers to the need for teachers to be engaged in all aspects of PL – training - opportunities for practicing - receiving feedback - observing colleagues - at least 4 to 6 times before they can be expected to have full mastery of that strategy.

**Training** refers to direct instruction on how to implement a strategy or practice in a classroom setting. Quality training includes explanation, modeling, connection to research and results, differentiating for learners at different levels, opportunities for experimentation and discussion, introduction to all materials needed, etc.

**Opportunities for Practice** refers to allowing teachers multiple chances over several weeks to experiment with the new strategies in a low risk environment in their own regular teaching settings.

**Receiving Feedback** refers to having someone observe each teacher several times as they practice the new strategy and give structured feedback that reinforces the positive actions of the teacher and makes suggestions for improving the use of the strategy observed.

**Observing Colleagues** refers to having each teacher observe several other teachers practicing the use of the new strategy, discussing what was seen and giving feedback to each teacher afterward.

**Professional Reading** refers to having a system in place for circulating articles weekly about the powerful practices being learned throughout all cycles.

**Looking At Student Work and Data** refers to the important practice of regularly engaging teacher teams in using structured protocols for examining authentic student work and other performance data that is directly connected to the professional learning cycles.

**Monitor, Measure and Modify** refers to the ongoing process of having the principal, the ILT, and other school leaders conduct frequent walkthroughs to all classrooms in order to have a clear understanding of the level of implementation of the practices being studied in the professional learning cycles to facilitate good decisions about future training and resource allocation.

Source: Program packet for CVESD's Instructional Leadership Team Training, Session 1, August–September 2017.

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All CVESD staff members have had opportunities to engage in the elements of this professional learning cycle, but their experiences have varied depending on their role. In the sections below, we describe how leaders and teachers distinctly engage in the professional learning cycle and how resources, including California’s funding formula, have supported them in doing so.

#### ***Professional learning for central office administrators***

Escobedo described how he sets the standard for professional learning throughout the district by building the capacity of his senior leaders in an ongoing manner. He explained that for several years, he has begun each cabinet meeting by sharing a research article related to instructional and leadership topics of importance to CVESD. The aim behind regularly sharing research, a practice emphasized in the professional learning cycle, has been to ensure Escobedo’s leadership team has a common understanding of effective instruction.

Although Escobedo initially facilitated these research-based discussions, he has slowly devolved responsibility for these discussions of practice to his team, rotating facilitators weekly. The in-depth conversations about research have built cabinet members’ understanding of instructional strategies, challenged some of their assumptions, and built cohesion within the team. The conversations have also refined their instructional and leadership skills by allowing them opportunities to facilitate learning experiences. By engaging senior leaders in professional learning in this manner, Escobedo has aimed to institutionalize a culture of learning at the district level that is replicated within Chula Vista schools.

#### ***Professional learning for principals***

Following the example set by Escobedo, district officials have facilitated cycles of professional learning for principals, often engaging school leaders in small group and individualized settings to personalize leadership development.

Principal development in CVESD has been primarily organized around cohort-based cycles of professional learning. Under previous superintendents, school leaders gathered informally to support one another in learning strategies to analyze and adjust instruction based on data. District leaders observed these informal groups and decided to codify them in an official structure. Escobedo created the lead principal role and charged each of leaders with supporting a cohort of 8–10 principals. He identified a group of principals with proven records of success to assume these positions and charged them with serving as nonevaluative facilitators of school leader learning within the cohort. Lisa Parker, a former lead principal who moved into a cabinet role, reported that her cohort would meet at 7 a.m. about once a month over breakfast to talk shop, share practices, and offer support to one another.

We met at least monthly. My cohort met at Panera. We’d get there early and spend a couple of hours. We had an agenda. We’d talk about district business, things that Dr. Escobedo wanted us to communicate. But [we] also [discussed] our school focus areas—what we were doing, our data, what was working and what wasn’t. Sometimes for new principals, [we engaged in] problem-solving, listening to each other, just really caring about and being there for each other.



In addition to the lead principals, Escobedo has tapped his district cabinet members to support principal cohorts, which they do in addition to their areas of responsibility (e.g., curriculum and instruction, human resources, innovation, language development, research and accountability, or student and family services). Thus, CVESD senior district leaders have dual roles: administrative overseers of a particular area and instructional leaders for a cohort of schools. In fact, Escobedo has restructured their job titles to include instruction as a demonstration of the importance of their leadership development work (e.g., Human Capital and Instruction, Technology and Instruction, etc.).

With this aim, cabinet members have provided personalized coaching to principals to enhance CVESD cohort learning. Most cabinet members reported that they visited their schools about once a month. Generally, they differentiated their support according to each building leader's level of competence and experience. Typically, they spent more time with struggling principals (weekly or biweekly visits), while stronger leaders only had visits every 2–3 months. Unlike the lead principals, cabinet members shared their observations with Escobedo, who ultimately conducted the evaluations for all 47 principals.

CVESD leaders explained that this intensive and personalized coaching has been vital for helping principals re-envision their leadership roles in the CCSS era. Ciriza explained, “I would say that I’ve seen, probably over the past 10 years, maybe 15 years, a shift in the role of the site leader, from manager to instructional leader.” While acknowledging that the district still had a handful of leaders on its campuses who focused primarily on managerial tasks, she noted that site visits had been instrumental in bridging the gap. In tailoring their support to meet each principal's leadership and school needs, ongoing site visits helped school leaders develop an instructional orientation, knowledge of CCSS and its expectations for deeper student learning, and effective pedagogical approaches through ongoing feedback.

This intensive and personalized coaching has been vital for helping principals re-envision their leadership roles in the CCSS era.

Finally, Escobedo explained that CVESD has provided formal training opportunities for its school leader cohorts through centralized professional development. To date, these trainings have focused on identified pedagogical or data-related practices and/or have allowed opportunities for supervising cabinet members to follow up with their cohorts to discuss how they might apply the training content at their school sites. During interviews, most cabinet members reported hosting principal cohort meetings at least once a month. They explained that these meetings were opportunities to share best practices and resources as well as address common areas of need.

Overall, CVESD principals have received support from two different sources. Their lead principal has served as a peer coach—bringing together a cohort of peers to problem solve and share effective practices. District leaders and trainings have been a second source of support, helping principals improve as instructional leaders and working with them to improve areas of need. Through the cohort process and individualized coaching, principals have engaged in professional learning cycles. They have received targeted trainings, conducted observations and walk-throughs in cohorts or with their coaches, and collected formative data to inform their professional learning discussions. In this process, they have also grappled with problems of practice and used data and insights from their colleagues to continuously support and improve their respective sites.

### ***Professional learning for Instructional Leadership Teams***

CVESD has translated its principal cohort learning structure to support the development of its teacher leaders as well. Former Assistant Superintendent John Nelson introduced Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), expecting each school to bring together the principal, assistant principal (if there was one), and teacher leaders to form an ILT.

The Office of Curriculum and Instruction maintained this structure after Nelson's retirement and has hosted district CCSS trainings, which have brought ILTs together to engage in collaborative professional development. In ILT training sessions, teams have explored specific instructional practices, processes, and protocols that have been recommended for use across CVESD. For example, ILTs have discussed the implementation of collaborative conversations across subject areas and best practices surrounding guided visits, a key element of the cycle of professional learning at school sites described in more detail below. During this time, training facilitators have also shared best practices and resources to address common areas of need or problems of practice.

After attending these district-led trainings, CVESD principals and teacher leaders explained that ILTs reconvene at school sites to determine how the content could be translated and incorporated into school-based professional learning structures. In interviews with ILT members, educators described how they used a combination of data sources (e.g., California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress [CAASPP] assessments, California English Language Development Test, English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, and Lexile levels from Achieve 3000)<sup>16</sup> to identify areas for improvement by grade level and/or subgroup and how they can use the discussed instructional strategies to improve teaching and learning.

Like the learning processes employed with school leaders and district officials, ILTs have developed the team members' professional knowledge through elements of the professional learning cycle. These collaborative groups have gathered and engaged with new strategies and content through trainings and other learning experiences. They have also collectively discussed the topics, analyzed relevant data to determine how the approaches might be translated to unique school sites, and engaged in ongoing dialogue to monitor implementation.

### ***Professional learning at school sites***

CVESD ILT members also described how they took their learning back to their campuses to implement the cycle of professional learning with teachers. While school personnel discussed how these topics were taken up at whole-staff professional development, they emphasized that teacher collaboration was at the center of site-based professional learning.

Through the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process and the additional funds allocated to the district through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), CVESD officials have been able to build collaboration time into school schedules by initiating a visual and performing arts (VAPA) program. A CVESD senior district official explained:

Through our LCAP, we were able to invest a considerable amount of money, about \$15 million, in hiring arts teachers. The benefit of that is not only are we able to provide arts instruction for our students, but when the art teachers are teaching the children, the teachers are released to collaborate. We've now built into their day an opportunity for them to collaborate around an instruction.

By allocating resources to its VAPA program and teacher collaboration time, the district has given teachers across CVESD a dedicated block of time every week (1.5 hours) or biweekly (3 hours) to collaborate with their grade-level counterparts and engage with professional content.

Additional LCFF funds have also allowed CVESD to invest in school-based instructional coaches called resource teachers. Each of CVESD's 46 schools has an assigned resource teacher who coaches full time and serves as a resource in the schools. Ciriza described their role:

They go into classrooms. They observe teachers. They write lessons with teachers. They model lessons for teachers. They coach and support them. They create resources for them. They even at times help them make connections to other teachers at other schools, so that networking among them is really helpful. They're really their coaches. They're supporting the teachers.

Moreover, district and school leaders explained that resource teachers regularly attend grade-level collaboration meetings to facilitate ongoing inquiry of CCSS and instructional practices and to address problems of practice.

CVESD educators explained that grade-level teams—with the support of resource teachers—develop and analyze performance tasks, writing samples, unit tests, and interim assessments during collaboration time, leaning on each other's expertise to identify areas for student growth and intervention. For example, the principal at Hilltop Drive asked each teacher to track student progress on Achieve 3000, an online reading program that serves as an interim assessment of student reading levels and nonfiction comprehension. Teachers engaged in this process collaboratively, noting student Lexile level growth and identifying specific instructional strategies to support individual students. Beyond data-related discussions, collaboration time has also supported teacher understanding of CCSS and its accompanying pedagogical shifts, which is described in more detail in the next section.

Teachers voiced enthusiasm and support for engaging with these ideas during their grade-level team meetings and recognized their impact on instruction. As one teacher leader stated,

The fact that collaboration time became part of the culture was huge.... For us to really go deeper into the learning for ourselves and to really take that time to plan more deeply for our students, it required time. It can't be done in isolation.

Another teacher expressed that she found these learning opportunities more meaningful given that they were not focused on making specific lesson plans or thinking about the day-to-day details of implementation. Instead, she explained, "The idea wasn't so much [about] trying to plan lessons as much as it was planning units, looking at big ideas, and just really putting ourselves in the shoes of students."

Beyond collaboration time, teachers often cited the positive impact of opportunities for *safe practice* in their professional learning. When instructional strategies and topics were introduced in CVESD, teachers were allotted multiple weeks to experiment with new strategies in low-risk environments. During this safe practice period, teachers tried out new approaches and opened up their classrooms so that peers could observe and discuss strategy implementation. In addition, teachers conducted

informal classroom walk-throughs to analyze the implementation of instructional practices. In CVESD, these visits have taken two primary forms: the ghost walk and the guided visit. A teacher leader at Hilltop Drive Elementary described the difference:

A ghost walk is one we did on campus with no students, just walking and looking at walls. There was a set of criteria that we were just looking at. There are no judgments based on any of that. It was more about coming back together afterwards as a staff. We discussed and debriefed.... Most recently, the district is asking us to do a guided visit.... A guided visit is when there are students.

As the teacher described, these walk-throughs have been nonevaluative and have subsequently been followed by evidence-based discussions of processes and structures for the given instructional strategy.

Overall, opportunities for safe practice, collaboration, and classroom observation have supported CVESD teachers at school sites by engaging them in the cycle of professional learning. These varied learning experiences, which include dialogue with their colleagues and instructional coaches, have allowed educators to develop their pedagogical expertise in an evidence-based learning cycle that can fuel continuous improvement.

## **Deliberate Common Core Implementation**

Typically, because we have such a large district, we bring grade-level leaders from each grade to understand standards or any type of an initiative. But this time, since the change was so profound, we brought in every single teacher in our system to understand the standards, make meaning of these standards, gave them some time to plan collectively as a group, to connect their existing resources to these standards and then [figure out] how to assess these standards.

—Superintendent Francisco Escobedo

Almost all staff members interviewed at the district and school levels attribute student success on the CAASPP to their early engagement with CCSS. California adopted the standards in 2010, and Chula Vista began developing its implementation plan shortly thereafter under the assistant superintendent of instructional services. By the 2011–12 school year, the district initiated its 4-year professional development plan, hosting sessions based on role, content, and grade level. Once district leaders were acclimated to the new standards, CCSS training focused on principals, teacher leaders, and ILTs. Finally, classroom teachers and school staff were trained.

San Diego State University Professors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, who had been partnering with CVESD on other professional learning initiatives, provided much of the initial CCSS training. At CVESD's request, Fisher and Frey shifted the focus of their sessions from the gradual release of responsibility model to CCSS instruction.<sup>17</sup> The decision to provide all teachers with district-level CCSS training represented a shift in the district's professional development approach. Previously, ILT members would attend district meetings and then be responsible for conveying the content to their school staff. This practice changed with CCSS, when all teachers on the 47 CVESD campuses came together for centralized training sessions. Escobedo and Nelson decided that it was imperative that all teachers participate in direct training on the new, more rigorous standards.

During the professional development in those 4 years, CVESD classroom teachers were able to “unpack” the standards by comparing and contrasting them to the old California standards, reviewing instructional resources, and planning lessons aligned with the new expectations. Table 2 summarizes the CVESD year-by-year rollout plan.

**Table 2**  
**CVESD CCSS Training Plan**

		Year 1	Year 2		Year 3	Year 4
Year		2011–12	2012–13		2013–14	2014–15
Role(s)		Principals	Instructional Leadership Teams	Classroom Teachers	Resource Teachers	Classroom Teachers
Content (PD Focus)		Writing	Opinion Writing, ELA	Mathematics	Opinion Writing, Mathematics	Informative/ Explanatory Writing
Grades	k–1	X	X		X	X
	2–3		X	X	X	X
	4–6			X	X	X

Data source: Chula Vista district and school interviews.

CVESD leaders decided that writing would be a primary area of focus for the multiyear rollout of its CCSS professional development for several reasons. On one hand, CVESD students had demonstrated mastery of reading and math skills on the California State Tests (CSTs) for several years. District leaders believed they could build on this strong foundation in making the necessary shifts for reading and math. However, writing required a greater shift in teacher practice. CVESD officials said that their elementary teachers had been accustomed to instructing their students in narrative writing but had less experience in the informative or explanatory writing that CCSS emphasized, which required students to draw upon texts and evidence to make substantiated claims. In addition, district leaders believed students would need support in constructing written responses to explain their mathematical reasoning, which was another CCSS-related addition to teaching and learning. Therefore, leaders believed a focus on writing instruction would benefit teachers and students in all three CCSS areas—reading, writing, and mathematics.<sup>18</sup>

CVESD district leaders developed their own Local Measure assessments in 2013 to gather evidence of CCSS instruction, which could evaluate the effectiveness of their rollout plan and determine where adjustments might be needed. Because the California Department of Education suspended its annual student assessments while new tests were being developed, CVESD leaders believed these measures could fill the gap and monitor progress across the district. The Local Measure assessments reflected CCSS expectations for all three contents areas and focused on:

- Reading (informational and literary texts): Teacher-conducted running records assessments to assess students’ reading levels (e.g., Lexile)

- Mathematics: A districtwide test aligned with CCSS that emphasizes students' concept development and problem-solving skills
- Writing: A common writing prompt scored using a common rubric that assesses students' writing development, particularly around explanatory and informative writing

During its centralized CCSS professional development sessions, principals, ILTs, and classroom teachers were introduced to the Local Measure assessments. Once they understood the importance of these new assessments in measuring student progress, CVESD leaders indicated that many were motivated to change practice, and data amassed from these assessments reflected these changes. For example, based on the Lexile reading levels in 2012, only 34% of CVESD students were on track for college and career readiness. Five years later, more than 60% were on track. In the span of 6 years, the percentage of students prepared for college nearly doubled as more students were exposed to more rigorous reading tasks. Nelson strongly believed that the district Local Measure assessments were a powerful driver of change and helped develop a sense of urgency and commitment to challenge thinking and current practice.

By the time of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium pilot in spring 2014, CVESD teachers had had numerous opportunities to understand and discuss CCSS over the previous 3 years. Notably, teachers of early elementary grades had been given time to discover and experiment with CCSS-aligned materials and approaches. They had observed the impact of the new ELA and math curricula, while their students also had years of exposure to the higher expectations of CCSS and its deeper learning practices. The students who began kindergarten in 2011 had only ever received CCSS-aligned instruction in CVESD. They were in 3rd grade when the first CAASPP was administered in the spring of 2015 and performed strongly, suggesting that their continuous exposure to more rigorous instruction may have contributed to their achievement.

Interviews with CVESD educators suggest that the district's thoughtful, multiyear implementation plan resulted in a high degree of buy-in from both teachers and principals. The majority of teachers and principals interviewed reported that they and their staff were invested in CCSS and working to shift their instruction as the more rigorous standards demanded. A teacher leader who participated in the various stages of the district's CCSS rollout explained:

It created a big shift in thinking for the adults before they actually implemented that idea for children. Each of the schools had a teacher who was the coach. Along with the Instructional Leadership Team, there was a lot of in-house professional development that extended from those cohort trainings that was a lot more ongoing and hands-on at the site.

As her comments suggest, the district's initial rollout of CCSS supported necessary shifts in teacher mindset by building teacher expertise across the district in an ongoing fashion. CVESD expended significant effort to ensure that all teachers could work together to understand the standards, collaborate on designing lessons, and build a supportive learning environment.

### **Generating solutions to implementation challenges**

The CCSS rollout process was not without its bumps. While CVESD officials implemented a deliberate and thoughtful CCSS training plan, they faced the challenge of building common understandings around the new standards. Given the district's interdependent structure, school



leaders had been accustomed to making independent decisions about teaching and learning. Further, the district did not adopt a CCSS-aligned curriculum immediately. It waited a few years into its CCSS implementation. That delay caused tensions to rise among the CVESD teaching force and parent base. These challenges and CVESD's approaches to grappling with them are described in the sections that follow. Ultimately, the district's stable and experienced senior leadership helped sustain CVESD's commitment to CCSS and overcome these unforeseen challenges.

### ***Creating cohesion in an interdependent system***

Once the initial CCSS rollout was complete, CVESD officials realized they needed a shared pedagogical vision across the district given its decentralized decision-making processes. District leaders believed the CCSS instructional shifts demanded greater coherence across CVESD, especially for its underperforming campuses and school leaders. As a result, senior district officials embarked on two approaches to motivate district and school personnel and improve instructional cohesion—the creation of district themes and an official instructional vision.

Escobedo initiated the first approach by creating annual themes that could serve as what he deemed “rallying cries” for constituents across CVESD. He described these themes:

You'll see every year, there's a certain theme.... There's an overall umbrella theme that's capped for 3 years. There's a sub-connection to that theme. The last 3 years was Enlightening the Human Spirit. The first year of that theme was Enlightening the Human Spirit Through Relevance. Then, the year after that was Enlightening the Human Spirit Through Rigor.

While Escobedo characterized these themes as motivational in nature, other district officials noted how school leaders and teachers enacted practices aligned with the annual mottos. Dr. Ernesto Villanueva, the Executive Director of Research, Accountability, Evaluation, Analysis, and Instruction, suggested that the mottos shaped principal practice, for instance. He explained, “The theme that we have now relates to [enlightening the human spirit through] *relationships*. Everybody is working on that piece. Whether it's relationships between students, or with students and teachers, we put it out there.” Dr. Matthew Tessier, the Assistant Superintendent of Technology, Innovation, and Instruction, also noted that principals were invested in “deciphering” how to translate themes into practice, given proven support for student success.

In addition to serving as unifying visions, the annual themes were research-based practices that helped foster healthy school communities and student success. After explaining how book studies at the cabinet level informed the selection of annual themes, Tessier described how the current year's focus on relationships was a case in point:

We looked at high-impact strategies for student achievement. We looked at the impact size. Student-teacher relationships, as you know, are huge. So, [the cabinet] started talking about how critical it is—especially for a child who maybe has gone through trauma or living in poverty—how critical it is for me [as a child] to believe you [a teacher or school staff member] believe in me.... Now, that was across the system, but what it looks like at the school site might look different.

Cabinet members reported that school leaders embraced these thematic frames and used them to inform how they would differentiate their implementation of CCSS-aligned practices within their school communities. A shared vision such as “enlightening the human spirit” was an example of how interdependence worked to meet the unique needs of schools while bringing greater coherence to its decentralized school system.

At the same time, district leaders realized that a theme did not advance a clear instructional vision to enable the transformation that CCSS required. CVESD leaders had developed a shared understanding of CCSS among teachers through the initial training sessions. Yet district leaders recognized that schools might make very different instructional decisions when implementing the standards due to the site-based autonomies. The end result might be 47 different interpretations of CCSS instruction. Emma Sanchez, the Executive Director of Language Development and Instruction, noted:

There’s a lot of autonomy at the school sites, which is great because it allows for creativity and innovation. But there also has to be a level of tightness, and an instructional focus is something that was needed to tie us well into focusing our efforts to build coherence in certain areas to improve achievement.

With leadership from the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, CVESD set out to create a districtwide instructional vision to align staff toward the required CCSS shifts. Ciriza, who became the Director of Curriculum and Instruction in 2016, stated: “When I first got [to this district role], one of the things that I came to notice right away was that as a district, we had a [collective] vision, but we didn’t necessarily have an instructional direction.” The need to develop and implement an instructional vision across CVESD aligned to CCSS was a necessary step to improving instruction and professional learning.

CVESD district officials collaborated with teacher leaders and principals to develop the district’s instructional vision. A team, composed of principals, assistant principals, resource teachers, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers, was assembled to support the work. They began by analyzing recent district data from the CAASPP and the California English Language Development Test to identify areas for growth, particularly for their English learner population. The team identified the speaking and listening strand as a critical area of need for its English learner population; they determined that an emphasis on these literacy-based competencies could benefit all students across content areas and performance levels. Over the course of a year, the team deliberated and adopted an instructional focus statement that emphasized oral language development. CVESD officials codified their vision into this district-adopted statement:

The CVESD community will work collaboratively to ensure that ALL students, including English Learners, Students with Disabilities and designated target groups, show measurable growth, which will lead to reducing the achievement gap in literacy and mathematics. This will occur through the implementation of high impact language development strategies aligned to the California State Standards and driven by the District’s LCAP goals.

Ciriza explained how the district instructional focus and its emphasis on high-impact language strategies were flexible enough for schools to adapt it to meet the unique needs of their individual populations: “The statement’s broad enough, but targeted enough, that everybody can relate. No

matter what they're working on, whether it's math, science, reading, writing, whatever, they can apply those strategies that will support the learning in the classroom." In its targeted yet universal appeal and impact, the adopted instructional vision statement also advanced the CVESD's central commitment to equity. It emphasized that all students should have access to rich learning experiences while advancing an instructional focus that would benefit its underserved student populations.

CVESD's instructional vision statement emphasized that all students should have access to rich learning experiences while advancing an instructional focus that would benefit its underserved student populations.

In the next step of developing the district instructional focus, the team of diverse stakeholders determined how they might bring the instructional vision to life via specific practices. Using CCSS expectations and the CVESD instructional focus statement as the foundations for their thinking, team members first worked to define what their instructional vision should and could look like if successfully implemented. They generated one overarching 3-year goal:

Teachers will be able to understand a model of learning that includes skill, will, and thrill as important aspects of how children learn.

They broke down this overarching instructional goal into areas aligned to the 3-year goal—(1) Skill: applying foundational and critical thinking; (2) Will: actualizing their own self-efficacy; and (3) Thrill: actively taking control of their learning. Within each area, the team of teachers and leaders also identified objectives, including concrete approaches that could be applied across content areas (e.g., collaborative conversations, writing responses, public discourse) to inform collective professional learning across the district. (See Figure 4 for full instructional focus statement.) Development, deliberation, and deployment of the CVESD instructional vision with its goals, skills, and objectives took 3 years. According to district officials, crafting the vision and focus goals took 18 months. They launched their first professional learning cycle for school and teacher leaders based on the district instructional vision in fall 2017. The work continued in spring 2018.

Ciriza, who spearheaded this effort, described the challenge CVESD faced in developing this approach: "We felt the need to identify a vision. But how can we support all 47 schools, principals, and teachers in a strategic, relevant way focused on professional learning?" She decided to leverage the existing structures within the interdependent CVESD system (e.g., resource teachers, ILTs, lead principals, and principal cohorts) to support the ongoing development of its teachers. Once CVESD set its instructional vision on the implementation of high-impact language development strategies aligned to CCSS, the Office of Curriculum and Instruction developed content to orient the ILTs from each of the district's 47 schools. Ciriza explained:

How do we build instructional leadership capacity? Part of this work that we're doing with our Instructional Leadership Team, our principals are part of that training. It's critical for them to be there alongside their instructional teacher leaders at their site. That builds their capacity as well. We're intentional about weaving in the instructional leadership from their side in terms of learning.

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## Figure 4 CVESD Instructional Focus Statement

**Chula Vista Elementary School District**

**Instructional Focus**

The CVESD community will work collaboratively to ensure that ALL students, including English Learners, Students with Disabilities, and designated target groups, show measurable growth, which will lead to reducing the achievement gap in literacy and mathematics. This will occur through the implementation of high impact language development strategies aligned to the California State Standards, and driven by the District's LCAP goals.

*Target Groups – English Learners, Students with Disabilities, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged, and Foster Youth.*

**Three Year Goal**

*Teachers will be able to understand a model of learning that includes skill, will and thrill as important aspects of how children learn.*

All teachers will model how to:

Skill: Develop and apply foundational and critical thinking skills

- o Interact with complex text in a variety of ways on a daily basis
- o Engage in collaborative conversations to consider the ideas of others and consolidate their learning. Learning with and from each other.
- o Demonstrate their understanding\_ by composing written responses that include appropriate structure, voice and academic vocabulary to an authentic audience.

Will: Recognize and actualize the impact of their own self-efficacy

- o Build stamina
- o Exhibit perseverance when faced with a challenging task
- o Demonstrate belief in themselves and understand that their ability to express themselves articulately gives them power!

Thrill: Actively pursue a love of learning by taking control of their own learning

- o Confidently drive their own learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom, understanding that they have the freedom to self-direct their learning.
- o Engage in high levels of discourse with confidence and with a variety of audiences to share knowledge.

Note: This statement was adopted by the district in 2017.

Source: Chula Vista Elementary School District.

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These centralized training sessions were designed to introduce school leaders and ILTs to the new instructional vision, develop a stronger understanding of specific strategies aligned to the focus goals, and determine how these recommended practices could be enacted and fostered at their sites. During the trainings, ILTs closely engaged with the idea of high-impact language strategies and the focus goal around collaborative conversations. They often incorporated professional readings on the respective approaches, employing the professional learning cycle model long used in CVESD. Beyond defining high-impact language strategies and collaborative conversations, district training facilitators engaged ILTs in discussions of concrete strategies for bringing them to life (e.g., See/Think/Wonder, Conversation Roundtable).<sup>19</sup>

Once each ILT received the central office training, they met to determine how the content fit into the school's instructional vision, current practices, and student needs. ILTs then customized the content of the district training session to meet their individual school needs. For example, some school leaders developed quality indicators for assessing the quality of language instruction, particularly the effective use of collaborative conversations during informal classroom visits on their campus. The use of these rubrics that outlined CCSS instructional expectations brought additional clarity. Quality indicators also allowed resource teachers, ILT members, and school leaders to provide classroom teachers with specific feedback and suggestions for improvement. ILTs also leveraged teacher collaboration time and professional learning cycles to support teacher understanding of the CCSS-aligned instructional vision and its accompanying pedagogical shifts.

Overall, CVESD efforts to unify its schools with thematic and instructional visions added cohesion to its decentralized system and guarded against misinterpretations of CCSS-aligned teaching and learning. Because of these efforts, CVESD classrooms were increasingly characterized by student-centered learning—opportunities that involve students in interdisciplinary and inquiry-based tasks that enhance their problem-solving and collaboration skills. For instance, principals and teachers noted that students engage in collaborative conversations and are engaging with more informational texts across content areas. In math, teachers increasingly have students grapple with realistic word problems to show how mathematical reasoning has real-world applications and ask students to construct written responses or share their reasoning. Finally, teachers and leaders interviewed in this study also described the creation of interdisciplinary units of study that allow students to make connections and apply their thinking across subject areas. While these CCSS-aligned instructional shifts were taking hold across the district, school campuses were encouraged to enact these approaches in ways that meet their students' needs and align their efforts with effective practices already used at their sites.

### ***Challenges with instructional staff***

District leaders also faced challenges with the district's instructional staff around curricular resources. There were no district-approved, CCSS-aligned curricula for 4 years, which was difficult for its principals, teacher leaders, teachers, and parents.

District leaders intentionally decided to delay purchasing CCSS-aligned materials based on the teachers' experiences during the most recent ELA textbook adoption in 2000. The text they adopted was supposed to be aligned to the former California State Standards and to support teachers in standards-based instruction. Yet Nelson observed that teachers developed a much stronger skill set when they went beyond the textbook and learned how to unpack the standards, develop indicators for success, and create standards-aligned assessments. Through this "heavier lift," teachers had

to understand the standards and figure out effective methods for teaching them. In cases in which the textbook was the primary instructional planning tool, Nelson said that teachers were “textbook driven rather than standards driven.” With this insight, CVESD district leaders believed that all teachers would need to do the “heavy lifting” with CCSS, using the same strategies of unpacking the standards, finding resources, and creating assessments, to strengthen their teaching practices. Thus, CVESD delayed adopting new instructional materials and instead hosted districtwide professional learning opportunities for all teachers to initiate and support the “heavy lifting.”

One principal commented on the challenges the district faced based on its decision to delay CCSS curriculum adoption:

There was that transition period where we’re working off standards, but we hadn’t adopted any curriculum yet. I think that was the challenge of what do we provide for [our staff]. What can they do?... It is important to have resources ... for teachers that they can have at their fingertips. It is challenging and time consuming to be looking for all those materials.

Lacking district-provided, CCSS-aligned instructional materials, teachers developed their own, beginning in 2011. Sometimes teachers were able to repurpose their existing textbooks, worksheets, and other instructional materials. More often, the new standards differed widely from the previous California State Standards, making these resources inadequate. In turn, many teachers had to explore sources for appropriate materials, typically through online repositories, such as Achieve the Core, BetterLesson, and Edmodo.

A classroom teacher explained the challenges around CCSS implementation:

One of the biggest struggles that we’re having is because CCSS came along. We no longer had a reading program. It was like, “Well, let’s just base it off the standards and create our own.” That was hard, because it was very time consuming.

The district office wanted its teachers to be successful and informed. It hosted numerous additional CCSS trainings to support their understanding and implementation of the standards. Leaders also shared the district’s ongoing rollout plan with the teachers union leaders during monthly consultation meetings between union representatives (vice president, president, or teachers) and the central office staff.

As interviewees suggested, finding curricular resources and developing units and lessons took a great deal of time beyond what had been expected previously. Some teachers and school leaders embraced the opportunity to design new curricular materials and instructional practices; others voiced concerns with the increased responsibilities and time expectations. When these concerns arose, the district responded by listening carefully to these vital stakeholder groups. Ciriza explained:

We all have to be on the same page in terms of where we’re going. Our teachers union will bring up concerns about working conditions for teachers, and the Common Core is a really big deal for our teachers union in that it was a change in their working conditions. They needed more time, and they needed other things.



In addition to listening to teachers' concerns, the district changed its practices and invited teachers and school leaders into the decision-making processes. A union representative explained how a new, joint committee of district staff, school leaders, and teachers was created to facilitate greater teacher input:

The vice president [of the teachers union] at the time decided, "You know, I need other voices." She invited three of us [teacher leaders] to join. That's where this whole consultation began. I was very lucky that I was part of that [initial committee] and have been ever since. As I became more involved, the group kind of evolved.

District officials and the teachers union today both acknowledge the improvements in their relationship. Ciriza described the shift in district interactions with the union: "I would say that in the past, the relationship with our teachers union was a barrier. But we are working on that. We understand that if we really want to move, we've got to get along." She explained further: "So far, that relationship has been very positive, because we all want the same thing. Thankfully, the union leadership groups that we're working with genuinely care deeply about children and learning. That's awesome!"

The engagement efforts were equally well received by the union, whose representative remarked:

The district has become so receptive and so collaborative with us in this aspect. We actually talk about everything related to curriculum, to assessment, to any professional development, report cards. Everything that touches instruction in any way goes through this consultation group. And by no means does the district have to do what we suggest or what we ask for. But we do definitely feel that as this [consultation] group has evolved, so has the relationship. That has been very helpful in making sure that teacher voice is being heard and included. At the same time, it has helped with the communication from the district down to the teachers.

Most important to improving union relations was the district selection of CCSS-aligned curricula. After several years of delaying the adoption of district-sanctioned curriculum for CCSS, the school board and senior district officials consulted with the district's teacher group to identify the best resources for ELA and math. Through their discussions, they selected teachers who would pilot the curricula under consideration. Leslie Bunker, CVESD School Board President, described this process:

We had the same teacher pilot both [the proposed ELA and mathematics programs], so they could compare them. Before when we did pilots [in which teachers only tested one program], we would get reports. It seemed that whichever one you piloted, that was your favorite. But this way, the same person did both [curricula] for a semester each. And they could really give feedback on what pieces they liked or didn't like. Then the teachers voted. So, I think, again, it was a good way to go.... We were okay with either one, and so [we] let the people who are using it decide.

Go Math was adopted in 2014–15, and the Office of Curriculum and Instruction provided district trainings in July 2015 to support implementation for the upcoming year. Benchmark, a literacy curriculum with a component for English language development, was added in 2016–17. After trainings over the summer of 2017, teachers began using it in the 2017–18 school year. The curriculum adoption processes reflected the district commitments to include teachers and school leaders in decision-making.

### ***Challenges with families***

The delay in adopting a new curriculum contributed to CVESD parent concerns as well. Accustomed to seeing their children come home with textbooks and workbooks, some parents were concerned that their children did not have any real books. They also had heard news reports of the potential impact of the harder standards and assessments on their children's test scores.

In addition, some parents had difficulty understanding the new instructional approaches their students were learning during the school day. When children had questions about their homework, parents sometimes were unable to answer them, leading to lots of frustration. A parent who is very involved in her children's school and district committees expressed this concern: "Unfortunately the way that CCSS rolled out, teachers didn't have books. I was like, 'Are you kidding me?' My kids are in a dual language class program; that [lack of traditional curricular resources] kind of freaked me out a bit."

The district responded to community concerns by focusing on parent education and, in turn, created the Parent Academy to support family learning around CCSS. On a selected Saturday, parents from across the district were invited to attend workshops on the new standards and strategies that would enable them to support their children. Over the years, these Parent Academies have grown in scope (from a handful of sessions the first year to several dozen in the most recent year) and size (from a few dozen parents to about 600 at the most recent one). The parent explained, "It's like attending a conference." Many schools followed up on the annual district Parent Academy with their own school-specific educational meetings. In addition, once the curricula were adopted, and test scores came in, apprehension decreased. As the parent volunteer explained, "So, I think once we started seeing better curriculum, and we've also had really good test scores, I think people are starting to see more benefits."

### **District stability in implementing Common Core**

Stability at the district level has contributed to the ability of CVESD to overcome challenges with the CCSS rollout. Escobedo has been the superintendent since 2010 and oversaw the district's CCSS implementation from the beginning. He was able to develop and sustain a stable and long-term vision to the district's approach to meeting student needs in the context of these more rigorous standards. Cabinet members, who were often charged with developing the policies and enacting this vision, were all seasoned district leaders, most of whom had long tenures as CVESD principals prior to their new roles. Given their extensive history in the district, district leaders maintained a deep commitment to Chula Vista and had firsthand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities associated with its interdependent structure. They also were sensitive to the critiques that parents and teachers had regarding CCSS implementation since they had heard them during their long tenure in the district, often as school-level principals. Senior leaders were committed to the district's instructional vision, stakeholders, and decentralized decision-making. Educators said this helped CVESD continue moving forward as a district, while grappling with the unintended consequences and difficulties that arose along the way.

## Supports and Interventions to Ensure All Students Learn

Our district has always been, as long as I can remember, very focused on struggling student groups.... As trite as it can seem, those really high expectations, and the belief that all children can learn and [staff is] accountable for making that happen, [are] the heart of our district.

—Lisa Parker, Executive Director of Student, Family, Community, and Instruction

CVESD leaders also attribute their ability to accelerate student progress to targeted efforts that have supported struggling student groups. As Parker’s quote suggests, focusing on the needs of student groups is a long-standing practice that has continued into the CCSS era. A teacher leader at Loma Verde corroborated this attentiveness and explained how it informed her school’s vision for student learning. Specifically, she described how her school had used Douglas Reeves’s research on 90/90/90 schools—schools with 90% poverty and 90% students of color in which achievement was 90% or above proficiency.<sup>20</sup> She explained how this research had long informed their commitment to equity and been a means of inspiring staff “to push our students and get them to move forward.”

In the CCSS era, CVESD has maintained this focus and has utilized multiple data sources to identify struggling student groups. Much of this analysis is based on student performance on state-mandated exams and the district’s interim Local Measures assessments. Yet CVESD has also incorporated additional measures, such as attendance, behavior concerns, and interventions received, in identifying students and student subgroups that require academic and holistic supports.

The district’s focus on traditionally underserved students has generated policies and approaches that support these students. At the central office, attention to these groups of students informed the district’s instructional vision statement and provided a sense of urgency around redressing opportunity and learning gaps. While language was identified as an area for growth for all CVESD students, Ciriza noted that the emphasis on high-impact language development strategies was particularly relevant for “our English learners, our children in poverty, foster youth, [and] students with disabilities”—subgroups identified as target groups by the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the district’s data analysis practices.

At the school level, data analysis has often informed discussions of interventions for student groups. The Executive Director of Research, Accountability, Evaluation, Analysis and Instruction described how conversations were initiated around subgroup data: “At a particular school, it may be about suspensions. Are we seeing that our Latino, African American, [or] undocumented students make up the majority of suspensions? That may be your inequity that you, as a leader, need to zoom in on.” Superintendent Escobedo described a similar process when discussing student subgroups with school leaders and possible ways to lend district support:

When I go to my observation, the first thing we do is review the data. When principals tell me, “Oh my goodness, look at these kids. They need help.” I ask, “What do you need to help this group of kids, or what can we do differently? What type of resources can we help you with?”

Conversations with school leaders about struggling students and groups have trickled down to the classroom level. For example, one teacher explained how she structured her week to ensure that students with learning gaps received more individualized instructional support: “I open up my computer, and my student data is right there... I [am] constantly monitoring their progress through assessment, through their student work, [and] with meeting with them.” A CVESD teacher leader also mentioned how teachers used interim assessment data from Achieve 3000—the district’s online, CCSS-aligned reading assessment—to inform small-group instruction. She described how she used the platform to support students from target subgroups: “I do it with them in a small group, so [I] can help front-load some vocabulary for them. You can have a dialogue about the comprehension questions and get a deeper understanding.”

Overall, CVESD district leaders, principals, and teachers frequently engaged in data analysis and used this as a springboard to inform school and classroom practice that could accelerate learning among the district’s most underserved students.

### **Instructional implications of English learners**

Interviewees often discussed how the district’s attention to struggling student groups translated into a focus on their English learner population and instructional strategies that would support their learning. Because CVESD classrooms are heterogeneously grouped, interviewees typically described using Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) to support English learners in mainstream classrooms. GLAD is a set of strategies that teachers can utilize to integrate English language development across content areas. While providing benefits to all students through approaches that develop critical thinking and vocabulary, GLAD provides particular benefits for English learners by immersing them in language and text-rich environments and by engaging them in a range of learning opportunities that enrich literacy development.

GLAD strategies were initially implemented in select CVESD schools with large percentages of English learners. With the adoption of the district’s language-focused, instructional vision, more CVESD principals clamored for support with this strategy, which other CVESD principals found effective. Given their commitment to ongoing professional learning, district leaders were eager to find ways to meet this need. To this end, the district hired two district resource teachers to act as GLAD specialists and support practitioners in the field. A teacher leader at Loma Verde described how GLAD specialists informed instruction at her school:

The teachers have been trained. Of those GLAD strategies, we’ve selected quite a few that we are doing to fidelity, which promote the language development [of] all students. These are the content cognitive dictionary, the comparative and narrative input charts, the poems and chants, and the See/Think/Wonder [protocol]. So, those are the ones you’re going to see across the grade levels.

Although GLAD strategies were initially chosen to support English learners, many in CVESD recognized how helpful they could be for the language development of all students. Ciriza stated, “We have such a high English learner population that our teachers are really becoming masters of teaching language.... Those strategies for building language to second language learners are good for all children.” Overall, in identifying and providing targeted supports for the district’s English learner population, CVESD leaders found that this differentiated approach could be an effective strategy for students across the district.

“We have such a high English learner population that our teachers are really becoming masters of teaching language.... Those strategies for building language to second language learners are good for all children.”

### **Instructional implications of students with special needs**

CVESD officials also frequently described learning supports for students with special needs when discussing how the district has sought to improve the performance of underserved groups. In CVESD, students with special needs are educated in mainstream, general education classrooms with varying levels of push-in support from Resource Specialist Program (RSP) teachers depending on the accommodations noted on the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Since CVESD teachers instruct students with a range of learning needs in their classrooms, the district has worked to ensure that they are knowledgeable about effective strategies to support students with special needs.

To support its students with special needs, the district took an approach similar to what it did to support its English learners. Specifically, CVESD hired district special education resource teachers to work with educators across the district during collaboration time, in classrooms, and in individualized coaching sessions. The special education resource teachers model, coach, and offer feedback on effective teaching strategies for students with special needs.

As another professional learning support, Keith Malcom, the Executive Director of Special Education and Instruction, mentioned how the district had organized intra-district visits so that teachers could see those implementing effective instruction for students with special needs in action. Through these learning exchanges, he hoped that teachers could answer the following questions: “What are they doing at that school that we could implement?” and “What could we learn from successes within our district?” Through these efforts, the district aimed to improve the ability of CVESD teachers to more effectively support students with special needs.

CVESD officials also suggested that the curricular and pedagogical shifts under CCSS were assets that teachers could leverage in supporting students with special needs. For example, one special education resource teacher remarked that the shift to student-centered learning necessitated by CCSS meant that teachers could spend more time with students, including those with special needs, and could use scaffolds to enable independent inquiry and discussion. Learning progressions, which are the vertical alignment of CCSS across grade levels, have also allowed teachers to follow the trajectory of each standard as a means to scaffold content and skills to meet special education students at their academic level.

## Wraparound services

CVESD maintains an analytical eye on its students to enable academic success, which has translated into instructional and professional learning practices that support student subgroups, such as English learners and students with special needs. To further support its vulnerable populations, the district has also partnered with local agencies to build a system of wraparound services to provide a range of holistic supports that can counteract external challenges that impede student learning.

Notably, CVESD has maintained five Family Resource Centers (FRCs), located on four elementary school campuses and in a high school in Chula Vista's most impoverished areas. Established in the late 1990s and early 2000s in partnership with other public agencies under the advisory group known as the Chula Vista Community Collaborative, these centers have served as "one-stop shops for families" to access needed social and "family-strengthening" services.<sup>21</sup> Lisa Parker, the Executive Director of Student, Family, Community, and Instruction, explained:

Schools refer families to the Family Resource Center if they are homeless, if there's been domestic violence, if there are money issues, for jobs.... The Family Resource Center is there to listen and assess what a family's needs are and then connect the family to resources.

Teachers at school sites with FRCs discussed their utility for students and families. One Loma Verde teacher leader described Fair Winds, the FRC on her campus, saying, "Since I've been here, and it's more than 11 years, they've been a constant for me.... If I see a student in need, I refer them to the Fair Winds Resource Center."

The principal at Loma Verde described the impact of the Promotores—local, Spanish-speaking residents who serve as liaisons between the community and integrated support centers. She explained that Promotores connect with families in a culturally and linguistically responsive way through one-to-one outreach and parent education classes held on school campuses. Overall, FRCs and their staff have provided critical resources to support CVESD families in navigating the challenging, day-to-day realities they face and ultimately provide resources and stability for students and communities.

Beyond the decades-old FRCs, CVESD officials described more recent efforts to enhance the social-emotional well-being of the district's target groups. For example, Escobedo noted that the district has allocated resources through its LCAP to secure additional school psychologists and four regional social workers to support foster youth. In doing so, CVESD reduced staffing ratios for school counselors and social workers so that they could be more readily accessible for students. This action also allowed the district to allocate mental health staff to high-need sites with more frequency, with a few hired on a full-time basis. Finally, CVESD officials described the role of liaisons who provided services and supports to students from military families. These partners work with CVESD social workers to meet the unique needs of this group of children, who comprised 12% of the student population in the 2016–17 school year.



## Areas for continued growth

### *Unpacking implicit bias*

While CVESD has targeted systems and resources in place to support its most vulnerable populations, senior district officials described many of these efforts as works in progress. They noted that the district needed to develop a stronger mindset and knowledge base on implicit bias and its influences on their work with students of color and students from low-income families. For example, previous conversations among district leaders about the high performance of African American students in one CVESD school surfaced preconceived and often deficit-laden notions about this subgroup and the impact of economic class. To improve their equity lens, CVESD officials have been working to unpack their subconscious beliefs through their partnership with a prominent social justice professor who has met with district leaders to challenge their “mental paradigms” on race and ability.

### *More attention to social-emotional learning*

CVESD officials also identified the need to increase attention to and cohesion around the district’s approach to social-emotional supports for all students and subgroups. Because of the district’s interdependent structure, schools vary in the degree to which they have implemented social-emotional supports. Some schools have implemented strong programs and approaches, while others are just getting started.

To illustrate the range of approaches, one principal explained that her school conducted anonymous, quarterly surveys to elicit student feedback on how teachers were supporting them emotionally. This school leader then shared the results with teachers during professional development and collaboration time to inform practice. Other site leaders described early efforts to adopt programmatic social and emotional learning (SEL) approaches that foster skills, habits, and mindsets that enable academic progress and productive behavior, including self-regulation, intrapersonal awareness and interpersonal skills, a growth mindset, and a sense of agency. For instance, the principal from Hilltop Elementary described his school’s growing focus on trauma-informed practice and reported that a few teachers at his site were piloting Sanford Harmony, a free curriculum with brief, daily lessons to build classroom community and embrace classroom diversity.

In a few instances, leaders and teachers described comprehensive efforts to incorporate SEL at their school sites. Otay Elementary is one such case. The principal, who had strong expertise in SEL, trained her staff on how trauma affects brain function, and later supported teachers in translating this knowledge into classroom practice. To this end, Otay staff engaged in an array of relationship-building activities, such as daily morning meetings, that established a positive climate for student learning; used Mind Up, a curriculum that infuses brain practices and mindfulness; and had explicit discussions of the zones of regulation with students.

Because of the district’s deep investment in supporting instructional shifts under CCSS, some officials suggested that there has been limited investment in incorporating social-emotional practices in teaching and learning, thus contributing to site variability. One teacher leader explained, “When we made this shift into CCSS, social-emotional supports took a back seat.... We made such a shift in focus in academics and achievement that we definitely put [social-emotional supports] on the side, and we’re feeling the effects of it.”

CVESD senior leaders expressed their awareness of this issue and their sense of urgency for improving SEL practices. They noted that the district was in the initial phases of building a shared vision for SEL supports and a coherent set of practices. To this end, they have convened a committee dedicated to designing and implementing a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) in the district. MTSS—a comprehensive framework and approach that aligns resources, initiatives, and interventions to support students’ academic, behavioral, and social needs—is seen as a vehicle for building a common vision, language, and approach to enhance the social and emotional dimensions of learning.

### ***Creating comprehensive and intersectional data tools***

Because CVESD officials identified equity and social-emotional learning as areas for improvement, they have been creating data tools to provide a holistic assessment of students and to better identify student supports. Villanueva explained the need for an intersectional approach to data analysis:

If I am an English learner who also is receiving special education services, that’s a different approach. Or if I’m an English learner, that is also in foster care, there are other things that are affecting my language ability and my language learning—having that opportunity to see how those overlap. We are complex individuals. We’re not just an English learner. We’re not just one of those categories.

Escobedo echoed this sentiment, explaining that earlier data tools were not accessible or comprehensive enough to provide holistic information to practitioners in a timely fashion. He offered, “Before, it was just numbers. We knew how many English learners were improving, but our intervention wasn’t focused.”

District leaders created the LCAP Matrix, a tool that integrates multiple sources of data for school leaders and teachers to inform their targeted approaches. Described as a data visualization resource, the LCAP Matrix provides an overview of each student’s assessment and enrollment history as well as their designation within various subgroups (e.g., English learner, foster youth, Individualized Education Plan, military family). The LCAP Matrix is connected to the district mainframe and is updated in real time. It is intended to provide school leaders and teachers with a snapshot into a student’s academic performance, attendance, and disciplinary history so that appropriate and multifaceted interventions can be implemented to advance student learning. Tessier, the Assistant Superintendent of Technology, Innovation, and Instruction, explained, “Each kid has a story. We really peel the onion. We find out everything about that child to move them forward in relation to those standards.”

“Each kid has a story. We really peel the onion. We find out everything about that child to move them forward in relation to those standards.”

To date, district leaders have used the LCAP Matrix to engage in discussions with their cohorts during site visits. Given its newness and complexity, principals and ILTs are developing their familiarity with the tool and discovering how it can be used to support students. School leaders and teachers reported limited engagement with the LCAP Matrix in their site-based data analysis practices, suggesting more exposure and training is needed for this tool to be incorporated into data analysis on school campuses.

## Conclusion

The Chula Vista case reveals how a district can advance wide-ranging yet complementary systems and priorities to enable student success. Specifically, CVESD demonstrates that a commitment to continuous improvement, clear decision-making structures, investment in leader and teacher capacity, and an analytic focus on struggling student groups can be critical ingredients in ensuring that all students, including those from vulnerable populations, have access to and excel in rich learning experiences.

In CVESD, the clear delineation of district, school, and joint decision-making responsibilities has provided clarity to its decentralized system. In addition, CVESD has allocated critical resources and created a system of supports to ensure that its more decentralized system fostered rigorous teaching and learning across its 47 schools. Its structures of cohort-based, professional learning have allowed leaders and teachers to engage with problems of practice and have enhanced their ability to make informed decisions, often with the guidance of seasoned leaders and educators. Through these practices, CVESD has maintained its commitment that those closest to students (e.g., principals and teachers) are best positioned to develop strategies that meet student learning needs, while generating professional learning supports that would allow teachers and principals to succeed to this end.

In this process, CVESD has also built an organization committed to ongoing learning and improvement at its various levels. Beyond its principal cohorts, the district has established professional learning and coaching structures that connect the central office to each of its schools. Through its ILTs and teacher collaboration time, the district has invested in ongoing opportunities for teachers and leaders to learn in collaborative processes. District use of the cycle of professional learning has emphasized these features and advances the expectation that professional growth is ongoing and includes instances of challenge and difficulty. This expectation has enabled teachers to engage in candid discussions of pedagogical shifts, experiment with new instructional strategies, and reflect upon these practices without risk of poor evaluations. Holding formative data and student work at the center of these conversations, CVESD teachers and leaders have maintained a keen eye on the impact of these practices on the learning of all students and particular student groups.

Against this backdrop, CVESD thoughtfully implemented CCSS in a deliberate manner, enabling its teachers to develop a strong understanding of and belief in the power of deeper learning practices associated with CCSS. In this process, CVESD demonstrated its commitment to professional learning by dedicating ample time and resources to ensure that all personnel had rich, professional development.

Beyond resource and time investments, stable leadership has also contributed to the successful implementation of the new standards and the district's ability to adapt to emerging challenges. Under the sustained leadership of Escobedo and many of his senior cabinet members, CVESD has had 8 years of continuous focus on and implementation of student-centered learning approaches aligned with CCSS in Chula Vista. The long tenure of its superintendent and the rich experience of CVESD district leaders also have enabled the district to address difficulties. With each issue that emerged, CVESD leaders listened to their stakeholders, invited their input, and collaborated

with them to resolve lingering concerns. Leaning on their relationships with constituents and their commitment to continuous improvement has enabled district leaders to grapple with difficult circumstances.

CVESD has also maintained a keen focus on its most vulnerable populations to ensure that learning gaps were minimized and student needs were being addressed. CVESD's data practices have led to the implementation of instructional supports for the district's English learners and students with special needs, many of whom are from low-income families and/or are students of color. In addition to academic interventions, the district has maintained a system of wraparound services that provide culturally responsive approaches; connect families and services; and include a growing number of counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Growing momentum in CVESD around social and emotional learning is also an ongoing effort that will further enable the district to provide holistic supports for all its students.

All of these efforts suggest that investment in capacity building and continuous improvement has contributed to student learning in CVESD. This, combined with attentiveness to marginalized students and groups, has enabled CVESD to support teachers and leaders in enacting CCSS-aligned practices and holistic supports that improve learning environments and meet the unique academic needs of its student population.

## Appendix A: CVESD's Achievement and Climate Data

**Table A1**  
**CAASPP Test Results**

Demographic	Residual	Proficient and Above in District (%)	Proficient and Above in California (%)
<b>2014-15</b>			
<b>Math All Students</b>	<b>0.162</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>34</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	31	21
Math African American	0.159	31	16
Math Latino/a	0.163	36	21
Math White	0.196	60	49
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.286</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>44</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	43	31
ELA African American	0.278	48	28
ELA Latino/a	0.274	48	32
ELA White	0.295	69	61
<b>2015-16</b>			
<b>Math All Students</b>	<b>0.137</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>37</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	37	23
Math African American	0.077	42	18
Math Latino/a	0.135	41	24
Math White	0.183	64	53
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.223</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>49</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	50	35
ELA African American	0.144	59	31
ELA Latino/a	0.213	56	37
ELA White	0.253	75	64
<b>2016-17</b>			
<b>Math All Students</b>	<b>0.187</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>38</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	38	25
Math African American	0.191	43	19
Math Latino/a	0.187	43	25
Math White	0.179	63	53
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.288</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>49</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	50	36
ELA African American	0.291	61	31
ELA Latino/a	0.277	56	37
ELA White	0.269	73	64

Notes: "Residual" represents the difference, measured in standard deviations, between the actual average performance of a district's students in a given racial/ethnic group and the predicted performance of the district's students in the given group based on the socioeconomic status of each group's families in the district. The residual for economically disadvantaged students was not calculated. "Proficient and Above" represents the percentage of students in a given group who met or exceeded the grade and subject standards on CAASPP, averaged across grades.

Source: LPI analysis of data from California Department of Education. (n.d.). California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results. <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/> (accessed 08/24/18).

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**Table A2**  
**Suspension Rates, 2016–17**

Demographic	Rate in CVESD	Rate in California
African American	1.6%	9.8%
Latino/a	0.6%	3.7%
White	0.7%	3.2%
All Students	0.6%	3.6%

Data source: California Department of Education. (n.d.). DataQuest. <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.

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## Appendix B: Methods

This individual case study of Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) is part of a larger, three-part, mixed-methods study that includes a quantitative analysis of district performance in California,<sup>22</sup> six additional individual case studies of positive outlier districts conducted from fall 2017 through winter 2018,<sup>23</sup> and a cross-case study that synthesizes findings from all seven individual cases.<sup>24</sup>

### Site Selection

Results from a multivariate, quantitative study of positive outlier districts in California identified districts eligible for the individual case studies. As described more fully in a separate report,<sup>25</sup> the quantitative study used a statistical regression model for predicting and measuring student achievement to identify positive outlier districts in which scores on the CAASPP were greater than predicted for African American, Latino/a, and White student groups from 2015 to 2017. For each racial/ethnic group, the model accounted for indicators of family socioeconomic status, including household income, parent education, family structure, and parent employment, all of which are factors that are beyond the district's control and that typically influence student performance. We used the size of the residual scores (the difference between the predicted and actual scores for each group) as the measure of performance for each district. This analysis both identified positive outlier districts and examined predictors of achievement at the district level.

In the second part of the project, we selected a demographically and geographically diverse set of seven districts from among the positive outliers in which we conducted individual case studies to examine the factors associated with their strong outcomes. To select districts for these individual case studies, we began with the group of districts that we had identified by our quantitative study in which African American, Latino/a, and White students consistently achieved at higher-than-predicted rates from 2015 to 2017 in both English language arts and mathematics. This reduced the sample to districts in which there were at least 200 African American and/or Latino/a students and at least 200 White students, to ensure adequate sample sizes and stability of the predictor variables.<sup>26</sup> Then we considered additional criteria—graduation rates, suspension rates, and relative rank on English language arts and mathematics test score residuals from the regression analyses both overall and for African American, Latino/a, and White groups individually. These criteria helped ensure that we selected districts that had positive outcomes on additional measures. We also intentionally selected districts that offered different levels of urbanicity, were from different geographic regions, and were of different sizes.

### Data Collection Methods

The overarching research question for this case study was:

**In CVESD, what factors may account for the success of all students in the district and for that of students of color in particular?**

We used a case study approach to address this question. Case studies allow researchers to investigate real-life phenomena in context, generating understandings of a phenomenon and its interplay with its environment.<sup>27</sup> A two-person research team was assigned to the district. We used

a multi-method research design, with data from a range of sources, including documents, district data, and interviews with a range of personnel at the district and school levels. We examined the following aspects of district and school operations:

- approaches to instruction and instructional improvement;
- approaches to curriculum and assessment;
- strategies for hiring, developing, and retaining staff;
- supports for school climate or social and emotional learning;
- supports for students with additional learning or out-of-school needs;
- provision of wraparound services;
- outreach to families and communities; and
- approaches to continuous improvement, including uses of data to focus efforts.

The research team conducted a screening phone call with senior district leaders to gain an initial understanding of factors that districts identified as relevant to their success in supporting student achievement, to learn important background information, and to generate an initial list of potential sites and interviewees.

We also reviewed data and documents prior to on-site field research. The research team collected and reviewed 53 documents, including:

- **Research studies:** analysis of previous district leadership changes;
- **Administrative documents:** CVESD policy statements, organization charts, websites, data tools, presentation slides, and strategic plans;
- **Curriculum and assessments:** training materials, curriculum overviews, classroom visuals, and rubrics for teacher feedback; and
- **Data sets:** district, school, and city demographic data and raw CAASPP results.

During 2-day site visits in fall 2017 and winter 2017–18, researchers conducted 30- to 60-minute interviews at district central offices and school sites with district leaders, principals, coaches, teachers, and other staff and community members. Research teams identified potential sites for school-level interviews through discussions with district offices. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify interviewees. In other words, researchers selected and interviewed several participants based on their positions and responsibilities and then asked those participants to recommend others well placed to speak to instructional strategies, change processes, and other factors supporting greater-than-predicted outcomes for African American, Latino/a, and White students in the district. In addition, researchers sought to visit schools serving students of color and those from low-income backgrounds and to interview staff who could speak to programs supporting achievement and increased equity in the district. A total of 24 individuals participated in interviews (Table B1).

**Table B1**  
**CVESD Interviewees**

<p><b>District Officials</b> (n = 9)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gloria Ciriza, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction</li> <li>• Francisco Escobedo, Superintendent</li> <li>• Keith Malcom, Executive Director of Special Education and Instruction</li> <li>• John Nelson, Former Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services</li> <li>• Lisa Parker, Executive Director of Student, Family, Community, and Instruction</li> <li>• Emma Sanchez, Executive Director of Language Development and Instruction</li> <li>• Matthew Tessier, Assistant Superintendent of Technology, Innovation, and Instruction</li> <li>• Jeff Theil, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources</li> <li>• Ernesto Villanueva, Executive Director of Research, Accountability, Evaluation, Analysis, and Instruction</li> </ul>
<p><b>Board Member</b> (n = 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leslie Bunker, School Board President</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principals</b> (n = 5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monica Castillo, Otay Principal</li> <li>• Lalaine Perez, Salt Creek Principal</li> <li>• Patricia Roth, Arroyo Vista Charter Principal</li> <li>• Sobeida Velázquez, Loma Verde Principal</li> <li>• Bill Willis, Hilltop Drive Principal</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resource Teachers and Teacher Leaders</b> (n = 8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anita Craven, Hilltop Drive Resource Teacher</li> <li>• Raimee Durfee, Marshall Resource Teacher</li> <li>• Reina Galvez, Loma Verde Teacher Leader</li> <li>• Tara Gonzalez, Otay Resource Teacher</li> <li>• Julia Martinez, Salt Creek Teacher Leader</li> <li>• Rosa Martinez, Teacher and Union Vice President</li> <li>• Shannon McKinney, McMillin Special Education Resource Teacher</li> <li>• Aaron Meier, Otay Teacher Leader</li> </ul>
<p><b>Parent</b> (n = 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angelica Maldonado, ELAC Parent Council Member</li> </ul>

Interviews with district administrators and senior staff focused on strategies, steps, and tools they were using to shift instruction to the in-depth learning required under CCSS, to support teacher and administrator learning, to use data to monitor and support school progress, to meet student needs, to engage the community, and to allocate resources to support their improvement efforts. Interviewers also asked district leaders about challenges to this work and how they overcame these challenges. We tailored the interview protocol based on the role of the interviewee and their tenure in the district. This differentiation ensured that some questions could be explored in more depth with respondents who were most likely to hold relevant and reliable knowledge on the topic of discussion. Each interview was audio recorded for transcription purposes if the respondent gave consent.

## **Analysis**

Case study analysis addressed themes identified from the literature and those that arose from the research data. These themes included: human capital issues, resources, instruction, curriculum, professional learning, social and emotional learning, data and accountability, culture, parents and community, schedules, and organization. Research teams triangulated findings across multiple data sources and sought both confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence to develop illustrations of the key factors that emerged as well grounded from the evidence. Each case study draft was reviewed internally by two members of the research team, checked by a district leader for accuracy, and revised based on feedback by two expert peer reviewers.

## Endnotes

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14. Nelsen, J., & Cudeiro, A. (2009). Lasting impression: Targeted learning plan has a maximum impact on teacher practice. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(5), 32–35.
15. Nelsen, J., & Cudeiro, A. (2009). Lasting impression: Targeted learning plan has a maximum impact on teacher practice. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(5), 32–35, p. 33.
16. The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) is administered annually using the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—one of two national tests developed with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The California English Language Development Test measures how well English learners are mastering the language. Lexile levels measure the difficulty of a text and students' reading skills. Achieve 3000 is an online platform that many CVESD schools use to ascertain student Lexile levels, typically at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year (BOY, MOY, and EOY, respectively).
17. “Gradual release of responsibility” is a direct instruction model known for its “I do, we do, you do” structure. First, the teacher directly instructs the class. Next, all the students work together to solve a new but related problem. Afterward, the whole class typically reviews several of the different approaches students used, with a focus on correcting any misconceptions that may have arisen and providing a clear explanation for the correct response. A second novel problem is often presented to the class to ensure understanding. Finally, once the instructor is confident that most of the class understands what is needed, they release the students to solve a similar task independently (working alone or in peer groups). In this model, responsibility for learning is gradually released from the teacher to the students.

18. In addition to the central office trainings by grade and content area for all teachers, CVESD provided voluntary sessions after school for teachers who wanted to dig deeper into CCSS. The district Mathematics Resource Teacher facilitated professional development for teachers interested in learning new strategies to support their instructional practices to reflect the need for more conceptual learning. The district Writing Resource Teacher offered similar professional learning sessions related to writing instruction beginning in 2011–13 on a voluntary basis. Both of these roles operate out of the central Office of Curriculum and Instruction and serve as resources for all schools across the district.
19. “See/Think/Wonder” and “Conversation Roundtable” are two instructional strategies being used in Chula Vista to support collaborative conversations. Designed to help make abstract thinking more concrete and visual, See/Think/Wonder asks students to answer three questions: (1) What do you *see*? (2) What do you *think* about that? and (3) What does it make you *wonder*?
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