



“We shake hands at the door”

How a Focus on Relationships Is Driving Improvement in Chula Vista

San Diego’s Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) is less than seven miles from the Mexico border. The largest K6 district in California, it serves approximately 30,000 students across 46 schools.¹ More than two thirds of its students are Latino/Latina, 87 percent are nonwhite, over half come from low-income families, and more than a third are English learner (EL) students. Yet district performance ranks among the highest in the county, similar to districts with more affluent student populations.

Consistently strong student performance, ongoing improvement, and innovative practices have earned the district recognition from the California Department of Education and from a range of policy and research organizations. It has been identified as a California Exemplary District,² a *positive outlier*,³ and a *bright spot*.⁴

CVESD’s widespread accolades notwithstanding, less is known

about just *how* the district has achieved such laudable results. This paper describes some of the ways in which the district has been so successful in improving outcomes for students when so many other school districts — despite the best of intentions — struggle to move the needle on student performance.

The research team for the descriptive study underlying this

Continuous Improvement Models

WestEd, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and the California Department of Education are partnering in an effort to identify exemplary districts across California that can serve as models for other California school districts. The purpose is to learn from what the partnership refers to as *Continuous Improvement Models* and to consider ways to spread and scale their effective strategies to other school districts. For the initial phase of this descriptive study, quantitative methods were used to identify districts that are serving a high proportion of students of color and low-income students and that, in particular, have demonstrated consistent improvement in suspension rates for students with disabilities.

During the period of this study phase, from 2014 to 2018, CVESD consistently demonstrated notable results in each analysis of data — both in its low suspension rates for students with disabilities and in its overall performance. As the research team conducted site visits and interviews with district leaders, principals, and teachers in CVESD, it became clear that much of the work the district was doing for all students — especially its focus on social-emotional learning and, particularly, relationship building — was a major contributor to reducing suspension rates for students with disabilities.

profile identified a number of strategies that appear to have contributed to CVESD’s success**:

- » Taking a collaborative approach to improvement, with educators and community stakeholders included in and helping to guide the continuous improvement process;
- » Adopting a “loose-tight” leadership approach that mixes district-driven standardized approaches with school-level flexibility in designing and implementing practices appropriate to local context;
- » Using student outcome data to identify language development as a specific instructional focus for the district and sustaining that focus over the course of the last two years to give new practices time to take root;
- » Creating specific processes and structures intended to engender districtwide coherence, including having a number of its cabinet members each provide support to a cohort of up to six schools, engaging principal leads to actively support improvement efforts, and tying professional learning (PL) to district priorities and context-specific needs; and
- » Developing a system to monitor progress toward district goals for student performance and well-being, as well as a system that includes twice-a-year visits by the

superintendent to each school and each classroom and that, as a complement to regular data reviews, incorporates use of a data protocol for regular classroom observations by the superintendent and others.

Yet, important as each of these strategies may be, what stands out most about CVESD’s improvement efforts is its intentional, deep, and sustained commitment to building positive relationships across the district: teacher to student, student to student, teacher to teacher, and administrator to teacher.

The research team originally identified CVESD as a Continuous Improvement Model based on the district’s work to reduce suspensions for students with disabilities. However, subsequent interviews with CVESD administrators, as well as classroom visits, revealed the district’s emphasis on building relationships as a throughline for its improvement work across indicators and across student groups. This profile of the district’s improvement approach describes how CVESD’s commitment to relationship building was foundational to the success of all its other improvement strategies.

Relationships at the Heart of Improvement Efforts

The difference that strong teacher-student relationships make in CVESD is readily apparent to anyone who has spent much time in schools, whether in California or anywhere else. CVESD classrooms and hallways look and feel distinctly different from those in many other districts. For one thing, in many classrooms across the district, teachers shake hands with each

* These strategies are aligned with the key principles of continuous improvement described in *Enacting Continuous Improvement: Overview of Key Concepts*, available at https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/Continuous_Improvement_infographic.pdf.

Chula Vista’s Strategies

Chula Vista’s strategies align with the key principles of continuous improvement:

- » Being about systems;
- » Focusing on the processes to improve outcomes;
- » Encouraging learning through a disciplined methodology; and
- » Valuing those on the “front line.”

student as they enter the classroom at the start of each day. According to Jennifer Matlock, a grade 2 teacher at Otay Elementary School, “When my kids come to the door, we do handshakes and greetings . . . that’s an expectation for everybody.”

The commitment to relationship building is part of a broader effort to support social-emotional learning (SEL) across district schools. That effort is reflected in the physical environment of every classroom, where a visitor might find diagrams of the human brain and how it controls emotion, displays of a *fixed* versus *growth* mindset, and a posted list of the norms for conflict resolution. To support students in regulating their emotions, many classrooms include a “calm down corner” or “peace center,” a quiet space with pillows, posted tips for emotional regulation, and other resources for stress relief. When students notice themselves becoming upset or scared, they can retreat to this space to reflect and re-center themselves. CVESD Superintendent Francisco Escobedo remarked that these classroom spaces, coupled with teachers and other adults attending to students’ social-emotional needs, can reduce students’ “fight or flight response” in difficult situations. Escobedo noted that it is critical for students to be “able to express their feelings or emotions.”

Informed by child development research, the district recognizes that positive teacher-student relationships help shape students’ experiences in school and can have a lasting impact on students’ emotional well-being and academic success. In fact, research reveals that strong teacher-student relationships are associated with both short- and long-term improvements in students’ academic engagement, attendance, and grades, and in schools’ suspension and dropout rates, even after controlling for student, family, and school demographic characteristics.⁵ As one CVESD site leader noted, “You can’t educate their minds until you’ve reached their hearts.”



Classrooms throughout the district offer a “calm down corner” with resources to help students regulate their emotions. Source: Otay Elementary School

Collaboration for Setting Direction and Generating Buy-in

Broad-based collaboration was considered a starting point for the district’s improvement efforts. CVESD leaders believed that to develop ambitious improvement goals and to identify and carry out the actions necessary to achieve those goals, they would need input and buy-in from district educators at all levels, as well as from other stakeholders. With that in mind, they convened a design team that included teachers, principals, district leaders, union representatives, university professors, researchers, and business leaders. The team’s role was to examine data, identify root causes of any problems the data revealed, brainstorm solutions, and set a clear direction for the PL needed to ensure successful implementation of instructional strategies.

Leadership That Establishes Expectations and Engages Sites Through Context-Specific Innovation

Complementing the district’s collaborative approach to improvement is its loose-tight leadership structure. This approach includes being “tight,” or more directive, in regard to certain key aspects of the district’s improvement efforts (e.g., the districtwide instructional focus), but being “loose” by

allowing more flexibility around what specific practices schools implement to support improvement. As part of this approach, each school develops its own site-specific instructional focus that aligns with the district’s instructional focus but is customized based on the needs of its students and the priorities of its school community.

This leadership approach is part of what the district refers to as *interdependence*, a term it uses to describe the decision-making relationship between the district office and school sites. While many decisions are made collectively (i.e., by the district with input from site leaders and teachers), some are made primarily at the district level and others are made by site leaders. In this sense, the district and schools rely or are dependent on each other for ensuring alignment between district goals and school site practices. According to district leaders, this interdependence enhances districtwide consistency and coherence around goals and improvement approaches while allowing for context-driven innovation at the school and classroom level. Ernesto Villanueva, Executive Director of Technology and Instruction, noted the impact this loose-tight approach has had on creating a shared vision at the district and site level, from district leaders to classroom teachers: “The people closest to the work are able to articulate the vision. This is my fourth district, and that’s not always the case.”

Improvement Efforts Guided by Data on Student Needs

Another key strategy in CVESD has been using data to identify student needs and inform development of specific improvement foci. Although the seeds of improvement were planted and nurtured over many years, the district’s current improvement efforts really began to take root in 2015/16. When examining student performance data that year, district leaders noticed striking achievement gaps, particularly in comparing the performance of their students with disabilities to the performance of other student groups. The gaps revealed in the data sparked a sense of urgency, prompting a districtwide conversation about how to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, as well as for all 30,000 students in the district.

Not limiting their examination to student performance data, district leaders and stakeholders also looked at results from student surveys, such as a survey for students in grades 4–6 that is intended to measure each student’s social-emotional skills and well-being. Superintendent Escobedo recalls that “when we reviewed the [survey] data, the area of highest need was that students felt they were unable to express their feelings or emotions.” The district concluded that students needed greater support from teachers and other staff to effectively and productively express their emotions.

Having identified key performance gaps and a key student need in the social-emotional realm, the next step for district leaders was to consider how best to address these challenges.

A Clear Instructional Focus: Language Development for All Students

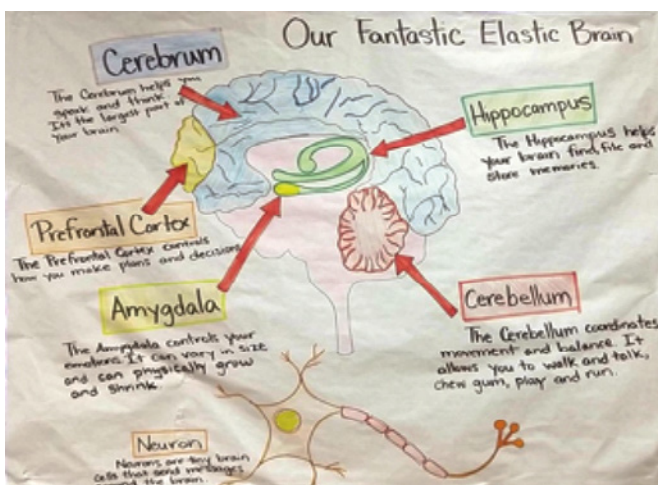
Once district and site leaders, and a broad range of stakeholders, agreed on CVESD’s new instructional focus, the district launched its new Instructional Focus Statement:

“The CVESD community will work collaboratively to ensure that **ALL students**, including English learners, students with disabilities, and designated target groups, show measurable growth, which will lead to reducing the achievement gap in literacy and mathematics. This will occur through implementation of **high-impact language development strategies** aligned to the California State Standards, and driven by the District’s LCAP goals.”

In practice, the district focused both on teaching collaborative conversations and on building trusting teacher-student relationships.

Identifying and Sustaining a Specific Instructional Focus

In its analysis of district data, district leaders identified speech- and language-related disabilities as the most common disability type among CVESD’s students. The team knew that high-impact language development strategies could serve as a powerful support for students with disabilities as well as for the district’s large number of EL students.⁶ But by focusing on language development strategies, the district sought to strengthen the language ability of *all* students — including but not limited to those with disabilities or those identified as ELs — to process and analyze information, collaborate with peers, and improve performance across subject areas.



Starting in kindergarten, students learn about parts of the brain and the role of those parts in controlling emotions and behavior. Source: Otay Elementary School

Having chosen the core instructional focus of language development, the District Professional Learning Content Team then began to discuss high-impact strategies for developing these skills. Teaching *collaborative conversations* — that is, the speaking and listening skills that enable students to participate in purposeful, academic discourse⁷ — is one such strategy the design team recommended for adoption districtwide. As noted by Gloria Ciriza, Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, “It really has been about how we make sure that, in the classroom, there is a deep

level of engagement in . . . conversation that really lifts up all students.” Now, educators districtwide use collaborative conversations as an instructional strategy for giving students greater access to, and helping them engage with, rigorous academic content, as well as for giving students the tools to better express themselves socially and emotionally.

Adopting a Parallel Focus on Students’ Social-Emotional Development

District leaders recognized that engaging, interactive instruction and strong, supportive teacher-student relationships are both key to keeping students focused, motivated, and ready to learn. Therefore, the district complements its instructional focus with a heavy emphasis on SEL.

In some schools within CVESD, such as Otay Elementary School, educators make sure that students — and others in the community — understand that SEL is grounded in neuroscience. Classrooms display a diagram of the brain, with labels explaining which brain segments are responsible for controlling which emotions. Starting in kindergarten, students learn to articulate the connection between parts of the brain and their own feelings and behaviors. In the hallway, colorful posters, some designed by students, explain how the prefrontal cortex, cerebrum, amygdala, and hippocampus play a role in students’ daily lives. These widespread and ongoing references to the underlying science help students, parents, the community, and other stakeholders understand the power of SEL in transforming student performance and well-being.

With the district’s loose-tight leadership approach, some aspects of CVESD’s SEL focus are considered non-negotiable: Every classroom in the district is expected to implement them, but school site staff are given some autonomy in how they do so. For example, the district requires that schools have an SEL curriculum, but each school can choose which curriculum and frameworks to adopt. Similarly, the district requires that all classes designate 15 minutes daily for SEL-specific instruction — in addition to integrating SEL into the academic curriculum — but schools or



Hallway displays at a CVESD elementary school reaffirm students' emotions and offer tips for self-regulation. Source: Otay Elementary School

teachers can decide when and how to best spend that quarter hour.

The focus on SEL has also led the district to take a different approach to student discipline. Rather than relying primarily on traditional methods such as suspensions, educators now also use an alternative, and research-based, form of student discipline known as restorative practices.⁸ Restorative practices aim to turn conflict into teachable moments that can be used to improve a student's behavior instead of simply removing a student from the classroom environment.⁹ Matthew Tessier, Assistant Superintendent of Innovation and Instruction Services, noted the



Hallway displays on restorative practices encourage students to reflect on behavior and repair relationships. Source: Otay Elementary School

obvious appeal of this alternative approach: “We all know students are not going to achieve if they’re suspended or they’re not at school.”

Asked what this attention to SEL and restorative practices has meant for them, CVESD teachers point to numerous examples of how it challenged them to change their ways of thinking, their relationships with other staff and students, and their instructional practices. Teachers and site leaders described improved instructional practices and a culture of trust, reflection, and personal growth that developed from the districtwide focus on SEL.

Importantly, CVESD has sustained its commitment to collaborative conversations and to relationship building over the last two years, giving new practices time to take hold and flourish in classrooms districtwide.

Specific Efforts to Engender Districtwide Coherence

Recognizing the importance of coherence across the district, CVESD has developed several specific structures and processes to help ensure that improvement efforts between the district and its schools are aligned and that implementation and quality among the schools themselves are consistent. For starters, based on their respective locations, district schools were grouped into one of seven cohorts (each with five or six schools). The cohorts serve as the structure for various ways of both aligning and supporting district and school improvement.

Engaging District-Level Cabinet Members to Support School Improvement Efforts

The superintendent has a cabinet of nine district leaders, of which six are individually assigned to work with a cohort of schools and are responsible for overseeing and supporting the site administrators in their cohort. The structure is designed to help ensure that all school leaders understand and implement the district's goals and initiatives. Although cabinet members sometimes meet with site leaders as a cohort, they also regularly meet

with individual school leaders at their school site to help ensure that each one receives the support needed to be effective. The structure also provides an opportunity for site leaders to discuss and offer critical input on districtwide proposals and initiatives.

In addition to providing information to schools and making sure site leaders are tuned into district goals and initiatives, the cabinet members coach and model high-quality instructional leadership. Cabinet members frequently visit the schools in their cohort, meeting with the principal to talk through instructional strategies and concerns that may be relevant schoolwide or just for individual students. Their coaching is built on a strong foundation of trust that has been intentionally developed as part of the districtwide focus on building relationships, not just teacher-student but also among adults in the system. For example, the district’s loose-tight leadership approach has helped engender positive relationships between district- and site-level leaders because, by enabling principals and other site leaders to make key decisions for their own school, the district has demonstrated that it recognizes and values the expertise of these educators.

As they work with their cohort schools, cabinet members apply some of the same SEL practices that principals and teachers are expected to use in their own work. For example, cohort meetings include time for site leaders to check in with each other about how they are doing. Cabinet members facilitate this check-in process in recognition of the fact that, like students, site leaders and teachers can be more successful if attention is paid to their well-being.

Engaging Principal Leads to Support Improvement Efforts

Complementing the support to schools provided by the district-level cabinet members is additional assistance from principal leads who are selected to provide support and facilitation for meetings of each cohort. Principal leads (1) convene and lead meetings for the instructional leadership teams (ILTs) of all the schools in their cohort (for more

about the teams, see the next section); (2) provide instructional leadership by helping principals implement and make connections between the district’s instructional focus, cohort training, and each site’s instructional focus; (3) provide cultural leadership by modeling and facilitating equity-driven leadership that is responsive to the needs of each school community; and (4) support principals with providing management and operational leadership.

The principal lead brings the cohort’s principals together once a month to share what they have been learning in their efforts to improve student outcomes and to hold each other accountable. As part of their role, the principal leads intentionally focus on building relationships among the principals. This structure and related processes also help build reciprocal trust among the principals in each cohort, enabling them to share data, challenges, and insights in an open and mutually supportive manner.

Tying Professional Learning to District Priorities and Context-Specific Needs

Each school has its own ILT consisting of the principal, lead teachers for each grade level, the instructional resource teacher, and, in many cases, a special education teacher. Each school’s ILT members are responsible for attending four or five cohort-wide PL sessions each year. These sessions, collaboratively developed by a team of teachers and school leaders from throughout their school’s cohort, are designed to support the district’s instructional focus and annual learning goals. The sessions are then co-facilitated by the cohort’s principal lead and teachers and leaders within the cohort. This approach gives teachers multiple opportunities to lead the learning from their perspective and experience as practitioners who are closest to the work in classrooms. Each school’s ILT then creates a plan for disseminating the trainings through its relevant grade-level teams.

Across the district, PL is structured into “PL cycles,” each lasting eight to nine weeks. During each cycle, educators participate in a series of ILT trainings that all have the same

specific focus, such as building student self-efficacy in reading or using success criteria to guide improvement efforts, and that are all related to the district’s overarching instructional focus for the given year (e.g., collaborative conversations). District leaders selected this PL structure based on research showing that PL is most effective when it involves more than a single training.¹⁰ PL cycles help sustain the PL focus over time, which affords teachers multiple opportunities to engage with the content and to take what they are learning and begin implementing it in their classroom before moving on to a new PL topic.

A System to Monitor Improvement Efforts

CVESD’s improvement began with examining student data, and the continual collection and examination of data remain a central component of CVESD’s continuous improvement process.

Classroom Observations Using a Data Protocol

Observation and feedback at every level of the system — from district leader to principal, principal to teacher, and teacher to fellow teacher — are a critical part of CVESD culture and are pivotal to effective implementation of the district’s improvement strategies. Every four to five weeks, principals engage in analysis of student data and undertake classroom observations so they can provide specific, targeted feedback to teachers. District leaders participate in a similar process for providing targeted feedback to principals. For example, the superintendent visits each school and each classroom twice a year.

In their classroom observations, CVESD district and school staff use a protocol that focuses their observation on success criteria in three key areas: (1) the physical classroom environment, (2) teacher engagement with the students, and (3) student engagement or behavior. Staff across all levels described the value of these classroom observations. Staff told the research team that the culture of trust in the district is critical to the success of these

“When you have that focus, and you go through those learning cycles, and you have a clear understanding of the purpose, and you begin to open up practice and take risks, and you really can be vulnerable — that’s when you see that powerful change.”

— Erin Mahoney
Principal of Clear View Elementary School

classroom observations and ultimately to instructional improvement because this trust allows educators to be vulnerable and self-reflective, and to adjust their practice as needed.

To provide the time for classroom observation and continued learning for teachers, every teacher has approximately 2.5 to 3 hours of dedicated collaboration time every two weeks. School sites provide the necessary time for classroom teachers to collaborate with each other by bringing in specialty teachers to teach visual arts, music, drama, dance, or other art enrichment courses during this period. CVESD teachers use their collaboration time for improvement-oriented activities such as classroom observations, exchanging feedback with peers who have filmed samples of their own classroom instruction, and analyzing student data. All of these activities require a high degree of trust — as teachers open the doors to their classrooms, as site leaders and teachers have honest discussions about student performance data, and as teachers embrace feedback on how they can improve their instruction.

Using Data to Monitor Improvement

Notably, the district does not closely follow a particular methodology for continuous improvement (such as improvement science). However, CVESD maximizes the effectiveness of its data use by monitoring student data *frequently* so that data are used to inform instruction on an ongoing basis. Equally important, the analysis is not

The screenshot shows a comprehensive student profile. Key sections include:

- Student Personal Information:** Student ID, Name, Birthdate, Gender, Status, School, Curriculum, Grade, Room, Teacher.
- Student Demographics:** Language, Class, RFP Date, 2015-16 Monitored EL, 2015-16 State LTEL or At Risk, IEP Status, SOC, GATE, FESP, Foster, Military.
- Local Measures Test History:** Table with columns for Test Year, School, Grade, Language, Reading Mat, Math Mat, Test Year, Overall PL, Overall SS, Progress, Expected, Difference.
- CELF History:** Table with columns for Test Year, Overall PL, Overall SS, Progress, Expected, Difference.
- CAASPP History:** Table with columns for Test Year, ELA, Reading, Writing, Listening/Speaking, Research/Inquiry, Math, Problem Solving, Conceptual Procedures, Communication, CST/CAAP A for Science.
- Enrollment History:** Table with columns for Entry Year, Summer, School, Entry Grade, Exit Grade, Entry Date, Exit Date.
- Absence Summary:** Table with columns for School Year and Total Absences.

Staff view the LCAP Matrix as a tool to convey the story of each child's learning journey. Source: Chula Vista Elementary School District

focused solely on classroom-level data but also on data for *each student* so that instruction can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual students.

One critical data tool created by the district is the online LCAP Matrix, a CVESD database with a profile for each student, including students' year-over-year data mapped against California accountability measures. For example, the profile identifies any demographic group of which the student is a part (e.g., EL, youth in foster care, special education), as well as the student's annual standardized test scores, total absences each year, and any disciplinary incidents.

In using the LCAP Matrix, district and school staff can look for student-level patterns and factors that may be contributing to each student's growth or underperformance. With these data, staff benchmark student performance at the beginning of the year, then mark progress in the middle of the year, and end of the year; they also collect formative feedback throughout the year. The regular review of data using the LCAP Matrix also serves as an early warning system so district and school site staff can intervene rapidly to support struggling students.

Staff view the LCAP Matrix as a tool to convey the story of each child's learning journey. Through these data profiles, district and staff leaders can study each student's educational history. When

conducting site walks and classroom observations, CVESD principals first examine the LCAP Matrix profiles for individual students, paying particular attention to students who are struggling either with academics or behavior, or sometimes both. Matthew Tessier noted that using the matrix in this way is similar to what happens when “you go into a doctor's appointment and they pull out that proverbial chart” — it gives whoever is using it some context and background for what the examination or, in this case, the observation will show. In the classroom, the principal focuses on specific students, asking them questions about *what* they are learning and *how* they are learning. According to Gloria Ciriza, principals will ask students to “tell me about what you are learning today.” Once the student responds, the principal will then ask, “How will you know you have been successful in learning that?” Says Ciriza, “If [students] aren't sure how to respond or what to say, they will often refer to the success criteria posted somewhere in the classroom and explain it. The greatest thing about this is that kids are *talking* about their learning. They are learning how to use their voices as a tool to articulate their thinking and learning . . . building *language!*”

Afterward, the principal provides teachers with targeted formative feedback, with special attention to the needs of the struggling students the principal had been especially tuned in to. With this feedback, teachers and other education staff can help ensure that each student receives the right supports at the right moment in time. Ciriza says this approach helps “ensure that no child ever sits in a classroom and is invisible to the teacher. We study the profiles and then watch [the students] in the classroom, which, in essence, shines a bright light on them so we can see exactly what their learning experience in the classroom looks like.”

Additionally, the district's LCAP Matrix includes a district- and a school-level view that shows student scores in the aggregate. This larger-scale view assists district and school staff in identifying systemwide trends by California Dashboard indicator and by student group.

The Results: Transforming School and Classroom Environment, Instruction, and Culture

CVESD’s improvement efforts have created an environment in which staff and students report feeling safe, emotionally connected, and engaged.* This combination has led to significant improvements in student behavior, with fewer referrals and fewer suspensions.

Evidence of CVESD’s success is visible in numerous other ways. When speaking with school and district staff, it is clear that adults systemwide have experienced a shift in mindset toward one of continual growth and adoption of a “whole child” approach that recognizes the value of supporting students’ social-emotional well-being. When observing classrooms, it is apparent that this shift in mindset has translated into concrete changes in instruction, the classroom environment and culture, and adult-to-student interactions. In turn, this shift in classroom practice has led to improvements in student well-being, behavior, and academic outcomes.

Physically, classrooms abound with evidence of teachers’ commitment to creating collaborative, student-centered learning environments with a focus on language development. The walls are covered with colorful displays with guidance on how to engage in collaborative conversations: sample language frames for academic discourse, body language for active listening, and charts with grade-appropriate guidance for deconstructing texts.

Across classrooms and grade levels, research team observations of teachers reveal a striking intentionality in their use of language. Teachers seamlessly refer to the language development charts on the walls, weaving these language frames into the conversation and prompting students to use them. Empathy is also featured prominently in teachers’ language choices. For example, in one kindergarten class, the teacher explained to students the

rationale for the various classroom rules. And when a grade 1 student began to lose focus and become restless, the teacher calmed him by saying, “I know you’re excited. I’m excited too.”

Most strikingly of all, students’ own language and behavior mirrored this focus on the use of sophisticated academic language and on emotionally attuned, empathetic connection. Grade 6 students described how “we can infer” various findings based on evidence in their texts. Noticing that a classmate had not yet spoken, one grade 5 student gently prompted her by name, asking “What do you think?” During an activity in which grade 6 students shared the personal qualities they are proud of and what they would like to improve upon, one student, apparently known as the “class clown,” demonstrated remarkable self-awareness as he reflected upon his jokester tendencies: “I’m proud of my sense of humor. I know it’s inappropriate at times, but I make jokes because it makes people laugh, and that makes me happy.”

Finally, classroom lesson plans demonstrated a thoughtful integration of SEL with academic learning. In early grades, students were having group conversations, writing stories, and developing creative projects focused on kindness and empathy. In a grade 3 classroom, the class connected a novel they have recently read to a writing exercise focused on learning from failure.

But what has garnered the most attention for CVESD are the outcomes for students on the California Dashboard indicators. CVESD has been consistently outperforming districts with similar demographics and continues to improve performance for some of the state’s most vulnerable student groups. The research team’s 2018 data analysis of the most recent year of available data showed that, when compared to other school districts with similar demographics, CVESD was one of only a handful of districts whose Dashboard color ratings were consistently green (the second highest rating possible) or higher across all available indicators. CVESD also received a “low” rating (i.e., a positive rating) for overall suspension

* Reports are based on interviews and panel discussions with teachers, site leaders, and district leaders.

rates* and ranked “high” for EL progress. Furthermore, for mathematics achievement, the district’s status was “medium” and improving, and for English language arts achievement, the district’s status was ranked “high.” The research team also created predictive models that calculated CVESD students’ expected performance based on district and student characteristics. Based on these models, CVESD decreased its suspension rate over three times more than predicted (328 percent) when compared to similar school districts.

* Note: A rating of “low” for suspension rates is a positive rating and is desired.

Yet, this good news notwithstanding, as noted earlier, CVESD’s improved academic outcomes are part of a larger story of success in a district where teachers express increased satisfaction in their work, where a culture of trust and support flourishes among district staff and between staff and students, and where students feel more connected and supported at school.

This improvement did not happen overnight; it took years. And it took not only the care and intention of district leaders but also the development of shared ownership across the system for improved outcomes for all students. CVESD truly is a model of improvement and a place from which educators, researchers, and policymakers can continue to learn.

Endnotes

- 1 Chula Vista Elementary School District. 2018/19 Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) and Annual Update. Retrieved from <https://www.sdcoe.net/about-sdcoe/Documents/district-LCAP/2017-20-Chula-Vista.pdf>
- 2 California Department of Education. (2018). *California exemplary districts awardees 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/sr/cs/exemplarydist2018.asp>
- 3 Chula Vista Elementary School District. (2018, April 24). “CVESD named California Exemplary District.” Retrieved from https://www.cvesd.org/news/what_s_new/c_v_e_s_d_named_california_exemplary_district
- 4 Ciriza, G. (2018). A district’s systematic approach to improvement. *Leadership*, 48(2), 12-15; Taketa, K. (2018). Chula Vista Elementary getting state, national recognition for equity work, high performance. *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/sd-me-chula-vista-elementary-20181121-story.html>
- 5 Quin, D. (2017). Longitudinal and contextual associations between teacher-student relationships and student engagement: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 345-387. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1133352>
- 6 Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wvc/publications_reviews.aspx
- 7 Kelly, L. B., Ogden, M. K., & Moses, L. (2019). Collaborative conversations: Speaking and listening in the primary grades. *Young Children*, 74(1), 30-36. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- 8 Augustine, C. H., Engberg, J., Grimm, G. E., Lee, E., Wang, E. L., Christianson, K., & Joseph, A. A. (2018). “Restorative practices help reduce student suspensions.” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10051.html; Bonell, C., Allen, E., Warren, E., McGowan, J., Bevilacqua, L., Jamal, F., Legood, R., Wiggins, M., Opondo, C., Mathiot, A., Sturgess, J., Fletcher, A., Sadique, Z., Elbourne, D., Christie, D., Bond, L., Scott, S., & Viner, R. M. (2018). Effects of the Learning Together intervention on bullying and aggression in English secondary schools (INCLUSIVE): A cluster randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet*, 392(10163): 2452-2464. Retrieved from <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2818%2931782-3>; Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerwitz, J. (2016). The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 325-353. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10474412.2014.929950>; Anyon, Y., Gregory, A., Stone, S., Farrar, J., Jenson, J. M., McQueen, J., Downing, B., Greer, E., & Simmons, J. (2016). Restorative interventions and school discipline sanctions in a large urban school district. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(6), 1663-1697. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3102/OO02831216675719>
- 9 Restorative Practices Working Group. (2014). *Restorative practices: Fostering healthy relationships & promoting positive discipline in schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf>
- 10 Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession*. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council. Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/nsdcstudytechnicalreport2009.pdf>

This report was authored by Kelsey Krausen, Ruthie Caparas, and Heather Mattson, with funding from the Stuart Foundation.

© 2019 WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Krausen, K., Caparas, R., & Mattson, H. (2019) *“We shake hands at the door”:* *How a focus on relationships is driving improvement in Chula Vista*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.



WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont and Georgia, to Illinois, Arizona and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. For more information about WestEd, visit <http://www.WestEd.org>; call 415.565.3000 or, toll-free, (877) 4-WestEd; or write: WestEd / 730 Harrison Street / San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.

We also invite you to go to WestEd.org/subscribe to sign up for our semi-monthly e-newsletter, the WestEd E-Bulletin, to receive the latest research, free resources, and solutions from WestEd.