



POSITIVE OUTLIERS SERIES

# San Diego Unified School District

## Positive Outliers Case Study

Laura E. Hernández and Anne Podolsky

# **San Diego Unified School District: Positive Outliers Case Study**

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## Executive Summary

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) supports teaching and learning in California's second-largest school district, educating students from preschool to high school each day. Nearly three quarters of SDUSD students are students of color, including 47% who are Latino/a and 9% who are African American. Almost 60% of students are economically disadvantaged, and 24% are English learners. Despite the wide achievement gaps across the state between students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, SDUSD has excelled at supporting the learning of all students.

SDUSD 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 all 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 complements the research series by describing the practices and policies within SDUSD 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 report describes how SDUSD has combined a commitment to instructional improvement and a system of holistic student supports to bolster achievement for all students. We identified five key factors that have enabled student success in SDUSD:

### **1. SDUSD maintained professional learning structures that support ongoing and targeted capacity building.**

SDUSD maintained and refined professional learning structures to support practitioners, often piloting approaches and/or collaborating with school leaders and educators so that professional learning could be better supported in the face of CCSS's increased instructional demands.

First and foremost, the district invested in the development of its school leaders, who receive individualized coaching from SDUSD's area superintendents and learn collaboratively with their counterparts through district-facilitated institutes and school visits to become stronger instructional leaders. SDUSD also developed and refined avenues for professional learning for its teachers so that they could receive job-embedded supports. For example, the district invested in coaches who support teachers through targeted coaching cycles and sought to improve the use of professional learning communities to support educators in understanding CCSS and its related pedagogical shifts. These job-embedded supports also focused on the use of diverse data measures, including formative assessments, so that practitioners could regularly monitor student progress and identify relevant supports to help all students excel. Combined, these efforts created layers of professional learning support for SDUSD teachers and leaders, allowing them the necessary time, collaboration, and continuous support to enact instructional shifts necessitated by CCSS.

### **2. SDUSD supported curricular and instructional shifts that promote deep student learning.**

After years without a coherent vision for student learning due to leadership turnover at the district level, SDUSD established an instructional framework to facilitate the deep learning that CCSS aims to foster. With this framework for CCSS-aligned teaching and learning, the

district also adopted a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” so that all students would have the opportunity and time to meet those standards. To help educators make sense of the new standards, the district adopted Robert Marzano’s Critical Concepts, which clustered the standards in a way that made them more manageable to teach and demonstrated their interconnectedness. Overall, the district’s guaranteed and viable curriculum helped teachers and leaders develop instructional priorities and understand more clearly how to improve student achievement in the context of CCSS.

SDUSD leaders also promoted learning environments that prepare all students to excel in postsecondary environments as being fundamental to the district’s guaranteed and viable curriculum. To this end, SDUSD adopted two initiatives. First, in 2016, the district began requiring that, to graduate, students must satisfy the “A-G requirements,” a series of courses necessary for admission as a freshman to the University of California or California State University systems. This SDUSD initiative gives students access to rigorous learning environments as well as to postsecondary opportunities. Second, to support students’ college readiness, the district began an early college program that encourages students with learning gaps to take college-level classes.

The district’s efforts to establish an instructional road map that allows all students to learn in more rigorous learning environments have worked in conjunction with SDUSD’s system of professional learning supports and gradually resulted in instructional shifts. District officials reported that teachers from across the district were more successfully implementing student-centered learning; interdisciplinary, project-based approaches; and differentiation strategies that support student learning under CCSS.

### **3. SDUSD developed a clear equity vision that informs district- and school-based efforts to ensure that all students excel.**

During the early implementation of CCSS, the district identified a complementary strategy to enhance its instructional and curricular vision: an intensifying focus on equity. SDUSD officials stated that the turnover of the district’s senior leadership over the past 2 decades had left SDUSD’s identity scattered, which affected how equitable practices were implemented throughout the district. To increase its ability to implement equitable practices, the district entered into strategic partnerships with Equal Opportunity Schools and the National Equity Project to diagnose inequities in its system and to develop an explicit equity vision.

This equity-focused reflection also motivated SDUSD officials to identify five “equity levers”—literacy, collaboration, meaningful engagement, relational leadership, and integrated multi-tiered systems of supports—through which they could examine how equity is facilitated throughout the district. In addition to providing a lens through which district and school leaders could monitor and support equitable practices in SDUSD schools, these equity levers have generated organizational shifts and professional learning practices at the district and school levels to redress existing inequities, particularly related to the district’s efforts to ensure access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Overall, SDUSD has not only maintained equity as a central commitment but has also embedded equity in the district’s practices for the benefit of the district’s students and communities.

#### **4. SDUSD developed and refined its structures to create a more comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting students.**

SDUSD's equity vision also compelled the district to assess and improve its systems to better address students' holistic needs. For example, to build on its system of student supports (e.g., a wellness program, LGBTQIA alliance, and Integrated Youth Services), the district identified integrated multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as one of its key initiatives. MTSS is a comprehensive framework and approach that aligns resources, initiatives, and interventions to support students' academic, behavioral, and social needs through two widely used systems: Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). To establish this system, SDUSD focused its efforts on developing and supporting school counselors who were charged with organizing and leading MTSS processes at each school. To this end, the district worked with its counselors to develop a data-driven process of identifying student needs and community assets that could support and monitor student progress and interventions. SDUSD also invested in coaches who could support counselors in providing academic, social, and emotional supports and created a school counseling and guidance program that could align counselor practice across the district.

In addition to MTSS, district leaders began efforts to transform SDUSD into a restorative justice district, wherein district schools would focus on building strong relationships and hold students accountable for their actions in supportive rather than punitive ways. To this end, the district piloted restorative justice practices at select schools in an attempt to support its broader implementation by building district and school infrastructure (such as professional learning for teachers and administrators) and created a department dedicated to supporting schools in adopting restorative practices.

#### **5. SDUSD meaningfully engaged students, families, and educators to support student learning.**

SDUSD leaders also identified meaningful engagement as a key lever for improving student achievement and well-being. To address the limitations of the district's previous approach to family and community engagement, which tended to nurture limited and less substantive partnerships, the district drafted a new vision and established its Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office in 2016 to systematically enact change. FACE's vision is based on four foundational principles that inform its approach: (1) families as co-teachers and co-learners, (2) community-school partnerships, (3) environments worthy of families, and (4) families as co-leaders.

To implement this vision, the district has invested in FACE resource teachers who spearhead these efforts, including efforts that build parent capacity to support student learning at home and support the development of productive teacher-family relationships. Cultivating new or stronger community partnerships to support student learning and students' access to social services through practices such as asset mapping has also been a district priority. In the face of financial and human capital constraints, these partnerships have enabled the district to sustain and expand its system of services and to implement MTSS. Finally, SDUSD's commitment to engagement has also meant creating forums at both the district and school levels to elevate student voice and incorporate student perspectives in decision-making processes.





## Introduction

Since 2013, the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has made steady strides toward increasing achievement for *all* students in the district. Under the leadership of Superintendent Cindy Marten, the district has blended two complementary approaches to drive student success. The first has been an emphasis on rigor and improved teaching and learning for students in the district, as required by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Across the country, these standards have shifted the emphasis of learning from memorization and recall and the application of basic skills to more advanced skills such as collaboration, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking—often called deeper learning. All students, regardless of their background, are expected to participate in quality learning environments and to graduate prepared to attend a postsecondary institution. To that end, the district has used its robust system of professional learning as the primary vehicle for teaching and learning transformation.

The district's second approach recognizes that addressing students' unique needs is critical to achieving high-quality learning. Consequently, SDUSD has complemented its focus on improved teaching and learning with a focus on equity, which, as Chief of Staff Staci Monreal explained, means that at SDUSD “each and every student gets what he or she needs, in the way they need it, when they need it.” The district identified specific levers through which it will actualize this equity vision across the district. Ongoing efforts to improve equity have altered district and school practice, increased efforts to meaningfully engage community stakeholders, and strengthened the district's system of holistic student supports.

This balance of high expectations for all with a keen focus on equity has supported strong student achievement on several fronts. From 2015 to 2017, African American, Latino/a, and White students in SDUSD achieved at higher levels on state tests of English language arts and math than predicted given the socioeconomic status of families in the district. Compared to state averages, a larger proportion of SDUSD students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds achieved proficiency on California's state assessment between 2015 and 2017. Moreover, SDUSD students tended to graduate at higher rates than the state average for their subgroup. For example, in 2017, approximately 82% of SDUSD Latino/a students graduated in 4 years, compared to 80% of California public school Latino/a students. Similarly, nearly 84% of African American SDUSD students graduated in 2017, compared to just 73% of African American students statewide. For SDUSD students of all races, graduation rates were 87%, compared to 83% across the state. In addition, SDUSD students of all races were generally suspended from school at lower rates than their peers in other California districts. (See Appendix A for more information.) SDUSD students' achievement suggests that the district's educators and leaders have been successful in supporting more rigorous and engaging instruction under CCSS.

In this case study, we identify the SDUSD practices and policies that helped the district adapt to CCSS and promote student learning, especially for students from low-income families and students of color. The case study is part of a larger quantitative study of district performance in California<sup>1</sup> and part of a larger qualitative study that examines trends across seven case studies of districts, such as SDUSD, that are doing better than expected on California's state assessment from 2015 through 2017.<sup>2</sup> For more information about the methods used in this individual case study, see Appendix B.

Based on an analysis of the data in this case study, we identified the following key strategies that contribute to SDUSD’s continuous improvement and student success:

- professional learning structures that support capacity building, especially among school leaders;
- ongoing curricular and instructional shifts that promote deeper learning;
- continued emphasis on equity and how it undergirds the district’s efforts to ensure that students, especially struggling students, receive a quality education;
- development and improvement of structures that address students’ social, emotional, and physical needs; and
- continued efforts to meaningfully engage students, families, educators, and the broader community to support student learning.

In describing these findings, we also highlight how SDUSD conducted its work in partnership with communities and organizations to extend its organizational capacity. To conclude, we summarize the key takeaways from SDUSD’s success in supporting student learning as the state has shifted to CCSS and new assessments.

## District Context

SDUSD is the second-largest district in California and educates over 128,000 students from preschool to high school.<sup>3</sup> Nearly three quarters of SDUSD students are students of color, including 47% who are Latino/a and 9% who are African American. Almost 60% of students are economically disadvantaged, and 24% are English learners. (See Table 1.)

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

Demographic	Number enrolled	Percent enrolled
African American	11,087	9%
Latino/a	59,806	47%
White	29,347	23%
Other	27,800	21%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	76,851	60%
English Learners	30,662	24%
<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>128,040<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>a</sup> This figure includes students enrolled in SDUSD public schools and students enrolled in district charter schools.  
Data source: Education Data Partnership. (2019). Ed-Data. <https://www.ed-data.org/> (accessed 05/13/19).

The district employs over 6,700 teachers. On average, SDUSD teachers have 14 years of experience, with first- and second-year teachers constituting only about 10% of the district's teaching force.<sup>4</sup> District and school leaders report that many of its early career educators come from local universities, including the University of California at San Diego and San Diego State University, and typically intern or student teach in the district prior to obtaining their placements. To fill its teaching vacancies, SDUSD adheres to the process outlined by its local collective bargaining agreement, which at the time of this study required school leaders to select candidates from a pool of senior teachers but allowed them to define their own interview process. SDUSD is divided into six areas that are each overseen by an area superintendent who reports to the district's chief of staff.

Programmatically, SDUSD offers an array of learning opportunities for its students beyond the four core content areas (English language arts, math, social studies, and science). For instance, the district maintains a robust Visual and Performing Arts program; a College, Career, and Technical Education program for students at the secondary level; and state-funded preschools and transitional kindergarten classrooms. For its English learners, the district has immersion programs for its recent arrivals but primarily mainstreams its English learners in general education classes, providing 30–45 minutes of English Language Development instruction daily. SDUSD also has dual and one-way immersion campuses and language pathways (i.e., a series of dual language courses) at the high school level.

SDUSD's operational budget of about \$1.3 billion supports district operations and programming,<sup>5</sup> but meeting the needs of SDUSD students, educators, and leaders has been challenging because the district is in a self-described "budget crisis." Although it has received additional funding through California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) for its population of English learners and students from low-income families, at the time of this study SDUSD leaders reported that the district cut \$124 million from its budget to reduce the deficit it had accrued over the past 2 decades, with half of these cuts affecting the central office.<sup>6</sup> Even with the additional funds provided by the weighted funding formula, district leaders asserted that the state's overall budget for school funding remained inadequate, and decades of this inadequacy had significantly contributed to SDUSD's financial challenges.<sup>7</sup> As one senior district official explained, "To deliver on equity with a less-than-adequate funding formula is really difficult. We appreciate the formula [LCFF] for being designed to deliver on equity, but we don't believe that it's ever been adequately funded to support systemic change."

Before Marten became Superintendent in 2013, the district had employed seven different superintendents (some permanent and some interim) over a 10-year period. Each leader had a different plan, which created uncertainty about the district's vision and identity. As a district leader explained, "When the district's identity is scattered and it's not clear, then you can't direct resources. You can't make funding decisions. You can't [provide] supports in a way that's going to be equitable so that different places get what they need."

Prior to this 10-year period, Superintendent Alan Bersin led SDUSD through ambitious, but tumultuous, reforms between 1998 and 2005. He focused on improving teaching quality in the district, largely by providing professional learning opportunities for principals that helped them become better instructional leaders. However, his efforts were met with much resistance because they were seen as top-down, centralized school reform efforts.

When Marten took the helm as Superintendent, she drew on her deep expertise in school improvement. Having worked as an educator and administrator for 25 years—10 of which were in SDUSD—Marten had firsthand experience developing and implementing comprehensive school improvement efforts that attended to teacher capacity and the provision of holistic student supports. Under her leadership, the district established curricular and equity visions that were responsive to school communities and that provided coherence and direction to its numerous schools. Strategic learning supports, organizational structures, and external partnerships bolstered these visions, enabling SDUSD to support its diverse population.

## Findings

### Professional Learning Structures to Support Instructional Shifts

SDUSD's professional learning structures have been foundational in supporting school leaders and teachers in the instructional shifts necessitated by CCSS. The district developed a clear vision for how to improve instruction and raise academic achievement. To support that vision, it refined its structures for teacher and leader development. While some learning structures have been in place for decades, the increased instructional demands of CCSS necessitated that the district develop additional avenues for professional learning, including increasing the number of teacher coaches and supporting teachers in the use of diverse data measures. Combined, these efforts created layers of professional learning support for SDUSD teachers and leaders and strengthened data practices to identify learning and instructional needs.

### SDUSD's vision and guiding principles

The seed for SDUSD's vision for improving student achievement was planted in 2009, when the school board adopted a school improvement plan, "A 2020 Vision for Local Excellence." Recently, this vision was updated with input from the current superintendent, as well as students, parents, staff, and community members. Today it is known as Vision 2020 and focuses on:

1. Closing the Achievement Gap with High Expectations for All.
2. Access to a Broad and Challenging Curriculum.
3. Quality Leadership, Teaching, and Learning.
4. Positive School Environment, Climate, and Culture with Equity at the Core and Support for the Whole Child.
5. Parent and Community Engagement with Highly Regarded Neighborhood Schools that Serve Students, Families, and Communities.
6. Well-Orchestrated Districtwide Support Services and Communications.<sup>8</sup>

Motivated by this vision, the district organized schools into "clusters" to encourage "greater community cohesion" and target its support efforts.<sup>9</sup> Each school cluster includes a high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it.

Although SDUSD originally generated this vision for improving student achievement in a top-down manner, Superintendent Marten believed that an effective vision and theory of change needed a balance of top-down and bottom-up input. She explained:

San Diego style reform has never been top down. It started with a deep focus on each of our school learning communities, or clusters, to fully understand the unique needs of each. Then, we built supports to help each community grow and thrive. In our model, the role of district leaders is to set expectations and then support each learning community as they rise to meet the challenge.

To inform this collaborative approach to vision-setting and change, Marten acknowledged that some schools in the district that had been operating fairly autonomously under prior district leadership were successful in improving student achievement. Consequently, their promising

practices could inform the work of other district schools. Furthermore, she understood that she did not have all the answers for improving achievement and recognized that educators were a valuable resource for helping each other improve practice.

### *Piloting*

To enact a vision for instructional improvement, SDUSD officials took a gradual approach. Specifically, district leaders piloted instructional improvements within select clusters, schools, and classrooms before broader adoption. Leaders said this process helped the district determine what worked and helped cultivate buy-in. For instance, leaders and educators who were interested in trying new practices could do so, and those who were more skeptical could wait to see the results before investing time in curricular and instructional shifts.

District leaders piloted instructional improvements within select clusters, schools, and classrooms before broader adoption. Leaders said this process helped the district determine what worked and helped cultivate buy-in.

The district used this pilot approach when it rolled out CCSS. Some schools adopted the standards prior to the districtwide adoption in the 2014–15 school year. They served as pilot schools so that district administrators could identify the practices that helped teachers make the required instructional shifts. A former SDUSD pilot school principal explained that district-level personnel visited her school during that pilot period, helping her and her staff focus “on literacy being at the heart of everything.” Importantly, the former principal commented that she “felt like it was a strong partnership” between her high school and the district.

The district has also used a variation of this piloting approach to build teacher buy-in to new instructional practices. For example, to expand College, Career, and Technical Education, interested middle school and high school teachers were able to attend a 2-week district Summer Institute to learn how to pilot career-related, project-based learning for their students. The former College, Career, and Technical Education Director said that inviting willing teachers to try out new strategies helped generate interest and gradually attract more teachers to the program. He explained that convincing a faculty member to adopt new instructional practices is difficult: “It’s tough getting that first transformation move to take place.” He and his team aimed to attract one or two more teachers to the Summer Institute each year, with the hope that new instructional practices would build enough momentum “to get dramatic exponential jumps” of interested teachers.

Another way the district supported the incremental spread of instructional shifts was through the work of teacher coaches, district employees who work with teachers at school sites to improve and align instruction with CCSS. These coaches, referred to as Common Core support teachers, similarly take a piloting approach to their work by providing targeted support and feedback to willing educators, as opposed to mandating coaching. When teachers saw how coaching helped colleagues learn and grow, they became interested in working with support teachers, thus allowing more effective instructional practices to spread.

### ***District-site collaboration***

The district recognized that trusting relationships are the foundation of instructional improvement. Just as coaches learned to build trust with teachers, district leaders, including SDUSD's superintendent and chief of staff, worked to build relationships with school staff through regular visits. The chief of staff said that, each Monday, she visited a different school in need of support. The lessons she learned about the obstacles the school faces to raising student achievement helped inform the district's priorities, especially for struggling schools.

In addition, area superintendents spent most of their time in schools providing support to principals and teachers. Mitzi Merino, an Area Superintendent, explained, "I get up every day and I go to schools and I stay there all day long ... next to leaders in classrooms, next to students." Because of how frequently she visited classrooms, Mitzi could, as she explained:

... find strengths and build capacity by connecting leaders to leaders, teachers to teachers.... Sometimes we don't have answers and we're not sure what to do. So we'll gather an integrated team and say, "How can you help us think differently about what this leader can do to support teachers, to become stronger?"

Other district leaders described a similar approach to working with educators. They said they identified positive practices occurring in the district, shared those practices, and connected effective educators with others who need support. Furthermore, owing to this close connection, district leaders said they could work with willing and interested educators to experiment with different practices and help effective practices spread, from the bottom up. Lamont Jackson, an Area Superintendent, described the district's collaborative approach:

We as a district have a belief that when we bring people together, powerful things can happen.... The power of a small group of people focused on something can be great.... We need to be together in a collaborative sphere.

### **System of professional learning supports**

To enact SDUSD's vision for instructional improvement and increased student achievement, the district invested time and personnel in the professional development of its teachers and leaders. Before the district's focus moved to adoption of CCSS in 2014, SDUSD had emphasized leadership development to spearhead improvement across its large district and held traditional professional development gatherings in which leaders learned about an initiative and reported back at their sites. Upon assuming the district helm, Superintendent Marten recognized the need to further invest in growing district, principal, and teacher capacity. In turn, the district improved upon its learning structures to allow school leaders and teachers to learn collaboratively with coaches and peers to enhance their professional learning in the context of these more rigorous standards.

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

SDUSD identified school leaders as central to district improvement efforts and provided principals with numerous opportunities to develop as leaders. SDUSD's chief of staff explained the importance of principals in leading change:

The role of the school leader is one of the important areas of focus that we have ... with any initiative that we implement, whether it was an initiative around



equity or moving all students into the sphere of success or building teacher capacity in all the different ways in which you could do that. No matter what the initiative is, without strong school leadership and without area superintendents who know how to support, coach, be warm demanders, then the transformation won't happen systemically in every classroom across the district.

As the chief of staff noted, area superintendents were key supports for principal development, providing coaching to school administrators during site visits and bimonthly principal meetings, as discussed below. Area Superintendent Merino shared that her “number one responsibility was to help leaders become stronger leaders so that they could impact the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms and change the outcomes for students.” Another Area Superintendent, Sofia Freire, explained that area superintendents support principals “through site-based coaching, side by side with principals.” She described what this coaching looks like:

If you look at my calendar Monday through Thursday, I'm at school visits. During those visits, if you can imagine the first 20 minutes in conversation with principals about what they've been working on and then being very strategic and focused in terms of what we're going to see in classrooms. [Afterward, we analyze] data from those classroom observations to determine next steps for the principals.

Principals also built their instructional leadership skills through Principal Institutes and Leadership Labs. As one area superintendent described, “The Institute is more of the ‘what’ and the Lab is the ‘how.’” At the Principal Institutes, district leaders gathered principals from each cluster and spent a full day learning. The area superintendents, chief of staff, and instructional support teams prepared content for the Institutes, and area superintendents and, occasionally, external experts delivered them. The Institutes also provided a regular opportunity for the Superintendent to address all principals regarding the district's focus on equity and students.

Through the Principal Institutes, the district provided guidance about CCSS and other district priorities. Topics at these Institutes included the district's focus on Marzano's Critical Concepts, which groups related the new standards to make them more understandable and manageable for instruction.<sup>10</sup> The district also shared resources with principals that they could use to provide professional development at their schools. Tavga Bustani, the Instructional Support Officer for Elementary Schools, explained:

Everything that we provide at the Institute in the delivery of our instruction—the PowerPoint, the materials, the resources, the videos.... A site leader can take that PD back to their school site, back to their [Instructional Leadership Team], maybe a certain grade level, however they choose to decide to implement it. But it's a replicable process and replicable learning, so they receive the content, and they have the tools and resources, at the conclusion of that Institute, and apply it at their school.

The Principal Institutes also helped principals learn how to better support students with diverse learning needs. For example, a recent Institute focused on special education. An area superintendent explained how the district structured this learning experience: “We actually had principals read this child's IEP [Individualized Education Plan] with a very critical lens and determine whether this child even needed these special services.”

Leadership Labs were another learning structure for principals and helped them implement what they learned in the Institutes. During labs, a small group of either elementary school or secondary school principals spend half a day together visiting each other's schools. They conduct walk-throughs, sometimes with area superintendents, and occasionally with teachers, to provide each other with feedback on teaching and learning conditions and note any areas for improvement.

SDUSD principals confirmed the value of the Leadership Labs. For example, Julia Bridi, an elementary school principal, said that meeting with other principals once a month provided an opportunity to problem-solve with her peers. She explained that they typically discussed how to support teachers in delivering instruction that improves 3rd-grade literacy outcomes, which was a district priority.

### *Professional learning supports for teachers*

In addition to preparing its principals to be strong instructional leaders, SDUSD also invested in the professional development of its teacher workforce. Specifically, the district refined its teacher learning structures and invested in personnel who support teachers in understanding CCSS and its related pedagogical shifts.

SDUSD resource teachers, a group that includes the Common Core support teachers who provide guidance in implementing and refining instruction to align with the new standards, were one such added support. Resource teachers, who are also district employees, work collaboratively with Common Core support teachers to help classroom teachers in improving their instruction in content areas or in support of students with particular learning needs. Each area superintendent has a team of subject- and level-specific resource teachers that consists of specialists in English language arts, math, English Language Development, and special education, as well as Common Core support teachers who serve elementary and secondary schools in their respective cluster. These resource teachers provide professional development and coaching to teachers on CCSS, including the district's Critical Concepts. A secondary school CCSS mathematics support teacher explained how she sees her role:

Teachers have a difficult time when a district person comes in because [they think] automatically, "You're in trouble."... But I'm like, "No. I'm here to help you. What I'm trying to do is take wherever you are and move you up that little bit." I have a teacher that doesn't want any talk in her class. I was coaching her, and we started real small.... I just brought another teacher in, and we modeled the talk so that the kids could see it, and now she does talk every day.

To support CCSS implementation, resource teachers followed a practice known as "coaching cycles." Over 4 to 6 weeks, resource teachers worked with SDUSD teachers at the same grade level on improving student learning in math and English language arts. Coaching cycles began with a pre-assessment of student performance in teachers' classes, which teachers could supplement with quantitative and qualitative data to determine student strengths and learning gaps.<sup>11</sup> Based on these data, teachers worked with resource teachers and principals to co-construct learning goals that align with CCSS and the Critical Concepts and to designate instructional practices teachers would use to support students in reaching these goals in the 4- to 6-week learning cycle.

Over the course of the cycle, the resource teacher modeled new instructional practices in the classroom. As teachers attempted new strategies, the resource teacher observed and later met one-on-one to provide feedback. Resource teachers also met regularly with the grade-level group to analyze the results of classroom assessments aligned to CCSS and to discuss how to tailor their instruction to student needs.

At the conclusion of the coaching cycle, students completed a post-assessment to determine whether instructional practices had improved student learning. In this process, principals, district administrators, and resource teachers completed classroom walk-throughs to assess, as one Common Core support teacher described, “What has taken hold? What evidence of the goal or the targets can we see in what kids are doing? Which instructional approaches do we see teachers taking on that are supporting the work?”

The goal of these coaching cycles was to help teachers see, as the instructional support officer for elementary schools explained, “the instructional path that would lead students to achieve.” The processes within the coaching cycles were designed to help teachers learn how to analyze data, assess student learning, and create goals aligned with the district’s standards—an approach that teachers could apply to their instruction moving forward.

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SDUSD also used professional learning communities (PLCs), which most district schools adopted prior to CCSS, as a key structure for supporting teacher learning and schoolwide instructional shifts. The district’s PLCs were informed by the work of Richard DuFour, who described a PLC as including “a systematic process in which teachers work together in teams to analyze and improve their classroom practice, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning.”<sup>12</sup>

SDUSD leaders emphasized the importance of PLCs during the district’s rollout of CCSS. Although PLCs had existed in the district for several years, SDUSD leaders noted that educators have increasingly used this time to examine multiple sources of student data, such as in-class assignments and formative assessments, to inform CCSS-aligned instruction. SDUSD elementary and secondary school principals reiterated this observation and the value of PLCs for instructional improvement. For example, Principal Bridi said that during PLCs at her site, teachers analyzed student data, planned a lesson together, and taught the lesson in front of each other to receive feedback on CCSS-aligned pedagogical practices. Bridi shared that the PLCs have encouraged constant reflection among her teachers and inspired them to think differently about CCSS and how they teach.

Despite the growing importance of PLCs in supporting instructional shifts, SDUSD leaders noted that PLCs varied significantly in quality across the district. To improve the effectiveness of PLCs, SDUSD focused on PLC best practices at several Principal Institutes and asked resource teachers to participate in PLCs when possible. One resource teacher described participation in PLCs as one of

her main responsibilities, noting how she aimed to shift PLCs from what she called “happy hours” to “true collaboration where they’re really talking about students at a different level, where it’s going to change achievement.”

### **Adopting more comprehensive data practices**

Underpinning the district’s approach to data use is Superintendent Marten’s widely cited directive to use data as a flashlight, not a hammer. An area superintendent explained that the statement is “about uncovering what we need to do and where our kids need us most.” To identify student learning needs, the district supports schools in using state data and developing its own formative assessments. Providing differentiated supports based on these needs is the next step. This means that not all students get the same amount of instruction on any one topic. As the area superintendent explained, “The kids that need more will get more.”

Staci Monreal, the district’s Chief of Staff, said that the SDUSD looked at trends in the district’s student achievement data from the California Department of Education to help the district and principals “set their focus.” Specifically, she explained that these data helped the district track annual changes in learning gaps or student improvement in learning, as identified by state tests. According to Monreal, the trend data prompted principals “to think about their ‘Why?’ Like, why change? What needs to be changed, and why does it need to be changed?” In turn, these data allow school leaders to target their professional development and instructional supports for students and educators who may need the most support.

While the summative assessment data on state tests shed light on student and school needs, nearly all the district leaders, principals, and teachers we spoke to discussed the value of using formative assessments to inform instructional improvement.

Monreal noted that formative assessments are critical to “looking at how students are doing on a regular basis: on a weekly basis, on a monthly basis, on a quarterly basis.” The regularly collected data help educators “figure out what supports need to be in place at the school level,” she explained. She noted that the emphasis on formative assessment occurred during the shift from the “high-stakes testing environment” under No Child Left Behind to Common Core, when the state provided little direction under CCSS. SDUSD’s leaders saw this as an opportunity to start “talking about the power of formative assessment.” Moreover, district leaders encouraged teachers to use data as a tool for learning and reflection, which was at odds with how some SDUSD district administrators and educators described data as being used during the No Child Left Behind era—as a tool to punish schools and districts.

To assist educators in developing formative assessments, the district adopted “Illuminate,” which is a digital platform that provides an item bank of multiple-choice and constructed questions aligned to CCSS. Teachers can use the Illuminate system to select a prebuilt interim assessment or a subset of questions focused on a particular standard. The district chose this system over creating a districtwide interim assessment. Ron Rode, the Director of Research and Development, explained that this flexibility allowed educators to align instruction and assessment to students’ needs rather than having a districtwide assessment drive the content and pace of teachers’ instruction.

Several SDUSD educators also have increasingly used observation and short assignments as formative assessments since the implementation of CCSS. A Common Core support teacher explained that under CCSS “there are so many opportunities to listen in and see what kids are doing versus standing up and teaching where you don’t really know what the kids are doing.” Rob Ellor, a high school assistant principal, commented that using short assignments as formative assessment “has become much more important, just even small-scale stuff like exit tickets<sup>15</sup> and having kids do short reflections at the end of the class, or even the beginning of the next class, and adjusting and shaping where that class goes.” Ellor encouraged his teachers to use these assessments to respond to students’ learning needs. He explained that he told his teachers:

I don’t want to know what you’re teaching exactly 3 weeks from now to the day, because I hope you don’t know. You really shouldn’t know. If you’re responsive to what your students are learning, you’ll have an idea, but not specific. That’s been a big shift. We used to have a number of teachers who would calendar out their entire semester.

Teachers and Common Core support teachers also reported using formative assessments during their coaching cycles and PLCs. Tara Malm, a Common Core support teacher, explained that teacher engagement with formative assessments was different from her PLC’s previous practice:

That process of analyzing an assessment, looking for, “What are the observable behaviors that we can actually notice and name? How are students doing with those? And then what are we going to do about it?” versus just, “Okay, I’ve got eight of 10 students that score proficient on this, so that’s 80% of my class.”... We’re actually looking at what students are doing and what they need for their instruction. We’re trying to make that generalizable to any assessment or any kind of data point that you want to collect. How can we have observable behaviors that we can use to really inform our teaching and our next steps?

Overall, data practices have taken on new forms in SDUSD since the onset of CCSS. Teachers, leaders, and district administrators each emphasize the importance and utility of an array of data sources and increasingly understand how data can improve teaching and learning.

## **Curricular and Instructional Shifts**

SDUSD’s professional learning structures provided a foundation for the implementation of CCSS beginning in 2014. The superintendent called the work of implementing these new standards a “rewiring of the heart of the organization to have a laser-like focus on teaching and learning.” Using these professional learning structures—including professional learning communities, Principal Institutes, and instructional coaching—the district introduced the new, more rigorous standards and their accompanying instructional shifts. As one area superintendent noted, the district approached CCSS implementation in a non-prescriptive manner. She explained:

We weren’t like, “You’re going to do this and here’s the benchmark that goes with it.” In the beginning it was, organically, let’s get our teachers together. Let’s teach them how to look at this and make sense. Let’s talk about designing units and then, finally, lesson design.

To begin CCSS implementation, the district offered professional development to school leaders and teacher leaders to explain the purpose of the new standards and the instructional shifts that would be necessary for students to excel. During the trainings, school staff also analyzed the standards to determine the behaviors they would want students to exhibit in classrooms. Principals and teacher leaders then shared this learning at their school sites, often during PLCs, with the support of area superintendents and resource teachers. District leaders recognized that demystifying the new standards and explaining their purpose needed to be the first step in implementation. As SDUSD's Chief of Staff Monreal explained, "In the early stages of our work, there was a lot of misunderstanding about what it [CCSS] is and what it isn't. We focused the work on getting really clear on what it means for us and why we were switching to Common Core."

Although the district focused on increasing teacher and leader knowledge of CCSS and the rationale for their adoption, SDUSD's onboarding efforts also resulted in disparate interpretations and instructional shifts at school sites. "Our approach wasn't systematic," explained one area superintendent, who was a principal in the district during CCSS implementation. She recalled that each school had its own ideas of what instruction should look like and how it should be monitored. "As an area superintendent, when I first went into schools, I could see we were all over the place." As a result of the unsystematic approach, area superintendents noted that teachers often referred to CCSS as driving their instruction but that their lessons were still aligned with the previous California standards or were often not on grade level during those early years.

SDUSD district leaders soon realized that schools needed more support to successfully implement CCSS. They created a framework to guide professional development and new instructional practices.

#### **Four learning cycles: A framework for CCSS teaching and learning**

To advance instructional improvements and their coherence across the district, SDUSD adopted a professional development framework, referred to as the "four learning cycles," in the 2014–15 school year. From their early observations of CCSS implementation at pilot sites, district leadership identified the following four districtwide priorities for creating high-quality instruction:

1. Creating an academic, social, and emotional environment worthy of children.
2. Promoting classroom environments that are alive with collaborative conversations.
3. Promoting student agency and voice.
4. Unlocking the genius of all children, including students with disabilities and English learners.

During the first year of the learning cycles, district and school leaders spent 3 months on each focus area, but they quickly recognized that teachers and school leaders needed more time to make sense of these concepts. Consequently, the district revisited these four themes in subsequent years in Principal Institutes and Leadership Labs so that principals could continue to learn how to lead instructional improvements in each of those areas.

Although the timing of the learning cycle has changed, district administrators have consistently kept the first learning cycle focused on supportive learning environments, emphasizing how to create environments that, as one area superintendent explained, "people love to show up to and feel a part of." As Instructional Support Officer Bustani discussed the district's motivation for

focusing on this topic at the beginning of the year: “We wanted the experience from the parent, from the teacher, from the student, to be overwhelmingly positive. What does that mean, in terms of establishing those conditions at your school?”

To support teacher and leader learning in this area, the district has had guest speakers in its Principal Institutes who speak on the development of democratic and nurturing classroom environments. District leaders have also recorded and taken photographs of positive classroom and school environments to provide schools with concrete examples and practices. To hold principals accountable for making instructional shifts based on these speakers and observations, district administrators and peer principals also look for evidence that principals are improving their school environments during Leadership Labs and area superintendents’ school visits.

### **SDUSD’s guaranteed and viable curriculum**

With the learning cycles in place, SDUSD refined its vision of an effective curriculum and of student access to that curriculum. District leaders sought to create a “guaranteed and viable curriculum,” which education leaders defined as a standards-based curriculum that guarantees *all* students the opportunity to learn and the time to meet those standards.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, every teacher and school- and district-level leader we spoke to expressed that the district’s focus on creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum has been central to improvements in student learning. Area Superintendent Freire provided a clear definition of this important concept and explained how it differed from the traditional understandings of curriculum:

There’s a difference between curriculum and curricular resources, and a lot of times, folks are using that interchangeably. The clear distinction that we wanted to make was that our curriculum is the standards.... There’s no leeway there, ... but they have leeway on what curricular resource they’re going to use to support [those standards].

Because of early challenges to developing a guaranteed and viable curriculum, SDUSD was motivated to partner with Robert Marzano’s team to develop the Critical Concepts for SDUSD during the 2016–17 school year. The Critical Concepts, which now serve as the district’s guaranteed and viable curriculum,<sup>15</sup> are a “focused set of critical concepts for each K-12 grade level in the content areas of English language arts, mathematics, and science.”<sup>16</sup> Freire explained that the Critical Concepts “[take] the state’s standards and [cluster] them in a way that makes it more manageable to teach them.” Not only does this help teachers deepen their understanding of the standards, but it also reflects how students learn the standards. As Area Superintendent Jackson explained, “We know that we don’t ever teach one standard in isolation.”

Marzano’s Critical Concepts helped SDUSD educators think more strategically about their work. Clustering state standards made them more manageable to teach and helped teachers and leaders understand how the standards relate to and reinforce each other across grade levels and content areas. After several years without a clear district vision for student learning, the district’s guaranteed and viable curriculum helped teachers and leaders develop instructional priorities and understand more clearly how to improve student achievement.

### *Ensuring postsecondary preparation for all*

The district sees as fundamental that learning environments prepare all students to enroll and excel in postsecondary environments. A guaranteed and viable curriculum ensures that students have access to the rigorous learning environments that CCSS seeks to foster. To this end, SDUSD has adopted two initiatives that drive this curricular shift: requiring all students to graduate having satisfied the A-G requirements and providing opportunities for students to enroll in college-level courses.

The A-G graduation requirements, which identified a series of courses necessary for admission as a freshman to the University of California or California State University system, were first implemented for SDUSD's class of 2016. The district undertook an initiative to increase its number of graduates who completed the A-G graduation requirements after an equity audit revealed that some student populations, such as African American and Latino/a students, were disproportionately placed in less rigorous courses and, therefore, these students did not meet baseline criteria for admission to many of the state's public institutions. To tackle this systemic challenge, Superintendent Marten established the Office of Secondary Schools in 2014 and tapped Cheryl Hibbeln, a long-time SDUSD principal, to be its Executive Director.

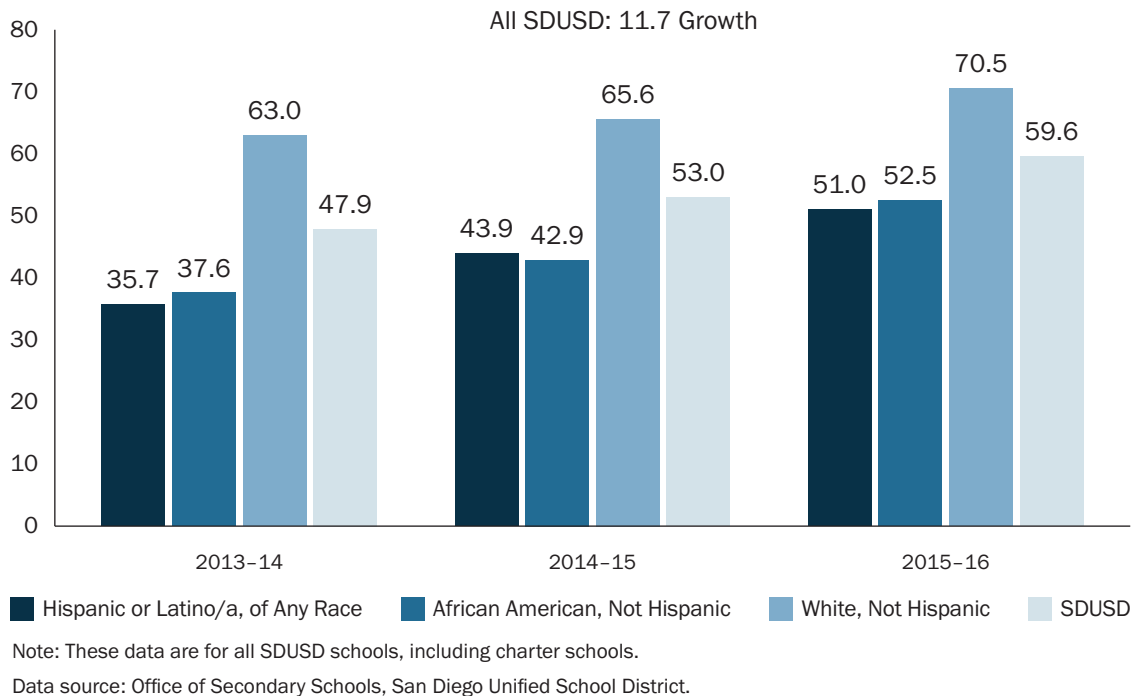
Hibbeln's approach to ensuring that all students meet the A-G requirements meant that district and school leaders needed to focus their attention on what SDUSD described as "equity sequencing," or the creation of master schedules that would allow for students to have access to A-G classes, and be on track for completion of A-G requirements, while in district schools. This process first involved school leaders reviewing their schedules to confirm that courses were arranged in a way that allowed students to satisfy the requirements. Second, district administrators reviewed all secondary courses to confirm that they met the A-G requirements. In addition, the district needed to ensure that students were, as the director of teaching, learning, and support in secondary schools described, being challenged "to take an extra elective class or an enrichment class or another AP class." She said this communicated to students, "This is school. School is serious. School is important, and I'm going to make sure that you've had every single opportunity to be successful and to prepare yourself for ... whatever may be next in your future." Importantly, having students graduate A-G ready was essential to SDUSD leaders improving racial and socioeconomic equity in the district, as described in more detail below.

Hibbeln's approach to ensuring that all students meet the A-G requirements meant that district and school leaders needed to focus their attention on what SDUSD described as "equity sequencing," or the creation of master schedules that would allow for students to have access to A-G classes, and be on track for completion of A-G requirements, while in district schools.

Requiring all students to satisfy the A-G requirements is showing early signs of success in improving graduation rates for SDUSD students. The number of students graduating from SDUSD schools having completed A-G requirements has also increased, improving by 11.7 percentage points between 2013–14 and 2015–16 districtwide as a result of the initiative. Increases in the completion of A-G requirements are even more pronounced for the district's African American and Latino/a student populations. (See Figure 1.)



**Figure 1**  
**Percentage of SDUSD Graduates Having Completed A-G Requirements**  
**(2013–16)**



Leaders said the initiative also spurred the district to more carefully examine data to identify critical content areas and grade levels that predicted graduation and postsecondary success. For example, after reviewing data about which students were meeting the A-G requirements and attending college, district leaders saw that the proficiency of students in 3rd grade could be traced to predict whether those students would attend college or drop out. This realization motivated the district to focus on 3rd-grade literacy. Hibbeln explained that as an ongoing improvement effort for the 2017–18 academic year, SDUSD’s superintendent has “made a promise to the district that we would focus on 3rd grade because we know that’s such a crucial year for readers. We want to make sure that we’re giving them as much support as possible so that no one’s falling through the cracks.”

Teachers and school leaders confirmed that 3rd-grade literacy was in fact a priority in their schools and classrooms. One principal said:

Third grade is my priority. I spend a lot of time sitting with the 3rd-grade table.... I make sure I’m in every single one of our PLCs. Not because I think they’re bad teachers, but so we can figure something out about our readers. It’s a critical year, and we’re not getting the gains that we should based on the efforts we’re giving, so something has to change.

We also saw evidence of this priority at a high-poverty elementary school at the south end of the district near the Mexico border. Posters outside of classrooms noted ambitious reading goals, such as “the percentage of 3rd-graders scoring at proficiency or higher in reading proficiency will increase from 28% to 80%” during the 2017–18 school year.”

### *Early college initiative*

The second major initiative supporting SDUSD students' college readiness and ensuring a guaranteed viable curriculum is the district's early college program. Although district high schools have offered college courses to higher-achieving students for more than 40 years, the early college program aims to serve all students. The current initiative departs from earlier iterations by encouraging students with learning gaps to participate in the program. This focus began when school and district leaders reflected on how to better support SDUSD students who were having to enroll in remedial math and English courses upon entering the San Diego Community College District or 4-year institutions. This trend concerned SDUSD officials because it meant that students had to take approximately three semesters of remedial math before they could take college-level classes. Consequently, students required more time and money to complete their coursework or did not complete their postsecondary degrees.

To remedy this situation, the district partnered with the San Diego Community College District to pilot the "College and Career Access Pathways" partnership in the fall of 2015, wherein 13 high schools offered college-level coursework taught by a college instructor to high school students. The district found that more SDUSD students passed the postsecondary coursework when they completed it as high school students within their high schools compared to completing it as community college students after graduating from SDUSD. Consequently, more SDUSD students were immediately eligible for college-level classes when they began their postsecondary careers. By the 2017–18 school year, the program was in its third year of implementation and present in 18 of the district's 22 high schools.

The early college program has helped students develop confidence in their ability to succeed in high school and college. SDUSD's executive director of secondary schools was formerly a principal at one of the pilot schools that offered postsecondary coursework to high school students. She explained:

Three hundred kids a day at our complex would go out and take college credits and earn credits and save their families money. It made them believe they could do college.... So, we'd send them to [the nearby community college] and not just to take the classes, but so that they believed they were college kids. A lot of them went to college because they had [that] experience.

An SDUSD principal echoed this sentiment and noted that the early college program improved student achievement, in part by building students' self-esteem:

I actually think that that college mindset and experience is a huge part of our success academically because it's giving students a bridge to what's next and building those skills and also that confidence. Kids go into their [state standardized] test as juniors, [thinking] "I just passed a college class last semester. What am I afraid of?" That's huge.

Now, every SDUSD high school offers community college courses, including course offerings for students who are struggling academically. For instance, the district partnered with nearby community colleges to create "The Legacy Program," which identified students who were struggling in math and had them enroll in two college courses in 11th grade—one remedial course and a statistics course—that satisfy the college mathematics requirements for non-STEM majors. The district created a similar course pairing for students struggling in English language arts coursework.

As the executive director of secondary schools described the early impact of these early college initiatives:

More than 90% of the kids [taking community college coursework] gain an A, B, or C regardless of subgroup. So, if they're in special education, if they're English learners, if they're Hispanic, if they're Black, any of the subgroups we're watching, it doesn't matter. They all perform at the same level, which is really amazing, and we're really proud of that.

### ***Ongoing challenges to providing a guaranteed viable curriculum***

Envisioning curriculum as the standards and having teachers help create materials to teach those standards has come with a few challenges, particularly around the district's lack of CCSS-aligned curricular materials to accompany these priorities. SDUSD made the strategic decision to invest in human capital development rather than curricular resources in its instructional reform efforts. As one Common Core support teacher explained:

We didn't go through a new curriculum adoption. We didn't buy new Common Core updated literacy materials. Instead, we tried to go the route of professional development and growing capacity within teachers so that no matter what curricular resource you're using, you have the habits of mind—this is how you assess, this is how you choose your text, this is how you plan out your text—so as to not let the curricular resource drive the instruction but rather let what your kids need drive it.

While this tactic provides educators with flexibility to experiment with resources and instructional practices and can generate long-term benefits, district leaders stated that many teachers remained uncomfortable with this practice. An area superintendent explained,

[Teachers] want something in their hands [that] they can turn [to], and they want something to tell them what to do. They want a list of texts to use for this unit, and [they want to know] this is what I teach for this unit, and this is what I teach for this unit, and they want it to be pretty much prescriptive. Not all, but there are quite a few that really would like that, and we still get questions pretty much every school we're at, "Why don't we have a curricular resource?"

Efforts to support teachers in identifying curricular materials were ongoing at the time of this study. For example, district leaders indicated that they were developing materials for grades 6–12, which would teach to CCSS for those grades and provide concrete guidance to educators as to what a guaranteed and viable curriculum looks like in their classrooms.

### **CCSS-aligned instructional shifts take hold**

SDUSD's ongoing efforts to improve its CCSS implementation gradually resulted in the desired instructional shifts. Notably, district officials reported that teachers from across the district were more successfully implementing student-centered learning; interdisciplinary, project-based approaches; and key differentiation strategies that support students in meeting these more challenging standards.

### *Student-centered learning*

As it rolled out its guaranteed and viable curriculum, the district supported teachers in implementing more student-centered learning approaches, which gave students more responsibility for their own learning. Multiple SDUSD educators described this as “students doing more of the work” compared to teachers as “the keepers of knowledge.” One Common Core support teacher said:

There’s more of that collaborative effort, definitely more talk and think time for students, which really helps our English language learners because they’re able to have the opportunity to orally rehearse, listen to peers that are more proficient, and get feedback from the teacher.

A hallmark of student-centered learning for many in the district was student talk. One SDUSD educator explained that student dialogue is important because “being quiet is not engaged. Talking and problem-solving is engaged.” Several SDUSD educators and leaders provided vivid examples of the type of active learning that has occurred since the implementation of CCSS. One assistant high school principal said:

Making sure that students understand that what they have to say is incredibly important. In math class, that might look like, “All right, let’s see if we can have a Socratic seminar about the most efficient way to solve this math problem.” Kids are like, “[My answer is] better, because of this.” “No, mine’s more efficient because of that.” At the end of the day they all got the right answer ... or they made mistakes, but learned from it and they’re having a rich discussion.

A Common Core support teacher similarly explained the social aspect of learning: “The kids need to talk. They need to interact.... Yes, [a teacher’s] room is going to be loud, but it’s not out of control.”

Student-centered learning in SDUSD is also characterized by students having more responsibility and control over what and how they want to learn. An elementary school principal noted that “kids are creating, kids are goal setting, kids are talking about their learning.” And a Common Core support teacher added, “There’s a lot more goal setting and reflection happening because we are seeing the need to have students know where they are.”

Many educators in the district said that before CCSS, instruction was much more teacher-centered. One teacher noted that many of her colleagues previously believed their jobs were to “stand and deliver. I hold all the control, I’m the bearer of the knowledge, I give it to you, and that’s how I operate.” A high school principal expressed a similar sentiment:

When I first came here, ... every math teacher [was] doing their own thing with their own assessments, with [this approach]: “I tell you this. Now you practice over here, show me the steps, and give me a right answer.” That’s not really what we’re looking for anymore. We’re looking for the thought process.

The extent to which SDUSD educators have moved away from teacher-centered practices varies. Several district leaders noted that convincing secondary teachers to adopt student-centered approaches has been especially challenging. One area superintendent said:

We are still seeing in a lot of high school classrooms the traditional lecture-style instruction that gives very little room for student engagement, student collaboration, group thinking, and group problem-solving. It’s very uncomfortable

for a lot of teachers, and so that's something that we're cognizant of and we're always working to figure out ways to change high school instruction particularly.

The area superintendent's comment reflected some of the inherent challenges in shifting to more student-centered learning. She explained that learning how to support active student learning, in which students guide the lesson and teach each other, requires updated instructional strategies that support student collaboration and dialogue.

Another challenge in this context relates to assessment. Because CCSS requires the examination of a variety of measures, including formative assessments, to assess student learning, teachers must work together to agree on what quality student work looks like. Teachers are expected to come to agreement during PLCs on how to score formative assessments, but district leaders acknowledged that this type of collaboration takes time. As one high school principal said, CCSS leads to "a little bit more work for teachers because once you have an open-ended question, we have to grade it," as opposed to being able to scan it for a score.

Overall, a shift to student-centered learning has not only benefited student learning but also helped teachers take a more supportive role, in which they facilitate student learning rather than act as the key supplier of knowledge for students.

#### ***Applied, interdisciplinary, and project-based learning***

SDUSD teachers and leaders described how the district's guaranteed and viable curriculum requires students to synthesize their knowledge across several subject areas in order to solve real-world problems through hands-on learning experiences. Explaining these new requirements, one area superintendent noted:

The shift has really been to a constructivist approach where we start by giving students a problem, understanding that there are multiple ways to solve the problem, expecting kids to be able to justify their thinking ... helping kids understand that there's more than one way to solve a problem. And then we're even moving and shifting away from calling it a problem.

SDUSD school leaders confirmed they have encouraged teachers to move toward more applied and project-based learning to support student achievement. For example, a high school principal explained how she encourages her teachers to adopt these approaches:

I tell them all the time, "I'd rather you try something super cool and innovative and it flop than I walk in and you're standing there modeling a problem and [you] want kids to repeat it." That's boring. It doesn't work for those kids. They're not making sense of what you're doing.... We're just wasting their time and ours.

District leaders and teachers said these shifts were largely driven by California's new standardized assessment of student performance that was implemented statewide during the 2015–16 school year. A high school assistant principal noted that the changes on the state assessment informed educators' approaches to instruction and assessment:

There's no longer a California test that's Trivial Pursuit of 100 questions of, "What do you know?" It's all about giving kids difficult texts and having them access or

synthesize and make sense of [them]. That’s what I want to see [teachers] doing when I come in the classroom.... I don’t want to see a test with 50 bubble-in answers. I’d like to see three short answer writings and then reflecting on alternative possibilities, and all these things that are much harder to grade, but really aligning with what the Common Core is looking at.

Not only have the expected instructional changes influenced teachers’ approaches to assessing student learning, but the shift to more applied and project-based learning has also required the district to update some classrooms’ physical learning environments. For example, one district administrator noted that SDUSD was in the process of converting “kindergarten and [transitional kindergarten] classrooms into makerspaces throughout the district.” A makerspace provides readily available materials and tools that allow students to explore, create, and test their ideas. LEGO donated resources to support SDUSD in creating these spaces in which young children can experiment with creating tools to solve real-world problems.

SDUSD students in upper grades also have several opportunities to learn in real-world settings at businesses and organizations throughout San Diego. The director of College, Career, and Technical Education (CCTE) explained that the district’s CCTE courses introduce over 17,000 students annually to opportunities in 15 local industry sectors in which students can shadow industry professionals and participate in internships. He said that through these experiences, students see how developing academic knowledge and skills can contribute to their future professional success. Internships also give students practice applying their knowledge to problems that require interdisciplinary solutions. For example, students participated in project-based learning labs such as a study of mammals at Sea World, an underwater rover engineering lab at Raytheon, and an engineering and mathematics lab aboard the USS *Midway* aircraft carrier.

The district relies on multiple funding sources for the CCTE learning opportunities. The program received funding through the state’s Local Control Funding Formula, federal grants under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act, a grant to expand career pathway programs in high school under the California Career Pathways Trust, and the California Technical Education Incentive Grant, which provided funds to develop and enhance k–12 career technical education programs. The CCTE director noted that his office had recently applied for 15 grants and received six of them. These six grants provided \$25 million to, among other things, update school facilities and equipment to better facilitate career and technical education and to pay for transportation so that students could participate in learning labs at businesses throughout San Diego.

### ***Differentiation***

Differentiating instruction to meet a variety of learning levels and student needs is another key districtwide strategy for improving CCSS implementation. To do this, SDUSD leaders said they asked teachers districtwide to identify a few “focus students” to examine in depth. This practice of identifying focus students had existed for several years in schools across the district, but the district made it a districtwide initiative during the 2017–18 school year. The instructional support officer for elementary schools explained the theory behind this approach:

The theory behind it is that the more we pay attention to their [students’] learning needs and the more we get underneath how to best meet [these needs], then we can step back and say, “What impacted the growth of this child? And let’s name

that.” And then we leave the teacher with those strategies [that worked]. Now [the teachers] can implement that when we’re gone. We figured out how to meet Melissa’s needs, and how do we take what we learned about Melissa and apply it [to other students], because it’s just good teaching.

In this approach, teachers select focus students who represent a broader group of students. The process of identifying student groups that might need more assistance is twofold. First, principals meet with their area superintendent to analyze school data (such as student tests, course tracking, and attendance) and identify student groups who are underserved in their school. Then, teachers select focus students in their classrooms who represent these groups—typically students with disabilities, English learners, and other students who are on the cusp of proficiency. Area Superintendent Freire explained that this approach has led teachers, principals, and district leaders to “spend a lot of time watching, zooming in on focus students, and getting down to the nitty gritty in terms of what kids can do and next steps for their learning.” Teachers share their classroom observations and formative assessment data on focus students during PLCs, discuss how to improve instruction, and share any successful strategies. Teachers have similar one-on-one conversations with their principals, who also provide feedback from classroom observations. Principals then confer one-on-one with an area superintendent about the progress of focus students and how to better support them.

The focus student strategy was a recent initiative districtwide, and SDUSD leaders said its early implementation at various sites yielded instructional improvements for many student subgroups, particularly English learners and students with special needs. SDUSD leaders also reported that attention on a focus English learner resulted in greater teacher familiarity with California’s English Language Development (ELD) standards and increased opportunities for language use. An official with the district’s Office of Language Acquisition explained:

As teachers plan, we now see them identify a content target and a language [ELD] target.... Many of them are now very aware that their English learners are sitting in their classes and what they have to do to make the content accessible. They are getting better at creating opportunities for collaborative conversations to deepen the language that kids use.

The collaborative efforts to understand the needs of English learners allow teachers to benefit from the expertise of others, district leaders said. They named one group of educators as having a particularly strong impact on improving teacher understanding of effective ELD strategies: the English learner support teachers, or what they now call English language instructional resource teachers (ELIs). Prior to the onset of CCSS, these resource teachers were what one district leader described as “more compliance-focused,” typically pulling English learners out of classrooms for targeted ELD support. Since 2013, the district has leaned on its English learner support teachers to work with teachers more directly during student-centered coaching cycles and PLCs.

District leaders also noted that students in special education have also benefited from the districtwide emphasis on focus students. Over the past 15 years, researchers have evaluated SDUSD services for students with special needs and identified systemic problems. These past problems included the overidentification of students of color and English learners as needing special education, stagnant student performance, and the disproportionate use of restrictive or segregated

learning environments.<sup>17</sup> In response to these reports, SDUSD placed more students with disabilities in general education classrooms, but teachers continued to report difficulty in supporting this subgroup.<sup>18</sup>

District leaders explained that analyzing the needs of specific special education focus students led teachers to a deeper understanding about the difference between accommodations, which change how a student learns the material, and modifications, which change what the student is taught or expected to know.

One area superintendent noted that she had already observed improvements in accommodations for special education students. She provided one concrete example of a 3rd-grade teacher who created an alternative reading comprehension assessment to support her autistic student:

The teacher had a feeling he was able to understand the book, but he could [not] articulate what he understood.... Instead of asking him questions that he needed to respond to, she gave him multiple choice on sentence strips, and he was able to answer every question correctly. If you would have given him the same assessment that everybody got, you would have assessed that he knew nothing about the book, but because they changed the assessment for him, they realized that he understood and made meaning of the book.

Analyzing the needs of focus students has not only helped teachers to refine their practice, but, as evidence suggests, has also helped principals and district leaders determine how to better support teachers. Area Superintendent Freire described one instance. She and a principal were observing a focus student, a 5th-grade girl from Vietnam who was learning English. Even though the teacher had “done a phenomenal job” preparing the lesson and provided opportunities to talk, Freire said, the student wasn’t speaking, which is critical for learning a new language:

Every time there was a turn and talk, she just let her partner talk. And every time they had to switch, she was quiet and her partner kept talking. She was never asked a question, so she never got to speak during that entire 20-minute lesson. But from the teacher’s perspective, all of the kids got to share because they did partner share.

Concentrating on the focus student helped Freire and the principal provide targeted feedback to the teacher about how to improve her practice, especially to better support English learners.

Another area superintendent illustrated how strategies used with focus students benefited all students. She explained that during a visit to a middle school, she received a printout of all the focus students and data about how they were progressing academically. As a result, when she entered the classroom, she was able to see the following:

You could see that the students were strategically grouped together, they were close to the resources, the charting on the wall that reflected the current study.... There are some very strategic things that teachers are doing. But it’s good for all kids, when you think about kids who really, really need it. And it just gives them the boost that they need to be proficient, to be masterful.



The area superintendent’s observations suggest that the practice of generating instructional scaffolds for focus students generates learning supports that can help all students excel in the more rigorous context of CCSS.

Overall, in its efforts to continuously improve instruction to ensure access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum, SDUSD has supported key instructional shifts that facilitate student-centered learning; the exposure to interdisciplinary, applied, project-based learning opportunities; and targeted differentiation strategies that hold universal benefits. These pedagogical shifts work in conjunction with the curricular changes to provide a more coherent instructional vision to SDUSD’s vast district.

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## A Keen Focus on Equity

Equity has been the overarching driving force of our system. Who has access to what? Who’s getting supports? ... We look at everything we do through an eye of equity and access.

—Wendy Ranck-Buhr, Instructional Support Officer

SDUSD’s deep commitment to instructional improvement and professional learning helps explain its early success in supporting its students to meet the rigorous learning expectations of CCSS. In addition, during the early implementation of CCSS, the district identified a complementary strategy to enhance its instructional and curricular vision: an intensifying focus on equity. SDUSD officials stated that the turnover of the district’s senior leadership over the past 2 decades had left SDUSD’s identity scattered, which affected how equitable practices were implemented throughout the district. To increase its ability to implement equitable practices, the district entered into strategic partnerships to diagnose inequities in its system and to develop an explicit equity vision that could ground its practices. Through these efforts, SDUSD created structures and practices designed to help teachers and school leaders support the academic success of students from low-income families, students of color, and students from other vulnerable groups.

### Diagnosing inequities and developing an equity vision

SDUSD leaders named two external partners as especially effective in helping them identify and remedy practices that reinforced achievement gaps. Equal Opportunity Schools, a national nonprofit based in Seattle, WA, worked with the district to increase the enrollment and success of African American and Latino/a high school students and those from low-income families in college-level classes. The National Equity Project, an Oakland-based nonprofit, helped the district to develop its equity vision.

### ***Equal Opportunity Schools***

Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) is dedicated to ensuring that “students of all backgrounds have equal access to America’s most academically intense high school programs—and particularly that students from low-income families and students of color have opportunities to succeed at the highest levels.”<sup>19</sup> The group collaborates with districts to increase equitable enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. In SDUSD, consultants helped the district analyze its data, such as reviewing AP and IB enrollment data as well as surveys of students and staff about access to and experiences in AP and IB courses. Then EOS worked with the district on developing strategies for improving the quality of course programming and increasing the diversity of enrollment.

One district official explained that the collaboration with EOS forced SDUSD to grapple with critical questions, including: “Who’s getting into AP courses? Do the demographics of the AP classes represent the demographics of the school?” In examining access gaps, SDUSD also considered how the data could inform student placement in AP or IB programs. A district administrator explained:

They [EOS] basically did research on what students had high probability of passing AP courses that weren’t currently in AP courses. Alongside that data, we worked with our principals and our counselors to encourage our students [who] could actually be successful in AP courses [to enroll].

Other SDUSD officials discussed how EOS research shed light on how teachers encouraged or discouraged students’ AP or IB placement. For example, one district leader noted that the EOS provided survey data related to students’ growth mindset and the degree to which students had an adult who encouraged them to enroll in these rigorous academic programs. She explained that the data suggested that students could excel in these programs, but students had differential access to teachers who encouraged them to do so.

### ***National Equity Project***

The mission of the National Equity Project (NEP) is to “build culture, conditions, and competencies for excellence and equity in districts, schools, classrooms, nonprofits, and communities.”<sup>20</sup> SDUSD officials entered into a partnership with NEP and adopted many of its instructional tools and resources for professional learning about cultural proficiency. One SDUSD leader described NEP’s approach as “interrupting a system of oppression with skill and grace.”

Through this partnership, SDUSD developed and adopted the following equity vision—to “develop equity leaders who unlock genius one student at a time and maximize the growth in every interaction.”<sup>21</sup> To actualize this vision, SDUSD leadership identified five “equity levers” through which they examine how equity is facilitated throughout the district. The first of these levers relates to **literacy**, which they describe in their equity belief statements as “serving as a key gateway to social justice.” The second pertains to **collaboration**. One district official explained this focus: “Our principals need to work in collaboration. Our teachers need to work in collaboration and our kids need to work in collaboration. That collaboration is critical to be able to meet students’ needs.” To address the inequity in access to college-level coursework that their partnership with EOS revealed, SDUSD officials also identified **meaningful engagement** as an equity lever, which they define as the behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement of students in classrooms. Attention to **relational leadership** is the fourth equity lever, which means cultivating partnerships

with stakeholders to “collectively and continuously ensure high-quality experiences and outcomes for students that fully prepare them to face their life journey with optimism, resiliency, and joy.” The final lever is a commitment to **integrated multi-tiered systems of support**, an approach to providing every student with the level of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports they need for school success.

One district official described what SDUSD’s equity vision looked like in practice:

We are being mindful of the culture and the conditions, of establishing a positive environment where there is an expectation where all students will succeed, regardless of color, ethnicity, demographics, and of how leaders are monitoring, giving feedback on, and collecting data around subgroups.

The vision and equity levers not only provide a specific lens through which the district can identify, monitor, and support the development of practices for its students, including those historically underserved by schools, but also provide consistent language that leaders use to surface and address lingering equity issues. One district leader explained:

NEP has given us the language that we need to articulate a vision for each and every student and given us the wording on how to ... interrupt inequities with skill and grace. We don’t shame or blame.... It’s basically about uncovering what we need to do and where our kids need us most. Then we’re unapologetic about the fact that the kids that need more will get more. That’s our equity stance.

### **Transforming district practices through an equity lens**

District and school leaders used their equity vision and its levers to build structures designed to enable supportive teaching and learning environments, particularly for marginalized racial and economic groups. These structures included professional learning experiences for teachers and principals, as well as changes in the organization of the district’s central office.

#### ***Equity vision in professional learning***

Many principals and district leaders described how the equity vision informed professional learning experiences. Three SDUSD area superintendents explained that they used rubrics aligned with each equity lever during school visits to inform principals’ goals for professional growth. To create the rubrics, SDUSD officials followed an approach they learned from the National Equity Project. First, they described what they would expect to see leaders, teachers, families, and students do if each of the equity principles were fully fulfilled. Then they created rubrics that described three stages of progress in meeting the equity vision for each lever. Area superintendents and principals can assess their own practices and school progress in each area. To inform incremental professional growth, they introduce principals to each of the levers at different points in time, allowing them to focus on addressing and improving their work in each of the areas.

The district's equity vision is also seen in its Equity-Centered Professional Learning Community Assessment Tool, a resource developed in partnership with the National Equity Project. This tool enables district and school leaders to assess the degree to which they have established and maintained structures that allow for equity to flourish. Instead of focusing on specific equity levers, it assesses the following:

- the degree to which an equity vision and purpose are articulated;
- how time and structures have been established and protected to ensure productive collaboration;
- how professional learning is constructed and implemented to support a focus on students;
- the degree to which structures that support the development of trusting relationships and candid, cross-cultural dialogue are designed and facilitated; and
- the degree to which equity-centered professional learning communities assess their efforts on the basis of results rather than intentions.

In addition to assessment tools, SDUSD has led trainings for principals and interested teachers to examine the district's vision and levers. One district leader explained:

The first cycle of study is, "How do we create an academic social and emotional environment worthy of children?... We had guest speakers that came and spoke to principals at the Institute around social justice, around a democratic classroom environment, around language that we use for students, and around how we promote a school climate and culture that's worthy of children.

Principals and teachers reported that these learning experiences have shifted mindsets and professional practices. For example, one area superintendent believed that professional learning on equity was the driving force in supporting the success of students of color and students from low-income families across the district. She explained:

Our focus on equity, I think, is what's shifting [student success]. It's no longer the status quo or trust that you're going to do what you need to do, but we're going to be intentional about [equity] and call it out.

A Common Core support teacher noted that equity trainings have encouraged teachers to identify whether they have bias toward students or certain subgroups of students. She explained that trainings helped educators "break those biases, make sure that they are equally supporting all students, and [are] not doing something unintentionally to cause harm."

SDUSD's equity commitment has also led district officials to identify "focus schools" to provide with more professional support for learning how to meet the needs of their students and subgroups. Area superintendents and members of the instructional cabinet said they targeted their efforts to provide learning support through school visits, coaching, and increased resources to the extent possible. The instructional support officer for secondary schools said that supporting focus schools is challenging "because you can't give everybody everything" but noted that the district defines equity "as everybody gets what they need, when they need it. And we have some schools who need more right now, so they get more right now."

### ***Central office reorganization to ensure equitable access***

In addition to informing professional learning, SDUSD's equity focus spurred structural changes in the central office. The partnership with EOS exposed inequitable access to rigorous courses across the district. In 2014, Superintendent Marten established the Office of Secondary Schools and charged it with tackling this challenge.

Building from the original data collected during the EOS partnership, the office developed its own data collection and analysis practices to monitor graduation rates and student access to robust learning environments (such as AP and IB courses) in the district's secondary schools. To diagnose the extent of the challenge in its early years, the executive director of secondary schools described a laborious process that allowed district officials to surface lingering inequitable access issues:

We printed 8,000 transcripts of the seniors in the city and checked them all by hand.... Everything you need to know about access, equity, and opportunity is in those pages. What classes do kids have access to? How do they do in them? How does the school respond when they don't do well? After we hand-checked all of those transcripts, I knew some very important things about the system and built a 2-year plan around how we were going to both bandage the system and start to transform it from the other end.

Despite the district's high graduation rate, the executive director and her staff noticed three distinct patterns. Although patterns were often school-based, she acknowledged that the high schools were isolating English learners, often keeping them in transitional programs for multiple years rather than 1 year, as district policy recommended. In addition, students with Individualized Education Plans were not succeeding at the same rate as their peers, and in many schools, students "had no access to anything that would have gotten them back on track," she said. Lastly, district officials noticed that students with weak math backgrounds were tracked away from core science courses needed for admission to California's public universities. They also found that 9th-graders placed in remedial math courses were much less likely to graduate or enroll in college.

Because these initial findings highlighted the need for more equitable access to challenging coursework, the district moved its counseling department under the purview of the Office of Secondary Schools, so that the department could better support counselors in attending to students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

Following the reorganization, the Office of Secondary Schools trained counselors on appropriate course placement, student progress monitoring, and interventions. To support the work of counselors, SDUSD created an early warning monitoring system that provided systemwide, real-time data on attendance, behavior, and coursework for high school students. Built within the district's technological platform (Illuminate), the system's model begins by allocating each student 100 points and then deducts points on a sliding scale depending on the student's academic, behavioral, and attendance records. Students are assigned four levels: on track, nearly on track, off track, and far off track. Students with scores below 50 on the 100-point scale are flagged as "far off track," and their scores are color-coded red in the display in Illuminate.

Both district and school personnel monitor this system, but only counselors and site personnel have the discretion to identify appropriate supports and interventions for students approaching the “far off track” level. The counselors and site personnel must then get the support of the central office when they determine interventions are needed.

### **Equity-oriented practices at school sites**

SDUSD’s equity vision has resulted in structural and procedural shifts at the district level, which aimed to “unlock the genius of every child” and ensure students’ access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum.<sup>22</sup> The district’s adoption of this comprehensive equity vision has also generated tangible shifts in school and classroom practice, which we describe below.

#### ***A keen focus on master schedules***

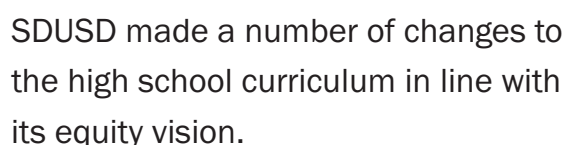
A notable shift was the ongoing evaluation and reformulation of master schedules. With guidance from area superintendents, school leaders began crafting schedules that ensure access, equity, and opportunity, using the district’s master schedule expectations. These expectations include student access to A-G aligned courses, AP courses, and early college enrollment; common teacher planning time for grade levels and departments; and built-in learning supports for students with learning gaps. After designing a master schedule for the year, each principal met with the Office of Secondary Schools to articulate how the schedule addressed equity. The executive director of the Office of Secondary Schools oversees this process and described a typical conversation:

We bring the principals in and they talk us through their design. What does your data tell you about your kids? How did you design your master schedule to close the gaps that you see in equity? What was your thinking around this? Was it to save the teachers or were there actually kids in the center of every decision that you made?

With the district’s emphasis on equity and access, school leaders increasingly made decisions about master schedules in line with these priorities, district leaders said.

#### ***A more equitable high school curriculum***

SDUSD made a number of changes to the high school curriculum in line with its equity vision. Courses not aligned with A-G requirements were eliminated or moved to the end of a course sequence to ensure that students first completed the required classes. This has been particularly relevant in math and science—subject areas in which students from low-income families and students of color had been tracked away from requirements. In their stead, schools, at the district’s behest, have introduced integrated classes that all students are required to take, ensuring that each student could meet A-G requirements. To address inequities in science, high schools have also ensured that all students take biology, chemistry, and physics, and that earth science—a course often taken in one’s freshman year that tracked students away from postsecondary opportunities—is integrated into that content. Conversely, a district official noted that a school can keep earth



SDUSD made a number of changes to the high school curriculum in line with its equity vision.

science as a separate course but must make it an option for students in their senior year. Similar action was taken in math. Schools now mandate that all students enroll in integrated math in their first 3 years of high school, eliminating lower-level math courses that were not A-G aligned.

In another move toward equity, the district revised its high school foreign language requirement in 2016 to recognize the linguistic skills of students with a primary language other than English (LOTE). Under the new policy, students could meet the LOTE requirement by alternative means, such as by passing a district-designated LOTE assessment and verifying 2 years of formal instruction in that language on a foreign transcript. With this policy, SDUSD aimed to support its newcomer and English learner students by providing them with avenues to demonstrate their foreign language proficiency and by validating their academic and linguistic assets.

As of 2018, almost 3,500 students have used these alternative paths to satisfy the foreign language requirement. High schools are also providing English learners with more equitable access to high school coursework. Previously, recently immigrated English learners enrolling in high school had been isolated in Newcomer Centers. These were intended as 1-year transitional programs for secondary students but had become places with culturally and age-inappropriate instruction where students remained for years. One district leader described Newcomer Centers as self-contained classrooms with instruction from the same teacher in every content area, similar to an elementary school. In 2016, following the adoption of its equity vision, the district transformed Newcomer Centers into International Centers. Sandra Cephas, the Director of SDUSD's Office of Language Acquisition, explained that International Centers were no longer a physical space per se, but were rather "a set of beliefs that any school adopts" to inform English language development. Holding central the belief that all members of a school community are responsible for the education of English learners, International Centers educate English learners in mainstream classrooms and, in turn, teachers have access to instructional coaches that support their understanding and implementation of effective strategies.

### **Overcoming challenges in the pursuit of equity**

SDUSD officials have faced challenges in implementing the changes associated with the district's vision for equity and access. These challenges have come in the form of principal, teacher, or community resistance to the onset of these policy shifts. For example, some school leaders neglected to tell their staff about needed changes to the course catalog or placement process, which resulted in the continuation of inequitable practices. Teachers and their union have also frequently voiced concern about these changes and their implications for teaching positions. Specifically, a senior district official noted teacher credentialing issues as SDUSD shifted to implementing its A-G requirements. She provided a specific example regarding the elimination or resequencing of earth science, explaining:

Earth science requires a geo-science credential, and there were teachers who that was the only credential they had, and they couldn't teach any other subject. If a school did not opt for earth science to be in 12th grade, which is a fine place for it to be, they had to excess<sup>23</sup> that position.

These changes also required the district to reach out to local communities to inform them of the changes and how they would support—not interrupt—student learning.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the fact that the office that monitors these changes is not in constant communication with school clusters and communities. Instead, area superintendents often spearhead conversations with communities at cluster meetings—spaces where consistent messaging could be conveyed that would build community and school support.

To address these communication gaps, SDUSD’s district office changed its approach to information dissemination and relationship building. For example, the department charged with overseeing A-G alignment shifted to conducting the school board report with area superintendents to establish a more thorough and consistent understanding of the policy among district leaders. To circumvent school-level challenges, the district also circulated a weekly online newsletter that shared information about SDUSD events, such as professional learning opportunities for teachers and youth advocacy programs offered throughout SDUSD. The newsletter in turn piqued the interest of principals and teachers and led some to reach out to district officials to learn more about these changes and the opportunities the district provides. District officials also described how they spoke with teachers in an attempt to build allies at school sites that could support the ambitious reform. One district leader explained:

I go into places and ... help people, get them compendiums, buy them books, do PD with them, try to change their thinking. I’ve found if I build up the department chairs and take them to coffee to build relationships, they tell the department, ‘Listen to her,’ and ‘I’m in.’”

Building equity mindsets and quelling concerns about their equity-oriented reforms remained an ongoing effort for SDUSD, but it showed promise in addressing the challenges that have emerged.

## **A Comprehensive Approach to Holistic Student Supports**

SDUSD’s equity vision also compelled the district to assess how it attends to students’ social and emotional needs. The district identified this need during its partnership with the National Equity Project. The group led district and school leaders in conversations about creating culturally responsive and democratic environments to enhance student learning. As a result of these discussions, SDUSD officials decided to systematically embed this focus in their first learning cycle in which principals and teachers considered how to nurture positive school climates that were worthy of children and families.

Furthermore, the district included this priority in one of its equity levers—integrated multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). MTSS is a comprehensive framework and approach that aligns resources, initiatives, and interventions to support students’ academic, behavioral, and social needs. It does so by combining the approaches of two widely used systems: Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Specifically, MTSS synthesizes the data-driven, academic interventions generated through RTI with PBIS’s evidence-based interventions that improve social and emotional well-being for all students. As one senior district official explained:

When we think about social-emotional learning ... it’s the systems that wrap around the students to promote academic success. Then, at the end of the day, our goal as nurses, counselors, psychologists, mental health providers, and social workers is to bring the student back to the class so that they can have maximized academic support given the structures that we’ve created to support that academic instruction.

To establish this system, SDUSD created departments to spearhead new initiatives and restructured existing departments to ensure that an integrated system of services could blossom across the district.



### **Improving and supporting counselor practice**

With SDUSD’s instructional and equity shifts, district leaders identified school-based counselors as central figures in district transformation. As previously mentioned, SDUSD officials had worked

District leaders identified school-based counselors as central figures in district transformation.

to have counselors embrace the academic dimensions of their role and to shift deficit mindsets that could inhibit access to A-G aligned courses and other robust learning experiences. At the same time, the district realized that counselors would need support to take on another new aspect of their role: organizing and leading the new MTSS process at each school.

### ***Using data to assess resources and needs***

To support counselors in identifying and suggesting appropriate academic, behavioral, and social interventions through MTSS, district leaders realized that they needed more information. They decided to assess the accessibility and integration of resources to support implementation throughout SDUSD. To do so, they drew on data from the California Healthy Kids Survey, the California School Staff Survey, and the California School Parent Survey to analyze the needs of students in the district’s clusters and consider what supports would address them. One senior district official described their aim: “We started our work to make sure that we were deploying services as needed for the schools that need it the most and the clusters that need it the most.”

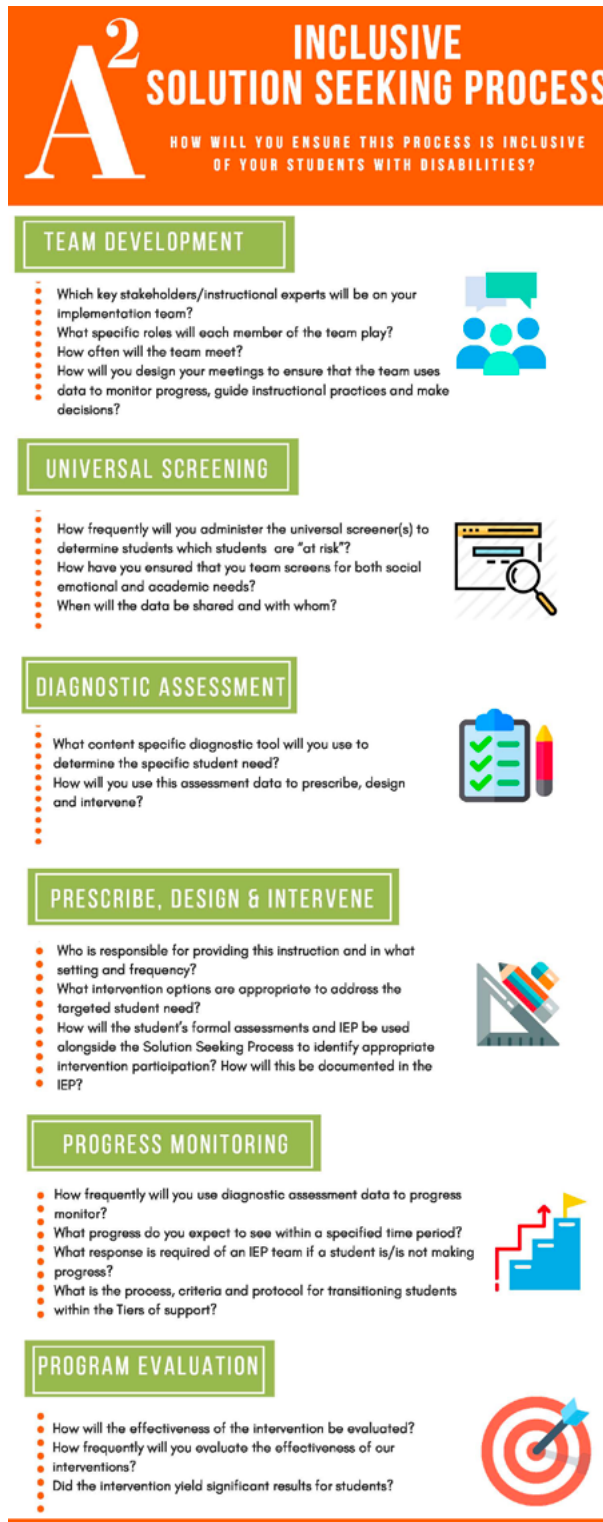
Next, SDUSD officials conducted an inventory of the district’s programs and services. The process spurred collaboration between the district’s counseling department and other district departments to identify resources that filled service gaps uncovered in their research. The counseling department also found new community partners able to provide student services. One SDUSD official noted:

San Diego is rich in services. We have a lot of community agencies that want to partner with us.... They want to be in our schools. What I do is to connect the dots and become more savvy as an administrator to connect myself to the community of San Diego to make sure that those supports are available for our students.

District officials also explained that these partnerships helped alleviate financial and human capital constraints. A senior leader in the counseling department stated, “Funding is an issue. We don’t have enough people to do what we need to do.... The way that I’m thinking about our work is let’s organize around those pockets of resources that we can find.” Partnerships with local universities, including the University of San Diego and San Diego State, also provided the district with a pipeline of strong counselor candidates. These candidates often intern in the district and gain exposure to SDUSD’s inner workings, creating a steady stream of counselors familiar with the district’s goals and priorities.

This initial needs and community assets assessment also spurred SDUSD to adopt a systematic process to supporting MTSS called A<sup>2</sup>. (See Figure 2.) Through this approach, counselors worked with integrated teams of stakeholders to collect and analyze student data to identify targeted supports and interventions and monitor progress to assess whether approaches are accelerating outcomes. Through this structure for MTSS decision-making, SDUSD aimed to foster a consistent and effective approach to meeting individual student needs.

**Figure 2**  
**SDUSD's A<sup>2</sup> Approach**



Source: San Diego Unified School District. (n.d.). District vision. <https://www.sandiegounified.org/district-vision>.

### ***Improving counselor practice***

SDUSD made additional structural changes to support counselor practice and improvement. These ongoing efforts included allowing counselors to specialize in elementary or secondary support, which was a departure from previous years, when counselors were assigned to a range of sites and grade levels. In addition, SDUSD leadership systematically aligned counselor practice across the district by developing a strategic vision and professional development plan and embedding it within SDUSD's existing comprehensive school counseling and guidance program, creating a new counseling framework. A district leader in the counseling department explained the origins of the new counseling framework as follows:

We started to think about how to best align the practices and supports for our counselors, through their professional development, through their culture and cycles, thinking about what we're looking at as far as the system of support and guided by the hard data.

The counseling framework established a curricular vision for grades 6–12 for how students engage with content related to social-emotional learning, with the goal of expanding this curriculum across the entire k–12 spectrum.

In previous years, counselors had worked in a more isolated fashion at their school sites, instituting site-specific programs to support student populations. But because of the high turnover rate among counselors in SDUSD and the fact that they often had multisite placements, maintaining continuity was a challenge. District leaders emphasized that this framework could provide a sense of common expectations and practice that maximizes student learning and opportunities.

To support counselors in their multifaceted roles, district resource counselors provided coaching to counselors and principals at school sites to support the implementation of academic and social and emotional initiatives. Coaching conversations often began with student survey data. As one leader in the counseling department explained, "It [data] starts conversations.... for example, if our Healthy Kids Survey says that only 30% of students highly agree that they feel engaged at school, what does that really mean for our classrooms?" The goal was for counselors and principals to become skilled at data analysis and use it as a basis for decision-making about school practices and individual student interventions. Resource counselors also advised schools on effective MTSS interventions and community agencies that could assist them in providing student supports.

### **Becoming a restorative justice district**

SDUSD officials have also reimagined how counselors can effectively support students to advance the district's equity vision and its integrated MTSS initiative. Yet district leaders realized SDUSD still needed to make significant changes to its approach to student discipline if it were to reach its equity aims and enhance its system of holistic student supports. To this end, the district piloted restorative justice practices at select schools and created a department dedicated to supporting schools to adopt restorative practices. Rather than focusing on punitive discipline, restorative justice practices encourage students affected by an infraction to work together to decide how to remedy the harm created by the incident.<sup>24</sup>

Like many districts, SDUSD once had a zero-tolerance student discipline policy that required automatic suspension or expulsion for certain behavior infractions. In 2014, the district appointed a manager of placement and appeal to investigate the impact of this policy and suggest revisions. In reviewing expulsion cases, the manager learned that many school leaders were reluctant to suspend or expel students due to these violations. Furthermore, district policies requiring disciplinary actions for these violations conflicted with California’s Education Code. This conflict called the district’s zero-tolerance policy into question. In the summer of 2014, SDUSD leaders recommended that the school board dismantle this policy. In its stead, the district recommended the implementation of restorative justice practices to better support students and teachers in behavioral management.

SDUSD described restorative justice as a set of practices that “further cultivate community on campuses with a focus on building strong relationships” and “hold students accountable for their actions while giving them a high level of support to create a campus culture of learning and safety for all school community members.”<sup>25</sup> To enact this vision, teachers commonly use “classroom circles”—such as harm circles, mediation, and restorative conferencing—to address disciplinary concerns and promote healing for affected school community members. These restorative processes help to build relationships and community.<sup>26</sup> For example, during a “harm circle,” individuals affected by an incident come together to discuss the harm from the incident and identify what should be done to resolve the harm. This helps the person responsible for inflicting the harm to better understand the consequences of their actions and helps those impacted to take an active role in deciding how they can best be repaired from the harm.

Since 2015, SDUSD has piloted restorative justice approaches in select high schools in an attempt to support its broader implementation by building district and school infrastructure (such as professional learning for teachers and administrators). SDUSD selected pilot sites based on high suspension and expulsion rates and also allowed high schools that were interested in pursuing the approach to participate.

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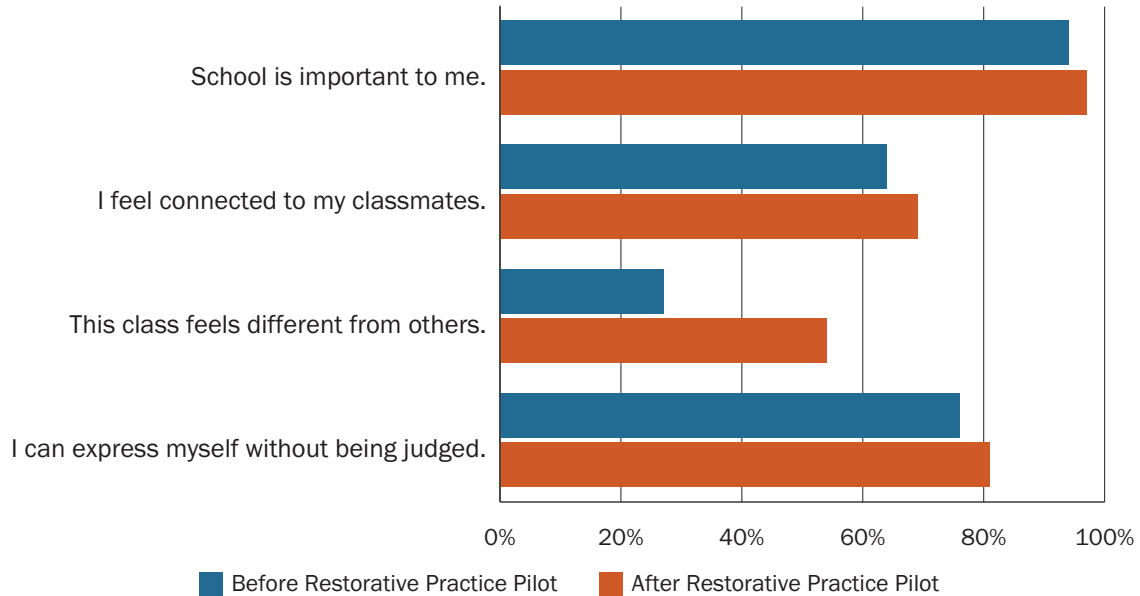
With a grant from the California

Endowment and in partnership with a researcher at the University of San Diego and the National Conflict Resolution Center, district administrators worked with pilot sites to implement restorative justice practices. During the pilot, the district created survey-based evaluation tools to assess student perspectives on the changes in school or classroom climate with the onset of restorative practices. Figure 3 shows the results of one such evaluation at the Crawford Senior High School pilot site, which found that students exposed to restorative practices expressed a greater sense of connection and inclusion at school.

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### Figure 3 Impact of Restorative Practices at the Crawford Pilot Site

*Crawford Pilot: Student Responses to Classroom Climate Survey*



Source: Student survey data provided by SDUSD leaders.

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A senior district official reported that further studies on the impact of restorative practices in SDUSD were underway. She described studies that were being conducted by researchers from San Diego State’s School of Public Health:

We have some small studies; for instance, a group of classrooms at one of our high schools. Graduate students did a research study where there were 12 classrooms, some with [restorative justice] circles, some without.... We’re now collecting pre and post data from teachers: pre-training and post-training. The trainings were intentionally designed with a week in between so teachers could go back, try on some of the work, and say, “This doesn’t work,” or “I need help with this.”

With the growth of the pilot programs, the district’s restorative justice department expanded to support these efforts. By securing ongoing grants and garnering increased district allocations, the department was able to maintain its external partnerships and hire additional staff. Furthermore, the SDUSD official leading this initiative noted that their efforts spurred intradepartmental collaboration. She explained that district central office staff from other departments volunteered “to come and help us with this work with the approval of their manager. I really developed a core team of folks who had other responsibilities, but we were just organically creating a movement of restorative practices.”

In the summer of 2017, SDUSD’s school board unanimously passed a resolution that requires all schools to use restorative practices instead of traditional disciplinary measures. In this resolution, the district also adopted a School Climate Bill of Rights, generated in partnership with two

community agencies, which must be posted and upheld at all school sites. This document codifies the district's commitment to conflict resolution in classrooms and delineates how students, families, and teachers can contribute to positive, collaborative, healing school environments.

### *Professional learning on restorative justice practices*

Because the recommendation to dismantle the zero-tolerance policy was initially met with some community, principal, and teacher resistance, the district spent the first year of its implementation of restorative justice practices embarking on an awareness campaign. The central office official leading this work explained:

It was really to dismantle and debunk the myths of restorative justice and give them an introductory training because [of the attitude] that, "It's nothing, it's soft on crime, it's not working." We're all very impatient, we want a change now. [We were] launching that districtwide campaign, talking to the board, making board presentations, [talking to] anybody who [would] listen, really.... We also connected the work with [MTSS] because I don't want anyone to feel like this is something else.

Directed trainings on restorative justice practices and related topics supplemented this awareness campaign. Much of this professional learning occurred at pilot sites, but district leaders noted that districtwide trainings were rolled out for all interested certified and classified staff. SDUSD officials emphasized that instructional leaders such as area superintendents and resource teachers were also invited to these trainings—a decision the district made to ensure that staff from a variety of positions would be able to see how restorative practices could be integrated across subject areas and grade levels.

Implemented with the support of the San Diego–based National Conflict Resolution Center, these trainings focus on restorative principles and their foundational practices, including restorative circles. A district official characterized the nature of these professional learning experiences:

I don't like to use the word "train" because I feel like that's more like lecture or sit and get. Our workshops are very experiential. We're doing the work, and we do some unpacking and some lecture content, but really they experience it as we go along.

Trauma-informed teaching was also a common topic in restorative practices training, as SDUSD leaders saw these topics as interconnected. During these discussions, teachers learned about the effects of trauma on the brain and how teachers can help students regulate their emotions to make choices that help them feel more in control of their environment. One area superintendent described how a school with high concentrations of students from an area mental health facility was engaging with this topic:

The school had to [adopt] trauma-informed care [and] restorative practices, because the adults were actually triggering things for the kiddos. We had to figure out what we [were] going to do differently and to understand that these behaviors are actually communicating a lot of pain and trauma.

She indicated that these conversations on trauma helped teachers realize how understanding trauma can translate into concrete shifts in classroom practice. This gradual shift from broader scientific concepts to practical strategies has been facilitated by a series of trainings on the topic.

Following the onset of its restorative justice initiative and the dismantling of its zero-tolerance policy, the district experienced a steady decrease in expulsions and suspensions. Those results suggest positive changes in SDUSD school climate and practice. (See Appendix A.)

### **Larger system of holistic supports**

SDUSD undertook significant changes to its disciplinary approach and counseling program to improve its ability to nurture the “whole child.”<sup>27</sup> The district also provided a range of holistic student supports as part of an extensive nursing and wellness program, as well as eight school-based health clinics and seven additional wellness centers. The wellness centers, which are located on each high school campus, provide “coordinated district and community support services [that] are accessible and customized to fit the needs of the neighborhood in which [they are] located.”<sup>28</sup>

The district also notably continued to maintain specific departments and initiatives to provide culturally responsive support and advocacy for marginalized groups. Much of these fell under the purview of the district’s Office of Youth Advocacy, which facilitated “multiple opportunities for every student to graduate from high school and pursue worthwhile college and career goals.”<sup>29</sup> Among its priorities were building cultural proficiency throughout the district, providing opportunities for students to develop voice and agency, and involving stakeholders in dialogue toward systemic improvement.

To this end, the district created Integrated Youth Services, a department that promoted racial and cultural harmony for students and staff through diversity and staff development workshops, the creation of culturally responsive curricula, and racial/cultural crisis intervention education. It also created a Southeast Asian/Somali Department, which works with families from these backgrounds to “overcome cultural barriers that keep them from getting involved in their children’s schools.”<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the district’s program for LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) Education and Advocacy continued to provide school site resources and district support to meet the needs of LGBTQIA students and their families. The program conducts professional development for staff regarding LGBTQIA issues; develops and supports staff in FAIR Education Act curriculum; facilitates student, leader, and community engagement; and holds PRIDE commemorations.

Overall, evidence showed that SDUSD maintained multiple holistic services and programs that promote student, school, and community wellness and responsiveness. This, coupled with its restorative orientation and attention to the social and emotional dimensions of learning, indicates that the district has made deliberate strides to support all of its students, including its most vulnerable populations.

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## New Directions in Community and Family Engagement

Through their work with the National Equity Project, SDUSD leaders identified meaningful engagement as one of the district’s five equity levers. This lever not only involves students’ behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement in schools, but also demonstrates SDUSD’s commitment to transforming its community and family engagement to implement this element of its equity vision.

Prior to 2016, the district’s approach to parent and community engagement was what one senior district leader called “traditional.” Efforts were primarily site-based (e.g., principal coffees, open houses, and PTA-sponsored events), although the district did maintain the Ballard Parent Center, which hosted SDUSD-sponsored parent workshops. In the context of CCSS implementation, district and school leaders noted that engagement often took the form of information sessions. One district leader mentioned Common Core 101 meetings and coffee-with-the-principal gatherings as spaces where SDUSD officials would put “Common Core in layman’s terms” so that families could be informed of its distinct features.

In these efforts, district leaders noted that parental participation was sparse and unrepresentative—often the loudest voices in these venues were those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. A Harvard researcher who served as an intern in the district during this time confirmed this pattern in her own research, compelling SDUSD officials to reconceptualize their approach to engage and elevate a wider range of community perspectives.

After a yearlong listening campaign, the district drafted a new vision and established its Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office in 2016 to systematically enact change. FACE’s vision is based on four foundational principles that inform its approach: (1) families as co-teachers and co-learners, (2) community–school partnerships, (3) environments worthy of families, and (4) families as co-leaders. (See Figure 4.) With these principles in place, the district has sought to create a multifaceted approach to community, family, and student engagement to bring its equity vision to life.

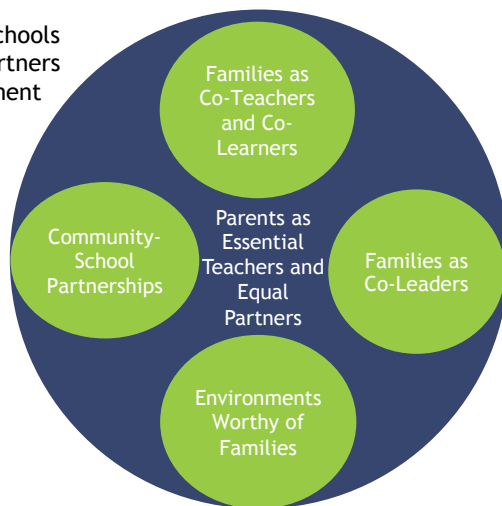
**Figure 4**  
**SDUSD’s Family and Community Engagement Belief Statements**

**Belief Statement:**

We believe families and schools are valued and trusted partners who share in the commitment to and responsibility of educating our children.

**Belief Statement:**

We believe families, schools and community organizations engage, connect and use partnerships to design and take action on outcomes that benefit our children.



**Belief Statement:**

We believe that positive relationships between families and schools serve to strengthen our collective leadership for the betterment of the community.

**Belief Statement:**

We believe that our schools and district environments are welcoming, organized, safe, and attractive that serve as neighborhood centers for families to gather, collaborate, and learn together.

Source: PowerPoint slide provided to the Learning Policy Institute research team by SDUSD district leaders.



The district's FACE resource teachers played a fundamental role in implementing a cohesive vision of family and community engagement. During the 2016–17 school year, SDUSD allocated resources for nine staff members—all credentialed teachers—to directly support the district's engagement initiatives. Most FACE resource teachers were assigned to a school cluster, frequently visited schools with area superintendents, and supported sites and families through outreach efforts and ongoing family learning, which we describe below.

Accessible meetings and diverse translation services were critical needs in SDUSD community outreach efforts. In the past, translation services were often limited at community engagements, thus inhibiting the participation of the district's diverse linguistic and ethnic groups. SDUSD officials also reported that many engagements took place at inopportune times and locations, limiting participation. To overcome these challenges, SDUSD held multiple gatherings in varied locations to increase attendance and generated creative solutions to enable families who speak a language other than English to participate. For instance, the district partnered with a local refugee center that provides translators and trains community members to act as translators and also with a local hospital that operates a translating phone.

### **Transforming family engagement**

SDUSD has sponsored a range of initiatives to build parental capacity. These efforts include an early literacy initiative, the Raising a Reader program, which focuses on helping parents build reading readiness in the district's lowest-performing schools. The district has also begun a Home Visiting Project that builds stronger family–school connections and provides parents with activities and strategies to support their child's healthy development, such as sharing tips for developing a routine for families to read together. In addition, SDUSD has continued to hold parent education workshops on a range of topics, including parent leadership.

Of the new FACE initiatives, district leaders most frequently cited the district's High Impact Home Strategies as an effective approach to helping families support student learning. High-impact strategies include, for example, talking about the title and cover illustrations before reading a book, stopping at interesting parts in the book and discussing what is happening, and discussing the big ideas after reading.<sup>31</sup>

The district defines these strategies as “research-based practices, linked to student learning, that when utilized by parents and caregivers at home, have been proven to have significant impacts on student learning and academic achievement in school.”<sup>32</sup> To date, these strategies have centered on literacy development and helping families productively engage in conversations with school personnel to enable academic progress. For example, at the elementary level, families learn how to effectively pose questions to students before, during, and after reading to build their comprehension. At the secondary level, guardians are taught how to pose questions to students, teachers, and principals to assess school climate and academic challenges. Parents engage with this content during area superintendent–facilitated cluster meetings, site-based family engagements, and coaching sessions with FACE resource teachers. They can also engage online via virtual handouts and videos on the FACE department website.

SDUSD officials also described how FACE resource teachers work with families to engage them in student-centered learning sessions. In general, parents are encouraged to observe classroom lessons frequently. In the student-centered learning sessions, parents can also practice learning

strategies with FACE resource teachers and then use these same learning strategies to support students at home. Learning sessions with FACE resource teachers include deep dives into the district’s designated High Impact Home Strategies. A FACE department member described how these student-centered learning sessions occur:

FACE resource teachers call the students in to model a strategy alongside the parent[s] as the resource teachers go around and coach. Then, the students go back to class. The parents are asked to try those strategies on for the next 2 weeks, go back [to the school] for a second meeting, review the strategies again, and learn new strategies. The same cycle repeats. Then, at the end, they review the data. What have you noticed? Has your child improved in reading? Have you noticed any other things? Then, that cycle moves on to another school and continues. So, it’s like a continuous cycle of coaching and teaching strategies.

District leaders noted that having credentialed teachers as FACE resource teachers enables this sophisticated approach to parent education. Prior to the establishment of the FACE department, the district had classified employees who conducted more traditional forms of family engagement. By contrast, a FACE department member explained, “With the resource teachers, you have credentialed teachers who know the instructional part of the classroom [and] can bring that directly to parents and conduct their own parent-teacher conference.” With their pedagogical knowledge, FACE resource teachers can also effectively respond to teachable moments that arise during parent coaching sessions.

### **Growing community partnerships**

Cultivating strong community partnerships was also a priority embedded in the district’s new FACE department principles. As previously discussed, the district maintains a range of relationships with external partners who advance SDUSD’s instructional and equity visions. For instance, SDUSD officials secured strategic relationships with local businesses that provide real-world learning opportunities for students in CTE programs and partnered with local community colleges to create an early college program. Community partnerships have also helped sustain and implement holistic supports that attend to students’ social and emotional needs. Often lending expertise and critical personnel, community partners have allowed the district to maintain a multifaceted system of supports despite budgetary challenges.

In providing critical services, SDUSD leaders emphasized that external partners were integral to launching the district’s equity vision for an integrated multi-tiered system of supports. One senior district leader explained, “We know that our students need more resources, and if we’re able to seek those out and find them, we want them.” This proactive approach to securing community partnerships is facilitated by the practice of asset mapping. While the district has long-standing relationships with many community partners, during the transition to CCSS, SDUSD officials continued to seek more partnerships that could further support students and families. A district official explained the process:

We start first by inventorying what was on our campus, what are the resources currently that we have on our campuses. Then we expand to what are the resources in the community, which ones are we tapping into, and which ones are we not. Then we went as far as, if our students are being bused here, where are the resources in the area that they live in.

Through this annual process, district leaders, in partnership with families and school personnel, were able to determine the strengths and struggles for school sites and clusters and identify potential community organizations to address identified service and opportunity gaps. In doing so, SDUSD sought to grow its robust system of partnerships and continue to provide students and families with support and opportunities.

### **Elevating student voice**

SDUSD's commitment to engagement also meant creating avenues to elevate student voice. To do this at the site level, district officials used data from the California Healthy Kids Survey when they coached principals. One area superintendent provided examples of the questions she posed to school leaders at their school sites: "If students aren't feeling safe at school, what can we do about that? How can we make them feel safe? If they don't feel like their voice matters in the classroom, what can we do about that?" School leaders and area superintendents then engaged in discussions and strategic planning to address student needs and concerns. At the district level, SDUSD leaders explained that the elevation of student voice has been exemplified by the creation of the student equity coalition, an initiative undertaken by the FACE department in 2017. SDUSD's equity coalition consists of appointed student ambassadors at each of the district's high schools who are charged with maintaining a keen eye on their school's campus climate. The ambassadors meet regularly with senior district leaders and their counterparts in other schools to share information about issues emerging on their campuses.<sup>35</sup> One senior district official described the origins of this initiative:

Our superintendent wanted to hear from students themselves, rather than having adults narrate student stories. Through our student equity coalition, the students tell us what they want to talk about. Then, we bring together members of the community, and we have a student panel, and use design thinking to model [and] to do some problem-solving around issues that are of concern to students.

SDUSD officials also reported that a growing number of principals, influenced by the district equity coalition, have established student equity panels at their own schools. As one senior district leader said, "The students who come to equity coalition ... have said how powerful it was, and that other students recognize it as well. The kids know that they have a voice."

### **Next steps for improved engagement**

SDUSD has taken strategic steps to refine its approach to community and family engagement, but district officials acknowledged that the district still needed to work on outreach. For instance, area superintendents noted that the depth and breadth of stakeholder outreach varied among clusters and that time, location, and language barriers still persist in particular areas. Other leaders acknowledged that their efforts to elevate and include a wider array of community and family perspectives have caused tensions among parent groups at school board meetings. Specifically, parents who had previously been prominent and active voices in the district argued that their perspectives had become marginalized. Finally, district leaders noted that there are several ways in which families' inclusion in student-centered learning sessions could be expanded. A FACE department member explained that to date, FACE resource teachers had focused only on literacy instruction and had primarily limited their efforts to elementary schools because of capacity limitations in their department, thus inhibiting parent learning around High Impact Home Strategies in other content areas and grade levels. A senior district official acknowledged that SDUSD is "still working out the bugs" with regard to this family and community outreach but voiced the district's ongoing commitment to this approach.

## Conclusion

The San Diego Unified School District case demonstrates how one district's intentional blending of a strong commitment to instructional improvement and a system of holistic student supports can bolster achievement for all students.

To support the district's diverse population in the context of the rigorous Common Core State Standards, SDUSD officials established a coherent instructional vision that emphasizes student-centered pedagogy and interdisciplinary, real-world applications to facilitate deeper learning. The district has supported this vision with an investment in collaborative professional learning and leadership development to ensure that best practices are disseminated and implemented. SDUSD has also approached this process incrementally by piloting various initiatives and by allowing leaders and teachers to grapple with the instructional shifts that CCSS requires. Overall, the district's multilayered system of professional learning supports has allowed school administrators and teachers to become invested in the district's vision and has allowed teachers and leaders the necessary time, collaboration, and continuous support to enact instructional shifts. The superintendent's emphasis on the illuminating, rather than the punitive, power of data has also supported this approach to instructional improvement.

SDUSD's early success on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) reflects its systemic professional learning to support CCSS adoption. The district's complementary focus on equity, which intensified after the onset of CCSS, promises steeper and more equitable student learning gains in future years. The district's explicit equity focus has allowed SDUSD officials to attend to the unique social and emotional needs of its diverse student population. Through partnerships, the district has reflected on its practices and exposed opportunity gaps in course access and in supportive learning environments that exist across the district. This reflection has motivated SDUSD officials to adopt a multidimensional and clear definition of equity and has resulted in organizational shifts and professional learning practices at the district and school levels to redress existing inequities. From its A-G requirements-for-all initiative to its efforts to become a restorative district to its refinement and expansion of SDUSD's system of holistic supports, the district has not only maintained equity as a central commitment but has also codified it in its practices to the benefit of its students and communities.

SDUSD has not done this important work in isolation. Rather, it has strategically built partnerships with communities, families, students, and agencies to leverage assets and build capacity to support students' holistic needs. In the face of financial and human capital constraints, these partnerships have enabled the district to maintain and expand its robust system of services. More importantly, this approach has allowed the district to collaboratively transform its learning environments to enhance opportunities for students and to mitigate existing inequities in the district.

## Appendix A: SDUSD'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>0.070</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>34</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	27	21
Math African American	0.202	21	16
Math Latino/a	0.039	25	21
Math White	0.143	64	49
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.093</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>44</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	37	31
ELA African American	0.184	33	28
ELA Latino/a	0.530	36	32
ELA White	0.141	73	61
<b>2015-16</b>			
<b>Math All Students</b>	<b>0.058</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>37</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	30	23
Math African American	0.184	24	18
Math Latino/a	0.024	28	24
Math White	0.133	67	53
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.065</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>49</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	43	35
ELA African American	0.149	38	31
ELA Latino/a	0.031	41	37
ELA White	0.110	77	64
<b>2016-17</b>			
<b>Math All Students</b>	<b>0.083</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>38</b>
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	31	25
Math African American	0.180	25	19
Math Latino/a	0.044	30	25
Math White	0.160	68	53
<b>ELA All Students</b>	<b>0.084</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>49</b>
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	42	36
ELA African American	0.158	37	31
ELA Latino/a	0.040	40	37
ELA White	0.139	77	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**  
**Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2017**

Demographic	Rate in SDUSD	Rate in California
African American	84%	73%
Latino/a	82%	80%
White	92%	87%
All Students	87%	83%

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

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**Table A3**  
**Suspension Rates, 2016–2017**

Demographic	Rate in SDUSD	Rate in California
African American	7.4%	9.8%
Latino/a	3.7%	3.7%
White	2.3%	3.2%
All Students	3.3%	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 San Diego Unified School District is part of a larger, three-part, mixed-methods study that includes a quantitative analysis of district performance in California,<sup>34</sup> six additional individual case studies of positive outlier districts conducted from fall 2017 through winter 2018,<sup>35</sup> and a cross-case study that synthesizes findings from all seven individual cases.<sup>36</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>37</sup> the quantitative study used a statistical regression model for predicting and measuring student achievement to identify positive outlier districts in which scores on 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>38</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 San Diego Unified School District, 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>39</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-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. Based on this preliminary phone interview, we visited the district during the winter of 2018 for 3 days of interviews with district- and school-level staff.

We also reviewed data and documents prior to on-site field research. Among the sources were SDUSD's Local Control and Accountability Plan for 2017–20, teacher and principal professional development documents, SDUSD organizational charts, district-level guidance, and SDUSD's website. These documents helped us understand the district's history and context, its mission and goals, its programmatic approach to supporting student learning, and its continued implementation of CCSS and its related instructional shifts.

During 2-day site visits in the winter of 2018, 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.

We conducted a total of 20 interviews with individuals in the following positions:

- Superintendent
- Chief of staff
- Area superintendents
- Executive director of secondary schools
- Director of College, Career, and Technical Education
- Director of research and development



- Director of language acquisition
- Instructional support officers for elementary and secondary schools
- Restorative practices program manager
- Secondary schools teaching program manager
- Counseling and guidance program manager
- Director of teaching, learning, and support in secondary schools
- Common Core support teachers
- Family and community engagement resource teacher
- Principals
- Assistant principals
- Teachers

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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