

A Path Toward Strategic Decision-Making CHARTING A DISTRICT'S LITERACY LANDSCAPE

by Heather Mattson and Scott Vince

In late 2015, Tracy Unified School District (TUSD) joined a group of four other California districts in a pilot, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to learn about and implement the Smarter School Spending framework for strategic decision-making and effective resource allocation (see sidebar). The timing was particularly fortuitous for TUSD. Prior to joining the pilot effort, TUSD leaders had been trying to determine why high school students, particularly freshmen, were struggling to meet academic targets. The TUSD leadership team decided to use the support from the Gates grant to more thoroughly investigate this concern. After the grant, in the spring of 2016, the district established what it called an Idea Team to identify possible strategies for alleviating this critical issue. This process set in motion an ongoing district commitment to collaborative adult learning that TUSD leaders believe has put the district on a path toward coherent literacy initiatives that are guided by data and metrics.

Learning Together

The TUSD Idea Team was composed of nearly 20 district stakeholders, including high school principals, teachers, and district office staff. The team met seven times over the course of spring 2016 and evaluated the research and best practices that were relevant to understanding and addressing

the needs of struggling high school freshmen. The team strove to cast a wide net for possible solutions — eventually developing 35 recommendations for improving learning in high school.

Understanding that TUSD couldn't possibly support 35 recommendations, the district's steering committee (composed

“OF THE TWO THINGS WE SELECTED TO FOCUS ON, ONE WAS IMPROVING LITERACY, K–12. THE INITIAL FOCUS WOULD BE ON K–3, WITH THE GOAL THAT EVERY STUDENT COULD READ AND WRITE BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE.”

— SHEILA HARRISON,
ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

of the superintendent and his cabinet) worked to narrow the list. The steering committee knew that all of the recommendations were rooted in TUSD's data and were research-based, so the committee focused on two criteria to narrow the list: (1) Is this solution or strategy doable in our current context? (2) Can we scale it up and get a great “bang for the buck”? The committee also considered implications for the district's union contracts.

A SMARTER SCHOOL SPENDING PILOT IN CALIFORNIA

In the fall of 2015, the Gates Foundation supported five California districts to implement a set of processes and tools — called **Smarter School Spending** — developed by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA). Collectively, the processes and tools are meant to improve a district's planning and decision-making, increase collaboration between academic and finance staffs, and lead to more effective resource allocation. In times of both greater expectations placed on districts and greater budget constraints, Smarter School Spending introduces a new way of aligning resources (people, time, and money) with a district's student achievement goals.

As part of the Gates and GFOA support, each district received funding for one year of assistance from a consultant, Pivot Learning, trained on the Smarter School Spending framework. In addition, Gates funded WestEd to bring the districts together in a Community of Practice (CoP) which includes both online and in-person meetings to share their learnings, successes, and challenges. Gates also funded WestEd to document lessons learned and emerging practices. In the spring of 2017, WestEd staff conducted interviews with district leaders from one of the Gates-funded CoP districts, Tracy Unified School District, to better understand the beginning of that district's journey toward more strategic decision-making. The information in this brief is based on these interviews.

Using these criteria, the committee eventually focused on two recommendations for further exploration: develop a summer bridge program and strengthen literacy, starting with early grades (K–3), throughout the district.

Once district leaders had specific areas of focus, they formed two implementation teams, each charged with the responsibility of actually putting one of the two main recommendations into action. The literacy implementation team had to figure out how to strengthen core offerings and identify research-based interventions to increase students’ proficiency in literacy in the early grades. According to Sheila Harrison, TUSD’s Associate Superintendent of Educational Services, the district chose to break with tradition by including all site administrators and key staff from across the district office on the literacy implementation team, rather than creating a team with only a select group of administrators. She explained, “This was a big risk on our part. Usually digging is done in small teams, but we really felt that if we wanted to move the needle we had to involve all of our site administrators.”

Undergirding the work of the literacy implementation team was an effort for all team members to collaboratively learn about Smarter School Spending tools. With the help of the district’s Gates-funded

consultant, the team members learned about several tools that would help them identify the district’s literacy program offerings and gap areas. These tools included the Landscape Matrix, the LACE Funnel, and the Initiative Charter (see sidebar). Currently, these tools are being used to help build the capacity of TUSD leaders to make decisions regarding literacy and other initiatives.

Using the Tools

Using the Landscape Matrix, the literacy implementation team was surprised to learn that more than 60 different literacy programs were being used in the district’s 19 schools. As Casey Goodall, Associate Superintendent of Business Services, pointed out, “We were not being consistent with the delivery of early literacy. We learned just how many different interventions and programs are currently being used at school sites, and we were overwhelmed.” Using a gallery walk to review the 60-plus literacy programs made it obvious to the team that the district did not have clear criteria for measuring the effectiveness of its literacy programs.

The implementation team carried out a gap analysis to identify the biggest weaknesses in the district’s literacy offerings. The analysis highlighted three major concerns: (1) a lack of a consistent model for teaching English learners; (2) a lack of consistent Tier 1 services (the high-quality instruction that all students should receive); and (3) lack of consistent Tier 2 services (the first level of more intensive instruction for those students who are not making adequate progress with the core curriculum).

Once district leaders had a complete view of the district’s literacy programs and the gaps across those programs, they were able to start to think about how they might fill the gaps. The literacy implementation team then used the LACE Funnel to identify which of the district’s many literacy

THE SMARTER SCHOOL SPENDING TOOLS

Landscape Matrix: A document that helps a district to put together an overall view of its “landscape” of programs and initiatives. Allows for the input of characteristics (grade level, description, sites served, implementation level, etc.). The Landscape Matrix provides an entry point for further discussions.

LACE Funnel: A tool (also called the LACE Framework) for identifying programs and initiatives that are: Large (in scope, and in the sense of requiring substantial resources with potential for large impact); Aligned (with school and district priorities); Credible; and Effective.

Initiative Charter: A more in-depth tool for taking a deeper look at a given program/initiative and documenting its intended outcomes, rationale, operating model, key considerations, and current status.

TRACY UNIFIED: QUICK FACTS

Students:	16,426
Schools:	23
English Learners:	26.0%
Free or Reduced-Price Meals:	50.0%
African American:	6.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native:	0.3%
Asian:	10.8%
Latino:	51.0%
Pacific Islander:	1.0%
White:	22.0%
Two or More Races:	4.0%

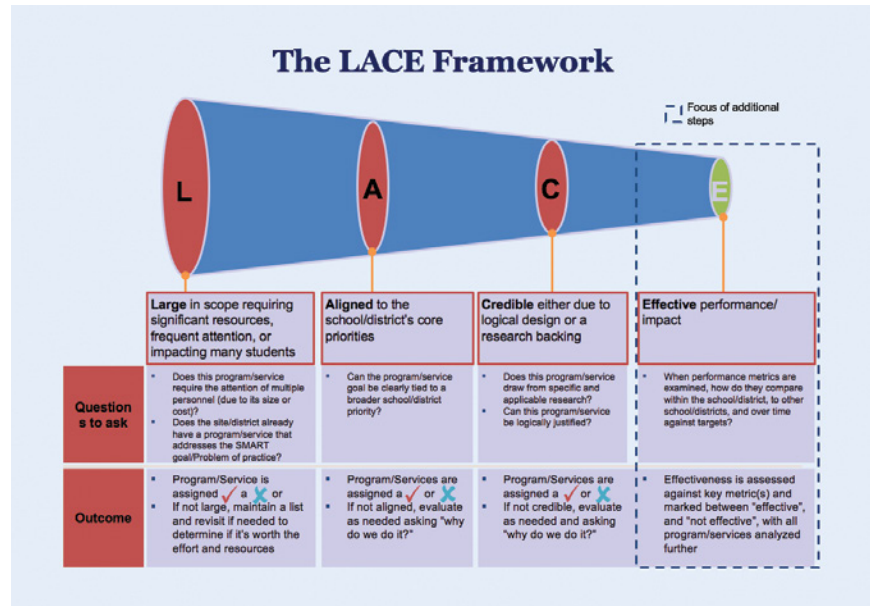
“WE WANTED TO INVOLVE ALL OF OUR SITE ADMINISTRATORS TO FAMILIARIZE THEM WITH THE SMARTER SCHOOL SPENDING TOOLS TO SEE HOW [THE TOOLS] COULD SUPPORT OUR SYSTEM OF DECISION-MAKING.”

— SHEILA HARRISON,
ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT OF
EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

initiatives were suitable for a more involved impact analysis. The LACE Funnel provides a filtering method to determine those initiatives that have a large reach, are aligned to district priorities, are credible (by logic or research), and are effective – in other words, initiatives that are worth devoting large amounts of resources to. The use of the LACE Funnel resulted in just seven literacy initiatives being identified for further analysis.

After the identification of the seven initiatives, TUSD leaders began to use the Initiative Charter to dig a little deeper into those seven literacy programs and others from the Landscape Matrix. The district leaders quickly realized that many of the programs were not being implemented as they were designed to be. As Stocking pointed out, using the Initiative Charter was an “eye-opening” process, one that enabled the district leaders to get a strong grasp of the intent and parameters of the seven programs.

Based on a more complete understanding of the intent of the seven initiatives, TUSD leaders plan to spend the next year developing metrics to understand which of the initiatives are most effective and which they may want to reevaluate. However, and perhaps critically, the TUSD team do not want to immediately abandon the other literacy initiatives. As Harrison pointed out, “We didn’t want [people to get the impression from] the Smarter School Spending processes and tools . . . that we’re cutting and getting rid of stuff.” Instead, the district wants to have site leaders use the tools to facilitate a process of “strategic abandonment” in the upcoming years. District leaders have already started removing programs that have very obvious overlaps with other programs. In future years, site leaders



will be required to use the tools to demonstrate that any programs that are being implemented have positive outcomes for students and therefore are worth the investment.

A Culture Shift

Site leaders indicated that breaking with tradition and having all site leaders join the literacy implementation team enabled them to see firsthand

“IT WAS ALMOST AS IF WE HAD TO GO THROUGH AND LOOK AT IT [THE VARIETY OF LITERACY PROGRAMS] TOGETHER AND GIVE OURSELVES PERMISSION TO ASK, ‘WHY ARE WE DOING ALL THESE THINGS?’ AND IT’S OKAY IF WE NARROW IT DOWN.”

— JULIANNA STOCKING,
PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR FOR
STAFF DEVELOPMENT

the value of the LACE Funnel and to understand its usefulness in decision-making. In fact, moving forward, TUSD leaders will use the LACE Funnel as part of a newly established, districtwide process to help make informed resource allocation decisions. In preparing for future years of decreased budgets, district leaders view the funnel and other Smarter School Spending tools as providing a common framework for making decisions that are calibrated for selecting programs that are appropriate and worth funding. As Stocking pointed out, using the tools has been a “game changer” for the district and has moved schools away from a system of “open autonomy and towards defined autonomy.”

Principals are now empowered and required to take a closer look at the variety of programs that they are spending money on, and principals have more leverage to make decisions based on data. Similarly, district leaders plan to use the LACE tool as a way to be much more strategic than in the past in selecting programs and

“THIS WHOLE PROCESS HELPED US SHIFT FROM BEING A TASK-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION TO A LEARNING-ORIENTED ORGANIZATION. IT HAS ENABLED US TO FOCUS ON WHAT’S MOST IMPORTANT — WHAT’S REALLY GOING TO IMPACT STUDENTS.”

— JULIANNA STOCKING,
PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR FOR
STAFF DEVELOPMENT

professional learning. TUSD leaders said that the process that TUSD has undergone in learning about and applying the Smarter School Funding framework and tools has served as a catalyst for a culture shift in the district, so that staff districtwide are asking themselves, “What if we do better with less, as opposed to just adding more without a clear rationale?”

The Future

TUSD leaders were quick to point out that even though they found the Smarter School Spending framework and tools to be enormously helpful, using the framework and tools took a long time and still is very much a work in progress, with many decisions remaining to be made about how the district approaches K–3 literacy. District leaders all agreed that the work they have done collectively with site administrators over a period of 18 months has laid a strong foundation for the future work of continuing to improve the district’s literacy offerings and student achievement.

In addition, now that the district has taken critical steps toward charting its literacy landscape and establishing new decision-making frameworks, ensuring that new staff understand and can apply this process of charting and decision-making is a vital next step. Several new

administrators will be joining TUSD in the coming year, due to resignations and retirements. Although some new administrators are from within the district and are familiar with the tools, some are completely new to the district. And as Harrison pointed out, “Even if they are currently in the district, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are fully on board with the things we are doing.” Onboarding will be an important part of the ongoing work in TUSD.

“PRINCIPALS SEE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IN A DIFFERENT WAY NOW. THEY ARE CONSISTENTLY ASKING, ‘HOW DO WE KNOW THIS IS WORKING? HOW CAN WE MEASURE THIS?’ WHEREAS, IN THE PAST, THEY WERE ALL TOO OFTEN JUST MAINTAINING SOMETHING BECAUSE THAT’S WHAT THEY HAD ALWAYS DONE OR BECAUSE THE STAFF LIKED IT.”

— LINDA BORAGNO-DOPP,
DIRECTOR OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

“OUR WORK ON THE SMARTER SCHOOL SPENDING PROCESS HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR MORE THAN A YEAR AT THIS POINT AND I DON’T THINK ANY OF US THINK WE HAVE ARRIVED. I THINK ONE OF THE MESSAGES HERE IS THAT THIS TAKES A LONG TIME. BUT STAFF FEEL LIKE THEY ARE BEING HEARD AND WE ARE LEARNING AND PROGRESSING TOGETHER.”

— CASEY GOODALL,
ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT
OF BUSINESS SERVICES

THE LOCAL CONTROL FUNDING FORMULA

In 2013, California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) made comprehensive changes to how California schools are governed and funded. Money from the LCFF accounts for about 80 percent of general funding that districts get from the state. The LCFF places increased emphasis on transparency and accountability, including requiring each school district — with input from parents and the community — to create and adopt a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). The LCAP should detail goals for student progress and district improvement, as well as actions and spending that the district will take to achieve those goals, and how progress will be measured. The LCAP also must explain how the goals and expenditures would increase or improve services and programs for each high-needs student group that receives extra funding.

The LCFF and the LCAP represent a major paradigm shift in planning and resource allocation for most California districts. Based on the experiences of TUSD, the Smarter School Spending framework and tools align well with the LCFF and LCAP expectations as districts make these shifts. According to TUSD leaders, applying processes learned from Smarter School Spending to the district’s LCAP work has had a direct impact on the cohesiveness of the LCAP. Interviewees in the district conveyed that staff across the district office and at school sites have a deeper understanding than they did previously that the LCAP is focused first and foremost on student outcomes and then on effectively allocating resources to meet the goals for improving student outcomes.

Key Takeaways

The interviews conducted by WestEd enabled the TUSD leadership team to reflect on its work and identify the following takeaways about a district reform effort aimed at more strategic decision-making and, ultimately, improved student outcomes:

- **People matter.** It is critical to ensure that the right people are at the table from the start. In this instance, it was critical that all TUSD administrators be brought into the learning process for using the Smarter School Spending tools.
- **Framing is important.** It is important to frame this type of work as being part of existing work, rather than as new work on top of everything else. For TUSD, the leadership was able to frame the learning process around the Smarter School Spending tools as being a high-leverage activity that supported the district's overall approach to student learning and the LCAP.
- **Leadership support is critical.** Without the ongoing support of district leadership, even the best initiatives can falter. TUSD leaders had the support of the superintendent throughout this process and made sure to keep the superintendent up to speed on all developments.
- **Support from an outside expert helps.** New tools and processes take a great deal of time and energy to learn. TUSD stakeholders were able to move this process along more quickly and efficiently due to technical assistance from a consultant than they would have been able to do without outside help.

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