

# FRESNO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

## DISTRICT LEVERAGES LCFF TO BRING IN MORE FUNDING, PILOT INNOVATIVE INVESTMENTS

More so than for many other districts, Fresno Unified's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a product of its location, size, and diversity. The largest inland city in California, Fresno is home to just over half a million people in the heart of California's fertile Central Valley. The seasonal agricultural production that supplies much of the country's fresh produce also contributes to a high concentration of migrant students and high rates of unemployment. Yet, Fresno is in the odd position of having an abundance of job openings that it can't fill because the demand for skilled workers outstrips the supply.<sup>1</sup>

Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) is the fourth-largest school district in the state. More than 73,000 students attend 102 schools and speak over 55 languages. A quarter of the students are English learners; they are mostly Spanish speaking, but there's also a sizeable Hmong community. Two-thirds of the students are

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Sources that informed this case study include: district board meeting documents; district webpages; news



Photo courtesy Fresno Unified School District.

Latino, 12 percent are white, 11 percent are Asian, and 9 percent are African American. The vast majority of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Many students struggle academically. Only 34 percent of third-graders and 44 percent of ninth-graders scored in the proficient range on the English language arts exam in 2013 compared to the state average of 45 percent and 62 percent, respectively.

The district acted early to ensure the success of the new Local Control Funding Formula. With most of FUSD's students falling into at least one of the high-need categories LCFF was created to help, the district embarked upon a major effort in the early fall to count its low-income, English learner, and foster youth students. To ensure the state-required family income verification paperwork was turned in, the district conducted extensive media outreach and offered incentives like free fair tickets. "We emphasized that this is your chance to help your school," shared Tammy Townsend, Executive Officer of State and Federal Programs for the district.<sup>2</sup>

## COMPLIANCE-ORIENTED APPROACH SHIFTS TO EXPANDED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

With the modest increase in dollars provided by LCFF and Proposition 30, approved by voters in 2012, the

articles; LCAP and related documents; and interviews with Maria Ceballos (*Reading and Beyond*), Cyndee Loryang (*Fresno Center for New Americans*), and Tammy Townsend (*Fresno Unified School District*).

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Photo courtesy Fresno Unified School District.

district made new investments in early childhood education and middle school redesign in the 2013–14 school year. The district built upon these early efforts in the 2014–15 LCAP to ensure the community was aware of how the first year’s LCFF funds were spent and how these investments would be expanded going forward.

In the early stages of the LCAP development process, the district initially engaged stakeholders by inviting them to district committee meetings about LCFF, but stakeholders were disappointed by the level of parent involvement.

Maria Ceballos, Community Connection Coordinator at Reading and Beyond, felt the district didn’t go far enough beyond the basic requirements in its initial stakeholder outreach. “Parents didn’t understand what LCFF was or how important their role was,” she said.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than create a new parent advisory committee to fulfill LCFF requirements, the district utilized its pre-existing District Advisory Committee (DAC) and District English Learner Advisory Committee (DELAC). While this was a common practice among districts, some Fresno community members grumbled that FUSD did not reach out to the community to invite new members,

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nor did it clearly explain the role of these committees in developing and reviewing the LCAP.

This led to confusion among parents, explained Ceballos. In addition, some groups were skeptical about how the 6,000 stakeholder comments gathered by the district ultimately informed the LCAP. While community members were happy to be asked how the district could help improve student outcomes, some felt that the district knew where it planned to spend the money before receiving all the feedback.

Cyndee Loryang, Project Coordinator at the Fresno Center for New Americans, also expressed some concerns about the district’s outreach strategy. “If you send out 5,000 flyers about a meeting but only two people come, something’s not working,” she said.<sup>4</sup>

Fresno Unified eventually shifted to a more collaborative planning mode that solicited a higher volume of input after similar community concerns were aired. Townsend said the district started collaborating with community-based organizations, including Californians for Justice, Parent Institute for Quality Education, and Reading and Beyond (which itself organized other community groups around LCFF and the LCAP).

Some of these organizations shared their own recommendations with FUSD and also served as intermediaries between parents and the district, gathering input and relaying those ideas to the district. Townsend felt that working with these groups created accountability on both ends, with each partner offering ideas but also figuring out how to implement them. “Tell us what to do and then help us do it,” became something of a mantra for the district.

When the Fresno Center for New Americans, a Southeast Asian parent group, asked the district to collect verbal feedback from Hmong families in the community (many of whom are illiterate), the district visited the center to solicit input from parents and began providing Hmong translation at board meetings.

The district held at least 19 meetings, workshops, and forums attended by about 1,500 people between January and March 2014, in addition to less formal presentations and follow-up meetings.

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it, other students wanted a voice as well. So FUSD, partnered with Californians for Justice, held an event for all interested students. The youths made suggestions that would never have occurred to adults.

One encounter that stands out for Townsend is when she talked to a student at a high school at which 85 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. “He said to me, ‘You know what I really feel the district should invest in? Please let my parents come to our football games and don’t charge them, because if you charge them, they won’t come.’”

## REFLECTIONS ON FIRST YEAR FUEL IDEAS FOR FUTURE IMPROVEMENT

LCFF has prompted some changes in the way the district operates. Developing the LCAP encouraged deeper collaboration between academic and fiscal departments, and it has promoted greater accountability. Townsend’s office will be monitoring the quarterly goals in the LCAP to see how the district is measuring up.

Still, the district acknowledges there is room for improvement. “Not everything has gone smashingly,” said Townsend.

Looking forward, Ms. Loryang feels the district needs to expand its internal capacity for meeting with stakeholders and responding to their questions. “We need more than just Tammy at the table,” she said. “She can’t answer everyone’s questions around programming, for example. Maybe the Curriculum and Instruction department or the superintendent need to be there to help support her.”

The district is collaborating on ideas with community members, starting with holding outreach workshops in the fall to allow more time for reactions to the LCAP in the spring. And Townsend has already begun holding lunchtime pizza events at each high school to discuss the 2015–16 LCAP.

## FIRST-YEAR SPENDING PLAN COMPREHENSIVE; PROBLEMATIC EXPENDITURES REMAIN

Of course, the process is just one piece of the LCAP; the actions and activities described in the plan will determine whether student outcomes improve.

District officials recognized the need to be flexible during the LCAP process. “It’s important to know that we had five drafts [of the LCAP],” said Townsend, and “the district made quite a few changes” before the school board approved the final document on June 4, 2014.

With each new version, the district tried to incorporate stakeholder feedback. After the first plan was posted, Townsend said foster youth organizations told the district the LCAP didn’t do enough for those students. “We sat down with them and asked, ‘What should we do?’”

Programs and services for foster youth tripled between the first and last drafts. The final LCAP adds more social workers, creates support groups and a foster youth round table to review the new initiatives and shape future actions, provides more academic support, and ensures that counselors receive professional development to be “aware of the unique challenges of foster youth.”

Fresno Unified’s LCAP also includes some innovative investments. An initiative at 10 elementary schools will lengthen the school day by 30 minutes, add 10 professional development days, and hire an additional staff member at each site.<sup>6</sup> School sites will each receive a share of \$9.3 million in school-site allocations, with which they can provide services from a “menu of best practices” — supplemental materials, Response to Intervention, and counseling — developed by district leaders. Though it’s not the first time schools are receiving site-level funds, it is the first time guidelines have been established for the use of those funds. The LCAP also provides additional kindergarten aides and expansion of the district’s secondary community day school.



Photo courtesy Fresno Unified School District.



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At the same time, parts of the LCAP lack transparency, and others raise concerns for advocates. The budget doesn't disaggregate base funding from supplemental and concentration grants, making it impossible to know which funds are paying for which programs. Also, the district lumps much of the money together instead of showing line-item expenses. For example, the LCAP contains \$8 million in services to support English learners through professional development on the new English Language Development standards, implementing the district's English learner master plan, and providing extended learning opportunities. But it doesn't specify how much of the \$8 million will be spent for each of those initiatives — a change the district plans to make in next year's required annual update to the LCAP.

Some advocates are especially concerned about the millions in supplemental and concentration dollars being spent on services that do not principally support low-income, English learner, and foster youth students. For example, the district proposes to use \$2.6 million in supplemental funds for custodians and ground maintenance positions, \$3.2 million for special education services and resources, and \$1 million for the vaguely described effort to "continue to work to ensure all students have the best learning conditions and post-secondary outcomes possible."

While some advocates are dissatisfied with these ambiguities and spending decisions, the district is poised to improve its plan in the coming years.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Fletcher, "Why Does Fresno Have Thousands of Job Openings – and High Unemployment?" *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/01/AR2011020106092.html?sid=ST2011020106132>.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Tammy Townsend, Executive Officer of State and Federal Programs, Fresno Unified School District, July 22 and Aug. 12, 2014. Other comments from this interviewee are from the same date.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Maria Ceballos, Community Connection Coordinator, *Reading and Beyond*, March 27, 2014. Other comments from this interviewee are from the same date.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Cyndee Loryang, Project Coordinator, Fresno Center for New Americans, Feb. 11, 2015. Other comments from this interviewee are from the same date.

<sup>5</sup> Originally, the district had proposed this model in 20 schools as an expansion of a successful school improvement effort piloted in three schools, but due to union pressures, it was reduced to 10 schools for the 2014–15 year. A complicating factor in spending decisions overall has been the yearlong struggle between the district and the local teacher's union over salary, benefits, and working hours. After nearly a year of contract talks and meetings with a state mediator, both sides finally agreed to a deal over compensation and responsibilities in early June that includes a 2.7 percent raise for 2013–14 plus a 3.5 percent raise effective July 1, 2014, as well as increased district contributions to employee health plans.



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