

TRUE GRIT

**The game-changing factors
and people elevating school climates
and learning outcomes in LAUSD**

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Educators  Excellence

Los Angeles

Acknowledgments

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Academy of Medical and Health Sciences at Roosevelt High School*	Manhattan Place Elementary
Alliance Cindy and Bill Simon Technology Academy High School	Math, Science and Technology Magnet Academy at Roosevelt High School
Alliance Tennenbaum Family Technology High School	Mission Continuation School
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center	Orchard Academies 2B
Arts in Action Community Charter School	Owensmouth Continuation School
Bert Corona Charter School	Quincy Jones Elementary School
Boyle Heights Continuation School	Richard A. Alonzo Community Day School
Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center	School of Communications, New Media and Technology at Roosevelt High School*
Dorothy V. Johnson Community Day School	School of Engineering and Technology at Mendez High School**
Humanitas Art School at Roosevelt High School*	School of Law and Government at Roosevelt High School*
Jack London Community Day School	Social Justice Schools: Global Issues Academy at Dr. Maya Angelou Community High School
John Hope Continuation School	Victoria Avenue Elementary
Los Angeles Academy of Arts and Enterprise	Watts Learning Center Charter Middle School
Magnolia Avenue Elementary School	Whitney Young Continuation School
Magnolia Science Academy Bell	

*Now a part of Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School

**Now a part of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School

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

Adriana Acero – Manhattan Place Elementary School
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Rosy Valiente – Orchard Academies 2B

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*View the interactive report online at
Educators4Excellence.org/LATrueGrit*

Methodology

Phase I: Gathering Information

Our team at Educators 4 Excellence Los Angeles (E4E-LA) set out to do something they didn't have the chance to do as teachers—learn from the best ideas and practices used at diverse district and public charter schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The team focused on 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 29 schools featured in this report and held focus groups with more than 300 teachers, administrators and other school-site personnel. Our aim was to unearth the strategies used to elevate expectations, morale and performance at these schools. Additionally, our team conducted interviews with teachers and administrators to get a vivid picture of what true grit has looked like on their campuses.

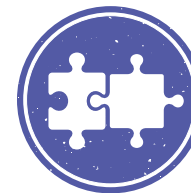


Phase II: Analyzing Data

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:



**Making Data
Dynamic**



**Working Smarter
Together**



**Strengthening
School Culture**



**Partnering with
Families and the
Community**

While these strategies are often interconnected, they are ranked above based on the rate at which education staff cited each factor as an influencer in academic performance.

Phase III: Sharing What We Learned

E4E-Los Angeles's second "True Grit Report" is a summary of focus group data analyzed over the summary of 2014 to highlights strategies local schools credit for helping them grow academically. The insights and voices of teachers working in True Grit schools are the core of this report, which has been shared with more than 400 schools as well as elected, district, union, academic and community leaders throughout California.

Preface: True Grit

Effective Support for the Transition to Common Core State Standards

Research for this report was conducted amid a rapidly changing landscape in LAUSD. First, our district was moving toward full implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which raises state education standards for students. These standards require students to show more of their learning, a deeper understanding of the content, and how their learning connects and applies to various subjects. For many teachers who lamented the district's use of scripted, cookie-cutter lessons, this was an exciting moment to bring back innovation to teaching.

Amid this transition, there were growing public concerns about our state's ability to successfully move toward these higher standards. Public opinion polling from PACE/USC Rossier,¹ EdNext² and others showed waning public support for Common Core, often due to misconceptions and confusion over the purpose and intent of these standards. At the same time, the 2014 PDK/Gallup poll showed that over 60 percent of the public continues to trust the voice of teachers on education issues such as CCSS. In that same poll, 87 percent of those who favored Common Core cited local teacher support for the standards as a “very” or “somewhat” important reason for their view.³

Clearly, teacher voice and engagement during this transition are pivotal, but in order to capture and capitalize on teacher support for this transition, teachers must be engaged as powerful agents of this reform, not merely passive subjects. In essence, instead of telling teachers: “Here is Common Core—now use this in your classes,” we must invite teachers to help shape the rollout, implementation, communication and professional development for Common Core.

We learned that the most bold schools in this report are wrestling with the weeds of implementation—they are curiously asking themselves:

Is there a better, more efficient, more impactful way to unlock these standards?

True Grit and Common Core

Three key trends emerged as best practices our schools should leverage:

1 **Rebuild confidence.**

It was not that long ago when teachers were told not to rely on their instincts or ability to solve problems, but to follow scripts and pacing plans. As a result, the role of teachers has been to implement—not engineer—solutions. As we shift to a Common Core approach, teachers are placed at the helm of instruction, and must acknowledge and address the real gaps that exist in terms of our own confidence, ownership and comfort developing instructional solutions.

2 **Reimagine collaboration.**

Collaboration is no longer just about a teacher's process. It's not merely about staff morale or collective problem solving. Collaboration must be the new status quo for teaching and learning. To help students reach higher standards, schools need formal meeting and planning structures, and expectations for collaboratively creating interdisciplinary assignments and assessments.

3 **Redesign the road map for a promising new journey.**

As schools dive into creating Common Core-aligned lessons and assessments, they must understand and communicate the vision propelling our shift to Common Core. Teachers need to be able to explain why we are making this shift to peers, students, parents and community. The transition to Common Core will be bumpy—as teachers and curriculum experts experiment with new approaches to lesson planning, instruction and assessment—but a compass can help teachers and our stakeholders understand our ultimate destination.

1 Polikoff, M., Marsh, J., Plank, D.N., Hall, M., Hardaway, T., Le, T. (2014.) Californians and Public Education: Results from the Fourth PACE/USC Rossier Poll. [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://www.edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/PACE%20USC%20Poll%20Nov%202014.pdf>

2 Education Next. (2014.) Education Next Program on Education Policy and Governance— Survey 2014. [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/files/2014ednextpoll.pdf>

3 Phi Delta Kappa International. (2014.) The PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://pdkpoll.pdkintl.org/october/>

Preface: True Grit

Additional Support for LAUSD's School Climate Bill of Rights

In addition to elevating education standards, LAUSD is transitioning to a new method of shaping and evaluating school climate. The move is a response to disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion in LAUSD, particularly for boys of color as reported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. In efforts to act upon this data, LAUSD recently adopted the School Climate Bill of Rights,⁴ which eliminates ineffective disciplinary tools. Some key aspects of the Bill include:

- Mandated placement of restorative justice coordinators in all schools by 2020
- Ending suspensions and expulsions for “willful defiance,” a vague category that has been disproportionately enforced among boys of color
- Better access to disaggregated school climate data to monitor and share trends with teachers, students and parents
- Implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior programs that proactively address and reinforce positive behaviors
- Minimizing the use of law enforcement, probation and juvenile justice levers to address school discipline issues

While this bill sets a vision for school climate reform, it does not provide schools with an answer to this pivotal question:

How do we shift our mind-sets and practices?

We learned that the grittiest of schools were engaging in explicit conversations about the rituals and practices that could support all students.

What expectations are we directly and indirectly communicating to students? What are we saying to ourselves and our students every day to affirm their ability to achieve greatness?

“If they know you really care and believe in their ability to achieve, students will believe in themselves and produce great work.”

*Rosy Valiente,
English Language Arts Coordinator, Orchard Academies 2B*

⁴ L.A. Unified Adopts New Policy on Student Behavior. (2013, May 14). Retrieved from <http://home.lausd.net/apps/news/article/311093>

True Grit and School Climates

Three key trends serving as critical levers to support LAUSD's School Climate Bill of Rights:

1 Admit there is a problem.

Schools that were able to prioritize culture acknowledged and confronted school climate problems. There were schools that said: *We aren't collaborating enough; let's find out why and fix this problem. We aren't expecting more leadership and ownership from our students; let's find out why and fix this problem.* Identifying the problem created a space and permission for staff to explore solutions.

2 Prioritize bringing solutions to life.

More than simply engaging in feel-good conversations about race or school culture, gritty schools committed to specific systems and rituals that reinforced, rewarded and encouraged positive behaviors. These were schools with positive chants, youth-led assemblies, and public displays of student leadership and community building.

3 Empower everyone to act as change agents.

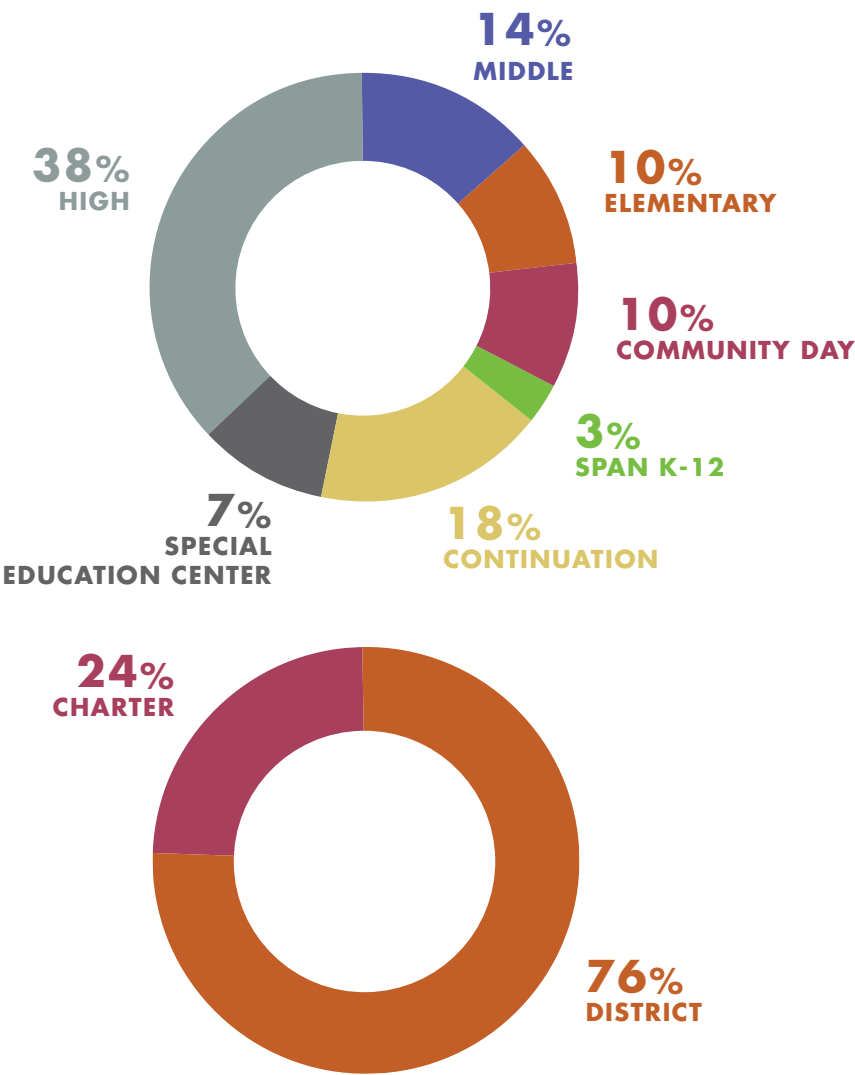
The strongest examples of gritty school cultures were ones where adults and peers held leadership roles as examples others could follow: youth leadership councils, student government associations and cultural rituals led by students. Just as important, these schools empowered teachers to lead peers in professional development and staff conversations about the effectiveness of data, systems and policies around school climate.

As you explore this report, you'll find these themes emerge frequently throughout our examination of how these True Grit Factors come to life and can be leveraged to help schools navigate the tough and important transition to Common Core, and the implementation of the School Climate Bill of Rights.



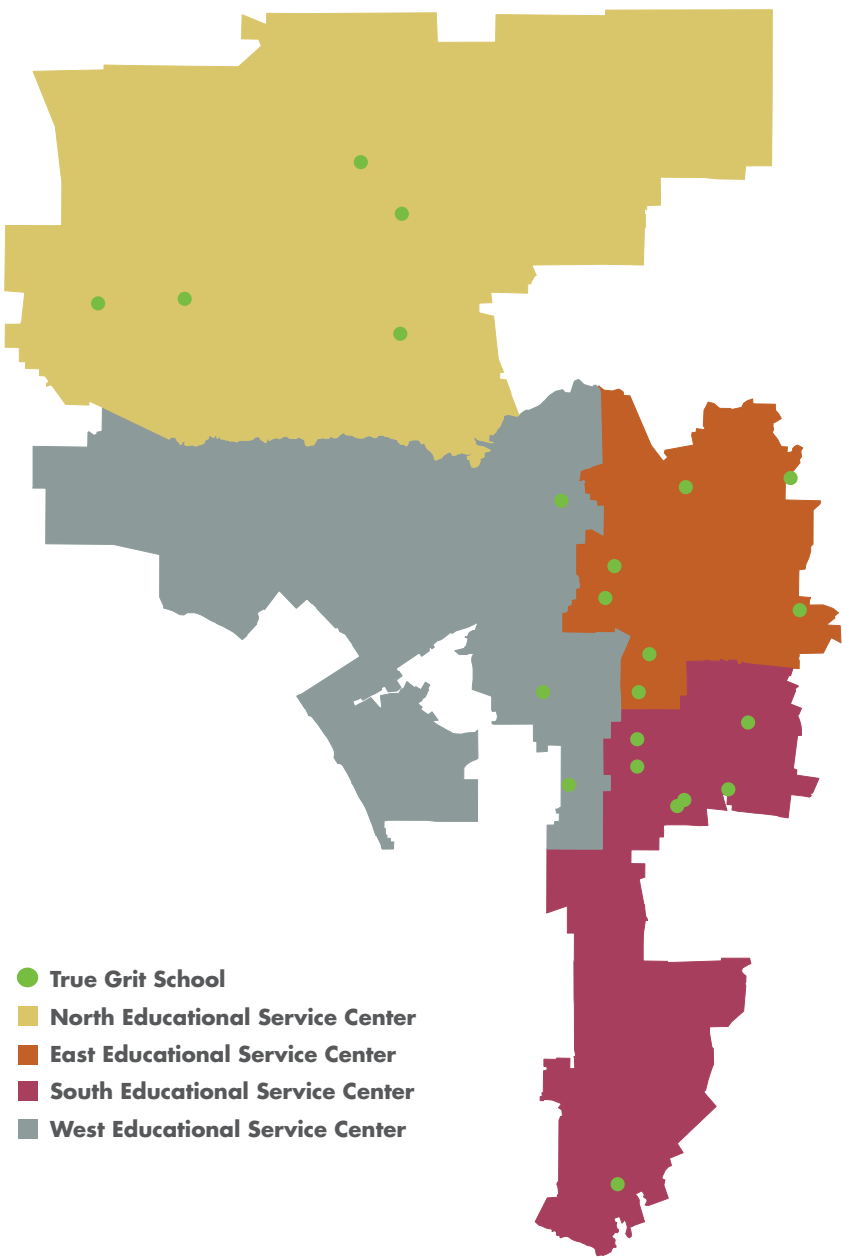
True Grit Schools in this Report

FIGURE 1: TYPES OF TRUE GRIT SCHOOLS



Note: The two figures above represent the True Grit Schools in this report and were generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

FIGURE 2: MAP OF TRUE GRIT SCHOOLS



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

True Grit Schools in this Report

FIGURE 3: STUDENT RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS
IN TRUE GRIT SCHOOLS—AVERAGE

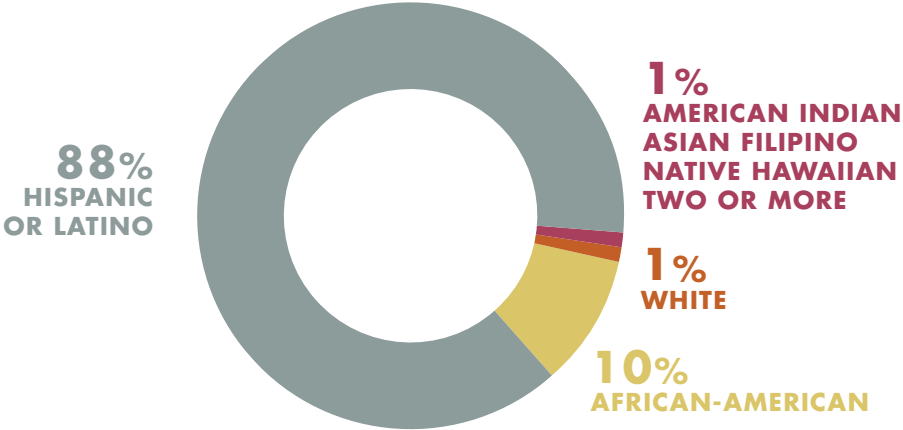
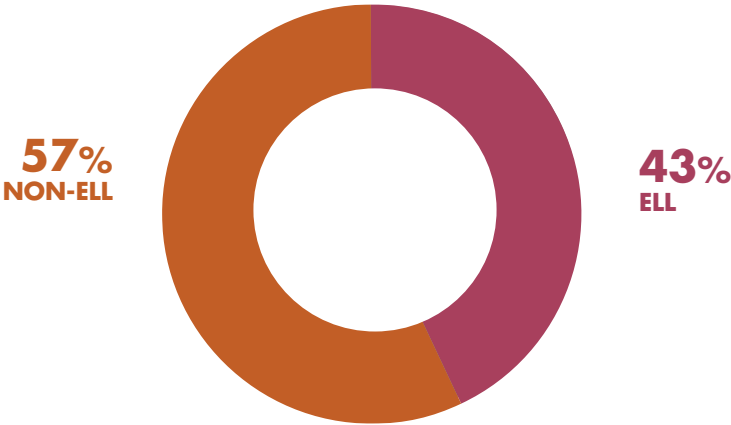


FIGURE 5: STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE FREE
OR REDUCED LUNCH IN
TRUE GRIT SCHOOLS—AVERAGE



FIGURE 4: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs)
IN TRUE GRIT SCHOOLS—AVERAGE



Note: The three figures above represent the True Grit Schools in this report and were generated using data from the California Department of Education, API Database for 2011-2012.

MAKING DATA DYNAMIC



Closing the achievement gap can feel like scaling a steep mountain, a feat even more daunting if you're climbing the mountain blindfolded. For this reason, it is not surprising that making data dynamic overwhelmingly topped the list of game-changing factors used to propel performance in our schools. After all, schools need data as a tool that can guide their practice by illuminating the strengths, challenges and gaps among their students. Data can also be used to spotlight a teacher's blind spots and best practices, which can inform decisions about areas for peer support, collaborative planning and professional development. Simply put, the schools we explored understand that helping students leap two grade levels in a single year is too challenging a journey to make without a flashlight and strong toolbox of proven strategies.

83% of schools identified making data dynamic as critical to their progress with students.

Schools that believe in making data dynamic include:

Academy of Medical and Health Sciences at Roosevelt High School*
Alliance Cindy and Bill Simon Technology Academy High School
Alliance Tennenbaum Family Technology High School
Arts in Action Community Charter School
Bert Corona Charter School
Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center
Dorothy V. Johnson Community Day School
Humanitas Art School at Roosevelt High School*
Jack London Community Day School
John Hope Continuation School
Los Angeles Academy of Arts and Enterprise
Magnolia Avenue Elementary School
Magnolia Science Academy Bell School
Manhattan Place Elementary School
Math, Science and Technology Magnet Academy at Roosevelt High School
Mission Continuation School
Orchard Academies 2B
Owensmouth Continuation School
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Richard A. Alonzo Community Day School
School of Communications, New Media and Technology at Roosevelt High School*
School of Law and Government at Roosevelt High School*
Social Justice Schools: Global Issues Academy at Dr. Maya Angelou Community High
Victoria Avenue Elementary

*Now a part of Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School

**Now a part of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High

Strategies listed below illustrate how schools use data dynamically to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What making data dynamic looks like for students

Students own, understand and act on their own performance data.

At a middle school in Pacoima, students graph their own performance data, taking ownership over monitoring their growth. They engage in a competition with themselves—striving to reach their personal best.

Students at an elementary school in South Gate use a data-based reading program called Accelerated Reader, which allows them to see their own data, and the clear connection between reading frequency and reading improvement.

At a high school in South Los Angeles, each student discusses his or her test scores with a counselor. They learn how to read their scores, which helps their understanding of where they need to grow for the year. This promotes student empowerment and accountability.

Data is analyzed and used to create healthy competition among classes at a high school in Wilmington. Through a question bank feature, teachers can show class results to spark healthy competition to achieve.

Teaching and learning are more personal for students.

Teachers at a high school in Glassell Park leverage data and technology platforms to draw comparisons that allow students to better understand areas of growth and mastery. Students, in turn, receive targeted instruction based on their collective and individual needs.

A high school in Boyle Heights uses data to form strategic groups of students for various projects or instructional needs. For example, a high-performer may be placed strategically in a group with a student who is struggling. Through peer teaching, both students have opportunities to deepen their understanding of the content or skill.

By using a computer-based math program, students at an elementary school in South Los Angeles are able to use data and technology that adapt to their differing learning styles. The program helps visual learners engage with math, and has increased student engagement and growth.

What making data dynamic looks like for staff

For data to be real, collection must happen in real time.

At an elementary school in Central Los Angeles, teachers collect data on reading fluency, which informs the language arts program that students will engage with: “Read 180” is used by struggling readers, and the “Treasures” program is used by other students to help them grow.

When their school year begins, teachers at a middle school in Bell analyze student data from the previous grade to identify areas of need and target those core skills.

In South Los Angeles, teachers at a continuation school administer biweekly assessments for vocabulary, reading comprehension and literary terms. These provide useful data that informs instructional decisions.

At a continuation school in San Fernando, teachers use a variety of standardized assessments to gauge where students are at the beginning of the school year. They then set individual goals with each student based on where he or she can continue to grow.

Data is a teacher’s compass. Growth is the student’s destination.

Teachers at a middle school in Bell meet at least three times per year as a whole staff to discuss data trends. They also meet with their principal to discuss students’ strengths and areas for growth based on the data.

Elementary school teachers at a school in Huntington Park collaborate as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to analyze student data and share student writing. In addition, they use common criteria charts for evaluating writing pieces for each grade level. They then share parts of the rubric with the students to foster student accountability for their learning.

School leaders at a high school in Boyle Heights value the time and energy required to successfully analyze student data. As a result, the administration provides a pullout day, where teachers are able to come together to review student work, calibrate and discuss next steps.

At a continuation school in San Fernando, teachers use a combination of standardized assessments and student portfolios to evaluate student progress.

In South Central Los Angeles, teachers at an elementary school work as grade-level teams to analyze student data, noting gaps in student understanding in order to provide remediation. If more than 25 percent of the students didn’t master a standard, teachers know to reteach the content.

What making data dynamic looks like for families and the community

Data is more than a reporting tool or end result. It is the opening to a conversation.

At a middle school in Bell, teachers show parents their child’s data to help them understand their child’s strengths, growth areas and important next steps.

In Canoga Park, teachers at a continuation school give a survey to students at the beginning of the year to gather information about their home life that will inform a “whole child” approach to teaching.

A Pacoima middle school uses an online data tool called PowerSchool, which provides transparency of the data for students, teachers and families.

True Grit in Action

Case Study: Making Data Dynamic

**ADRIANA ACERO, KINDERGARTEN TEACHER,
MANHATTAN PLACE ELEMENTARY**

The Challenge

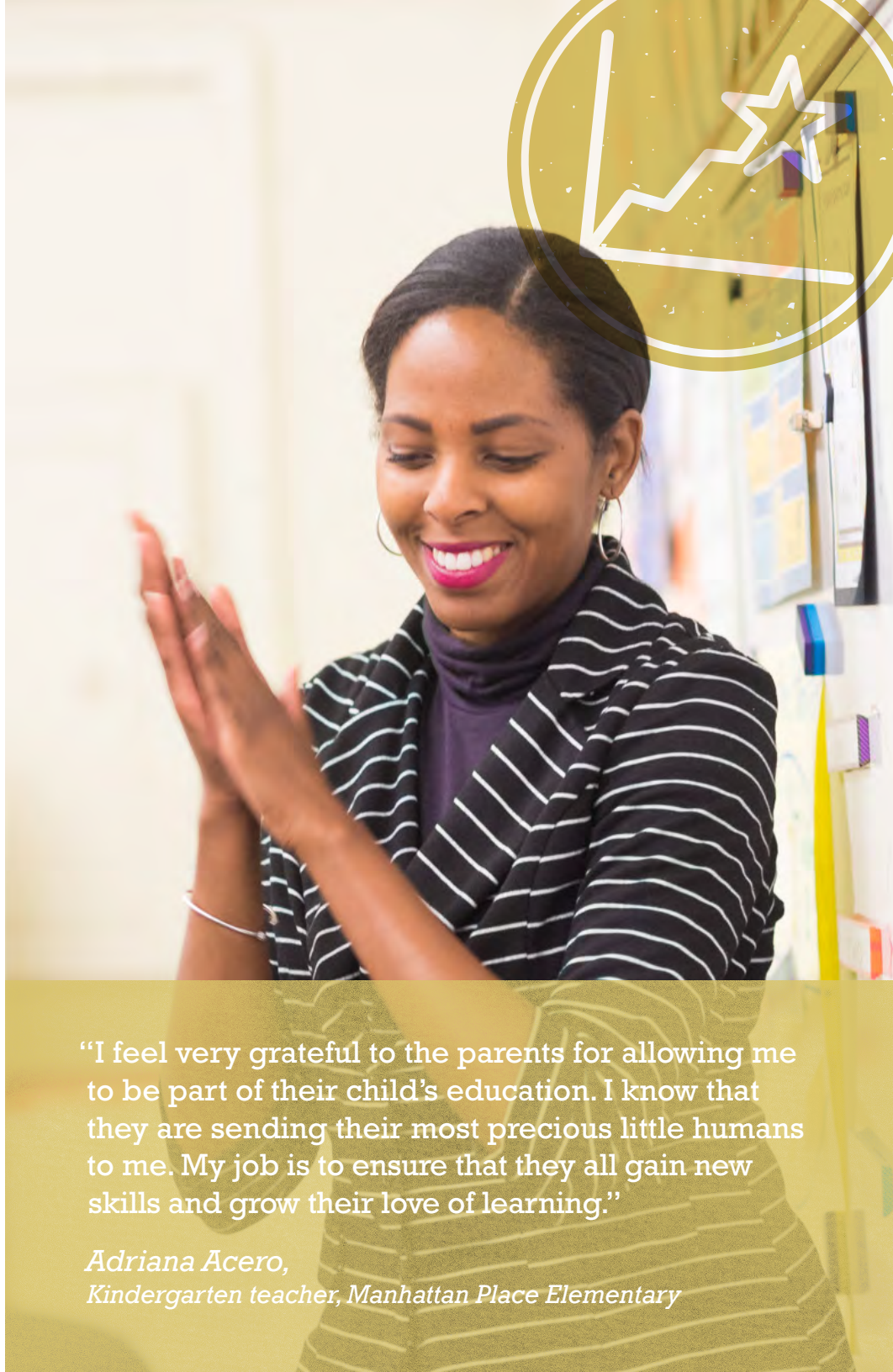
Data should inform the learning journey, not merely the final destination. Analyzing student data and work needed to happen constantly and in real time throughout the year in order for teachers to collaboratively develop solutions for helping our students. Data can also help give context to the decisions teachers make around our practice. In this way, student data and observations of practice must be examined simultaneously and continuously.

In our staff meetings, I constantly heard this need reiterated by my peers. After all, teachers will develop new skills, gain new perspectives and grow as practitioners not merely from books but by learning from one another.

The Solution

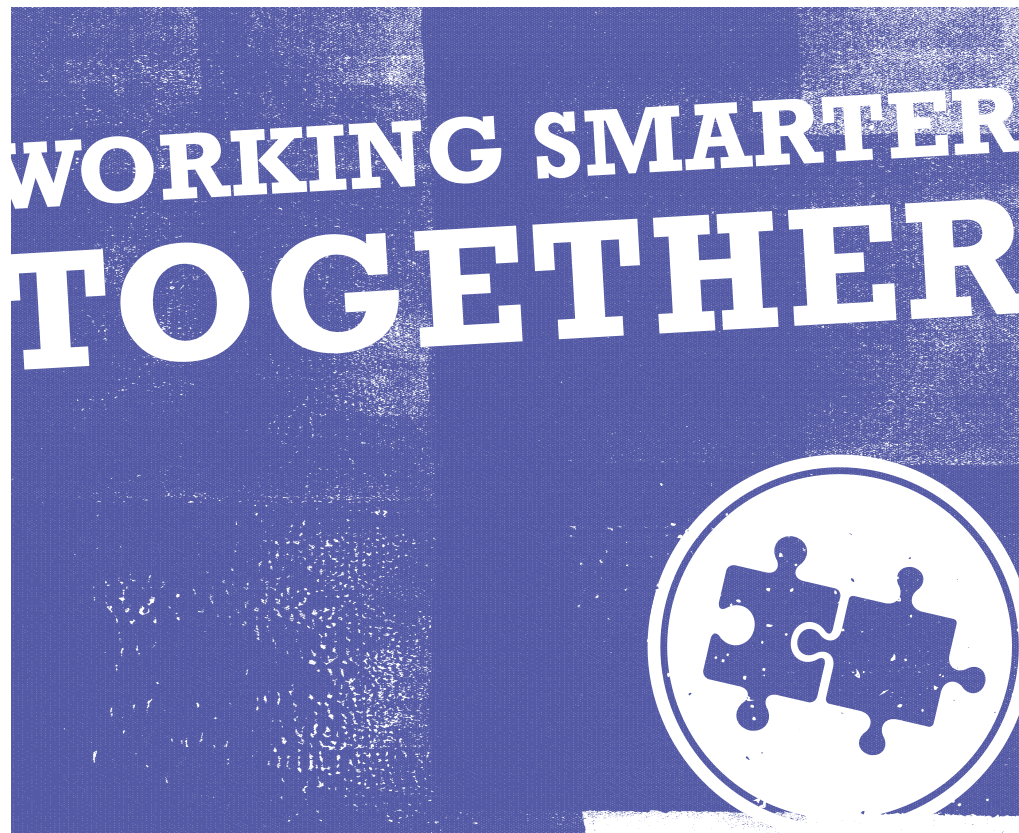
At the beginning of the year, teachers working in the same grade level come together to develop performance tasks in both English Language Arts and Math. These tasks are used to measure the content and skills being taught. This ritual created a space for teachers to talk about best practices for assessment and what we can learn from our students' work. For instance, we can use assessments and data to isolate the specific literacy challenges facing our students—the kinds of words they are struggling to read and why.

This school year, there has been more opportunity to visit with teachers, and discuss data and student work. I have found this time to be very significant as I get to not only look at what my students are doing but also see what students in other classes are doing. This enables me to regularly benchmark how they are performing against their peers down the hall, which in turn allows me to compare my teaching techniques to those of my peers. This opens the door for more peer observation and collaboration around best practices and common challenges.



“I feel very grateful to the parents for allowing me to be part of their child’s education. I know that they are sending their most precious little humans to me. My job is to ensure that they all gain new skills and grow their love of learning.”

*Adriana Acero,
Kindergarten teacher, Manhattan Place Elementary*



Acting. Business. Computer Science. Dentistry. Engineering.

We could go on recounting the jobs from A to Z that require adults to communicate, collaborate and problem-solve as a team. As teachers, we are grooming and shaping the future talent that will enter these inherently collaborative and knowledge-based careers. Why shouldn't the teaching profession mimic these skills? The staff who cited this factor as game-changing are creating a team approach to identifying instructional gaps and challenges, planning for student success, evaluating their school's progress and creating responsive professional development to share best practices.

72% of schools identified working smarter together as critical to their progress with students.

Schools that believe in working smarter together include:

Academy of Medical and Health Sciences at Roosevelt High School*
Alliance Cindy and Bill Simon Technology Academy High School
Alliance Tennenbaum Family Technology High School
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center
Arts in Action Community Charter School
Boyle Heights Continuation School
Dorothy V. Johnson Community Day School
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School of Law and Government at Roosevelt High School*
Social Justice Schools: Global Issues Academy at Dr. Maya Angelou Community High
Victoria Avenue Elementary
Watts Learning Center Charter Middle School

*Now a part of Theodore Roosevelt Senior High

Strategies listed below illustrate how schools work smarter together to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What working smarter together looks like for students

Students and teachers work in teams.

Literacy is like a tapestry that links all content areas together for a high school in Boyle Heights. Literacy is integrated into the curriculum in all areas through common rubrics, interdisciplinary essays, and qualitative reflections on a student's own strengths and growth areas.

At a high school in South Los Angeles, students engage in interdisciplinary projects across subject areas, reinforcing important content and skills.

Teachers at a continuation school in Hollywood collaboratively identify students who need the most review, and then provide opportunities for those students to engage in English and Math boot camps that address their needs.

Teachers at a school in Bell used common planning time to design interdisciplinary projects that enabled students to move from one class to another, and see common themes, structures and connections across content areas.

Students see teachers and peers as role models for collaboration.

The staff at a high school in Boyle Heights models the behavior that they expect from the students, including academic language, professionalism and collaboration.

At a community day school in South Los Angeles, teachers model great working and collaborative relationships with each other that students observe and seek to emulate.

In a South Los Angeles high school, youth participate in student government, where they model the school's values, put leadership vision into practice and organize culture building activities for their peers.



“Teaching is an opportunity for me to help my students build knowledge about the world in which we live. The skills and content we teach are all interconnected. Language arts is not taught in isolation from social studies, science or art, but rather is integrated into these subjects. In this way, as students are learning to better read and write, they are building knowledge in the other content areas as well.”

*David Hessel,
Fourth Grade Teacher, Magnolia Avenue Elementary School*



What working smarter together looks like for staff

Teachers create strong professional relationships.

At a community day school in South Los Angeles and a high school in Glassell Park, the staff engage in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which have created an intentional place for cross-department collaboration. At PLCs, the staff can discuss curriculum, create common assessments and collaborate around a shared set of expectations.

The principal at a middle school in Bell always has his door open, which enables teachers to feel supported by the administration. This sets the stage for the kind of open-door policy that teachers have with each other and with students.

Every teacher at a high school in Wilmington has a specialized role, such as Department Chair, Technology Lead, Sports Lead. This fosters a culture of shared ownership, leadership and responsibility.

Time for collaboration is carved into the school's systems and rituals.

Teachers at an elementary school in Central Los Angeles are given autonomy during common planning time to set goals, and discuss what is and is not working. Grade-level teams also meet once a month in half-day professional development sessions to plan collaboratively.

At a community day school in South Los Angeles, teachers leverage the physical proximity of their classrooms to visit and learn from one another. This also allows teachers to ensure that there is consistency across classrooms in regard to academic and behavior expectations.

Grade-level teachers at an elementary school in Watts receive a shared prep period each week that they use to discuss trends around student needs, best practices and integration across subjects.

Teachers at a South Gate elementary school use Dropbox to collaborate and share documents for planning purposes. A shared Dropbox for each grade level has increased collaboration by creating a common bank of resources.



Teacher growth is fueled by collaboration

At an elementary school in South Gate, teachers meet as a team to review the Common Core State Standards and plan the curriculum to ensure that students are receiving standards-based instruction.

The staff at a high school in Wilmington engage in professional rounds each month, where they can observe their colleagues and learn from best practices.

At an elementary school in Boyle Heights, teachers receive professional development to implement programs such as Singapore Math. Then, teachers observe each other's approach to execution and debrief best strategies.

What working smarter together looks like for families and the community

Families are invited to be part of their child's academic team.

A strong parent liaison at a special education center in Reseda helps families understand the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process for students who are in need of extra services and support. The parent liaison also helps to guide parents to the services that would benefit their child.

At that same center in Reseda, there is a communication committee, which consists of teachers and support staff, such as a speech therapist. The committee provides parents with strategies that can be leveraged at home to help their child grow.

Students at a Canoga Park continuation school lead conferences each semester, and all parents are required to attend. With students who have mostly disengaged from their families, this is an opportunity to bring parents in to talk about their child's goals and progress.

True Grit in Action

Case Study: Working Smarter Together

**DAVID HESSEL, FOURTH GRADE TEACHER,
MAGNOLIA AVENUE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

The Challenge

Our large staff of 60 teachers needed more time to really work together to plan curriculum, assessments and intervention strategies. While we had banked time for weekly meetings, this was not enough time for teachers to both uncover underlying student issues and develop strategies for improving these challenges. Teachers needed more time to go deeper into student issues and the ideas of their colleagues.

The Solution

Three years ago, we started a monthly Saturday Academy for teachers. We meet for four hours (teachers are compensated for their time), and our principal gives us wide latitude to plan the topic we wish to explore on that day. Most trainings are led by teachers, but some feature external presenters. Topics have included teaching strategies to improve poor reading skills in upper-grade classrooms, and how to plan and implement English Language Development lessons that better prepare students for the academic curriculum.

Teachers are given plenty of time to plan and work together. Most sessions end with teachers getting down to work and creating lessons based on what they learned. For instance, we might plan an interdisciplinary unit using content and skills from History, English Language Arts and Science. Teachers have the space to develop as professionals by learning from peers. Together, we accomplish wonderful things in our classrooms, and these meetings give us an opportunity to really present and showcase innovative practices.

Additionally, our Saturday Academies are held on the same day as a monthly student program run by Reading to Kids, a grassroots organization that brings Saturday reading clubs to school campuses to foster a love of reading. On this special Saturday, teachers, students and their families immerse in learning new skills. This activity models that everyone—including parents and teachers—can continue learning and growing.





STRENGTHENING SCHOOL CULTURE

With a district and legislative spotlight on improving school climates, schools must implement policy reforms into the fabric of their campus culture. Strengthening school culture was the third commonly cited factor driving school performance. Schools that selected this factor as pivotal to their growth in achievement have intentionally prioritized culture as the building block for success. They define and refine the expectations, systems and protocols that crystallize what culture looks, feels and sounds like for their students, staff and families.

34% of schools identified strengthening school culture as critical to their progress with students.

Schools that believe in strengthening school culture include:

Bert Corona Charter School
Boyle Heights Continuation School
Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center
John Hope Continuation School
Los Angeles Academy of Arts and Enterprise
Magnolia Science Academy Bell
Math, Science and Technology Magnet Academy at
Roosevelt High School
Owensmouth Continuation School
School of Engineering and Technology at Mendez High School**
Whitney Young Continuation School

“Our students feel welcome. They did not feel that way before being transferred to our school. We’re small enough to all know each other’s names and stories. Our students don’t feel like they are a number. We are a family.”

***Jon Stewart,
Math and Spanish Teacher,
Jack London Community Day School***

**Now a part of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High

Strategies listed below illustrate how schools strengthen culture to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

What strengthening school culture looks like for students

Students receive education information, options and encouragement.

At a middle school in Boyle Heights, there is a wall on campus that highlights student growth, which reinforces a culture of transparency and the celebration of progress. Similarly, classrooms have data walls to accessibly show students where they are and where they need to continue to grow.

In Reseda, a special education center offers students opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities, such as drama, sports and music. This provides a creative outlet, and helps connect school culture to college and career aspirations.

Teachers at a continuation school in Valley Glen have high expectations for their students and create an environment where students feel valued. They do this by conducting one-on-one meetings with students to discuss individual progress made toward reaching goals.

Grit and growth are expected and celebrated.

Growth and achievement are recognized at a middle school in Pacoima through award assemblies and field trips. As a result, a culture of achievement and high expectations has become second nature for the students.

At a continuation school in Canoga Park, no student fails. If the work is not done the way it is supposed to be done, it is handed back and students have the opportunity to redo their work. As a result, the culture is a safe space where failure is not an option and learning is encouraged.

Students lead monthly awards assemblies at a continuation school in Boyle Heights. In these celebrations, students see their peers applauding individual and collective academic and attendance gains.

Youth are developed and empowered to be leaders today and tomorrow.

At a special education center in Reseda, students are taught to be entrepreneurial with enterprises, such as cooking, jewelry-making and blanket-weaving. These enterprises are a great way to build culture and teach students marketable skills.

Teachers at a high school in South Los Angeles help form a student government association to teach and leverage youth leadership.

An annual Peace Conference is held at a community day school in Valley Glen. As part of the conference, students and teachers work together to plan and execute the event, uniting the school community toward a shared set of values around peace and conflict resolution.



What strengthening school culture looks like for staff

Expectations are crystal clear.

At a continuation school in Canoga Park, teachers set clear expectations when it comes to attendance, rules and academics. For example, students are only allowed to be absent four days in the semester. Because of these expectations, the school has one of the highest attendance rates and one of the highest completion rates of any continuation school.

All teachers at a middle school in Pacoima use the same discipline policies, ensuring that there are consistent expectations in every classroom.

Weekly meetings help teachers at a high school in Boyle Heights address any student issues. These meetings provide a space for ensuring full transparency and communication between all staff members regarding student needs.

The culture embodies a growth mind-set.

There is a palpable culture of grit and growth through student celebrations and recognition ceremonies at a middle school in Boyle Heights. Students and staff engage in STAR ceremonies to spotlight performance gains and character values. The school also hosts talent shows, fashion shows and an art walk. All of these activities strengthen school pride and culture.

At a middle school in Watts, teachers have an open-door policy for both students and adults, which contributes to a positive culture of open communication and support.

Once a month, teachers at a community day school in Valley Glen engage in all-day professional development, where they learn from peers by teaching each other best practices.

More time. More collaboration. Greater results.

The staff at a middle school in Pacoima has built in 18 minutes every day for an advisory class. During this time, teachers are able to check in and support students with homework or extra help, fostering stronger teacher-student relationships.

At a middle school in Bell, the staff restructured the schedule to allow time for both enrichment and intervention programs for students. In addition to freeing up time for Special Education students to receive extra support, the new scheduling enables the school to offer more elective courses to capture the imaginations and passions of their eighth-graders.

At a continuation school in Huntington Park, teachers have moved to a new schedule where classes are longer and semesters are shorter, increasing a school-wide focus on earning credits. This has also increased attendance, promoting greater student growth and a culture focused on results.

What strengthening school culture looks like for families and the community.

Families and support providers are invited to be part of the school's approach to education.

A community day school in Valley Glen forges relationships with outside partners to infuse academics with career education. Teachers focus on integrating curriculum and career planning for students.

At a middle school in Bell, community and school-wide events are used to build a sense of school culture through activities like assemblies for high SAT scores.

A high school in South Los Angeles has instituted specific family engagement programs such as the Parent Beautification Day, the Parent Institute for Quality Education and Coffee with the Principal, promoting family engagement in the school community.

True Grit in Action

Case Study: Strengthening School Culture

**JON STEWART, MATH AND SPANISH TEACHER,
JACK LONDON COMMUNITY DAY SCHOOL**

The Challenge

Based on their past experiences, the students at my Community Day School have a negative connotation of education. Sadly, many come from tough homes and face seemingly insurmountable challenges that often make school feel like a distraction, not an ideal destination. Often hampered by the weight of these realities, our students struggle to see the connection between education and their futures. As a result, school culture was negatively impacted because students were not physically or mentally present in their schooling or in the planning for their futures.

The Solution

We realized that we needed to help our students bridge the gap between their current school curriculum and their future careers. The entire staff at our school set out to create lessons and curricula that would showcase to students what opportunities awaited them after graduation, and how their education could help them arrive at those opportunities.

A science teacher created an environmental science program that focuses on urban gardening. Students learn about the science involved in growing and caring for plants. They also exercise business and marketing skills by selling what they grow. Our social studies teacher has used his background in film to illustrate how students can use arts such as filmography to support issues in their community. He teaches students how to film and use editing software, and shows examples in his class of how people have used documentaries to advance their stories and social change.



I started to incorporate personal financial literacy into my algebra classes. Students are able to learn about basic investment opportunities and strategies, including banking, loans, insurance and taxes. My students find that the skills they learn in algebra apply directly to how they can better manage their money now and in the future. This helps students see why becoming proficient in mathematics will help them personally and professionally.

Since connecting our curriculum to career planning, we have seen increases in attendance, student engagement in class and completion of work. Many of our students have been able to showcase their work at our annual school conferences, and some have been able to demonstrate their learning to outside community members who, in turn, provide internships and funding. This has enabled our students to see that learning can add immediate and long-term value to their future.

PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES & THE COMMUNITY



3% of schools identified partnerships as critical to their progress with students.

School that believes in family and community partnerships:

Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center

Conventional wisdom, as well as countless research-based studies, tells us that the most influential factors in children's lives are their parents and teachers. Indeed, one of the reasons teachers are drawn to this noble profession is because they shape the hearts and minds that will lead our future. This is also one of many reasons teachers and families should work together to set expectations and support structures for students.

It's also important to note that only one of the schools we examined identified family and community partnerships as the most critical factor propelling their school's growth. We believe this happened for two reasons.

First, this True Grit Factor was mentioned as a strategy leveraged to enhance all the other factors.

Second, staff also cited the lack of community engagement capacity and expertise on their campuses. Not surprisingly, schools that had dedicated roles focused on partnerships tended to have more parent and community engagement on their campuses.

Luckily, there are many advocacy and community organizations pushing for increased parent voice, engagement and partnerships with schools. To shine a spotlight on the role and resources these organizations offer, we have included information about parent advocacy organizations in this report. We hope teachers, administrators and school staff seek out these organizations as thought leaders and resources for meaningful and impactful partnerships with parents.

Strategies listed below illustrate how schools forge partnerships to support and empower students, staff, family and community.

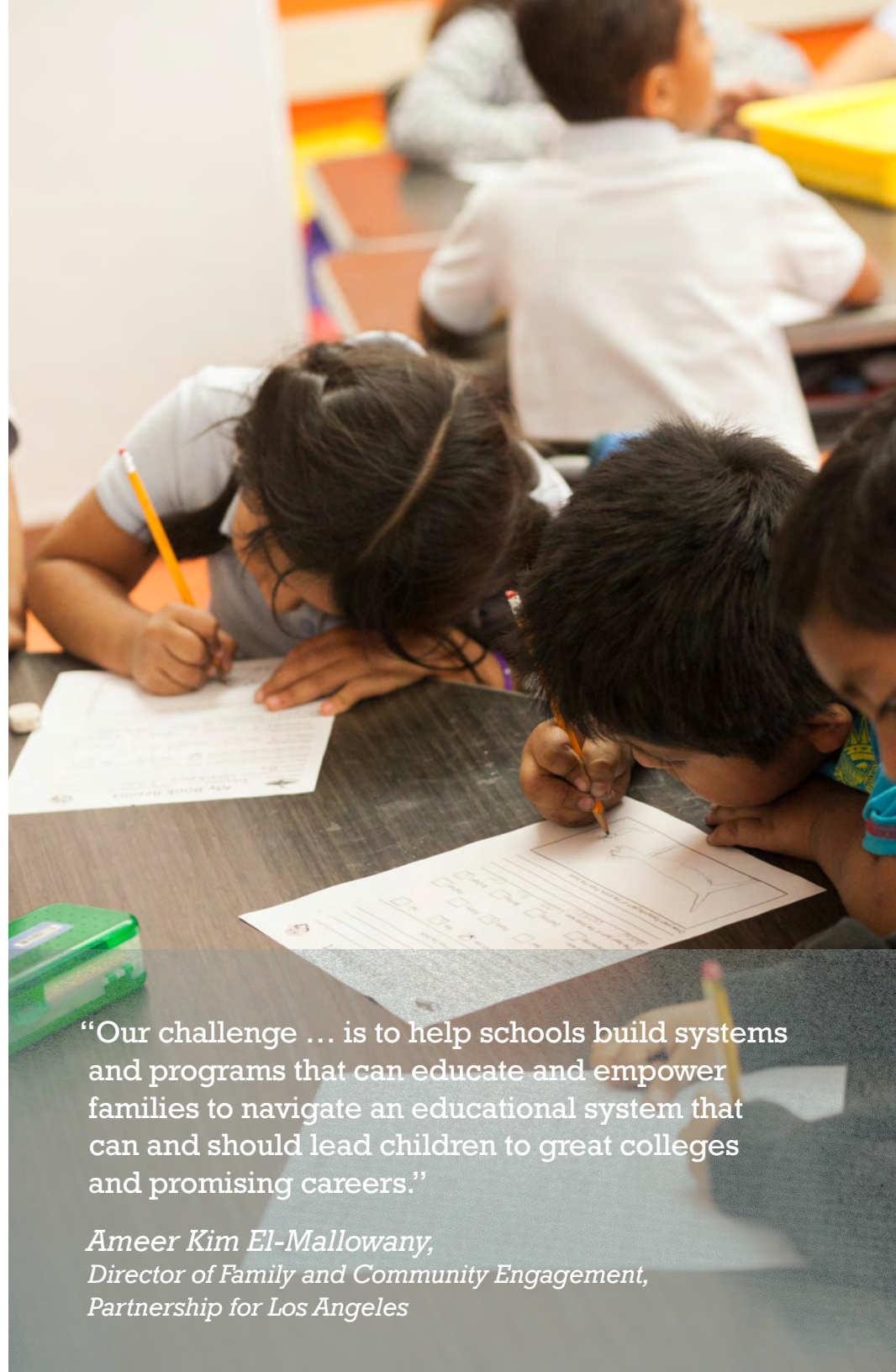
What strengthening partnerships looks like for students, staff and families

In Pacoima, a middle school leverages online data platforms to transparently share data with students, teachers and families. This enables families to monitor their child's progress flexibly from home or work.

At a special education center in Reseda, community-based instruction allows students to navigate real-life situations and experiences. Students are exposed to the community through field trips as well as partnerships with outside organizations and other schools.

The staff at a continuation school in San Fernando hold meetings with parents to share growth data and discuss ways families can support academic skills, behaviors and mind-sets at home.

Several schools in this report hold Saturday academies and parent colleges that leverage partnerships with nonprofit organizations to provide students and families with enrichment and support trainings around skills like reading, college-readiness, financial literacy and health.



“Our challenge ... is to help schools build systems and programs that can educate and empower families to navigate an educational system that can and should lead children to great colleges and promising careers.”

*Ameer Kim El-Mallowany,
Director of Family and Community Engagement,
Partnership for Los Angeles*

True Grit in Action

Case Study: Partnering with Families and the Community

**AMEER KIM EL-MALLOWANY,
DIRECTOR OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT,
PARTNERSHIP FOR LOS ANGELES**

The Challenge

At the Partnership for Los Angeles, we operate a network of schools in South and East Los Angeles. Our approach for graduating students ready for college and career hinges upon three key pillars: cultivating great school leaders, supporting highly effective teachers, and engaging and empowering families. The latter pillar is essential because parents don't always understand the anatomy of our public educational system. This may be because when our parents were students—some at our very own campuses—they didn't always experience a high-performing education system; or because our older caregivers attended public schools prior to the era of one-to-one technology, Common Core and high-stakes testing.

Our challenge at the Partnership is to help schools build systems and programs that can educate and empower families to navigate an educational system that can lead their children to great colleges and promising careers. Informed and empowered teachers and families are the greatest agents for changing a child's future.

The Solution

We are helping our schools tackle this challenge in three steps.

The first step is teaching schools how to get their students' parents in the door. We train teams of parents and staff in our schools to provide welcome centers on campus, and hold events and activities that allow parents to feel greeted and welcomed. This is the first step to building a bridge of true family engagement, and it is particularly important for families that may find their school inaccessible due to language barriers or educational divides.

The second step is to help school leaders, teachers and support staff redefine engagement. It's not enough to have a welcome center and a family BBQ in the fall. Schools must empower families with a deep and rich content experience that helps them effectively navigate their child's educational journey. This kind of direct academic usefulness empowers parents to understand and use student transcripts, graduation requirements, and enrichment and college programs. At all of our schools, we work with staff to offer Parent College on Saturdays, which trains parents with concrete skills and leadership development to better navigate the public school and college systems.

The third step is to measure how steps one and two are actually helping students be more successful in college and careers, which is the bottom line. This is about helping schools get more granular with their data to simultaneously measure what families they are engaging, what families they are failing to reach, and how steps one and two are impacting a school's goal. This means supporting schools to refine their family engagement strategies and content in a way that will expand their reach to more students' families, and directly align with a school's goals around academic content. For instance, a school's lessons in science and physical education can be leveraged to teach health and wellness to families by providing trainings on ways to support youth in their health and wellness.

Building school ownership and capacity is core to our model. Our Family and Community Engagement team partners with our schools to build the capacity and expertise to lead, refine and share best practices around parent engagement.



Stronger Family Engagement

A few examples of community-based organizations pushing for stronger family engagement in public education.

Organization	Mission	Geographic Focus	Website
Building Skills Partnership	To improve the quality of life for low-wage property service workers and their families by increasing their skills, access to education, and opportunities for career and community advancement.	All of Los Angeles	buildingskills.org
CADRE	To work toward South Los Angeles schools that include and respect the cultures of their families and communities, genuinely engage parents in decision-making, regardless of race, income, language, immigration status or age, and actively maintain equal power with parents who effectively hold them accountable.	South Los Angeles	cadre-la.org
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)	To empower Central Americans and all immigrants by defending human and civil rights, working for social and economic justice, and promoting cultural diversity.	All of Los Angeles	carecen-la.org
Families in Schools	To involve parents and communities in their children's education to achieve lifelong student success.	All of Los Angeles	familiesinschools.org
Inner City Struggle	To promote safe, healthy and nonviolent communities by organizing youth and families to build power and influence in Boyle Heights, El Sereno, unincorporated East Los Angeles and Lincoln Heights to work toward economic, social and educational justice.	East Los Angeles	innercitystruggle.org
LA Voice	To transform Los Angeles into a city that reflects the human dignity of all communities, especially those in greatest need.	All of Los Angeles	lavoicepico.org
Los Angeles Urban League	To enable African-Americans and other minorities to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power and civil rights through advocacy activities, and the provision of programs and services in our uniquely diversified city and region.	Crenshaw district and South Los Angeles	laul.org
Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF)	To promote social change through advocacy, communications, community education and litigation in the areas of education, employment, immigrant rights and political access.	All of Los Angeles	maldef.org
Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)	To create partnerships between parents, students and educators to further students' academic success.	All of Los Angeles	piqe.org
United Way of Greater Los Angeles	To create pathways out of poverty so that everyone who lives in our communities can have a better quality of life.	All of Los Angeles	unitedwayla.org

Stronger Family Engagement

A few examples of organizations building high capacity and expertise around family engagement.

Organization	Mission	Address	Website
Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) – Community Schools	To foster great schools that support the personal and academic success of children and youth from birth through high school.	All of Los Angeles	laep.org
LA's Promise	To partner with schools and parents committed to giving underprivileged students a promising education, and the tools needed to succeed in both their personal and collegiate lives.	South Los Angeles	laspromise.org
Los Angeles Unified – Parent, Community, Student Services Branch	To support school efforts to implement effective family engagement activities that value partnerships with parents for the benefit of children's learning and achievement.	All of LAUSD	achieve.lausd.net/Page/303
Partnership for Los Angeles Schools – Family Engagement Team and Parent College	To transform schools and revolutionize school systems to empower all students with a high-quality education.	East and South Los Angeles	partnershipla.org/
Youth Policy Institute (YPI) – Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood	To transform Los Angeles neighborhoods using a holistic approach to reduce poverty by ensuring families have access to high-quality schools, wraparound education and technology services, enabling a successful transition from cradle to college and career.	Pacoima and Hollywood	ypiusa.org



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?” Here are the top 10 strategies that emerged:

10 Ways to Foster True Grit

1 Funding focused on implementation of new district policies.

In this moment of transition to new and higher state education standards, technology-enabled instruction, and improvements to school climate policy and practice, we need our district to invest smartly in the training, resources and time needed to fully understand, implement and evaluate policy shifts.

2 Strategic reductions in class size.

Strategically reduce class sizes, particularly for schools that struggle with high rates of suspension, expulsion and teacher turnover, as well as low rates of attendance and achievement. Reductions in class size are no silver bullet for improving achievement, but they can be essential instruments when combined with increased training, evaluation, and support for teachers and administrators.

3 Dedicated staff for data-driven intervention and family engagement.

The district can prioritize a school-based leadership role tasked with analyzing and sharing data trends about school climate, discipline and achievement. This specialist can serve as an in-house data analyst who shares positive and negative trends, and helps facilitate conversation around how to make those trends actionable through changes to communications, policy, procedure, staff training and student/parent outreach. Similarly, they want to prioritize family and community engagement by having a dedicated staff member whose job is to identify trends, best practices, and areas for improvement in terms of how schools and staff members partner with families and community.

4 Compensation for planning, performance and impact.

While teachers are wary and unsupportive of compensation programs based solely on test scores, they do crave a compensation system that aligns to three main factors to pay for: time spent planning, performance on a variety of indicators, and impact and leadership roles that benefit the school community. These measures must be based on an equitable and valid multimeasure evaluation system.

5 Invest in a truly comprehensive and Common Core-aligned curriculum.

Teachers consistently lament the loss of electives that enriched curriculum, and provided a creative outlet for reaching the multiple learning styles and interests of students. They want to see electives restored as part of a core curriculum, and to have the time and freedom to collaboratively create and implement new Common Core-aligned lessons.

6 Invest in training on Common Core.

Schools want more time and district-led training on Common Core State Standards—what are they, how to teach them, how to roll these standards out in your school. They also want time to visit exemplar schools and lab classrooms to see Common Core-aligned lessons and standards in action.

7 **Balanced decision-making.**

Those closest to the students should be empowered to make decisions around curriculum, scheduling and budget. While the district may have valuable insights into larger budget implications and data trends, individual schools offer a critical perspective on how these budget and policy decisions might translate to concrete action on the ground. Schools want to see a more refined and clarified system for shared decision-making that empowers school leaders and teachers to offer input on major policies and funding changes that will affect schools.

8 **Time for collaboration.**

Teachers want to see both school and district leaders prioritize time for training, collaboration and common planning. This is essential now more than ever as schools grapple with how best to transition to new Common Core State Standards for education and new reforms around school climate.

9 **Targeted professional development.**

Often the best way to target a problem is by involving those closest to the problem in the process of generating solutions. Teachers want more relevant professional development based on their staff and students' specific strengths and growth areas. If the expertise exists in-house, they'd like professional development to be created and offered collaboratively with peers.

10 **Real-time access to assessment data.**

There is a consistent desire to see better alignment between student performance data and teacher planning. Teachers want access to their students' data in order to make smarter decisions about their instruction and approach to intervention. In addition to making data real time, they also want improved platforms that enable them to analyze data trends in a user-friendly manner.

Closing Thoughts

In addition to our district transitioning to new education and school climate standards, we recognize this report is also launching during a transitional moment in measuring school performance. This report studies the last year that API, in this form, would be used as the common yardstick for measuring school performance. At this very moment, our state is determining another formula and approach for measuring the multiple factors that create successful schools, including growth in achieving the new Common Core State Standards and other priorities mandated by Governor Brown's Local Control Funding Formula.

We look forward to our state and district moving swiftly to develop a valid, fair and transparent system for measuring school performance. Not only is this key to ensuring equity and accountability for students, parents and educators, it is also the basis of reports like this that aim to share best practices for improving school performance. As noted throughout this report, educators crave access to best practices and new sources of information and inspiration. Only by measuring and studying what is working in our schools can we share best practices and keep learning from our challenges and strengths.

"We've spent three years studying grit, which I now believe is truly contagious—educators pass on the pursuit of grit and growth to their colleagues and their students."

*Ama Nyamekye,
Executive Director, Educators 4 Excellence-Los Angeles
Former tenth grade teacher*

Appendix



**MAKING
DATA
DYNAMIC**
(19)



**WORKING
SMARTER
TOGETHER**
(17)



**STRENGTHENING
SCHOOL CULTURE**
(9)



**PARTNERING WITH
FAMILIES AND THE
COMMUNITY**
(1)

SCHOOL	API GROWTH	REGION	MAKING DATA DYNAMIC (19)	WORKING SMARTER TOGETHER (17)	STRENGTHENING SCHOOL CULTURE (9)	PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY (1)
Academy of Medical and Health Sciences at Roosevelt High School*	69	E				
Alliance Cindy and Bill Simon Technology Academy High School	75	S	●	●		
Alliance Tennenbaum Family Technology High School	65	E	●	●		
Alphonso B. Perez Special Education Center	41	E		●		
Arts in Action Community Charter School	61	E	●	●		
Bert Corona Charter School	43	N	●		●	
Boyle Heights Continuation School	112	E		●	●	
Diane S. Leichman Special Education Center	52	N	●		●	●
Dorothy V. Johnson Community Day School	104	S	●	●		
Humanitas Art School at Roosevelt High School*	66	E				
Jack London Community Day School	63	N	●	●		
John Hope Continuation School	45	S	●		●	
LA Academy of Arts & Enterprise	59	E	●		●	
Magnolia Avenue Elementary School	67	E	●	●		
Magnolia Science Academy Bell	49	S	●	●	●	
Manhattan Place Elementary	59	W	●	●		
Math, Science and Technology Magnet Academy at Roosevelt High School	71	E				
Mission Continuation School	84	N	●	●		
Orchard Academies 2B	55	S	●	●		
Owensmouth Continuation School	55	N	●		●	
Quincy Jones Elementary School	51	E	●	●		
Richard A. Alonzo Community Day School	45	W	●	●		
School of Communications, New Media and Technology at Roosevelt High School*	57	E				
School of Engineering and Technology at Mendez High School**	45	E			●	
School of Law and Government at Roosevelt High School	65	E				
Social Justice Schools: Global Issues Academy at Dr. Maya Angelou Community High School	62	E	●	●		
Victoria Avenue Elementary School	50	S	●	●		
Watts Learning Center Charter Middle School	65	S		●		
Whitney Young Continuation School	46	W			●	

*Now a part of Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School

**Now a part of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School

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**.