



**The District Role in Graduation Rate Improvement**  
Promising Practices from Five California Districts

Final Report

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## Executive Summary

While evidence is mounting about school-level programs and policies that contribute to increased high school graduation rates, little attention has been paid to the role that districts can play in creating conditions for and supporting higher graduation rates.

In 2009-10, California joined other states in using a cohort graduation rate—a rate that uses the state longitudinal database to track individual students over time to produce a more accurate and consistent indicator of graduation rates across schools, districts, and states. Calculations for the class of 2013 indicate that 80.4 percent of California students who enrolled in high school in 2009–10 graduated four years later. Those graduation rates are significantly lower for students with disabilities (60.8 percent), migrant students (74.3 percent), English learners (61.6 percent), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (72.7 percent). Early examination of these data suggests that there has indeed been progress in graduation rates in California.

This study describes district-level strategies that might have a positive influence on graduation rates. The purpose of the study was to understand what practices, policies, and programs district leaders attribute to increased graduation rates. To do so, we identified the ten districts in the state that had the largest increases in graduation between 2009-10 and 2012-13. Of these, we selected five to interview. Since the focus of the study was on improvement strategies rather than strategies being used by districts with consistently high graduation rates, one of the artifacts of this process is the fact that many of these districts had graduation rates well below the state average to begin with and so had more room for growth. In addition, we cannot say with certainty what caused the growth in graduation rates. What we report are district and school leader perceptions of what might have contributed to their success. Given the descriptive nature of the study, the strategies reported cannot be generalized with confidence to other districts. Despite those limitations, we consider it important to identify districts statewide showing high levels of improvement on such measures and to describe what they attribute to their success.

The practices district leaders cited most often include data use (to build a sense of urgency, hold schools accountable and drive professional development), convening school staff both within and across districts, and ensuring that the right staff are in place to implement the programs and policies. The policies that district leaders said were essential to their success were those related to school choice and providing students with a menu of school and credit recovery options as well as higher education articulation policies. Districts cited the importance of credit recovery and intervention programs for students at-risk for not graduating on time. Other contextual factors included leadership consistency, developing partnerships, securing grants, and creating a sense of collective responsibility for the success of all students.

## Introduction

A growing number of research reports point to the fact that dropping out of high school is related to undesirable outcomes, including poorer health and lower lifelong labor earnings (Belfield & Levin, 2007). For example, in 2008, the median income for individuals who had dropped out of school was approximately \$23,000; in contrast, individuals with at least a high school credential earned approximately \$42,000 (Chapman, Laird, & Kewal-Ramani, A. 2010). As a result, the Center for Labor Market Studies and the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago (2009) estimate that over a working lifetime, high school dropouts earn \$400,000 less than individuals with a diploma. In addition, high school dropouts face an 11 percent unemployment rate, compared to 7.6 percent for those with their degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

The 2015 *Building a Grad Nation* report found that U.S. high schools have made improvements in graduation rates in recent years, reporting a 2.4 percentage point increase in the national four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate since 2011. The increase in graduation rates (to 81.4 percent in 2012-13) is attributed in part to significant improvements in graduation rates among low-income, minority, and special education students. Despite those encouraging trends, nearly one fifth of students who entered high school in 2009 did not graduate four years later (DePaoli et al., 2015).

In 2003, provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act required states to report graduation rates. In California, that rate was reported using a ratio of the number of graduates in a given year divided by the number of graduates plus the number of dropouts in each grade level in high school. For years, critics have claimed that this calculation overestimates the number of actual graduates. As states have improved their capacity to track students over time with the implementation of longitudinal data systems, there has been a concerted effort to report more precise outcomes for students, including graduation rates.

In 2009-10, California joined other states in using a cohort graduation rate—a rate that uses the state longitudinal database to track individual students over time to produce a more accurate picture. Calculations for the class of 2013 indicate that 80.4 percent of California students who enrolled in high school in 2009–10 graduated four years later. Those graduation rates are significantly lower for students with disabilities (60.8 percent), migrant students (74.3 percent), English learners (61.6 percent), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (72.7 percent). Early examination of these data suggests that there has indeed been progress in graduation rates in California.

Modest growth in graduation rates has come at a time when California was experiencing a fiscal crisis of historical proportions. Although fiscal constraints have eased in the state in the last two years, the districts in this study began their turnaround efforts when the state was in the throes of recession and steep budget cuts. As resource-strapped districts across the country focus renewed attention on graduating more students who are college and career ready, it is useful to examine the practices in districts that have seen growth in graduation rates. Educators, administrators, and researchers continue to learn how to better identify performance problems as well as identify and implement strategies to support continuous improvement and school turnaround (e.g., see

Herman et al., 2008; Huberman, Parrish, Arellanes, Gonzalez, & Scala, 2012; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006).

This brief is designed to identify district-level strategies that might have a positive influence on graduation rates. The purpose of the study was to understand what practices, policies, and programs district leaders attribute to increased graduation rates. To do so, we identified the ten districts in the state that had the largest increases in graduation between 2009-10 and 2012-13. Of these, we selected five to interview. Since the focus of the study was on improvement strategies rather than strategies being used by districts with consistently high graduation rates, one of the artifacts of this process is the fact that many of these districts had graduation rates well below the state average to begin with and so had more room for growth. In addition, we cannot say with certainty what caused the growth in graduation rates. What we report are district and school leader perceptions of what might have contributed to their success. Despite those limitations, we consider it important to identify districts statewide showing high levels of improvement on such measures and to describe what they attribute to their success. This brief, then, provides information for other districts struggling with similar issues, even though we cannot say with certainty that they will get similar results from attempting to replicate these strategies.

In this study, American Institutes for Research (AIR) collaborated with the California Dropout Research Project to conduct a qualitative study of districts with improved graduation rates over four years. The California Dropout Research Project conducted the initial quantitative analysis to select the sample of districts and generate data on other outcomes (e.g., academic performance index indicators) to see whether districts that are improving on graduation rates are also improving on other outcomes. AIR then conducted interviews with key staff from five of those districts to understand more clearly what practices might account for their success.

# Dropout Prevention Literature Review

## *What is the dropout problem?*

In 2012, over 760,000 students who entered high school four years earlier failed to graduate on time (Education Week Research Center, 2014). Also in 2012, the United States ranked near the bottom in high school graduation rates among developed nations as identified by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2014), with only Austria, Greece, Luxemburg, Mexico, and Sweden having lower high school completion rates. The national graduation rate has been improving over several years, but had only reached 81% in 2012-13 (NCES, 2014).

California’s average graduation rate was 80.4% in 2012-13, an improvement of almost 6 percentage points compared to 2009-10 and it edged up slightly in 2013-14 (see Table 1). In addition, graduation rates for all of the subgroups listed in Table 1 increased, particularly for African American and Hispanic students (for additional discussion of updated state and district graduation rate trends, please see Appendix A). However, graduation rates for these students, as well as for low-income, English learner, and special education students, remain lower than the state average (CDE, 2015).

**Table 1: California Cohort Graduation Rates, 2009-10, 2012-13, and 2013-14**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	3-Year Difference	2013-14 (%)	4-Year Difference
African American	60.5	68.1	7.6	68.1	7.6
Asian	89.0	91.6	2.6	92.3	3.3
Hispanic	68.1	75.7	7.6	76.4	8.3
White	83.5	87.7	4.2	87.4	3.9
Low-income	68.0	74.8	6.8	75.4	7.4
English learners (ELs)	56.4	63.1	6.7	65.3	8.9
Special education	56.7	61.9	5.2	62.2	5.5
<b>State Total</b>	<b>74.7</b>	<b>80.4</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>80.8</b>	<b>6.1</b>

*Source:* Cohort Outcome Data for the Class of 2009-10, 2012-13, and 2013-14 by Ethnicity and Program, CDE, 2015)

The social and economic cost of not receiving a high school diploma is high, both for students, and the economy more broadly. Students without diplomas are less likely to be employed; and if they are employed, they are likely to earn less (Rumberger 2011; U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). They also have higher rates of incarceration, poorer health outcomes, are more likely to require public assistance, and are less likely to vote (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Pettit & Western, 2004).

### ***Why do students drop out?***

In focus groups with students who had dropped out of high school, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006), found that there was no single reason why students dropped out. However, there were some common themes, including lack of interesting classes, lack of academic rigor, personal reasons, such as having to get a job, failing in school or feeling unprepared in school, and doubting their ability to meet high school graduation requirements. Another paper described three categories of dropouts—those who are pushed out, those who were pulled away from school, and those who “fell out” of school (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). “Push out” factors included causes such as poor performance in school, being bullied, or being close to being expelled; “Pull out” included factors such as peer influence, jobs, or family commitments. “Fall out” included factors such as disengagement, for example, not liking school, or not having friends in school. Yazzie-Mintz (2010) reported that 16 percent of students who had considered dropping out did so because they were being picked on or bullied, another “push out” factor. Ultimately, there are many reasons why students might drop out of school, and while school and district staff might not be able to control all of these factors, they can certainly have an influence on some of them through strategies and policies that encourage student engagement and persistence in school.

### ***What strategies and policies do schools use to prevent dropout?***

Research shows that there are early signs that students might be at-risk of dropping out. For instance, failing a course, attending school less than 90 percent of the time, or having a low academic GPA in ninth grade are all associated with lower graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). These “early warning” indicators can be used to identify at-risk students and then provide interventions to put them back on the path to graduation.

Research on dropout prevention has identified several key components for addressing risk factors, some of which are outlined in the Institute of Education Science’s dropout prevention practice guide:

1. Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.
2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out.
3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance.
4. Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behavior and social skills.
5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process.
6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school (Dynarski et al, 2008, p.6).

Among the most common programs addressing the needs of at-risk students are those providing academic and attendance or engagement supports. These programs feature enhanced curriculum, tutoring, attendance goals, social activities, and mentoring and counseling specifically designed to provide students with reasons for completing high school (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). In addition to these programs, dropout prevention literature emphasizes the importance of student-

adult connections (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). The adult could be a teacher, counselor, administrator, district office personnel, or just about any member of the educational community; connections help students remain engaged in their education. Finally, research has shown that students who participate in sports or clubs are more likely to graduate (Rumberger and Arellano, 2007).

Beyond the general strategies outlined above, a small number of specific dropout prevention programs have been shown to have had a positive impact on dropout or school completion rates. Freeman & Simonsen (2014) identified 11 experimental studies that had statistically significant improvements on these outcomes. They found that the impactful programs included strategies such as academic, behavioral, attendance, and study skill strategies, and school-level organizational components (for example, 9<sup>th</sup> grade academies, or schools-within-schools). Almost half of the studies showing a positive impact described the simultaneous implementation of multiple of these components in schools.

Although graduation rates have been steadily increasing in many states, districts, and schools over the past five years, the fact that many thousands of students still do not graduate from high school on time emphasizes the need for greater understanding of why students drop out and what can be done to keep them in school (DePaoli et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in all the research on dropout rates, there is a notable gap in the literature about the role of the district in preventing dropout. What little information exists on district-level interventions appears primarily in the form of guidance on developing district dropout prevention plans. Districtwide strategies include offering multiple credit recovery opportunities, instituting alternative schools, and implementing district-wide early intervention systems (Baker Evaluation, Research, and Consulting, Inc., 2008; Johnson, 2010; West Virginia Department of Education, 2011).

In the early 1990s, researchers posited that incremental improvements in education were the result of a focus on programmatic reforms rather than a more comprehensive systemic approach to improvement (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Since then, several researchers have pointed to the important role that districts can and do play in supporting better outcomes for students (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002; Supovitz, 2006; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Supovitz' case study of Duval County, Florida Public Schools (2006) points to the dual roles that districts play as support providers and agents of accountability. Districts, he says, need to find "an appropriate stance" (p.192) that balances its roles of authority, support, and broker of external partners all while simultaneously building their own capacity for doing so. This systems approach to improvement generally points to several district practices and contextual conditions that can support school improvement: strong leadership and a coherent vision, resource allocation that builds system capacity to address identified challenges, coordination across the system, and the development and brokering of relationships with external partners who can provide targeted support for improvement. Many of our findings align with this growing body of research.



## Methodology

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What school districts in California have the largest four-year improvement in graduation rates?
2. What role do district policies and/or practices appear to play in contributing to these outcomes?
3. Are there similar policies and/or practices across these districts that contribute to higher graduation rates?

To assist in addressing these questions, researchers from the California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) at U.C. Santa Barbara conducted an analysis of the district cohort graduation rates between 2009-10 and 2012-13.<sup>1</sup> Their analysis identified the districts in the state that saw the highest growth in graduation rates.

The analytic sample for the quantitative analysis consisted of 264 of the largest school districts in California.<sup>2</sup> The decision to restrict the district sample in this way was made for two reasons. First, some school districts in the state enroll relatively few students. Second, many smaller school districts consist of only one school. In districts with few enrollments and those with just one school, the cohort graduation rates can fluctuate greatly from year to year and may unduly influence estimates. Importantly, even after restricting the analytic sample to the largest school districts in California, the analyses captured nearly 85 percent of all cohort students in the state.

District data were gathered from the California Department of Education (CDE) online data repository, Dataquest. CDE Dataquest provides data on a range of education metrics including school performance, test scores, student demographics, postsecondary transition, school staffing and student misconduct. Researchers at the CDRP focused on variables related to cohort enrollment, graduates and graduation rate to perform their analyses. For every district in the sample, the researchers determined a district's cohort graduation rate improvement by calculating the difference between a district's 2012-13 cohort graduation and its 2009-10 rate. Using this analysis, AIR identified the ten districts with the greatest increases in graduation rates between 2009-10 and 2012-13.<sup>3</sup> Examining graduation rates of the ten districts with the greatest growth in graduation rates allowed variety on the desired dimensions (such as geographical location, size, and district type). It is important to note that each of the districts that emerged from this first phase of the study had graduation rates that were lower than the state average in 2009-10 and thus had greater room for improvement. For example, despite the fact that Barstow

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<sup>1</sup> We completed the selection process based upon changes between 2009-10 and 2012-13. However, as data for 2013-14 became available during the course of the study, we included those graduation rates as well. Readers can see Appendix A for those trends.

<sup>2</sup> The analytic sample was restricted to California school districts with 2012-13 student enrollments greater than 1,000 students ( $N = 264$ )

<sup>3</sup> For the statistical brief describing outcomes for the ten districts with the greatest improvement in graduation rates see "An updated analysis of California school district graduation rate improvements" at: [http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs\\_statbriefs.htm](http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs_statbriefs.htm).

Unified School District showed the most growth over this period (see Table 2), the district’s 2012-13 graduation rate was still below the state average.

We selected five districts, among the ten with the greatest increases in cohort graduation rates, in an attempt to include variation in geographic location; urban, suburban, and rural contexts; district structures (unified district, unified high school district); and student economic and racial composition among the districts included in the interview sample.

We then contacted top administrators from these five districts to invite their participation in the second phase of the study. This included interviews with one or two key district staff (depending on district size) and an interview with one high school principal from each sample district. Of the five districts initially selected, all but one agreed to participate. As a result, another district from the initial list of ten was selected and agreed to participate.

In all, twelve sixty-minute interviews were conducted and recorded. The interview protocols used in this study are shown in Appendix C and Appendix D.

Those recordings were then transcribed and loaded into a qualitative analysis software program for coding and analysis. Analysis included codes for district context; culture, vision and mission of the district; specific strategies implemented such as academic supports, adult advocates, behavioral and social-emotional learning supports, professional development, rigorous and relevant instruction; challenges, and advice to other districts on improving graduation rates. Two interviews (one district-level and one principal-level) out of the full sample of 12 that were conducted were coded by multiple researchers and discussed to improve reliability.

From this initial analysis, we further divided responses into four categories: practices, policies, programs, and other contextual factors.

## Sample District Graduation Rates

Cohort graduation rates for the five selected districts are displayed in Table 2. On average, these districts increased by almost 19 percentage points over the course of four years, substantially more than the average for the state at 5.7 percentage points. These gains are notable, particularly in districts serving high percentages of socio-economically disadvantaged students (see Appendix B for tables showing district demographics, and graduation rates by student subgroups).

**Table 2: Enrollment and Graduation Data for the Interview Sample of Five California School Districts with High Increases in Cohort Graduation Rates between 2009-10 and 2012-13.**

	Number of High Schools	Grade 9-12 Enrollment	Graduation Rates		3-Year
			2009-10	2012-13	Change
Barstow Unified	2	1,718	46.6	72.6	25.9
Fullerton Joint Union High	8	14,607	70.5	91.6	21.0

	Number of High Schools	Grade 9-12 Enrollment	Graduation Rates		3-Year
			2012-13	2012-13	2009-10
Stockton Unified	4	10,010	66.1	82.4	16.3
Moreno Valley Unified	5	10,401	65.7	81.0	15.3
Tulare Joint Union High	6	5,306	72.4	87.0	14.6
<b>State</b>		<b>1,964,759</b>	<b>74.7</b>	<b>80.4</b>	<b>5.7</b>

Source: Adapted from Enrollment and Cohort Outcome Data for the Class of 2009-10 and 2012-13, CDE, 2014).

Readers should note a few things about the data presented in Table 2. First, 2009-10 graduation rates in these districts are all lower than the state average, some by more than ten percentage points. Therefore, these districts had the capacity to increase far more than, say, a district with a 2009-10 graduation rate of 85 percent. Secondly, there are likely many reasons why district graduation rates might improve over time, including corrections of data tracking errors as was the case in one of the districts. We conducted interviews to try to understand to what practices, policies, programs, and contextual factors district and school staff *attributed* their improvement. Contextual factors may have been beyond the scope of the school or district to influence, but might have had an impact on graduation rates, nonetheless. Thus, readers should understand that we cannot conclude from our analysis that any one, or even any combination of factors described below, *caused* the increases in graduation rates, but rather were associated with and perceived to be related to these increases.

Third, we wanted to discover whether any of these districts might have counseled at-risk students out of the district and into charters or other districts. However, we have no evidence of this. We examined overall enrollment numbers and the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch as indicators of change in the risk status of the students enrolled over this time period. Although several of the districts had declining enrollment, in all cases the free and reduced price lunch percentages either remained stable or increased (in two cases, by over ten percentage points).

Last, given that this is a small study that included just two or three interviews in a small number of districts in California, there may be other relevant factors that we did not hear about.

## Interview Themes

The major themes from our analysis fall into four overarching categories: practices, policies, programs, and contextual factors. Much of the dropout prevention research cited above examines discrete interventions such as specific programs or policies that are designed to address dropout. However, our analysis revealed that districts not only implemented such programs and policies, but also engaged in broader practices that do not fit within the category of discrete interventions. We also added a fourth category that included contextual factors such as leadership and sustaining momentum. We will discuss each in greater detail below.

### Practices

In addition to dropout policies and programs, respondents from all five districts spoke of changing practices they considered related to graduation improvement. Practices are the strategic activities in which districts and schools engaged that are not related to formal programs or policy. Respondents reported that the activities we describe below were crucial to their success.

### Data Use

One of the most common practices cited by respondents as contributing to increased graduation was data use (eleven respondents). This was described in several different ways. Along with the development of better data systems for states, districts, and schools, there has been significant attention to training and supporting the use of those data to inform policy and practice. Research in the last 10 years has focused primarily on data use in schools, rather than the role that districts may play. One exception to this is a review of research conducted by Honig & Venkateswaran (2012). According to Honig and Venkateswaran, both central office and school staff participate in an exchange that is supported by data that is focused on specific problems of practice and that benefit from supporting and trusting relationships between district and school staff.

Furthermore, district offices may provide the professional training designed to build a culture of data use. Our findings support those findings and mirror practices suggested in a recently released framework for building a culture of data use (Gerzon & Guckenbug, 2015) that include ensuring access to data, opportunities and training in making meaning from data, and modeling safe and supportive data use.

The districts in this study used data in a variety of ways – first by uncovering the scope of the problem to create a sense of urgency. Then, building upon research that has validated the leading indicators of risk, districts collect and report those data more frequently (monthly, in most cases). Those district-level data-based conversations contribute to school-level interventions and placement practices/policies for the most at-risk students. Furthermore, districts played an important role in helping schools not only access the data they need for students before they enroll in high school, those data also informed the kind of professional development that districts offered to schools that supported data use, data analysis, and research-informed decisions regarding interventions. Thus, data use is a foundational practice on which the districts have built a number of other organizational practices and policies.

## **Building a Sense of Urgency**

First, district leaders used data to build a sense of urgency about the need to address poor graduation rates. They did so by publicly discussing those outcomes and then challenging district and school staff to decide whether they were satisfied with their results and make commitments to improve. One district respondent defined this approach as an important lever to create a change in the culture of their schools:

*We came up with a theme called ‘excellence on purpose’ and ... how we do things on purpose, and not leave it to chance, including our graduation rates. So that was more the sense of urgency, creating this culture that things are going to be different and they’re not going to be just different, but they would be measurably different.*

This kind of strategy is something that McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) point to in their work on district roles in supporting school reform. They report that although district leaders are often advised to “advance broad goals with something for everyone,” the district leaders they profiled “articulated unambiguous goals and priorities” (p.23). This was true for these five districts as well. As one school leader said:

*It really hit me hard when I saw our numbers. I never really looked at our graduation numbers. We get them, but it didn’t mean that much because nobody ever put an emphasis on it and it was like oh ... we really need to change.*

Making those data publicly available was said to create a sense of urgency and a call to action. One district told the story of receiving a phone call from a community member who wanted to support district efforts to improve graduation rates. “It kind of gave me a wakeup call in looking at our data and thinking, ‘Oh my god, we are the highest dropout and lowest graduation rate in the county.’ From that, we started having discussions within our district.”

## **Holding Schools Accountable**

The second strategy district leaders mentioned was using data to hold schools accountable and as a basis for making necessary adjustments along the way. Once districts created a sense of urgency for change, respondents from all five districts reported that they used a variety of data to hold school leaders accountable for results. They identified and used leading indicators to help district and school staff determine which students might be at risk and whether progress was being made. Thus, as research has provided stronger validation for the most powerful indicators of risk, districts began to look at attendance, behavior, and credit accrual more frequently than they had in the past. As one leader reported,

*Our Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services was directed to have a meeting with principals on a regular basis, along with head counselors. They look at data and they review the data on a monthly basis saying how many students were on track to graduate, how many students were credit deficient, what are you doing with those specific students – and not just a summary...but specific names...it increased the accountability...to make sure students were doing better, that they were enrolled in the proper intervention classes.*

This approach to holding schools accountable was something that the other districts mentioned as an important piece of their overall strategy. And holding them accountable before senior year was essential. As one leader said, “We don’t wait until their senior year.” These districts reported that they identify students at risk *before* they arrive in high school and then monitor progress frequently.

*We reach out to our feeder schools now and ask them, hey, do you have any kids that are struggling both academically and behavior, because typically those go hand in hand. Send a list of those kids who are struggling so we can do two things, we can meet with them like the first week of school so we know who these kids are, we know who to target, and we can strategically place them in teacher’s classes, because you and I both know that if we put five or ten kids that are struggling all in the same classroom it’s going to be a very difficult class to manage.*

This is a key role that districts can play in providing access to data beyond the four walls of an individual school and is an important aspect of data use and how those data can influence school practices such as classroom placements and targeted supports to smooth transitions into high school.

### **Access and Professional Development**

The third data-related practice reported by respondents was ensuring access to data and providing the professional development necessary to build capacity for making meaningful and strategic decisions. As one school leader put it,

*Having to be accountable is very helpful, because it’s like okay we’re accountable now for this, we really need to focus on this and having the support from the district office to hold us accountable and to help us with what we needed was major. In the past it was like, you need to improve your graduation rates, but there was no support behind it.*

School principals and teachers need to learn how to access and analyze data and they need to learn more about the research behind specific targeted interventions that will help address the challenges students face. Districts played a key role in this. For example, one district reported that they administer a postsecondary placement exam district-wide to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Teachers then develop courses to help accelerate and target student learning for those who do not perform well on the exam. Respondents reported that their districts did not simply ask schools to address their graduation rates, but also provided appropriate data tools that would help schools monitor their progress. One district said they implemented an early warning system using research-based indicators identified by the Chicago Consortium. The district provided the data and then engaged schools in professional development to implement early warning systems that includes analyses of those data, selection of appropriate interventions that addressed the needs of students on their campuses and ongoing monitoring. The district lead described:

*Every site has an Early Warning System Team and they identify students, but once they identify them, each school created their own intervention program for these students. We gave autonomy to all the schools saying you develop what strengths you have in supporting these students, but you must develop some intervention program for them.*

Another school leader described the approach they had taken to the analysis of their data which informed the development of individual teacher and departmental professional development. After discovering that students were primarily struggling with ninth grade science and math classes, they worked with those departments on strategies for improvement. As the principal described, school leaders asked:

*What can you do as a department to help your students? At the same time we already had professional learning communities, so that gave the teachers the opportunity to meet with each other and discuss strategies, find out what's working, what's not, and move those kids along...And not only did we look at departments, I ran lists every quarter of each teacher's grades...some of our teachers had sixty to seventy percent failure rates. So as the administrator, I started meeting with those teachers and we looked at grading practices, we talked about philosophy, we talked about best strategies and different things and I think that helped so much for individual teachers to go oh wow, I guess I am failing a lot of kids and what can I do to help my students succeed.*

Having access to these data helped inform decisions about resource-allocation (such as professional development funds) and support targeted development for individual teachers.

## **Convening**

Districts were described as conveners, allowing district and school leaders to learn from their colleagues within and across other districts. During regular meetings (most often monthly), district leaders met with principals and sometimes counselors from high schools to discuss progress and strategies for addressing student needs. Nearly all respondents pointed to the importance of collaboration. One school leader said that the opportunity to learn from one another and think more deeply about the needs of specific students was essential to the school's success. These meetings were facilitated by the district. A principal described this critical support:

*The ability to collaborate, having the ability to create interventions that address the needs of your students, not a one size fits all, but at the same time have the opportunity to collaborate with others so that you can learn from each other and apply things that are working well for others that you feel also would work well for your site.*

These conversations often led to healthy competition among district and school leaders and also created opportunities for school leaders to point out where district policies hamper improvement.

Several districts also mentioned their role in convening schools that share feeder patterns, a particular challenge for high school districts that might have students from up to 15 different schools coming into the district. One district reported that they organize the first meeting between the high schools and their feeder schools and districts. According to one school leader, these meetings were initially focused on curricular alignment, but have drilled down to looking at students who have been identified as at-risk in middle school. "We specifically looked at who was at risk, so we're actually able to break it down." In larger districts, central offices can assign directors to a portfolio of schools. As one described it,

*Each set of six to eight schools has a director overseeing those schools... They are very hands on with their schools. They do instructional rounds with the principal and a couple*

*of teachers. We're adding the behavioral rounds along with that... We will probably find some areas of need and the need for re-teaching, reinforcing.... we meet every week, all of the directors, myself and then all of the support directors, like curriculum and information technology.*

These kinds of structures were said to help districts balance oversight and evaluation with ongoing support.

## **Staffing**

Nearly all respondents noted the importance of districts ensuring that schools have the right staff. Again, this challenge emerged in different ways in the districts we interviewed. For example, one district focused a great deal of their attention on ensuring that high schools had adequate counseling ratios and that the counselors were being held accountable for regular meetings and individual learning plans for every one of their students. As one school leader said, “I’d say the most important thing is relationship building with the students.” And nearly all mentioned the importance of hiring and retaining teachers who are not only committed to the district’s efforts to improve graduation rates, but who also can connect with disengaged youth. As one respondent said,

*I really believe it is putting the right people on the bus... Then once you have those people there, you give them the resources and the tools necessary to follow the vision of the district.... It's just one thing I can't say enough about... A huge part of our success is knowing that the kids feel like they're wanted and they want to be on that campus.*

## **Policies**

Policies are the formal rules and structures that guide much of the educational decision-making such as student placement options, access to interventions, and scheduling. All respondents agreed that the traditional, comprehensive high school is not necessarily appropriate for every student. All district leaders mentioned the need to address policies that hinder access to alternatives to the comprehensive high school. Respondents in all districts reported creating a more flexible “menu” of options (for example, school choices, or credit recovery options) from which students could select. Respondents also noted the need to address policies regarding mobility between more traditional schools and alternative schools and other credit recovery opportunities. For example, one district administrator described increasing access to credit recovery options by abolishing a policy that prevented students who had been suspended during the regular academic year from attending summer school.

In addition, respondents from nearly all of the districts mentioned instituting assessment policies designed to capture student learning early or to smooth students’ transitions between high school and higher education. For example, one district established an articulation agreement with a local institution of higher education to grant student admission based on their performance on an assessment. The policies described below raise additional questions about implementation and the intersections between the policies, practices, and programs highlighted in this brief. Although it is important to note that district and school administrators pointed to these policies as essential to their success, it is also likely that the district approach to implementing them is key



to their success. However, an examination of policy implementation was beyond the scope of this study.

### **School choice**

Although school choice may be more limited in small, rural districts, larger districts can offer students a number of alternatives to the traditional high school. One of the larger districts from the sample included alternative schools of choice that focus primarily on career and technical education such as nursing, automotive and computer technology as well as small high schools (usually between 500-600 students) that focus on different career pathways such as law or environmental science. In addition, despite drastic funding cuts, this district maintained an adult education program that brings 18-20 year old students back into the system.

*We've been pulling a lot of students back into school and then we either help them graduate through the comprehensive high school or we get them prepared to go to the adult school. We still have an adult school program where a lot of schools in California do not. With all the funding cuts we refused to let that go because we have really high poverty, high crime, and high transiency among the population, so we wanted to make sure that we have enough services.*

### **Credit recovery options**

Districts varied on their approaches to credit recovery options, though all had them. Some districts provided access to credit recovery through online programs such as PLATO and made these programs available to students on the traditional high school campus before school, at lunch, or after school. Others provided options for credit recovery at alternative high schools. Policies varied with the number of credits students can earn through these alternative routes, reflecting a variety in district contexts. For example, one district enacted a policy allowing more flexibility for students who want to recover credits through alternative routes like continuation or summer school. Another district limited the number of alternative credits a student can earn and still graduate from the comprehensive high school. That policy, they believed, would provide an incentive for students to stay in school.

### **Higher education institution articulation policies**

Lack of relevance in high school classes is one commonly cited factor that contributes to low graduation and postsecondary transition rates (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2006). One approach to addressing that challenge has been the addition of applied learning in high school classes so that students can see the life sciences in anatomy or physiology or the mathematics in engineering or automotive design. Three districts mentioned concerted efforts to address course relevance for students.

A second policy approach addresses dual credit options and admissions agreements with local institutions of higher education that not only provide access to higher level courses for advanced students, but also provide opportunities for first generation college-goers to envision themselves at college. One district enrolls students at a local institution of higher education in cohorts, beginning in grade 11. Students targeted for this opportunity are not the high achievers. Rather, the district targets students who are often first generation college-goers. Students are bussed to

the school and pay no tuition or book fees. The district leader mentioned that this policy also includes costs for tuition and books: “We also pay for their tuition and we pay for their books, so there’s no out-of-pocket costs for our students. That is something that the college has worked with us as far as the funding for that.”

Another district has students take college placement exams during their junior year of high school so that schools can offer remediation and support to students who need it before they get to the local junior college. This district also has an agreement with local colleges stating that students who earn a C or better on the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC), a full-year college preparatory English course, will be automatically enrolled in English 100 in any University of California and local community colleges, without taking placement exams or being placed into what both a district and school leader referred to as “remedial purgatory.” A third district has developed an articulation agreement with a local California State University where students from the district who meet the university course and GPA requirements are automatically accepted.

## **Programs**

Respondents mentioned a number of intervention programs being implemented at both the school and district levels. In fact, academic supports and personalized learning were the most commonly cited strategies that accounted for the positive results. The programs mentioned vary and address social-emotional, behavioral, and academic supports for students. However, for the purposes of this brief, we focus primarily on programs that are implemented district-wide or programs that require specific resources from the district for school-level implementation. Throughout this section, we cite programs by name. We did not examine the quality or effectiveness of these programs, but share them here because those we interviewed mentioned them.

### **Credit recovery programs**

Several of the districts reported that they purchased online credit recovery programs that allow students to make up deficient credits. PLATO was commonly cited as an online program that districts utilize.

### **Intervention programs**

One district mentioned a bridge program that builds upon past practices where schools conduct freshman orientation or assemblies that support successful transition into high school. That orientation is being expanded to include multiple days and targeted academic preparation for incoming ninth graders. These programs require resources from cash-strapped districts to pay personnel, material, and facilities costs.

Other districts mentioned programs that reward students for attendance or academic success. One of the districts we interviewed mentioned that their initial approach to truancy was “taking a hard line” in collaboration with the local police department.” However, when they examined outcomes, their approach did not seem to be working; in fact, the dropout numbers increased. So they took an approach they learned about from another district in Southern California and

implemented two programs – restorative justice and Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS). “It’s a student empowerment, student engagement program where students, nontraditional learners become part of the solution on campus. We’ve also brought in restorative justice<sup>4</sup> instead of suspension and expulsion.”

## **Other Contextual Factors**

Contextual factors are those that constitute neither specific activities, programs, nor policies. Rather these are environmental factors that leaders described and having contributed to their success such as relationship-building, trust, and partnerships.

### **Leadership consistency**

Several respondents pointed to the importance of consistency in leadership to maintain momentum of district-wide efforts. However, as McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) point out, this does not necessarily mean consistency at the superintendent level. Although leadership change can create what McLaughlin and Talbert call “churn” (p.22), the districts they studied were strategic in embedding programs, practices and policies into the system so that they continued to function, despite shifts in top leadership. This kind of consistency was something that several respondents noted as an important factor in their success, allowing interventions to take root and to adjust when the data suggest that adjustments are necessary, rather than starting from scratch. One district staff member pointed to consistency in mid-level district staff as key to their success:

*It’s having the consistency in that department, because a lot of the people in that department have been there like six, seven years consistently. We’ve got a really solid team that works well together that constantly grows and gets continuous professional development, is very proactive in writing grants.*

### **Partnerships and grants**

Several of the districts mentioned that they have strategically identified community partnerships and applied for grants which have supported their efforts to improve outcomes for students. One district sought out community based organizations and businesses willing to adopt a school. Each high school has a partner who provides a variety of supports, depending on the needs of the school. Another district mentioned that they have been the beneficiaries of several years of grants that focus on preventing dropout. “We’ve been awarded millions of dollars in grants over the last like seven or eight years, probably close to twenty million dollars in grants, counseling grants.”

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<sup>4</sup> Restorative justice programs involve all stakeholders in a given incident and shift the focus from punitive measures for perpetrators to repairing the harm caused by the behavior. Many of these programs include formal mediation processes or circles that help address behaviors by helping offenders see, understand, and make reparations for the specific harm they have caused. For one example of how restorative justice is designed to be implemented in Alameda County, California, see Restorative Justice: A Working Guide for Our Schools: <http://healthyschoolsandcommunities.org/Docs/Restorative-Justice-Paper.pdf>

## **Collective responsibility culture of caring**

All of the respondents referenced the need to create a sense of collective responsibility and a culture of caring – not only for students, but also for the adults who work at the district and school level. This seemed particularly important for three districts that serve large numbers of homeless students and students who are in foster care. Several district leaders talked about the importance of modeling respectful and caring behavior. One district administrator said,

*I speak to every principal on the phone at least every other day and I first talk about how they're doing, what are their needs, how can I help them, what can I do to help them feel successful and be successful. So this is a trickle down. The principals are to meet with the assistant principals, assistant principals are supposed to meet with teacher leaders, and so this respectful, caring, nurturing, hopefully approach trickles down to the whole organization.*

Another district also includes targeted outreach to parents who may not be familiar with the education system or who might have had negative experiences in the system themselves:

*We have a parent component. It's called Parent Institute for Quality Education, PIQE, and we provide this program for all our parents. It's a nine week course that they take one night a week for about three hours for nine weeks. Parents are given training on how to be involved with their students, educating them about the requirements for graduation, the A through G requirements, how to read a transcript when they get the transcript, how to read a report card, what questions to ask when they go into the counselor. In the last four years we've probably had close to sixteen hundred parents go through those trainings.*

## **Summary of Reported Challenges Across Districts**

### **Creating buy-in from all stakeholders**

Each of the districts mentioned the importance of creating buy-in from all stakeholders and, as mentioned earlier, initially used their performance data to create a sense of urgency among staff. However, all of those we spoke to also mentioned that creating buy-in was also a challenge, particularly for staff who had become accustomed to year-after-year of poor performance. As one leader said, “I still think that one of the greatest challenges is low expectations.” District leaders suggest that changing those expectations must begin at the top:

*When people in key leadership roles have a vested interest in the success of our district and have a vested interest in the community, that sets an example and a model for our support staff and for our teaching staff. I don't want to say it's as simple as that, but sometimes I really believe it's as simple as that. You lead by example and you have that culture and people believe in that.*

However, addressing the performance of school leaders and teachers who are resistant to change was a challenge for all of the districts. For example, one school leader talked about the importance of understanding who the union representatives are on campus. That school leader suggested that having union support from the beginning makes conversations about poor teacher performance later on slightly easier. Another school leader noted,

*The people that don't buy into the culture don't stay here. So the reality is in the last five years we have helped some folks pursue other careers outside of our school ... But we just keep preaching the culture: 'This is what we are, and this is how we are,' so they kind of get sucked up into that flywheel culture and they do their part.*

Other challenges described by two or three respondents included teachers being overwhelmed by too many initiatives at once, sustaining buy-in and engagement in initiatives, insufficient funding, and increasingly challenging student populations.

# Considerations for Districts and Schools

## Advice from Respondents

We asked interview respondents what advice they had for other district leaders interested in improving their graduation rates. The following is a summary of the most common responses.

### **Form caring relationships with staff, parents, and students.**

Respondents from all five of the districts emphasized the importance of forming strong relationships with others in order to have an impact on graduation rates. Some respondents described the respect and care with which they treat their staff, hoping that by modeling these relationships, they will encourage teachers and other school staff to treat their students in the same way. One said, “Just like with kids, teachers don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Others described going to the schools to meet with students and parents in person to share successes, respond to questions, and encourage them. One district administrator described this as a culture of caring:

*We continue that focus [of] creating a culture of caring for kids, from the teacher to the support staff, the classified support staff, to the administration. It’s just one thing I can’t say enough about. That’s been a huge part of our success and that will continue to be a part of any district’s success is knowing that the kids feel like they’re wanted and they want to be on that campus.*

### **Focus on continuous improvement.**

Several respondents described aspects of a continuous improvement cycle, such as picking a student-focused goal, getting buy-in from stakeholders, implementing a small number of research-based strategies, monitoring them, and evaluating which aspects are working, and which are not. One district administrator reiterated the importance of sharing successes from this process with school staff, students, and parents to make sure they understood that their work was paying off.

In addition to describing the improvement process, many respondents noted that this process takes time and persistence, rather than shifting priorities or starting new initiatives every year. A district superintendent commented, “Don’t look for a quick fix. There is no quick fix. You have to develop a system-wide approach to improving the graduation and dropout rate.” In addition, one school administrator advised,

*Looking at the brutal facts constantly and saying okay, we’re doing this, but can it be better. Because it is about whether our students are being served or not, and if they’re not, even though we thought they were, then we’ve got to change whatever that is. For us it’s been being not afraid to look at the brutal facts about our own school.*

Although this advice came from a principal rather than district-level administrator, district level staff echoed the need to review data when talking about using data to create a sense of urgency and motivate change and improvement efforts, as described earlier in the report.

## **Support great teachers and leaders, but let those who are not helping students go.**

Many respondents described the importance of providing support to innovative and hard-working school staff and leaders in the form of approval for new strategies, programs, materials, or financial resources. One administrator described the relationship between support for staff and building trust:

*The other thing that helps at the district level [is] you really have to develop relationships with your teams, your staff, before you start asking them to do things... If you start with the support early on, when they ask you can we go to training, sure, I'll provide you the funding. Can we get these materials, sure, I'll support you in the materials... So by doing that initially they start seeing wait a minute, he is supportive, so when you ask for a new initiative, they say he's been supportive, we'll go along right now. So just like working with students, the same thing with staff, if you develop relationships with staff, they will come along with you when you ask them to do some things that might be tough, they trust you and that's a big component, trust.*

Two district administrators noted that it is more important to invest in people and professional development than in technology.

In spite of the focus on support for great staff, three respondents noted that it is also important to know when staff are not adequately supporting students, and to remove them from the system. After describing many different supports and incentives provided to teachers and leaders in the district, a district administrator commented, "I hate to use this phrase, but we tell our principals, when in doubt, kick them out. It can be hard." Although this may seem severe, the administrator noted that ultimately, these difficult decisions come down to what is best for students.

Other advice provided by respondents included always keeping the focus on outcomes for students, seeking additional funding to support school and district implementation of district initiatives, and partnering and collaborating with others to meet common goals.

## Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

While the IES Dropout Prevention Practice Guide (Dynarski, et.al., 2008) outlined six key school-level practices that help prevent dropout, little attention has been paid to district practices that can support schools in their efforts. School improvement initiatives do not simply pass through district offices. Rather, research suggests that district offices act as initiators, interpreters, and enactors of policies intended to improve student outcomes (Sykes, O’Day, & Ford, 2009).

This brief reports on district efforts to improve graduation rates in five California districts and provides additional anecdotal evidence that districts do indeed have vital roles to play in supporting improved outcomes for students. The five districts profiled here represent a range of urban, suburban and rural districts in both northern and southern California. While we cannot say with certainty that the practices, policies, and programs described in this brief caused high rates of growth in graduation outcomes, we report the perceptions of leaders in those districts. Just as causes of dropout are varied, it is likely that reengaging students at risk for dropping out are varied as well and are largely dependent upon the systems into which those practices, policies, and programs are enacted. Strategies that work well in larger districts, for example, may not be viable for small, rural districts and vice-versa. In addition, it is possible that there are districts that implemented similar initiatives, but did not experience the same degree of success as these five districts. Thus it is possible that the ways in which policies were implemented and the intersections between policies, practices, programs and other factors might have contributed to their positive. However, an examination of implementation was beyond the scope of this small study. Despite these limitations, we believe this brief contributes in important ways to our understanding of district practices that can contribute to positive outcomes for students at risk.

Although much of the research on systemic reform has focused attention on instructional improvement in particular, the strategies adopted by the districts selected for this study attended more to structural and behavioral supports for the most at-risk students. We heard very little about specific instructional reforms. And yet, our findings support much of the emerging research on systemic reform that focuses on the important role that districts play defining a clear vision for school improvement, allocating resources (including policies and personnel) that align with that vision, building strategic partnerships within and beyond the district, and using state and federal policies to guide efforts (Supovitz, 2008). Although each of the districts had adopted programs designed to support students at risk of dropping out, each also acknowledged the need to address broader context into which those programs were introduced. Many of those we spoke with described the essential, but difficult task of examining performance, publicly acknowledging where that performance is poor, and then building the collective will to improve those outcomes. Those practices illustrate the kind of balance between accountability and support that Supovitz pointed to in his profile of Duval County and the importance of the positive supports and relationships that districts can build throughout the system. In many ways, this also reflects the findings of Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) who suggest that improvement efforts are less successful when situated within weak or adversarial relationships.



Several questions remain. For example, do students who participate in online and summer credit recovery options acquire equivalent knowledge and skills as their peers in traditional courses? Given the growing prevalence of these alternatives, it seems a more rigorous, student-level study might be warranted that examines graduation outcomes and alternative credit recovery options with measures of student academic achievement. Will districts who have achieved graduation rate gains be able to sustain their increased graduation rates over time? As other reports on school turnaround have suggested (e.g. Huberman, Parrish, Hannon, Arellanes, & Shambaugh, 2011), sustaining growth over time is often as challenging as achieving it in the first place. In addition, will the strategies districts reported leading to these early wins need to shift over time? The challenges of students who still have not graduated, in spite of average district graduation rate improvements, may be more intractable and complex than those of students who were already on the verge of graduating. Ultimately, further research into effective district and school practices, policies, and programs will help us to continue to better understand the dropout problem and what can be done to address it for all students.

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## Appendix A: Updated California and District Graduation Rates 2009-10 – 2013-14

Since the initial writing of this report, the California Department of Education released academic outcome data for the 2013-14 academic year. Looking at Table 1, we see that the statewide graduation rate increased to 81.0%. This represents a 6.3% improvement in graduation rate from 2009-10. Table 1 also disaggregates graduation rate improvement in the state by student ethnicity and program. Generally speaking, every ethnic group except of White students experienced improvement from the previous academic year. The same is true for low-income, English Language Learners (ELLs) and Special Education students.

**Table 1: Updated Statewide Cohort Graduation Rates 2009-10 through 2013-14**

	<b>2009-10 (%)</b>	<b>2012-13 (%)</b>	<b>3-Year Difference</b>	<b>2013-14 (%)</b>	<b>4-Year Difference</b>
African American	60.5	68.1	7.6	68.2	7.7
Asian	89	91.6	2.6	92.4	3.4
Hispanic	68.1	75.7	7.6	76.6	8.5
White	83.5	87.7	4.2	87.6	4.1
Low-income	68.0	74.8	6.8	75.6	7.6
English learners (ELs)	56.4	63.1	6.7	65.4	9.0
Special education	56.7	61.9	5.2	62.3	5.6
<b><i>State Total</i></b>	<b><i>74.7</i></b>	<b><i>80.4</i></b>	<b><i>5.7</i></b>	<b><i>81.0</i></b>	<b><i>6.3</i></b>

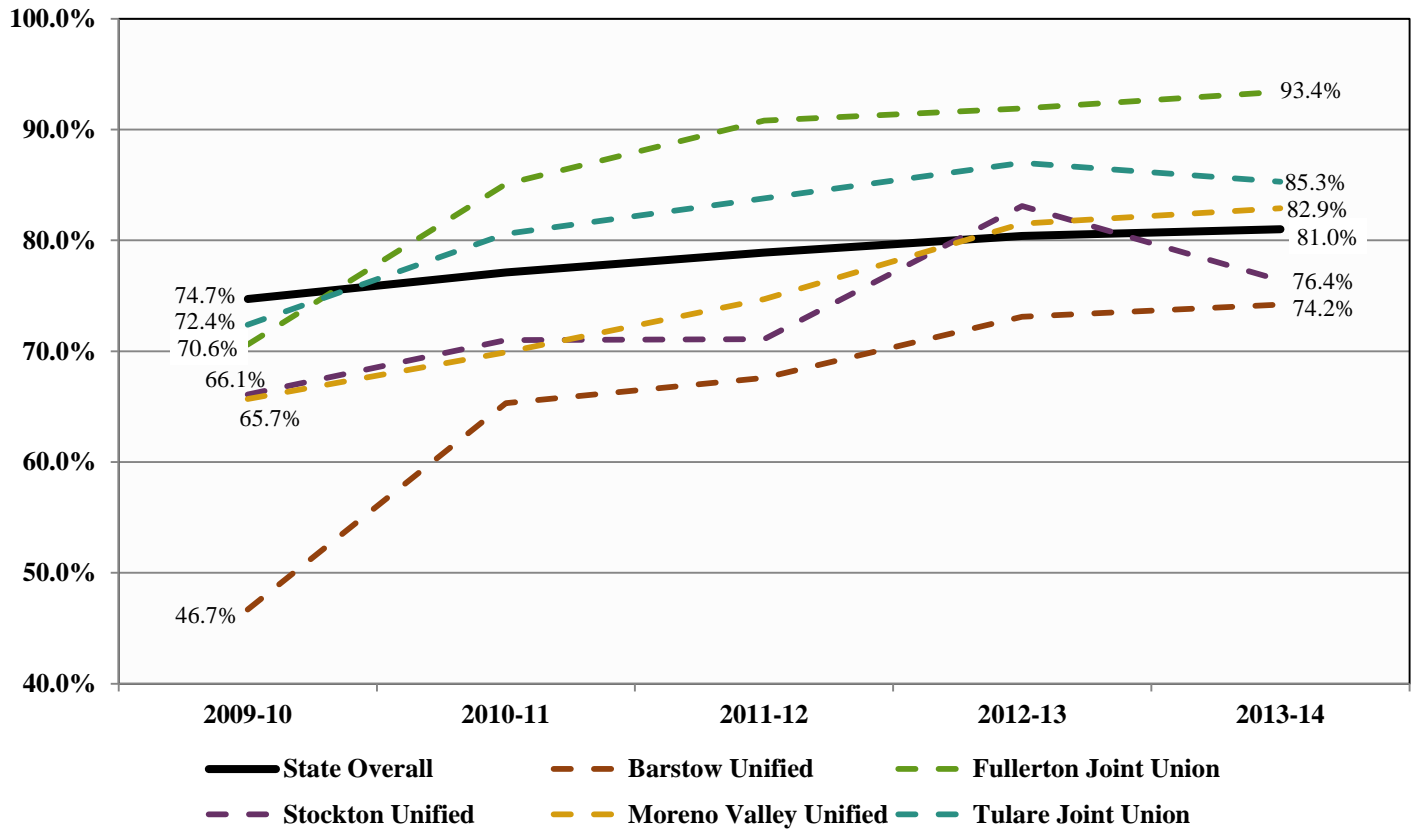
With these data we were also able to compare the 3-year and 4-year graduation rate improvement figures for each of the districts included in this report. The 2013-14 graduation rate data show that three of the five districts highlighted in this report improved upon their 3-year improvement rate. As you can see from Table 2, Barstow Unified, Fullerton Joint Union, and Moreno Valley each showed improvements in graduation rate from 2012-13 while Stockton Unified and Tulare Joint Union had lower rates of improvement in 2013-14 relative to the 2012-13. Districts with the greatest 4-year improvement in graduation rates were Barstow Unified (27.7%), Fullerton Joint Union (22.8%), Vallejo City Unified (18.0%), San Bernardino City Unified (17.7%), and Moreno Valley Unified (17.1%).

**Table 2: Updated District Cohort Graduation Rates 2009-10 through 2013-14**

	<b>2009-10 (%)</b>	<b>2012-13 (%)</b>	<b>3-Year Difference</b>	<b>2013-14 (%)</b>	<b>4-Year Difference</b>
Barstow Unified	46.7	73.1	26.4	74.2	27.5
Fullerton Joint Union	70.6	91.9	21.3	93.4	22.8
Stockton Unified	66.1	83.1	17.0	76.4	10.3
Moreno Valley Unified	65.7	81	15.3	82.9	17.2
Tulare Joint Union	72.4	87	14.6	85.3	12.9
<b><i>State Total</i></b>	<b><i>74.7</i></b>	<b><i>80.4</i></b>	<b><i>5.7</i></b>	<b><i>80.8</i></b>	<b><i>6.1</i></b>

Figure 1 visualizes the graduation rates of these five districts relative to the overall state graduation rate.

**Figure 1: California State and District Cohort Graduation Rates 2009-10 thru 2013-14**





## Appendix B. District Information and Demographics

**Table 1: District Information and Demographics for Five California Districts with Increased Graduation Rates, 2012-13**

<i>District Location</i>	Barstow Unified	Fullerton Joint Union High	Stockton Unified	Moreno Valley Unified	Tulare Joint Union High	California State Average
Region	South	South	Central	South	Central	N.A
Urbanicity	Town	Suburban	City	Suburban	Suburban	N.A
<b><i>Demographics</i></b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
African American	14.6	2.2	11.4	17.1	3.8	6.3
Asian	0.8	18.1	10.0	2.0	1.7	8.6
Hispanic	53.4	53.1	61.7	66.5	69.9	52.7
White	23.7	20.5	7.5	9.6	22.9	25.5
Low-income	75.7	37.3	85.7	81.2	73.8	58.0
English learners (ELs)	13.1	11.2	27.2	22.0	14.1	21.7
Special education	11.4	8.6	8.2	12.2	5.6	10.9

**Table 2: District Graduation Rates by Select Student Subgroups for Five California Districts, 2009-10 to 2012-13**

	Barstow Unified		Fullerton Joint Union High		Stockton Unified		Moreno Valley Unified		Tulare Joint Union High		California State Average	
	09-10	12-13	09-10	12-13	09-10	12-13	09-10	12-13	09-10	12-13	09-10	12-13
African American	33.9	64.5	78.3	91.9	64.0	83.5	63.6	78.2	74.6	84.5	60.5	68.1
Asian	100.0	100.0	81.5	97.4	78.7	90.6	67.2	81.8	75.0	86.4	89.0	91.6
Hispanic	45.4	73.2	57.0	88.2	64.1	82.4	63.9	81.8	70.8	85.4	68.1	75.7
White	53.0	75.0	91.0	95.4	50.6	71.8	75.1	84.8	74.3	91.1	83.5	87.7
Low-income	42.8	68.5	84.6	87.6	67.8	83.7	64.5	80.2	66.8	84.2	68.0	74.8
English learners (ELs)	37.5	68.3	32.2	77.2	50.1	73.1	44.9	63.8	55.4	77.8	56.4	63.1
Special education	25.0	51.1	67.3	67.4	30.8	59.4	56.0	57.0	62.5	81.4	56.7	61.9
<b><i>District</i></b>	<b><i>46.7</i></b>	<b><i>73.1</i></b>	<b><i>70.6</i></b>	<b><i>91.9</i></b>	<b><i>66.1</i></b>	<b><i>83.1</i></b>	<b><i>65.7</i></b>	<b><i>81.0</i></b>	<b><i>72.4</i></b>	<b><i>87.0</i></b>	<b><i>74.7</i></b>	<b><i>80.4</i></b>

# Appendix C. District Leader Interview Protocol

## Profiles of California Districts with Improved Graduation Rates

### District Administrator Interview

Winter 2014-15

<b>Respondent:</b>	<b>Title:</b>	<b>District:</b>
<b>Interviewer:</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Consent Received:</b>

### Introduction

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. I am \_\_\_\_\_, from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), working as a partner with Dr. Russ Rumberger and the California Dropout Research Project at UC Santa Barbara.

We are working on a project to identify and profile districts with high growth in graduation rates over the last three years. As your district has been identified, we would like to interview you, [*for first interview with Sacramento City, Stockton, and Moreno: “one other district administrator,”*] and one high school principal from your district (we will ask you for a recommendation at the end of the interview). We are interested in hearing about the practices, strategies, and circumstances you associate with your graduation performance and in possibly identifying effective strategies and interventions for supporting and transforming other districts. We will be creating a report profiling the selected districts, summarizing our findings, and highlighting best practices to share with other districts, policy makers, and interested parties.

Before we start, I would like to cover some logistical items. This interview is scheduled for an hour. You are free to end it at any time and to pass on any questions you do not wish to answer. All information obtained today will only be used for purposes of this study. We may wish to share the name of your district and possibly quotes from this interview. However, all sections written about your district will be sent to you prior to the release of the report to ensure accuracy and to gain your permission for inclusion.

We would like to record our conversation for note taking purposes. No one outside the research team and a transcription service will listen to the recording, and if at any point you would like the recorder turned off, just let us know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

## Respondent and District Background

1. Let's start by having you tell me a bit about your background.
  - How long have you been in your current position?
  - And how long have you been with the district?
  - *If different amount of time:* What other positions have you held in this, or other, districts?

**Note to Interviewer:** If the respondent does not seem to think the district's graduation rates have improved, probe more to understand why and then continue the interview. If the district administrator has not been with the district long enough, probe for what s/he knows about the district's graduation rates in the past.

2. Your district's graduation rates appear to have grown more than other districts in the state over the last three years. To what extent do you feel that your district has performed well in graduating students from high school since the 2009-10 school year?

## Policies, Programs, or Practices Related to District Graduation Rates

3. Overall, what policies, programs, or practices do you feel have been most **effective** in achieving your district's improved graduation rates? I realize there are probably multiple strategies, but if you had to limit them, what would you list as the top three?
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Note to Interviewer:** For **each** strategy administer the seven probes below.

- i. When and why did you decide to focus on this effort and who made that decision?
  - a. Who (else) was involved?
  - b. Was research on dropout prevention strategies and/or district-wide and/or school level data analysis played a role?
- ii. How well do you feel this policy/program/practice has been implemented? What process did you use for implementation? And how well did it work?
- iii. What role, if any, did outside providers play in the implementation of this policy/program/practice? If substantial, who were they and what did they do?

- iv. Did you secure additional funding or resources to implement this policy/program/practice? What particular tradeoffs in terms of funding and resources has your district had to make to provide these supports?
- v. What specifically about this policy/program/practice was important to your district's graduation rate? Can you provide examples?
- vi. What effect do you believe this policy/program/practice has had? Can you provide specific evidence? [If not mentioned above] What effect do you think it has had on student achievement [and which specific groups of students], if any?
- vii. Are there any state policies that facilitated or hindered implementation of this policy?

### Other District Supports and Changes

Next, I would like to learn about any other major district-wide supports that have been implemented, or changes that have occurred, that may have influenced graduation rates in your district over the past 5 years.

**Note to Interviewer:** Only administer the questions not already covered in the three strategies above.

- 4. First, in the last 5 years has your district implemented any major, new supports or engagement activities for **students or subpopulations of students** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - i. Examples: Enrichment or elective classes, sports, after school programs, credit recovery, partnerships with community-based support providers (such as counseling or work-based experiences), or extra aide time
- 5. Over the last 5 years, did your district implement any major, new district-wide **supports for teachers** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - i. Examples: Intensive professional development, coaching, or other mentoring specifically related to support for students at-risk
- 6. In the last 5 years has your district implemented any major, new district-wide leadership models or **supports for principals** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - i. Examples: Distributed leadership, leadership relationship building, intensive professional development, coaching, or other mentoring specifically related to support for at-risk students

7. Over the last 5 years did your district implement any other major, new district-wide **supports for schools** that you think may have impacted graduation rates in your district? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
- i. Examples: Assistance with school culture or climate, data analysis, early warning systems, budgeting, or staffing
8. In the last 5 years, did **any other major changes** happen in your district that you think may have impacted graduation rates in your district, such as: (For each “yes,” probe on when this happened and what it entailed.)
- changes in the schools included in your district, or the opening of nearby alternative schools?
  - a new district vision (e.g., high expectations, no excuses policy, shared responsibility)?
  - hiring a new superintendent?
  - changes in school scheduling (e.g., extended school year/day)?
  - reductions or increases in class sizes?
  - implementation of a new curriculum or assessment?
  - new instructional strategies?
  - a new data system and/or increased use of data?
  - relationships with key stakeholder groups (e.g., community, parents, labor unions, the school board)
  - new staffing practices (e.g., hiring/firing policies, performance pay, redistribution of teachers)?
  - new budget policies (e.g., more or less flexibility around budgeting, reallocation of resources)?
9. Over the last 5 years, did your district collaborate with any **outside providers** or entities to help improve your district’s graduation rate? If yes, to what extent did these collaborations help or hinder your progress?

### **Three Most Important Policies, Programs, or Practices Revisited**

10. After our discussion of other major changes in your district, would you amend the three policies, programs, or practices you listed above as the most effective in achieving your district’s graduation rates? [REPEAT THE THREE EFFORTS IDENTIFIED]. If yes, how would you change the list or what additional thoughts would you add?
11. Of these three things, if you had to pick **one** as **most** important, which would it be and why?

## Challenges and Next Steps

[ALWAYS ASK Q12 BUT QUESTIONS 13-15 CAN BE SKIPPED IF YOU ARE SHORT ON TIME]

12. Did your district implement policies, programs, or practices designed to address students at risk of dropping out in the last 5 years that you feel were not as successful as expected? If so, what were they? Why do you feel they were not fully successful?
13. We are also interested in learning what you feel have been or are the greatest challenges to increasing your district's graduation rate. I recognize there are likely multiple challenges. But if you had to limit it, what are the top three challenges your district has faced over the last five years?
1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_

14. How have you, or are you, addressing these challenges?
15. How are you planning to sustain and/or increase your district's graduation rate over time? What are the district's next steps in these efforts?

## Advice to Other Districts

16. Based on your experience, what advice would you give other districts that are attempting to increase their graduation rates?
17. How replicable do you consider this advice/these strategies for other districts?
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your district's success?
19. The last question is which principal in your district would you recommend that we interview to get a school-level perspective on the district's graduation rate increase?
20. If we have any addition questions, is it okay with you if we email you?

**Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. We really appreciate it!**

# Appendix D. School Leader Interview Protocol

## Profiles of California Districts with Improved Graduation Rates

### Principal Interview

Winter 2014-15

<b>Respondent:</b>	<b>Title:</b>	<b>District:</b>
<b>Interviewer:</b>	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Consent Received:</b>

### Introduction

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. I am \_\_\_\_\_, from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), working as a partner with Dr. Russ Rumberger and the California Dropout Research Project at UC Santa Barbara.

We are working on a project to identify and profile districts with high growth in cohort graduation rates over the last three years. Your district has been identified as such, and we have already spoken to a district administrator who recommended that we contact you to provide us with a school-level perspective. We're interested in talking to you about practices, strategies, and circumstances you associate with your district's graduation performance and in possibly identifying effective strategies and interventions for supporting and transforming other districts. We will be creating a report profiling the selected districts, summarizing our findings, and highlighting best practices to share with other districts, policy makers, and interested parties.

Before we start, I would like to cover some logistical items. This interview is scheduled for an hour. You are free to end it at any time and to pass on any question you do not wish to answer. All information obtained today will only be used for purposes of this study. We may wish to share the name of your district and possibly quotes from this interview. However, all sections written about your district will be sent to you in advance to ensure accuracy and to gain your permission for inclusion.

We would like to record our conversation for note taking purposes. No one outside the research team and a transcription service will listen to the recording, and if at any point you would like the recorder turned off, just let us know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?



## Respondent and District Background

1. Let's start by having you tell me a bit about your background.
  - How long have you been in your current position?
  - How long have you been in your current school? And how long have you been with the district?
  - *If different amount of time:* What other positions have you held in the district?
2. Your district's graduation rates appear to have grown more than other districts in the state over the last three years. To what extent do you feel that your district has improved or had high graduation rates since the 2009-10 school year?

**Note to Interviewer:** If the respondent does not seem to think the district's graduation rates have improved, probe more to understand why and then continue the interview. If the principal has not been with the district long enough, probe for what s/he knows about the district's graduation rates in the past.

## Policies, Programs, or Practices Related to District Graduation Rates

- 3A. Overall, what **district level** policies, programs, or practices do you feel have been most **effective** in achieving your district's improved graduation rates? I realize there are probably multiple strategies, but if you had to limit them, what would you list as the top three?
  1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3B. Are there other school-level policies that you feel have been as effective, or more effective, in raising the school or district's graduation rate over the past three years?

**Note to Interviewer:** For **each** strategy administer the seven probes below.

*Probes for district-level strategies:*

- i. To your knowledge, when and why did the district decide to focus on this effort and who made that decision?
  - a. Were you and/or other school staff involved?
  - b. Are you aware of whether any research on dropout prevention strategies and/or district-wide and/or school level data analysis played a role?

- ii. How well do you feel this policy/program/practice has been implemented at your school?
  - a. What process did you use for implementation? Do you know if the implementation process was similar across other schools in the district? And how well did it work?
- iii. What role, if any, did outside providers play in the implementation of this policy/program/practice?
- iv. What specifically about this policy/program/practice was important to your school's high graduation rate?
  - a. Can you provide examples?
- v. What effect do you believe this policy/program/practice has had at your school?
  - a. Can you provide specific evidence?
  - b. [If not mentioned above] What effect do you think it has had on student achievement [and which specific groups of students], if any?
- vi. Are there any district or state policies that facilitated or hindered your implementation of this policy/program/practice?

*If they mention school-level policies, strategies, or practices not implemented district-wide, ask the following:*

- viii. Please briefly describe the school-level policies, strategies, or practices that might have influenced your school graduation rates that you mentioned earlier [in 3B].
- ix. How, if at all, did the district influence (in positive or negative ways) the implementation of these strategies?
  - a. *[Probe on leadership interests, district vision/mission, and organizational or financial support.]*

## Other District Supports and Changes

Next, I would like to learn about any other major district-wide supports that have been implemented, or changes that have occurred, that may have influenced graduation rates in your district over the past 5 years.

**Note to Interviewer:** Only administer the questions not already covered in the three strategies above.

4. First, in the last 5 years has your district implemented any major, new supports or engagement activities for **students or subpopulations of students** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - a. Examples: Enrichment or elective classes, sports, after school programs, credit recovery, partnerships with community-based support providers (such as counseling or work-based experiences), or extra aide time
5. Over the last 5 years, did your district implement any major, new district-wide **supports for teachers** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - a. Examples: Intensive professional development, coaching, or other mentoring specifically related to support for students at-risk
6. In the last 5 years has your district implemented any major, new district-wide leadership models or **supports for principals** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when were they implemented and what do they entail?
  - a. Examples: Distributed leadership, leadership relationship building, intensive professional development, coaching, or other mentoring specifically related to support for at-risk students
7. Over the last 5 years did your district implement any other major, new district-wide **supports for schools** that may have impacted graduation rates? If yes, when did you implement these and what do they entail?
  - a. Examples: Assistance with school culture or climate, data analysis, early warning systems, budgeting, or staffing
8. In the last 5 years, did **any other major changes** happen in your district, such as: (For each “yes,” probe on when this happened and what it entailed.)
  - changes in the schools included in your district, or the opening of nearby alternative schools?
  - a new district vision (e.g., high expectations, no excuses policy, shared responsibility)?

- hiring a new superintendent?
- changes in school scheduling (e.g., extended school year/day)?
- reductions or increases in class sizes?
- implementation of a new curriculum or assessment?
- new instructional strategies?
- a new data system and/or increased use of data?
- relationships with key stakeholder groups (e.g., community, parents, labor unions, the school board)
- new staffing practices (e.g., hiring/firing policies, performance pay, redistribution of teachers)?
- new budget policies (e.g., more or less flexibility around budgeting, reallocation of resources)?

9. Over the last 5 years, did your district collaborate with any **outside providers** or entities to help improve your district’s graduation rate? If yes, to what extent did these collaborations help or hinder your progress?

**Three Most Important Policies, Programs, or Practices Revisited**

10. After our discussion of other major changes in your district, would you amend the three policies, programs, or practices you listed above as the most effective in achieving your district’s graduation rates? [REPEAT THE THREE EFFORTS IDENTIFIED]. If yes, how would you change the list or what additional thoughts would you add?

11. Of these three things, if you had to pick **one** as **most** important, which would it be and why?

**Challenges and Next Steps**

**[ALWAYS ASK Q12 BUT QUESTIONS 13-15 CAN BE SKIPPED IF YOU ARE SHORT ON TIME]**

12. Did your district implement policies, programs, or practices designed to address students at risk of dropping out in the last 5 years that you feel were not fully successful? If so, what were they? Why do you feel they were not fully successful?

13. We are also interested in learning what you feel have been or are the greatest challenges to increasing your district’s graduation rate. I recognize there are likely multiple challenges. But if you had to limit it, what are the top three challenges your district has faced over the last five years?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

14. To your knowledge, is the district trying to address these challenges? If so, how?
15. To your knowledge, how is your district planning to sustain and/or increase the graduation rate over time? What are the district's next steps in these efforts?

### **Advice to Other Schools or Districts**

16. Based on your experience, what advice would you give other schools or districts that are attempting to increase their graduation rates?
17. How replicable do you consider this advice/these strategies for other schools or districts?
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your school's or district's success?
19. Those are all the questions I have for now. If I have any additional questions, is it okay if I email you?

**Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today!**

# Appendix E. District Profiles

# District Profile: Barstow Unified School District

Prepared by AIR and the California Dropout Research Project

## Barstow Unified School District

### Overview

Barstow Unified is a small, southern, rural joint union high school district with one traditional comprehensive high school and one alternative high school. Barstow’s 2012-13 high school student population of approximately 1,720 is predominantly Hispanic; 13 percent of students are English learners (ELs) and more than 75 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Student Characteristics, 2012-13**

	District (%)	State Average (%)
African American	14.6	6.3
Asian	0.8	8.6
Hispanic	53.4	52.7
White	23.7	25.5
Low-income	75.7	58.0
English learners (ELs)	13.1	21.7
Special education	11.4	10.9

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

*“Once [students] find their niche or their interest ... a light bulb is turned on with our students who are enrolled in that program and may have otherwise been a dropout.”*

Barstow Unified  
District Administrator

Barstow had a 26.4 percentage point increase in its cohort graduation rate for all students between 2009-10 and 2012-13 (see Table 2). Graduation rate increases for African American (30.6 percentage points), Hispanic students (27.8 percentage points), and ELs (30.8 percentage points) are particularly notable.

**Table 2: Cohort Graduation Rates**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	Difference (%)
African American	33.9	64.5	30.6
Asian	100.0	100.0	0.0
Hispanic	45.4	73.2	27.8
White	53.0	75.0	22.0
Low-income	42.8	68.5	25.7
English learners (ELs)	37.5	68.3	30.8
Special education	25.0	51.1	26.1
<b>District</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>73.1</b>	<b>26.4</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>74.7</b>	<b>80.2</b>	<b>5.5</b>

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

While Barstow’s graduation rate is still below the state average, the district’s improvement is substantial. Underlying the district’s orientation to high school retention is an explicit effort to provide all students with ample opportunities to succeed in high school and beyond. Part of this strategy hinges on relationships between staff and students, and between schools and community organizations. Based on interviews with school and district staff, this profile details the following strategies identified as being key to the school’s success:

- Addressing Individual Needs
- Building a Student-Centered Culture
- Community Partnerships

## Factor 1: Addressing Individual Needs

### “Now a light bulb is turned on.”

Central to Barstow’s retention and graduation rate improvement strategy is an effort to address individual student needs by offering flexibility in class schedules, credit recovery options, and coursework. A district administrator explained that helping a student find a path that fits can be the deciding factor: “Once they find their niche or their interest and whether it’s an ROP or CTE class... we’ve seen success stories ...that now a light bulb is turned on with our students that are enrolled in that program and may have otherwise been a dropout, that have now achieved success in all their courses.”

### Flexibility

Barstow provides multiple curricular and credit recovery options for all students. For instance, each high school has several smaller academies with career and technical education foci, such as food service, STEM, and industrial trades. The emphasis is on student interest but also providing skills relevant to students’ post-secondary goals. A school administrator described their approach as an effort to: “offer things that the kids are interested in, but that will also help them out in the community.”

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*“Their needs in their home environment may be different than a traditional high school student...they are the sole support of the household...so we move forward and graduate them as soon as possible.”*

Barstow Unified  
School Administrator

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To help students with credit recovery, the district uses online course work and independent study programs. The policy and online platform has been effective, in part, because it offers students the opportunity to recover credits without the stigma of sitting in class with younger students. Likewise, it affords working students the flexibility of completing work on their own schedules. The district also allows students to graduate at other times in the year. A district administrator acknowledged that the traditional high school schedule makes it unduly hard for some, noting that: “we move forward and graduate them as soon as possible.”

## Factor 2: Building a Student-Centered Culture

### Student-Centered Staff

The district has also shifted its orientation to students and between staff—where they strive to make students feel welcomed and cared for. A school administrator explained that in fostering warm and supportive relationships, the school has made gains in creating “an environment where students felt comfortable coming to school.” The same administrator expressed the belief that “by availing ourselves to students...for anything” the school has started to see gains in attendance and graduation. A district administrator echoed this idea, arguing that forming relationships with students conveys to students that they are cared for, “in a manner that they truly feel that we have their best interests in mind.” One school administrator said that counselors play “a huge role” in furthering schools’ efforts to be in contact with all students. Counselors work closely with students, meeting with them at the beginning of and throughout the year, to help students stay on track with coursework and credit recovery.

### Celebrating Student Achievement

The district has also begun to make academics important by celebrating student achievement. Building upon a practice that schools often follow for athletics, they now hold Academic Award Assemblies where they recognize high-performing students with letter jackets and pins. This practice “started a buzz”, catching on quickly and supporting a culture of academics. Schools also began posting college acceptance letters in the main hall, for all students, staff, and parents to see. A school administrator explained: “The increase in the graduation rate...we’ve gone through this culture and climate shift...where we made academics important...the students have bought into it.”



### Factor 3: Community Partnerships

A district administrator highlighted the importance of working with the community. In Barstow, schools partner with the Business Community Coalition and the local junior college. The Business Coalition partners with each school, setting goals and meeting quarterly to review their progress. The junior college also partners with the schools to allow students to attend early college and complete credit recovery courses. Students can potentially graduate high school with up to 40 college credits. The administrator explained: “Our community has a vested interest in our students and the students feel that, [so] they’re more apt to succeed and they’re more apt to continue their education.”

#### More Information:

- For more information about this district, please go to the district website: <http://www.barstow.k12.ca.us/>
- For more information about this study, please contact Helen Duffy, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, San Mateo, California: [hduffy@air.org](mailto:hduffy@air.org) or (650) 843-8181.

## Fullerton Joint Union High School District

### Overview

Fullerton is a midsize, Title I joint union high school district with six traditional comprehensive high schools, two in Los Angeles County and four in Orange County. Fullerton’s 2012-13 high school student population of approximately 14,607 is predominantly Hispanic; nearly 30 percent are English learners (ELs) and 45 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Student Characteristics, 2012-13**

	District (%)	State Average (%)
African American	2.2	6.3
Asian	18.1	8.6
Hispanic	53.1	52.7
White	20.5	25.5
Low-income	37.3	58.0
English learners (ELs)	11.2	21.7
Special education	8.6	10.9

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Between 2009-10 and 2012-13, Fullerton Joint Union had a 21 percentage point increase in its cohort graduation rate for all students (see Table 2). Graduation rate increases for ELs (45 percentage points) and Hispanic students (31.2 percentage points) are particularly notable.

**Table 2: Cohort Graduation Rates**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	Difference (%)
African American	78.3	91.9	13.6
Asian	81.5	97.4	15.9
Hispanic	57.0	88.2	31.2
White	91.0	95.4	4.4
Low-income	84.6	87.6	3.0
English learners (ELs)	32.2	77.2	45.0
Special education	67.3	67.4	0.1
<b>District</b>	<b>70.6</b>	<b>91.9</b>	<b>21.0</b>
<i>State</i>	<i>74.7</i>	<i>80.2</i>	<i>5.5</i>

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Fullerton Joint Union’s graduation rate improvement is substantial. Underlying the district’s orientation to high school retention is an explicit effort to prepare students for their adult lives beyond high school. Based on interviews with school and district staff, this profile details the following two strategies identified as being key to the school’s success:

- College Readiness for All Students
- Fostering an Entrepreneurial Culture

## Factor 1: College Readiness

### “High Stakes Tests that Matter”

A district administrator noted that focusing on “tests that matter,” in other words, high stakes tests that directly impact student progress, has been essential to improving the district’s graduation rate. In order to help high school staff determine which students will need additional supports immediately upon entry to high school, students also take the state high school exit exam in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, even though they are not required by the state to take it until 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Additionally, in partnership with the local community college, all students take college placement exams at the end of their junior year. Senior year coursework is then tailored with “the specific purpose of having [students] score higher on the community college placement test at the end of their senior year.” Fullerton began the initiative in SY 2011-12 to ensure that all students are prepared for college; administrators cited it as a central strategy in graduation rate improvement.

These proactive steps help school and district staff to provide targeted interventions, both to help students graduate from high school, and be prepared for a smooth transition into college.

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*“[Emphasizing college readiness] helps our students, especially as juniors, to have a realistic view of what’s after high school and therefore what they have to do to get their diploma and then to go to postsecondary, so it serves both worlds for us.*

Fullerton Joint Union  
District Administrator

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Furthermore, administrators reported that participation in these tests earlier than is required has been effective in increasing graduation rates because it forces students to consider the next phase of their education. As one administrator noted, “[taking the placement exam] also helps with high school graduation because it’s telling students, if you were taking this exam for after high school, here’s where you’re at. So it’s a good...motivator that I have to push forward towards graduation.” In contrast to the California Standards Tests (CSTs), the administrator argued that the high school exit exam and college placement exams are relevant to all students: “The CSTs never really mattered for high school and quite honestly I don’t know how the Common Core tests are going to matter to high schools either, because none of these results are used for the kids’ future.”

Fullerton’s college prep initiative helps students to avoid the “purgatory” of remedial math and English upon college entrance. The placement test allows school staff to hone in on the skills students will need to be successful in college, and allows them to address those deficits before leaving high school. For those that don’t perform well, the courses they will take their senior year save them time and money spent on remedial course work. “It’s called remedial purgatory because they’re wasting their time. There’s such a dropout problem at community college because for many kids it takes them two years of remedial courses before they can even start taking courses that are transferrable.” For students who perform well on the test may enroll in college courses, allowing them to earn early college credit while saving time and money. Many students graduating from Fullerton enter college with credit for at least one class.

While an emphasis on, and drive towards, college readiness is a defining strategy for Fullerton, administrators also acknowledge that not all students will attend college. The district has adopted an “entrepreneurial” or competitive and service-oriented approach that encourages schools to provide appropriate services for all students.

## Factor 2: Fostering an Entrepreneurial Culture

Fullerton fosters an “entrepreneurial” atmosphere, a culture where students are given a great deal of autonomy and choice so that they can pursue relevant coursework in an environment that suits their secondary and post-secondary needs. Students may choose their high school, opt to take advanced classes, or enroll in smaller academies that align with their career or college goals. The district provides many supports to help students reach their goals, such as extra study periods during the school day, free after-school tutoring, and summer school.

### Relevant Options for All Students

Giving students and families a choice of high schools through a district-wide open enrollment policy creates competition between high schools, incentivizing them to improve their curricular offerings to attract and retain students. One administrator explained: “[open enrollment] puts a significant amount of pressure for you to be on your A game.” As a result of this initiative, schools have increased their range of coursework and programs. One school has created several new academies: an arts academy, a sports medicine academy, and an engineering academy. There has been increased enrollment in all of these programs. Citing the success of these academies, one administrator suggested that the model works: “because it’s very focused on each individual student and their accomplishment in moving forward, all those programs, sports medicine or whatever... We have a higher graduation rate because they have a purpose for being here.”

Similar to the open enrollment policy, all students are granted “open access” to Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes. Although opening access to AP classes could have resulted in lower pass rates, in fact the district’s pass rate continued to improve in spite of a continually increasing AP participation rate.

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*“It’s very focused on each individual student and their accomplishment in moving forward, all those programs, sports medicine or whatever... we have a higher graduation rate because they have a purpose for being here.”*

Fullerton Joint Union  
School Administrator

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### Serving the Needs of All Students

Just as the comprehensive high schools have worked to make course work relevant to each student’s adult life, the district has recently opened a state-of-the-art alternative high school (“the second most beautiful school in the district”) across the street from the California State University—Fullerton to serve students with non-traditional needs. A district administrator described the importance of the alternative school, “as a symbol: it sends the message that every kid matters, that every kid is important.” The school was designed to provide additional services for students who might not thrive at a large, comprehensive high school, with small classes, childcare, and a hybrid instructional model that allows students to move at their own pace.

In addition to the alternative school, all comprehensive high schools in the district also offer on-campus options for students who might fall behind in the form of Opportunity Programs. Opportunity Programs serve the most at-risk 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students by providing smaller classes and extensive elective opportunities, such as agriculture, life sciences, or Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC). These programs are designed to keep students engaged and on-track to graduate from high school. Opportunity Programs are flexible, so students can transition back into the regular high school as soon as they make up enough credits and get back on track.

### Academic Supports and Incentives

The district holds itself accountable for the success of students by offering numerous academic supports such as, school-day study periods, free after-school and Saturday tutoring, and summer school. Each school also supports students academically through a 24-minute study period, mandatory for all students earning Ds or below, and optional for students with Cs or higher. Thus, struggling students are given extra support but are motivated to improve so they can earn extra free time. A school administrator cited this practice as “the golden ticket,” explaining that this short study period has made a tremendous impact on student performance. In fact, the study period has been so successful that the school will have to change the criteria to ensure continued participation.

By offering a myriad of services to address the needs and goals of all of its students, Fullerton Joint Union High School District has seen a dramatic improvement in its graduation rate. The district strives to prepare students for college and careers, offering relevant coursework and providing ample and varied academic supports.

### More Information:

- For more information about this district, please go to the district website: <http://www.fjuhsd.net/>.
- For more information about this study, please contact Helen Duffy, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, San Mateo, California: [hduffy@air.org](mailto:hduffy@air.org) or (650) 843-8181.

## Moreno Valley Unified School District

### Overview

Moreno Valley is a midsize Title I unified school district located in Riverside County with four traditional comprehensive high schools and six small alternative programs. Moreno Valley’s 2012-13 student population of about 34,924 reflects diverse backgrounds; 22 percent are English learners (ELs) and 81 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Student Characteristics, 2012-13**

	District (%)	State Average (%)
African American	17.1	6.3
Asian	2.0	8.6
Hispanic	66.5	52.7
White	9.6	25.5
Low-income	81.2	58.0
English learners (ELs)	22.0	21.7
Special education	12.2	10.9

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Moreno Valley Unified had a 15.3 average percentage point increase in its cohort graduation rate for all students between 2009-10 and 2012-13 (see Table 2). Graduation rates for all subgroups in the district also improved, although some (e.g., Hispanic students) more than others (e.g., students in special education).

**Table 2: Cohort Graduation Rates, 2009-10 to 2012-13**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	Difference (%)
African American	63.6	78.2	14.6
Asian	67.2	81.8	14.6
Hispanic	63.9	81.8	17.9
White	75.1	84.8	9.7
Low-income	64.5	80.2	15.7
English learners (ELs)	44.9	63.8	18.9
Special education	56.0	57.0	1.0
<b>District</b>	<b>65.7</b>	<b>81.0</b>	<b>15.3</b>
<i>State</i>	<i>74.7</i>	<i>80.2</i>	<i>5.5</i>

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

The district’s mission statement is, “To ensure all students graduate high school prepared to successfully enter higher education and/or pursue a viable career path.” Interview respondents reported tailoring several research-based strategies to improve the district’s graduation rates. Based on interviews with two district administrators and one school principal and supported by information on the district website, this profile details the following strategies identified as being key to the school’s success:

- Building a Culture of High Expectations;
- Increasing Credit Recovery and Academic Support Opportunities; and
- Partnering for Success.

## Factor 1: Building a Culture of High Expectations

### “Excellence on Purpose”

District staff described promoting a cultural shift toward higher expectations and accountability for all stakeholders, which they labeled their “Excellence on Purpose” initiative. This approach emerged with the arrival of the new superintendent in 2011 and the recognition that district graduation rates, which were around 60 percent, were unacceptably low. The district made sure that parents, students, and teachers were all fully apprised of the data, which created a collective sense of urgency to make change. The culture shift involved encouraging all stakeholders to take responsibility for student success. The culture shift impacted all staff in the district, from registrars and clerks, who were expected to ensure that student attendance and enrollment status were being tracked accurately, to teachers, who were expected to regularly review lists of students receiving Ds and Fs and provide appropriate interventions, to students themselves, who had a responsibility to ask for help and take advantage of support opportunities offered by the district. The district culture promotes a no excuses mentality. As one district administrator described, “I say all the time, you can’t wait for someone to tell you what to do. If you see something happening, you have to do something about it. If you don’t know what to do, call someone.” A school administrator noted that district staff model this expectation themselves, and collective commitment to student success is also emphasized in the district’s 2014-2020 Strategic Plan.<sup>5</sup>

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“We came up with a theme called *Excellence on Purpose*. Within that climate approach we started talking about how we do things on purpose and not leave it to chance, including our graduation rates. It was about the sense of urgency, creating this culture that things are not going to be just different, but they would be measurably different and that they would be considered and defined as being excellent.”

Moreno Valley  
District Administrator

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### Support and Professional Development

Increasing collective responsibility and accountability for student success requires increased supports for school staff. The district committed to providing these supports in the form of regular meetings with school leadership and counselors, training on research-based strategies for increasing graduation rates, particularly for students from low-income families,<sup>6</sup> and helping school staff to systematically review and act on data indicating which students are at risk of not graduating on time. A school administrator noted, “The support that we receive from our district office is phenomenal. . . . Having the support from the district office to hold us accountable and to help us with what we needed was major. In the past it was like, ‘you need to improve your graduation rates,’ but there was no support behind it. It’s a real culture shift.”

## Factor 2: Increasing Credit Recovery and Academic Support Opportunities

### Summer School, After School, and Online Opportunities

The district increased opportunities for credit recovery and academic support through summer school, after school, and online offerings. District staff strongly encouraged students with Ds and Fs to attend summer school to make up credits or improve their grades. The district recognized that students receiving low or failing grades in earlier classes were unlikely to be successful in subsequent classes, even if they were promoted to the next grade. Summer school access was expanded by increasing capacity, providing summer school at all four comprehensive high school campuses, and reversing an old district policy that prevented students with behavior infractions from attending. The district also provided credit recovery options to ninth graders, instead of making them wait until grade 10 for to get support. In addition to improving summer school credit recovery options, the

<sup>5</sup> 2014-2020 Moreno Valley Unified School District Strategic Plan: <http://www.mvusd.net/pdf/Strategic.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Respondents specifically noted research and support from Robert Balfanz (see <http://new.every1graduates.org/robert-balfanz/>), Ruby Payne (see <http://www.ahaprocess.com/who-we-are/dr-ruby-payne/>), and InnovateEd (see <http://innovateed.com/>).



district celebrated student success by having a districtwide summer graduation ceremony for all summer graduates.

The district also increased funding for after school and online credit recovery programs to increase the flexibility and number of options to allow all students to be successful. Supports such as after school tutoring, AVID, Aventa Learning online credit recovery classes, and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) preparatory classes were offered.<sup>7</sup>

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“Kids who grow up in poverty, who don’t grow up with a lot of structure in their lives, need more opportunities, and when we provide those opportunities, they flourish.”

Moreno Valley  
District Administrator

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### “Help Me Graduate” Hotline

The district implemented a “hotline” that students can call to ask questions about how to get back and stay on track for graduation. The district also has a website where students can find out about the requirements for graduating, who to contact when they need help, templates for 4-year plans, and other information for students and their parents.<sup>8</sup>

## Factor 3: Partnering for Success

### Adopt-a-School Program

The district started a program where community businesses and faith-based groups can “adopt” specific schools in the district in order to, “lead to greater understanding of, and support for, public education, while giving educators an awareness of the needs of the business world.”<sup>9</sup> Groups that adopt a school are encouraged to get involved in many ways, including taking campus tours, attending student awards ceremonies, participating in career days, and providing support for school supplies or events. The amount and type of involvement is up to the organization and is negotiated with school principals. One business supported a school that had low attendance by having employees greet students as they came into school, providing the school with rulers that said, “Attendance is Important,” handing out attendance certificates, and sponsoring a raffle for students with perfect attendance to win a trip to Disneyland. A faith-based community partner had members mentor students, providing individual support and attention to children. Currently, over 100 community groups have participated in the Adopt-a-School program.

### Higher Education Partnerships

As noted in the district’s mission statement, student success does not end at high school graduation, but includes post-secondary opportunities as well. Although college transition supports and opportunities might not be an obvious dropout prevention strategy, some research has shown that more rigorous instruction and challenging opportunities may help keep students in school who would otherwise disengage or drop out.<sup>10</sup> One example of a higher education opportunity in the district includes the Middle College High School Program partnership with Moreno Valley College, which allows students to accumulate both high school and college credits in their junior and senior years. Students take classes on the college campus, and have the opportunity to complete more than one year’s worth of college units by the end of their senior year of high school. This program not only saves students time and money, but also gives them a clear understanding of what it takes to be successful in a real college setting.

<sup>7</sup> AVID: <http://www.avid.org/default.aspx>; Aventa Learning (now fueleducation™): <http://aventalearning.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Moreno Valley Unified School District’s “Help Me Graduate” campaign: [http://www.mvusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=168161&type=d&pREC\\_ID=345727](http://www.mvusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=168161&type=d&pREC_ID=345727)

<sup>9</sup> From the Moreno Valley Unified School District website: [http://www.mvusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=288412&type=d&pREC\\_ID=663652](http://www.mvusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=288412&type=d&pREC_ID=663652)

<sup>10</sup> Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Morison, K.B. (2006). The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts. Retrieved from <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Documents/thesilentepidemic3-06final.pdf>

More recently, the district signed an agreement with California State University - San Bernardino stating that any students who meet the university admissions requirements will be automatically accepted into the university.<sup>11</sup> District administrators are hoping that this agreement will motivate students who previously may never have considered college a possibility to pursue higher education.

**More Information:**

- For more information about this district, please go to the district website: <http://www.mvusd.net/>.
- For more information about this study, please contact Helen Duffy, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, San Mateo, California: [hduffy@air.org](mailto:hduffy@air.org) or (650) 843-8181.

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<sup>11</sup> Although this partnership was initiated too recently to have been related to the 2009-10 to 2012-13 increase in graduation rates, it is included here to demonstrate another innovative strategy the district is exploring.



## Stockton Unified School District



### Overview

Stockton Unified is a midsize Title I unified school district located in San Joaquin County with four traditional comprehensive high schools and seven smaller specialty or alternative programs. Stockton’s 2012-13 student population of about 38,400 reflects diverse backgrounds; 27 percent are English learners (ELs) and almost 86 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Student Characteristics, 2012-13**

	District (%)	State Average (%)
African American	11.4	6.3
Asian	10.0	8.6
Hispanic	61.7	52.7
White	7.5	25.5
Low-income	85.7	58.0
English learners (ELs)	27.2	21.7
Special education	8.2	10.9

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Stockton Unified had a 17.0 average percentage point increase in its cohort graduation rate for all students between 2009-10 and 2012-13 (see Table 2). Graduation rates for all subgroups in the district also improved substantially.

**Table 2: Cohort Graduation Rates, 2009-10 to 2012-13**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	Difference (%)
African American	64.0	83.5	19.5
Asian	78.7	90.6	11.9
Hispanic	64.1	82.4	18.3
White	50.6	71.8	21.2
Low-income	67.8	83.7	15.9
English learners (ELs)	50.1	73.1	23.0
Special education	30.8	59.4	28.6
<b>District</b>	<b>66.1</b>	<b>83.1</b>	<b>17.0</b>
<i>State</i>	<i>74.7</i>	<i>80.2</i>	<i>5.5</i>

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

The district’s mission statement is, “To provide every student with high quality instruction, a well-rounded educational experience, and the support necessary to succeed.”<sup>12</sup> Based on interviews with two district administrators and one school principal, and supported by information on the district website, this profile details the following strategies identified as being key to the school’s success:

- Instituting Personalized Learning Environments;
- Increasing Credit Recovery Opportunities; and
- Providing Supports for Schools.

<sup>12</sup> Stockton Unified School District website, *About SUSD*: <http://www.stocktonusd.net/about-susd>

## Factor 1: Instituting Personalized Learning Environments

### Small School Options

After having three of its large comprehensive high schools labeled as “dropout factories” by a Johns Hopkins study in 2007,<sup>13</sup> the district decided to address the problem by instituting several small schools designed to provide more personalized, sometimes technically-oriented, learning environments for students. In addition to a larger continuation school, they instituted the Stockton Early College Academy, the Pacific Law Academy, the Health Careers Academy, and the Weber Institute, among others. Many of the smaller schools have an average enrollment of 500 students or fewer and focus on a particular area of study, or have pathways in topics, such as health careers, law, automotive, or computer technology. The district has open enrollment, so with the support of counselors, students can choose which of the school environments is the best fit for their educational goals. District staff solicit parent and community engagement in deciding what types of schools or pathways will provide the most benefit to both students and the community. In spite of high turnover in the district superintendents, support staff and upper management have continued building on this strategy of personalized environments for several years. It seems that the focus on these types of schools is paying off—not only have district graduation rates risen dramatically,<sup>14</sup> but this year, six of Stockton’s smaller schools were ranked as gold, silver, or bronze on the U.S. News’ “Best High School” rankings.<sup>15</sup>

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*“We listen to what our parents say and we listen to our community stakeholders, and say, ‘What is it that you want for your kids? We want to help you, and we want to make sure that [students] are going to be successful.’”*

Stockton  
District Administrator

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### Individual Learning Plans and Attendance Meetings

Since being labeled a dropout factory, the district has instituted individual learning plans for all students, for which counselors are primarily responsible. These plans help students and their parents map out student progress toward graduation to ensure that they graduate on time. The district also educates parents and students about the consequences of chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of school). SUSD elementary schools participate in the University of Pacific’s Attendance Matters contest every September along with schools throughout the county. Stockton’s schools have taken first place for attendance the last two years and all participants showed improvement. Counselors meet with parents and students when students are absent frequently, and explain the importance of attendance in terms of academic performance and loss of funding to school services such as family resource and referral services. At these meetings, they also discuss alternative school settings to ensure parents and students are aware of their options.

## Factor 2: Increasing Credit Recovery Opportunities

In addition to increasing the number of small schools in the district, the district also began providing several credit recovery opportunities for students in all school types. A grant has allowed the district to offer *credit recovery and other academic supports after school and even on weekends as needed*, which one principal noted has “helped dramatically”. Two high schools in the district also offer AdvancePath Academy,<sup>16</sup> which is a blended online and small group instruction intervention class for students who might not be doing well in a more traditional setting. Although housed at specific schools, students from all over the district are eligible to attend.

<sup>13</sup> Schools with a Three Year Average Promoting Power Ratio (Class of 2004, 2005 and 2006) of 60% or Less: <http://web.jhu.edu/CSOS/images/ListofSchoolswithaWeakThreeYearAveragePromotingPowerRatio.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The graduation rates of the three schools previously labeled “dropout factories” were between 85.3% and 90.1% in 2012-13, well above the state average (DataQuest, Cohort Outcome Data for the Class of 2012-13, School Results Reports, <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/page2.asp?level=School&subject=Graduates&submit1=Submit> ).

<sup>15</sup> Stockton Unified 2015 U.S. News School Rankings: <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/california/districts/stockton-unf>

<sup>16</sup> For more information AdvancePath, see the program website: <http://www.advancepath.com/>  
To watch the AdvancePath Academy in action in Stockton, see this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXpZ5U0surw>

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*“[Credit recovery allowed students to take] the fun electives like arts and drama and music, the things they really like that keep them involved in school, knowing full well they had to take whatever they needed after school. So it’s been really, really successful.”*

Stockton School  
Administrator

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A school principal noted that it is successful in part because it directly tests student mastery of subjects, it is “businesslike” in that the expectations for success are clear, but the timing structure is flexible, and there are incentives for doing well. Students can choose to participate in the program in a morning or afternoon session, and also have the ability to work on content from home. Increased credit recovery options allowed students more access to electives such as arts, drama, and music, which serve to keep students engaged and “hooked into” school.

### Factor 3: Providing Supports for Schools

In addition to the district wide options and opportunities mentioned above, Stockton Unified School District also provides several supports for schools across the district. These involve a commitment to retaining low

counselor-to-student ratios, district staff help with student tracking, and successfully applying for grants that have supported the district’s work in all of these areas.

#### Counselors

Almost every high school in the district has four to five counselors, whose positions were retained throughout the recent economic recession. Counselors identify students who are struggling early, provide interventions and guidance to help students stay on track to graduate, communicate with parents, help students with individual learning plans, provide behavior interventions, and coordinate with other intervention staff such as social workers.

In addition to the commitment to regular district counselors, the district also has a contract with an outside counseling agency which is active in about 15 of the district schools. The agency provides services such as gang and drug abuse interventions and tobacco suppression counseling.

#### Tracking Students

Another strategy noted by district administrators is using data systems to quickly and accurately identify students who are not attending or enrolled who should be early on in the school year. Child Welfare and Attendance (CWA) liaisons track students carefully and follow up with missing students through any means available to ensure that they are enrolled and attending school. A school administrator noted that the CWA liaisons do everything they can to “take the excuses [for not attending] away” from students, including picking students up, giving them bus passes, helping students with flexible schedules, and feeding students.

#### Grants

Over the past several years, the district has won numerous grants to support their work in helping students to graduate. These included a Gear Up grant, a grant from the California Endowment Foundation to focus on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and restorative justice practices, several federal grants supporting counseling programs, and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Center grant. A district administrator noted that one piece of advice she would give to other district administrators is to “aggressively seek grant funding” to support district goals.

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*“We visit homes, we talk to neighbors, we talk to the mailman, we talk to anybody and everybody. We call every number that we have for anybody that knows the kid ... We have a very good handle at all times on who’s not at school and we try to find them and make sure they’re in school, if not in our district, then somewhere.”*

Stockton District Administrator

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**More Information:**

- For more information about this district please go to the district website: <http://www.stocktonusd.net/>.
- For more information about this study, please contact Helen Duffy, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, San Mateo, California: [hduffy@air.org](mailto:hduffy@air.org) or (650) 843-8181.

## Tulare Union High School District

### Overview

Tulare is a small Title I union high school district located in Tulare County with three traditional comprehensive high schools and three alternative programs. Tulare’s 2012-13 student population of about 5,300 reflects diverse backgrounds; 14 percent are English learners (ELs) and 74 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Student Characteristics, 2012-13**

	District (%)	State Average (%)
African American	3.8	6.3
Asian	1.7	8.6
Hispanic	69.9	52.7
White	22.9	25.5
Low-income	73.8	58.0
English learners (ELs)	14.1	21.7
Special education	5.6	10.9

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Tulare had a 14.6 average percentage point increase in its cohort graduation rate for all students between 2009-10 and 2012-13 (see Table 2). Graduation rates for all subgroups in the district also improved.

**Table 2: Cohort Graduation Rates, 2009-10 to 2012-13**

	2009-10 (%)	2012-13 (%)	Difference (%)
African American	74.6	84.5	9.9
Asian	75.0	86.4	11.4
Hispanic	70.8	85.4	14.6
White	74.3	91.1	16.8
Low-income	66.8	84.2	17.4
English learners (ELs)	55.4	77.8	22.4
Special education	62.5	81.4	18.9
<b>District</b>	<b>72.4</b>	<b>87.0</b>	<b>14.6</b>
<i>State</i>	74.7	80.2	5.5

Source: Publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

The district’s tagline is, “Quality Schools Preparing Exceptional Students.” Interview respondents reported tailoring several research-based strategies to improve the district’s graduation rates. Based on interviews with one district administrator and one school principal and supported by information on the district website, this profile details the following strategies identified as being key to the school’s success:

- Implementing a Districtwide Early Warning System
- Social Emotional Supports for Students
- Increasing Credit Recovery Opportunities

## Factor 1: Increasing Student Academic Support Opportunities

### Online Credit Recovery

Although the district had previously offered summer and night school classes for students who were behind on credits, enrollment in these options was limited—more students needed credit recovery than could get into these classes. The district recognized that some students were giving up hope of graduation when they realized they were so far behind that they would never be able to catch up. Therefore, as one of the first strategies designed to improve graduation rates, the district invested in an online credit recovery system, PLATO Courseware, and implemented it system-wide.<sup>17</sup> Online credit recovery classes are now available before and after school at all high school campuses in the district. Two high schools offer a PLATO class built into students' regular schedule, in addition to their regular core coursework, for students who are behind on credits. The district administrator estimated that approximately 40 percent of students in the district have taken at least one online credit recovery course. He reported that due to these extended credit recovery opportunities, fewer students were leaving the comprehensive high schools to attend alternative sites, helping them to stay engaged and eventually graduate.

## Factor 2: Partnerships to Increase Student and Parent Engagement

### Partnering with a Local Mental Health Support Organization

The district realized that although they could provide multiple academic supports, many students were experiencing challenges outside of school that were impacting their performance and behavior in school. They contracted with a local nonprofit mental health organization, the Tulare Youth Service Bureau (TYSB), to provide services to students experiencing issues such as neglect, substance abuse, gang-related issues, or bullying, in or out of school.<sup>18</sup> Students are referred by counselors, and staff from the TYSB come into schools three-to-four days a week to meet with students and provide counseling services that supplement what the school can provide. District staff meet with TYSB staff at the beginning of each year to plan out how the district will use the TYSB services most effectively.

### Partnering with Tulare County

The district also won a grant which they used to partner with Tulare County Office of Education to implement a program called Reconnecting Youth (RY).<sup>19</sup> RY is a small semester-long class for 9<sup>th</sup> and sometimes 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who are at risk of not graduating that is designed to increase school performance, and decrease drug use, anger, depression, and suicidal behavior. Three teachers from three high schools in the district were trained on the program curriculum by county trainers who taught the course in the first year of implementation. When the grant ended, the district has decided to continue funding the program, noting that they saw “tremendous success” with students who had participated. Now, after students participate in the RY class, they are given a mentor who monitors their progress until they are back on track. Mentors could be teachers, counselors, or administrators, depending on the particular high school site.

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*“We realized now we’re hitting academics and credit recovery, but once [students] leave our door they have issues that we’re not reaching, mental health issues, social emotional issues, so we said we need to increase our support for our students in that area.”*

Tulare District Administrator

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### Partnering with PIQE

PIQE, or the Parent Institute for Quality Education, was started in San

<sup>17</sup> For more information on the Plato classes, see the Edmentum website: <http://www.edmentum.com/products-services/plato-courseware>

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network lists Plato as having “moderate evidence of effectiveness,” and several studies with various research designs have shown that Plato classes are positively correlated with higher test scores and in some cases graduation rates. For a summary of the research base (conducted by Plato) see:

[http://www.immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/PLATO\\_US/P040800F.pdf](http://www.immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/PLATO_US/P040800F.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the Tulare Youth Services Bureau, see their website: <http://www.tysb.org/>

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Reconnecting Youth, see their website: <http://www.reconnectingyouth.com/ry/index.html>



Diego in 1987 to support primarily Latino families interested in addressing conditions preventing their children from succeeding in school. It has since expanded statewide and even beyond California. Its core program is a 9-week class for parents, delivered in their primary language at a school site to help parents become “educational advocates” for their children. The district administrator reported that this program has been very successful in Tulare, estimating that almost 1,600 Tulare parents had graduated from the class over the past four years. He noted that getting parents involved in their children’s education is “a big factor in the success of our kids, because if you can support the parents, then you’re building up the family and that helps the students.”

### Factor 3: Implementing a Districtwide Early Warning System

#### The ABCs

Once the district realized that their dropout rate was the highest in Tulare County, several years ago, they began to look into research-based strategies for identifying and supporting students at risk of dropping out and encountered Dr. Robert Balfanz’ work on early warning systems (EWS). Dr. Balfanz’ research, and that of many others, shows that students who are at risk of dropping out or not graduating on time can be identified as early as middle school using data on student Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance (or Credits), referred to as the ABCs.<sup>20</sup> The district created lists of at-risk students based on these criteria for schools, which were initially based on freshman and sophomore data. Now, through an agreement with feeder schools (which are all in different districts), high schools meet with and get lists of at-risk students based on 8<sup>th</sup> grade data, allowing them to provide interventions for students even earlier than before.

#### School Autonomy Within the District-wide EWS

Although the district felt that it was important to have a systematic way of identifying at-risk students across the district, they also recognized that to get buy-in an ensure students received individualized supports, schools needed to be in charge of the interventions provided. Therefore, after providing lists of identified students based on their ABCs, the district asked schools to design and implement school-based intervention programs to serve students. One such intervention was to assign students a mentor who meets with them every other week to check on their grades and provide guidance. A school administrator described how they adapted their existing RTI structure to serve the students on the ABC list. To address students’ academic needs, the school created a mandatory study hall at lunch time, referred to as the “no excuses” room. Lunch is provided and books and other resources are made available. In addition, the school took the initiative to visit and learn from another school in the region that had implemented a support class for at-risk students.<sup>21</sup> The district’s support for this work allowed them to design their own system of tailored student supports.

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*“The biggest bang for our buck is the mentoring, because once students saw the relationship, that people cared, they started having an interest in being at school and understanding that there was a reason for being at school.”*

Tulare Joint Union High School  
District Administrator

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#### More Information:

- For more information about this district please go to the district website: <http://www.tjuhsd.org/>.
- For more information about this study, please contact Helen Duffy, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, San Mateo, California: [hduffy@air.org](mailto:hduffy@air.org) or (650) 843-8181.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Dr. Balfanz’ work, see <http://new.every1graduates.org/robert-balfanz/>); for additional resources on early warning systems, see <http://www.earlywarningsystems.org/>

<sup>21</sup> See the OASIS program at La Serna High School: <http://www.wuhsd.org/domain/974>

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