



## Primed for Reform

### *A District's Use of Existing Assets to Drive Improvement* ▴

*This brief highlights one California district's initial successes in turning around its long-standing low performance. With administrators and educators in the midst of implementing a robust reform agenda, there are clear signs that the district is on the rise. The reform initiatives have stopped a downward slide in student attendance, behavior, and performance. With more students attending school and graduating, and with fewer students receiving referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, the community's perception of the district has improved markedly. To begin the turnaround, district leaders engaged the community for help focusing the district's change efforts. Now, many community stakeholders are actively involved in shaping the delivery of needed services for students. Administrators have created clear accountability structures to ensure each staff member does his or her part to enact change, and teams are working collaboratively to carry out key activities. The district's reform agenda promotes multiple initiatives that work in tandem and are based on identified student needs.*

*The district has also benefited from the statewide rollout of California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Because the LCFF's requirements align to the district's initiatives, the district is able to advance its comprehensive reform efforts with greater momentum and state backing. The district is well poised to significantly impact how disenfranchised students are served.*

The Region IX Equity Assistance Center (EAC) at WestEd has worked with the district to document its reform efforts over the past two years. EAC staff have attended monthly district meetings and events, conducted school site visits, reviewed district documents, and interviewed key district staff to understand the implementation of various initiatives. Additionally, the EAC collaborated with the district to create a Principal Evaluation System Handbook that linked existing district practice with policy and research on best practice. This brief captures some of the main lessons that the EAC has learned from the district's turnaround

➤ This brief reports on the early stages and initial successes of turnaround efforts in a California school district.



progress, including the ways it has linked existing efforts and successes with those required by the state's LCFF initiative.

## District and City Context

Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD) is located in the city of Vallejo, north of the San Francisco Bay Area. Vallejo is home to approximately 117,000 residents of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds — 30 percent White, 25 percent Asian, 22 percent Black, 20 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent mixed or other heritage. The main employers in the city are the school district itself, Six Flags Discovery Kingdom, Kaiser Permanente, and Sutter Health. Many residents are the third and fourth generations to live in the city. An estimated 24 percent of residents have college or graduate degrees and another 36 percent have attended college and/or received two-year associate degrees.<sup>1</sup>

VCUSD has 26 schools and serves approximately 15,000 students, representing diverse backgrounds — 35 percent Hispanic or Latino, 31 percent Black, 22 percent Asian, 10 percent White, and 2 percent multiple races. Approximately 71 percent of the district's students qualify for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, 18 percent are English Learners, and 11 percent are identified as Students with Disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

In 2004, the state took over control of VCUSD because of financial issues in the district caused by a lack of accountability and because the district had inadequate data management systems and a history of low academic achievement. The

1 See [http://www.ci.vallejo.ca.us/about\\_vallejo/demographic\\_profile](http://www.ci.vallejo.ca.us/about_vallejo/demographic_profile)

2 Based on 2012/13 CBEDS data from <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us>, and 2013/14 Data Quest data from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/Dataquest>

district had not been providing oversight to ensure the use of a consistent curriculum, and had not been using common assessments to gauge learning or the quality of teaching. As one district staff member describes it, "There was no real focus on equity related to the instruction students received. You got what you got depending on your teacher."

According to a 2004 Fiscal and Crisis Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) report, there were serious learning issues in the district, with 31–48 percent of students scoring Below Basic on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts over the previous four years. At the middle and high school levels, student performance declined over this period, particularly in Algebra I, with a majority of the district's students scoring Below Basic.<sup>3</sup> The district's data management systems did not count the number of students served. The district was overstaffed, employing more adults than needed to serve students. According to both the FCMAT report and the perceptions of district staff, there was minimal district direction, little accountability and follow through, and an insufficient data system to track students or the work of adults.

The challenges were significant for anyone trying to remedy the issues plaguing the district. From 2002 until 2011, the district struggled to get back on its feet and to keep a superintendent who could provide a consistent vision for the organization. VCUSD had five superintendents in this nine-year time span. There was also turnover of various high-level staff in the Business and Human Resources offices. Each new superintendent introduced various changes to improve the district's fiscal practices and academic curriculum, but changes typically failed to last because those who promoted the changes moved on.

3 See <http://fcmat.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/02/VallejoPA11104.pdf>

VCUSD had one of the top 10 highest rates of suspending students among California school districts, and only half of VCUSD's students were graduating. Of students who were graduating, most were not college or career ready. The district served many youth who were entering the juvenile justice system. The students came from homes and communities experiencing poverty and health disparities. Safety was an issue both in the schools and in the community.

The district's challenges were mirrored in struggles that the city faced. In 2008, the city of Vallejo filed for bankruptcy, which was attributed to the loss of industries and jobs, most markedly the closing of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard that at one time had more than 40,000 employees. The job losses had contributed to the loss of residents and city revenue. There was a lack of employment opportunities for young people and for graduates from the city's schools. However, in 2011, a Federal judge released the city from bankruptcy status, and Vallejo is now taking new measures to find revenue. It has instituted the first of its kind Participatory Budgeting whereby residents have a say in developing project ideas.

## Reforming a Low-Performing District

Around the same time the city of Vallejo was emerging from bankruptcy, its school district also began to turn around. In 2011 the district brought in a new superintendent who has remained with VCUSD and is as committed to the district's improvement as when she started there. Together, the superintendent and the school board have worked to strengthen district leadership that is able to enact change.

To turn around the range of challenges VCUSD faced, these leaders recognized the importance of engaging the community, mobilizing partnerships, holding staff accountable, and setting a

multifaceted reform agenda to unify a district that had previously undergone so much turmoil.

### Engaging the community

The first key change in district functions was a move to engage a community that had been disenfranchised and to learn who the connectors in the community were. The new superintendent in 2011 immediately held numerous community listening sessions to hear what the community felt was needed to turn around a struggling district and to share her vision for district improvement. Through these sessions and other means, the superintendent mined the community prior to instituting curricular changes. She identified existing assets within the community to understand the supports and partnerships that could be leveraged to fill gaps in services the district was not yet providing. The community listening sessions were a first step in forging relationships with parents, community members, local clergy, city officials, unions, and various other stakeholders who could work with the district to jointly support student success. Participants in these sessions resonated with the issues the district already had identified, and this provided unification between the district and the community. According to district staff, the superintendent built confidence with the community very quickly, in part, because engaging the community was so unconventional for the district.

### Mobilizing partnerships

After convening community listening sessions and connecting with businesses, the superintendent was approached by several interested partners that wanted to help VCUSD because the district was a major player in the community. Specifically, Kaiser Permanente, the largest employer in the city, wanted to work with VCUSD because data from Kaiser studies showed that the community was suffering from ailments that led to short life ■■

spans. For years, Kaiser Permanente had wanted to partner with the district but previous VCUSD administrations had not engaged Kaiser's services. But this changed when the new superintendent created a Director of Partnerships and Community Engagement position to serve as the connector between the district and the community. This position grew directly out of the superintendent's one-on-one meetings with board and community members. Through this position, the district has forged various partnerships, including a partnership with Kaiser Permanente that is now supporting the Full Service Community Schools initiative by providing health clinics and medical services at its schools. Other partners supporting district initiatives include the Sierra Health Foundation, Solano County Probation Department, Solano County Health and Social Services, and the United Way. Such partnerships are helping the district to support the whole child and have helped the district be successful in developing a process of identifying and monitoring crossover youth — young people who are involved in the child welfare and foster care systems, and are drawn into the juvenile justice system.

### Holding staff accountable

After joining VCUSD in 2011, the superintendent created new leadership structures for her cabinet, executive cabinet, and principal evaluators as a way to hold staff accountable. She established ground rules of trusting one another, being loyal to the team, and keeping information shared at these meetings confidential. She communicated clear expectations for each team and created organizational charts to delineate responsibilities. Even at the individual level, each district staff position has strategic actions on which the staff member is evaluated annually so that there is transparency of expectations for the role. According to district staff, these tight structures and evaluation systems were not in place before. One member had never before been formally evaluated until the current

superintendent came on board. Now, everyone is held accountable to a set of goals and standards that are aligned to the district's goals.

In 2011/2012, the district rolled out an administrative reorganization that led to various staff members moving on because they did not fit well with the new way of working. Many staff with historical and institutional knowledge remained, and the superintendent tapped into their knowledge and skills. The superintendent built her district administrative team based on staff who had the mindset that *all children can learn* and who demonstrated that they were willing to do hard work to achieve the ambitious goals she was setting for turning around the district. Staff had to have a sense of urgency to meet the needs of students. District staff have indicated that they are aware of the time sensitive nature of their work, noting that time is of essence when it comes to improving student achievement. In the words of one staff member, "We are building the plane as we are flying it."

District leaders have also recognized the importance of collecting and systematizing the use of data, which previously had been performed inconsistently. To this end, the superintendent created a Director of School and Student Accountability position to manage and interpret hard data and establish a robust student accountability system. Now, the district monitors attendance, behavioral, and performance data by student, classroom, grade, school, and districtwide. It also regularly manages data on school climate, student engagement, and course access to understand the conditions that facilitate student success.

### Setting a multifaceted reform agenda

A robust turnaround agenda has emerged that builds on this groundwork with staff, the community, partners, and the school board. The district has established goals that include increasing

**FIGURE 1. VCUSD's multiple initiatives to address multiple needs**

Initiative	Need
<p><b>Full Service Community Schools:</b> Comprehensive academic, social, mental, and physical education services to meet student, family, and community needs</p>	<p>Increase parent engagement                      Provide access to basic services                      Increase student attendance                      Increase sense of belonging                      Address basic needs</p>
<p><b>Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM):</b> A framework for teaching based on natural ways of learning</p>	<p>Increase academic achievement                      Increase access to rigorous courses                      Increase student attendance</p>
<p><b>Wall-to-Wall Academies:</b> Small learning communities that link learning to real-world application</p>	<p>Increase college and career readiness                      Increase access to rigorous courses                      Increase student attendance</p>
<p><b>Restorative Justice:</b> Emphasizes repairing the harm caused by crime and conflict through a reparative, inclusive, and balanced approach</p>	<p>Improve school climate                      Improve student engagement                      Increase student attendance                      Increase sense of belonging</p>
<p><b>Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS):</b> Proactive, schoolwide behavior strategies to increase academic performance, improve safety, decrease problem behavior, and establish positive school culture</p>	<p>Improve school climate                      Improve student engagement                      Increase student attendance                      Increase sense of belonging                      Address basic needs</p>
<p><b>Common Core:</b> New state-adopted K-12 academic standards</p>	<p>Increase academic achievement                      Increase access to rigorous courses                      Increase college and career readiness</p>
<p><b>Positive Youth Justice:</b> Improve the lives of crossover youth through positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and wrap-around services</p>	<p>Improve school climate                      Increase student attendance                      Increase sense of belonging                      Address basic needs</p>

student achievement, eliminating the achievement gap, graduating all students meeting A–G requirements, increasing student enrollment, reducing the dropout rate and referrals, providing safe and supportive school environments, and involving parents and the community.

These goals are reflected in a multitude of initiatives which represent the scope of needs the

district is addressing. The initiatives support different elements of the school system, are intended to complement each other, and are based on data and identified needs. Figure 1 lists a handful of the district’s initiatives and the needs each is intended to address. For example, the Wall-to-Wall academies were expanded to include all 10th grade students in a small learning community in which students experience the same classes and

**FIGURE 2. The state’s LCAP priorities align with VCUSD’s needs and reform initiatives**

Needs	Initiatives	LCAP Priorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement Gap</li> <li>• Decreased Enrollment</li> <li>• 50% Dropout Rate</li> <li>• Students Not College &amp; Career Ready</li> <li>• Lack of Safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full Service Community Schools</li> <li>• STEAM</li> <li>• Wall-to-Wall Academies</li> <li>• Restorative Justice</li> <li>• Positive Behavior Intervention</li> <li>• Common Core</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Engagement</li> <li>• Student Achievement</li> <li>• School Climate</li> <li>• Basic Services</li> <li>• Implementation of Common Core</li> <li>• Course Access</li> <li>• Parent Involvement</li> <li>• Other Outcomes</li> </ul>

teachers together. The academies culminate in a final project reflecting the skills and knowledge learned through the academy. Parent and student survey feedback influenced the introduction of four new academies: the Health and Fitness Academy, Visual and Performing Arts Academy, International Finance Academy, and Law and Justice Academy. This initiative supports academic achievement by appealing to student interest and basing content on real-world application.

### Signs of Improvement

The district has made several notable initial impacts through its multifaceted reform efforts. In 2013, after nine years of state control, the district regained oversight of its schools from the state as a result of implementing sound fiscal and academic practices. The programs implemented since 2011 have engaged students and teachers in ways that have reduced the rates of referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. The district’s graduation rate has increased by 5 percent. For the 2013/14 academic year, the district’s student enrollment did not go down, and for the first time since 2008, the district is anticipating an increase in student enrollment. Parent and community feedback about changes in the district is positive, and the district’s regular

efforts to reach out to approximately 4,000 stakeholders have contributed to the changing community perception.

### Primed for New School Funding from the State

As the district was beginning to implement its reform agenda, California lawmakers were also considering similar reforms aimed at improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap throughout the state. In 2013, California adopted the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), a new way of deciding how much money each school district will receive. The LCFF, which will direct more funding to the highest-need students (English learners, low-income, and foster youth), requires that districts establish parent advisory committees to advise school boards and superintendents on LCFF implementation and to engage communities as they develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). Although these requirements represent a new direction for the state, the Vallejo district sees them as supporting the road that the district was already on. Figure 2 illustrates the alignment between the district’s originally identified needs, the initiatives

implemented to address those needs, and the new state-mandated LCAP priorities.

Under the new funding system, districts must set annual goals in eight areas of state priority: student engagement, student achievement, school climate, basic services, implementation of Common Core, course access, parental involvement, and other student outcomes. These areas of focus were priorities for the district prior to the state mandate, so this mandate represents an opportunity for VCUSD to garner momentum for the initiatives already underway. The district also sees the LCAP as an opportunity to critically analyze and refine its strategic actions.

The district's process for developing its LCAP has been led by the superintendent, driven by a district LCAP team, and influenced by multiple school and community stakeholders. The LCAP team consists of a subcommittee of cabinet members representing key district offices — Academic Achievement and Accountability, School and Student Accountability, Categorical and English Language Learners, School Support and Management, Special Education, Technology and Information Services, and Human Resources. The cross-office collaboration enabled the team to comprehensively address the LCAP priorities from multiple vantage points.

The district has centered its LCAP process around community feedback from students, parents, staff, and community organizations, building on the district's community listening sessions from 2011. The district has also kept advisory bodies (such as the English Learner advisory committee and the Parent Teacher Association) in the loop as it has developed an LCAP plan. As one means of gathering input, the district sent a survey (translated to Spanish) to every student's home. The district regularly tracked parent response rates to the survey and sent out multiple reminders to ensure parents had an opportunity to voice their opinions. The

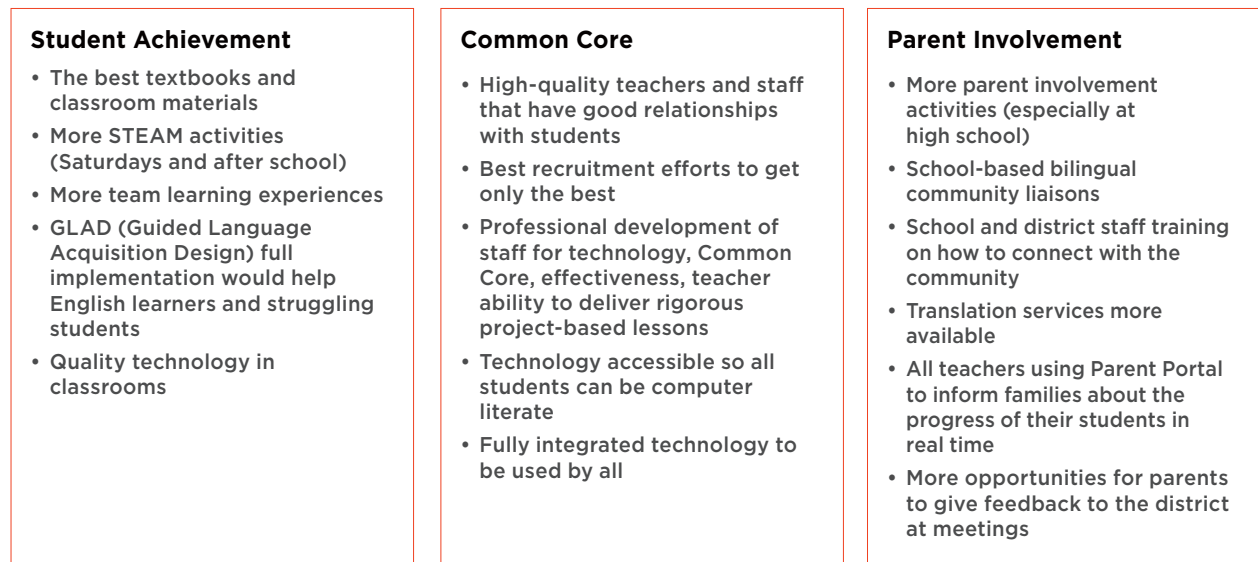
district also announced the initiative and survey to all district staff and encouraged their participation in the process and completion of the survey.

Survey data were analyzed and presented to 23 in-person stakeholder meetings with the following groups: students, parents, district advisory committees, the California School Employees Association, the Vallejo Education Association, classified and certificated staff, principals, reform initiative coordinators, district managers and coordinators, and cabinet members. Special attention was given to ensure caregivers of children in foster care were present at the parent meetings. Participants provided feedback on the survey data presented and were prompted to describe what they would like to see the district do to address the data findings. Results, particularly those of students, poignantly spoke to the lack of opportunities students have to succeed. For example, students' responses included: "Students want better science and math teachers," "Teachers [should be] teaching critical thinking instead of worksheets," and "All students need access to computers."

In addition to administering the survey and holding multiple stakeholder meetings, the district also gathered input from parents and community members by other means, including through the district's website. The LCAP team created a document that shows the alignment of stakeholder feedback to the eight required LCAP priorities. Figure 3 has an excerpt (focusing on three of the eight LCAP priorities) from the district's synthesis that aligns the community feedback to the LCAP priorities.

The district then made structural changes to the way it functions to ensure the LCAP could be adopted as requested by the various stakeholders. It ensured that financial and human resources as well as space and equipment were in place to allow the requested changes to take hold. The district created 39 new positions in support of the feedback. The LCAP team was charged with ■■

**FIGURE 3. Community input aligns with LCAP priorities**



developing job descriptions, such as a technology coordinator, technical support assistants, STEAM and Common Core coaches, and counselors for high school and college to name a few. In addition to these new positions, stipends will

be provided for bilingual communication support and technology point-persons at school sites to address immediate student, staff, and family needs. The LCAP team identified the space needed for computer labs in schools that did not already have them and the technology equipment to both update obsolete technology and ensure all schools had modern and sufficient technological capacity.

The district developed a draft LCAP, which it posted on its website to make the plan accessible to all. Visitors to the website were invited to provide feedback on the draft plan, and many have given input either through the website or directly to the district. At the time this brief was being written, the district was about to take its LCAP plan to the Board for a public hearing and subsequent approval. Upon approval, the district will begin to allocate more fiscal, personnel, material, and technological resources to students who need it most. Through the LCAP, the district hopes to continue and expand upon the progress made so far toward its goals.

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