
TRUE GRIT

The game-changing factors and people
lifting school performance in LAUSD

Educators  Excellence

Los Angeles

Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Letter from a True Grit Teacher	4
Process and Methodology	5
True Grit: What We Were Looking For; What We Found	6
True Grit Schools in this Report	8
Student Demographics of True Grit Schools	10
True Grit Factor #1: Strengthening School Culture	12
True Grit Factor #2: Making Data Dynamic	20
True Grit Factor #3: Working Smarter Together	28
True Grit Factor #4: Building Smarter Systems	36
True Grit Factor #5: Partnering with Families & the Community	42
Call To Act	50
Closing Thoughts	53
Appendix	54

Acknowledgments

This report was made possible thanks to teachers and administrators at the following schools who opened their doors and shared their strategies:

Academia Moderna	Florence Avenue Elementary
Academic Performance Excellence Academy	Highland Park Continuation
Alliance Jack H. Skirball Middle	ICEF Vista Elementary Academy
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center	Lexington Avenue Primary Center
Amestoy Elementary	Magnolia Science Academy Bell
Animo Jefferson Charter Middle	Magnolia Science Academy 7
Animo Locke 1 College Preparatory Academy	Mt. Lukens Continuation
Avalon Gardens Elementary	New Open World Academy
Barack Obama Charter	North Valley Military Institute*
Coliseum Street Elementary	Northridge Middle
David Starr Jordan Senior High	Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy
Duke Ellington Continuation	Olive Vista Middle
East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy	Osceola Street Elementary
Edwin Markham Middle	Port of Los Angeles High
Esteban Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy	Ritter Elementary
	San Fernando Institute of Applied Media
	TEACH Academy of Technologies
	Thomas Jefferson Senior High
	Valor Academy Charter
	View Park Continuation

A special thank you to the team of teachers who helped author this report:

- Angie Trae-Greenberg — Valor Academy Charter
- Damaris Pereda — Animo Jefferson Charter Middle
- Laurie Walters — New Open World Academy
- Martha Maitchoukow — Edwin Markham Middle
- Pamela Amaya — Academic Performance Excellence Academy
- Pearl Arredondo — San Fernando Institute of Applied Media
- Phil Gerlach — Edwin Markham Middle
- Zelman Lara-Salas — Esteban Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy

*Formerly known as North Valley Charter Middle

Dear Reader,

You might be wondering exactly what True Grit is. You won't find true grit in a test score or in the letter grade we, teachers, mark on student papers.

Having worked in this incredible profession of teaching for more than 30 years, I can tell you that grit is doing whatever it takes to make sure each child succeeds.

True Grit is the unwavering pursuit of growth, the courageous conversations we have that help parents and peers take students to new heights. Grit is the determination that permeates our classrooms, the ambition we show in the face of angst, and a belief in what is possible.

A few years ago, I helped found the New Open World pilot school on the Robert F. Kennedy campus. Our idea was bold—to build a school in a community where the majority of the students were far below grade level. We wanted our school to be a place where technology, innovation and project-based learning helped our students grow. Now that we have opened a school based on our idea, we meet weekly to analyze our students' work and create curriculum to meet their needs. The majority of our staff has continued to return each year, fostering a consistent and collaborative school culture. That being said, our students and staff still have room to grow. To me, that is the pursuit of grit. My school is just one of the many stories captured in this True Grit report, which features strategies from 35 schools across the Los Angeles Unified School District that made significant and measurable gains in student achievement.

Those of us who helped author this report want readers to uncover, learn from, and celebrate the grit and growth in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). This includes the often-unsung heroes who show grit every day—the teachers, parents, community members, administrators and, most importantly, our students.

Sincerely,

Dr. Laurie Walters

Founding Teacher—New Open World Academy

Process and Methodology

Phase I: Gathering Information from Schools

Our team of outreach directors at Educators 4 Excellence—Los Angeles (E4E-LA) set out to learn from schools that grew 40 points or more based on data published by the Academic Performance Index (API), a database used to measure school performance across California. We visited all of the 35 schools featured in this report and held focus groups, which were structured conversations with more than 400 teachers, administrators and other school-site personnel. Our aim was to unearth the strategies used to elevate expectations, morale and performance at their schools. Additionally, our team conducted interviews with teachers and administrators at these schools to get a more vivid picture of what true grit has looked like on their campuses.

Phase II: Analyzing Data from Schools

After conducting focus groups and interviews, we analyzed the data to identify consistent trends in terms of strategies commonly leveraged at these schools. The trends that emerged became our True Grit Factors: Strengthening School Culture, Working Smarter Together, Making Data Dynamic, Partnering with Families and the Community, and Building Smarter Systems.

Phase III: Sharing What We Learned

In the summer of 2013, a team of six teachers transformed stacks of focus group data into E4E-LA's first-ever "True Grit Report," which highlights our featured schools and the strategies they credit with helping them grow academically. The insights and voices of teachers working at True Grit schools are at the core of this report, which has been shared with elected, district, union, academic and community leaders throughout California.

True Grit

What We Were Looking For; What We Found

Amid the rancor of debate in policy and legislative arenas, there is a different kind of talk happening in our schools, where teachers meet in classrooms and staff lounges to discuss how policies and innovations get implemented on the ground. As former classroom teachers, the staff at Educators 4 Excellence visits and learns from hundreds of public schools and teachers each year. We do this because elevating teacher voice begins by listening to what teachers actually have to say.

In the fall of 2012, we decided to share what we have been learning from more than 400 teachers working at schools that had measurable and significant gains in student achievement. This was the genesis of True Grit, a project to spotlight and learn from school growth and innovation. Instead of focusing on failure, which happens all too often in education reform conversations, we focused on how we can build upon and replicate growth.

We launched this project by going on a listening tour—we held focus groups at dozens of schools that grew 40 points or more according to the Academic Performance Index. Our goal was to examine the following “True Grit Factors” that contributed to elevating school performance:

- **Strengthening School Culture**
- **Making Data Dynamic**
- **Working Smarter Together**
- **Building Smarter Systems**
- **Partnering with Families & the Community**

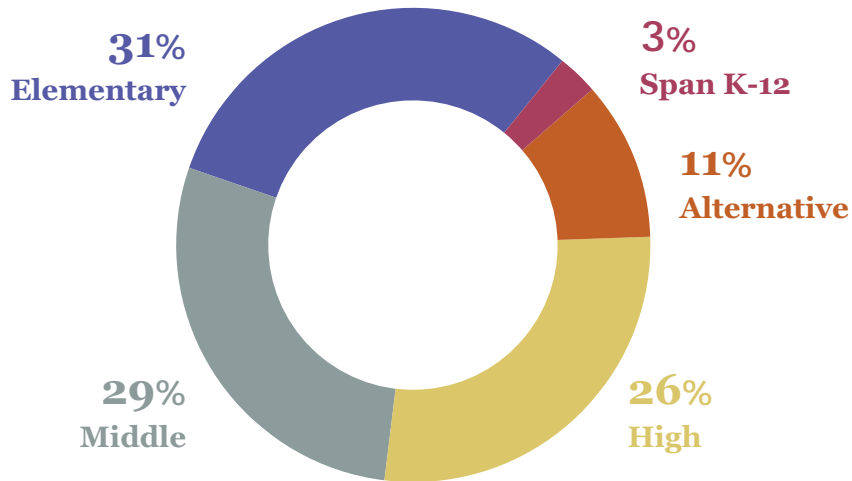
We also asked which of these True Grit Factors has been game-changing for each school. The answers to these questions are highlighted in the pages of our first-ever True Grit Report. Far from exhaustive, this report presents a snapshot of how schools strengthen and leverage culture, data, collaboration, systems and partnerships to grow in performance. For each factor, we highlighted how specific strategies support the different needs of diverse stakeholders—from students to staff, family and the community.

The True Grit report contains common strategies used at diverse schools that are operating in every corner of LAUSD and serving students of diverse abilities, incomes and ethnicities.

What we discovered was a mix of common sense and innovative practices. We learned that the True Grit strategies are not implemented in isolation, but work in concert with each other. For instance, for data to be used dynamically, schools need strong systems to analyze data collaboratively and set clear goals. A strong school culture often creates the right conditions to foster partnerships with families and the community. We saw that growth is a process involving both small changes and seismic shifts in our schools. We learned that the most effective school leaders expect, foster and empower leadership in others—their teachers, students and families. Though a sobering truth, we also learned that these schools in this report haven’t figured it all out: They must still push themselves to continue walking along the often-bumpy, albeit incredibly rewarding, road of progress.

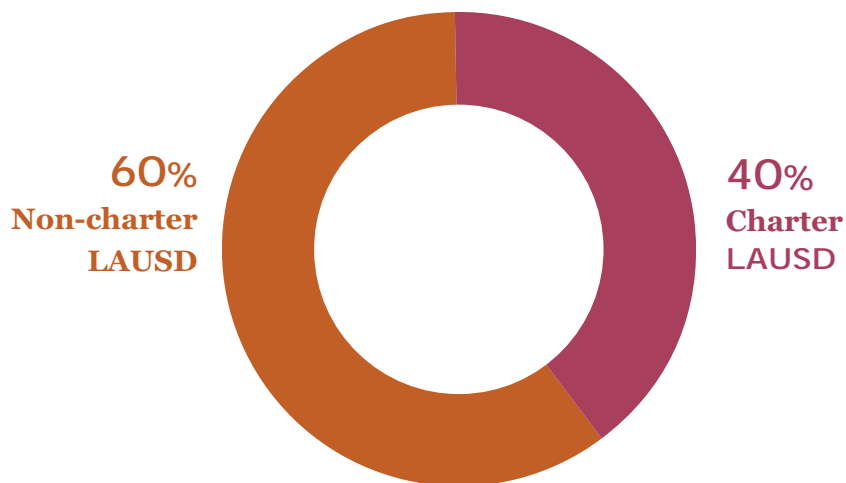
True Grit LAUSD Schools in this Report

Figure 1: Types of True Grit LAUSD Schools



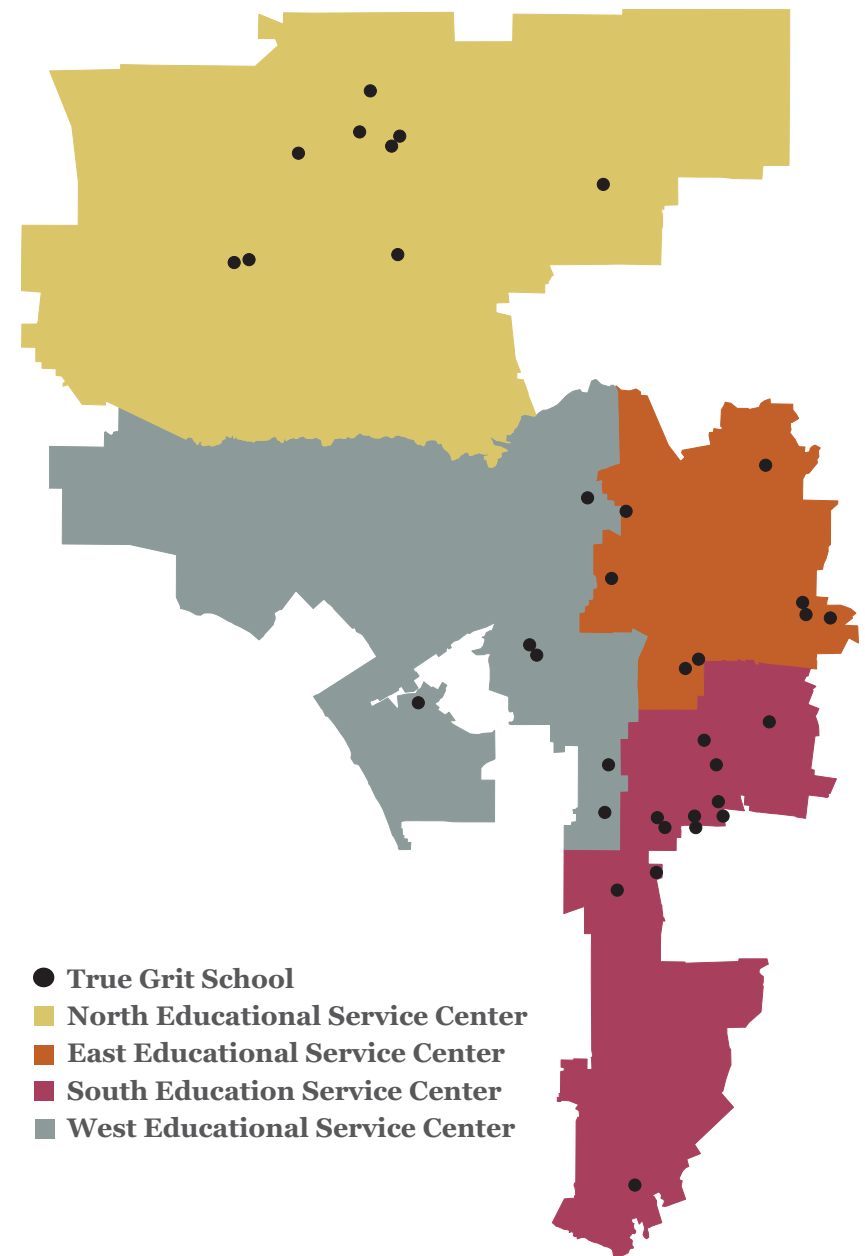
Note. The above figure represents the True Grit Schools in this report and was generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

Figure 2: Types of True Grit LAUSD Schools



Note. The above figure represents the True Grit Schools in this report and was generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

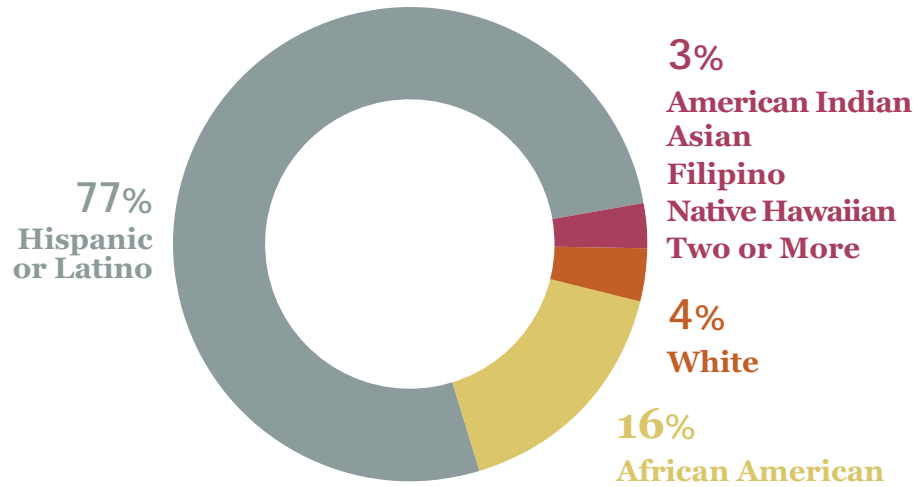
Figure 3: Map of True Grit LAUSD Schools



Note. The above figure was adapted from a map provided by LAUSD - Master Planning and Demographics.

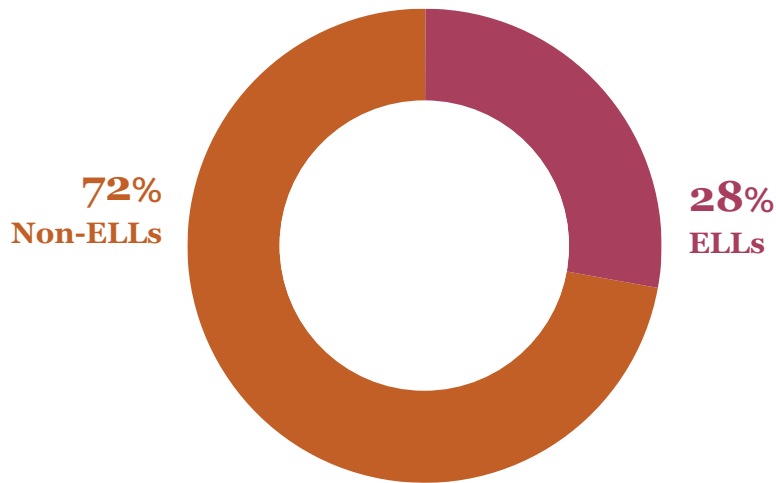
Student Demographics in True Grit LAUSD Schools

Figure 4: Student Racial Demographics in True Grit LAUSD Schools — Average



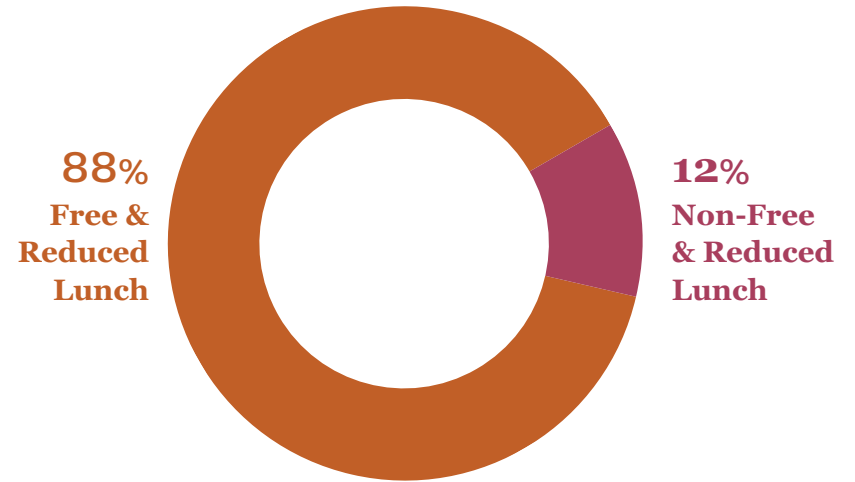
Note. The above figure represents the True Grit Schools in this report and was generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

Figure 5: English Language Learners (ELLs) in True Grit LAUSD Schools — Average



Note. The above figure represents the True Grit Schools in this report and was generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

Figure 6: Students Who Receive Free or Reduced Lunch in True Grit LAUSD Schools — Average



Note. The above figure represents the True Grit Schools in this report and was generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.



TRUE GRIT FACTOR #1 STRENGTHENING SCHOOL CULTURE



For better or worse, culture digs its roots deep into the hearts, minds and behaviors of any community, including our schools. Not surprisingly, culture building was identified as one the most game-changing strategies to elevate both morale and, as a result, performance. We use the term culture building because although culture is pervasive, it is not unchangeable. We saw the dynamism of culture in the changing strategies, messages and rituals used to inspire growth in our schools.

66% of schools
identified strengthening school culture as
critical to their progress with students.

Academic Performance Excellence Academy
Alliance Jack H. Skirball Middle
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center
Animo Jefferson Charter Middle
Avalon Gardens Elementary
Barack Obama Charter
Duke Ellington Continuation
East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy
Esteban Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy
Highland Park Continuation
Magnolia Science Academy Bell
Magnolia Science Academy 7
Mt. Lukens Continuation
New Open World Academy
North Valley Military Institute
Northridge Middle
Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy
Olive Vista Middle
Osceola Street Elementary
San Fernando Institute of Applied Media
TEACH Academy of Technologies
Valor Academy Charter
View Park Continuation

Below is a list of strategies that illustrates how schools strengthen culture to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What strengthening culture looks like for students

Achievement and growth are celebrated in multiple ways. Some schools hold monthly character-driven, themed assemblies, while other schools make time during whole-school assemblies to reward students for their academic growth and achievement. An elementary school in South Los Angeles celebrates “Way to Go Wednesdays,” where students are acknowledged in front of their peers for their academic achievement and/or improvement, and parents are contacted in recognition of their child’s success.

Schools develop the “whole child” by teaching and reinforcing character. In some cases, this happens through instruction, school assemblies, and field trips. A middle school in South Los Angeles implements a weekly focus on specific character development traits. After in-depth discussions, students create skits to illustrate their understanding.

School behavioral programs reinforce the positive. In some schools, students earn merits or points for their positive behavior and contributions to school culture. A school in Northridge uses “Noble Knight Money” to incentivize their students. Practices like this are only effective if implemented collaboratively and consistently among staff, however.

Professionalism is both an expectation and an aspiration for students. Dress codes are one of many ways that schools set the tone for their professional culture. Every Friday, a middle school in Sylmar allows students to “Dress for Success” in professional business attire to promote self-confidence and reinforce the notion of students as our future leaders.

What strengthening culture looks like for staff

A clear vision and mission is more than a paragraph on school letterhead. It is “operationalized” in the day-to-day activities of the school. A San Fernando elementary school requires all new teachers to attend a week-long summer “New Teacher Institute” to learn more about living the school’s mission, values and culture.

Staff connect personally with peers and students. Personal connections set the stage for providing individualized attention and instruction. In a Van Nuys school, the whole staff makes it a priority to know the names of every student, a community norm that reinforces the importance of each and every child.

Making time for team building helps create stronger day-to-day working relationships. By engaging in team-building activities, staff can get to know more about one another, which helps foster productive collaborative relationships. An elementary school in Van Nuys and a high school in South Los Angeles both organize staff retreats and social events that build the culture and strengthen professional relationships.

What strengthening culture looks like for families & the community

Partnerships with community organizations, colleges and foundations strengthen the particular mission or focus of a school. Whether it’s technology, the arts, science or leadership development, outside organizations can offer resources, support and expertise. A Granada Hills school has partnered with the California Cadet Corps. This program provides character and leadership development, which underscores the school’s focus and theme.

Families and community members are invited to contribute their unique talents and resources to strengthen school culture. At many schools featured in this report, teachers, parents and community members come together to host school-wide events that promote school spirit, encourage fundraising efforts and support student achievement, such as an art gallery night, a fundraising bake sale, and creating costumes for a school play or performance.

True Grit in Action Strengthening School Culture

Phil Gerlach, Edwin Markham Middle

The Challenge

At Markham Middle School, it's been challenging to build a college-bound culture when there are so many needs facing our school and students. Our students often lack access to and knowledge of college. This lack of exposure to the culture of college presents an obstacle to our students who already face a steep climb in today's society.

The Opportunity

In order to address these concerns, my colleague Oscar Espinoza and I worked with the University of California-Irvine to bring MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement) to our campus in Watts. As MESA students, our middle schoolers participated in a dynamic learning environment where they designed and built projects to compete in mathematics challenges. Through the MESA program this year, a group of students from Markham had to design, build and test a prosthetic arm. A project of this caliber required an incredible amount of time outside of the school day. In total, our students spent nearly 500 additional hours working on Saturdays, after school and on or during vacations to design, build, test and compete.

The students won four competitions throughout the school year. Instead of stopping after these first victories, however, our students continuously worked to improve, practice and prepare again. At the end of the school year, our students made their way to Portland, Oregon, for the MESA National Engineering Design Competition. Their grit, persistence, intellect and dedication resulted in a first-place victory, a huge win for them and our entire school community. More than a science competition, this opportunity showed my students—and our entire school community—that creating a college-bound culture of grit and determination begins right now, in middle school.





School Culture

Our True Grit Checklist

Students Show True Grit When...

- Youth take ownership over organizing the assemblies and activities that build school culture and reinforce achievement
- All staff adhere to a discipline system that holds uniformly high expectations for community building and student behavior

Schools Show True Grit When...

- The culture on campus is palpable and welcoming, with staff and students who smile and greet each other
- There are systems and rituals structured into the week's calendar to reinforce school culture and character development through assemblies and other community activities

Families and Community Show True Grit When...

- Local universities and companies partner with schools to provide additional opportunities to prepare their children for college and careers
- Families are invited to contribute their unique skills and expertise to strengthen the culture and capacity of the school

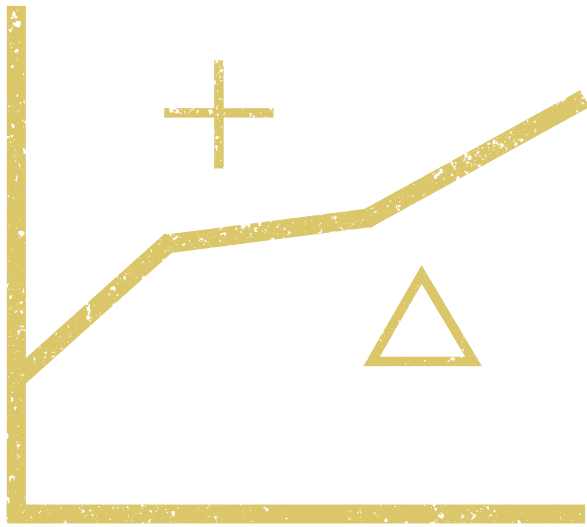


// I never give up on those I have the opportunity to serve. I turn failures into opportunities to inch closer to mastery.

Every year, I make a promise to my students on the first day of class: *I will care for and respect you as I do my own daughter.* To this day, I have kept my promise." //

—Zelman Lara-Salas, True Grit Teacher

TRUE GRIT FACTOR #2 MAKING DATA DYNAMIC



Data should never reduce students into mere proof points or test scores. On the contrary, effective use of data provides a complex and nuanced perspective on the strengths and challenges of our students as well as our teaching. For many schools, data drives a lively and multifaceted conversation about the work of teaching and learning. When used dynamically, data empowers students, teachers, parents and school leaders to make informed decisions.

63% of schools
identified making data dynamic as
critical to their progress with students.

Academia Moderna
Alliance Jack H. Skirball Middle
Amestoy Elementary
Animo Jefferson Charter Middle
Avalon Gardens Elementary
Barack Obama Charter
Coliseum Street Elementary
David Starr Jordan Senior High
Edwin Markham Middle
Florence Avenue Elementary
ICEF Vista Elementary Academy
Lexington Avenue Primary Center
Magnolia Science Academy Bell
Magnolia Science Academy 7
New Open World Academy
North Valley Military Institute
Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy
Olive Vista Middle
Osceola Street Elementary
Ritter Elementary
Thomas Jefferson Senior High
Valor Academy Charter

Below is a list of strategies that illustrates how schools use data dynamically to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What making data dynamic looks like for students

Students are empowered with data about their growth and challenges. It's important to allow students the opportunity to accessibly track their progress toward goals and also get inspired by the progress of others. Middle schools in Watts and Sylmar create "data walls" in their classrooms that explicitly show how students are growing and working toward mastery.

Great teachers create learning communities and intervention plans that are informed by student data. Teachers are constantly making strategic decisions based on the individual and group needs of students. At an elementary school in Crenshaw, teachers use data to create differentiated small groups and targeted intervention plans.

Standards-based grading gives students a consistent way to understand their own progress toward meeting clear standards. Rather than grading on the traditional scale (A-F), standards-based grading can assess the mastery level of individual state content standards. A middle school in Alameda uses this type of grading system to help students understand and speak fluently about their own progress, challenges and mastery toward meeting standards.

Many schools marry data with technology to create truly customized learning experiences for their students. By customizing assignments, schools can tap into the individual strengths and needs as well as the tech-savvy nature of the students. An elementary school in Watts uses Spacial Temporal (ST) Math, a standards-based instructional software designed to help all students reach math proficiency through engaging, self-paced objectives.

What making data dynamic looks like for staff

Data is examined, questioned and investigated. To use data dynamically, teachers create time to dig into student performance data. A San Fernando middle school builds time in the schedule to analyze quarterly benchmark data, reflect on progress and create action plans.

Technology empowers schools to analyze and make smart decisions about data. Schools use appropriate technology tools to efficiently understand and make good use of information. A school in Del Rey uses DataDirector, an online data management system, to analyze trends and organize information.

A variety of assessments—from state standardized tests to teacher-created assessments—empower schools with robust information to create student profiles. The variety and frequency of assessments creates a clearer picture of student performance, allowing teachers to be more strategic. In addition to real-time data, such as daily "exit-slips," teachers across True Grit schools report using Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments to work strategically toward student growth.

What making data dynamic looks like for families & the community

Data is organized and presented in a way that helps families better understand the needs of their children. Many schools track and share data to strategize with students, teachers and parents as a team. A teacher in Koreatown trains parents to ask questions about student performance data during parent-teacher conferences.

Data equips families to be advocates for their children. Some schools across Los Angeles use dynamic data to inform and bolster their call for family action. Two elementary schools in West Los Angeles and a middle school in East Los Angeles create targeted intervention plans to meet the needs of individual students, and the information is presented in a way that is accessible to and inspires families to take action.



True Grit in Action

Making Data Dynamic

Damaris Pereda, Animo Jefferson Charter Middle

The Challenge

Our students were underperforming, and my colleagues and I constantly asked ourselves, “What is it going to take to help our students grow?” We reflected on our instruction and believed that we were using data dynamically because we were analyzing our students’ grades and grouping them accordingly. Still, we weren’t seeing strong growth among our students. That’s when we realized there was no strong connection between the skills and needs of students and the classes they were taking. This was largely because classes were determined by our grading system, which did not always align with student progress or mastery of standards.

The Opportunity

We decided to revamp the way that we use data to group and support students. Now, we measure student progress based on standards. Through a variety of assessments, we capture information about the skills that students have mastered and those they still need to work on, which helps us create targeted intervention groups. Through a tool called DataDirector, we develop assessments aligned to standards. If a student gets questions 3, 7 and 12 wrong, for example, and those questions are all aligned to the same standard, we know that the student needs further instruction on that standard. At least twice a month, we use departmental meeting time to analyze data and create intervention groups for students with targeted action plans. Specific assessments are then developed and used to measure growth. This data is transparently shared with students and parents.

As a result of using standards-based instruction and intervention grouping, our API score grew by 84 points during the 2011-2012 school year.



// There has been a shift in the way we talk about our students. It is no longer about what grade they earn. It is about the skills and content students understand. //

—Damaris Pereda, True Grit Teacher



Making Data Dynamic

Our True Grit Checklist

Students Show True Grit When...

- Data lives not just in a student tracker or on a public bulletin board, but in the conversations that students are having with their teachers
- Students can articulate their own goals for taking their achievement to the next level

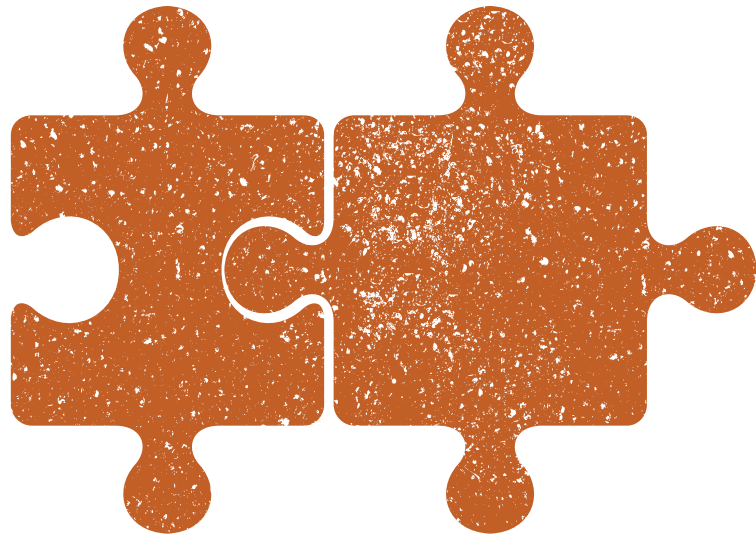
Schools Show True Grit When...

- Teachers use data to make decisions about how to maximize the time and talent in the classroom
- Teachers use multiple data points to assess a student's mastery, including both formal and informal assessments

Families and Community Show True Grit When...

- Conferences and conversations with parents are centered around their child's unique skills, strengths, challenges and progress toward meeting goals
- Parents feel empowered by data and accustomed to discussing their child's progress and areas for growth

TRUE GRIT FACTOR #3 WORKING SMARTER TOGETHER



Carving out time for collaboration is crucial for growth and success; however, simply putting people together in a room to “collaborate” won’t necessarily produce effective results.

True collaboration happens when teachers form professional relationships with peers and are united by a shared vision and clearly identified objectives. Schools with collaborative cultures work smarter—not simply harder—because they are able to share questions, ideas and practices. As a result, collaborative schools challenge the isolationism of teaching and engage teachers and school leaders in determining solutions to shared problems.

60% of schools
identified working smarter together as
critical to their progress with students.

Academia Moderna
Alliance Jack H. Skirball Middle
Amestoy Elementary
Animo Locke 1 College Preparatory Academy
Avalon Gardens Elementary
Coliseum Street Elementary
Edwin Markham Middle
Esteban Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy
Florence Avenue Elementary
ICEF Vista Elementary Academy
Lexington Avenue Primary Center
Magnolia Science Academy Bell
Magnolia Science Academy 7
Mt. Lukens Continuation
New Open World Academy
North Valley Military Institute
Northridge Middle
Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy
Osceola Street Elementary
Port of Los Angeles High
Thomas Jefferson Senior High

Below is a list of strategies that illustrates how schools work smarter together to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What working smarter together looks like for students

Students benefit from having all teachers collaborate to tackle new Common Core Standards. As our district implements rigorous Common Core Standards, with greater focus on interdisciplinary understanding, several schools across Los Angeles expressed the need to work collaboratively on planning cross-curricular projects. At an elementary school in South Los Angeles, teachers across contents meet to plan meaningful units of study to develop relevant content and projects with real-world application.

Teachers have an open-door policy, not only for students but also peers. This enables students to benefit from the collective expertise of their teachers, who invite feedback and support to elevate the quality of instruction in all classrooms. Teachers from East Hollywood, Florence, and Mar Vista keep their classroom doors and lines of communication open for advice, solutions-oriented thinking, and the sharing of best practices around classroom management, data, lesson planning and innovative modes of teaching.

To make good use of collaboration time, schools ensure that time spent on collaboration is focused on meeting student needs. Schools across Los Angeles meet in grade-level and content-level teams, often called Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Small Learning Communities (SLCs). An elementary school in Florence and a middle school in Northridge both meet in PLCs to focus on behavior and academic needs, cross-curricular projects, data analysis and planning.

Creating a culture of collaboration and shared learning often begins with the adults in the building who can model these beliefs and behaviors. In many schools, staff come together to explore new texts, ideas and strategies, which models the importance of collaboration for their students. The staff from an elementary school in Sylmar reads and discusses shared texts that can be applied to their practice, such as *Teach Like a Champion* by Doug Lemov and *The End of Molasses Classes* by Ron Clark.

What working smarter together looks like for staff

The way schools organize their physical environment can create the right conditions for collaboration. With the convenience of proximity, teachers can easily discuss and create goals. Several schools across our vast district, including an elementary school in West Los Angeles, have arranged their classrooms strategically to foster collaborative relationships with particular teams or departments.

In collaborative partnerships, both individuals feel supported and challenged by each other. Through formal and informal methods of observation and discussion, teachers can partner to provide support and feedback. A high school in South Los Angeles has a “buddy” teacher system where teachers are appropriately matched and frequently observe each other and offer positive and constructive feedback. An elementary school in Florence has veteran and new teachers engaging in peer observations to examine best practices.

Educators have structured time allotted within the school day to collaborate with one another. With the multitude of tasks that teachers juggle on a daily basis within their own classrooms, time to collaborate with other teachers is sacred and enormously beneficial. Schools in Northridge, East Los Angeles and the West side specifically mention the importance of building schedules that prioritize sacred collaboration time and common planning throughout the week.

More than a buzzword, collaboration is used to reinforce school culture. Teachers in many schools meet multiple times throughout the day to strategize about how to best support the individual needs of their students. A continuation school in South Los Angeles particularly cited collaboration as essential to its positive and strong school culture.



What working smarter together looks like for families & the community

In this technology-powered age, schools leverage a range of free tools to collaborate. These various tools allow for flexibility in communication with diverse partners. A middle school in the San Fernando Valley uses Edmodo, a multifaceted social media platform that allows teachers, students and parents to come together and share ideas and practices.

Creating structured committees enables schools to tap into the unique expertise of all stakeholders to solve school challenges. Through focused committees, schools can hone in on specific school needs and problem-solve together. Schools in Gardena and Northridge have structured committees that meet consistently to discuss school needs, such as budget, curriculum alignment or school discipline.

Teachers at a variety of schools cocreate and co-facilitate professional development with peers or industry experts. This ensures the development of trainings tailored to the specific needs of their colleagues and students. Teachers at a high school in Granada Hills collaborate to create, execute and participate in weekly professional development. A middle school in San Fernando Valley leverages a range of partnerships to tailor professional development to its unique focuses on areas such as technology, science, arts and more.

// We don't often get to spotlight the unsung heroes who show grit every day—the teachers, parents, community members, administrators and, most importantly our students. We must all learn, work and grow together.

—Laurie Walters, True Grit Teacher

True Grit in Action Working Smarter Together

Pearl Arredondo, San Fernando Institute of Applied Media

The Challenge

Four years ago, San Fernando Middle School had 1,600 students. Student achievement was low, student engagement was difficult to foster, and both staff and students were getting lost in the shuffle. It was clear that our school was too big to provide the kind of individualized community that teachers and students craved.

The Opportunity

A new district program offered an opportunity for teams of teachers to begin creating their own pilot schools. We jumped at the chance to submit a rigorous application, through district competition, and were approved to launch our own pilot school serving 400 students. We created a school with an open-door culture that invited teachers, administrators, parents and community members to partner in creating this new school. We invited teachers to be involved in important decisions about matters such as hiring, curriculum and budget. Not only was the staff encouraged to be vocal at our school, but students were encouraged to be active participants in molding new policies to foster high expectations and aspirations for students and staff. Through a partnership with Youth Policy Institute, we provided new technology tools to strengthen our approach to project-based learning.

During the 2011-2012 school year our school grew 55 points in API. Also important, our classrooms are collaborative think tanks where subject matter is woven into real-world scenarios, parents are engaged as partners and both students and teachers are encouraged to be curious, courageous, collaborative and creative.



True Grit in Action

Working Smarter Together

Zelman Lara-Salas, Esteban Torres High School
Engineering and Technology Academy

The Challenge

Sadly, many of our students believed that only those of affluent families and those living in communities far different than their own had the capacity to excel academically. Some developed a sense of helplessness, others an ingrained sense of low self-esteem. Our students needed strong role models to guide them through their developmental process, emotional and academic resources, and a sense of stability. Without these essentials, our students had no foundation upon which to dream.

The Opportunity

We decided to build a school environment that consistently provided ample opportunities for students and teachers to develop and sustain personalized working relationships; a school that would foster trust and empower students to believe in themselves. Teachers supported the establishment of student-led clubs. Teachers and students collaborated with each other to develop academic growth plans and support networks that assist the students emotionally, socially, and academically.

Within the first year of our pilot school, we began seeing signs of rising self-esteem and school pride among our students. During the second year, it became clear that our students were becoming confident and self-motivated learners. As a result, our school grew 53 API points, 90% of our first senior class graduated on time, and 93% of them were accepted to either a four-year college or a community college. This upward trend continues today.

Working smarter together

Our True Grit Checklist

Students Show True Grit When...

- Projects are integrated across several classes and reinforced by teachers who collaborate to enable students to bring together their skills in a range of subjects
- Staff serve as great role models for what collaboration toward a common goal and the pursuit of lifelong learning actually looks like in real life
- Students are tutoring each other, engaging in academic dialogue focused on the task at hand
- Classrooms are filled with “organized chaos,” as students collaborate on projects and challenge each other by presenting and defending their opinions with evidence and gusto

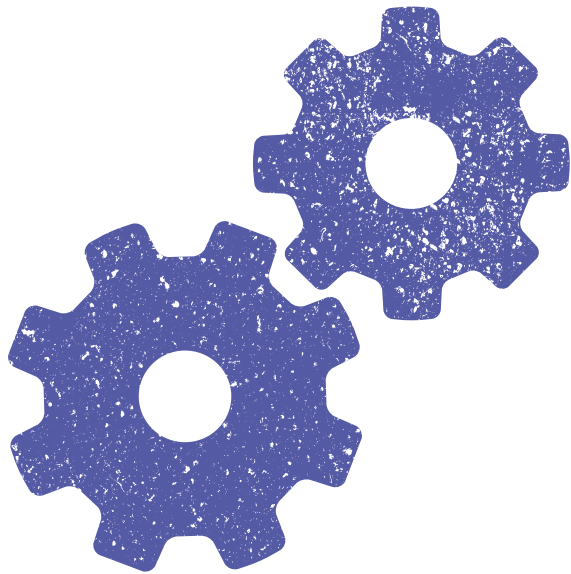
Schools Show True Grit When...

- Time is carved into the schedule for staff to analyze results of assessments and develop intervention plans together
- Lessons are swapped, ideas exchanged and input shared so that all students benefit from the collective wisdom and expertise of many teachers
- Teachers lead on campus as department chairs, coordinators and content-area specialists so that knowledge and peer support is fully harnessed and shared

Families and Community Show True Grit When...

- Diverse stakeholders, including teachers, parents and community members, sit on councils to help make decisions about budget, instructional needs and school policies, while always keeping student needs at the forefront.

TRUE GRIT FACTOR #4 BUILDING SMARTER SYSTEMS



The behind-the-scenes systems for organization and communication are often the connective tissue that enables schools to function and flourish. Explicit systems that are implemented and embraced make it easier for schools to create a positive culture, communicate and collaborate with staff, parents and students. By creating smarter systems, schools can boost efficiency and ensure accessibility—particularly around tracking data, planning instruction and communicating effectively.

23% of schools
identified building smarter systems as
critical to their progress with students.

Academia Moderna

Academic Performance Excellence Academy

Amestoy Elementary

Animo Jefferson Charter Middle

David Starr Jordan Senior High

East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy

Northridge Middle

San Fernando Institute of Applied Media

Below is a list of strategies that illustrates how schools are building smarter systems to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What building smarter systems looks like for students

A clear, consistent and fair discipline system reinforces a culture of high expectations. For a discipline system to be successful, it must be implemented consistently by all staff. Students in a South Los Angeles middle school follow a discipline system where they can earn merits or demerits for their behavior. Students can save their merits to receive various rewards, such as a “Friday free-dress” pass. A middle school in Pacoima uses PREP points to reward students for being prepared, respectful, engaged and professional.

What building smarter systems looks like for staff

Teachers crave structured, meaningful feedback to continue growing as professionals. Prior to the rollout of a district-wide evaluation system, many True Grit schools across Los Angeles implemented consistent systems for providing feedback to teachers based on their performance. One school in South Central Los Angeles uses a multi-measure teacher evaluation tool called the College-Ready Teaching Framework (CRTF), which provides teachers with feedback based on a rubric of defined core competencies.

What building smarter systems looks like for families & the community

Systems are used to demystify the process of “getting grades” for families and students. Technology tools enable and empower families and students to see and track academic progress. An elementary school in Huntington Park uses the Powerschool System, a Web-based platform to track student grades and attendance and communicate progress seamlessly to students and parents.



True Grit in Action Building Smarter Systems

Pamela Amaya, Academic Performance Excellence Academy

The Challenge

Building a strong school culture can be challenging, especially if staff is not aligned in values, beliefs or approach. In the past, our school lacked clear systems to support hiring and collaboration. As a result, our staff was not always mission-aligned or willing to collaborate. Not only was this problematic for us, the teachers, but the students did not reap the benefits of having teachers communicate consistently high expectations or share content knowledge and strategies for meeting diverse student needs.

The Opportunity

We recognized that hiring the right people and fostering a collaborative school culture would help retain great teachers and increase student achievement. We revamped our hiring system by creating a panel of teachers who all had a voice in selecting new hires that would be a good fit and add value to the team.

In addition to participating in the hiring process, we improved our professional development systems by empowering teachers to design and facilitate professional development, which created an open dialogue for sharing best practices. As a team of teachers, we created our professional development calendar, planned curriculum together and began discussing student needs. Teachers led professional development trainings in their area of focus, such as technology and special education. We also read and discussed relevant books that would enhance our effectiveness in the classroom. Our goal was to make sure this learning could be immediately used to impact our students. By hiring the right people, collaborating and training productively, we saw a 57-point growth in our API during the 2011-2012 school year.



Building Smarter Systems

Our True Grit Checklist

Students Show True Grit When...

- There is a clear system that enables all staff to communicate and reinforce clear expectations, positive behavior and appropriate consequences

Schools Show True Grit When...

- Teachers are evaluated through multiple measures, such as observations, their lesson planning, student data and contributions to the school community
- Teachers are provided feedback and support to keep growing as professionals

Families and Community Show True Grit When...

- There are clear protocols for communicating information about their children as well as broader information about the school

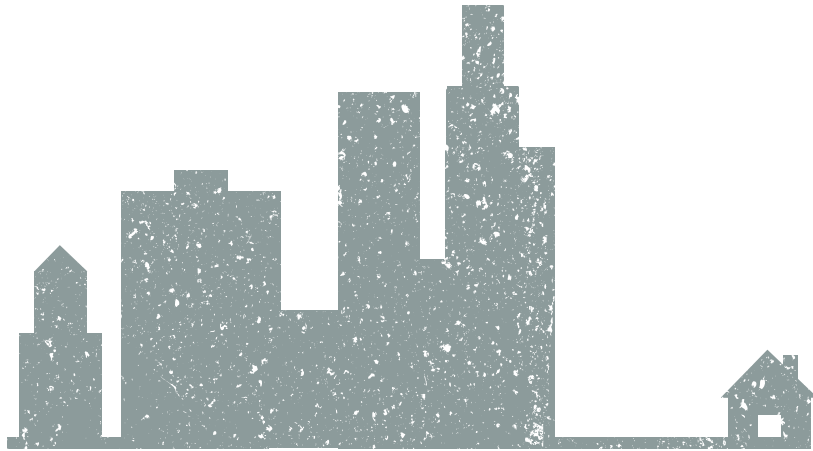
// We improved our professional development systems by empowering teachers to design and facilitate trainings, creating an open dialogue for the sharing of best practices.

//
—Pamela Amaya, True Grit Teacher

TRUE GRIT FACTOR #5 PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES & THE COMMUNITY

20% of schools identified partnerships as critical to their progress with students.

Duke Ellington Continuation
East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy
Florence Avenue Elementary
ICEF Vista Elementary Academy
Lexington Avenue Primary Center
San Fernando Institute of Applied Media
Valor Academy Charter



When school doors are open, parents, families and communities are invited to partner with schools to raise expectations for students and public education. To build meaningful relationships with parents and the community, these schools intentionally create time and space for collective dialogue, problem solving and shared leadership. This whole-community approach reminds students and teachers that our entire city is deeply invested in ensuring students go on to promising colleges and careers.

Below is a list of strategies that illustrates how schools forge partnerships to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What partnering with families & the community looks like for students

Active parent participation lets students know that education is a family priority. This, in turn, promotes an active student body. An elementary school on the West side asks parents to volunteer at least 40 hours a year at the school to stay connected and feel a sense of school pride and ownership.

The worlds of school, culture and community are integrated explicitly for students. Targeted events can be great ways for schools and families to help students bridge the gap between life and school. An elementary school in Florence holds teacher-led literacy and math nights that allow teachers and families to jointly engage in academic activities.

Schools facilitate partnerships that connect students to college and career resources. Through these partnerships, students explicitly see the value in pursuing their education. A school on the West side partners with local colleges and companies to provide students with experiential learning and networking opportunities in colleges and businesses.

What partnering with families & the community looks like for staff

Parent coordinators work in partnership with teachers by acting as liaisons between schools and families. Parent coordinators often foster meaningful relationships and open communication between schools and families. A pilot high school in East Los Angeles has a parent coordinator who leads workshops and classes to keep parents informed and provide professional development opportunities to help parents support their child's needs.

Engagement is a two-way street—where schools and families use a variety of systems to communicate success, opportunities and challenges consistently. These avenues for feedback allow staff to engage and welcome families. An East Hollywood school and South Los Angeles school conduct monthly meetings where parents and teachers give reciprocal feedback on issues like bullying.

Teachers connect students and parents to important information through multiple methods. Information about student progress is shared transparently between teachers and parents through a variety of platforms that work best for teachers and their families. A school in San Fernando cited that it communicates with parents through phone, email, in person and other technology systems.

What partnering with families & the community looks like for families & the community

True parent engagement means finding structured and meaningful ways for parents to guide school decisions and direction. In almost every instance, it is not the structure that enables true parent engagement, but the school leadership, culture and ethos that invites parents to engage, invest and take action. At many schools, such as a high school in East Los Angeles, parents have a seat on governing councils and are viewed as partners in the education of students.

Partnerships can meaningfully connect stakeholders—such as community organizations, philanthropists and foundations—to our schools. These partnerships open doors to vital wraparound-services for students. A continuation school in West Athens is involved with various partnerships, such as a local theater arts program bringing professionals and resources into the school. The Youth Policy Institute (YPI) partners with a school in the San Fernando Valley to provide a robust parent center and state-of-the-art technology services.

Open doors often open new resources and opportunities for schools and their local communities. By opening doors to families and community members, schools welcome investment and pride in the work that they are doing. A middle school in Pacoima invites family and community members to a breakfast three times a year to share and celebrate the school's growth and success and cultivate new partnerships.



True Grit in Action

Partnering with Families and the Community

Martha Maitchoukow, Edwin Markham Middle

The Challenge

“You teach at Markham?” people would ask me. “Isn’t that the school where cars in the parking lot were flipped over and set on fire?” Markham Middle School had a reputation for being unsafe, mainly because the school was located in the middle of Watts, a neighborhood riddled by poverty and gang violence and surrounded by three major low-income housing projects. Suffering from a continuous revolving door of teachers and administrators, Markham had incredibly low morale and poor academic performance. It became clear that it was up to us—the teachers, parents and community—to own the problems and new direction of Markham.

The Opportunity

Owning our problems and our future meant reaching out to colleagues, parents and the community for support. Markham has been experiencing a steady transformation over the years, even earning us the name “new” Markham. This change is the product of building partnerships between school staff, parents and community members. A key element of this change was creating regular structured time for teachers to collaborate and share best practices across departments that are led by teachers who are elected each year by peers. Markham has opened doors to parents to engage in parent classes and events, with more than 200 parents participating in the September 2013 Parent College program. We work closely with the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a nonprofit education management organization, and with universities like USC to bring additional resources and expertise onto our campus.

At the “new” Markham, teacher retention has improved, attendance rates have increased and suspensions have decreased. As a result, we were able to raise our API score by 41 points during the 2011-2012 school year. We know we still have challenges to tackle, but today we tackle them in partnership with peers, families and the community.



// I constantly remind my students that they can be ‘awesome,’ that success is possible and I do not accept irresponsibility. I also know we can’t do this alone—parents are my greatest partners in creating successful futures for our children. //

—Martha Maitchoukow, True Grit Teacher



True Grit in Action

Partnering with Families and the Community

Angie Trae-Greenberg, Valor Academy Charter

The Challenge

At the time of my school's founding, there were very few successful charter schools in the area, so the local community didn't know what our small start-up school could offer. For the most part, we were outsiders to the community and had a lot to learn. Despite our newness, we wanted parents to trust us with their most valuable possessions—their kids! We knew that if the local community didn't connect with the staff that the students wouldn't reap the benefit of having parents and teachers working together to provide the best possible education for our students.

The Opportunity

We pounded the pavement by going to every neighborhood and community event, including Chamber of Commerce and neighborhood council meetings. Our mission was to talk to anyone and everyone about Valor. We knew that we needed to do more than introduce Valor to the community. We needed to forge strong bonds between our school and the community.

As an authentic way to engage the local community, we began hosting Valor breakfasts to invite the community to interact with the students and teachers in action. Today, the Valor breakfasts are unique mornings where students lead adults in tours and conversations about our work. This has increased support of the school in terms of people advocating and providing resources for our students. Our school, which grew 40 points in API, also creates opportunities to recognize and celebrate community members who provide vital leadership and support for our school.

Partnering with Families and the Community

Our True Grit Checklist

Students Show True Grit When...

- Local universities and companies partner with schools to provide additional opportunities to prepare students for college and careers
- Parents and teachers work in concert to reinforce the value of school for students by interacting during and beyond school hours to meet the goal of college and career readiness

Schools Show True Grit When...

- Technology is part of a teacher's toolbox, enabling efficient communication with parents and students
- Schools are always buzzing with workshops and trainings for parents to be empowered advocates for their children and the school

Families and Community

Show True Grit When...

- Parents are more than volunteers or passive recipients of information. Instead, parents have active leadership roles in the school community and clear pathways to affect decision making
- Community partners are key figures on campus, providing additional support and resources because they are just as invested in the school as the staff

Call to Act

During our focus groups at each school, we posed the following question to school staff: “What can leaders in your school, district, union and the community continue to do to support your school’s growth?” This list features the top ten strategies—that emerged as clear trends—for supporting continued growth.

Ten Ways Leaders in Our Schools, Districts, Unions and the Community Can Foster True Grit

1 Localize Spending

Our district can provide schools a menu of budget options for using additional revenue to invest in the specific resources and support needed to meet the diverse needs of students at individual school sites. With more ownership over school budget, schools can be more empowered and accountable for results.

2 Give Schools Control Over Staffing Decisions

Our district and union can give schools more control over hiring decisions to ensure a solid match between the school and the candidate.

3 Offer Professional Development on Systems Creation

Our district and union can invest in providing resources and professional development for schools to implement meaningful school-wide systems and procedures that efficiently track and monitor growth in culture, behavior and academic progress.

4 Invest in Teacher Leadership and Demonstrated Success

Our union and district can recognize school and student growth and success, and forge agreements to compensate teachers for taking on additional leadership roles that support peers and students.

// I grew up in the same neighborhoods as my students, I sat in the same classrooms and I faced very similar challenges. When my students are afraid to try, I remind them that any change worth making will never be easy. //

—*Pearl Arredondo, True Grit Teacher*

5 Place Teachers at the Helm of Curriculum Development

Schools and our district can unlock the creativity of teaching by enabling teachers to have a voice in curricular choices and the opportunity to collaboratively create and workshop lessons and assessments.

6 Empower Teachers and Parents to Lead Change

Schools can include teachers and parents in decision-making processes about school policies through governing councils and school improvement/action teams.

7 Make Collaboration Time a Priority

Schools can build time into the regular schedule for teachers to collaborate, particularly around data analysis, to plan for differentiated groups and adjust the curriculum strategically. It’s important for schools to provide teachers with this built-in collaboration time to analyze data together, share best practices and conduct peer observations.



8 Offer Professional Development for and by Staff

Schools can create professional-development opportunities for teachers that are differentiated, job-embedded, and specific to their practice and school site. Schools can allow staff the flexibility to determine their professional development needs and lead trainings that meet their needs. Additionally, schools can provide opportunities for teachers to share best practices with peers at their site.

9 Get Smarter about Testing

As we transition to Common Core, the district can allow more flexibility in periodic assessment schedules throughout the year so that the data can be more informative for instructional planning. In addition to district and state assessments, schools can use multiple measures of data to monitor their performance.

10 Make Partnership a Two-way Street

Schools can offer more opportunities for families to be informed and empowered allies in the pursuit of student achievement. Simultaneously, we need parents to be engaged in the success of their students and the school mission. Particularly in lean budget times, we need leaders offering support services, grant dollars and volunteers to reach out and engage the schools in their communities or issue areas of focus. The district can offer an online platform to serve as a bridge enabling schools and community organizations and foundations to connect and build mutually beneficial partnerships.

Closing Thoughts

Our aim in publishing this report is twofold.

We want the ideas featured in this report to inform, challenge and motivate the work of our teachers, principals, districts, unions, community organizers, academics and elected officials.

But most importantly, we want you to put down this report and go visit, learn from and support the True Grit happening right now in our schools.

// My students know that they have to target their brain like a muscle that can always grow stronger. Sharing this perspective reminds my students that we are always working toward and celebrating growth. //

—Angie Trae-Greenberg, True Grit Teacher



Appendix



School	API Growth 2011-2012	Location in Los Angeles Unified School District	Strengthening School Culture	Making Data Dynamic	Working Smarter Together	Building Smarter Systems	Partnering with Families & the Community
Academia Moderna	86	S		●	●	●	
Academic Performance Excellence Academy	57	W	●			●	
Alliance Jack H. Skirball Middle	51	S	●	●	●		
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center	55	E	●				
Amestoy Elementary	40	S		●	●	●	
Animo Jefferson Charter Middle	84	E	●	●		●	
Animo Locke 1 College Preparatory Academy	67	S			●		
Avalon Gardens Elementary	56	S	●	●	●		
Barack Obama Charter	175	S	●	●			
Coliseum Street Elementary	47	W		●	●		
David Starr Jordan Senior High	94	S		●		●	
Duke Ellington Continuation	119	W	●				●
East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy	43	E	●			●	●
Edwin Markham Middle	41	S		●	●		
Esteban Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy	53	E	●		●		
Florence Avenue Elementary	58	S		●	●		●
Highland Park Continuation	67	E	●				
ICEF Vista Elementary Academy	53	W		●	●		●
Lexington Avenue Primary Center	52	E		●	●		●
Magnolia Science Academy Bell	61	S	●	●	●		
Magnolia Science Academy 7	50	N	●	●	●		
Mt. Lukens Continuation	50	N	●		●		
New Open World Academy	44	E	●	●	●		
North Valley Military Institute	48	N	●	●	●		
Northridge Middle	45	N	●		●	●	
Nueva Esperanza Charter Academy	43	N	●	●	●		
Olive Vista Middle	62	N	●	●			
Osceola Street Elementary	51	N	●	●	●		
Port of Los Angeles High	45	S			●		
Ritter Elementary	45	S		●			
San Fernando Institute of Applied Media	55	N	●			●	●
TEACH Academy of Technologies	97	S	●				
Thomas Jefferson Senior High	43	E		●	●		
Valor Academy Charter	40	N	●	●			●
View Park Continuation	190	W	●				

For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table—the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators 4 Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers.

With a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers' Principles and Beliefs, E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at **Educators4Excellence.org**.