Description of Flash Drive Handouts

1) GFE Power Point Presentation
2) District Partnership Project Summary – 1.5 pages
3) David & Talbert Final Report to the Cowell Foundation – October 2012. The final document of a four-year study of the reforms in Sanger. 80 pages
4) David & Talbert year two report on the District Partnership Project to the Central Valley Foundation – June 2012. 20 pages
5) Student Performance Graphs – Multi year API and AYP graphs with subgroups. 12 pages
6) Educational Leadership Article – "Data, Our GPS" – February 2012 Rich Smith, Marcus Johnson, and Karen Thompson
7) West Ed. Article – "Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education" – January 2011. 22 pages
8) Sample District Meeting Form-Questions for school districts pursuing funds.
9) Sample ELL Proposal Activity Table
10) Sample grant budget form
11) Sample grant proposal form – 12 pages
12) Sample form – district board meeting – 1 page

District Partnership Project Summary

The District Partnership Project, with funding from the Central Valley Foundation, brings together two high–poverty, predominantly Latino central California school districts: Sanger Unified (11,000 students) and Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified (2,500 students). Sanger brings a history of dramatic improvement in student performance that has garnered attention at a state and national level. Firebaugh brings a commitment to the reforms found in Sanger with recent improvement in student outcomes, as well as a desire to learn from Sanger and continue this positive growth.

The District Partnership Project, initiated in January 2011, creates opportunities for both partners to learn from each other as they strive to accelerate the success of their English Language Learners. With funding support from the Central Valley Foundation (CVF) over four years, the Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership is a "demonstration project" to test and refine this collaborative strategy for improving outcomes in both districts. CVF funded this project to see if the remarkable changes in Sanger can be duplicated in another district with similar challenges. The implementation of this unique project is being carefully documented by nationally known experts in the field of school reform, Drs. Jane David, Kenji Hakuta and Joan Talbert (Bay Area Research Group and Stanford University).

The shifts in culture that came about in Sanger over several years are happening more rapidly in Firebaugh. Firebaugh views Sanger as helping to accelerate what they are already doing and learning from Sanger's mistakes. Observing Sanger initiatives first hand and having immediate access to Sanger leaders provides Firebaugh leaders with "hands-on" professional development tailored to their needs. The partnership functions as a high-level professional learning community (PLC) focused on enhancing Firebaugh's culture of continuous improvement. At the same time, Firebaugh's circumstances are not the same as Sanger's, which requires adaptation to work in Firebaugh's setting.

Building on a strong start during the first six months, the Partnership shows multiple signs of accelerating reform efforts in Firebaugh and enhancing reforms in Sanger. Personal relationships are strong at all levels: teacher-to-teacher, principal to principal, and district administrators to their counterparts. Major accomplishments include the following:

Rather than a traditional model of staff development, the partnership provides Firebaugh staff with a living example of the initiatives proposed. Site visits to Sanger provide Firebaugh staff with first-hand observations and a deep understanding of the initiatives (PLCs, Explicit Direct Instruction, English Language Development, Response To Intervention), which have accelerated Firebaugh teachers' ability to put new ideas into practice. Classroom walkthroughs with Sanger leaders in both Sanger and in Firebaugh have enhanced Firebaugh leaders understanding of the initiatives. Through observing Sanger PLCs, talking to Sanger teachers, and participating in PLC professional development together, Firebaugh teachers have dramatically strengthened their PLCs over the last year. This training has included workshops provided through nationally

known experts in the field of PLCs and school reform, Rick and Becky DuFour (http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/websites.html).

As a result of the partnership, a dramatic shift occurred in Firebaugh in regards to classroom instruction. Taking their cue from Sanger, Firebaugh teachers who in the past had closely followed the textbook, were inspired to see that Sanger teachers drive their instruction by the state standards and draw from the textbook and other resources as appropriate. Observations in Sanger schools and on-site professional development from Sanger's in-house Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) trainer helped Firebaugh teachers understand and strengthen their use of direct instruction strategies.

Response To Intervention (RTI) is a complex method of organizing the school and grade levels to allow student movement between classrooms for re-teaching and advancement. It requires ongoing communication between teachers and immediate data analysis to facilitate the formation of student groups. It is now being implemented in Firebaugh, primarily in the elementary schools where scheduling is less challenging than in the secondary schools. Visits to Sanger to see how RTI works in practice have helped the implementation process.

In addition to increased uses of data in teacher PLCs, Firebaugh principals are looking more closely at their schools' data to identify strengths and weaknesses across subjects and grade levels. A new source of data funded through the project is the English Language Learner Assessment (ELLA) system, which helps determine the progress of English learners' ability to listen, speak, read and write in English.

In addition to these accomplishments, the Partnership has provided unanticipated benefits. The timing of the Partnership provides both districts with additional resources as they prepare for the transition to the Common Core State Standards. Sharing knowledge and resources is even more important as districts struggle to address the demands of these more rigorous standards, especially for English Language Learners.

The Partnership is proving to be a rich source of new knowledge about how districts can collaborate and learn from each other in ways that benefit student learning, particularly those struggling to learn English. As such, it promises to provide valuable lessons for districts, policymakers, and funders.

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**Turning Around a High-Poverty School District:
Learning from Sanger Unified's Success**

An external evaluation commissioned by S. H. Cowell Foundation

Final Report

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Bay Area Research Group

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Stanford University

October 2012

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Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Jane David and Joan Talbert have been studying school and district reform initiatives over the past three decades with a particular focus on uses of evidence, learning communities, capacity building, and organizational change. Separately and together they have studied reform in dozens of school districts across the country, large and small, urban and rural. David's recent book (with Larry Cuban) is *Cutting Through the Hype: The Essential Guide to School Reform* (Harvard Education Press, 2010). Talbert's latest book (with Milbrey McLaughlin) is *Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities: Professional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement* (Teachers College Press, 2006).

Executive Summary

Sanger Unified School District has achieved continuous improvement in its students' academic proficiency and in closing achievement gaps for nearly a decade. Located in California's Central Valley, noted for its extreme poverty and prevalence of English learners, Sanger Unified exemplifies the notion of a "turnaround" district that continues its upward trajectory. From a district designated as one of the lowest performing in the state eight years ago, Sanger now draws the attention of educators across the state and nation who are eager to learn what they did.

With funding from S. H. Cowell Foundation in San Francisco, we set out in 2008 to document the Sanger story. Over the next four years we collected data through interviews, observations, and surveys along with test scores and other outcome measures. Together these data tell the story of how district leaders developed a culture of continuous improvement through leadership principles and strategies that now permeate the district.

Key Findings

Sanger's approach flies in the face of most district reform efforts. Rather than adopting new curriculum and monitoring fidelity or bringing in private vendors, top Sanger leaders set out to fundamentally change the culture of the district:

- From focus on adults to focus on students
- From following textbooks to diagnosing student needs
- From professional isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility
- From top-down to reciprocal accountability
- From leaders as managers to leaders of learning

How Sanger leaders brought about these cultural shifts is the essence of the district's success. Three core principals coupled with practical strategies guided their leadership of change:

- Take a developmental approach to change. Select a few complementary initiatives and maintain a sustained focus on them, starting small and building over time with repeated opportunities for learning from training and colleagues.

- Balance mandates, flexibility, and support in implementing and refining district initiatives. Create demand for change, balance loose and tight control, and undergird high pressure with high support.

- Build commitments and relationships to support and sustain change. Maintain clear and consistent communication and pay attention to the importance of social trust and relationships in developing motivation and capacity for change.

Putting these ideas into practice—also a developmental process with feedback loops built in—yielded a district culture in 2012 dramatically different from that in 2004. Most notably, district leaders chose and stuck with just four initiatives – professional learning communities (PLCs), direct instruction (EDI), response to intervention (RTI), and English language development – that together squarely focus teachers' work on all students, on grade-level standards for their learning, and on diagnosing and responding to their learning needs in real time. Each of the four initiatives invests in site leadership, focuses on students, and bases decisions on evidence of student learning.

- District leaders took multiple steps to develop principals' and teachers' interest in collaboration as an approach to improving their practice. They sent successive cohorts of administrators and teachers to the DuFours' inspiring conferences over the years. Although mandating that all teachers participate in a PLC, district leaders worked systematically to support their work by developing a data system that would allow them to enter and access their assessment data. Teachers unanimously point to their PLCs as key to student learning. Moreover, the model for collaboration spawned many variations among administrators, including principal PLCs and cross-school teams formed to solve particular problems of practice.

- Sanger created a two-pronged approach to improving instruction that is grounded in diagnosing and responding to student learning needs. One prong was the adoption of an instructional approach (EDI) defined by a set of principles about learning rather than a pre-specified curriculum. These principles emphasize clear learning objectives, student interaction in pairs, constant flow of feedback from students, and close monitoring of each student's progress towards grade-level standards. The second prong was the creation of a system of staged interventions (RTI) for all students both within the regular classroom and also during time specifically allocated each day for instructional interventions. A parallel system of behavior interventions supports the instructional interventions.

- Sanger shifted district and school administrator's thinking and skills from being managers to being leaders of learning by developing their deep understanding of each initiative and how they work together to increase student learning. As well as investing in existing administrators the district nurtured teacher leadership through PLCs and support roles, creating a pipeline for future school and district leaders already knowledgeable about teaching and learning.

- Sanger administrators shifted the culture from top-down mandates and compliance to reciprocal accountability by making clear that everyone has a role to play in improving student success. They reframed accountability from meeting external demands from the state to meeting expectations for their own work at all district levels. Mechanisms for accountability hold teachers and administrators accountable for collecting data and using evidence in decision making. These include annual public forums for principals to present their student performance data, identify areas for improvement, and commit to strategies for improvement.

Central office leaders in turn are accountable for providing principals and teachers with the resources they need to succeed, from training to data systems.

Our study of Sanger uncovered a dynamic system of interdependent parts characterized by an openness and commitment to continuous improvement, not only for student outcomes but for every corner of the district. We draw two overarching conclusions from our findings which respond to the most common questions asked of Sanger and other successful districts:

- Can Sanger sustain its success? We conclude that the ways in which Sanger has steadily achieved success are those that will sustain it—through establishing norms and routines in which people at all levels of the district monitor, learn from, and improve their practice. The emphasis on learning from evidence at all levels of the system and sharing knowledge through collaboration are central.

- Can other districts learn from Sanger? We think so. But the lessons to be drawn are less about the particular initiatives the district chose than about how Sanger leaders prompted and supported changes in thinking about learning, for students and adults. Key to the district's continuous improvement are broad leadership and technical knowledge of administrators and teachers, along with their use of evidence of student learning to ground all decisions.

We end on a cautionary note. When asked whether Sanger's success can continue in light of continuing budget cuts, the superintendent replied:

> [We] keep going in tight times with enthusiasm. It is the collaborative culture of the district that makes this possible. My concern is: how many years can we draw from that well without finally pulling the last bucket out. There hasn't been anything recharging the ground water and we are depleting it.

I. Introduction

In 1999, applicants for positions in the Sanger Unified School District saw this billboard sponsored by the teachers' union as they drove into town: "Welcome to the Home of 400 Unhappy Teachers." In stark contrast ten years later, a teacher active in union leadership said: "There is not one principal in this town I would not work for."

This shift in teachers' attitude is one of many indicators of the district's transformation over the past decade. Today hundreds of visitors walk through classrooms each year in this overwhelmingly poor and minority district. They see students engaged in lessons and teachers unruffled by unexpected visitors. Sanger's test scores gains for all students and for English learners have surpassed average state gains each year since testing began under No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Stories of turnaround schools are rare. Stories of turnaround school districts are even rarer, particularly those with a track record that is still strong after eight years. The Sanger Unified School District created an engine for continuous improvement. Other districts have some of the individual elements of Sanger's comprehensive reform but few if any have accomplished the sweeping changes in district culture that undergird and sustain their improvement strategies.

How did Sanger manage to produce these results? Will they last? What can others learn from Sanger's evolution? With funding from S. H. Cowell Foundation in San Francisco, we have had the opportunity to investigate Sanger's successes and its struggles and document the path that led them from dire straits to one of the most talked about districts in the state. Our goal is to capture what it is about Sanger's approach that is so different from typical improvement efforts and to suggest the kinds of lessons that have relevance for district reform across the nation.

Background

The Sanger Unified School District lies in the middle of California's Central Valley where the child poverty rate is two to three times the national average. Here families have been locked in a cycle of poor educational outcomes and poverty for decades. Sanger Unified has 19 schools serving 10,500 students. For comparison, 94 percent of districts in the nation have fewer than 10,000 students and together serve roughly half the students in the country.[1] Sanger's schools include three district-sponsored charter schools, a community day school, and an adult school. Like other Central Valley school districts, Sanger Unified is challenged to educate students from families with limited educational backgrounds, many of whom do not speak English. In 2010-11, 83 percent of district students are minority, 71percent are poor, and 22 percent are English learners.[2]

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[1] http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_091.asp
[2] Based on 2010-11 Ed Data http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

In 2004, Sanger Unified was named one of the 98 lowest performing districts in the state. Seven schools, and the district, were declared in need of improvement (Program Improvement or PI) under federal law. Program Improvement can be a life sentence for districts like Sanger, especially with increasingly higher thresholds for moving out of PI and ever shrinking resources. In Sanger, however, all seven schools moved out of Program Improvement within five years. Moreover, four of them went on to achieve State Distinguished Schools status. By the end of the 2008-09 school year, all but one of Sanger's 13 elementary schools reached the state target of 800 on the Academic Performance Index (API),[3] with the middle and high schools close behind. As of 2010-11 this general pattern has held. The district, which began lower than the state in 2004, ended the 2010-11 school year with an API of 815, substantially higher than the statewide average of 778. Sanger continues to outperform the state for all students and for English learners on NCLB measures. Still, along with virtually all similar districts in California and half the schools in the nation, the district did not meet the increasingly stringent NCLB requirements which triggered the Program Improvement label for the 2011-12 year.

In 2011 Sanger's superintendent Marcus Johnson was named National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators. Teams from well over a hundred districts have visited Sanger seeking their secret to success. In addition to accelerating students' academic achievement, which we describe below, Sanger has amassed awards in non-cognitive areas. In 2010 all 13 elementary schools received rewards from the Bonner Center for Character Education at California State University Fresno for their outstanding school-wide Character Education programs. The district was also named as the outstanding Community of Caring District in America by the National Center for Community of Caring at the University of Utah.

Sanger's story is far from typical in the world of education reform. Observers will not find a magic bullet or even a recipe. In striking contrast to typical district improvement efforts that combine a wide array of 'research-based' programs and initiatives, Sanger demonstrates the payoff that comes from sustaining a singular focus on student learning and nurturing the implementation of a small number of keystone practices over many years. The district's approach embodies respect for teachers and school leaders and investment in their continual learning. Sanger's story also exemplifies the use of evidence, from data and from experience, to ground decisions inside classrooms and beyond.

Because Sanger's leaders believe in the power of evidence to guide new directions, the evolution of their reforms does not follow a linear path. Instead it is a story of many moving parts and interconnections. As we write, adjustments are being made as new evidence suggests what is and is not working well. We try to give a sense of what Sanger leaders and staff did and how they did it, from intended shifts in districtwide culture to a sustained focus on a coherent agenda.

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[3] The Academic Performance Index (API) is California's annual measure of performance of schools and districts on state tests.

Data sources

Our report is based on data collected from fall 2008 through Spring 2012. These data include one or more interviews with school-level staff in 13 schools including 28 interviews with principals and assistant principals, 110 interviews with elementary, middle, and high school teachers, 12 interviews with Curriculum Service Providers, and six interviews with school psychologists and counselors. In addition to casual conversations with students during school visits, we conducted a focus group with high school students. We interviewed nine key district administrators multiple times, as well as the school board president and teacher union presidents. We also interviewed several community leaders, parents, and heads of agencies that work closely with the school district on behavior and social-emotional issues.

We administered an online survey to all teachers in spring 2009 and again in spring 2011. We observed classrooms in eight schools and multiple PLC meetings in schools at each level. We observed a range of key district-wide events including: annual Principal Summits, professional development sessions, district site visits to schools, Alternative Governance Board (AGB) meetings, and Academic Leadership Team (ALT) meetings. We also reviewed a broad range of documents from the district office and individual schools, including the Principal Summit presentations from all Sanger schools and test score reports. We report annual student achievement data from 2003 to 2011 based on the California Standards Test (CST), the state's Academic Performance Index (API), and metrics designed to meet federal requirements for school progress under No Child Left Behind legislation.

Organization of the report

The next section highlights Sanger's achievement data, documenting the district's rapid turnaround and continuous improvement. Section III provides an overview of Sanger's approach—the five overarching goals that district leaders pursued for changing the district's culture and the principles and strategies they used to bring about these changes. The core of our report—Sections IV through VIII—describes how each of the five changes in district culture change came about: shifts from focusing on adults to students, from textbooks to diagnosing student needs, from isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility, from external to reciprocal accountability, and from leaders as managers to leaders of learning. We conclude with a discussion of two questions: Can Sanger sustain its success? What are the lessons from their experiences for other districts?

For a glossary of frequently used acronyms and brief descriptors, see Appendix A. Appendix B presents demographic information for each Sanger school.

II. Evidence of Sanger's success

Sanger Unified has attracted attention across the state for its unusually strong track record in continually increasing achievement levels of all its students. Year after year its students' performance on the California Standards Test has improved – overall and for subgroups – at rates exceeding average state gains. In fact, Sanger has been singled out in several research studies for its progress with English learners and special education students and for achievement in non-cognitive areas as described in the Introduction.

Notable trends in student achievement on the California Standards Test

Sanger's progress in accelerating student achievement began in 2005 just as the district embarked on a series of reforms intended to continuously improve learning for all its students. These data speak for themselves and offer a compelling rationale for studying how Sanger achieved these unusual results.

We highlight notable trends here on the California Standards Test (CST) followed by the state's Academic Performance Index.

Sanger outperforms the state on gains in percent Proficient or Advanced on the California Standards Test (CST) for all students from 2003 to 2011. In fact, Sanger's gains are close to double those of the state in both English language arts (ELA) and math. (See Figure 1 next page**)**

- In ELA, Sanger student scores increased 35 percentage points (from 25% to 60%) versus 19 points for the state (37% to 56%).

- In Math, Sanger student scores increased 39 percentage points (from 29% to 68%) versus 19 points for the state (39% to 58%).

The dotted green line in Figure 1 represents the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) annual targets, which soared in 2011 to rates unattainable by districts and subgroups across the state. California, like other states, set low expectations for the early years which meant that the rate of increase for the later years would have to be very steep in order to reach the unrealistic goal of all students becoming "proficient" by 2014. The expectation for Sanger in 2011 already exceeds students' overall performance in English language arts and next year the same will hold in math. That all Title I schools would be deemed failures under NCLB by the 2014 deadline has never been in dispute. In 2010-2011, 50 percent of the Title I schools in the nation were labeled Program Improvement and that figure will increase dramatically if the expectations are not revised.

Figure 1

Percent of Sanger Students Proficient or Above on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts and Math Compared to State 2003-2011

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	25%	27%	35%	42%	47%	51%	56%	58%	60%
CA Actual AYP ELA	37%	37%	42%	45%	46%	48%	52%	54%	56%
CA Target AYP ELA	12%	12%	23%	23%	23%	34%	45%	56%	67%

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
SUSD Actual AYP Math	29%	31%	44%	52%	55%	60%	66%	67%	68%
CA Actual AYP Math	39%	40%	45%	48%	49%	51%	54%	53%	58%
CA Target AYP Math	13%	13%	24%	24%	24%	35%	46%	56%	67%
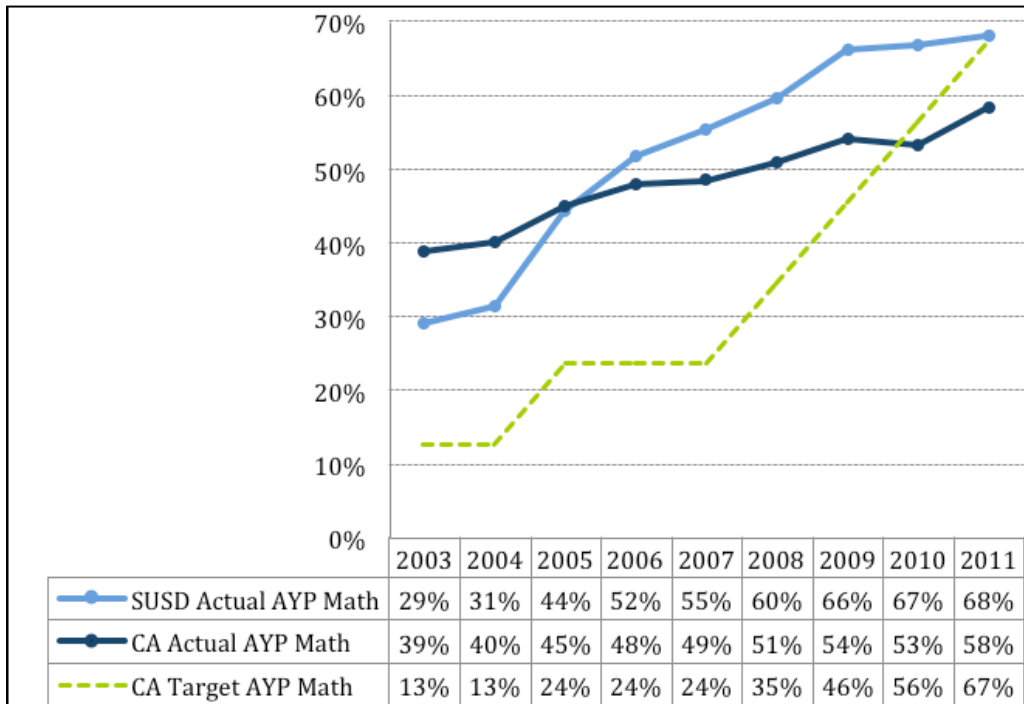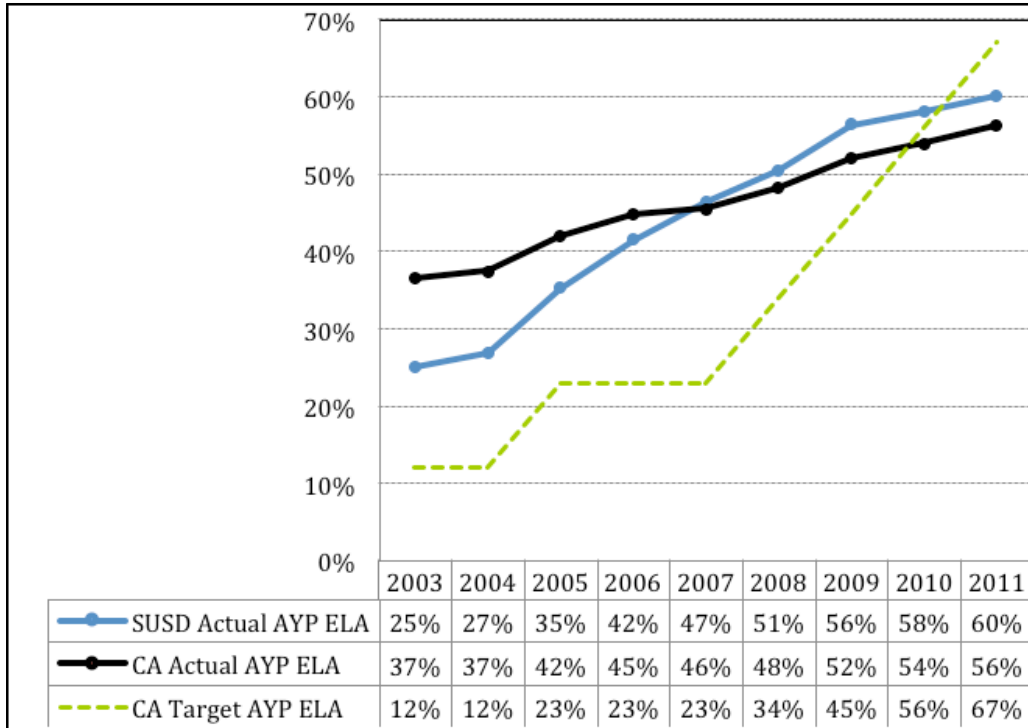
Sanger's English learners outperform the state on gains in percent Proficient or Advanced on the CST in ELA and math.[4] The increase in percent of Sanger's English leaners who reached proficiency from 2003 to 2011 almost doubles the state gain. See Figure 2.

- In ELA, Sanger's English learners' scores increased 38 percentage points (from 11% to 49%) versus 20 points for the state (19% to 39%).

- In Math, Sanger's English learners' scores increased 43 percentage points (from 19% to 62%) versus 22 points for the state (27% to 49%).

Figure 2 on the next page shows CST trends for English learners for English language arts and math. Here too Sanger's English learners started below and ended above the state's percent reaching proficiency, with accelerated gains year after year. .

Sanger's Hispanic students, students with disabilities (SWD), and socio-economically disadvantaged (SED) students also outperformed the state. Sanger's gains for each subgroup are roughly double the state's gains from 2003 to 2011.

- In ELA, Sanger's Hispanic students' scores increased 37 percentage points (from 18% to 55%) versus 24 points for the state (26% to 50%).

- In Math, Sanger's Hispanic students scores increased 41 percentage points (from 23% to 64%) versus 22 points for the state (27% to 49%).

- In ELA, Sanger's SWD scores increased 40 percentage points (from 5% to 45%) versus 20 points for the state (14% to 34%).

- In Math, Sanger's SWD scores increased 38 percentage points (from 9% to 47%) versus 20 points for the state (16% to 36%).

- In ELA, Sanger's SED students' scores increased 39 percentage points (from 17% to 56% versus 23 points for the state (21% to 44%).

- In math, Sanger's SED students' scores increased 43 percentage points (from 22% to 65%) versus 23 points for the state (from 26% to 49%).

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[4] Although districtwide, English learners are 22 percent of student enrollment in 2010-11, they are 38 percent of students tested because the state includes students recently reclassified as fluent English.

Figure 2

Percent of Sanger English Learners Proficient or Above on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts and Math Compared to State 2004-2011

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	11%	10%	20%	24%	31%	36%	42%	47%	49%
CA Actual AYP ELA	19%	18%	22%	25%	26%	29%	33%	36%	39%

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
SUSD Actual AYP Math	19%	20%	35%	42%	46%	51%	60%	61%	62%
CA Actual AYP Math	27%	27%	32%	35%	36%	39%	43%	46%	49%
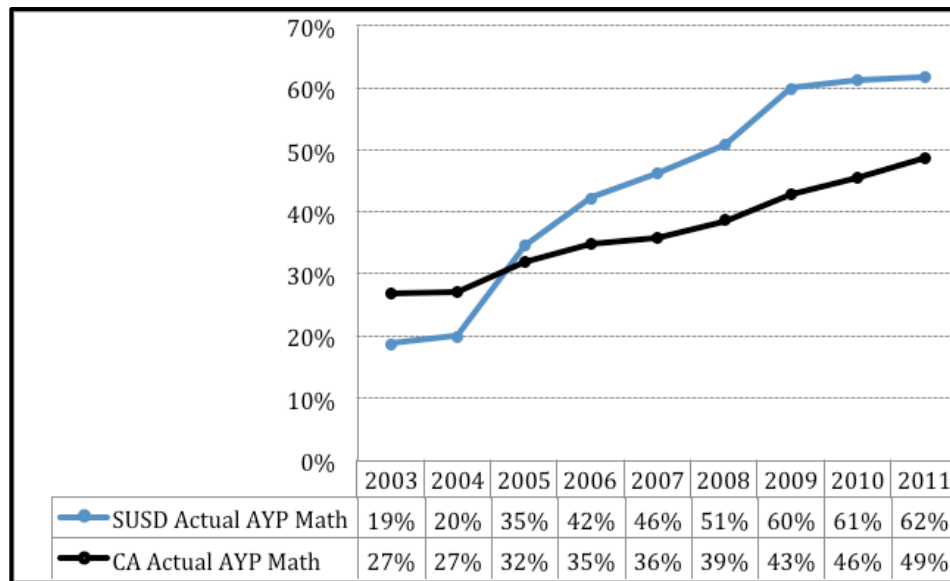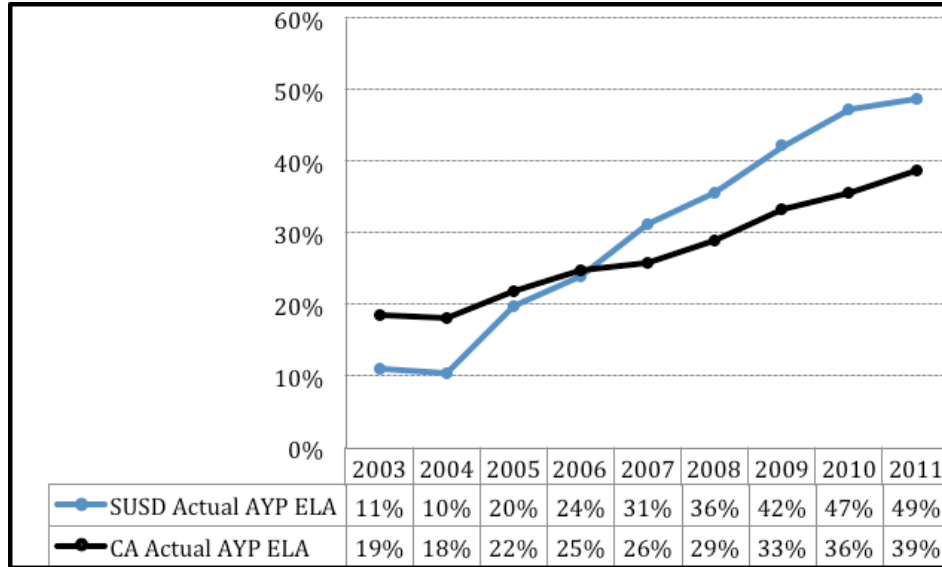
Sanger achieved a rapid turnaround in moving schools out of Program Improvement. All seven Sanger schools that were labeled Program Improvement (PI) by the state in 2004 had exited PI by the end of 2008-09. Four went on to achieve State Distinguished School status.

Sanger was one of four districts singled out for showing unusually strong performance by students in special education. Researchers used a rigorous process to identify California districts that significantly outperformed their peers. Sanger, with high poverty and a lower than average classification rate in special education, showed much stronger performance on the CST than similar districts and the state. In mathematics 49 percent of special education students scored proficient or above (compared to 33 percent for the state) and in ELA 38 percent (compared to 32 percent for the state).[5]

Sanger high school students are passing the state graduation exam (CAHSEE) at increasing rates. Sanger High School's 10th grade passing rate in ELA increased from 72 percent in 2004 to 88 in 2011 (compared to 82 percent in 2011 statewide). In math, the passing rate at Sanger High increased from 74 percent in 2004 to 88 percent in 2011 (compared to 83 percent statewide).

Notable trends in student achievement on the Academic Performance Index

Sanger also shows remarkable progress on the state Academic Performance Index (API) which is the basis for comparing schools and incorporates the CST described above as well as other measures.

Sanger, also designated as a failing district under Program Improvement, has now exceeded the state target of 800 on its Academic Performance Index (API) index as have almost all of its schools. In 2005 Sanger was slightly lower than the state (702 versus 709), yet by the end of 2011 Sanger's API exceeded the state's by 37 points (815 for Sanger, 778 for the state)—a gain for Sanger of 113 points versus 69 for the state. See Figure 3.

Sanger's English learners gained almost twice as much as the state on the API from 2003 to 2011. Sanger's English learners gained 145 points compared to 75 points for the state. Sanger's English learners began 5 points ahead of the state and ended 65 points ahead, with Sanger's English learners' score of 771 nearing the state target of 800. See Figure 4.

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[5] Huberman, H. & Parrish, T. *Lessons from California districts showing unusually strong academic performance for students in special education*. WestEd, January 2011.

Figure 3

**Sanger Growth on Academic Performance Index (API)
Compared to State 2005-2011***

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
SUSD Actual API	702	730	752	778	795	805	815
CA Actual API	709	720	728	742	755	767	778
CA Target API	800	800	800	800	800	800	800
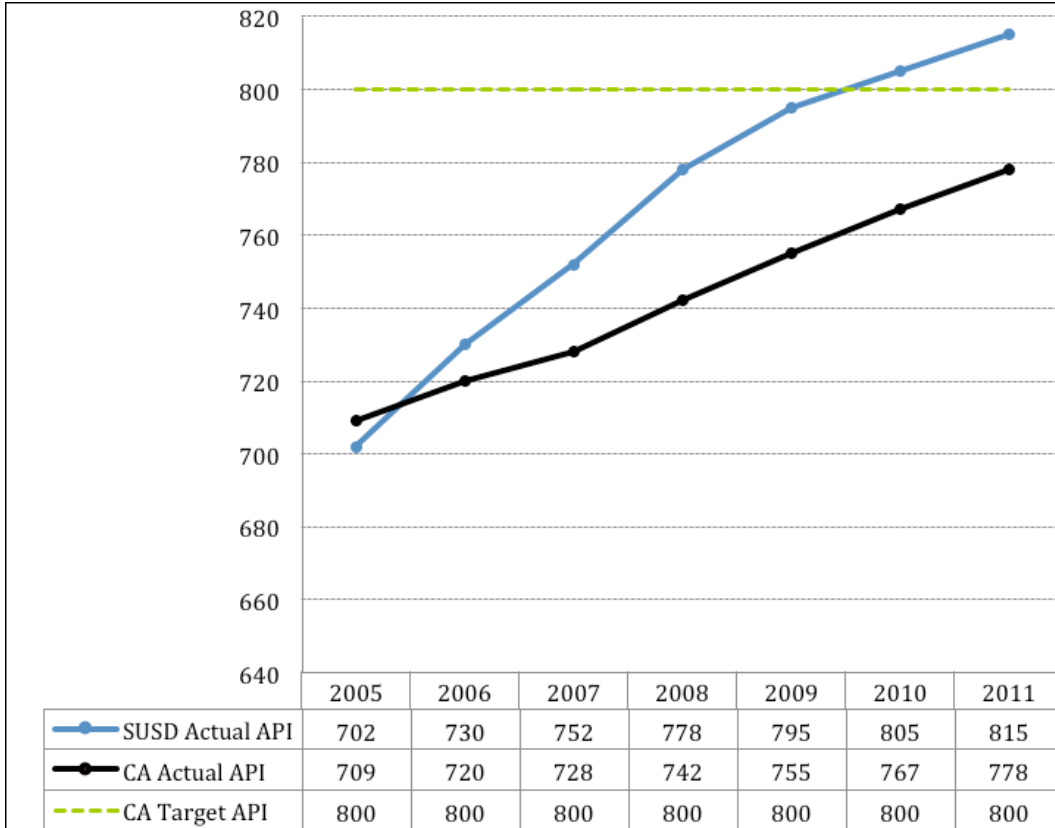
* California no longer reports API scores prior to 2005.

A majority of Sanger's schools achieved the highest possible ranking in comparison to 100 similar schools based on their API performance. Nine of Sanger's 15 schools received a score of 10 in the state's similar schools ranking; the rest were ranked 7 or above with one exception.[6]

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[6] One elementary school declined from 10 in 2009 to 8 in 2010 to 3 in 2011, prompting district leaders to provide intensive support for the school during 2010-11 (see discussion in Section VII)

Figure 4

**Sanger Growth on Academic Performance Index (API) for English Learners
Compared to State 2005-2011***

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
●—SUSD Actual API	636	662	691	727	745	760	771
●—CA Actual API	631	641	646	662	677	692	706
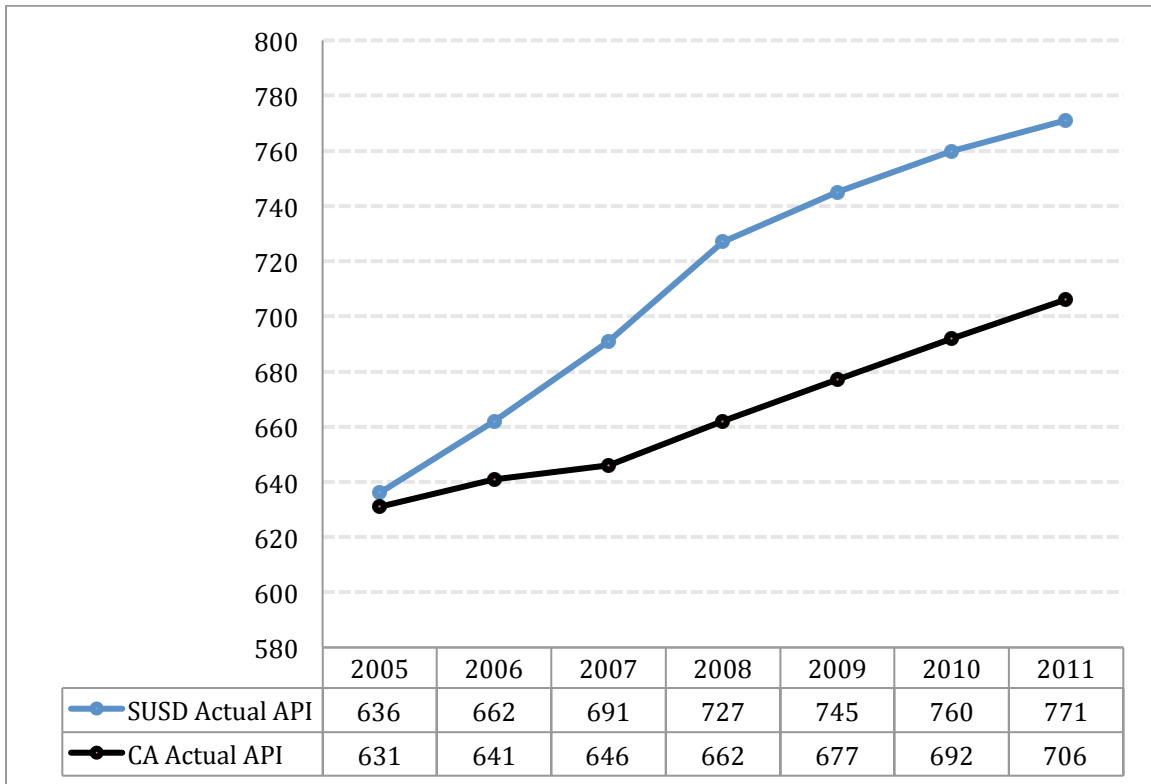
Notable accomplishments beyond student test scores

Sanger's accomplishments extend beyond the acceleration of students' academic performance, as we noted earlier. The district has received numerous honors including those for individual schools' performance (for example, State Distinguished Schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools) and the Superintendent of the Year award bestowed on Sanger's superintendent in 2011. Many of Sanger's awards target achievement in non-cognitive and behavioral areas, including Character Education awards and Community of Caring recognition. In addition Sanger High School has maintained graduation rates from 95 to 97% in the past few years. Other indicators of success include:

In a study of U. S. school districts with at least 10,000 students and majority Latino population, Sanger was among the top ten districts in the nation distinguished for their exceptional Latino graduation rates. The analysis reported by Education Week (Diplomas Count, June 7, 2012) compared a district's actual Latino graduation rate in 2009 with the rate expected based on 10 characteristics including poverty rate, district size, and levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation. Sanger's actual rate was 78

percent, 11 percent higher than its expected rate of 67 percent (tying two other districts for 9th position among 38 districts with rates at least 1 percent above their expected rate).

Sanger attracts hundreds of visitors each year. Visitors are mostly from the region and state, but they come also from across the country. They are attracted by Sanger's exceptional track record, and by the honor and national publicity associated with Marc Johnson's selection as AASA's 2011 Superintendent of the Year.

Sanger is cited as an exemplar in publications by several national figures in education reform. Most notably these include DuFour et al (2009)[7] and Fullan (2011)[8]. Sanger is also featured in a video by Fullan (in process).

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[7] DuFour, R., R. Dufour, R. Eaker & G. Karbanek. *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever it Takes*. Solution Tree, 2010. (Chapter 12)
[8] Fullan, M. *Moral Imperative Realized*. Corwin Press, 2011. (Chapter 3)

III. Sanger's approach to reform

California officials and educators flock to Sanger to find out what makes the district so successful. How has the district managed to achieve continuous improvement in student achievement over nearly a decade? In the fall, visitors come to observe Sanger's Principal Summits where principals take turns presenting their school's data on CST trends for all student groups, describing their focus and strategies for improvement, and responding to questions from district administrators. Visitors are struck by the transparency and spirit of collaboration they witness. Throughout the year, educators travel to Sanger schools to see what their successful classrooms look like. Visitors are impressed by youngsters' poise in greeting visitors, their orderly behavior on school grounds, and the way they respond in full sentences to questions the teachers ask them randomly in their classrooms. They want to know how to replicate what they see.

Our sense is that most visitors are looking for answers in the wrong places. The questions they ask are usually something like: What ELD (English Language Development) program did you adopt? How do you schedule interventions? Who provides teacher training? They are looking for concrete answers to the question "what works"? What program or restructuring design or support provider can they use to replicate Sanger's success? When opportunities arise for district leaders to describe the fundamental changes in culture they achieved, observers often conclude that it was all about the superintendent's charismatic leadership. The 'great leader' theory of school reform enjoys a long history and is a ready explanation here, especially since Mr. Johnson was named AASA Superintendent of the Year in 2011. This account breeds pessimism that districts could ever replicate Sanger's success.

Neither of these presumptions about Sanger's success gets to the bottom of this district's continuous improvement. After studying Sanger Unified for four years we conclude that the right questions are:

- What vision for their school system's culture did Sanger leaders pursue in the quest to improve student achievement?
- How did they bring about the desired changes?

Our account of Sanger's success features a growing cadre of leaders working across all district schools to bring about and sustain a district culture with the capacity to continuously improve student achievement.

We tell the story of Sanger's success as succinctly as we can. It is a complex story, and clearly it would be much easier for us to just describe the instructional initiatives Sanger leaders pursued over the past eight years – Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), direct instruction (EDI), pyramids of academic and behavioral interventions (RTI), and English Language Development (ELD) strategies. However, this

would miss the vision behind leaders' decisions, as well as the principles and strategies of their leadership for changing the system.

Our characterizations of the values, beliefs, and goals are derived from our data, as is our model of how the goals fit together. Reviews by Sanger's district leaders agreed that the representations are accurate from their perspective, including the diagram designed to capture the essence of the district reforms.

Vision for a District Culture of Continuous Improvement

Sanger leaders' vision for their district's culture was grounded in their values and beliefs, as well as knowledge about organization learning and improvement that they gleaned from work with the Riverside County Achievement Team (RCAT) and conferences they attended during the early days of their reform effort. The vision translated into five overarching goals for transforming the district's culture to support continuous improvement in all Sanger students' achievement. Each applies to multiple levels of the district:

- *Focus on student learning.* The superintendent established early on that the district's mission is to ensure that all children reach their potential. Student learning would be the focus of all adults in the system. This meant that adult needs and comfort with the status quo would no longer be valid criteria or concerns for district or school policy and would be replaced by using evidence to select and refine strategies leading to improvement.

- *Diagnose and address student needs.* Teachers and schools would focus on meeting the learning needs of every child to ensure that all become proficient at grade level standards. This meant that educators would need to teach to grade-level content standards and continually monitor and respond to student learning needs, rather than delivering a curriculum or following the textbook. In fact, across the system, decisions would no longer be based on routines, assumptions, or compliance with external mandates, but instead on evidence of student learning.

- *Collaborate and share responsibility for student success.* "Together we can" became a mantra for Sanger's reform. From teacher professional learning communities in schools to district leadership teams to community partnerships, adults would collaborate to ensure student success. This meant that teachers would need to abandon privacy norms, district staff would need to break down central office silos, partnerships with parents and the broader community would need to be built.

- *Create a system of reciprocal accountability.* Educators at all levels of the system would make decisions based on data and be held publicly accountable for doing so. From teachers' ongoing reviews of student progress to principals' annual presentations of school trends in student performance to district leaders, educators

would be held accountable for grounding decisions in evidence of student learning. At the same time the central office would be obliged to provide teachers and principals what they need to succeed.

- *Develop leaders of learning.* District and school administrators would lead improvement through working with educators to improve instruction for all students and developing broad teacher leadership. This meant that administrators would need to move from being primarily managers of buildings and programs to learning with teachers new approaches to improve student achievement and supporting their progress. They also would actively support the development of a pipeline of teacher leaders and potential administrators steeped in the district's reform culture.

Embedded in each of these goals for changing the district culture is the expectation that evidence would be used to guide decisions. Each goal embodies the idea of repeated cycles of inquiry in which questions are asked, evidence gathered, and actions taken leading to another cycle.

This vision for creating a district culture of continuous improvement posed significant challenges. District leaders knew that these cultural conditions could not be created through mandates nor implemented like programs. Rather they were about changing people's minds and habits–the ways in which they thought about their jobs, their colleagues, and their students. So they faced the challenge of leading culture change. Figure 5 on the next page captures the kinds of shifts in culture they would need to bring about.

Leadership Principles and Strategies

Sanger's leaders created their own particular philosophical framework that has guided their strategic choices about how to bring about major changes in the culture through influencing the beliefs and practices of those working for Sanger Unified.

The Sanger way of leading change follows three core principles that ground particular, explicit strategies. First is that culture change is gradual and it is essential to take a ***developmental approach to change***. Strategies grounded in this principle include:

- *Sustained focus on a few initiatives.* In contrast to the all-too-common "mile wide and inch deep" approach to reform, Sanger leaders picked four complementary initiatives as the backbone of their reforms and stuck with them, with continuing training and support to both spread and deepen understanding of each initiative. They knew that educators' learning and shifts in practice would need to be nurtured over time and that intensive and sustained training would be critical. They use the continual repainting of the Golden Gate Bridge as a metaphor for the district's approach to constantly reinforcing district values and providing educators with repeated learning opportunities to refresh their understanding and skills for the core initiatives.

Figure 5

Sanger District Reform: Goals for Shifting District Culture
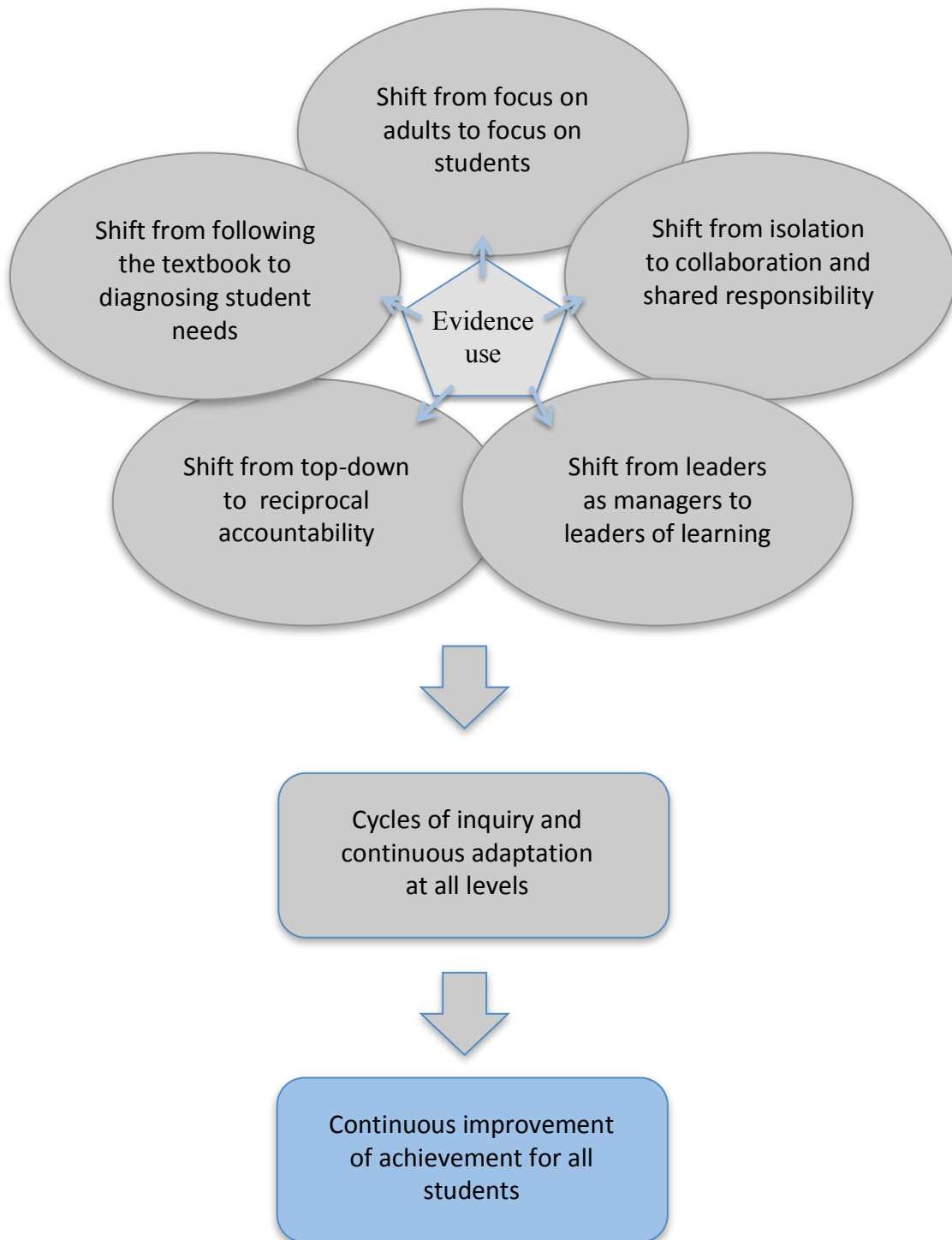
- *Creating demand*. Sanger leaders encourage the adoption of new practices by introducing them to principals and teachers through carefully selected training opportunities and through exemplars within district schools. They highlight successful practices and create pilots to develop and test new programs or practices as part of a strategy to create demand for innovation rather than to mandate it from the top. This leadership practice also reflects the district culture of evidence-based decision making. Principal and teacher networks spread the word about effective practices, creating appetite and informal opportunities to learn them.

Another core principle for Sanger's change leadership is **balancing mandates, flexibility, and support in implementing and refining district initiatives**. Built on district values of collaboration and evidence-based accountability, this principle prompts leaders to think and act strategically in ways that leverage change but avoid top-down directives that engender a compliance mentality. They walk a fine line that has shifted over time as the initiatives have broadened and deepened. Two strategies are key:

- *Balancing tight and loose control*. Sanger leaders define clear parameters within which schools have discretion, seeking to balance what is decided at the district and school levels. Referred to as "tight-loose," leaders are clear about their "non-negotiables" which translate into requirements for schools (the what). At the same time, schools are clear about the flexibility each has to do it "their way" (the how). As evidence accumulated about effective school practices on any one of their four core initiatives, the district tightened requirements with clearer guidelines for practice and/ protocols for assessing progress.

- *Coupling high pressure coupled with high support*. Sanger leaders ask a lot of their principals and teachers and a lot of themselves. District leaders have high expectations for principals and push them to become strong school leaders of teacher PLCs and effective teaching and learning. At the same time, they have organized the central office to ensure that principals are relieved of responsibilities and requests that are not central to their role as instructional leaders. Similarly, teachers are pressed to embrace collaboration with colleagues, direct instruction, English language development, and interventions and are provided with supports ranging from dedicated time for meeting to ongoing training opportunities and coaching.

Further, because district leaders see the problem of culture change as one of changing professionals' minds and practices, they emphasize the importance of **building commitments and relationships to support and sustain change.**

- *Clear and constant communication*. Continuing conversations between district leaders and school staff are integral to Sanger's views of how a system changes and how changes are sustained. From the superintendent's slogans and annual themes and storytelling to learning communities up and down the system,

conversations reinforce the district's core commitment to student learning and expectations for adults.

- *Working "below the green line."* Early on, Sanger leaders developed a perspective on leading change that attends to the critical importance of social trust and relationships in developing motivation and capacity for change. In a Riverside County conference during the mid-2000s, district leaders learned about the ideas of Margaret Wheatley who applies dynamic models from the "new" sciences to organizations.[9] In particular, district leaders were entranced by the Six Circle model developed by Wheatley and other organizational change consultants in the 1990's. The concept "below the green line" refers to a diagram in which the dynamics of change – relationships, communication, and identity – fall below the line, and structures and operations that are the more typical focus of reforms are above the line (which happens to have been green in its widely disseminated version). Sanger leaders across the district use this jargon and understand its meaning and importance in leading change and addressing problems they encounter.

Figure 6 on the next page shows how Sanger translated the Six Circle model to frame its focus on collaboration and professional learning communities (PLCs). In this framework, culture change comes about through action "below the green line," through professionals working together to improve student success. (In the diagram the dotted line is the green line.)

The importance of the "below the green line" mindset is captured by this comment from a district administrator who works between the central office and schools:

We know right away when you miss the 'below the green line' piece. If you move too fast or skip a critical conversation or say something before you have given them an opportunity to learn to do something you are asking of them.

A clear vision for a district culture of continuous improvement combined with these principles and strategies for leading district change undergird Sanger's transformation.

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[9] See Wheatley, M. J. *Leadership and the New Science: Learning from an Orderly Universe*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992.

Figure 6

"Below the Green Line" in the Context of PLCs

STRUCTURE

Time created for weekly PLC meetings.

STRATEGY

OPERATIONS

"Essential" standards set at all grade levels.

Grade level performance assessments calendared for school year.

INFORMATION

Teachers collaborate frequently and meaningfully to discuss best practices.

RELATIONSHIPS

IDENTITY

Teachers plan as a team to ensure support to one another.

Grade level refers to "our" students' achievement and learning.

IV. Shift from focus on adults to focus on students

At the heart of Sanger's continuous improvement is an explicit focus on students and a commitment to the success of each and every one. It would be hard to find a district administrator across the nation who doesn't state this priority. Yet few have mobilized an entire system of administrators, teachers, and staff to bring all students' success to the fore of their daily work.

Shifting the focus to students is the fundamental premise undergirding Sanger's district reform. In fact, this shift in focus was fundamental to all the culture shifts described earlier and shown in Figure 5: classroom instruction, teacher collaboration, reciprocal accountability, and leadership. Each is rooted in using evidence of student performance and carries an explicit focus on students.

So how did this pivotal shift to students happen? From the beginning of his tenure, Sanger's superintendent Marc Johnson made his position clear: "The only reason an adult is in this district is because it is a position that is necessary to support student learning." Typically districts introduce reforms by adopting new programs or best practices that are focused on what the adults do. In so doing, central office staff stay within the functions of their divisions, school administrators press teachers to implement the new programs, and teachers accommodate new practices to varying degrees.

Sanger leaders described their practices prior to 2005 in much these same terms, characterizing teachers as "independent contractors" with widely varying instruction across classes in the same grade and the same subject. In this common scenario, adults tend to blame the students and their families for poor academic performance, and the strongest teachers often migrate to higher performing classes and schools. Under Superintendent Johnson, this climate was not allowed to persist.

Sanger district administrators shifted the focus of school administrators and teachers from adult prerogatives to student needs by insisting on judging progress based on evidence of student learning and creating a culture in which blaming students was not acceptable. Fundamental to Sanger's approach is the idea that hoping for improvement and relying on individual judgment must be replaced by using evidence of student learning to select and refine strategies.

Establishing new norms

Sanger's overarching approach to reforming the district has been to create a culture and common language that focuses attention and resources on student learning and on adult learning in support of that goal. Superintendent Johnson has followed a purposive strategy over the years to communicate the expectation of continuously improving student achievement. A man of passion, he repeatedly states the district's mission: "To have every child reach their potential."

Sanger's approach to reform tackled both cultural change and instructional change. The label of "Program Improvement" provided evidence that the district was not serving all students. Superintendent Johnson saw his role as shifting the attention of all educators in the district away from adult needs to student needs. He points to three "foundational" beliefs: "Hope is not a strategy," "Don't blame the kids," and "It's about student learning." Now widely referred to throughout the district, Deputy Superintendent Smith expands on the meaning of each slogan:[10]

- We must become strategic in what we do for students.
- Our students' ethnicity, socioeconomic status and home language will not be excuses for adults who are responsible for their learning.
- We must hold ourselves accountable for ensuring our students learn what we set out to teach them.

Such slogans might be found in other districts but few stick with them for a decade and back them up with strategic action. Sanger has translated these guiding values into action by selecting and sustaining a small number of carefully chosen initiatives that consistently focus adults on improving student learning and that reinforce each other: collaboration on data use, direct instruction, and interventions tailored to students' needs.

The superintendent has been the district's moral and inspirational leader who tells stories and uses slogans that capture and reinforce the mission of having every child reach their potential. He uses the power of conversation to communicate a constant focus on students, respect for teachers, and trust in all Sanger employees. For example, he starts every year with a keynote, in contrast to districts that bring in guest speakers, to "set the tone and remind ourselves of our mission."

To reinforce respect and support for teachers as they are pressed to focus on students and be accountable for their success, Superintendent Johnson visits every classroom twice a year:

> Regular classroom visits became one way I can reassure them [teachers] that 'I am here to support you.' They also became a way to reinforce the theme for the year. So, on the first visit I hand out a pin with a card and thank them for the difference they have made.

In the process, he has shifted the attitude of most teachers from fear and anxiety over being evaluated to welcoming feedback and support. He consistently conveys his commitment to collaboration as key to diagnosing each student's needs. For example, one year the theme was: "Together we can." Each teacher received a pin picturing giant sequoias with a note that explains how the trees can reach such heights in spite of their very shallow roots: each tree's roots are interwoven with those of others so in groups they are strong while one standing alone is at risk of toppling.

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[10] W. Richard Smith. "Culture of Collaboration," *The School Administrator* 69. no. 1 (2012): 14-20.

Similarly, Superintendent Johnson has used the power of communication to gain union support for the district reform efforts, again through focusing the discussion on students. He describes getting the union on board early in his tenure through ongoing conversation with the bargaining unit. He believes most problems can be solved by advance communication and now has the support of union leadership as well as rank and file teachers.

Reinforcing the norms: Attention to evidence

Inspirational rhetoric and ongoing conversations are only a starting place in Sanger. District leaders take seriously that "hope is not a strategy" and have invested in explicit strategies and initiatives to monitor and improve student achievement. The language used to talk about district initiatives in meetings and training sessions is always tied to specific ways in which they will help Sanger students. Pushback from teachers and site administrators is met with the question of whether the topic under discussion would be better for students, shifting debates from adult critiques of a proposed plan to its expected contribution to student learning.

Common across the initiatives is attention to data that tracks student learning. Sanger's mode of direct instruction rests on a constant flow of feedback from every student so that the teacher can check for understanding. This practice leads to interventions first in the classroom. Student response to those interventions determines next steps, including targeted English language development for English learners. (See Section V for more on instruction and interventions.) Teachers' professional learning communities (PLCs) at each grade level focus on student data based on their common assessments to guide their instruction and lesson planning. (See Section VI for more detail on PLCs.)

To support this system of data use the district developed interim assessments and adopted data software that allows teachers to pull items to create tests and then easily enter student data and receive summary reports. In 2007, the district created interim assessments designed to predict student performance on the end-of-year California Standards Test (CST) which are given at the beginning each quarter to guide instruction. Similarly the district adopted quarterly assessments based on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) given in the fall to English learners which allow teachers to measure student growth in language development over the school year. Still, the primary assessments used by teachers to track individual student progress as a basis for determining needed instruction are the common assessments developed by teachers in their PLCs to measure performance on specific learning objectives.

The benefits of data that facilitate tracking student progress in multiple ways are evident. However, intensive data collection has its downside: it takes time away from instruction and it requires a data system and support for teachers to obtain data in a user-friendly form. As we describe in Section V, teachers express concern that an intensive focus on test scores narrows what they teach.

Nonetheless, the norm of seeking evidence and judging effectiveness in terms of student achievement has taken hold and focuses teachers and administrators on students. It is evident well beyond uses by teachers and extends to measures that go beyond test scores. For example, schools collect data on patterns of student behavior which in turn influence the kinds of behavioral interventions they adopt.

The focus on students is integrated into district-led activities. Principals' annual Summits provide detailed reports on evidence of progress in improving student learning (described in Section VII). Moreover, when principals present their data publicly, district administrators are quick to catch any explicit or implicit suggestion that students or their families are to blame. Similarly, in monthly Administration Leadership Team meetings the superintendent always closes with an inspirational story about a struggling student who has succeeded against the odds "as a reminder of the work we do."

Principals in their schools and teams of administrators from across the district collect evidence from observing classrooms on a regular basis, comparing notes to discern patterns that signal successes and issues to be addressed. (See Section XIII). Often these data trigger experimental pilot programs in which a small group of schools, together with district staff, develop new approaches to identified weaknesses. For example, after determining that schools were struggling with putting interventions in place, an RTI pilot was created resulting in strategies and guidelines for creating effective interventions. Similarly, when uneven ELD instruction was documented, a group of schools became a pilot for devising more effective ELD instructional strategies. These are described more fully in Section V.

As a result of these pervasive uses of evidence ultimately linked to student learning, all district administrators internalized the new norms and pass them on to all those with whom they work. The slogans and, more importantly, the beliefs that underlie them are now voiced at all levels of the district as are uses of evidence that tracks student learning. A curriculum support provider in one school summed it up this way: "Our focus is on the learning, not the teaching"

V. Shift from following the textbook to diagnosing student needs

Shifting the district culture to focus on students rather than adults carried with it a major shift in thinking about identifying and meeting the instructional needs of students. The common practice of following the textbook or "delivering" a curriculum and simplifying instructional demands for struggling students had to be replaced. Educators would need to understand and teach grade-level content standards and continually diagnose and respond to student learning needs. Students who were struggling would receive instruction targeted to their needs both within their classrooms and in additional periods set aside for instructional interventions.

Sanger's two-pronged approach to improving student learning has at its core diagnosing and responding to student learning needs. One prong was the adoption of an instructional approach defined by a set of principles about learning rather than a pre-specified curriculum. These principles emphasize clear learning objectives, student interaction in pairs, constant flow of feedback from students, and close monitoring of each student's progress towards grade-level standards. The second prong was to create a system of staged interventions both within the regular classroom and also during time specifically allocated each day for instructional interventions.

In parallel with this shift to diagnosing student needs and bolstering identified weak spots, the development of professional learning communities provided a forum for teachers to design better ways of diagnosing students' needs and strategies for meeting their needs. Professional learning communities are the subject of Section VI.

The introduction of new instructional practices and organizational arrangements to accommodate interventions caused a shift in classrooms across all schools of a magnitude unusual in district reform. The breadth and depth of this shift reflects both the underlying principles of district leadership and key strategies for changing practice. Unusual among their peers in other districts, Sanger leaders:

- Viewed changes in instruction as a *developmental process* requiring multiple opportunities for teachers and school leaders to learn new instructional practices over time.
- Communicated expectations for *extensive use of feedback and data* in the classroom and in teachers' professional learning communities.
- Modeled repeatedly that all adults in the system *share accountability* for student success.

Here we describe how Sanger leaders managed a transformation in instructional approaches that has resulted in continuous improvement in the achievement of Sanger's students. We begin with the shift to a new approach in the regular classroom and then turn to development of a complex system of interventions.

Building a new instructional program

The initial impetus for shifting instructional practices came from the state's 2004 declaration that the district was in Program Improvement. Typically, district leaders threatened with state takeover adopt a curriculum districtwide and press for its faithful implementation. Sanger leaders chose a different path. Their first step was to insist that elementary teachers agree on one language arts textbook, even though it was not an official state adoption year. But the next step was not to pressure teachers to implement the new text. Instead, the approach that evolved began with district insistence that teachers understand and teach to grade-level standards and work from a shared conception of effective teaching. The textbook became one of many resources to draw upon. A shared conception of effective teaching practices would have the benefit of creating a common language across classrooms and schools.

To create a shared conception of effective teaching, in 2005 Sanger chose to implement districtwide an approach to instruction adapted from DataWorks Explicit Direct Instruction which was initially designed with struggling English learners in mind. This version of direct instruction with its focus on diagnosing every student's level of understanding throughout each lesson had considerable success in one of Sanger's poorest schools. In this approach, instruction moves from a teacher-centered format, with repeated checking for understanding, to students' guided practice to independent work each day. District leaders coupled this approach with a parallel emphasis on creating a flexible system of interventions for all students according to their needs.

Creating demand

As with each strand of Sanger's reform, the choice of a specific approach to instruction grew out of the experiences of those in the district. In this case, one elementary school—the first in Sanger to be labeled Program Improvement by the state—had already experimented with an approach to direct instruction identified by the principal and demonstrated substantial increases in achievement. With training and support in Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) from DataWorks, the principal and teacher coach at this school taught their staff a specific set of strategies for developing and teaching lessons designed to help struggling students. One of the poorest schools with half their students classified as English learners, their success created demand, spurring interest among principals and teachers in implementing EDI in their schools.

Grounded in Madeleine Hunter's elements of effective lessons,[11] the principles embodied in Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) over time became the district's de facto definition of effective lessons.[12] The approach incorporates clear teaching objectives and

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[11] Madeleine Hunter's method, popular in the 1970's and 80's, had seven elements: learning objective, standards for performance, anticipatory set, teaching (presenting information, modeling, checking for understanding), guided practice, closure, and independent practice.
[12] In the high school, Sanger's adaptation of EDI is sometimes referred to as Sanger Unified Direct Instruction (SUDI).

teacher-centered instruction, along with guided and independent practice. But what struck the strongest chord with Sanger leaders and teachers was the absolute insistence on teaching to grade-level standards, ongoing checking for understanding, and frequent "pair-shares" that provide opportunities for conversation between pairs of students so important to English learners. The argument that Sanger students would never reach or exceed grade-level proficiency if teachers targeted instruction to their existing level of understanding made sense to Sanger educators, particularly when coupled with a system of targeted interventions described later. Similarly, calling on students randomly rather than the usual suspects (e.g., by drawing students' names from a cup) and holding up small white boards provided quick and easy ways to gauge understanding across the whole class.

Developmental Learning Path

Although Sanger leaders expected all teachers to implement the components of direct instruction introduced in EDI training, they left considerable discretion to principals and teachers on *how* to carry this out. At the same time, the district expected principals to lead and support these changes in instruction and held them accountable for progress over time. As one elementary teacher described the process in her school: "They [school administrators] gave us a year to chew on the whole philosophy. Then they got into details." In another school, the principal had conversations about EDI with all the grade-level PLCs each of which could then choose which elements they wanted to try out first. This combination of "tight" and "loose" is a hallmark of Sanger's reforms through which the district, and in turn principals, communicate expectations to teachers. Both the developmental strand and loose-tight strategy are illustrated in the box below.

Introducing Direct Instruction

An elementary school principal describes how he introduced direct instruction (EDI) to his faculty:

We started by having small conversations with grade levels about the concept of EDI. Then we asked the grade levels to pick the components of EDI that they would focus on first, understanding that they were going to go through all of the components but that I wanted a focus so that I could come in and evaluate how they were doing based on what they told me they would work on. So we picked two a month that we would focus on.

The key to it was then I went in and observed, but I took teachers with me. So I took a grade level team with me to go and watch another grade level team. "This is what they're focusing on." And then we all gave feedback to the teacher that was presenting. And then the [kicker] to that was, I did one. I did one for all of them to observe.

I think that learning process was non-threatening. You pick what you're gonna work on. At the end, though, the tight leadership was: "At the end we're going to go through all five of these. You just tell me where we're gonna start." And I think the kicker really was that the principal struggled with it. . . . It ended up being great with me having to do the lessons. Because once I got out there and had to do 'em, then there was no excuse for the teachers about "Well you don't understand this." Because I could understand that it was hard. I actually got pretty good at it.

Teachers are pressed by district and school leaders to implement EDI and are surrounded by opportunities to learn more and get help in the classroom, including repeated districtwide training sessions in direct instruction. Within three years of the district adoption of this approach to instruction, 90 percent of all teachers had participated in some formal training. In addition, all principals attended training consistent with district leadership's philosophy that principals are key to helping their teachers learn about and embrace instructional change. District leaders expected teachers to put their new-found skills into practice but not all at once, given their understanding of the developmental nature of implementing new practices.

The provision of training also followed a developmental path. Initially, principals and teachers attended training sessions led by DataWorks. The next phase involved training by DataWorks at Sanger which made it much easier for larger numbers of teachers to attend. With the need for ongoing training for teachers new to the district and those wanting additional training, the third phase shifted to training provided by Sanger staff with extensive knowledge of direct instruction and the Sanger context. These include short "refresher" classes, exemplifying the district's "repainting the bridge" strategy. In doing this, Sanger not only tailored professional development to its specific needs, it also weaned itself from reliance on external providers.

Developmental learning is also reflected in Sanger's adaptation of EDI to its evolving needs. In preparation for teaching to the Common Core State Standards, EDI training is gradually introducing higher level questioning strategies. Similarly, as we describe later, introducing more opportunities for student talk is becoming a higher priority, especially in ELD instruction.

Teachers continue to learn more about instruction in their Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) each represented by one person on the School Leadership Team. These leaders attend additional training and share what they have learned with their colleagues in their PLC. In the words of an elementary teacher:

> At the beginning, [EDI] was very difficult, a whole change in our thinking. But once we got used to it—they didn't throw us into it—they gave us the training, have had several follow-ups, they come into our classrooms and give us feedback. . . It was hard . . . But with the PLCs, we help each other develop our EDI lessons.

PLCs are described in more detail in Section VI.

How expectations are communicated

Principals play a major role in leading and supporting teachers to implement the components of EDI and carry much of the accountability. Since the early years of adoption, district leaders have become more directive about ways that principals can do this. For example, the district asked all principals to teach EDI lessons in their schools, building on the success of one principal who took this approach (described above). From the district office perspective, this is intended to promote deeper understanding of EDI and demonstrate commitment to and credibility with teachers. Principals are also asked to

do structured walkthroughs in classrooms using a district-designed form to capture implementation of EDI and, importantly, as a basis for providing feedback to teachers. The context is not intended to be "gotcha" but rather a vehicle for helping teachers get better at EDI. A district leadership team also makes periodic visits to every school, focusing on a particular aspect of classroom instruction; their feedback is typically a letter to the principal shared with teachers.

How teachers perceive walkthroughs varies across schools. Survey results suggest that, by and large, teachers find their principal's visits to their rooms and feedback to be helpful and not threatening. In 2011, 83 percent of teachers reported that site administration regularly observes their classrooms and 76 percent reported that administrator feedback on their teaching is useful. At the same time, in interviews, teachers expressed concerns about the rigidity of the forms used and the timing of visits since they are not always teaching an EDI lesson. Teachers also commented that they struggle with how to resolve conflicting feedback from different observers in instances when the observers differ in their expectations for how a lesson should go. To the extent that the walkthroughs are the basis for formal teacher evaluations, concerns are heightened. Section VII describes struggles at the high school over this issue.

Curriculum support providers (CSPs) are also key players in communicating expectations to teachers. (Elementary schools typically have one CSP while the middle and high school have one for each core subject.) The role of the CSP is to identify where help is needed or requested and to provide it. CSPs visit classrooms, sometimes with principals on their walkthroughs, and sometimes on their own. Principals benefit from what they call "partner walks" when they observe with the CSP as a way to improve their own capacity to look at instruction.

Teachers generally trust and value their CSPs, although these judgments vary across schools as do CSPs' instructional knowledge and coaching skills. The strongest CSPs worry about, for example, whether teachers are checking for deep understanding and whether they are moving from guided practice to independent practice during the lesson. Others might focus on the absence or presence of more superficial activities. Also, CSPs who have training and experience in coaching are better able to communicate suggestions to teachers. In the 2011 survey, about half of the teachers (53 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that their CSP is a key resource for their teaching. Sanger continues to develop CSP leadership capacity, viewing the position as a pathway to school and district leadership positions.

Teachers' adoption of new practices.

To teach standards at grade level, teachers need to know what that means. Sanger's investment in EDI training helped many teachers, especially elementary teachers, understand the state standards and how to translate them into multiple lesson objectives. "We knew what the standards were but we didn't really pinpoint and deconstruct the standards. . . how to define it for 7 year olds," said one elementary teacher.

Studies of instructional reforms typically find that elementary teachers are more likely to embrace new practices than secondary teachers, particularly high school teachers. Sanger is no exception, especially with an intervention designed initially for elementary teachers. Differences of opinion notwithstanding, almost three-quarters of all teachers surveyed agreed they were committed to EDI both in 2009 and in 2011; the bulk of those who did not agree were secondary teachers. Still, across all teachers on the spring 2011 survey reported use of EDI is high: 87 percent of all teachers reported that they use EDI to introduce new skills or concepts.

In our interviews a majority of teachers and principals had positive things to say about EDI; many also expressed concerns about its limitations. Not surprisingly, veteran teachers—and high school teachers—were more likely to express reservations with a new instructional approach than newer teachers, yet even veterans often characterized the elements of EDI as sound instructional practices. A middle school teacher said: "The amount of work I put in ahead of time is huge. But the payoff is huge. The kids are engaged. They are constantly doing something on the white board or pair share" An elementary teacher put it this way: "[With EDI] I was so focused. I knew exactly what I was going to do. Before I would just go off on tangents. I knew I had to get to the kids who didn't get it. So I had to be focused." Another middle school teacher pointed to better results:

> My students now can complete problems that my students weren't able to do in prior years. It took me a year to get comfortable with EDI. I still have a lesson plan in front of me. It felt robotic at first which is why some teachers don't like it. But it is fantastic. I can't imagine going back to the way I taught. It works really well for math. Still getting there in science. The steps don't really work. [Middle school teacher]

The theme of getting comfortable with EDI and moving beyond the robotic stage was increasingly prevalent across our four years of interviews. The staged implementation, repeated training, and continued pressure from district leaders resulted in growing acceptance, coupled with increasing test scores in virtually all schools. Nonetheless, teachers worry that it is difficult to incorporate extended reading and writing into an EDI format and even more difficult to manage explorations and experiments. As one CSP described a middle school PLC:

> Now the team [PLC] has a feel for having the freedom to respond to what you need to for kids. A concern is the idea that EDI in itself is not going to get to the kind of concept knowledge we want in our kids. We've built in some extra pieces. The team has done a lot of exploring what the Common Core is. [They] know you don't want just the skill because it doesn't stick.

Teachers' critiques of EDI often go along with critiques of the test-driven nature of the curriculum. For example, teachers wrote comments such as these on the survey:

> Essential Standards, based on what is tested most frequently rather than what is most important, cause important skills and concepts to be neglected or even ignored. In English, because writing is not adequately assessed on the CST, it is not adequately taught.

There is too great a focus on improving test scores and teaching the test. This results in students who are less prepared to think for themselves when placed in situations that are not multiple choice, or do not fit into a nice little skill development. The push to increase test scores at the cost of actual thinking simply is not worth it.

On our 2009 survey 53 percent of teachers reported that the emphasis on improving student test scores pushes aside important learning goals; in 2011 the percent increased to 63 percent. In interviews, whether discussing English learners or all students, teachers always mentioned that comprehension and writing are the two areas where students struggle the most. (In our experience in other districts these two areas always top the list of concerns regardless of instructional approach.) Similarly, concerns that teachers are not asking probing higher-order questions of students is a common critique independent of curriculum.

Even teachers with positive reactions expressed some concerns they had with EDI. One elementary teacher noted: "I am so concerned about not birdwalking—EDI says never do this—that I think I miss some teachable moments. And I don't think everything can be EDI." At the higher grades especially, teachers were stymied on how to integrate EDI into lessons focused on inquiry such as experiments in science. On our 2011 survey, 57 percent of high school teachers reported that higher order thinking and conceptual understanding do not fit well into the EDI lesson structure. Teachers all described the challenge of having enough time at the end of class to get to independent practice which is the time when the teacher works with a small group of students who struggled with the lesson.

Much of the variation in teachers' reactions to EDI appeared to stem from their differing views of district and school administrators' expectations. Some felt pressure to adhere to a regimented approach, while others perceived more flexibility. Teachers who viewed EDI as adaptable, with essential elements that all need to be included in some ways, were less critical of EDI than those who interpreted it as inflexible. The former tended to have a deeper understanding of EDI's underlying principles and feel comfortable applying them as they deemed. It was also often the case that their principal, vice principal(s), and CSP understood EDI deeply and monitored teachers' adherence to the principles rather than to surface routines.

Teachers who had previously taught more discovery learning and cooperative learning noted that they rarely had evidence that these approaches were any more effective. Comparisons are difficult because direct instruction, which has certainly led to increased test scores in Sanger, has much more feedback from students to teachers built in than do other approaches to instruction. Some teachers argue that the feedback is limited to more factual content than conceptual understanding. Sanger teachers, especially at the secondary level, also worry that their students do not have enough opportunities to think critically. Although as one high school teacher said after expressing concern that students didn't have enough content knowledge to think about critically, "Maybe EDI doesn't get them to think as critically as I'd like, but it's better than what we did before."

Creating a range of academic and behavioral interventions

Targeting classroom instruction to grade-level standards means that many students, especially English learners, need considerable scaffolding and re-teaching to reach the goal. Rather than lowering expectations for grade-level work, district leaders embraced an intervention strategy based on Response to Intervention (RTI). With origins in special education, RTI defines a Pyramid of Interventions which begins with the classroom teacher and moves to successively more intensive interventions as students' needs require. (See Figure 7 on next page) Sanger embraced RTI for all students, not only those who were candidates for special education. This conception of interventions fits well with the focus in EDI and in PLCs on data that identifies skill weaknesses, with their fundamental belief that all children should be helped to reach their potential, and with their culture of collaboration. This stance, reflecting the importance of coherence to Sanger leaders, is in stark contrast to many districts around the country which interpret RTI as a federal mandate for special education and approach it with a compliance mentality.

Figure 7

Pyramid of Interventions

The Pyramid of Interventions represents three levels or tiers of instructional and behavioral intervention with the expectations that at least 80 percent of students' needs will be met in the bottom tier. The broadest tier at the base represents instruction for all students, including classroom instruction and interventions to which students are deployed during the school day. The interventions are targeted to students' particular level of need ranging from work on particular skills to enrichment activities. The second tier represents instruction targeted to small groups of students during classroom time to provide just-in-time instruction to those needing additional help. The third tier at the top represents more intense individual interventions for those whose needs are not met by Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions. The figure below illustrates the Pyramid and its application both to academics and behavior.

Response to Intervention

School-Wide Systems for Student Success

| Academic Systems | Behavioral Systems |

Intensive, Individual Interventions
•Individual Students
•Assessment-based
•High Intensity
•Of longer duration

1-5%   1-5%

Intensive, Individual Interventions
•Individual Students
•Assessment-based
•Intense, durable procedures

Strategic Group Interventions
•Some students (at-risk)
•High efficiency
•Rapid response

5-10%   5-10%

Strategic Group Interventions
•Some students (at-risk)
•High efficiency
•Rapid response

Universal Interventions
•All students
•Preventive, proactive

80-90%   80-90%

Universal Interventions
•All settings, all students
•Preventive, proactive
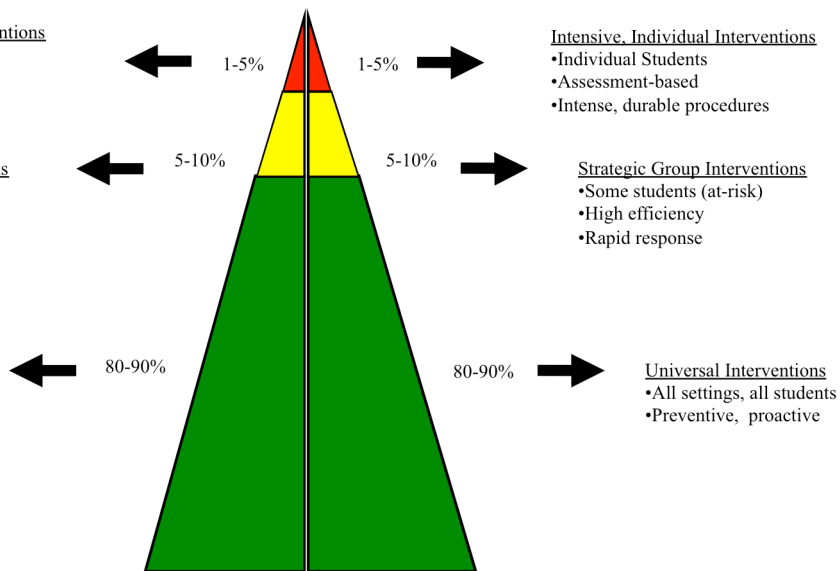
From loose to tight: Implementing Interventions

Sanger had several pieces in place which facilitated the implementation of the RTI throughout the system. The district's special education department had been ahead of the national curve for several years both in pursuing full inclusion[13] and RTI with the goal of replacing the long-standing model of using discrepancy scores[14] for identifying learning disabilities, instead relying on the classroom teacher to identify and hopefully resolve learning challenges in the classroom. Moreover, schools were familiar with the concept of deploying students—that is, regrouping by learning level—through their state-required English Language Development intervention in which English Learners are grouped by their language level. Nevertheless, formally incorporating a set of interventions schoolwide for every student within the regular school day posed formidable challenges.

District leaders began the push for interventions by asking schools to develop their own pyramid of interventions for both the academics and behavior. They provided some examples but left it up to schools how to structure and define the interventions. Principals learned approaches from each other but ended up with different approaches and many were struggling. In some Intervention Teachers handled all the interventions often with minimal communication between the IT and regular teachers. In others, scheduling and flexibility to move students in and out of particular intervention classes posed problems.

Four years into this effort, the district began to "tighten," requiring all schools to clearly define Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions and launching small pilot for further development of the pyramid concept. District leaders asked two schools to develop specific forms, tests, and structures to ensure that Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions would not only serve their goals for all students but also meet federal requirements for identifying students for special education. With extra funds to pay for teachers' time, the two schools reviewed research, created forms, and designed workable schedules with guidance from a district RTI support person.

Once the pilot schools completed their task, they trained RTI teams from every school, sharing all the tools they had developed. Schools were open to incorporating these elements because they understood that rules for students to move into special education had to be the same at each school. In this way, the needs of regular and special education were merged, resulting in a system of interventions that includes two levels within Tier 2 to accommodate federal requirements. Many were also motivated because they saw their system was not working well: "People were eager to try it. All saw need for a change. Intensive kids not getting help. Also –reporting back to teachers didn't happen [so they] didn't know what they [the intervention teachers] were doing."

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[13] Full inclusion refers to the full participation of special needs students in the regular classroom with appropriate educational and behavioral supports.

[14] Discrepancy scores measure the difference between a student's score on a test of general intelligence and an achievement test.

As of 2012 all schools have interventions in place. These range from classes in middle and high school that allow credit recovery for students who would otherwise not graduate and after-school programs to far more complex arrangements that involve re-sorting all students in a school for part of each day. These schools exemplify the district's "all hands on deck" philosophy

In elementary schools with schoolwide deployment, every adult in the school works with a small groups of students for the intervention period. Students are redistributed from their regular classroom based on data from a variety of assessments to groups that use programs designed to bolster specific skills. Students who have mastered the skills receive some type of enrichment or reading opportunity such as Accelerated Reader. For example, in one school, students at a grade level are distributed across six teachers instead of the usual two for half an hour every morning in language arts and again in the afternoon for English language development based on their EL level. Schools vary on how often they reassess to move students from one intervention group to another. Typically, students are shifted among groups every few weeks.

At the middle school level, time is set aside after lunch for all students to go a class called 'academic seminar' which ranges from help for students struggling in 7[th]grade math to an honors debate class. In addition is a separate class for students who are beginner ELs and RSP students called core replacement where the goal is to catch up with regular classroom. Exemplifying the district focus on data, leaders are revisiting this strategy having observed the need for these students to be around those who are performing at higher levels. In addition, both the math and English departments deploy students to interventions during the last period of the day.

Scheduling interventions at Sanger High School is particularly challenging because graduation requirements greatly limit flexibility in allocating time during the school day. Few opportunities for deployment exist. Summer school and afterschool are the primary time slots with summer school usually reserved for credit recovery. Students are assigned to after-school tutorials and many attend but it is short (30 minutes) and every two weeks. In 2011-12 the high school began experimenting with a new approach for the growing number of students who fail algebra in 9th grade. Instead of waiting until summer, students who fail first semester, retake the first semester in the second semester.

Systematic approaches to behavior, including tracking and using data, are often sidelined in districts focused on state academic standards. In Sanger, behavioral interventions are central and taken in stride as "the way we operate." Positive behavior and anti-bullying are integrated into the classroom; and the structured activities of EDI lessons are also tools for classroom management. In addition, the district's Pupil Services Department staffs several programs which target students who need more intensive socio-emotional interventions, including Second Step, a Tier 1 intervention, and Special Friends, an individual Tier 2 intervention for younger students.

The combination of the tight structure of EDI lessons, the integration of behavior systems in the classroom, and the "nip-it-in-the bud" philosophy of behavioral

interventions has resulted in classrooms with far fewer behavior problems. Visiting teachers to Sanger from another district told us they could not believe how well-behaved the students were compared to their students with the same demographic profile. Visitors believe that somehow Sanger students are different, forgetting that many are English learners and most are poor and living in neighborhoods populated by gangs.

New collaborations and uses of data

Both academic and behavioral interventions exemplify collaborations between regular education and special education and among teachers and support staff in schools. The concept of shared responsibility for "our kids" is not an abstraction, it is evident in the ways staff work together. Although staff had some initial reticence, over time this new way of working together has not only taken over but is highly valued. PLCs are at the center of this shift. It is no longer "my" students and "your" students. An elementary teacher told us: "Schoolwide [there is] a lot of change—seeing the children as our kids instead of my kids. The district has pushed us to see that all the kids belong to us." (See also Section VI on collaboration.)

Using data is at the core of academic interventions. Tier 1 rests on teacher diagnosis of learning every day in the classroom. Implementing interventions in the classroom is consistent with EDI's emphasis on diagnosing weaknesses through checking for understanding and working with small groups or individual students who have not mastered particular skills or lesson objectives. As one middle school teacher said: "When they go to their independent work, I know exactly which kids to pull. That's the most powerful part, the checking for understanding." At the same time, teachers report that they struggle with having enough time at the end of the lesson to work with a small group while others do independent practice.

In order to diagnose students' needs beyond daily checking for understanding, teachers need appropriate assessments, whether formal or informal. They have access to results from a range of assessments, some of which they design and administer. The district created a quarterly test designed to predict performance on the CST. Called the Diagnostic Progress Assessment (DPA), teachers use these results to track student progress over the year. These results are usually posted colorfully in elementary classrooms and are used to engage students in setting goals and tracking their own progress. A parallel test for English learners was piloted three years ago and then expanded to all schools to provide teachers with the ability to track growth in language development for their English learners. The English Language Learners Assessment (ELLA) based on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) which is administered in October and provides results in the spring. ELLA, like the CELDT, is individually administered two to three times a year allowing tracking progress during the year which is not possible with the CELDT. Elementary teachers also rely on *DIBELS* (*Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills*) which unlike the others are very quick (one-minute) tests giving teachers a quick reading on skills such as oral reading fluency. Most classroom assessment, however, relies on teacher-developed tests coupled

with teachers' day-to-day observations of students. Teacher-developed tests are the main fodder for weekly PLC discussions of students and effective instructional strategies.

Teachers, especially veteran teachers, are positive about the increased attention to data, particularly as a guide for providing appropriate interventions to students. For example, a veteran kindergarten teacher explained:

> We learn from our data. I had never had that experience 30 years ago. We looked at the CELDT scores of our kindergarten children in first grade and saw that every single one has grown at least one level. It has to do with the deployment part. We never did that 10 years ago. We test their level on the CELDT and we divide up our 60 kinders. I take 20 beginners, another has ELs, and the third works with advanced. We use Avenues. We work on building sentences and vocabulary. The results have been so exciting and increasing their vocabulary reflects back in their writing and reading. And their self esteem is really increased by this. We have a really "yes you can" attitude.

On the behavior side, data are also closely tracked. For example, at one elementary school, the school psychologist described how she collects and uses data on behavior.

> Once a month I take the discipline binder from the principal and enter all the principal referral forms. So when teachers have their PLC meetings, I run a report to see if [the data point to] particular hot locations or ethnic groups. We have a daily referral goal – a formula based on research. So we can compare across months.

The data have revealed surprises. For example, the psychologist quoted above noted a pattern of increased misbehavior the week before Halloween even though the adults assumed it would be after eating the Halloween candy. So teachers are on alert to nip problems in the bud during this period. These data help teachers be aware of schoolwide patterns of behavior and proactive about responding.

Reliance on data presumes that data are timely and available as needed. Appropriate interventions rest on having a system to manage student data so they can be matched to interventions and reassigned as needed. Where this works well, there is usually someone in the school who has a master list of all students and keeps track of their progress on a range of skills in language arts and math. This tracking is possible because teachers enter test results on their computers into progress monitoring sheets. As one CSP described:

> I help teachers see what to do by helping them analyze data and set up small groups [of students] to meet specific needs or guided reading. . . At the beginning of school I look at a list of classes and see what [each] kid needs. . . I looked for holes for each kid and then looked at programs that could match.

Creating demand for more effective instruction for English Learners

During the last year three elementary schools—whose principals are a PLC—agreed to become an ELD pilot meaning that they would study, design, and test out more

effective ways of teaching English learners in their ELD intervention. The increase in the gap last year between ELs and EOs (partly attributable to the escalating demands of AYP) provided an impetus to look more closely at what ELD interventions look like and how they connect to the core program and academic interventions. Across the district how ELD is taught and the process of moving students through language levels varies considerably providing further impetus to sharpen instruction for English learners—and, as the group is discovering, see implications for English speaking students as well.

The principals are joined by others in the district with ELD expertise and led by the district administrator who oversees ELD. The eight participants meet monthly at one of their school sites, observe ELD classes, and discuss their observations and implications for strengthening the program. The group is looking closely at the assessments used for language development and required reporting for the state, trying to streamline the time demands on teachers as well as provide useful data on students. Their work, still in progress, underscores the complexity of the challenge. Because ELD is a state-required program for all English learners, it has become a collection of programs targeted to specific language acquisition skills. As such, it is disconnected from core classroom instruction and from the academic interventions to which EL students are assigned. The pilot schools are working to figure out how these three pieces can be connected. At the same time they observe that the core EDI program is not well-suited to the ELD intervention because it relies on more teacher talk than student talk and language learning rests on conversation. Moreover, the group sees that many English speaking students would benefit from ELD instruction. As one participant put it: "We see the impact of poverty in the early years where some of the language kids have is similar between ELs and EO s who are not getting the language and practice at home."

Sanger High School like most high schools with English learners (ELs) has struggled to decrease the number of long-term ELs. Through a multi-faceted approach over the last five years, EL students have shown remarkable improvement on their API scores and CAHSEE[15] passing rates. The box on the next page documents how they achieved this success.

Embracing these challenges, the pilot group and the high school story illustrate Sanger's strategy to address and solve problems and ultimately to create demand among other schools to adopt the fruits of their labor. The elementary pilot embodies the district's commitment to minimize extra administrative overhead for teachers by simplifying the testing and reporting while the high school approach to ELs exemplifies the payoff that can result from combining several of Sanger's key strategies.

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[15] CAHSEE is the California High School Exit Examination which must be passed to graduate. Students initially take the CAHSEE in the 10th grade and can take it repeatedly until they pass.

How Sanger High School accomplished significant improvement
in English Learners' performance

Sanger High School systematically improved its instructional supports for English learners with dramatic results. EL students' API scores grew from 646 in 2006 to 744 in 2011, and during the same period EL sophomores' CAHSEE passing rates soared from 27% to 47% in ELA and 32% to 51% in math. At the same time, Sanger High has steadily increased its rate of reclassifying ELs.

How did the school accomplish significant improvement in EL success? By combining Sangers' key strategies for continuous improvement, with a focus on EL students' learning needs:

- _Leadership development._ Invested in a full-time ELD CSP position charged with overseeing all strands of EL instruction across content areas; enhanced teacher training in strategies to support ELs' access to content.
- _Instructional interventions_: Refined the EL intervention system to include a pathway to redesignation that includes different levels and kinds of ELD support along the way: sheltered ELD/ SDAIE/English Lab with regular curriculum supplemented by a Corrective Reading Program.
- _Evidence use_: Introduced ELA assessment of all 8th graders who scored below Basic on the CST during the spring before they enter 9th grade to determine needs; required teachers to use a class seating chart that indicates each student's CELDT score as a reminder and an aid to observers; began closely monitoring EL students' grades to make sure they meet the reclassification standard of at least a C in all course.
- _Collaboration:_ The ELD CSP and English department chair began working together on 8th grader assessments and orientation; created a PLC for ELD and SDAIE teachers across subjects, including joint PD and classroom observations.
- _Communication_: Involved students in looking at their data and learning how the EL support and reclassification system works; created celebrations for 'graduation' from EL classification and student motivation to achieve the criteria; developed reciprocal accountability among teachers and EL students to reach criteria for reclassification.

Together these strategies built Sanger High School's capacity to continuously improve its EL students' progress on language and academic development, from the time they enter the school.

VI. Shift from isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility

Sanger Unified stands out for its strong *districtwide* collaborative culture. Back in 2004 when its dismal student performance earned it PI status, the district had the typical conditions of insulated central office departments, isolated principals, and autonomous schools with teachers on their own behind classroom doors. Since then district leaders worked long and hard to develop and support the professional learning communities at each level of the system that are in evidence today. They created structures and leadership for new dialogue, data use, shared accountability, and collaboration to improve student achievement.

District leaders have been acting on the principle of collaboration to improve student achievement in many ways and on multiple fronts over the years. They continue to develop strategies, structures, and expectations for teachers, principals, district administrators and staff to work together to better meet the needs of all students. Leaders' sustained effort and consistent communication of the message "Together we can!" gradually shifted the district culture from one of isolated classrooms, department silos, and protected resources to one in which professionals collaborate and share responsibility for improving student success. Through district outreach and partnering on community initiatives, parents and local organizations have become part of a broader collaboration and shared responsibility for the well-being and success of Sanger's youth.

The district's PLC initiative for teacher collaboration, based on the DuFours' model, was a primary vehicle for shifting the culture. District administrators point to their participation in a Spring 2005 conference on PLCs run by Rick and Becky DuFour in Riverside County as the impetus for their initiative. Although many other districts across the state and nation have taken on PLC initiatives in recent years, some using the DuFour model, few if any have come close to accomplishing Sanger's districtwide culture change.[16] The difference is that Sanger administrators understood that developing high-functioning teacher PLCs is not primarily a matter of mandating and enforcing new structures and routines. Rather, it meant changing teachers' habits of mind, building trust and transparency, and creating shared accountability for student success. Acknowledging these challenges for change, district leaders:

- Took a *developmental approach* to leading change: creating repeated opportunities for teachers and principals to hear the DuFours, come to understand the new standard of collaborating on instruction to improve student success and, over time, put the ideas into practice.
- Linked PLC work to other goals for district reform – *use of evidence* to diagnose student needs and to ground decisions about effective strategies.

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[16] The DuFours point to Sanger Unified School District as exemplar of a districtwide PLC
See Chapter 12 in Dufour, R., R. Dufour, R. Eaker & G. Karhanek, *op cit*.

- Consistently *communicated and modeled* that all adults in the system share accountability for student success and hold teacher teams, schools, and the district office accountable for results.

These core principles for change leadership account for the district's success in developing teacher PLCs across all district schools and creating a collaborative district culture.

Over the years, Sanger leaders established particular structures, guidelines, and tools to support adult collaboration across all of the traditional boundaries of district practice. Notably, given a long-standing schism in education, special education and academic instruction units now work together; and principals and district officers work together in PLCs. Leaders at each level of the system have come to use the four questions that guide teacher collaboration in the DuFours' PLC model:

- What do we want students/teachers/principals/district administrators to learn?
- How we will know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond if they have not learned it?
- How will we respond when learning has already occurred?

Sanger's journey to develop a district culture focused on every student's success went hand-in-hand with its efforts to create teacher Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at grade levels within each district school and to build collaboration among adults at all levels of the district. Superintendent Johnson saw adult learning communities as the unifying concept for the district's reform: "This is the framework of our work. The pieces that we are trying to do all flow into that."

Developing teacher collaboration and shared responsibility

When asked to explain their district's dramatic success in improving student achievement over recent years, teachers attribute the biggest effect to PLCs. In our 2011 district-wide survey, 90% of Sanger teachers agree with the statement "PLCs are critical to our success." A high school teacher explained the district's success in these terms: "The PLC story is what we would say has changed the school. That makes us great."

The DuFour model for teacher PLCs reframes the idea of instructional quality from an individual teacher's success in the classroom to a teacher team's success in bringing all students up to standards. In their national conferences and the many regional conferences that Sanger educators attended over the past eight years, Rick and Becky DuFour argue that teachers are morally obliged to collaborate in meeting student learning needs. They explicitly challenge common beliefs that might inhibit progress. For example, in illustrating how high-functioning PLCs use common assessments to determine who had best results for a particular standard or unit, the DuFours role play common excuses teachers might make for why one class did better than another – the students had different abilities or a low-performing class met at the worst time of day – and counter the excuse with evidence. They present strong evidence for why teachers

should open up their practice to one another in order to do better for kids. They directly challenge the common notion that there are good and bad teachers by showing evidence that teachers in an elementary grade PLC have different skill profiles; their data show the same teacher doing best on a math standard and worst on an ELA standard.

The model's four questions to frame PLC work place considerable demands on teacher learning and collaboration:

- *"What do we want students to learn?"* means that teachers have to know and share understandings of the state standards for their grade level in each content area.
- *"How will we know when they have learned it?"* prompts teachers to develop or adopt a common assessment to measure student learning of a standard and also to decide on a threshold for proficiency (often defined as scoring 70% correct on the assessment to correspond to the California State Test threshold for Proficient). PLCs also set a "SMART goal" [17] for themselves – typically that 80 percent of students in the class will be proficient on the standard.
- *"How will we respond if they have not learned it?"* requires that teachers agree on a re-teaching intervention for students who score below proficient on the common assessment. In the DuFour model, they should 1) identify individual students who fell below standard and 2) compare average student performance across classes to see if one teacher did much better. If a teacher stands out on success in teaching a standard, then colleagues might get his or her recommendations for re-teaching the standard in their classroom with target students or the PLC might decide to "deploy" students and send all low-performing students to this teacher's classroom for re-teaching.
- *"How will we respond when learning has already occurred?"* requires that teachers create enrichment activities that build on the standard to use in their classroom or, if they deploy students, in the class designated for enrichment.

This vision and design for teacher collaboration on instruction poses considerable technical, organizational, and cultural challenges of change. Sanger administrators understood this and took a strategic, developmental approach to their PLC initiative. They began by ensuring that teachers and principals understood and came to believe in this new model of collaborative teaching.

Creating demand

Sanger Unified has embraced challenges for culture change from the start. Key was *creating an appetite* for PLCs among teachers, as well as a critical mass of teacher leaders steeped in the DuFour model. District leaders also saw principals as key in supporting culture change within their schools and involved them in all facets of

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[17] SMART goals stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound goals for student learning that focus teachers' instruction and common assessments.

professional development for PLCs. Since launching the PLC initiative in 2006-07, the district has sent all principals and over half of the teachers at all grade levels to at least one DuFour conference in Riverside County. In our 2009 survey, 28 percent of Sanger teachers reported attending a DuFour conference, and in 2011 the percent had risen to 52%. The vast majority of those who participated rated it as "extremely valuable" in our surveys.

A veteran teacher who came to the district eight years before the PLC initiative began described the launch in this way:

> The first year they said we are going to be starting PLCs. It was a big education process. A few from each site went to DuFours. They did a lot of staff development educating people about what a PLC is and how it's different from grade-level planning time, clarifying the purpose, and how it functions. How we work together. It took time. They were sending people who came back and shared, so more people understood the vision and goal. Providing the time was important.

District administrators established the necessary condition for teachers to develop demand for PLCs by carving out time in each school's schedule for PLC work. At a minimum, each school has a "late start" or "early release" day every two weeks with at least an hour and a half dedicated to PLC time. This signaled their commitment to teacher collaboration and created time for teachers to figure out what the initiative was about and how they might work together in the PLC. Through this process teachers came to demand dedicated time for their work together and to carve out more time informally.

Looking back on their journey to become part of a collaborative teaching team, teachers point to shifts from their early perceptions of the district PLC initiative. A middle school teacher told us that: "During the first year, there was not necessarily resistance, but people were unsure. Now we really want PLC time." Another teacher said: "PLC… shifted the focus away from me closing the door on my classroom to looking at the kids. We're not being 'thrown under the bus.' We have lots of new teachers and they don't want to be thrown under the bus." One 4th grade teacher new to the district in 2009-10 commented: "I couldn't have made it through these first three years without my grade level partners…. The PLCs really help you work together to be sure all the kids are getting it [standards] and see what one teacher is doing who is successful.

District leaders continued to develop demand and commitment to PLCs by sending teachers and administrators to the DuFour conference in Riverside each year. Their *"Golden Gate Bridge"* strategy – repainting the bridge from one end to the other - was designed to refresh and deepen district leaders' understandings and commitment to the model. As the principal pipeline grew and new teachers stepped into CSP and PLC lead roles, the district sustained school leadership for the initiative by ensuring that they learned from the horse's mouth. Beyond sending leaders to the annual DuFour conference, the district continued PLC training on site through monthly meetings of principals and teacher leaders from each school's Leadership Team.

Communicating what's tight and loose

District administrators consistently communicated the priority that all district teachers will be part of a PLC that collaborates to ensure that all their students meet grade level standards. They conveyed what was nonnegotiable about the district policy and what would be left up to schools. "Tight" from the onset was that all schools would become organized into teacher PLCs by grade level or course group and follow the DuFour model for collaboration and shared responsibility. Also tight was that principals would protect teachers' time for PLC work, rather than usurping it for other school business.

"Loose" was how schools designed protocol for PLC meeting agenda and record-keeping and how PLCs developed a division of labor among teachers and designed their common lessons, assessments of student learning, and interventions to meet student needs. This allowed schools and PLCs to develop ownership of their response to the district demand for teacher collaboration on instruction and acknowledged that PLCs would follow different developmental trajectories.

As the initiative progressed and teachers had become comfortable collaborating and sharing responsibility for student achievement, the district tightened its standards for PLC practice. In 2009-10, with principal review and input, the district developed a rubric for tracking each of their PLC's progress. The Spectrum of Learning rubric for PLCs asked principals to rate each teacher team on several dimensions of development. (See Appendix C). In the progression of district culture change, this tool represents a tightening of district prescription for PLC practice and school accountability for ensuring progress. It built on knowledge of how high-functioning PLCs in the district perform and established a developmental frame for school leaders to use in pushing and supporting their PLCs' progress. It provides school leaders with criteria and benchmarks for assessing and giving feedback and strategic support to their PLCs. As an accountability tool for Principal Summits, it prompts school leaders to identify struggling PLCs and define efforts planned to bring them up to standard. It also serves as a dashboard for district administrators and staff to track progress on culture change and customize their support to schools.

Balancing pressure and support

Six years after Sanger Unified launched its PLC initiative, teachers expressed great enthusiasm for PLCs and growing capacity to collaborate in designing lessons, assessing student learning, and using data to address student learning needs. As noted, 90 percent of district teachers reported on our 2011 survey that "PLCs are critical to our school's success." Yet not all PLCs in all schools are high-functioning. Each year some are reconstituted either because teachers have been re-assigned to a new grade level and/or a new teacher is hired or transfers from another district school. Teachers in these PLCs face the challenge of developing new relationships and trust essential to PLC functioning. Those that have stable and collegial relationships still face challenges in deepening their practice and, especially in the middle school and high school PLCs that

include large numbers of teachers, making sure that all members contribute and are on board with collective decisions. Clearly, PLCs take time to evolve and some are farther along than others on team functioning, routines for data use, and creating instructional responses to student learning needs

District leaders anticipated struggles and unevenness in PLC development. Although making teachers' participation in PLCs mandatory and tightening pressure on their performance through Spectrum of Learning ratings and evaluation of their students' CST results, the district invested substantially in providing support to PLCs. Most important, involving principals and other school leaders in DuFour conferences multiple times developed their capacity to assess PLC practice and be strategic in providing support. The CSP position is a key resource for PLC support as well, and the district has protected this in the face of budget cuts over the years. Further, ongoing district training has developed PLC lead teachers' skills in facilitating their team. These investments and supports for teacher PLCs are crucial to the steady progress they are making across Sanger schools.

Developing PLCs: Challenges and supports

Sanger teachers have faced myriad challenges in their efforts to develop effective PLCs with colleagues. Challenge for learning and change include developing new routines for working together, learning and agreeing on Essential Standards, using evidence to guide instruction, and sharing responsibility for all students' learning. Across district schools, PLCs have made steady progress on these practices since the initiative began. Yet many have struggled as well. Our interviews with PLC Leads and other teachers capture some of the hurdles they have faced, as well as the kinds of support that helped them to move ahead.

Shared commitment and routines. As teachers begin their work together in a PLC, they have to get past professional and personal barriers to collaboration. One teacher described this shift as: "You have to swallow your pride and be willing to listen to other people and take from them." Another said: "You need to see that everyone's opinion is valuable." According to reports, it can take up to a year of working together to develop mutual trust and respect.

Yet, turnover in a PLC can create this challenge anew. For example, a 2nd grade teacher in a PLC of four teachers commented that they had a "rough start", since two of the teachers had been transferred to the grade level. These teachers needed to learn the grade-level standards afresh and to get up to speed on the lessons and assessments that their PLC colleagues had developed. Churn creates the need for teachers to recreate trusting relationships in their grade-level or course PLCs.

PLC size, on both ends of the spectrum, can also present challenges for creating good working relationships. At the secondary level, the sheer numbers of people typically involved in teaching core courses makes team building problematic. In contrast to elementary grade PLCs that have 2-4 teachers, secondary school PLCs often have 7-8

teachers. PLC leads are in the position of forging commitment and trust among many diverse personalities, making sure everyone shows up and participates in PLC meetings, and facilitating their work on instruction. Conversely, elementary grade PLCs can be too small. One teacher commented that with just two teachers they have limited sources of knowledge: "I'm the leader and I don't know everything." In other cases, teachers pointed to the difficulty of formal facilitation with two people. Regardless of size, PLCs are expected to forge a new culture and practice among teachers who might differ in their views of effective instruction. An agreement to look at student test data does not mean that teachers can reach consensus on how to interpret the data or what interventions can improve student achievement.

By 2011, large proportions of district teachers gave their PLC a survey rating of 'advanced' on criteria of "full attendance" (70 percent), "interacting with mutual respect" (64 percent), and "sharing a commitment to working together" (58 percent).[18] The vast majority of other teachers gave ratings of 'somewhat advanced' on these items; almost none rated their PLC as low on these participation standards. Still, some PLCs struggle to develop "effective routines for their work together" – just half of the teachers gave an advanced rating on this survey item, not much higher than in 2009.

As district leaders anticipated, the developmental trajectories of PLCs differ within and across schools. Those not yet up and running continue to benefit from district training for PLC leads and support from their CSP and school administrators. One middle school CSP described her efforts to bring along the struggling grade-level teams:

> Certain grade levels are talking about student learning and teaching strategies. Some are scratching the surface. I'm coaching one grade level and trying to help them with conversations. One [subject area] PLC is organized and one isn't. We gave them time to plan—one whole release day. Now they are functioning.

Another CSP described a PLC of four teachers that included a person who didn't come through for the team. The lead teacher "was willing to focus on the elephant in the room" and the CSP came in to facilitate the conversation. The team moved past this hurdle. Such support roles are crucial and strategic in moving the district's PLC initiative forward.

Shared knowledge of California Standards and lesson planning. Some teams have made great strides in "developing EDI lessons" together and have come to see them as a key resource for their collaboration. Teachers' ratings of their PLC as 'advanced' on this practice nearly doubled in two years – from 22 percent in 2009 to 38 percent in 2011. Shared learning objectives and lessons provide grounding for the team to develop common assessments and evaluate student performance. Yet, the time it takes to develop lessons collaboratively exceeds the time allotted for PLC meetings, which are mainly devoted to creating common assessments and reviewing the results. Some teams that made progress on EDI lesson planning divided up the work by the Essential Standards for

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[18] Our 2009 and 2011 teacher surveys asked teachers to rate how far their PLC had developed on a 5-point scale from Beginning to Advanced for 17 dimensions of practice.

a course or semester. For example, one high school English PLC we observed mapped the Essential Standards and developed a pacing guide for their course, then each teacher on the team took responsibility for drafting lessons for particular standards; a teacher submits her or his draft lesson to the team, and together they review and come up with any agreed-upon refinements. A high school history PLC used a different model: the lead teacher and a colleague developed a binder of all lessons for the course, inviting colleagues to submit lessons or assignments for particular Standards, then after all teachers on the team taught each lesson they discussed how it went and made refinements.

With the expanded use of Smart Boards in district schools in 2010, most PLCs began developing lessons for the new technology. A teacher in a 3rd grade PLC of three teachers said that this had prompted the team to review lesson in place from earlier years and to revise or refine them as Smart Board lessons. The teacher best at technology was helping his colleagues get them up and running.

CSPs in all schools and VPs in secondary schools play an important support role for PLC lesson development. One middle school CSP explained that she is the "pre-PLC person" to look at lessons that have been drafted by an individual for the group or by a planning team. For example, one PLC had planning teams of 2-3 teachers who created a PowerPoint for each of the lessons in a unit. The CSP then reviewed the drafts and in some cases worked as part of a planning team if they needed the support. This CSP also met daily at lunch with a PLC that was struggling last year, "to help them with their lessons and give feedback from my Focused Walks [classroom observations]."

Evidence use. The DuFour model for PLC practice calls upon teacher teams to develop common assessments for their Essential Standards, use them to find out if students learned them, and analyze data to make decisions about how to respond. This is the area where PLCs appear to have made greatest progress in two years. Teacher survey data show substantial increases in percent of teachers giving their PLC a rating of 'advanced' (the highest rating on a five-point scale) on nine items. These include: "Create common assessment" (53 percent to 67 percent), "Use data to identify areas for improvement" (43 percent to 54 percent), and "Create SMART goals (40 percent to 51 percent). Appendix D shows increase in 'advanced' ratings for all nine PLC practices that had significant increases (at least 10 percent) on teachers' ratings of their PLC as 'advanced' between 2009 and 20011. Although PLCs are still working to improve their comfort with and use of data, many have made great strides

Yet PLC members do not always see eye-to-eye on the kinds of data to take into account in evaluating student performance. A high school PLC Lead commented that there is not always full buy-in on common assessments as the basis for a student's course grade.

> Grading is controversial, and people get emotional. I talk about grades as reflecting learning, and homework fits into learning but not [into] the grade. Some are not with me on that [wanting to weigh homework in grades apart from mastery of course standards].

Disagreements around grading criteria are not uncommon in high schools, and this is the kind of roadblock that PLCs encounter in trying to develop shared understandings of evidence use in instruction.

Responses to student learning needs. Once a PLC has assessed and examined data on their students' mastery of Essential Standards for an instructional unit, they need to decide on responses to the learning needs of students who fell below proficient, as well as those ready for enrichment. Despite the district requirement that each school clearly define Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions, described in the preceding section, PLCs have leeway in how they implement them. Each teacher team determines both structure and content of interventions for a particular unit. Ideally, in the DuFour model, these decisions are based on evidence – numbers of students not meeting standards, differences across classes, and the nature of unmet learning needs. This is a considerable challenge for PLC learning and practice. The team needs to translate the range of student learning needs into differentiated instructional responses in the classroom and/or deploy students according to their learning needs to different classrooms.

Some PLCs deploy students so that the teacher with the highest scoring class re-teaches concepts for students who didn't master the standards. This practice requires a high level of trust and comfort in comparing teachers' results and is logistically challenging. All PLCs expect each teacher to do Tier 1 interventions in their classroom. As described in Section V, this entails differentiating instruction in the classroom to address learning needs of individual students. Yet, teachers gave rather low survey ratings to their PLC on "discuss how to differentiate instruction in the classroom" (40 percent 'advanced'), and just half (51 percent) gave their team an 'advanced' rating on "plan appropriate interventions for their students" (although this is substantial improvement from 35 percent in 2009). Collaborating to design interventions, then, remains a challenge for many PLCs.

PLC lead teachers continue to develop their skills in facilitating this shift toward collaboration on addressing different student learning needs identified through common assessments. Often a CSP coaches and supports a PLC's collaboration on instruction to ensure all students' success. One described how she organized a PLC to observe each others' classrooms, focusing on a particular element such as checking for understanding which she said "has opened a lot of doors to discussion and professional learning." As teachers work together to address the learning needs of all students, through interventions and discussing each others' approaches to teaching particular standards, the PLCs are improving the quality of all teachers' classroom instruction.

Shared accountability. When talking about their PLC, Sanger teachers regularly comment on the major shift they have experienced toward shared responsibility for all students' learning. (See box below.) At the same time, just half of Sanger teachers consider their PLC to be 'advanced' on the survey item "share ownership of their students' achievement and learning" (49 percent on the 2011 survey). This testifies to the developmental nature and challenge of making this culture shift, especially in secondary

schools where PLCs are large and norms of autonomy are strongest (at this level just 38 percent rate their PLC as 'advanced.') Although the district reached a tipping point toward a collaborative teaching culture by 2009, PLCs' continuous progress depends upon sustained support.

What teachers say about their PLC

Value of a PLC

I couldn't have made it through these first three years without my grade level partners . . . The PLCs really help you work together to be sure all the kids are getting it and see what one teacher is doing who is [most] successful. We help each other with so much. [Novice elementary school teacher]

Evidence Use

Now we have SMART goals. My partner and I have weekly standards to go through. We have an assessment…we have to hit 75% proficient or advanced. Those students who didn't hit it are on a list. When we get together on Wednesday we figure out what to do for those kids. [Elementary school teacher]

Last year we used all common assessments, scanned into Edusoft and looked at written problems. We found that kids didn't know some of what they should. Quadrilateral is algebraically demanding and that's where we struggled. Now we compare data and ask 'how is your class doing better?' We talk about how I/someone taught this method that worked best. [Explains that his kids did better on quadrilateral and he used a method other than the one in the book.] When we discussed the data, they asked me to explain my method and why it's better than the book's and now they all use it and call it "the [teacher's name] way." [High school teacher]

Shared Responsibility

It used to be just **my** kids, now I am responsible for all the second grade kids. All 80 are mine. They move into interventions . . . and when we work in our PLCs, it is nothing about complaining; it is about 'this is my RSP student but look how she outperformed my EO students.' We talk about what we are seeing. We share information. So that has been eye opening to have three other sets of eyes telling me what they see. 'Oh I see your EL student is doing better than mine.' PLCs have just changed the way that we do things. [Elementary school teacher]

We moved beyond comfort issues 3-4 years ago. Now we always think of students as 'our students' not 'my students.' We're not concerned any more about who did well, but what to do about these students [who didn't meet standard]. What's happened is that our scores on common assessments are coming to be more similar. We've kept the same assessment, so can compare scores over 4 years. It's the same for CST scores. There used to be a big gap between the top and bottom [classrooms]. It's a cohesive PLC effect. [High school teacher]

Developing collaboration and shared responsibility at all system levels

Sanger administrators were systematic in pursuing their goal for a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility across the district. They tackled barriers in the central office at the same time as they launched the teacher PLC initiative. Over time, they selected and developed leaders at all district levels who promote and support professional collaboration as the best way to achieve all students' success.

Central office

When the current district administration began in 2003-04 there were nine central office departments, each run autonomously by a department head under the Superintendent's supervision. As is often the case in central offices, directors avoided interaction and complained about one another to their superior. With the goal of breaking down the silos and developing cooperative relationships across the departments, the current Deputy Superintendent, hired in June 2004, created a new forum for communication. He described daunting challenges for change:

> So we began to hold Ed Services meetings Friday morning with everybody sitting around a table. I'd write the agenda… they wouldn't have it in advance. And I'd expect them to know everything and be ready to answer any questions I had. We would close each time with each person saying a little bit about what they were doing and working on. Pretty soon there was communication [although] it was horrendous [at first].

As is often the case, SUSD's district silos contained different educational philosophies and protected themselves from painful confrontations with colleagues. As communication opened up, ideological conflicts surfaced. The Deputy Superintendent created situations that forced staff to work out their differences, replacing silos with the first steps of collaboration:

> There was a huge debate over LitCon and DIBELS [assessments]. Special Ed wanted DIBELS. Categorical and Multilingual/Multicultural wanted LitCon. They had a huge blowout. But we'd stay there an hour or two hours until we hashed everything out. Pretty soon what happened was they began to work together and share resources—or at least discuss. And they actually began to learn where everybody else was and what their projects were, and they began to work together. We had to break down the silos.

One of the most striking facets of Sanger's reform is its success in breaking down the Special Education- regular education silos and developing a collaborative relationship between them at all levels of the system. With district administrators' leadership, relationships and understandings developed across the old boundaries to ground the hard work of succeeding with special needs students in regular classrooms. Currently, Sanger's Pupil Services division is staffed by former teachers and school psychologists with deep knowledge of both regular and special education. They have strong relationships with school administrators and teachers and embrace the view that "all kids are our kids." At all levels of the system, this unit's leaders and professional staff collaborate with their regular education counterparts. In the schools, special education

teachers and psychologists work with teachers on managing students' diagnosis and movement between Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (see Section V on instruction).

Pupil Services leaders point out that challenges of collaboration are greatest at the high school level, since how to tackle response to intervention becomes more complex as students move up grade levels. Teachers have 9th graders reading at the 5th grade level, and they have to get them prepared for high-stakes tests, especially the CAHSEE if they are to graduate. In keeping with district norms, they approach such challenges through discussion between PLCs and Special Education teachers and work out ways of collaborating on interventions to meet the needs of diverse students. They improve the approaches by reflecting together on evidence of how they worked and making adjustments.

Middle system

Sanger established several forums for cross-school communication and dialogue between schools and the central office. Some were designed for school accountability and are described in more detail in the next section (annual Principal Summits and Alternative Governance Board (AGB) reviews,) Others serve the main purpose of principal leadership development and creating a pipeline of teacher leaders (monthly meetings of Curriculum Support Provider (CSP) and of Sanger Academic Achievement Leadership Teams (SAALT), described in the section on Leadership. In each instance, however, the cross-school convenings serve to develop professional community and potential for collaboration on particular work.

These forums are also vehicles for vertical communication between schools and the district office. For example, Principal Summits initially forged relationships between school principals around their "shared ordeal" of having to present student outcome data to central office administrators and collaboration on improving their presentations. Over time district administrators made clear through this forum and their responses to school data that they welcome communication and transparency regarding school challenges and are ready to collaborate with them to improve student achievement.

Bimonthly Administrator Learning Team (ALT) meetings convened by Sanger district administrators afford opportunity for dialogue among principals. Although designed mainly for communicating information from district administrators to principals, they also have created a bond among principals. In early years, principal learning communities evolved informally between the principals of similar schools. Some did Walkthroughs in each others' classrooms and shared observations and thoughts on leading improvement.

By principal request, the district formed official principal PLCs in 2010-11. In the spirit of teacher PLCs, principals come together to address an instructional problem in their school and seek input on leadership strategies for improvement. The later section on Leadership Development describes the evolving design for this work. Significantly, it embodies the district principles of collaboration and shared responsibility for improving

district student learning. And it emerged through demand rather than mandate. Also, district administrators are involved, just as principals are involved in teacher learning, so that shared understandings develop between system levels as well as across schools. The principal PLCs can become contexts for piloting new initiatives, as is the case with the ELD pilot begun in 2011-12 in a PLC of three principals and a district official (see discussion in Section V).

Curriculum Support Professionals (CSP), whose role is to provide strategic support to teachers and teacher teams on instructional improvement, constitute a critical "middle system" in Sanger's reform initiative. As illustrated earlier in this section, the CSPs help support PLCs and instructional improvement in their content area, meeting with and guiding the practice of multiple PLCs. A cross-school PLC of instructional leaders began to emerge through the monthly meetings of CSPs with district curriculum staff. As district reforms have evolved, beginning with the EDI instructional reform in 2006, the CSP sessions focused on developing their skills to identify where teachers and PLCs needed support. This in turn provided a forum for these teacher leaders to share ideas and learn about ways of giving feedback to their school colleagues.

During 2009-10 when the district focused on training teachers in a new writing program, the CSPs shared strategies that had worked in their school. A CSP gave this example of learning from one another: "One meeting we did Walkthroughs, and a CSP talked about how she did a 'mock' visit [to teachers' classrooms] prior to the formal observation from the principal or VP… so that she could give feedback to the teacher ahead of time. Now I do this too." This CSP also commented that they are learning from one another how to customize their feedback to teachers; some benefit from direct suggestions, others do not.

School Leadership Teams and cross-school networks

Sanger's reform strategy included developing school-based leadership teams that span grade levels and content areas. As described later, this design for developing teacher leadership was rolled out gradually across district schools. The elementary and middle school LTs include teacher leaders of each of the grade level PLCs, the CSPs, and school administrators; the high school LT includes the four APs and CSPs. With monthly meetings that include training and exchange of ideas, this structure enabled the development of a professional community across schools with both administrators and teachers.

Within each school, the LT teachers were expected to lead their PLC's training in the core district reform initiatives – namely PLCs, EDI, and RTI. These teacher leaders would be the carriers of the reforms and trainers of teachers, in collaboration with the content CSPs and administrators. As such, Sanger schools' LTs have become vehicles for developing PLC Lead's leadership skills, building a broad cadre of school reform leaders, and growing a pipeline of system leaders who can move into administrator positions.

The LT networks and cross-school visitations through the principal PLCs spark new interactions among teachers across schools. Networks form at all levels of the system, made natural and important in a district culture that defines their joint work as teaching "our kids." Informal communication and support is a big part of a teachers' life in Sanger Unified. One teacher we interviewed said the district is like "a small family." She said that people reach out for support within and outside their school and gave an example of emailing three teachers in other schools for advice for her PLC on how to teach multiplication.

The webs of relationships, collaboration and shared responsibility among district professionals have broadened and deepened over the years since the PLC reform began. They are propelled and sustained by Sanger's clear vision and leadership for all adults to share responsibility for continuously improve student achievement. This vision and leadership extends to parents and the broader community.

Engaging the community in partnerships for student success

Apart from each school's outreach and engagement of its students' families, Sanger Unified has spearheaded or co-lead several community-focused initiatives that have built a strong support system for students and their families. Over a decade ago the district sought and received grants to open a Community Day School and to participate in a national Community of Caring program. The former was a partnership with Sanger's police department to help address the chronic local gang problem and support youth to stay out of prison and complete high school. In its twelfth year, the school has a strong track record. Community of Caring brought a set of core values – caring, respect, responsibility, trust, family – that united the district schools and community agencies and leaders. To this day, Sanger police cars are decorated with the Community of Caring sign and logo. These initiatives both expressed and nurtured community leaders' belief in "resiliency" or the idea that every child in Sanger has the ability to be successful with enough support. The district slogan "Every Child, Every Day, Whatever it Takes" expresses this belief and commitment.

Sanger also developed a Family Resource Center (FRC) through funding from the County and the Cowell Foundation to support families in the community. Located at one of the district's highest-poverty schools, the FRC Center was set up as a place where families across district schools could come for resources and a link to social services. It provides parent education and anger management classes, help with applications for food stamps, Medicare and Medi-Cal, and food and clothing. The Center recently has shifted its mission to developing families' capacity to fend for themselves. A "blueprint committee" interviewed 600 people and selected an advisory committee of residents who developed a mission and values to anchor the FRC's work. The new director and her Family Advocate assistant are moving to strengthen the Center as nexus of support for families and the school system. Its vision of building family capacity mirrors the district's commitment to developing youth resiliency.

Also supporting parent education and leadership in the community is Parent Involvement in Quality Education (PIQE), a program which teachers parents how to support their children in school and at home. Parents learn from trained community members how to navigate the school system from teacher conferences and the academic standards to course schedules and counselors at the high school. They also learn how to create ongoing dialog with their children about schoolwork. Parents are taught in their home language and, after a series of nine weekly sessions, they participation in a graduation ceremony which is an important community celebration powerful for the parents and their families. Since 2006, 1500 parents have graduated, 800 of whom are parents of high school students. As one parent described in her "commencement" speech:

> What I didn't know was that PIQE not only benefits my junior high student but it is also helping my 5 and 3 year old. . . The advantage for them is huge. I now have the additional tools to start them off on the right track for their entire 12 years of school here at Sanger Unified. . . If I had to summarize PIQE in one word it would be, 'Empowerment'.

The empowerment theme is exemplified by the accomplishment of another PIQE graduate in Sanger: he ran for and won a seat on the Sanger Board of Education.

Sanger's Community of Caring Task Force extends the district's partnership with the community beyond parents to include all youth development organizations, family and social service organizations, and agencies in the community. Formed in 2009 in the wake of a gang-related shooting in a downtown park, the task force is designed to foster information sharing and collaboration across organizations in support of youth and the community. Currently, the group convenes biweekly at one of the local churches and is lead by Pastor Sam of a local Mennonite Brotherhood church. Attendance at a typical meeting is 20 or more. A January meeting we observed included pastors from at least six local churches (pastors of fourteen different community churches are on the Task Force roster), two police officers, Sanger's mayor, the City Manager, Chamber of Commerce head, Boys and Girls Club head, head of the Youth Council, head of Youth Missions, CA Health Collaborative, Parks and Recreation director, PTA president, Knights of Columbus, School Resource Officer, school district representative, and several community members. Only organizations committed to collaboration are invited to join the CCTF, and the current chair personally screens out any comers that seek membership for self-promotion.

Sanger district leaders have been instrumental in building partnerships with local churches and agencies. This network of community support organizations and agencies significantly expands schools' capacity to be successful with all students. Not only do youth and their families benefit from of a safer and more resourceful environment, but educators find encouragement and validation of their collaboration and shared responsibility for all students.

Sanger's reach in collaborating to improve all students' success goes beyond the district and its community to include other districts in the region and state. Over recent years, Sanger district leaders have participated in district networks that aim to improve the achievement of English learners and other disadvantaged student groups – the California Collaborative, the California Office to Reform Education {CORE) and the Stanford ELL Network – and are partnering with a smaller rural district in Fresno County to mentor and exchange successful practices. Through these collaborations Sanger leaders and educators are sharing their experiences and resources and benefiting from those of other districts. Superintendent Johnson sees this as crucial during a time of scarce resources:

> The role of the superintendent now is not only to collaborate within your own district but also developing collaboration among districts. We as superintendents have to start working together and lend our strengths to one another. Because it makes no sense for each of us to try to reinvent the same wheels at the same time in the face of so many reductions.

VII. Shift from top-down to reciprocal accountability

Over the years Sanger developed a district culture of reciprocal accountability based in evidence, one in which school administrators and teachers are asked to share data on their students' performance and be accountable for improving results. In turn, district administrators and staff hold themselves accountable for supporting teachers' and schools' continuous improvement.

Sanger leaders have built mechanisms for data-based accountability throughout the school system. What is unusual about their approach is (1) holding teachers and administrators accountable for collecting data on student learning and using evidence in the decisions they make in their quest to improve student achievement, (2) creating a culture in which doing so is viewed as a professional responsibility, and (3) holding themselves as district leaders responsible for providing teachers and principals what they need to succeed. This conception of accountability is consonant with Sanger's culture of collaboration and shared responsibility and is undergirded by technical and moral support from district leaders. It is what the superintendent calls "reciprocal accountability." He explained: "If I have an expectation for or from you, then I have an obligation to provide you with whatever it will take for you to succeed. You must hold me accountable as well because if not, you didn't fail, I did."

The simplicity of the phrase "reciprocal accountability" belies the complexity of putting it into action. Few district leaders— nor those at the state or federal level—have been able to translate the ideal of reciprocal or mutual accountability into practice. Typically far more emphasis is placed on the punitive role of sanctions than on the support side of the equation. Indeed, prevalent accountability systems push many educators toward a cynical view of accountability as an external demand, rather than as shared professional responsibility to students. Not only do Sanger leaders see reciprocal accountability as a moral imperative but they have created a system which balances demands on educators with the supports needed to succeed.

The district's approach to accountability goes hand in hand with its "tight-loose" strategy whereby district mandates are tempered by flexibility in how they are adapted and carried out by principals and teachers. Yet administrators walk a tight line in maintaining balance between tight and loose, pressure and support.

Developing school accountability for continuous improvement

From the federal and state, and often district, vantage points, external accountability is the favored method to motivate change. This approach is embodied in NCLB with its requirements for schools to continually increase scores on state tests with sanctions for failure to do so. When Sanger was named one of the lowest performing districts in the state, Sanger leaders appealed to this external pressure to mobilize support for the changes they were asking of administrators and teachers. A year earlier leaders had seen the writing on the wall, but in pressing for a districtwide focus on essential

standards and quarterly district assessment they encountered complaints and resistance from principals and teachers. In Deputy Superintendent Smith's words:

> When I arrived in Sanger I began pushing to create a system that would provide student achievement data throughout the school year. When we implemented the DPA [District Performance Assessment], there was a great deal of push back. The phone calls, emails, and meetings with staff were not pleasant. The belief was that there had to be an alternative motive–a "gotcha" reason for wanting to know if students were learning. My response was, 'Guys, we're on fire! The ship's burning. And by the way, we're going to be taken over by the state if we don't do something.' In October of that year we were named as one of the first 98 Program Improvement school districts in the state—we were a member of the lowest performing districts in California. It created that cathartic moment where I was able to say, 'Look, This is for real.' This moment created a tremendous amount of credibility and a realization that we were in this together; the district office and the schools.

Once Sanger's leaders had the staff's attention, they took a different approach to accountability. Rather than relying on negative labels and sanctions, they focused on building the leadership capacity of principals as well as central office staff and the instructional capacity of teachers. They used external accountability to create a sense of urgency for reform but, internally, they developed a model of reciprocal accountability.

Over time, Sanger leaders created a balance between pressure to adopt new ways of working and support for implementing the new ways. The accountability mechanisms they designed embody this balance. For example, the Principal Summits described below serve two purposes: (1) holding principals accountable—they literally must render an accounting publicly each year, and (2) arming them with skills and practice in asking questions (inquiry), instructional strategies, data analysis, and public presentations.

Several structures at different levels of the system illustrate this approach. In addition to the Principal Summits, Alternative Governance Boards for schools that reached PI4 (Program Improvement for the fourth year) hold principals and teachers accountable for identifying strong and weak aspects of instruction and adapting instruction as needed. PLC agendas and minutes keep principals informed of how each PLC is functioning and the Spectrum of Learning, described below, locates where they are on the developmental path. Classroom walkthroughs by the principal and by the district leadership team provide feedback to teachers on uses of EDI.

Sanger's accountability mechanisms embody several of its core reform principles from following a developmental path to balancing pressure and support for continuous improvement. These mechanism also reinforce core district values, including collaboration and strategic choices about what is tight and loose in district policy initially and over time.

Taking a developmental approach: Principal Summits

When the state named Sanger a PI district, leaders realized that few school or district administrators knew what the label was based on or what it meant. As Deputy Superintendent Smith put it:

> There were no administrative expectations for anybody. Administrators didn't know what was expected of them. They really had no reason to study the data, to know State requirements, or to understand the sanctions for low performance. Our principals couldn't even tell me the difference between API and AYP. They had no idea!

Not only did principals not fully grasp federal and state requirements for continuous improvement in achievement across subgroups and the consequences for failure to do so, they had no way to measure progress. As Smith put it: "We had no dipstick. We couldn't tell how we were doing." This concern led to the development of the quarterly district performance assessment (DPA) described earlier and, in turn, the establishment of annual Principal Summits in which every principal presents data about their school to district leaders. District documents describe the Summits this way:

> Sanger Summits are an opportunity for principals to present their school's past and current level of student achievement, their plans for improving achievement, and to receive feedback/suggestions from their peers. The Summits also allow the District Office and district support providers to better understand the needs, goals, programs, and direction of all schools. Summits are a dialogue from which all participants grow and improve for the benefit of the children of Sanger Unified.

The developmental path from the first summits to the current ones was not a smooth one. Borrowing the general idea from a neighboring district, the summits were a way for principals to report to the district on what they were doing. Principals are to report on the data requested by the district and answer questions posed by district administrators, observed by the superintendent, and open to the public. Each principal is allocated one hour, usually scheduled in groups of three during Monday and Wednesday mornings in October.

In the first year, principals were asked to present the prior three years of API data. According to Smith, they didn't know where to find the data, and, in response to the pressure, principals began walking by his office going to see the superintendent. Smith also heard from a district colleague who said "Everybody's *very* upset about this. This is *wrong*. You're stressing these guys! They're really stressed!"

When the rules tightened in the second year, the response was even more dramatic. As one principal described the shift: "[District leaders] went easy on us the first year. The second year they went at the [school] administrators. [We were] swearing back and forth."

Principals had no formal training in locating and analyzing their school's test score data. Yet, over time, they became quite skilled at disaggregating and presenting

their data for all student subgroups by subjects. They learned by doing and through asking questions of each other and observing each other's presentations. Smith described his philosophy of professional development in this context:

> People learn best when there is a need to learn. The more you need the knowledge and information, the more you seek to learn it. And as we continued to require more in our Summits, our principals became a professional development system within their own ranks. We had created a demand for critical knowledge.

As principals' skills in data-based accountability improved and as they developed trust in district administrators' commitment to support their school's success, their views of the summits became much more positive. One said: "At the core the important questions were being asked: show us what you know, how you know it is working, and how you will help your site get better." Another said: "The whole purpose of the summit is to get us to reflect so we will do it on our own." And, one described getting calls afterwards from two district administrators: "They have gotten better at patting us on the back. . . They realize now how much it matters to us."

Requirements for principals' presentations increased over the years. As one principal described: "At the beginning it was just getting started and knowing how to present the materials and understand the data. That was the focus. Now it is more the instructional pieces. More refined each time."

By fall 2010, principals were asked to present state test scores across 5-6 years by subgroup and proficiency level, movement of EL students across state-defined levels of proficiency, and implementation stages of the key reform components by grade level or department. They also were asked to describe steps they are taking to ensure continued growth for each grade level and department, reasons for improvements or lack thereof, and their top three areas of focus for the year. [See "Sanger Summits 2011-12" in Appendix E].

Reporting on district rubrics for measuring progress on key district initiatives were introduced into the schools and the Summits the same year. Called Spectrums of Learning, they asked principals to rate the developmental stage – from 'literal' to 'refinement' to 'internalized' to 'innovative' – for each of their grade levels or departments on several dimensions for PLCs, EDI, RTI, and ELD instruction. These rubrics signal the district's developmental view of change and prompts school leaders and district staff to customize their support to particular stages of teacher development for each initiative.

Principals are expected to cover a lot of ground within strict constraints on Summit presentations. The Power Point presentation must not exceed 45 minutes including questions from district administrators (usually two or three seated at the "head table"). This is followed by 15 minutes of audience participation—an innovation over the last two years as the summits have become standing-room only events, attracting visitors from dozens of districts across the state.

We observed Principal Summits in their fourth, fifth and sixth years. Both the presentations and exchanges between the principals and "head table" were professional and focused on instructional challenges and strategies, reflecting a substantial evolution from descriptions of early summits. Before Sanger's reputation for success spread across the Valley and the state, Summits were public but rarely attended by outsiders. In the last three years, the Board Room where they are held has been packed. This appeared to influence the Summits to a small extent. More time was devoted to explaining Sanger-specific reforms and acronyms and to responding to questions from the audience.

Principals interviewed subsequent to their presentations were proud of their work and offered no complaints about the time spent preparing or the event itself. They reported learning from the experience and learning from each other. Principals who are not in the first group to present often attend to get a sense of the kinds of questions the "head table" is asking. Some attend to hear particular colleagues. All hear the presentations from peers scheduled on the same day. Principals described "learning from putting it all together" and "looking at all the data." One principal said:

> When we first did it I said here's another exercise. But when it is all said and done, I get to know my school much better. I look at the numbers much more closely. How all the subgroups are doing. Gets me to start asking questions of the teachers.

In addition to benefits to each principal including enhanced public speaking skills, the shared experience of the Summits has served to forge ties across school leaders and create an informal professional learning community among them. As noted in the earlier discussion of cross-PLC collaboration, Principal Summits became a model for PLC Summits in several district schools. Forums for teacher PLCs to present their data and the focus of improvement efforts to the whole faculty serve as a way for teachers to share their work with colleagues beyond their PLC and also as a mechanism for reciprocal accountability within the school.

Piloting a new accountability system: Alternative Governance Boards

In 2004-5 when the first Sanger school reached its fourth year of Program Improvement, Sanger leaders took advantage of the situation to test a school-based accountability mechanism. When the state identifies a school as PI5 (fifth year in Program Improvement), one option the school and district have for major restructuring is to select an Alternative Governance Board (AGB). Sanger leaders decided not to wait a year and put an AGB in place in year 4 to act in advisory capacity. The state's idea was to take governance out of the hands of the school. Sanger's idea was to create a board that could help the school improve through monthly meetings structured to look at data and help identify solutions together with school leaders and staff.

The first school to reach PI4 was the testing ground for Sanger's AGB plan. Smith said:

> So as we started the AGB, we came to learn that there was not a model to follow. It became a "learn as we go" situation. We quickly realized that the AGB didn't have to

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be directive; it could be used as a "mirror" that you hold up to the school as you ask critical questions about instruction, data, and student learning.

Reflecting the same philosophy underlying PLCs and the Principals' Summits, the district's vision for the AGB was to create a board that could actually provide help to each school. All the AGBs have been chaired by the Deputy Superintendent which, according to one district administrator, "was a huge statement to sites that this was important and was not going to go away." AGB members bring expertise in leadership, management, curriculum, instruction, and data use to help guide school leaders diagnose issues and develop solutions. For example, one school's AGB included the Associate Superintendent, the Director of Student Services, a California State University professor, Director of Special Projects, two curriculum coordinators, and an expert in Edusoft, the district's data system at that time. Superintendent Johnson noted: "We made a deliberate decision not to put school board members on it because then it is not alternative."

Each monthly meeting focuses on a particular issue identified by the principal, for example, 6th and 7th grade mathematics PLCs in the middle school. Meetings begin with a report from the principal followed by classroom visits by teams composed of PLC members and AGB members. Teams are asked to observe particular elements of the classes they visit, such as how teachers are checking for student understanding. After visiting 5 or 6 classrooms within a 45-minute window, teams report back to the group on the trends they observed. The meeting is then turned over to teachers in the focal PLCs, in this case 6th and 7th grade math teams, who present and interpret data. For example, one team presented data on how students scored on the most recent District Progress Assessment, broken out by teachers and compared results to scores on the prior assessment. The teachers offer their inferences about strengths and weaknesses and next steps. AGB members then ask questions which have been provided in advance to the teachers.

Everything that happens in the AGB meetings goes into the minutes which are distributed to the entire staff of the school. And, as Smith put it, "When you publish the minutes of the AGB, the whole staff begins to talk . . . and we learned that the staff reads those the minutes cover to cover."

The AGBs provide principals with additional authority in asking their teachers to make changes. As one said: "We [principals] were able to say 'This is what the AGB wants and expects. . .' Teachers went from hating it (the monthly visits) to wanting to do well by the AGB Board." Several factors likely contribute to this shift in attitude. The fact that AGB members visit classrooms every time they meet and invite teachers to present data at each meeting raises trust and confidence. Similarly, the fact that the AGB pursues questions raised by the principals increases their relevance to the staff. Moreover, the fact that the minutes are made public—documents which include summaries of feedback from observations and PLC presentations—heightens interest in the AGB's activities.

However, maintaining teachers' trust and making feedback productive depends upon principal leadership and communication skills. Teachers in one elementary school

reported that they had been "traumatized" by their AGB several years ago. At the time, these teachers had little understanding of the purpose or expectations of the classroom visits. Moreover, the then principal had publicized negative feedback regarding particular classrooms, and teachers felt they were being pitted against one another. Years later, this school still suffered from low morale and distrust of the district administration that stemmed from that AGB experience. The warning signal for district leaders was a dip in the school's test scores in 2011, and they initiated a process of identifying and addressing the problem. A half-day session with teachers lead by an expert consultant surfaced the source of the school's troubled culture and launched an intense district effort to help the school move forward. District administrators have been working with the new principal and teachers on the Leadership Team to help them develop strategies and leadership for re-building trust and a collaborative culture.

Balancing pressure and support from the top of the system is challenging given the variation in school culture and leadership. In this case, the district had relied upon a principal's skill and judgment in communicating the AGB's purpose and conveying feedback in a way that motivated improvement. As highlighted in the next section, Sanger has invested heavily in creating school and district leaders who are well prepared to lead continuous improvement in the spirit of reciprocal accountability.

Developing teacher accountability through PLCs and classroom observations

As described in Section VI, teacher PLCs have shared responsibility and accountability built into the DuFour model. Teachers are accountable to one another to show up and participate in designing standards-based instruction, assessing student learning, and diagnosing and responding to students' ongoing learning needs. In well-functioning PLCs, teachers feel a sense of professional responsibility to prepare and contribute during and after the formal meetings. As noted earlier, most of Sanger's PLCs have developed a strong sense of reciprocal accountability to one another for pulling their weight on the team and taking group decisions back to their classrooms.

Sanger district and school administrators hold teachers accountable for working collaboratively with their grade level or course group colleagues to meet the learning needs of all of their students. To support this developmental path, district leaders asked principals to monitor PLC practices through requesting minutes of PLC meetings on a regular basis. How principals do this varies. Some look at and comment on minutes weekly. Others simply collect them. One principal described seeing the progress of PLCs through reading the minutes every week: "I read the minutes every week and I respond. The agendas and minutes have evolved too—from candy sales and restrooms to looking at assessments, who made it and who did not. I've seen phenomenal growth."

Also, the principal and Curriculum Support Providers (CSP) typically sit in on PLC meetings both to assess where they are in developing effective collaboration and to provide support. In keeping with the district's developmental approach to change, as well as its principle of coupling pressure with support, school leaders think and work strategically to tailor their support to PLCs. For example, a middle school CSP described

facilitating a discussion in one PLC where a member had let the team down and they needed to address "the elephant in the room" in order to continue working as a team to improve student achievement. This PLC was being held accountable for moving past interpersonal issues to focus on their students' growth.

Teachers are also held accountable for implementing the district instructional initiatives – EDI, RTI, and ELD strategies. The Spectrum of Learning rubrics were created as a tool for school leaders to assess teachers' and PLCs' developmental progress. They can then target supports where needed. Typically when district or school leaders identify a pattern of weak implementation, they work on developing mechanisms and tools to support progress. For example, a principal might identify teachers who could benefit from refresher EDI sessions run by the district. Similarly, as described in Section V, weaknesses in meeting the needs of English learners at the high school led to a strategy designed to encourage greater use of CELDT data among teachers and PLCs. The EL CSP and a committee of teacher leaders in the high school developed a strategy requiring that each classroom teacher use a seating chart that identifies the CELDT level of each student. The seating chart serves two purposes: 1) the teacher will know and can readily reference the CELDT scores of each English learner in the class, and 2) the CSP and others can use the chart during classroom observations to monitor the learning of EL students at different levels of English mastery. In turn, this informs teachers' instructional decisions and school leaders' target support to teachers and PLCs.

Classroom observations by teams of school leaders are a key accountability mechanism, as well as a strategy for leadership development (as highlighted in the Section XIII). For example, in the middle school, teams including a CSP, assistant principal, and the principal conduct Focus Walks in which they briefly observe classrooms to assess and give feedback on how well teachers are moving through all the steps of the lesson. Their goal is to help teachers insure that they get to students' independent practice by the end of the lesson. Teachers consider this strategy to be a coaching tool—another example of an accountability strategy paired with strong support. Along with PLCs, Focused Walks and other forms of administrator observations, district leaders have developed a culture in which teaching is far more transparent than is typical. As of our 2011 survey, 70 percent of teachers indicated that they are comfortable opening their classrooms to observers (up from 58 percent in 2009). As we noted in Section V, teacher survey responses also confirm that site administrators spend time observing classrooms and, more unusual, that teachers find their feedback helpful.

Districtwide SAALT teams of district and school staff, described in the next section, also visit schools regularly. Their goals are both to provide feedback to the school based on walkthroughs of every classroom and to glean from the visits in which areas the district needs to offer additional training. As with Focused Walks in the schools, the observations are not intended as "gotchas," but rather as means to identify strengths and weaknesses and where additional training or coaching might be needed.

Despite district and school leaders' intentions of providing useful feedback, classroom observations can be used and experienced as teacher evaluations.

Walkthroughs by school or district administrators carry potential for judgment and sanctions if a teacher is not conforming to district policy. In fact, some of Sanger's high school teachers reported that they had been reprimanded by an administrator for not following a strict schedule for steps in EDI instruction. They perceived the district's classroom observation protocol to be rigid and their administrators' walkthroughs as "gotcha" occasions. These concerns exploded in Fall 2011 when the union president took teachers' complaints about the district's EDI strategy to the Board. By then, however, district leaders had got wind of teachers' growing concerns about rigid accountability pressures coming from the observation protocol. They began working with high school PLC leaders, who in turn worked with teachers in their PLCs, to design a new form adapted to high school course demands for student learning and to develop understandings about its intention to provide guidance for improving instruction. Sanger district and site administrators have been working long and hard to regain the trust of high school teachers who had been alienated by classroom observations.

District leaders' response to this potential crisis illustrates how Sanger's culture of continuous improvement prompts leaders to acknowledge and address problems that inevitably arise. Nonetheless, this moment in recent district history shows that teachers' trust in district leaders and initiatives is fragile and must be continuously nurtured. In a broader context of external accountability and disrespect for teachers, administrators are challenged to constantly communicate and act on their shared accountability for student learning.

Balancing pressure and support

Sanger administrators and teachers take reciprocal accountability seriously. In a different context, the multiple structures in place for tracking progress and reporting findings publicly might be perceived as heavy-handed by teachers and principals. But in Sanger, these mechanisms are part of a culture of transparency and shared commitment to improving student achievement. They also reflect a culture of personal and professional trust that has been built over time through conversations and demonstrations that the goal of accountability is to ensure that students succeed, not to sanction adults. Reciprocal accountability in Sanger is fundamentally rooted in a culture focused on serving all students.

District leaders consistently express respect for school administrators and teachers at the same time as they push them to improve results. This Sanger leadership norm is nurtured and enforced through modeling and coaching from the top. For example, following an AGB session at one of the district schools, a district administrator gave this advice to a colleague who had come across as harsh during the questioning period:

> Here would have been a better way to put it: 'Gosh, I know you guys have worked really hard on this. But have you considered the following?' And put out the question. At that point in time, you've acknowledged that it's hard, you've acknowledged that they're working hard, but you forced them to take a look at the things that you want them to look at and adjust to. 'What would I expect when I come back next time? What

would I hear from you on this?' That's different from saying, 'Get your butt in gear and do this.'

Maintaining the balance between pressure and support that underlies reciprocal accountability is a delicate balance that district leaders have learned can go awry and threaten carefully built trust. From teachers in professional learning communities who have learned to make their practice public, to principals who present their school's data to district leaders in a public forum, accountability is usually understood to be a way to get additional guidance and assistance. They feel safe to share their shortcomings, since the response will be support rather than criticism. Accountability is not without pressure, however. Educators in Sanger feel pressed to succeed in helping their students reach their potential, but they know that they are not likely to fail because of the multiple sources of assistance from both peers and superiors.

VIII. Shift from administrators as managers to leaders of learning

Leadership at all levels of the district is central to the magnitude of change Sanger embarked upon. Both the superintendent and deputy superintendent determined early on that investing in developing principals as leaders of teacher and student learning was a critical strategy. Without strong school site leadership, attempting to create a culture of collaboration focused on students and new instructional practices would not succeed. To lead their schools, principals would need to understand the initiatives and how to judge and support the progress of their teachers and their students. District office staff also needed to learn about the initiatives and ways of judging and supporting school progress.

As changes began to take root, Sanger leaders recognized that sustaining the culture of the district and the initiatives underway would require more than developing the leadership of those already in administrative positions. They would need to create a pipeline of leaders inside the district. Through nurturing teacher leadership, interested teachers would become curriculum support providers, assistant principals or principals and even central office leaders. The result is a system that creates a cadre of leaders and potential leaders across the system who are deeply immersed in the culture and in the practices that they are to lead.

The need for a pipeline also applies to the top leadership positions in the district. Paying attention to succession well in advance of the departure of top leaders is a rarity among districts. With a major investment in nurturing new leaders from within, Sanger distinguishes itself from many districts which seek new principals and central office staff from outside.

Developing principals' leadership of teacher and student learning

Sanger district leaders have made major investments to ensure that principals understand what the district is asking of teachers. Typically in Sanger, with a new initiative such as PLCs, principals are the first to be sent to a workshop and often accompany teachers to additional trainings. Even when professional development sessions are offered on site, principals typically attend with groups of teachers. Over time, the constraints on administrators' time have curtailed their presence at all trainings. But the district has made adaptations. For example, in a series of three full-day professional development sessions for teacher leaders and CSPs on incorporating writing as formative assessment in EDI lessons, school administrators and CSPs attended a half-day session in advance that provided an overview of what teachers would experience – what the district refers to as "frontloading." During the full-day sessions, CSPs are present with teachers; principals are expected to be there from 1-3 only with the option to attend for the entire day. When teachers return to their schools, the principal has a good sense of what they have learned and how they are expected to use it in their classrooms without spending three full days.

Principals also learn from their public Summit presentations described in section VII. The experience of looking closely at their data and presenting it in a variety of

detailed breakdowns, showing exactly who did and did not make progress over the prior year, leaves principals deeply familiar with their school's performance. These leaders learn not only from putting their own data together but also in talking to other principals in preparing their Summit presentations and observing other Summit presentations. And they learn from the kinds of questions district leaders put to them during their presentations. As described by a second year principal:

> It [the Summit] was incredibly stressful but it is brilliant. It is such an effective and strong tool. It makes me as a principal really delve into my school and truly look at where my school is. You need to be prepared not just to show tables but really know the data and where your strengths and deficits are, what the next steps are. So stressful but building the data is huge. It really really helped me last year and this year. They added new things this year. One we had to identify strengths and weaknesses in five areas and a monitoring piece and SMART goals for it. And how we would measure. Forces you to really delve in. I have definitely grown as a new principal through that process.

Principals also participate in semi-structured walkthroughs or focused walks in their own school and other schools. In the early years of the S. H. Cowell grant the district created SAALT (Sanger Administrative Academic Leadership Teams) composed of a group of district administrators plus school administrators and CSPs. On a regular basis these teams would visit every school for half a day, first spending time with the principal to determine the focus for the classroom observations or walkthroughs and then spending some time in every classroom noting the particular focus. The SAALT team would break into smaller groups so all classes could be observed. Then the team would convene with the principal, compile results in a plus/delta format, and discuss any particular issues that arose. After the time in the school, the final step was to compose a feedback letter to the principal—who usually participated in the discussion of the key messages that would be most helpful—to be shared with the entire staff.

The combination of having multiple eyes looking at one's school and discussing observations provided a rich learning opportunity for principals, as did their visits to other schools in which they picked up new ideas and created a frame of reference for their own work. These experiences also contributed to building a new culture through developing a common language and shared understandings and expectations. As one principal described:

> When you walk through with them [SAALT team], things become even more clear. I think it brings clarity and unity. . . This year I looked to those [district] people and I said I need help with my interventions. . . . They became a planning team for me and came to meet with me and showed me schools to go to.

The SAALT teams did more than provide learning opportunities for principals. They also were a powerful way to build the knowledge and understanding of district office staff. Over the years, SAALT has continued to evolve to meet the needs of increasingly busy administrators, and to maintain the original purpose of collaborating with the school staff so "you are all growing together," as one SAALT team member described and not perceived as an external monitoring group. Rather than a small number

of fairly large teams, the district has created seven administration visitation teams, each headed by a district administrator with four or so principals and assistant principals. Site administrators are spread among the seven teams and each team visits the schools of those administrators. Under this arrangement, each host site administrator or team picks a focus when they conduct a school visit.

These groups of principals are now the same as their administrative PLCs formed in 2010-11 in response to principals' desire to have their own PLCs. The agenda is still focused on improving effectiveness within the key district initiatives: PLCs, RTI, EDI, and ELD with the SAALT activities a key part of this. In addition, the principals talk and meet informally with their PLC peers to ask questions and exchange ideas. In the middle and high school, the assistant principals operate as PLCs within their schools.

Discussions are underway for further structuring the work of the teams next year by picking a districtwide focus as a way to unify efforts to strengthen shared challenges such as the quality of student writing.

The strong emphasis on building the instructional knowledge of principals and assistant principals goes far beyond the typical workshops or exhortations to principals to be instructional leaders. In Sanger the roles are substantially redefined. Principals are expected to spend a substantial amount of their time in classrooms. In exchange, the district minimizes the administrative demands placed on principals. As one example, monthly administrative meetings for principals are informative, efficient, and provide time for feedback which often sets the agenda for the next meeting.

As a result, Sanger principals are knowledgeable about all of Sanger's initiatives, and therefore have credibility in their relationships with teachers. Importantly most have also developed "below the green line" skills in collaborating, facilitating and building relationships without which their work with teachers would falter. As more Sanger teachers move up the pipeline to become principals, the more they enter the job prepared to lead instruction (see below).

Developing teacher leadership

At every grade level or course group in every school, teachers lead their PLCs. This is the first opportunity for most teachers to take on leadership responsibilities. To carry out this role, they must understand the purpose and function of PLCs as well as develop facilitation skills to navigate bumps in the road. (See Section VI.)

Sanger's reform strategy included developing school-based leadership teams that span grade levels and content areas. This design for developing teacher leadership was rolled out gradually across district schools as part of an S. H. Cowell Foundation grant that launched school Leadership Teams (LTs) beginning in four schools in 2007-08, another six schools in 2008-09, and the remaining schools in 2009-10. The strategy was initiated as a vehicle for spreading effective practices identified in one school to all schools, for example, innovative structures for interventions to specific instructional

strategies. It evolved to serve as a mechanism for sharing expertise when funds could not support training of all teachers in a particular area—a mechanism which could not work in the absence of functioning PLCs.

The elementary and middle school LTs include teacher leaders of each of the grade level PLCs, the CSPs, and school administrators; the high school LT includes the four APs and CSPs. These LTs attend training sessions throughout the year with responsibility for sharing what they have learned with their grade level teams. Initially, trainings focused on building expertise in the core district reform initiatives. Each year the trainings delve more deeply into particular aspects of each initiative. For example, in 2011-12 training has focused on developing academic language and writing.

As the carriers of the reforms back to their schools, together with their CSPs and administrators, these teachers expand their knowledge and develop additional leadership skills in working with their grade level teams. As such, Sanger schools' LTs have become vehicles for developing the leadership skills of PLC leaders, building a broad cadre of school reform leaders, and growing a pipeline of system leaders who can move into CSP and administrator positions.

Creating a pipeline for leadership positions

Inevitably, administrators leave. One downside of success is that other districts seek to hire your staff. Also, leaders seek district office positions elsewhere since Sanger has only a few such positions. Although few—none to our knowledge—leave Sanger because they are dissatisfied, personal reasons and retirement also account for leadership vacancies.

Typically, when districts lose strong leaders, they launch a search for strong candidates. Sanger leaders made a conscious decision instead to "grow their own," believing that Sanger's culture and practices are best preserved by those already familiar with it. With ample talent throughout the ranks of teachers, Sanger leaders are confident that they can develop their own staff to become leaders. To date they have demonstrated that this approach works well.

From teacher to principal

CSPs usually rise from the ranks of teachers, often with encouragement and support from their principal and even their peers. Among these skilled teachers and coaches are some who aspire to administrative positions. They may become assistant principals first or move directly into a principalship. In the last five years, all principal vacancies have been filled with educators already in the system, including five vacancies in 2010-11.

Interviews with new principals who have moved up the ladder in Sanger suggest they are extremely well-prepared in the core initiatives: EDI, PLCs, ELD, and RTI; and most have coaching experience. They are less prepared in specific management and

operations tasks. When asked what was most difficult about the job the first few months, a new principal said: "For me, honestly learning the little things. You have to do a fire drill this month, a grounds survey, . . . Hardest thing is finding out all the little things that run a school. Like writing a purchase order." This principal went on to describe having strong instructional skills but little knowledge of the budget and technical requirements for things like expulsion hearings. These are taught in administrative programs but not all new principals have completed the program when they begin their first principalship.

District leaders are willing to trade off knowledge of budget and operations for expertise in instruction and facilitation because the former are easier to backfill. Learning the ropes of running a school is eased for new principals by having ready-made PLCs which provide both moral and technical support. In addition, every new principal is assigned a mentor who is always available to answer questions and provide guidance and support. A new principal describing her first year said:

> One of the things that [the Deputy Superintendent] did that was huge: He assigned mentors to each one of the new principals so each had a mentor principal so [name] became mine. Every week he would come in and go over my board and walk classes and he was always a phone call away.

Teachers who desire to move to administrative positions are helped by a collaborative arrangement between Sanger and Fresno State University which brings its administration credentialing program to Sanger so teachers and CSPs can sign up and attend classes in Sanger. It also creates a support group among those enrolled in the program—a natural PLC.

Succession planning

Building leadership to succeed those at the top of the system is a challenge that few districts undertake, in part because the decision is often predetermined by the board of education. Sanger has had the good fortune—which it has certainly influenced—to have had a stable board of education throughout the last decade. Each election brings threats of changes but none has transpired to date.

Planning for succession for top leaders is always a risky proposition since boards of education usually select superintendents who then choose their administrative team. Consequently, the risk is always present that school board members will want to exercise their muscle, particularly if an election brings new board members to the table with their own agenda. Warding against this in Sanger is its striking track record in raising achievement and a board which has supported the current superintendent throughout his tenure. Still, those opposed to the current leadership can always find data to attack weak spots in the system.

Sanger's top leaders have developed a pipeline that can sustain the district culture and create leadership continuity not only at the school level but also the central office. They have also become increasingly clear about what it takes to lead continuous improvement in Sanger suggesting that the "great leader" explanation for Sanger's

success is not a compelling one. Sanger will not see another superintendent like Marc Johnson, nor does there need to be in the eyes of other district leaders. In their view, what is important understanding how this superintendent inspired others, what he held tight, and how he steered the ship. Similarly his deputy superintendent, who developed many of the strategies now in place, has been transparent to all about his goals and methods for reaching them.

Two years in advance of the retirement of the deputy superintendent, he and the superintendent named three administrators—one a former principal already in the district office and two directly from school sites—to leadership roles in the central office. All had lived the evolution of Sanger's transformation. Responsibilities for overseeing the schools and for the many programs and projects were divided among the three. The trio worked as a team knowing that one would be chosen to succeed the deputy superintendent. At the end of the 2011-12 school year, one of the three was named to succeed the departing deputy and a principal was named to replace him in the trio of managers. The superintendent is expected to announce his retirement in the next couple of years, leaving behind a central office with several highly qualified candidates to succeed him.

That top leaders are replaced from within is not highly unusual. The difference in Sanger is the assurance that those who move up the system are deeply immersed in Sanger's history and culture and committed to the same philosophy focused on students and strengthening the capacity of the system to adapt.

IX. Sustainability and lessons

Sanger's transformation to a district culture of continuous improvement is extraordinary. It offers insight into what it takes to change a district's culture from one that seeks "quick fixes" to one that prods and nurtures educators to ensure that all students realize their potential. Sanger's transformed culture did not emerge over night or through a recipe for "what works." District norms and capacity for ongoing adult learning, collaboration, and use of evidence are the result of consistent leadership and hard work over several years.

With achievement scores for every subgroup rising each year at rates surpassing the state, this high-poverty high-minority district has justified close study. Our documentation over four years uncovered both explicit and implicit goals, principles, and strategies that have guided changes in Sanger, as well as the impacts that these changes have made on adults and students alike. We now turn to two obvious questions raised by Sanger's story: Can the district sustain its success? What are the lessons from their experiences for other districts?

Sustainability

The question of sustainability looms over any success story. Over the past eight years Sanger has created a districtwide capacity to achieve impressive results for students, but how long can it last? Are the culture changes deep enough to withstand shocks from outside (such as budget cuts) as well as from inside? Are they robust enough to survive the turnover of its top two leaders?

Districts, like large companies, can have their moments in the sun, but sustained success often lasts for only a few years. Sanger already has a track record that extends to nearly a decade. One explanation for its sustained success could be the particular philosophical underpinnings of the district's work. We noted earlier how Sanger leaders were introduced to concepts of "dynamic systems" through consultants who were familiar with the writings of Margaret Wheatley and others who apply discoveries in self-organizing or self-renewing systems to organizations.[19] They saw the importance of working "below the green line" —moving beyond structures, operations, and strategies which are the focus of most district reform efforts to the core elements of culture: relationships (how people work together), information (how ideas are communicated and discussed), identity (how people see themselves and share a vision and responsibilities).

In so doing they created a *dynamic system* which is evident in the ways they:

- Solicit feedback formally and informally.

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[19] These systems can be found across different domains of science from quantum physics to molecular biology. See Margaret J. Wheatley, op. cit.

- Create multiple intersecting learning communities which serve not only to build relationships among peers within schools but also across schools and between schools and the district office.
- Monitor data frequently.
- Adapt to changes through identifying and solving problems as they arise [as evidenced in two cases we described in which district strategies backfired and required rebuilding trust and collaboration].
- Launch small pilot projects in a few schools to develop and test new ideas.
- Constantly adjust what is tight and what is loose in response to feedback, balancing central direction with autonomy.
- Seek new information by networking outside the district.

Through focusing on collaboration, evidence, and adaptation, Sanger leaders more or less consciously created a dynamic system that begins to approximate self-renewing systems identified in recent decades in scientific fields as disparate as thermodynamics and ecosystems. Such systems are characterized by access to new information (internal and external), high levels of self-awareness, sensing devices, and strong capacity for reflecting. Self-renewing systems can reconfigure themselves to deal with new information or new circumstances. They are resilient and therefore able to sustain themselves even when their environment changes.

Having the characteristics of self-renewing systems does not guarantee survival in nature. And human organizations can only approximate those that exist in nature. Nevertheless, the underlying idea holds: the closer the approximation, the more sustainable the system. To the extent that Sanger maintains these self-renewing capacities, it has the potential to sustain and extend its accomplishments well into the future.

Key among these capacities are professional learning communities and the leadership that allows them to flourish. Once teachers have experienced productive collaboration, they are strongly motivated to continue. To the extent that principals can sustain the conditions for teachers to work together, PLCs can continue to diagnose and meet students' learning needs. This is the crux of Sanger's extraordinary success in bringing its high-poverty students' performance to levels comparable to those of districts in middle-class communities.

Ultimately, however, the district needs resource levels that are adequate to ensure protected teacher collaboration time and access to useful data and to develop leadership capable of balancing pressure and support. This year the deputy superintendent retires. In the next few years the superintendent is expected to retire. As we described earlier, Sanger has taken the unusual step of planning for succession. The top leaders brought into the district office school leaders who have been immersed in Sanger's culture and contributors to its success. These leaders are now working as a team and are poised to move into top positions, carrying with them the same beliefs and understandings that the current top leaders embody.

Still, district organizations are by nature hierarchical and therefore fragile. Internally, missteps can unravel carefully built trust, particularly in a system characterized by high expectations and hard work. Externally, the politics of school board elections can undermine the best laid plans for succession. And the continuing drastic state cuts in district budgets can severely hamper efforts to support teachers and principals, with the risk of destabilizing the pressure/support balance on top of the demoralizing effects that the cuts have on everyone.

Lessons

Extracting lessons from successful ventures is always a risky proposition. In education, such lessons tend to be quite general and sound very familiar, such as the need for strong leadership and a climate that promotes learning. We could generate a similar list from studying the Sanger Unified School District, from grade-level standards to professional learning communities. But such a list would miss the essence of Sanger's reform. In Sanger, as in other cases of successful reform, the real story lies in how the reform unfolded—the process of changing a system. A list of the particular initiatives Sanger leaders embraced barely scratches the surface of this story.

Sanger's reform experience illustrates the complex, evolutionary nature of major system change. Sanger's leaders did not march in with a plan nor did they expect a dramatic and rapid overhaul. Dire as their problems were, the leadership did not imagine dismantling the system. Their approach was to size up the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and central office and focus on a small number of strategies that were appropriate to their students and compatible with each other. Choosing to invest in building professional learning communities and in direct instruction and interventions for students met these criteria. Moreover, these choices were consistent with a set of beliefs and principles about how to change the culture of the system and improve student achievement.

From our extensive analysis of Sanger's work, we do not conclude with a list of Sanger's strategies or particular structures and mechanisms. We have described those that worked for Sanger in this report. Instead, we conclude that the lessons relevant to others are a step removed. We offer a set of guidelines that strike us as the underlying keys to Sanger's success and are closely aligned with district leaders' vision for system change:

- Think big. Envision a dynamic organization with a culture of shared responsibility for student achievement that can adapt to changes in the environment.

- Adhere to a set of core principles and beliefs and communicate them consistently and clearly in multiple ways, from stories to slogans, over and over. Communicate face-to-face whenever possible, not through pieces of paper or electronically. Maintain focus on learning for all students.

- Focus on building the capacity of the system to learn at all levels. Invest in developing leaders of learning starting with school administrators. Solicit feedback frequently and act on it, making adjustments as needed.

- Foster collaboration up, down, and across the system as a key vehicle for continuous learning and shared accountability. Create intersecting learning communities so that everyone has ongoing access to professional support and information. Ensure that purposes are clear, time is available, and supports in place.

- Focus on a very small number of initiatives that clearly support one another and can both build on and help develop shared conceptions about what it takes to improve learning. Build connections between what educators are already doing and what they are being asked to do differently. Tie all initiatives to the fundamental goal of identifying and meeting the needs of each student.

- Balance demands on educators with the supports they need to do what they are being asked to do.

Can every district do this? Does size matter? It's easy to disregard unusual successes. In the case of Sanger, one can point to the number of students (10,000) and the 10-year tenure of the superintendent and argue that these rare circumstances limit the usefulness of lessons for others. Consistent leadership over time is without question necessary. Whatever the size of the district or the agenda for change, staying the course is perhaps the single most important contributor to long-term success.

District size is more complicated. What Sanger has accomplished is clearly more difficult in very large districts. Yet the ideas underlying sustainable system improvement still hold. For large districts, communication and relationship building are difficult at a system level. Even if the superintendent has a cadre of administrators who understand and can lead an agenda to shift the culture, getting the message out to hundreds of schools often through several levels of administration is more difficult than in a district where the superintendent can personally visit every school.

At the same time, officials in districts—large and small—often take actions that undermine progress towards creating the kind of system capacity that Sanger has developed. All too commonly, district administrators create expectations without providing the guidance and support necessary to meet them, expect changes in staff beliefs and culture to occur quickly, and fail to solicit feedback to determine if messages sent are the same as the message received. Such actions can demoralize educators and school leaders and, in any case, work against intended changes to improve school performance.

Our biggest worry about lessons from Sanger applies to all districts, large and small. Almost across the board, thinking is in terms of quick fixes and specific programs that can meet a particular need at a particular time. For example, district leaders who observe Sanger's Principal Summits believe that if they launch a similar strategy, they will be well on their way to success. Encouraging this view of change, external experts and support providers often come with a bag of tricks that includes the latest "hot"

program or practice. Even the federal government through its grants competitions and What Works Clearinghouse reinforces the idea of fixes—innovations that promise better reading instruction or new uses of technology.

Underlying these views is a narrow conception of "replicating" success. Our hope is that this documentation of the thinking behind and evolution of Sanger's transformation reframes the notion of replication. It pushes the notion away from copying and towards understanding the important underlying ideas and thinking about how they can be adapted to any particular district.

Looking Ahead

Sanger has done an extraordinary job of meeting the goals and demands put forth by current state and federal requirements. As in most districts, Sanger has given top priority to raising test scores, which means paying close attention to the standards that are tested and the form in which they are presented on the test. These drive the curriculum and become the primary measure of success for every student, classroom, and school. Criticisms of the California Standards Test are legion, yet they define the system in which the state's school districts operate.

Sanger leaders and teachers worry about this. They see that the five-paragraph essay is not the same as learning to express complex ideas in writing. They see that teachers ask low level questions, that multiple choice answers limit thinking. Yet this is how success is defined.

District leaders are hopeful that the new Common Core standards will provide the needed external signal for developing curriculum and assessments that require more higher-order thinking. When the superintendent was asked about next steps, he responded: "We will look at how you improve practices within a PLC. How you use student work to generate discussion around practices. [We will] look at some alternate assessment instruments that are getting past multiple choice and some project-based rubrics." So begins a new chapter in Sanger's continuous improvement journey, this prompted by a diagnosed need and the potential opportunity afforded by new national standards.

The district system is well positioned to adapt to more complex demands on teaching and learning and to help their students reach the new standards. Yet the learning curve is steep, staff are working hard, and resources are shrinking. We leave the final word to the superintendent when asked whether Sanger's success can continue in light of continuing budget cuts. He answered:

> [We] keep going in tight times with enthusiasm. It is the collaborative
> culture of the district that makes this possible. My concern is: how many
> years can we draw from that well without finally pulling the last bucket
> out. There hasn't been anything recharging the ground water and we are
> depleting it.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Acronyms and Glossary

ROLES & TEAMS	
Curriculum Service Provider (CSP)	School-based fulltime staff whose job is to support teachers through coaching, mentoring, assisting with data analysis, and other tasks targeted to instructional improvement and student learning.
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Professional team in which members collaborate to evaluate and improve productivity. All levels of the Sanger district system (teacher, principal, and central office) work collaboratively. Teacher PLCs meet at least weekly by grade level or subject/course to design common assessments, review student performance, and decide on interventions in repeating cycles.
Lead Teacher (LT)	Each teacher PLC, usually a grade level or subject area/course group, is headed by a Lead Teacher who leads the planning for PLC meetings
INSTRUCTION	
Direct Instruction (EDI)	An approach to instruction that prompts teachers to (a) emphasize clear learning objectives, (b) teach the meaning of concepts, (c) check for student understanding in multiple ways throughout the lesson (including calling on students randomly and having students hold up white boards), and (d) provide opportunities for students to learn and practice the concept through conversation with a peer ("pair share") and independent work.
Interventions (RTI)	Each school designs and updates "pyramids of interventions" as a guideline for teachers' and PLCs' responses to students who are not meeting particular academic or behavior standards. The first level of response is pulling aside a small group within the classroom, the second is deployment across classes targeted to students' needs, the third is specialized instructional intervention for students with special needs. Each school has a pyramid of responses to student academic needs and a pyramid of responses to behavior issues.

English Language Development (ELD)	A state-required course of study for English learners to develop fluency in English while learning core content. ELD focuses on listening, speaking, reading, and writing through appropriate instructional materials and teaching, aligned to California ELD and core content standards. In Sanger, English learners receive ELD each day in addition to their regular classes—all considered part of their core curriculum. Interventions for ELLs are in addition to regular ELD
IMPROVEMENT STRUCTURES	
Principal Summits	Each fall every principal presents results from multiple sources of data to a panel of district administrators in a public setting that typically includes visitors from districts around the Valley. Using Power Point, the principal presents CST results for several years for the school, content areas, grade-levels, and student subgroups; movement of English learners across CELDT levels, progress on the district initiatives (PLCs, ELD, EDI, Interventions), and priorities for the current year based on these data.
Sanger Administrative Academic Leadership Teams (SAALT) Walkthroughs	SAALT teams are composed of a group of district administrators plus school administrators and CSPs. On a regular basis these teams visit every school for half a day, first spending time with the principal to determine the focus for the classroom observations or walkthroughs and then spending some time in every classroom noting the particular focus. Afterwards the group reconvenes to discuss and communicate its observations to the principal.
Alternative Governance Board (AGB)	One option the state provides for major restructuring for schools identified as PI5 (5th year in Program Improvement). Sanger leaders decided not to wait a year and put an AGB in place in year 4 to act in advisory capacity. The state's idea was to take governance out of the hands of the school. Sanger's idea was to create a board that could help the school improve through monthly meetings structured to look at data and help identify solutions together with school leaders and staff.

ASSESSMENTS	
California Standards Test (CST)	Administered annually in the spring in grades 2-8 in English language arts and math. It is the basis for meeting the federal No Child Left Behind requirements and for the state API (see below).
Academic Performance Index (API)	California's metric for school accountability that combines measures of academic performance and growth for all numerically significant student subgroups.
District Progress Assessment (DPA)	Sanger's benchmark assessment given 3-4 times a year to assess progress towards the CST.
California English Language Development Test (CELDT)	Federal law requires students in kindergarten through grade twelve whose home language is not English to take an English skills test. In California, the test is called the CELDT. Individually administered in the fall, it tests skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English and classifies English learners into one of five levels or proficient in English.
English Language Learners Assessment (ELLA)	ELLA, like the CELDT, is individually administered two to three times a year to assess student progress during the year which is not possible with the CELDT.

Appendix B
Sanger School Demographics 2010*

	Grade span	School size	# certificated staff	Percent Hispanic	Percent White	Percent Asian (Hmong)	Percent FRL	Percent English learners
Centerville	K-6	238	14	66	29		79	19
Del Rey	K-6	302	16	92		6	95	47
Fairmont	K-8	483	23	40	45	13	58	20
Jackson	K-5	390	22	83	15	2	79	21
Jefferson	K-5	368	22	98	1		94	59
John Wash	K-6	378	20	41	18	37	59	26
Lincoln	K-5	391	24	95	4		90	49
Lone Star	K-6	579	28	39	10	42	75	44
Madison	K-5	472	23	77	9	10	83	32
Quail Lake Charter	K-8	516	24	30	55	11	27	6
Reagan	K-5	269	18	69	19	10	70	15
Sanger Academy Charter	K-8	530	27	79	15	3	63	16
Sanger HS	9-12	2676	115	69	16	12	82	16
WAMS	6-8	1653	74	79	10	8	82	18
Wilson	K-5	523	27	95			91	53

*Does not include Hallmark Charter (home schooling), alternative schools or adult school.

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*Does not include Hallmark Charter (home schooling), alternative schools or adult school.

	Sanger Unified School District			
	Professional Learning Community Continuum			
Element	**Stage #3** **Literal** (*Initiation)	**Stage #4** **Refinement** (*Developing)	**Stage #5** **Internalized** (*Sustaining)	**Stage #6** **Innovative**
Mission: Learning for All is a core purpose	An attempt has been made to identify learning outcomes for all grade levels or courses, but this attempt has not impacted the practice of most teachers.	Teachers have collaborated to identify essential learning outcomes and the teachers are committed to providing the appropriate instruction to enhance student mastery of each outcome	Essential learning outcomes are clearly articulated to all stakeholders in the school, and each student's attainment of the outcomes is carefully monitored	*Complete, creative and challenging* implementation of Professional Learning Communities that meets the needs of ALL learners at the school
	Responding to students who are not learning is left to the discretion of individual teachers.	Teachers have developed strategies to assess student mastery of the learning outcomes, they monitor the results, and they attempt to respond to students who are not learning	The school has developed systems to provide more time and support for students experiencing initial difficulty in achieving the outcomes.	
	Staff members have articulated statements of beliefs or philosophy for their school; however, these value statements have not yet impacted their day-to-day work or the operation of the school.	Staff members have made a conscious effort to articulate and promote the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that will advance their vision of the school. Examples of the core values at work are shared in stories and celebrations.	The values of the school are embedded in the school culture. These shared values are evident to new staff and to those outside of the school.	
		People are confronted when they behave in ways that are inconsistent with the core values.	The values of the school influence policies, procedures, and daily practices of the school as well as day-today decisions of individual staff members.	
Goals: What are our priorities?	Staff members have participated in a process to establish goals, but the goals are typically stated as projects to be accomplished or are written so broadly that they are impossible to measure.	Staff members have worked together to establish long- and short-term improvement goals for their school. The goals are clearly communicated.	All staff members pursue measurable performance goals as part of their routine responsibilities. Goals are clearly linked to the school's shared vision.	*Challenging* goals that meet the needs of ALL students are embedded in the culture of the school
	The goals do not yet influence instructional decisions in a meaningful way.	Assessment tools and strategies have been developed and implemented to measure progress toward the goals.	Goal attainment is celebrated and staff members demonstrate willingness to identify and pursue challenging stretch goals.	
What do we want students to know?	District leaders have established curriculum guides that attempt to align the district curriculum with state standards.	Teachers have worked with colleagues to review state standards and district curriculum guides.	Teachers have worked in collaborative teams to build shared knowledge regarding state standards, district curriculum guides, trends in student achievement, and expectations of the next course or grade level.	*Complete* staff commitment and a *creative* approach to meeting the needs of ALL students is embedded in the school culture
	Representative teachers may have assisted in developing the curriculum guides. The materials have been distributed to each school, but there is no process to determine whether the designated curriculum is actually being taught.	Teachers have attempted to clarify the meaning of the standards, establish pacing guides, and identify strategies for teaching the content effectively.	Teachers have established the essential learning for each unit of instruction and are committed to instruct their students in the essential learning according to the team's agreed-upon pacing guide.	

*Adapted from *Learning by Doing* Reproducible, 2006 Solution Tree

	Sanger Unified School District **Professional Learning Community Continuum**			
Element	**Stage #3** **Literal** (*Initiation)	**Stage #4** **Refinement** (*Developing)	**Stage #5** **Internalized** (*Sustaining)	**Stage #6** **Innovative**
How do we know students learned it?	District officials analyze the results of state and provincial tests and report the results to each school. Principals are expected to work with staff to improve upon the results.	Teachers have worked together to analyze results from state and district tests and to develop improvement strategies to apply in their classrooms.	Every teacher has to develop a series of common, formative assessments that are aligned with state standards and school pacing guides. The teams have established the specific proficiency standards each student must achieve on each skill.	*Complete* staff commitment and a *creative* approach to meeting the assessment needs of ALL students and each specific PLC
	The district administers district-level assessments in core curricular areas. These assessments have been created by key central office personnel, by representative teachers serving on district committees, or by testing companies who have sold their services to the district.	Teachers of the same course or grade level may create a common final exam to help identify strengths and weaknesses in their program.	The team administers common assessments multiple times throughout the school year and analyzes the results together.	
	Classroom teachers typically feel little commitment to the assessments and pay little attention to the results.	Teachers have discussed how to assess student learning on a consistent and equitable basis. Parameters are established for assessments, and individual teachers are asked to honor those parameters as they create tests for their students.	Team members then use the results to inform and improve their individual and collective practice, to identify students who need additional time and support for learning, and to help students monitor their own progress toward agreed-upon standards.	
What do we do if students did not learn it?	The school has created opportunities for students to receive additional time and support for learning before and after school. Students are invited rather than required to get this support.	The school has begun a program of providing time and support for learning within the school day, but unwillingness to deviate from the traditional schedule is limiting the effectiveness of the program.	The school has a highly coordinated, sequential intervention system in place. The system is proactive: It identifies and makes plans for students to receive extra support even before they enroll.	*Complete* and *creative* approach to meeting the learning needs of ALL students is embedded in the school culture
	Many of the students who are most in need of help choose not to pursue it.	The staff has retained its traditional 9-week grading periods, and it is difficult to determine which students need additional time and support until the end of the first quarter.	The achievement of each student is monitored on a timely basis. Students who experience difficulty are required, rather than invited, to put in extra time and utilize extra support.	
		Additional support is only offered at a specific time of the day or week (for example, over the lunch period or only on Wednesdays) and the school is experiencing difficulty in serving all the students who need help during the limited time allotted.	The plan is multi-layered. If the current level of support is not sufficient, there are additional levels of increased time and support. Most importantly, all students are guaranteed access to this systematic intervention.	

Appendix D

PLC Development:
Items with Increase in Percent Advanced of 10 or More from 2009 to 2011

Q7: How would you describe how far your PLC has developed on a 5-point scale from beginning to advanced?
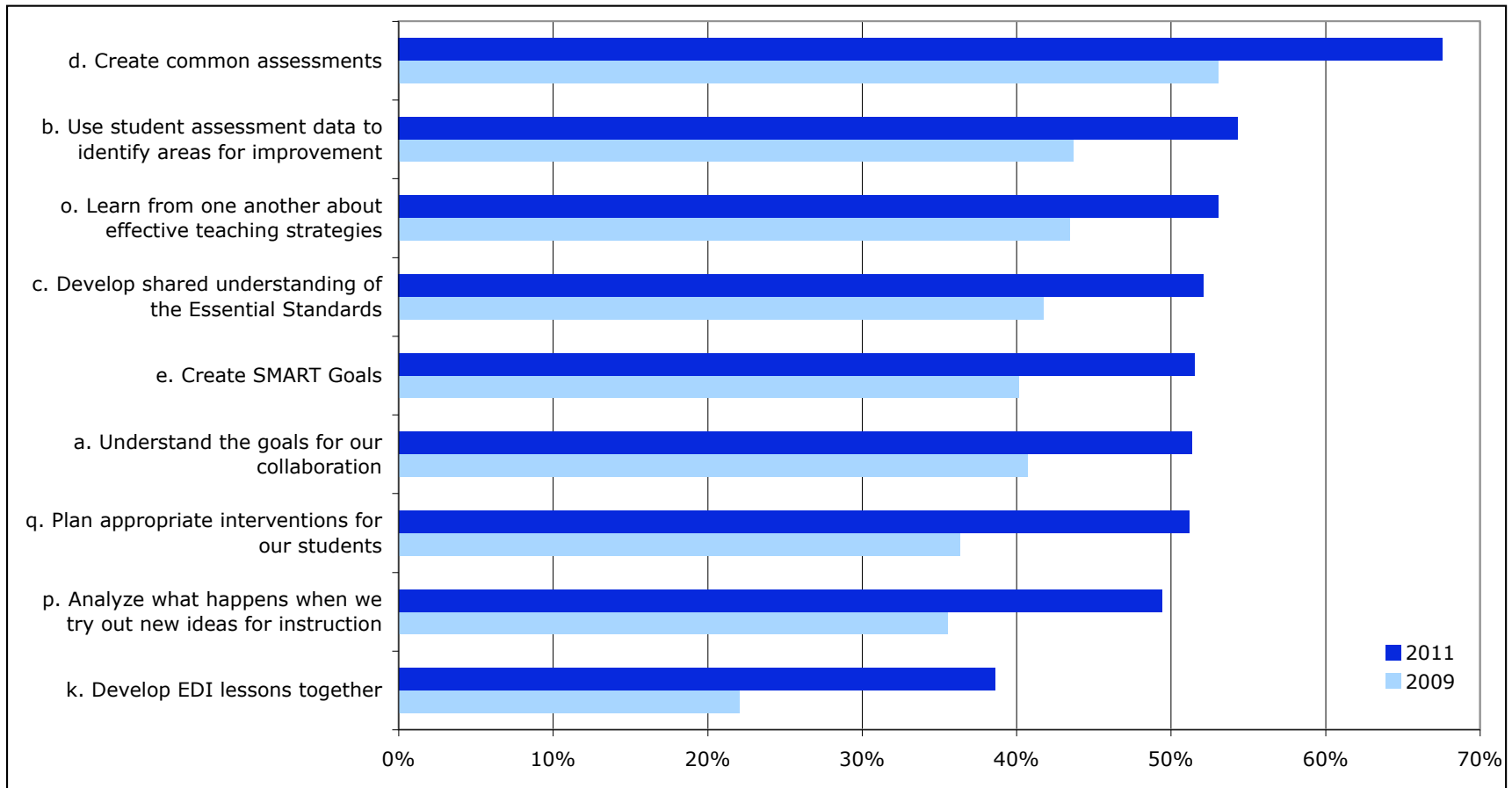
n = 346-349 for 2009
n = 311-314 for 2011

Appendix E
Sanger Summits 2011-12

<u>What is a Sanger Summit?</u>
Sanger Summits are an opportunity for principals to present their school's past and current level of student achievement, their plans for improving achievement, and to receive feedback/suggestions from their peers.   The Summits also allow the District Office and district support providers to better understand the needs, goals, programs, and direction of all schools. Summits are a dialogue from which all participants grow and improve for the benefit of the children of Sanger Unified.

<u>Items to Bring to the Summit for Discussion</u>
Participants are to create their presentation in PowerPoint. Please make graphs clear and concise. Each graph should be on a single page/frame. Participants are to bring no less than 15 photocopied sets of their presentation. Items to be included in your presentation:

A graph or diagram showing:

1. Your school's overall <u>API for the past 5+ years.</u>

2. AYP levels for all significant sub-groups, as well as the Special Education and EL sub-groups regardless of significance, over the past 5+ years using <u>percentage and number</u> of students who are proficient/advanced on the CST ELA. (In your presentation point out any achievement gaps and discuss your plmls to address these achievement gaps.)

3. AYP levels for all significant sub-groups, as well as the Special Education and EL sub-groups regardless of significance, over the past 5+ years using <u>percentage and number</u> of students who are proficient/advanced. on the CST Mathematics.   (In your presentation point out any achievement gaps and discuss your plans to address these achievement gaps.)

    High schools must also show <u>sophomore AYP proficient/advanced results for ELA and Math</u> over the past 5 years.

4. Show the level movement of EL students on this past year's CELDT.

5. The number of students in each EL classification as compared to prior year. (A, B, EO, etc.) Clearly show the number of students who advanced levels, stayed the same, or regressed from each classification using your CELDT data for the past 5 years.

6. The <u>% and number</u> of students moved from performance band to performance band for Language Arts (plus or minus) over the past five years.

7. The % and number of students moved from performance band to performance band (plus or minus) for Mathematics over the past five years.

Spectrum of Learning Levels

Innovative Stage
Internalized Stage
Refinement Stage
Literal Application Stage
Developmental Learning Stage
Non-application Stage

8. The Utilizing the Spectrum of Learning (above) and the Sanger Unified rubrics for each District Initiative please graphically display your responses in the following areas:

District Initiatives	Graph of Department and Overall Grade Level /Department Implementation based on Rubrics	Identified Top 3 Strengths and Top 3 · Weaknesses of your school by initiative	Description of Monitoring System and strategies to ensure growth and development	Summit Goal for Your School by Initiative- Written as a SMART goal for ·the year,. (Quantifiable)
EDI Implementation	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide
Instructional supports for English Language Learners - SDAIE and ELD	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide
PLC implementation	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide
Classroom Interventions - Formal Tier I interventions	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide
RTI Implementation academic intervention pyramids-Tiers I- III.	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide
Behavioral pyramids of interventions emphasizing Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)	Single Slide	Combined on a single slide		Single Slide

Principals will be given **45 minutes** to present their materials and talk about their plans with questions from the head table. A 15 minutes audience participation period will take place at the conclusion of the 45 minutes presentation.

Materials Packet -   Each principal is to bring <u>a single packet</u> of materials that they use for walk-throughs, informal observations, intervention planning, etc....... .forms and materials used at your school that you want to share with your peers and the superintendents.

All Summits 8:30-12:00	Participants
Wednesday, Sept. 28	John Wash, Sanger Academy, Quail Lake
Tuesday, Oct. 11	Madison, Wilson, Jefferson
Wednesday, Oct. 12	Centerville, Del Rey, Fairmont
Tuesday, Oct. 18	Jackson, Lincoln, Reagan, Lone Star
Friday, Oct. 21	WAMS, Sanger High School
Monday, Oct. 24	Community Day School, Taft/Kings River, Hallmark, Sanger Adult

Sanger-Firebaugh District Partnership Project:
Year Two (July 2011 – June 2012)

Jane L. David
Bay Area Research Group

Joan E. Talbert
Stanford University

June 2012

Sanger-Firebaugh District Partnership Project:
Year Two

The Sanger-Firebaugh district partnership was created to accelerate student achievement in both Central Valley districts, particularly among English learners. Launched in January 2011with funding from the Central Valley Foundation (CVF), the Partnership brings together two high–poverty, predominantly Latino Central Valley school districts: Sanger Unified and Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified. Sanger brings a history of continuous improvement and is pressed to sustain its upward trajectory, especially with English learners. Firebaugh brings evidence of commitment to reform and recent improvement in student outcomes, as well as an appetite for learning from Sanger to continue this positive trend.

The District Partnership Project creates opportunities for Firebaugh to learn from Sanger's successes and for both partners to learn from each other as they strive to accelerate success of their English learners and sustain strong trends for all students. With Central Valley Foundation funding over four years, the Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership is a "demonstration site" to test and refine this strategy for improving outcomes in the two districts.

Documentation of the Partnership's work and outcomes is built into the project in order to draw lessons useful to other districts, funders, and policymakers.[1] Given our history of documenting Sanger Unified's improvement efforts, we were invited to document the progress and impact of this pioneering partnership.[2]

This report summarizes results of documentation research over the first full year of the Partnership Project (July 2011–June 2012), following a six-month start-up period (see our Baseline Report, September 2011). Data for this report come from:

- Participation in monthly Partnership Leadership Team meetings
- Observations of professional development conducted or brokered by Sanger in Firebaugh
- Observations of district Leadership Team and Best Practices meetings in Firebaugh
- Repeated interviews with district administrators and key staff in both districts
- Repeated interviews with principals of all Firebaugh schools and principals of Sanger schools visited by Firebaugh
- Repeated interviews with teachers at each Firebaugh school and teachers at Sanger schools visited by Firebaugh
- Classroom observations in all Firebaugh schools

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[1] The lessons we ultimately draw from the Sanger- Firebaugh Partnership will also be informed by comparison with findings the less-intensive partnership between Fresno and Long Beach that has been documented by California Collaborative staff.
[2] We provide more detail on the design of our documentation research in Appendix 1.

We begin our report with a description of how the Partnership operated and developed over the year. Then we turn to evidence of progress, as well as challenges, for each Project component or stand of partnering work: professional learning communities (PLCs), instructional improvement—including direct instruction (EDI), response to intervention (RTI), and English language development (ELD)—plus uses of data and development of a district culture of continuous improvement.[3] We end with a summary of accomplishments and next steps.

Partnering activities deepen relationships and learning at all system levels

During the second year of the District Partnership Project, an increasing number and variety of partnering activities took place at all levels of the two districts. They included monthly meetings of the Partnership Leadership Team, teacher professional development by Sanger leaders during Firebaugh's August orientation days and in follow-up sessions throughout the year, joint participation in professional development, principal mentoring and coaching for the Alternative Governance Board at Firebaugh's middle school, district leaders' participating together in walkthroughs focused on EL instruction, and Firebaugh teachers' visits to Sanger schools. These activities go beyond and deepen those launched during last year's six month start-up period.

Partnership Leadership Team (PLT) meetings. The PLT includes the top administrators from each district, the project director and documenters. It functions as both a coordinating committee and a forum for surfacing and solving problems in either district or the Partnership. PLT monthly meetings are a key mechanism for coordinating work and a forum for joint decision-making and problem solving. The meetings are usually conducted by phone, with face-to-face meetings in January and June. The face-to-face meetings feature documenters' formative feedback and framing of issues for the partners. Our role as documenters on the team is to surface issues that arise through our interviews and observations "on the ground" with teachers and school administrators, and to frame problems for the partners to address. In June 2011 we shared baseline teacher survey data (see our September 2011 report) and in January and June 2012 reported evidence of progress and issues to discuss.

Over the course of the year, PLT meetings have evolved from conversations that were focused mainly on logistics to conversations that dispose of logistics quickly and move on to issues the districts are facing in their reform efforts and shared problem-solving. Like all professional learning communities, district partners needed to transition from logistics to surfacing challenges, sharing practices and the thinking behind them, and discussing solutions to particular problems. This requires that professional trust be built, and our observations confirm that the team is already able to function as a strong learning community as the project moves forward.

Teacher professional development with Sanger leaders. Sanger-led professional development was the focus of Firebaugh's three-day teacher orientation in August.

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[3] These initiatives are summarized in Appendix 2.

Sanger Deputy Superintendent Rich Smith led two half-day sessions on PLCs, one for secondary teachers and their administrators and one for elementary teachers and their administrators. Sanger district staff person Mike Bustamante led two half-day sessions on EDI, and district administrator Matt Navo led sessions on Response to Intervention (RTI) for the elementary staff and Jon Yost led a secondary level RTI session. The sessions featured the big ideas that ground these core Partner initiatives and practices that Sanger developed in each.

Teachers' reactions made clear that the timing of sessions undermined their impact. Many teachers we interviewed in the Fall commented that the Sanger presenters were impressive but they could not remember much about the content. They were preoccupied with setting up their classrooms and meeting in their PLCs to plan lessons and develop common assessments. In response, district administrators plan to reserve at least a half day during one of the August professional development days for teachers to work in their PLCs. A fourth PD day was pushed back to October to provide staff with an opportunity to work in their PLCs after the start of the school year In addition, PLCs at all schools will have an additional half hour on four of their early release days.

Despite their reaction to the timing of the August sessions, many teachers commented on how the follow-up sessions with Sanger's in-house trainer during the year helped them to think about and use EDI strategies in more flexible and effective ways. The follow-up sessions helped teachers to see how they could adapt the strategies in their classroom.

Joint participation in professional development. Following up on their joint participation in the two-day DuFours conference on Professional Learning Communities in March 2011, the district leadership teams in Sanger and Firebaugh attended a two-day conference in the fall and again in the spring, while a new cadre of Firebaugh teachers attended in the spring. This experience continued to build relationships and trust between the districts, through discussions during the conference as well as during breaks and meals. Building relationships and trust through shared experiences and open communication has been a key part of Sanger's culture change that is now fundamental to the Sanger-Firebaugh partnering strategy.

Teachers who experienced the DuFours conference for the first time this year became part of a growing proportion of Firebaugh teachers who are ready to lead their PLCs. Several teachers commented that this was the best professional development they had experienced in many years.

Firebaugh and Sanger also attended training from Steve Zuieback, a management consultant who introduced Sanger to the importance of relationships in changing practices and the phrase "below the green line" which signals this. Zuieback presented one day in Sanger and then two days to two different groups of teachers in Firebaugh, expanding common language between the two districts.

Principal mentoring and coaching. Sanger's highly regarded middle school principal, who assumed a district office position last summer, worked closely with the Firebaugh middle school principal who was new to the school in 2010-11. He participated as a member of their Alternative Governance Board, joined in doing classroom walkthroughs, and made himself available to answer questions at all times. Both principals reported tremendous value and learning in this relationship last year. However, evidence mounted during the fall of this year that the Firebaugh principal was not translating this learning into action. He was busy with other commitments and requested a leave of absence that was granted.

Moving quickly, Firebaugh's superintendent replaced the principal with a seasoned district staff person with strong relationships to both staff and community and to provide consistency in leadership. This move built upon evidence gleaned through the Partnership and appeared to avert further decline in teacher morale, raising teachers' confidence in the professionalism of district leaders and appreciation for their rapid response.

Walk-throughs focused on ELL instruction. Firebaugh leaders participated in a meeting of Sanger's ELD pilot to strengthen ELD instruction, which is being carried out by a group of Sanger school leaders with support from the district office. (See p. 11 for a more detailed description of the ELD pilot.) Through observing the discussions, participating in the classroom visits in one school, and joining in the groups' reflections on the observations, Firebaugh leaders got a first-hand sense of how Sanger school leaders gather evidence and develop new approaches. Firebaugh leaders took away new insights that have relevance for their schools from the rich discussion which focused on (1) the importance of linking what goes on in ELD instruction with what is going on in core classroom instruction, and (2) the need to expand on the EDI structures to ensure more opportunities for extended student conversation.

Cross-district visits. Teams of Firebaugh teachers and their principals visited "partner" schools in Sanger over the past 18 months of the project. Sanger leaders matched Firebaugh elementary schools with the Sanger elementary schools most comparable in student demographics, and the one middle school and one high school in each district are partnered. Each host school provided an overview of their work after which teachers observed classes, PLC meetings, and had opportunities to ask questions of staff. Both Firebaugh visiting teachers and their Sanger hosts described the visits as valuable. As noted in our Year One report, over three-quarters of Firebaugh teachers agreed with the statement in the March 2011 survey: "Partnering with another district benefits our improvement efforts."

This year's school visits provided opportunities for growing numbers of Firebaugh teachers to see first hand the strategies both districts are implementing: professional learning communities, direct instruction, interventions, and English language development. In interviews after visits to Sanger schools, Firebaugh teachers pointed to specific ideas they took from their observations and conversations and consistently expressed interest in having more opportunities to visit Sanger schools, especially to

deepen their understanding of interventions for English learners. Sanger teachers have expressed interest too in visiting Firebaugh schools to better understand their situation, glean new ideas, and support their new colleagues' work.

Partners made progress on each strand of their work

The District Partnership Project's Year Two components and expected outcomes focused on: improving instruction by enhancing the development of PLCs in every school, strengthening EDI, RTI, and ELD, improving the use of data at all levels, and enhancing the district culture of continuous improvement. Each strand of partnering work represents an initiative or strategy that has been key to Sanger's steady improvement of student achievement.

Because Sanger is relatively advanced on each of the desired outcomes, the Partners worked mainly to accelerate Firebaugh's development. Our documentation evidence thus focuses primarily on outcomes in Firebaugh, while also pointing to evidence of benefits to Sanger for each strand of work and emerging opportunities for joint work on shared challenges.

Enhancing the development of Professional Learning Communities

Teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) have been the backbone of instructional improvement in Sanger. Although they range on a developmental continuum, most of Sanger's PLCs are high-functioning collaborative teams. They meet weekly with protected time set aside, including a two-hour block every other week. In grade level or course groups, teachers work together on setting learning goals aligned to grade-level content standards and developing common assessments based on the learning goals. In meetings the teams review assessment results, discuss what has or has not worked well, and design responses to ensure that every student meets the standard.

When the partnership began in January 2011, Firebaugh had already begun to develop grade-level and content area PLCs. Yet, considering that Sanger's PLCs took several years to become full-fledged learning communities, the PLCs in Firebaugh schools were fledglings by comparison. Our 2011 report documented both promising signs of progress and hurdles to be overcome. Positive were survey responses that showed a vast majority of teachers agreeing with the statement "PLCs are critical to our school's success" and most rating their own PLC as at least 'somewhat advanced' on having mutual respect, regular attendance, and shared commitment to working together.

The main hurdle to progress was a lack of dedicated PLC time. Many teachers commented in interviews that time intended for PLC work was often usurped by principal-run staff meetings. At the secondary level, time was difficult to schedule and agendas a challenge since many courses are taught by only one teacher. Due to lack of dedicated time coupled with their early developmental phase, over half the teachers gave their PLC low ratings on having effective routines for their meetings, planning

interventions and discussing how to differentiate instruction. These baseline data pointed to areas for improved policy and practice.

Firebaugh made significant headway this year on PLC development thanks to district and school administrators' priority for teacher collaboration, teacher visits to Sanger schools, and broader participation in the DuFours PLC conference. First, district and school policy established an early-release schedule on Wednesdays providing time dedicated to elementary grade-level PLCs and secondary subject department PLCs. Across district schools, teachers reported that their PLC time has been protected this year and that their team is making progress. The high school still struggles with scheduling PLC work, since many teachers coach sports or run clubs that meet after school. This problem is avoided in Sanger, where late-start Wednesdays create PLC meeting time that does not conflict with teachers' after-school responsibilities. As we noted in our earlier report, Firebaugh is constrained by the bussing schedule for elementary grade students.

Second, PLC practice in Firebaugh schools has benefited from teacher visits to Sanger over the past year since Spring 2011. By now nearly half of Firebaugh teachers have visited Sanger schools. Those who observed PLC meetings were struck by the teams' professionalism and skill in identifying student learning gaps and deciding how to respond through deployment or interventions in their classrooms. Teachers we interviewed commented on Sanger PLCs' "strategic" teamwork and "intensive use of student data" and took away a concrete vision of a high-functioning PLC to guide their own work with colleagues to improve student learning. A high school teacher commented that "It was great to be a fly on the wall in PLC meetings and see how they use data. I've been three times and want to do more of that."

Third, teacher leaders who participated in the DuFours conference this year were energized to make their PLCs effective in improving student achievement. Teacher leaders across grade levels commented that the DuFours conference had urged participants to confront colleagues' resistance to PLC work, and several reported taking on this challenge and improving their team's functioning.

Signs of momentum on PLC development also come from teacher reports at each of Firebaugh's schools. Across the schools, teachers report having made progress this year on establishing routines for meetings, using data to assess student learning needs, and developing interventions that meet their students' differential learning needs – areas that they rated low in last year's survey.

By the end of the year, teachers of kindergarten through fifth grade students in the primary and intermediate schools pointed to routines their PLCs were using to improve student learning. For example, a primary grade teacher said: "We do formative assessments that we have been creating; we discuss how we are going to teach certain subjects… we create EDI lessons. After we take a test, we ask how did it go?" When asked if ELL issues are a focus of their PLC work, a primary teacher responded "Definitely! . . . When we are grouping kids [for interventions] – because we are sharing

each other's kids – we share how they are doing and talk about what we are doing with different [CELDT] levels."

The intermediate grade PLCs have been sharing their experiences with assessment and intervention routines and refining their practice. As an intermediate grade teacher described their new shared routine: "Now we have common formative assessments each week – based on standards taught that week. We test on Friday and have results by Monday. Then we group the kids [by performance level] and reteach on Wednesday."

Middle school and high school teachers also registered strong traction on PLC development this year. Notably, a middle school teacher new to the district commented on the culture he encountered and how different it was from other districts he had worked in: "The district is a PLC – the administration is involved, even teachers from other classes. Even classifieds are working together." In one department at the high school, a teacher told us that their PLC was humming and should be watched by school administrators as an exemplar. "We have a clear agenda and follow it. We have objectives and work through them."

Despite evidence of progress toward a district PLC culture and teacher teams' collaboration on instruction, Firebaugh is moving along a trajectory that will take more years and continued investment. At some grade levels Firebaugh teachers still struggle to develop trust and strong working relationships in their PLCs. The district is investing in building staff capacity to use their new data system and providing the kind of support staff that benefit Sanger PLCs reviews of data. In the meantime, Firebaugh PLCs are developing common formative assessments and working on implementing classroom practices and interventions that address student learning gaps.

The Partnership's focus on ELD instruction and interventions promises to support PLCs in both districts that are struggling to meet wide-ranging needs of their English learners. This year Sanger has pioneered the development of instructional guidelines and an observation tool that Firebaugh leaders are eager to learn from and adapt to support the work of PLCs to improve their English learners' achievement. The observation tool designed for the iPad aims to facilitate written comments, rather than relying solely on checklists.

Improving instruction for English language learners

During the past year, Firebaugh and Sanger have broadened and deepened their focus on English language learners (ELLs). Both districts have increased their awareness of the importance of core instruction, English language development, and tight links between the two. For Firebaugh, a major step has been to move away from reliance on an outdated set of textbooks towards using the standards as their guide to instruction. Firebaugh has also made great strides in implementing a system of interventions for students who struggle. Both districts are deepening their understanding of and strengthening their approach to English language development.

Shifting to standards-based instruction

Under No Child Left Behind, schools have been pressed to demonstrate "fidelity to the textbook;" in other words, the textbook becomes the guide to what is taught. Sanger long ago moved away from this model, taking as their guide the standards that the state expects all students to master. Under standards-based instruction, teachers are guided by the standards and use the textbook and other resources as needed to teach the standards. This idea was picked up by Firebaugh elementary teachers during their early visits to Sanger in the first six months of the Partnership. During the past year, teachers' visits to Sanger schools have provided the missing piece: a model of what it looks like and what it takes. As an elementary teacher put it: "I am super excited about this. Seems like we should have always been doing this. We are teaching what the kids are supposed to be learning."

Teachers' observations in Sanger schools provided a concrete alternative to marching through the textbook—an approach especially problematic in Firebaugh with an outdated elementary textbook series adopted before revisions that addressed needs of ELLs. The school visits also demonstrated to Firebaugh teachers that direct instruction (EDI) was not a regimented approach to be used for all instruction. Teachers observed variation among Sanger teachers teaching the same lesson and, like Sanger teachers, began to see ways in which EDI could be flexible and adapted to different learning goals. This point of view was reinforced by the on-site "refresher" trainings provided by Sanger's EDI in-house trainer.

Another significant insight in Sanger's history and now in Firebaugh is the importance of high-quality initial instruction—an idea embedded in EDI. This means that students, especially ELLs, get strong clear instruction in their regular classroom tied to the standards they are expected to learn. The better the instruction students receive in their core classroom, the more targeted and effective interventions can be.

The shift to standards-based instruction is not an easy one. An overall curriculum, pacing guides, and materials need to be developed as well as lessons following the EDI structure. This is a huge task. As one teacher explained: "We can't just pull from our existing curriculum because it isn't any good. And [it is] hard to start from scratch and revamp the whole curriculum." At the same time, both districts face the challenge of preparing for the increased demands of the Common Core standards and new assessments, particularly for their ELLs. The good news is that the Partnership provides opportunities for joint work which will benefit both Sanger and Firebaugh as they prepare for Common Core.

Implementing a system of interventions for all students

Over the past year Firebaugh schools have made major strides in creating a system of interventions for their students. The underlying idea behind Response to Intervention (RTI) is that students will receive additional instruction targeted to their specific learning needs. Defined in three tiers, the first is part of their regular or core

instruction: Students who do not understand the key learning objective for a given lesson are pulled aside during independent study during the last part of the class for re-teaching and review.

The second RTI tier is tightly linked to teachers' work in their PLCs and entails dividing up responsibilities for interventions. Through reviewing evidence of student learning in an instructional unit, teachers assign students to one of several intervention classes according to their learning needs. This seemingly straightforward action in fact requires a major change in teachers' thinking about sharing responsibility for student learning. Traditionally, each teacher has his or her own students, taught behind closed doors. Deploying students to other teachers requires a shift from "my students" to "our students." Relationships established in PLCs and decisions based on data help smooth this transition. A Firebaugh elementary teacher described how their PLC takes students from different classes who didn't get it and puts them with the best teacher for that lesson (which other teachers can observe). "Now we have actual data to show [which] kids didn't get it and we have a big emphasis on what to do if a kid didn't get it."

The third tier is reserved for the small number of students who require much more intensive help and may be considered for special education. These students work with a resource teacher in much smaller groups. Together these three tiers make up the academic side of RTI.

RTI also has a parallel system of interventions on the behavioral side. Similar to Sanger's approach, Firebaugh is implementing PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports). From visits during the first year of the Partnership Firebaugh teachers were struck by students' manners, attention span, and knowledge of classroom routines. During the past year in their school visits, Firebaugh teachers were particularly interested in learning more about the behavior systems used by Sanger schools. Although Firebaugh had adopted PBIS, this was the first opportunity for teachers to see what it could look like in practice. Many teachers are now using elements of the behavior system they observed in Sanger schools. An elementary teacher described working hard preparing over the summer to put PBIS in place this year: "We went full force with PBIS and turned the school around. . . The whole idea stemmed from Lone Star [school in Sanger]."

Putting into practice a system of interventions for academic achievement and behavior is a tall order. Teachers in both districts struggle to complete their lessons with enough time to pull the handful of students aside who need additional help to master the lesson. Firebaugh teachers, like Sanger initially, are challenged to move from "my" students to "our" students, a shift that is especially difficult for teachers who view themselves as more effective than one or more of their peers. Logistics are also challenging: how to efficiently reorganize all students in a grade level by their instructional needs, assigning the strongest teacher in that particular area to the students farthest behind. Moreover, schools aim to have smaller numbers of students in the intervention classes for those who need the most help. This requires an "all hands on deck" philosophy meaning that every credentialed adult in the building needs to pitch in. As we describe later, Firebaugh leaders have been innovative and strategic in providing extra

support, including the strategic use of certificated tutors and at least one support staff person in each school.

Finally, interventions are a particular challenge at the high school level where course requirements for graduation do not allow for much intervention time during the day and afterschool time cannot reach all the students who need it. Sanger High School is looking into alternatives, as is Firebaugh High School, trying out new approaches. For example, Firebaugh High School instituted interventions in algebra and geometry last year for the first time which was made possible by hiring two certificated tutors. Sanger High School redefined the ELL intervention system as a pathway to redesignation that includes different levels of support along the way from sheltered ELD/SDAIE/English Lab to regular classes supplemented by a Corrective Reading Program.

Enhancing English language development

California requires all English learners to received English language development (ELD) during the school day. ELLs are deployed by their CELDT level. However, what ELD should consist of and whether it bears any direct connection to regular classroom instruction is interpreted differently across schools and districts. Firebaugh is now working on ways to strengthen ELD, as is Sanger. As one Firebaugh teacher described: "In the past ELD was a catch-all. A little of everything. No real organized plan. This year we have an organized plan at their level and then in their regular class they get another dose." This teacher went on to describe how they learned from Sanger to 'frontload', that is, to provide English learners with the vocabulary and background needed to access the next lesson they will have in their regular classroom.

At the same time, Sanger has taken on the challenge of strengthening their ELD program and raising questions about how well it is connected to core instruction and whether instructional techniques developed under EDI are effective for ELD. As mentioned earlier, Sanger has created an "ELD pilot" in which three schools are experimenting with ways of improving ELD instruction. The group of principals, experts from other schools, and district administrators meet monthly in one of the three schools. As part of each meeting, the group briefly observes ELD classes throughout the school, focusing on a particular aspect or research question. These observations then provide the fodder for subsequent discussion and analysis. For example, the group is observing that EDI actually constrains the amount of conversation among students, so ELD teachers are adapting the original EDI model to encourage more opportunities, time and support for extended conversations. At the same time, the pilot team is looking to streamline the demands that multiple assessments and recordkeeping place on teachers.

Firebaugh leaders have attended one session and the partners have agreed that someone from Firebaugh will join the Sanger pilot team over the next year. This will both bring Firebaugh perspectives and knowledge to the table and ensure that lessons from the effort will be picked up in both districts. Similarly, the Partners have plans for sharing strategies and tools such as the iPad observation form that is being developed in Sanger.

ELD is an area ripe for joint work between the partners. Both districts want to move beyond primary emphasis on Academic Language to ensure that English learners understand the underlying concepts, can read complex text, and be able to write about the ideas. This direction also positions both districts to move forward with the Common Core standards.

Improving the use of data at all levels

Fundamental to Sanger's continuous improvement over the past seven years is evidence-based decision making – from teachers' checking for student understanding in the classroom, to PLCs use of common assessments to identify students' learning needs, to annual Principal Summits that use test data and measures of progress on district initiatives to set priorities for each school's improvement. The partnership aims to enhance and extend such uses of data in Sanger and in Firebaugh. More broadly, district leaders are promoting evidence-based practice within each of their districts, at all system levels and across each of the core initiatives. Indeed, as described earlier, evidence use is central in PLCs, EDI and RTI. Here we focus on the development and use of district-level data systems, with particular attention to the partners' collaboration on developing data to improve English learners' achievement.

Adopting Sanger's structures for data use

The partnership project stipulated that Firebaugh would adopt Sanger's District Performance Assessment (DPA) administered tri-annually, conduct its own Principal Summits, and collaborate on the Alternative Governance Board (AGB) at the middle school, with support from Sanger leaders. Firebaugh is at an early developmental stage in implementing each of these systems for data development and use.

This year Firebaugh administered the DPA twice and, with some lag time, provided the data to schools for teachers' use in PLCs. For the most part, teachers found the data to be of limited use for instruction. Not only did they receive results much after the assessment, but many thought that the test items were not well-aligned to their grade-level standards and state test. The lag time in getting data to schools was due to Firebaugh's less-developed data management system, as well as the unexpected departure of the district's IT staff in the middle of the year. The technical challenges of managing DPA data are being worked out; and the substantive issues will be addressed as the DPA is revised to better align with Common Core Standards, a project the districts will take on together.

Principal Summits were conducted over the course of the fall, using a less elaborated protocol than is currently used in Sanger. Given the developmental nature of this practice, Sanger leaders advised Firebaugh to begin using a form that was in use in Sanger a couple of years after they launched the Summits. As was the case in Sanger during early years, the principals were challenged to organize their CST data in ways that revealed strengths and weaknesses in their school's grade level and subgroup performances. Also, one of the four Firebaugh principals was new to the district so

inherited data from the previous year. In a sense, this year was a 'practice round' for Firebaugh Summits, to be institutionalized in the years ahead. The Summits promise to be an important lever for data-based decision making in Firebaugh, as they were in Sanger.

The AGB process, triggered by the middle school's Program Improvement Year 5 status, was implemented in the middle school in 2008. When the Partnership began, Sanger's highly successful middle school principal Jon Yost joined the Firebaugh Middle School AGB. Firebaugh leaders involved in the AGB were struck by the ways in which Yost used questioning to prompt data use and reflection among participants and regarded his role in the AGB as important modeling for them. This past year, the AGB meetings have opened with data presentations, unlike prior years. Thus the AGB was another important vehicle for advancing data use for diagnosing and addressing the improvement needs and priorities of a school.

Another Sanger practice for data use that Firebaugh adopted this year is "walk throughs" of classrooms using Sanger-developed protocol. Firebaugh administrators participated in walk throughs with their counterparts in Sanger schools and in Firebaugh schools. This process helped the partners to develop a shared understanding of EDI and ELD instruction and of how to use such data as the basis for feedback and conversations with teachers. The data gleaned from classroom observations served also to extend the notion of data-based decision making beyond test scores.

Partnering on evidence use to enhance English learner achievement

The partners' focus on improving English learners' language and academic development has prompted their adoption or creation and use of new data tools and cross-district collaboration to refine them. For one, the districts together have adopted a new assessment of English learners' proficiency levels (ELLA) to supplement the annual CELDT testing and obtain interim data on ELLs' language development. The ELLA was administered twice this year in both districts, in the winter and spring. The verdict is not in yet on how useful these data might be, however most teachers we interviewed in both districts reported that they were of small value beyond the CELDT and their own ongoing assessments. This may change after they receive coaching on ways of using ELLA, to be provided this fall in both districts by a new Sanger district administrator (formerly an elementary school principal) with expertise in ELD instruction.

In addition, the districts have adopted new data systems that use ELLA data to produce developmental profiles of ELLs' language skills. They had both initially planned to use a data management system called OARS, which Firebaugh took the lead in attempting to implement this year. In light of the numerous glitches and shortfalls Firebaugh encountered, Sanger chose to purchase a different system. Firebaugh's piloting of OARS benefited Sanger's subsequent choice. Now that both districts have functioning data systems that can track students' language development, the ELLA assessments will prove to be useful for teachers' decision making for instruction.

Most promising is the Sanger ELD pilot that will provide both districts with classroom observation tools for developing data focused on ELD instruction. To date, Firebaugh leaders have accompanied the Sanger pilot team on walk throughs using a draft protocol, and plans for next year include bringing a Firebaugh leader into the pilot. The protocol will support the development of shared understandings of goals for ELD instruction within the districts –and across the districts as well. Data developed through walk-throughs will be used for purposes of providing feedback to individual teachers and PLCs, as well as focusing content for district training.

Three other developments to support data use within the partner districts are worth noting. First, through project funding, Sanger hired a new data person who is both developing the districts' data bases and capacity for analysis and providing data summaries to the partners and documenters on request. This investment is creating the capacity for partners to access various kinds of student data for ongoing problem solving and it supplements the role that Key Data Systems (KDS) plays for both districts to summarize state data in accessible annual reports. Second, the districts have agreed to partner in developing their readiness to meet Common Core Standards and ensure that English learners are not left behind as standards for student performance are raised. Over the next year this partnering work will include developing curricula, practices, and assessments focused especially on writing in the early grades. New assessment tools and the data they will generate promise to be important resources for each district in both moving instruction toward higher-order outcomes and monitoring progress in order to fine-tune professional development and school supports. Third, both districts are members of the Stanford ELL Network which is in the process of obtaining longitudinal data from member districts in order to perform additional analyses that can support district decision making, such as tracking long-term ELLs and identifying their characteristics.

Enhancing the District Culture of Continuous Improvement

The shifts in culture that came about in Sanger over several years are happening more rapidly in Firebaugh. Leaders at all levels of the system have been encouraged to promote and model the core principles that undergird Sanger's continuous improvement. The partnership provides district leaders and staff with an excuse and impetus to change the status quo. This can happen because Firebaugh leaders and most educators respect Sanger's history and see the underlying principles and beliefs as good for all students.

Unlike the many district teams which visit Sanger and try to take one piece of their work, Firebaugh leaders grasp the importance of the big picture: changing district culture and maintaining focus on a small number of key related initiatives. Adopting Sanger's successful developmental approach is one piece, realizing that opportunities for training need to continue and expectations for progress begin small and increase over time. Firebaugh leaders have found that the Spectrums of Learning that Sanger created for each of their initiatives provides a roadmap for their own evolution. These rubrics designed for Sanger's core district initiatives – including PLCs, classroom instruction, supports for English learners, and interventions – capture six different states of

development from non-use to innovative.[4] Firebaugh leaders also wisely choose to decline opportunities that would dilute their focus.

Firebaugh views Sanger as helping to accelerate what they are already doing, learning from Sanger's missteps and building on their own recent history. Firebaugh leaders are also learning from Sanger leaders' modeling and advice on how to lead system culture change. Observing Sanger activities first hand and having immediate access to Sanger leaders provides Firebaugh leaders with "hands-on" professional development tailored to their needs. The partnership functions as a high-level professional learning community focused on enhancing Firebaugh's culture of continuous improvement.

At the same time, Firebaugh's circumstances are not the same as Sanger's and therefore require translation and adaptation to make sense and work in Firebaugh's setting. Firebaugh has a higher proportion of ELLs and families in poverty. Its smaller size and greater distance from Fresno has implications for staffing, budget, and how they can organize for PLCs and interventions. For example, a smaller district budget has less flexibility, especially in maintaining support staff for teachers which in turn affects staffing for interventions. In middle and high school, many courses are taught by only one teacher which limits PLC options. And Firebaugh has fewer community resources to draw upon. In spite of these differences, Firebaugh leaders are creative in coming up with solutions.

Accomplishments and next steps

Building on a strong start during the first six months, the Partnership shows multiple signs of accelerating reform efforts in Firebaugh and enhancing reforms in Sanger. Relationships are broader and deeper at all levels: teacher to teacher, principal to principal, and district administrators to their counterparts. Major accomplishments include the following:

Partnering activities have expanded and paid off for both districts. Increased partnering activities have benefitted teachers and administrators at all levels in Firebaugh and Sanger. Sanger's involvement in teacher professional development in Firebaugh and teachers' visits to Sanger schools to see examples first-hand provided deeper understanding of the initiatives (PLCs, EDI, ELD, RTI) and accelerated Firebaugh teachers' ability to put new ideas into practice. Walkthroughs with Sanger leaders in Sanger and in Firebaugh enhanced Firebaugh leaders understanding of the initiatives as did more intensive mentoring and coaching. The Partnership Leadership Team has evolved into both a planning and problem solving group that coordinates and prioritizes a potentially infinite list of partnering opportunities.

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[4] Sanger has expanded its list of district initiatives to emphasize supports for ELLs. Their initiatives now include: EDI, SDAIE and ELD, supports for ELLs not making adequate progress, PLCs, RTI academic interventions, and RTI behavioral interventions emphasizing PBIS. The Spectrum of Learning for each has six stages: Non-application, Developmental Learning, Literal Application, Refinement, Internalized, and Innovative.

Firebaugh's teacher PLCs are more organized and more effective. Through observing Sanger PLCs, talking to Sanger teachers, and participating in DuFours PLC professional development together, Firebaugh teachers have strengthened their PLCs over the last year. Building on teachers' concerns last year, the district and schools established policies that ensure dedicated time and clear agendas for PLCs. Grade-level PLCs in the two elementary schools and subject PLCs in the two secondary schools are developing routines for using formative assessment data to diagnose student skill gaps and design responses; they follow the DuFours model and draw upon examples and tools shared by their counterparts in Sanger.

Firebaugh teachers are taking major steps in shifting their instruction from textbook-based to standards-based. Taking their cue from Sanger, Firebaugh teachers who in the past had been pressed to closely follow the textbook were inspired to see that Sanger teachers drive their instruction by the state's Essential Standards and draw from the textbook and other resources as appropriate to each standard. Observations in Sanger schools and on-site professional development from Sanger's in-house EDI trainer helped Firebaugh teachers understand and strengthen their use of direct instruction strategies.

Teachers in Firebaugh and Sanger are strengthening their approaches to English language development (ELD). Both districts are investigating ways to improve instruction for ELLs, separately and together. A major goal of these endeavors is to ensure that ELLs not only learn the academic vocabulary necessary for success in core subject instruction but also understand the underlying concepts, read complex text, and write about the ideas. Firebaugh will join Sanger's pilot set up to develop stronger ELD instruction.

Firebaugh schools have made significant progress in implementing interventions for all students. RTI (Response to Interventions) are now underway in Firebaugh, primarily in the elementary schools where scheduling is less challenging than in the secondary schools. Visits to Sanger to see how RTIs works in practice have helped, yet it takes commitment and careful organizing to do them well. Because the Firebaugh PLCs are looking closely at data, they are able to regroups student for interventions and assign the more effective teachers to the lowest scoring students. Firebaugh High School is experimenting with an intervention class for algebra and geometry with results to be judged when test scores become available.

Systematic uses of data are on the rise. In addition to increased uses of data in teacher PLCs, principals are looking more closely at their schools' data to identify strengths and weaknesses across subjects and grade levels. Joint professional development from the DuFours and observations of Sanger PLCs in action have helped Firebaugh teachers utilize data effectively in their PLCs which translates into targeting instruction to student needs in the regular classroom, in ELD classes, and in interventions. Walkthroughs adapting Sanger-developed tools and the initiative of Principal Summits modeled after Sanger's Summits contribute to site and district administrators' understanding and use of a range of data that capture teaching and learning. In adapting some of Sanger's key

strategies for data use at each level of the district, Firebaugh leaders have established expectations and routines for decision making based on evidence of student learning needs.

Firebaugh is developing a culture of continuous improvement for all students. The Partnership provides district leaders and staff with resources to push ahead on developing a culture of continuous improvement. With an emphasis on basing decisions on data that track student learning, supporting teacher collaboration, and strengthening site leadership, Firebaugh leaders have taken significant steps in this direction. Understanding the developmental nature of making changes in every school and classroom, Firebaugh and Sanger leaders know that this takes time. Yet both districts agree that the Partnership is already noticeably accelerating Firebaugh's progress toward building such a culture.

In addition to the above accomplishments, the Partnership has bestowed unanticipated benefits. For example, Sanger's connection to organizations and high-caliber consultants allows them to broker new connections for Firebaugh. Moreover, Firebaugh leaders believe that they benefit from their association with Sanger given its strong local and national reputation for accelerating student achievement.

Moreover, the timing of the Partnership is auspicious given the upcoming transition from the current standards and assessment system to one governed by the Common Core State Standards and yet-to-be developed assessments. It is auspicious because the transition occurs at a time of barebones budgets and minimal guidance from the state. Just as teacher collaboration raises the knowledge of the group, district collaboration does the same. Sharing knowledge and resources is even more important as districts struggle to figure out the implications of more rigorous standards, especially for English language learners.

Collaboration also takes time. Coordinating activities between two districts is complex. Each has many demands and constraints to work into their calendars. Formal district partnering activities (e.g., shared professional development) need to be defined and calendared in the spring of the preceding year. Other events can be scheduled on a more ad hoc basis (e.g., school visits) but still require lead time and matching schedules.

Next steps for the Partnership

Activities that began as unidirectional, Sanger to Firebaugh, are now becoming joint efforts. For example, next year someone from Firebaugh will train with the Sanger EDI trainer to build Firebaugh's training capacity. This request from Firebaugh led to Sanger's acknowledgment that they need to expand their own training capacity beyond reliance on one person. The two districts will also open their professional development sessions to the other district. For example, this summer Firebaugh will send its small number of new teachers to Sanger's new teacher professional development. In addition, both districts plan to work together on two issues: long-term ELLs and preparing for the Common Core. Each is doing small pilots on Common Core and will collaborate to share progress and next steps.

Next steps for documentation

In addition to tracking partnering activities and their impacts, we will focus on the progress of strengthening English language development in both districts, including the role of ELLA and other assessments and use of the new observation protocol. In late winter, we will do a second administration of the teacher survey to all teachers in both districts which will provide measures of change in the key outcomes of the Partnership between 2011 and 2013. We will continue to participate in the Partnership Leadership Team meetings and collect data to document positive impacts as well as challenges and how the Partnership overcomes them.

The Partnership is proving to be a rich source of new knowledge about how districts can collaborate and learn from each other in ways that benefit student learning, particularly those struggling to learn English. As such it promises to provide valuable lessons for districts, policymakers, and funders.

Appendix 1. Role of Documentation

We are documenting and tracking progress on the Partners' relationships and activities, Firebaugh's implementation of the reform principles and leadership strategies outlined above, and student outcomes in both districts. Thus far, we have developed baseline data for tracking change on each facet of the Partnership. We also are documenting differences between the two districts that now or in the future might shape different strategies or outcomes. For example, what difference does it make that Sanger has 19 schools and Firebaugh has 6?[5] Are there differences in how each district is impacted by state budget cuts? How do the English learner populations differ in readiness, stability, and community support?

Using baseline data, we initially focus on the "intermediate outcomes" aligned with Sanger's core principles and strategies. We use indicators at both district and school levels to track progress across years. For example:

At the district level we expect to see trends toward:
- Clear communication to principals and teachers about what is expected in practice and in terms of principles that focus this work.
- Resources for PLCs to work well, including time and access to useful data, data systems that support instruction.
- High-quality professional learning opportunities for teachers

In schools we expect to see steady progress toward:
- Effective PLCs where teachers look at evidence of student learning and gear their instruction according to what they see
- A range of interventions for students that support language learning and academic learning
- Instruction in which teachers are explicit about what students should be learning and frequently check to be sure that students understand the concepts
- Principals who understand how to lead and support teachers in these endeavors

Throughout the District Partnership Project, the documentation team will collect both qualitative and quantitative data to track all these indicators in addition to student outcomes. We will track progress on student achievement for English learners and for all students on state measures (CST and CELDT), though a general rule of thumb is that impacts do not show up until the third year of a successful reform initiative hence we will not report on these until then.

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[5] These numbers include continuation and community day schools for both districts.

Appendix 2. Initiatives Important in Sanger-Firebaugh Partnership

Professional Learning Community (PLC): Collaboration in a professional team to evaluate and improve productivity. All levels of the Sanger district system (teacher, principal, and central office) work collaboratively. Teacher PLCs meet at least weekly by grade level or subject/course to design common assessments, review student performance, and decide on interventions in repeating cycles. Four questions guide their work: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they learned it? What will we do if they didn't learn it? What will we do if the did learn it?

Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI): An approach to instruction that increases the efficiency of lessons by prompting teachers to (a) communicate to students the learning objective for each lesson, (b) teach the meaning of relevant concepts, (c) check for student understanding in multiple ways throughout the lesson (including calling on students randomly and having students hold up white boards), and (d) providing opportunities for students to learn and practice the concept through conversation with a peer ("pair share") and independent work.

Interventions: Each school designs and updates "pyramids of interventions" as a guideline for teachers' and PLCs' responses to students who are not meeting particular academic or behavior standards. The first level of response is pulling aside a small group within the classroom, the second is deployment across classes targeted to students' needs, the third is specialized instructional intervention for students with special needs. Each school has a pyramid of responses to student academic needs and a pyramid of responses to behavior issues.
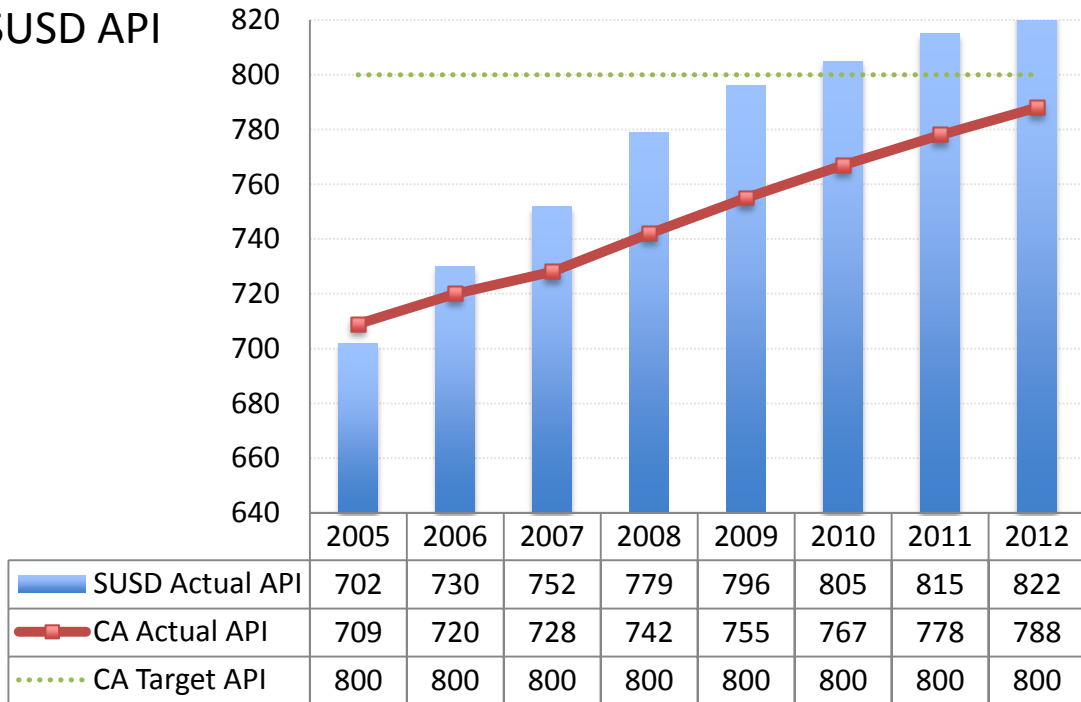
English Language Development: A state-required course of study for English learners to develop fluency in English while learning core content. ELD includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing through appropriate instructional materials and teaching, aligned to California ELD and core content standards. In Sanger, English learners receive ELD each day in addition to their regular classes—all considered part of their core curriculum. Interventions for ELLs are in addition to regular ELD.

Principal Summits: Each fall every principal presents results from multiple sources of data to a panel of district administrators in a public setting that typically includes visitors from districts around the Valley. Using Power Point, the principal presents CST results for several years for the school, content areas, grade-levels, and student subgroups; movement of English learners across CELDT levels, progress on the district initiatives (PLCs, ELD, EDI, Interventions), and priorities for the current year based on these data. District administrators ask questions about causes of trends, details of next steps, and reach agreement with the principal on how the central office staff will support the work.
ELLA: A new interim assessment based on the annual CELDT (California English Language Development Test) to be given in January and May to provide more frequent data on students' language acquisition than the October administration of the CELDT.

SUSD API

SUSD API

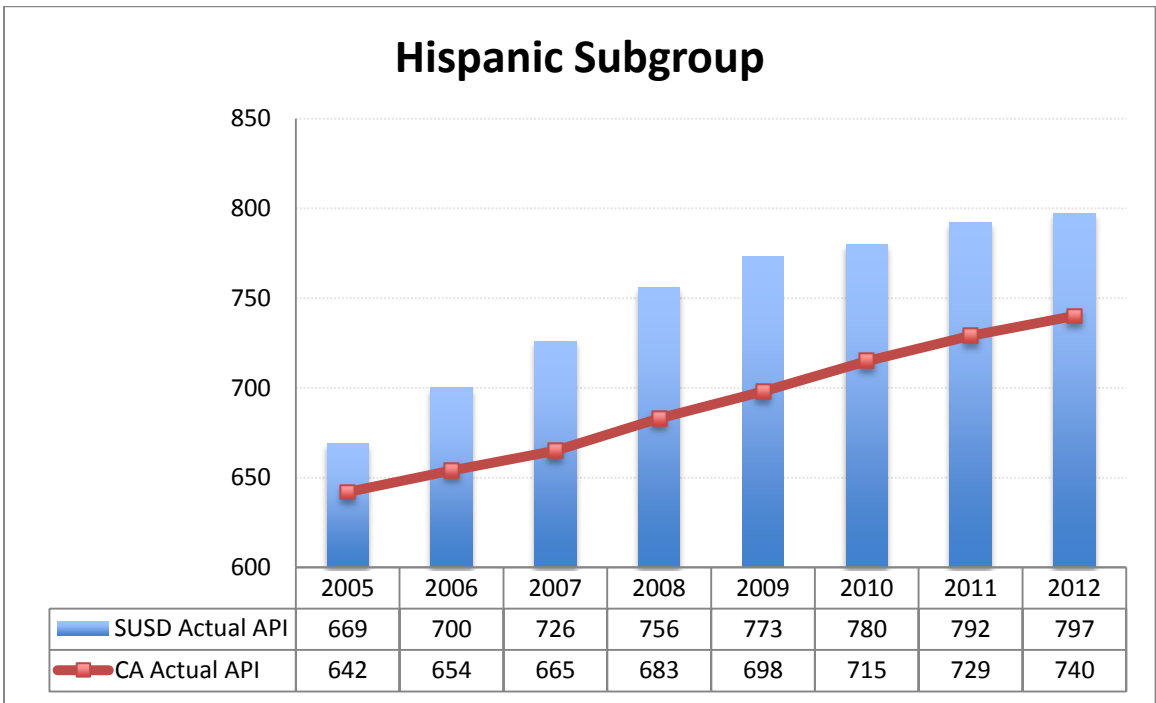| SUSD API	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	702	730	752	779	796	805	815	822
CA Actual API	709	720	728	742	755	767	778	788
CA Target API	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800

SUBGROUPS

African American Subgroup

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	746	723	749	769	814	817
CA Actual API	643	659	674	686	696	710

Asian Subgroup

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	761	783	783	821	843	858	864	886
CA Actual API	831	844	852	866	878	890	898	905

Hispanic Subgroup

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	669	700	726	756	773	780	792	797
CA Actual API	642	654	665	683	698	715	729	740

White Subgroup

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	796	814	831	853	864	877	876	884
CA Actual API	790	801	805	816	828	838	845	853

Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Subgroup

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	671	698	726	756	775	784	796	805
CA Actual API	641	652	662	680	696	712	726	737

English Learners Subgroup

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	636	662	691	727	745	760	771	772
CA Actual API	631	641	646	662	677	692	706	716

Students w/ Disabilities Subgroup
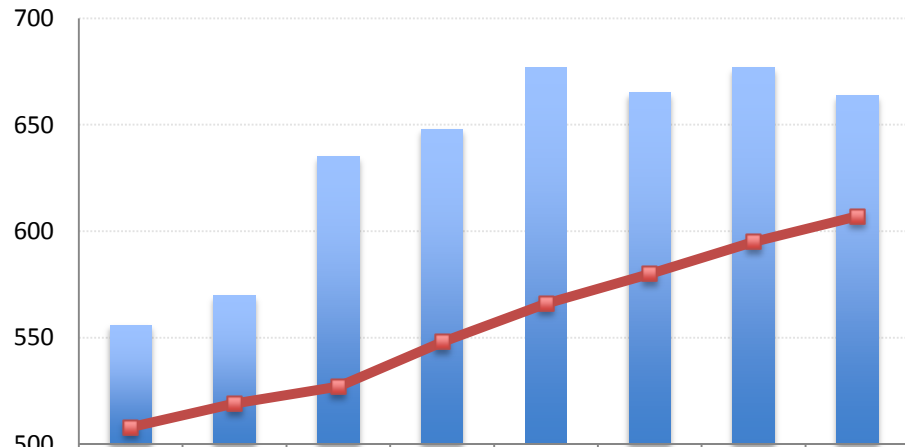
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual API	556	570	635	648	677	665	677	664
CA Actual API	508	519	527	548	566	580	595	607

SUSD AYP English Language Arts

SUSD AYP ELA

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	25%	27%	35%	42%	47%	51%	56%	58%	60%	62%
CA Actual AYP ELA	37%	37%	42%	45%	46%	48%	52%	54%	56%	58%
CA Target AYP ELA	12%	12%	23%	23%	23%	34%	45%	56%	67%	78%

SUBGROUPS

African American Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	29%	18%	28%	39%	45%	47%	52%	59%	61%	63%
CA Actual AYP ELA	24%	25%	29%	32%	33%	36%	40%	41%	43%	50%

Asian Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	29%	28%	38%	44%	46%	53%	61%	66%	69%	73%
CA Actual AYP ELA	57%	59%	65%	68%	69%	72%	75%	77%	79%	80%

Hispanic Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	18%	20%	29%	35%	41%	46%	51%	53%	55%	57%
CA Actual AYP ELA	21%	22%	27%	30%	31%	35%	39%	42%	45%	47%

White Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	49%	52%	56%	64%	68%	69%	75%	74%	75%	79%
CA Actual AYP ELA	55%	56%	61%	64%	64%	66%	70%	71%	72%	74%

Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	17%	19%	28%	34%	40%	45%	50%	53%	56%	58%
CA Actual AYP ELA	21%	22%	27%	29%	30%	34%	38%	41%	44%	46%

English Learners Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	11%	10%	20%	24%	31%	36%	42%	47%	49%	50%
CA Actual AYP ELA	19%	18%	22%	25%	26%	29%	33%	36%	39%	41%

Students w/ Disabilities Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP ELA	5%	9%	19%	22%	29%	33%	38%	37%	45%	43%
CA Actual AYP ELA	14%	15%	17%	20%	21%	24%	30%	32%	34%	36%

SUSD AYP Math

SUSD AYP MATH
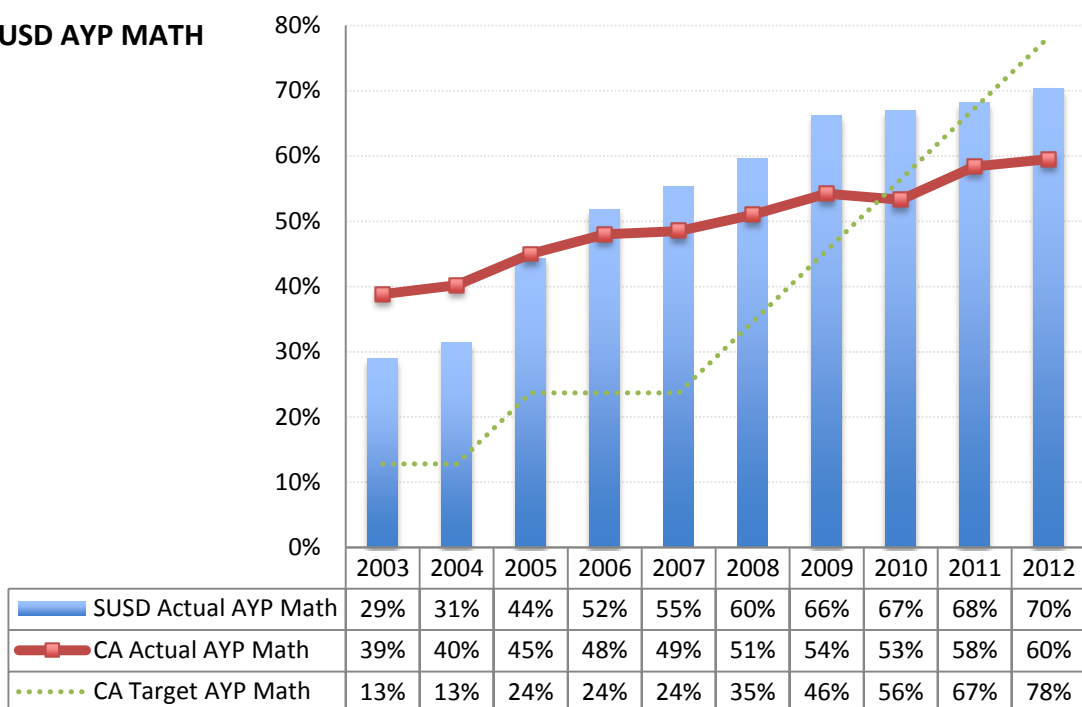
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	29%	31%	44%	52%	55%	60%	66%	67%	68%	70%
CA Actual AYP Math	39%	40%	45%	48%	49%	51%	54%	53%	58%	60%
CA Target AYP Math	13%	13%	24%	24%	24%	35%	46%	56%	67%	78%

SUBGROUPS

African American Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	29%	23%	38%	47%	48%	50%	52%	66%	74%	71%
CA Actual AYP Math	22%	23%	27%	30%	31%	34%	38%	40%	41%	43%
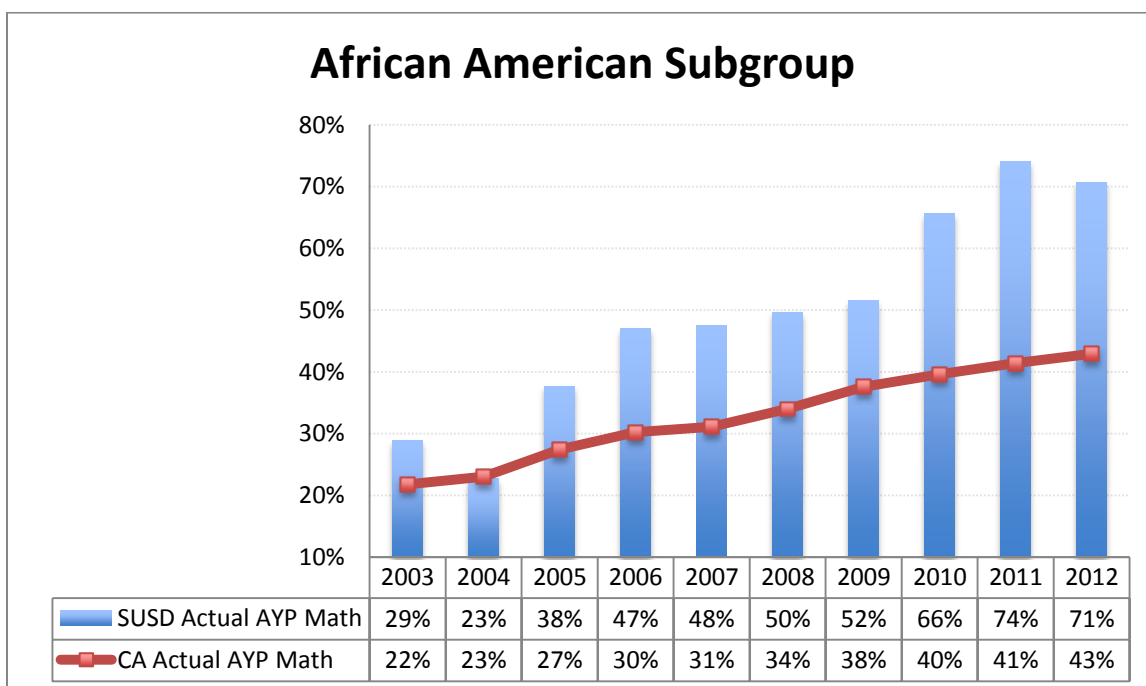
Asian Subgroup
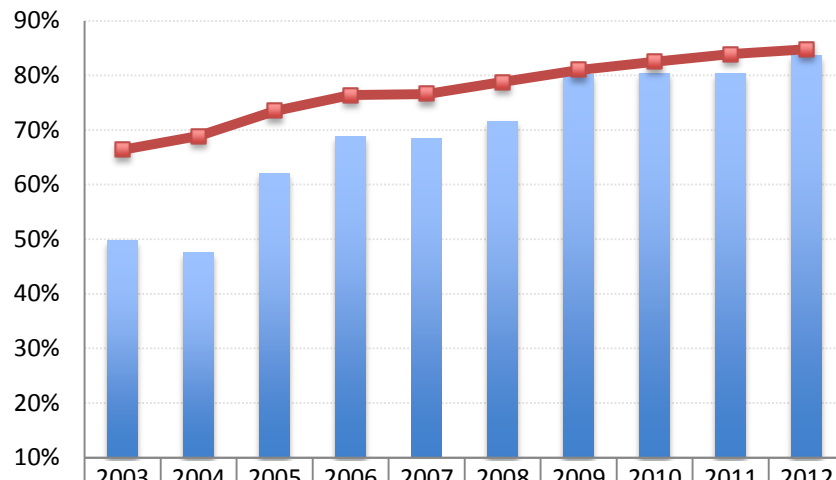
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	50%	48%	62%	69%	68%	72%	80%	80%	80%	84%
CA Actual AYP Math	66%	69%	74%	76%	77%	79%	81%	83%	84%	85%

Hispanic Subgroup
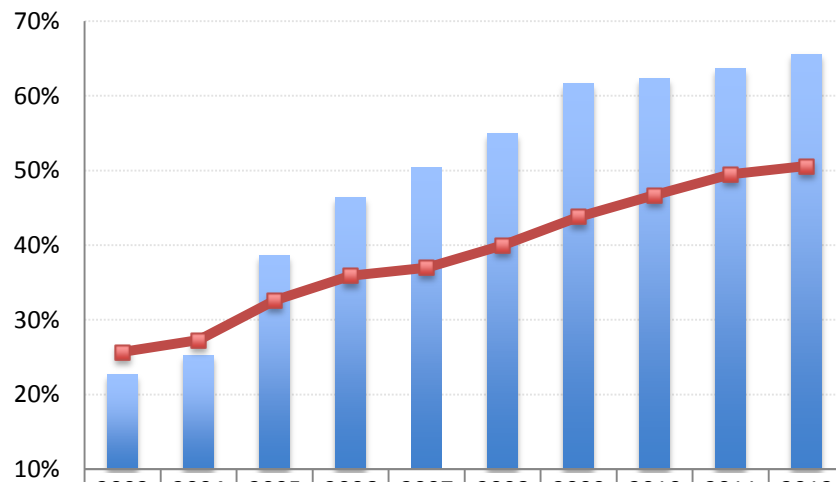
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	23%	25%	39%	46%	50%	55%	62%	62%	64%	66%
CA Actual AYP Math	26%	27%	33%	36%	37%	40%	44%	47%	50%	51%

White Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	48%	50%	59%	65%	68%	73%	77%	78%	77%	81%
CA Actual AYP Math	54%	55%	60%	63%	63%	65%	67%	69%	70%	71%

Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	22%	24%	39%	47%	50%	55%	62%	64%	65%	67%
CA Actual AYP Math	26%	28%	33%	36%	37%	40%	44%	46%	49%	50%

English Learners Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	19%	20%	35%	42%	46%	51%	60%	61%	62%	64%
CA Actual AYP Math	27%	27%	32%	35%	36%	39%	43%	46%	49%	50%

Students w/ Disabilities Subgroup

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
SUSD Actual AYP Math	9%	13%	23%	31%	40%	41%	50%	48%	47%	48%
CA Actual AYP Math	16%	17%	20%	22%	24%	28%	32%	35%	36%	37%

Data, Our GPS

Determining what students need and working together to provide direction are the keys to this district's success.

Rich Smith, Marcus Johnson, and Karen D. Thompson

Sergio entered the Sanger Unified School District as a kindergartner not yet fluent in English. As a 9th grader in 2010, he still had not scored high enough on measures of English language ability and academic achievement to shed the English learner label. For years, students like Sergio flew under the radar in our district, gliding from one grade to the next. But since 2004, Sanger Unified has undergone a dramatic transformation. Now district educators know exactly how all their students are doing, and they work relentlessly and collaboratively to discover what each student needs to succeed.

Thus, when we, as school leaders, sat down with Sergio's parents in spring 2011 for a chat, we knew where Sergio stood; this knowledge gave us a starting point for conversation. Sergio's parents told us that Sergio's language abilities in Spanish had faltered since a farm accident several years back. No one had ever asked Sergio or his parents why they thought his academic progress had stalled. With data that alerted us to Sergio's lack of progress and a commitment to asking questions that would help us understand his needs, we gained the necessary information to design an appropriate learning environment for him. Conversations like these have enabled our district to experience a dramatic turnaround.

From Struggling to Exemplary

Located in California's Central Valley, Sanger Unified enrolls approximately 10,000 students, 82 percent of whom are students of color (primarily Latino, with sizeable black and Hmong populations and a growing Sikh population). Half of the district's students speak a language other than English at home. Unemployment in our area currently stands at approximately 30 percent, and three-fourths of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2004, Sanger was named one of the lowest-performing school districts in the state.

Today, the Sanger district as a whole and 12 of its 13 elementary schools have exceeded the state's academic performance targets. Nine of Sanger's 18 schools attained the highest possible ranking in statewide comparisons with similar schools. Further, we have shown dramatic increases in the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on state standardized tests in English

language arts and math, far outpacing statewide gains. For example, from 2004 to 2009, the number of Sanger students scoring proficient or advanced in math increased 35 percentage points (from 31 percent to 66 percent), versus a 14-point increase for the state (from 40 percent to 54 percent).

English language learners (ELLs) in Sanger show particularly dramatic gains, not only outpacing gains in achievement for ELLs statewide but also closing the gap with English-only students. In 7th grade math, English learners in Sanger now outscore English-only students statewide. Moreover, English learners in Sanger are becoming fluent in English more quickly. We do not believe this progress is accidental. (See the graphs at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_201202_thompson_figures .pdf for more data on Sanger's success.)

Guiding Principles

Sanger's appearance on the list of California's lowest-performing districts in 2004 served as a dramatic wake-up call. We immediately decided that before we took any other actions, we needed to identify a set of principles to serve as our philosophical foundation. After deep discussions of our core beliefs, we created a set of three guiding principles:

1. Hope is not a strategy.
2. Don't blame the kids.
3. It's about student learning.

We've spent the past seven years working hard to enact these principles in everyday situations. Early in our district's transition we heard teachers say things like, "I taught it; they just didn't learn it." Applying our guiding principles, we realized that we could not simply hope that our students would learn, and we could not blame students if learning did not occur. Instead, school leaders worked to cultivate the belief that teaching effectiveness is measured by whether students learn what we have

taught. Through intensive districtwide professional development in explicit direct instruction, Response to Intervention, and checking for understanding, we have created a common framework for instruction so that all teachers and administrators in the district have a shared understanding of what constitutes an effective lesson.

Guided by Data

Early in our reform effort, we committed ourselves to monitoring student achievement. We realized that the standardized test scores we received back from the state each fall pointed out our failures during the previous year, but there were no opportunities for schools

or teachers to rectify the learning gaps for those students.

We needed a "global positioning system" (GPS) to tell us where our students were and what they still needed if they were to reach their learning destination. To obtain this crucial information, we created a district progress assessment that tests all students three times a year on the most essential standards for each grade level. The assessment provides us with actionable student learning data and enables our teachers to address issues immediately.

For example, order of operations is an essential tool for success in algebra. So, as our 7th grade teachers receive feedback from the district assessment on their students' mastery of this topic, they identify students across the entire grade who need intensive intervention

in the order of operations. They place these students in a targeted intervention group taught by the teacher whose students were most successful in the topic and then assess the students again to determine the success of the intervention.

In addition to data on all students' progress in the content areas, we collect data on English learners' language development. In California, ELLs take a state language test each October, but we had no other data to show us how ELLs were progressing on the English language development standards throughout the year. Through a grant from the Central Valley Foundation, we implemented a testing program that

We needed a GPS to tell us where our students were and what they still needed if they were to reach their learning destination.
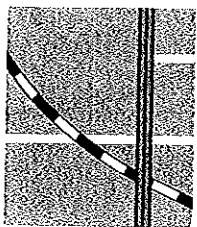
enables us to check student mastery of these standards three times during the year.

When the teachers at Del Rey Elementary School reviewed data from the first round of the district English language development assessment last year, they noticed that 2nd grade students were struggling the most in listening comprehension. The teachers worked together to implement specific strategies to increase these students' listening comprehension.

For example, as part of the state and district English proficiency assessments, students have to orally retell a story that they have heard. The 2nd grade teachers at Del Rey realized that remembering all pieces of the story was overwhelming for many English learners. Therefore, they began experimenting

with tools such as the five-finger summary method, in which students learn a format for recalling and retelling key events. They noticed substantial improvement in English learners' performance in listening comprehension.

Not only do teachers have a clear idea of students' academic needs, but students themselves also know where they stand. As we began to examine our high school ELLs' results, we found

18 schools vary in the depth of their collaboration, all use data to determine what supports students need. In looking at data together, teachers identify groups of students with particular needs and group them for instruction on the basis of those needs. PLCs that collaborate effectively shift students all the time, rather than having stagnant groups. As PLCs have matured and grown at every school in the district,

between the sentence types, on the other hand, completed an extension activity under the direction of another teacher. On the third and final day of this regrouping, teachers administered a follow-up assessment to check students' understanding.

In other cases, after examining data, members of this PLC shared teaching methods that had been particularly successful. For example, when the team noticed that many students in one class were scoring at the proficient and advanced level on the compare-and-contrast strategy in reading comprehension, that class's teacher shared a graphic organizer she had developed to help her students.

PLCs across the district meet at least once a week, but this team chose to meet during most of their preps as well, for an average of at least three meetings a week. Thanks to this intensive collaboration, the team truly felt responsible for the learning of all students, not just the students on their own rosters.

Not only do teachers have a clear idea of students' academic needs, but students themselves also know where they stand.

that a large number of ELLs had made little or no English-language growth over five or more years. We began to meet with these students to ask what we could do to better meet their needs. We were shocked by what we learned. The students had never been told what they needed to accomplish to exit ELL status.

We organized a presentation in which we simply told students the criteria they needed to meet to become classified as fluent in English. We also shared with students their current test scores and grades so they could see where they stood. Many were already close to meeting the criteria and were able to be reclassified quickly because they knew which assessments and classes to focus on. Teachers were then able to provide extra intervention for the smaller group of students who needed more significant help.

Our Kids, Not My Kids
Sanger's use of data is the touchstone for our professional learning communities (PLCs). Although the PLCs at Sanger's

teachers tend to refer to students as "our kids," not "my kids."

Last year at Washington Academic Middle School, after assessing students' ability to use various sentence types in their writing, the 6th grade PLC realized that many students were still struggling. For three days, the teachers regrouped students during students' language arts period. Those who struggled the most with this skill were placed in a group with the teacher whose students had scored highest. Those who already understood the differences

A Job Never Completed
To properly maintain the Golden Gate Bridge, painters must constantly repaint it. When the painters reach one end, they start back over on the other end. Sanger's initiatives and efforts work the same way. District leaders continue to train and support principals and teachers over and over in the key elements of district initiatives. With each subsequent training, teachers' and principals' knowledge deepens.

A recent independent report explains what's behind Sanger's success:

> There is nothing esoteric about Sanger's focus on professional learning communities or direct instruction or English language development. What is unusual is the professional commitment with which they have taken on the challenge to teach all students to their potential and a corresponding set of strategic actions

that both push and prepare educators to continually improve so that their students can do the same. . . . the whole is much larger than its parts, and the lessons lie in how Sanger's leaders have inspired, educated, and trusted principals, teachers, and students.[1]

Although we are proud of our accomplishments thus far, there is much still to do. We are especially concerned about students like Sergio who have become long-term English learners. We continue to seek the best ways of addressing their needs.

Sergio is now receiving special education services to address his comprehension deficits. His daily program includes English language development that specifically targets vocabulary building. His schedule was also modified to pr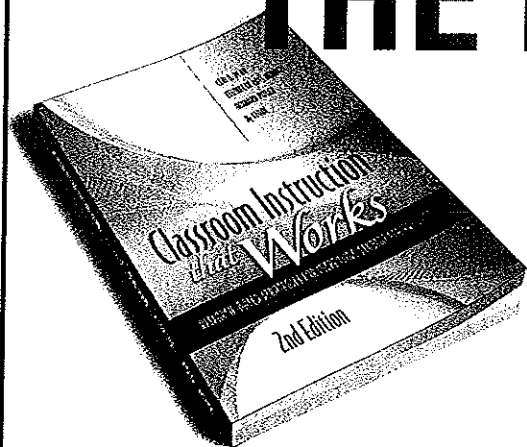ovide scaffolded support for his academic courses, again focusing on developing the necessary academic language to ensure his success. He is currently passing all of his classes and is on track for graduation.

We're also pursuing relationships with school districts that face many of the same issues that we do. This past year, we obtained a grant from the Central Valley Foundation to develop a partnership with the Firebaugh–Las Deltas Unified School District, a smaller district with a similar student population. We are sharing our leadership and PLC models as well as practices and tools associated with the development of English language proficiency. We believe that learning never stops, and working with other districts is another great way to learn. **EL**

[1]David, J., & Talbert, J. (2010). *Turning around a high-poverty school district: Learning from Sanger Unified's success.* San Francisco: S. H. Cowell Foundation, pp. 47–48.

Authors' note: The student name in this article is a pseudonym. Sanger has collaborated with researchers from Stanford University (including Kenji Hakuta and Karen D. Thompson) to independently analyze data and document student achievement outcomes.

Rich Smith (rich_smith@sanger.k12.ca.us) is deputy superintendent and **Marcus Johnson** (marc_johnson@sanger.k12.ca.us) is superintendent of Sanger Unified School District in California. **Karen D. Thompson** (karend thompson@stanford.edu) is a doctoral candidate in Educational Linguistics at the Stanford University School of Education.

California Comprehensive Center at WestEd

Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education

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WestEd

Acknowledgments

Abstract

Through a rigorous selection process based on special education performance over four years, we identified eight unified districts that showed unusually strong academic performance for their special education population compared to similar districts in California. We conducted interviews with these districts' special education directors to identify the policies and practices they credited for their success. Ultimately, we selected four districts for quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The main themes that emerged across the four districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices leading to improved student achievement for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts); collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts); continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention (RtI) (three districts); and targeted professional development (three districts). We believe that these findings, and the districts themselves, can serve as models for other districts that are struggling to improve the performance of students in special education in their districts.

Contents

Introduction

Improved academic outcomes have been an important emphasis for special education policy over the past decade. For example, the 2001 reauthorization of the ESEA, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), specifies that schools be held accountable for the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students. It also specifically requires the disaggregation and reporting of data for specific subgroups, including students with disabilities. Failure to show AYP for students in special education can result in an entire school or school district being placed in "In Need of Improvement" status.

More recently, the newly released federal *Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) states that the Administration's ESEA reauthorization proposal will increase support for "improved outcomes of students with disabilities" (p. 20). In California, 84 percent of school districts with sufficient students with disabilities to count for accountability purposes failed to make AYP for 2009-2010 specifically due, at least in part, to the academic performance of their students in special education.

The purpose of this study is to identify districts that beat these daunting odds. For example, Sanger Unified, which we profile below, enrolls students in poverty at a much higher rate than the state average (76 versus 50 percent) and actively attempts to serve students outside special education when appropriate, classifying only 8 percent of its students in special education compared to the statewide average of 10 percent (13 percent nationally). Yet Sanger's students in special education show much higher academic proficiency on statewide tests than similar districts and than the state average, and Sanger continues to make AYP. Given the challenges faced by 84 percent of California districts in making AYP, it is important to identify districts like Sanger from across the state, to analyze what they are doing, and to consider whether their strategies might work for students in special education statewide.

To identify such districts, we used a rigorous selection process based on special education academic performance from the 2005-06 to 2008-09 school year. We selected a four-year span for these analyses to identify districts whose exceptional performance had been sustained over time.

These analyses resulted in the identification of a number of districts statewide showing higher-than-predicted academic success for their students in special education. To further explore these results, we conducted in-depth phone interviews with the special education directors in eight of these districts to learn about the policies and practices they had put in place that they attributed their success to. From these eight, we selected four districts with clear, well-articulated strategies to feature in this report.

We believe this information will contribute to district, county, and state-level consideration of strategies for improving special education performance by providing specific examples of what has worked. We also consider it important to highlight districts with considerably higher than average success with this important sub-population of students to recognize their impressive achievement, and to enable other districts to learn from them. Because we focus on higher poverty districts in this report, these findings may be of particular assistance to other "high need" districts in California and across the country.

Study Background

In 2001, in *Education Finance in the New Millennium,* Chaikind and Fowler (2001) predicted that the future of special education would focus on questions regarding the "best outcomes for students with disabilities." However, while the 1997 IDEA amendments required states to establish performance goals for students with disabilities, some critics have argued that these changes did not go far enough in fully establishing a results-oriented process (Wolf & Hassal, 2001).

In 2002, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education recommended that special education focus on the outcomes achieved by each child and not on "process, litigation, regulation and confrontation" (p. 8). The preamble to this report states, "The ultimate test of the value of special education is that, once identified, children close the achievement gap with their peers" (President's Commission, 2002:4).

The intended purpose of the NCLB legislation of 2001, as described above, is "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (NCLB, 2001, § 1001). These provisions emphasize that the expected educational outcomes for students with disabilities, or for any other subgroup, are the same high expectations held for all students. Given the challenges that students in special education face, some may believe that low performance is inevitable. However, at least one study by Hanushek et al. (2002) shows value added in regard to academic performance from special education services—so improvement is possible. They report that, "The average special education program boosts mathematics and reading achievement of special education students, particularly those classified as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed, while not detracting from regular education students" (p. 584).

Analyses of key student and district characteristics and academic achievement of students identified for special education in California show that while some districts are achieving relatively impressive outcomes, many are not. For example, large variation is found across districts in the percentage of students with disabilities scoring proficient in English language arts (ELA)—from 0 to 60 percent across California districts (2006-07). The high end of this range shows that low performance for students in special education need not be a given.

This variation is illustrated in Exhibit 1. Each district in California is represented by a circle; the circle's size is based on district enrollment. The exhibit maps the percentage of students in special education scoring proficient and above against the percentage of students identified as being in special education by district. Although a slight positive correlation between performance and percentage of enrollment identified as special education, there is relatively high variation in performance across the range of percentages of students identified.

Exhibit 1: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts as a Function of the Percentage of Students Identified for Special Education in These Districts, 2006-07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)
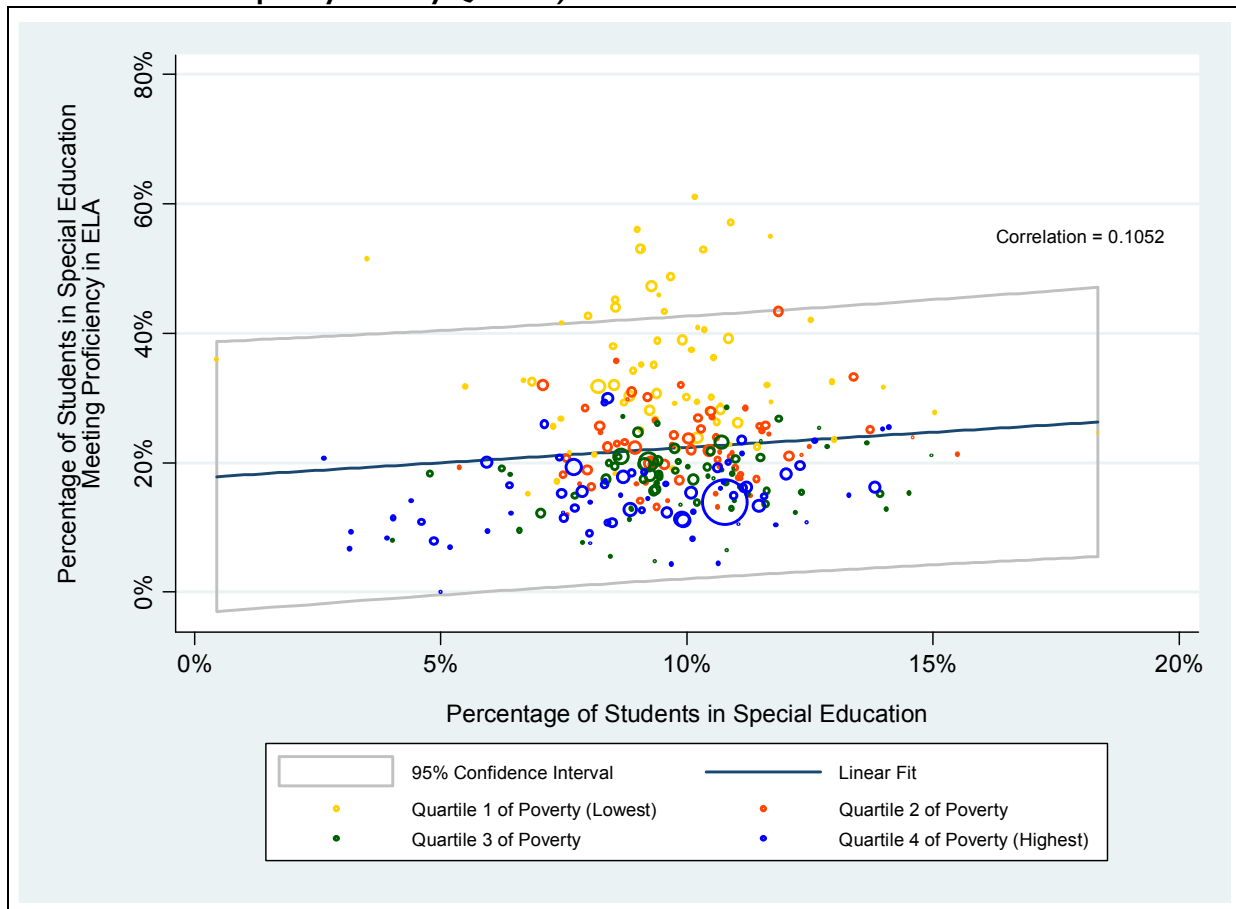
Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

Some of the variation shown above is negatively related to district poverty (defined as the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch), as indicated by the number of high-poverty districts (in blue) in the lower ranges of performance. However, relatively high performers are also found among these high-poverty districts.

This illustrates that while the poverty of its students is beyond district control, other factors are not. For example, Exhibit 2 provides information similar to that shown in Exhibit 1 above, but plots ELA proficiency against the percentage of students in special education spending 80 percent or more time in general education classrooms. Overall a positive correlation is observed; however, there is a great deal of variation. These data suggest that when students in special education are included in general education classes with appropriate supports, they appear to do better than predicted, but that increased general education placements may also lead to poorer than predicted performance when such placements are not well implemented.

Exhibit 2: Percentage of Students in Special Education in Unified School Districts Meeting Proficiency in English Language Arts as a Function of the Percentage of These Students Served 80 Percent or More Time in General Education Classrooms, 2006-07 (Each District Is Represented by a Circle Proportional to Its Size and Grouped by Poverty Quartile)
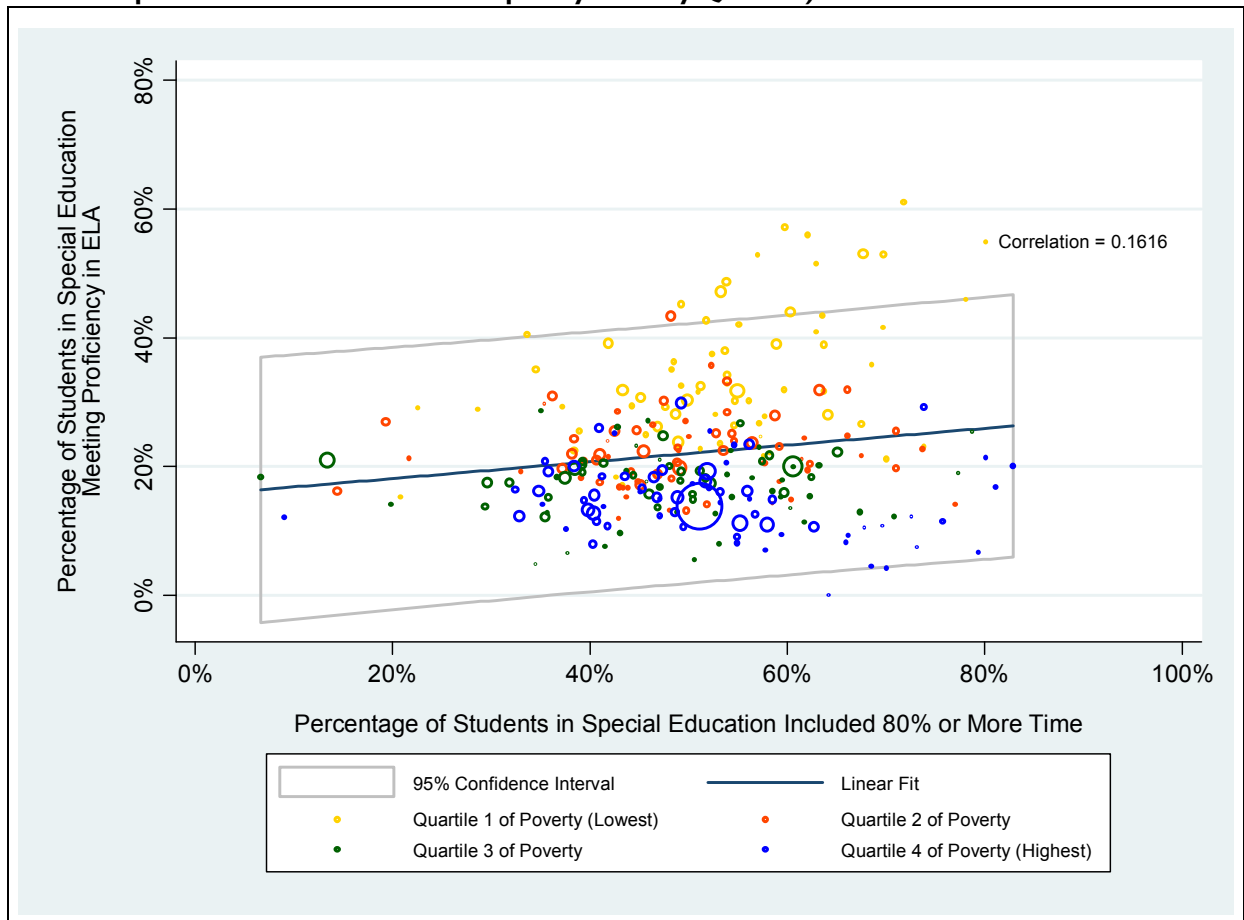

Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program and California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) data.

In addition, regression analyses that include variables measuring the percentage of time served in regular education classes, student poverty, special education spending, and variations in the mix of categories of disability enrolled also show a strong, statistically significant relationship between regular class placements and district-level special education performance. Increased special education spending also shows a positive, statistically significant relationship with student outcomes, but the magnitude of the relationship is small.

The current study seeks to better understand the policies and practices implemented by districts that have special education performance that is substantially higher than predicted. It grows out of prior work done we have done through the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) identifying high-performing, high-need schools and districts.[1] The study also draws upon previous research that examines effective practices leading to improved student achievement for students in special education (e.g., Cortiella & Burnette, 2008; McLaughlin et al., 1997).

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[1] Examples of high-performing, high-need school profiles from this prior work can be found at: http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/ideas/schools.htm.

A study by the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts (2004) is especially relevant to the current study. The purpose of the *Study of MCAS Achievement and Promising Practices in Urban Special Education* was to identify district- and school-level practices supporting achievement among elementary and middle school students with special needs in urban public schools. Achievement data were used to identify urban districts with promising ELA and mathematics achievement among students with special needs. The research team visited 10 schools in five districts and interviewed over 140 school personnel. A small number of parents of students with special needs were also interviewed at each school. From these data collection efforts, the researchers identified 11 practices that supported success with students in special education (UMass Donahue Institute, 2004):

- An emphasis on curriculum alignment with curriculum frameworks
- Effective systems to support curriculum alignment
- Emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum
- Culture and practices that support high standards and student achievement
- A well-disciplined academic and social environment
- Use of student assessment data to inform decision-making
- Unified practice supported by targeted professional development
- Access to resources to support key initiatives
- Effective staff recruitment, retention, and deployment
- Flexible leaders and staff that work effectively in a dynamic environment
- Effective leadership

It is interesting to note that all of these practices, with the exception of "emphasis on inclusion and access to the curriculum" (#3), are similar to the practices emphasized in the effective schools literature for general education (see for example Fuller et al., 2007; Perez et al., 2007; Parrish et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Levine & Lezotte, 1990). This suggests that to improve academic results for students in special education, practices similar to those implemented for general education students, with an additional emphasis on inclusionary practices, may be effective.

In the Donahue study, all of the case study districts were committed to inclusion and noted various ways in which they implemented this practice. A common strategy was the use of flexible groupings that integrated special needs students into general education classrooms throughout the school day. No two districts implemented the same inclusion strategies, with practices ranging from full inclusion of all students identified for special education with dual certification of all regular and special education teachers, to a more modest level of inclusion in which resource teachers supported students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

District Selection for the Current Study

Districts were selected based on higher-than-predicted achievement for students with disabilities on statewide performance measures. Publicly available data from the Academic Performance Index (API), AYP, California Standards Tests (CST), and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) databases as well as district demographic data for ethnicity, poverty, the share of English learners, and the share of

students with disability status were included in these analyses, which included data from 2005-06 through 2008-09.[2]

We first ran regression analyses on standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA mean scale scores for the students-with-disabilities subgroup population, controlling for the district's percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch; percentage of African American, Asian, and Hispanic students; percentage of English learners (ELs); percentage of students with disabilities; and percentage of students within the various disability classifications (e.g., mental retardation, autism).

We averaged the difference between the actual and the predicted standardized CST and CAHSEE mathematics and ELA scale scores for students with disabilities to produce district-level measures by year from 2005-06 through 2008-09. We then averaged these measures across the four years to obtain a single academic performance measure for students with disabilities that would reflect sustained performance. We were seeking districts where the students in special education performed considerably better than predicted and did so consistently over time.

Because this was a comparative analysis, it was important to control for the grade range of students served. Thus, we limited our analysis to unified school districts, which serve over 70 percent of California's students.

In zeroing in on the districts to interview, we screened out small districts (those at or below the 30th percentile in terms of unified district enrollment) to ensure that the selected districts would not simply reflect circumstances associated with unusually small size. In addition, we only selected districts serving a percentage of students with disabilities within one standard deviation of the state average for unified districts. Last, we only selected districts that were above the state average percent proficiency on CST ELA and mathematics for students with disabilities and above the predicted academic performance for students with disabilities as estimated by our regression analysis.

After applying these criteria, we ranked the remaining districts based on their above-predicted performance as described above. Ultimately, we selected 8 districts from the top 20 to interview. Because of our interest in interviewing districts with high levels of poverty, we first selected the 4 districts in the top 20 whose percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch exceeded the state average, which is 50 percent. To also gain an understanding of how the practices reported by higher poverty districts might compare with those with lower poverty, we selected the remaining four districts from among those that had 10 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

District Interviews and Analysis

Between May and July 2010, we interviewed the special education directors from the eight selected districts to obtain descriptions of the policies and practices they considered most effective in improving and sustaining special education achievement in their districts. During a one-hour phone interview, we discussed instructional and management practices associated with their high performance for students with disabilities.

To guide the discussion, we developed an interview protocol that included questions related to the effective practices described above. However, discussion was not limited to these practices—we asked

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[2] Only CST scores were included in the study. Scores on the California Modified Assessment (CMA) or the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) were not considered as the majority of students in special education take the CST with or without accommodations.

respondents to initially describe the three most important factors that they attributed to special education performance in their districts without any suggestion of the literature cited above.

We analyzed these interview data seeking instances where well-articulated strategies had been developed and implemented by the district for the explicit purpose of improving the education outcomes of its students in special education. Conversely, we sought to avoid instances where it appeared that external factors were affecting the observed high performance. Through this process, we narrowed the initial eight districts to four sites whose strategies seemed fully developed and could be clearly described (and would therefore be of strong potential interest to other districts). We excluded sites with issues such as not meeting special education proficiency targets as well as those with possible issues with the types of students being identified for special education. Once initial profiles were created for the remaining four districts, the respondents provided comments regarding completeness and accuracy.

District Backgrounds

Listed alphabetically, the districts featured in this report are Kerman, Sanger, Upland, and Val Verde. As shown in Table 1, they are located in either the southern part of the state (Upland and Val Verde) or in the Central Valley (Kerman and Sanger), and range in size from about 4,400 to 19,200 students. They have diverse student populations. Three of the four districts (Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde) have above-state-average student poverty while Upland is slightly below the state average. Similarly, three districts have percentages of English learners above the state average, with one below. Finally, three districts have a state-average percentage of students in special education (10 percent), while Sanger is below average at 8 percent.

Table 1: District Demographics, 2008-09

District name	Region	Enrollment	Percent special education	Percent poverty	Percent English learners
Kerman	Central	4,398	10	78	30
Sanger	Central	10,368	8	76	22
Upland	South	14,307	10	40	14
Val Verde	South	19,183	10	74	26
State average	N/A	13,094	10	50	20

Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

District Profiles

Below, we provide brief profiles of these districts, including their demographics, special education performance, and the strategies identified by their special education directors as contributing to their success. It should be noted that these descriptions are based on one-hour interviews conducted with each special education director. These district respondents have read, sometimes added additional information to, and confirmed the accuracy of the summaries in this report. Our attempt is to provide brief and summative information, rather than detailed descriptions of their special education programs. The broader concepts they describe may be of interest, and readers may wish to follow up with these districts to pursue more detailed questions regarding specific strategies of interest. After the profiles, we summarize the overarching strategies across the four districts.

District Profile 1: Kerman Unified School District

In Fresno County, Kerman Unified enrolls approximately 4,400 students. Over three-quarters (78 percent) of its students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and almost one-third (30 percent) are English learners. In 2008-09, 40 percent of Kerman's students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored proficient or above in mathematics and 37 percent in English Language Arts, compared with 33 percent and 32 percent for students in special education statewide, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable levels of students in poverty (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: Average Special Education Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Kerman Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09
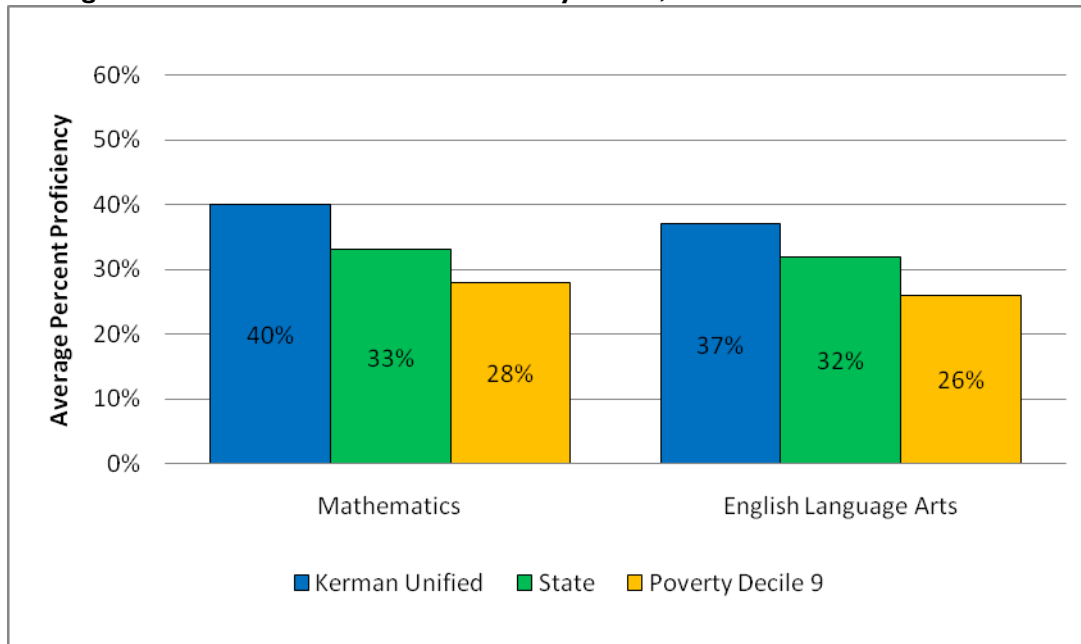
Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In June 2010, we interviewed Robert Postler, who had been Kerman's coordinator of special education for two years, to learn about the factors he credited for the district's success. He noted three main factors:

- An inclusion philosophy with support from resource teachers;

- Use of Read 180; Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) supported by professional development; and Response to Intervention (RtI) strategies; and

- Emphasis on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with collaboration between general and special education teachers.

Mr. Postler described Kerman's inclusion philosophy as follows: "It is my belief and the district's belief that special education is considered not to be a separate entity; they are all one and have the same right and privileges as general education kids." At the elementary and middle schools, they strive for full inclusion; most students identified for special education are fully integrated with support from resource teachers. At the high school, students in special education receive support from four resource teachers within or outside general education classrooms depending on student needs.

The district uses Read 180, a comprehensive intervention for students below grade level, with a large number of students with disabilities at the elementary and middle school levels. Postler cited the intervention as resulting in significant success. Specific teachers are trained in the program and work 90 minutes per day with students, who rotate among three stations: small group work with the teacher, computer work at the student's level, and individual reading.

In addition, Kerman has utilized Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) for the past four years, supported by ongoing staff development. EDI focuses on the use of (a) instructional grouping (using flexible skill grouping as opposed to "tracking"); (b) instructional time (increasing academic learning time—the time students are successfully engaged); and (c) continuous assessment (providing ongoing in-program assessments to inform instructional practice). EDI is used especially at the K-8 level, with weekly monitoring by school and district administrators to ensure consistent implementation.

Over the past year, the district special education director reported having worked with the support of the superintendent to formally implement RtI through a district-relevant implementation plan and staff training. The district has also recently purchased Read Well, a reading intervention program for K-3, as well as DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) Online, an assessment program that measures students' early literacy skills in five areas: phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Finally, Kerman has emphasized PLCs for several years, which specifically includes collaboration between general and special education teachers. Mr. Postler attributes their efforts to fully incorporate students with disabilities into the core curriculum as well as the programs and strategies described above as the keys to their impressive academic success.

District Profile 2: Sanger Unified School District

Sanger Unified, which is also in Fresno County, enrolls approximately 10,400 students. Over three-quarters (76 percent) of its students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and more than one-fifth (22 percent) are English learners (see Exhibit 2). In 2008-09, 49 percent of Sanger's students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored proficient or above in mathematics and 38 percent did so in English Language Arts, compared to 33 and 32 percent for students in special education statewide, and 28 and 26 percent in districts with comparable levels of students in poverty (see Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Sanger Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09
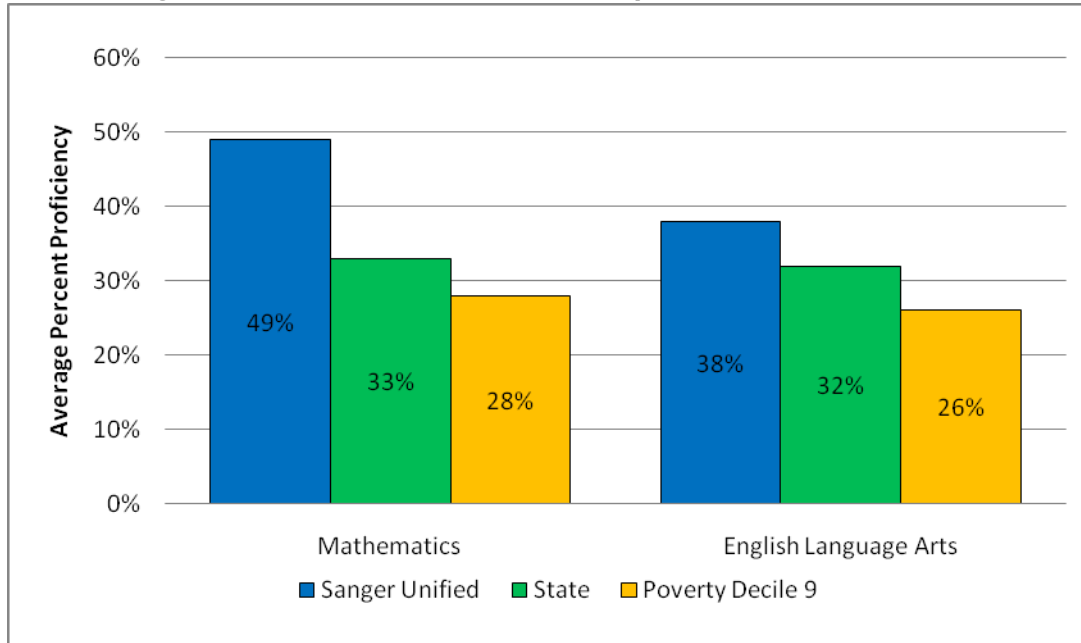
Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

These results are especially impressive given the relatively low percentage of students served in special education in the district. In 2008-09, Sanger identified 8 percent of their students for special education compared to the statewide average of 10 percent and over 13 percent nationally. Despite this more concentrated population of students in special education, which district staff describe as being primarily focused on students with the most severe needs, the special education population in Sanger performs substantially better than other districts statewide.

In June 2010, we interviewed Sanger's special education director, Matt Navo. He attributed three primary factors to Sanger's success:

- Full inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms;

- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) with continuous assessment; and the use of Response to Intervention (RtI); and

- Implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where general and special education teachers as well as school psychologists collaborate.

Mr. Navo described full inclusion as the district's vision for special education—i.e., to fully include as many children as possible in a regular education setting, along with full support to meet their needs. An important underlying rationale is the strong belief that all students can achieve.

Mr. Navo described the second factor, EDI, as "a way to provide a structured lesson delivery on new concepts while gain real time information about how a student is responding to that instruction."[3] The teacher can then immediately intervene with those students who do not understand the lesson. In addition, through the use of RtI, Sanger attempts to meet students' exceptional learning needs outside of

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[3] See the Kerman Unified profile for a description of EDI.

special education when appropriate. Only when other interventions have not worked are students referred to special education. Thus, he described the successful implementation of RtI as contributing to the district's substantially lower-than-average rate of special education identification.

As the third factor, Mr. Navo noted that Sanger has had PLCs for the past six years. The PLCs allow general and special education teachers to collaboratively discuss evidence regarding the degree of student learning taking place and to use their RtI system to respond to student needs. School psychologists are part of the PLCs as well. Sanger uses psychologists differently from most districts. While school psychologists are often used almost exclusively to conduct special education assessments (to determine if students qualify for service), in Sanger they function as "quasi-vice principals," serving on leadership teams, conducting walk throughs, dealing with student behavior issues, and serving as the backbone of the RtI process.

District Profile 3: Upland Unified School District

Upland Unified in San Bernardino County enrolls 14,300 students, with 40 percent eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and 14 percent English learners (slightly below the statewide averages of 50 percent and 20 percent). In 2008-09, Upland's students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored above average in mathematics (40 versus 33 percent) and English language arts (39 versus 32) compared with the state as a whole, and also scored higher than in districts with comparable percentages of students in poverty. (See Exhibit 5.)

Exhibit 5: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Upland Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09
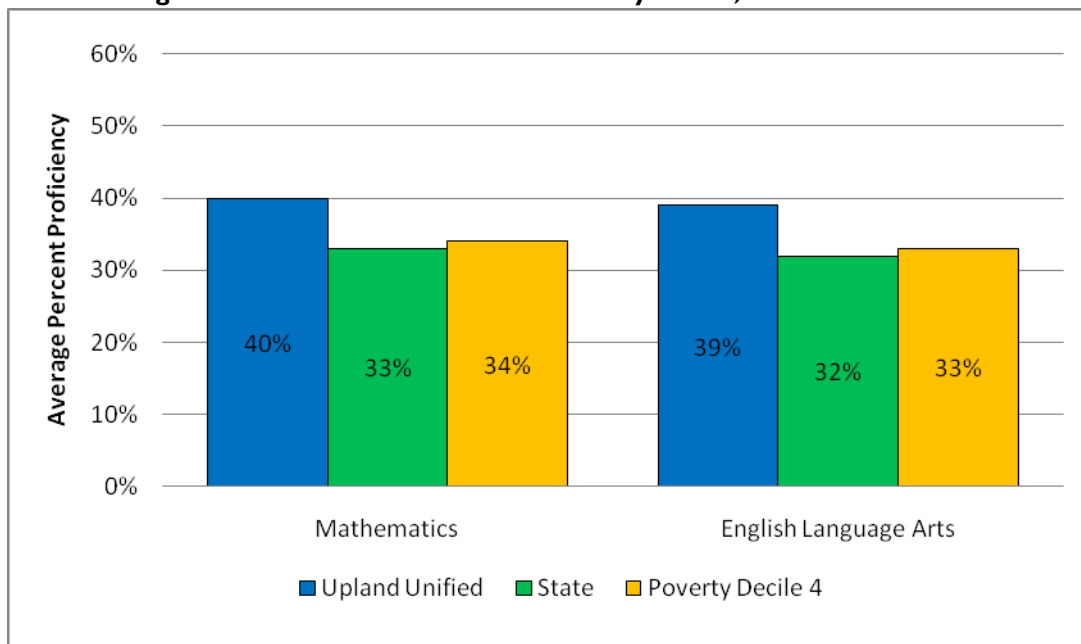
Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In June 2010, we interviewed Upland's director of student services, Lori Thompson, who cited three primary factors that have contributed to the district's success with its special education population:

- A blended program through curriculum mapping and common assessments;

- Collaboration and co-teaching,; and

- Professional development (e.g., Guided Language Acquisition Design [GLAD] strategies).

Special education in Upland continues to evolve, and is moving toward a blended program in which students and teachers associated with special education are integrated into general education—particularly at the junior high and high school levels. Five years ago, the district started "de-tracking" its high school. To allow all students to be on the same academic track, general and special education teachers developed common curriculum and assessments in all departments. All students now take college prep courses in mathematics, English, social science, and other subjects. Instead of being in a separate class, students identified for special education take college prep classes and receive specialized academic instruction from special education teachers when needed. At the middle school level, students in special education get access to the core curriculum in classes where general and special education teachers work collaboratively.

At the elementary level, while the district still has resource and special day class teachers, the district is implementing more blended instruction—particularly in social studies and science, because these subjects are easier to blend than mathematics and English language arts. Upland used to cluster special day classes at just a few schools with a lot of bussing. However, given the cost of bussing and the goal to have students attend their neighborhood schools they have distributed their special day classes more evenly across the district. This makes blended instruction more viable because students in special education are no longer concentrated at a few school sites.

In addition to collaborating and co-teaching when blending instruction, teachers engage in formalized transition planning for students in special education moving into junior high and high school. Sending and receiving teachers meet to discuss the students with disabilities making these transitions. The goal is to maximize the degree to which they can be in blended classes and fully exposed to the core curriculum, with the levels of support needed to make them successful.

Upland has emphasized professional development for teachers in meeting the needs of all learners. Ms. Thompson described the adoption of GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design) strategies, which focus on literacy and visual strategies for learning, as very useful for students in special education.

District Profile 4: Val Verde Unified District

Val Verde Unified, in Riverside County, is a relatively large district, with an enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. About three-quarters (74 percent) of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and more than one-quarter (26 percent) are English language learners. In 2008-09, Val Verde's students in special education taking the California Standards Test (CST) scored at or above average in mathematics (37 versus 33 percent) and English language arts (32 versus 32 percent), compared to students in special education statewide. Compared with districts with comparable percentages of students in poverty, Val Verde's students with disabilities scored higher in both mathematics (37 versus 28 percent) and English language arts (32 versus 26 percent). (See Exhibit 6.)

Exhibit 6: Average Special Education Percent Proficiency in Mathematics and English Language Arts on the California Standards Test for Val Verde Unified Compared to the State Average and to Districts with Similar Poverty Levels, 2008-09
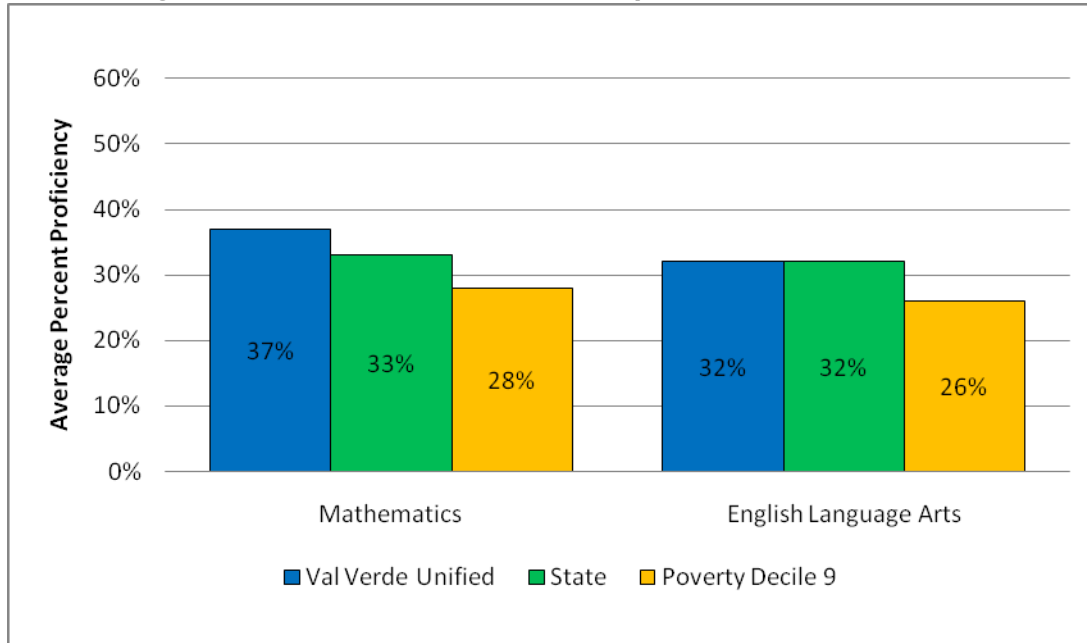
Source: The California Standardized Testing (STAR) Program

In May 2010, we interviewed Val Verde's special education director, Vicki Butler, along with the middle and high school program specialist, Christine Counts, and the elementary school instructional coach, Jeff Mossa, to learn about the factors they credited for Val Verde's strong performance with its students in special education. Ms. Butler explained that the students in special education are performing well partly because the general education students are performing well. The philosophy in the district is that special education is not separate from general education; it is treated as part of the whole. Also, special education is deliberately located in the curriculum and instruction department as opposed to under student services to avoid silos and bridge the gap between general and special education. In addition to this philosophy, the team cited three primary factors that have contributed to the success of their students identified for special education:

- Equitable access to the core curriculum and assessments;

- Professional development for special education teachers; and

- Collaborative teaching and teamwork.

Val Verde uses a "flexible model" for students in special education; students are integrated into general education as much as possible but also receive specialized academic instruction depending on their needs and IEP goals. As Ms. Butler pointed out, "These models are better than the old model that we used to have where we separated kids out and isolated them. These are more entwined with the regular education program." The team also noted that through the use of RtI strategies, they have been able to identify and provide services for at-risk students to keep their special education population at 10 percent.

Another important factor identified by the Val Verde team is their professional development for special education teachers. Two years ago, the district received a Special Education Teacher Professional Development Grant as part of the Reading First project. Special education teachers were trained in the

English language arts core curriculum, Houghton Mifflin, which is usually only offered to general education teachers. This training allowed special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum's different components and supplements. Teachers were also given Step Up to Writing training related to their writing program, as well as training on GLAD strategies (described in the previous profile), co-teaching, and data analysis.

At the elementary level, Val Verde emphasizes collaborative teaching and teamwork through learning centers. The learning center is a place where students can be taught through small group or targeted individualized instruction in a general education setting. Also, there is a special education teacher on each elementary school leadership team to ensure that special education is fully integrated with general education. In addition, each elementary school has an instructional coach who facilitates data meetings.

At the middle and high school levels, there is a special education team that works with grade-level teams. Students with disabilities are fully included in general education classes with either instructional assistant or special education teacher assistance in their classes. There are also Basic Classes, which are smaller and designed for students with more intensive needs. Next year, the district will add instructional coaches to its secondary programs as well. According to Mr. Mossa, "We have built the capacity of our special education teachers to have them bring value to the general education classroom for the special and general education students."

Overall District Themes

Examining themes across the four districts, the following strategies emerged in support of special education performance:

- Inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts)

- Collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts)

- Continuous assessment and use of RtI (three districts)

- Targeted professional development (three districts)

- Use of Explicit Direct Instruction (two districts)

Inclusion and access to the core curriculum was the strategy most emphasized by all four district administrators as having contributed to special education performance in their districts. However, as in the Donahue Institute study, inclusion efforts take different forms across these districts. In Kerman and Sanger, the strategy is to fully integrate as many students identified for special education as possible, with proper support from resource teachers depending on student needs. Upland, on the other hand, is moving toward a blended program, which started with the "de-tracking" of its high school, providing students in special education more access to college prep courses at the high school level and to the core curriculum at the middle and elementary levels. Similarly, Val Verde Unified uses a "flexible model" in which students with disabilities are integrated into general education as much as possible but also receive specialized academic instruction when needed.

All four districts indicated that for inclusion to work, general and special education teachers need to collaborate. This strategy was consistently mentioned as a way to improve special education performance as well. In two of the districts (Kerman and Sanger), the collaboration takes place through PLCs, where special and general education teachers discuss student needs and plan instruction together. In Sanger, school psychologists are also part of the PLCs. In Upland and Val Verde, collaboration takes the form of blended instruction, transition planning, use of learning centers, and special education teacher participation on leadership teams to ensure integration of general and special education.

Kerman, Sanger, and Val Verde cited continuous use of student assessment data and RtI strategies as a way to respond to student needs and limit the number of students referred to special education. Kerman, Upland, and Val Verde provide targeted professional development to meet the needs of all learners, emphasizing particular strategies (e.g., EDI, GLAD) or training special education teachers to better understand and use the core curriculum. Finally, Kerman and Sanger both use EDI as a way to structure lesson content and increase student engagement through the use of flexible groupings and ongoing assessments.

Study Implications

It is important for education researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to give greater consideration to the substantial variation observed in the academic results for students with disabilities in school districts across the state. Some districts are producing educational outcomes for their students in special education that are much better than those of other districts. Given the magnitude of spending on special education services and all that is at stake for these children, it is important that we gain a better understanding of what these districts are doing that might inform others.

This study begins this process. Through a rigorous selection process, we found a number of districts that substantially and consistently outperformed similar districts on state performance measures. Subsequently, we conducted in-depth interviews with the special education directors in eight of these districts to learn about the strategies they had put in place to improve special education performance. Finally, we selected four districts for further analysis and to feature in this report.

The main themes that emerged across these districts are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices for students in special education: inclusion and access to the core curriculum (four districts); collaboration between special education and general education teachers (four districts); continuous assessment and use of RtI (three districts); and targeted professional development (three districts).

All four districts were very clear about the need for students in special education to gain full access to the curriculum, that this will only occur through strong general and special education collaboration, and about the importance of creating a learning community unified in the belief that all children can learn. Aside from this overall philosophy, though, each district reported developing specific strategies that were somewhat unique.

We believe these districts, and others like them, can serve as "lighthouses" for other districts struggling to fully incorporate their special education population and to give them the best possible chance to succeed academically. Next steps could be to extend this exploration of what is working in California and to form networks to share this success with others. For example, more could be done to identify high-performing districts in California, which may serve as models to others. Further exploration could occur through site visits to districts and schools in order to document through interviews and observations how successful special education outcomes are produced at different sites.

In addition, the California Department of Education, the County Offices of Education, and the California Comprehensive Center might work collaboratively to facilitate sharing of these best practices. Some of

this is occurring already through school partnerships in five California Counties[4] and through webinars with principals[5] and special education directors[6] facilitated by the California Comprehensive Center.

Last, this study only examined performance on the California Standards Test (CST), which is the statewide examination given to the vast majority of students in special education in the state. However, it also would be important to study the performance of students taking the California Modified Assessment (CMA) and the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) to understand best practices for the students in special education taking these assessments.

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[4] For a description of these partnerships, an interim report can be requested from Mette Huberman (mhuberman@air.org).
[5] For an example of a webinar with a high-performing, high-need middle schools, see:
http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/4333
[6] For a webinar with the special education director in Sanger Unified, see:
http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/e/4860

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CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION
Sample Questions for Meetings with School Districts

1.	Have you implemented any district-wide initiatives?
	
	    a. How did you gain acceptance for these initiatives?
	    b. Did any pertain to ELs?

2.	What are your plans and goals for the ELL kids in your district?
3.	What are your district's key ELD instructional strategies? a. Which are having the most positive results?
4.	What is your policy on reclassification?

5.	How does the proposed director for this project participate in the district's overall planning for ELLs?
	
	    a. Will they have access to keep the project moving?
	    b. How will the project be sustained after the grant period?
	    c. How do you envision the program helping kids in the future?

6.	Tell us about your relationship with the unions?
	
	    a. Are you currently in negotiations?
	    b. If not, how long did it take reach agreement?
	    c. Were there any particular issues that surfaced?

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION
Sample ELL Proposal – Activity Table
(Proposals are for three years – this sample is for Year 1 only.)

TABLE 1.A   OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES & PARTICIPANTS
(Year 1 of 3)

Replace the examples below by selecting text typing over it.

Activity (Include details of participation)	Total Number of Student Participants	Total Number of Non-Student Participants	Start & End Dates (Mo/Yr)
Example 1: 1. 45 3rd graders at 3 sites will attend afterschool program for 30 wks (2 hr/day for 3 days/wk) to learn 400 academic vocabulary words and complete homework.	45	0	Oct 2012 to May 2012
Example 2: 2. 21 teachers will attend 3 days of professional development to improve vocabulary teaching strategies	0	21	Aug 2012; Nov 2012; March 2013

TABLE 1.B   OVERVIEW OF OUTCOMES & ASSESSMENTS
(Year 1 of 3)

GOAL (Quantifiable outcome)	District or School Assessment of Achievement or Participation	If applicable, which State Assessments will be used? Include dates of assessments and when data will be available.
Example: 45 third grade English Learners at CELDT levels 1-3 will understand and use 400 academic English vocabulary words after 100 hours of participation.	District-designed test. Success is 85% correct on post-test of choice and fill-in items using a sample of the 400 words. Results will be available within 2 weeks of end of activity.	Participants will increase (1) more than one level on CELDT-Reading (assessment will take place July-Oct 2012 and results will be available Jan 2013) and (2) CST-ELA (taken April 2013 and results available Sep 2013).

TABLE 1.C   ACTIVITY TIMELINE
(Year 1 of 3)
Examples

ACTIVITY	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
Site Visits to Xxxxx, Xxxxx, Xxxxx			X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Formative Assessment		X	X				X				X	
PLC Training							X	X	X	X	X	
Inter-District Mentoring (Admin Leaders)				X		X				X		
Alternative Governance Board Meetings			X	X	X		X	X	X		X	
Response to Intervention observation/development			X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Academic Language Training (word lists)			X		X		X		X			
District Culture Leadership Training				X		X		X		X		
Use of Data			X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X

TABLE 1.C   ACTIVITY TIMELINE
(Year 1 of 3)

ACTIVITY	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION

Sample ELL Proposal - Budget Form

(Proposals are for 3 years; bottom tab has detail for Year 1 only as a sample.)

OVERVIEW: BUDGETS FOR 3 YEARS

Yellow cells have automatic calculation formulas; don't type in these cells. Enter amounts requested from CVF.

	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	TOTAL
1000 CERTIFICATED ADMIN SALARIES				$0
1000 CERTIFICATED SALARIES				$0
2000 CLASSIFIED SALARIES				$0
3000 BENEFITS				$0
4000 BOOKS & INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPLIES				$0
4000 OTHER SUPPLIES				$0
5000 CONSULTANTS & CONTRACTS				$0
5000 TRAVEL				$0
7000 INDIRECTS				$0
TOTAL	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**	**$0**

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION (CVF)

Sample English Language Learner (ELL) Grant Proposal Form

Please submit the completed full proposal, plus attachments, by email by [date].
Thank you.

|	
Name of School District	
Date	
Name/Title of Contact Person	
Email address	
Telephone number(s)	
Mailing address	

Name of Superintendent	
Number of years s/he has been Superintendent of this district	
Total number of years s/he has been with the district	
As applicable, list Superintendent's prior position(s) with the district	
Name(s) of Associate or Assistant Superintendent(s), if any	
Number of years each has been with the district	

Name and title of proposed Project Director for the proposed program	
Number of years s/he has been with the district	
Number of years s/he has been in current position	
To whom does this person report to within the district?	
2011-12 District Enrollment	
2011-12 number of English Learners and percentage of total enrollment	
Number and percentage of RFEPs for 2010-11	
District's 2010-11 API – Overall	
District's 2010-11 API – English Learners	
Please list 2 largest Sub-Groups and their 2010-11 APIs	

	Y	N
Is your district in Program Improvement? Yes		
If yes, for how many years?		

Title of proposed project	
Number of schools in proposed project	
Names of schools in proposed project	
Grade levels to be served by proposed project	
Estimated numbers to be served by project for Year 1	
ELL students	
EO students (if applicable)	
District-level administrators	
Site administrators (principals, vice principals)	
Teachers	
Other: (please identify)	
Total number to be served by project for Year 1	
If you expect variance from year to year, please list variance in number of participants served by year and explain.	
Estimated amount requested for Year 1	
Total amount requested for 3 years	

1. **Please describe the proposed project.**
   The proposed project should begin during the 2012-13 school year and should be for a maximum of three years.
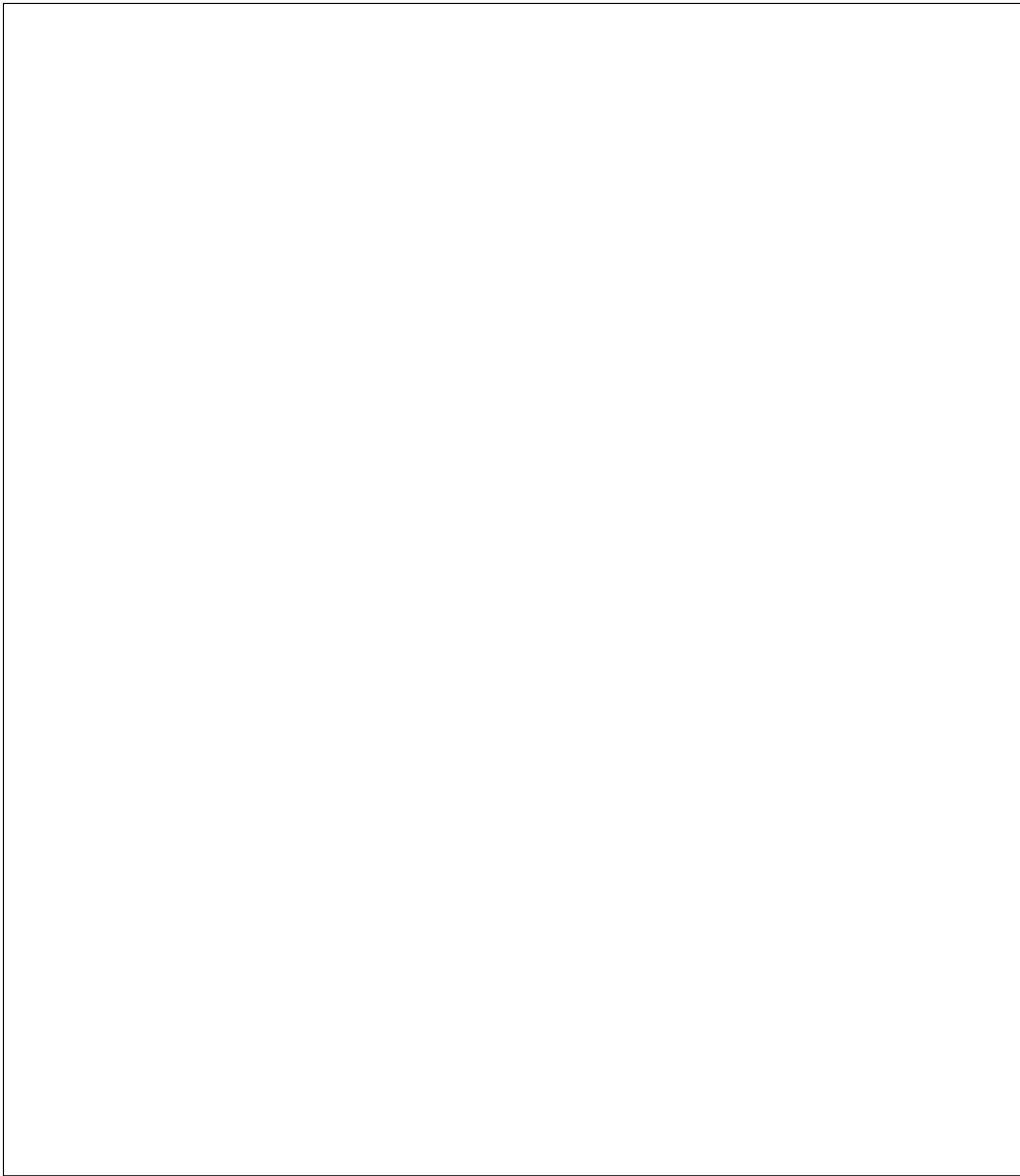
2.   What are the top 3 goals of the proposed project?

3.   How does the proposed project "fit" with the district's other projects?

4. How will you track the proposed project's progress?

5. What is the documented need for the proposed project? (You may cite your own and/or outside research.)

6. Has the district launched successful initiatives for English Learners in the past? Yes	Y	N

If yes, please describe in the space below.

7. What are the district's key instructional strategies for ELLs?

8. Do you have ELL training for teachers? Yes	Y	N
If yes, please describe in the space below.		

9. Does the district utilize Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) No	Y	N
If yes, please describe in the space below.		

10. Governing Board. Please describe your governing board. Include:

    A. Number of members

    B. Whether they represent the entire district or region of the district

    C. Average length of term

    D. The number, if any, of members who have a particular interest in programs for English learners

11. Supplement/supplant: Describe how CVF's funds will supplement rather than supplant existing funding, and specify whether the funds requested from CVF were previously provided by other sources (e.g., Title I) and designate such sources, if any.

12. Other grants: Please list grants you have for the current school year (2011-12) and the next school year (2012-13). List the name of the funder, the amount of the grant, the length of the grant, and a VERY brief description of the grant.

13. Average expenditure: What was your district's "revenue limit" expenditure per ADA for 2010-11? Also, what was your district's additional categorical expenditure per English learner for the same year?

14. Student participants:

A. Please identify the specific groups of students your program will target (e.g., ELLs in 3rd grade with CELDT levels 3 or lower)

B. If other factors are used to identify specific participants within the groups, tell how that will be done. Please describe your process for:

      B.1   Selection

      B.2   Recruitment

      B.3   Retention

15. Non-student participants:

A. Please identify the specific groups your program will target (e.g., 2nd grade teachers with a majority of ELL students not yet proficient on the CST-English Language Arts test.)

B. If other factors are used to identify specific participants within the groups, tell how that will be done. Please describe your process for:

      B.1   Selection

      B.2   Recruitment

      B.3   Retention

16. Outside service providers:

    A. If you propose to utilize outside service providers on contract, please list their names, phone numbers, emails, and websites, and describe their functions.

B. Please describe any current or recent experience with the provider(s) and the reason for their selection.

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17. Partners:

A. If you propose to collaborate with partners or groups, please list their names, phone numbers, emails, and websites, and describe how you will partner and/or collaborate.

B. Specifically describe why they have been selected to partner or collaborate.

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18. Attendance: Please specifically describe how you will document and report attendance of (1) student participants and (2) non-student participants.

19. Program changes: Please outline how you will notify CVF of any significant program changes (e.g., leadership or personnel changes; schedule changes) in a timely manner.

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS:

Please attach the following documents:

- Letter of support from the Superintendent that indicates support for the proposed project and for participation in the outside evaluation study.

- Board-approved district Master Plan for English Learners.

- CELDT scores ("all assessments") for the district for the following test windows:
    - July 2011-October 2011 (available January 2012)
    - July 2010-October 2010 (available on the CDE website)
    - July 2009-October 2009 (available on the CDE website)

FULL PROPOSAL IS DUE [date]. Please email the completed full proposal and attachments to…

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION
Notes from School Board Meeting - 2012

Name of School District:	
Meeting Date:	
Start and Ending Time:	
Number of School Board Members Present:	
Public Attendance:	#
Comments: *(Were there staff, parents, general public, media, etc.?)*	

Most Substantial Amount of Time Given to:	Describe:

Briefly describe the Superintendent's role at the meeting:

General Comments:

Submitted by:		**Date:**	

Please attach the meeting's agenda to this report.