

STOCKTON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

HIGH-NEED URBAN DISTRICT FOCUSES ON RESTORING ACADEMIC PROGRAMS WHILE WEATHERING STAKEHOLDER PRESSURE

The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) process could have been smoother for Stockton Unified School District (SUSD). There was the superintendent's unexpected retirement midway through a three-year contract, an impasse with the local teacher's union on salary negotiations forcing revisions to the document five months after it was approved, and criticism by some civil rights groups that the district wasn't doing enough to solicit input from diverse members of the community.

Stockton is a mid-size community of 300,000 in California's northern San Joaquin Valley, located near the Silicon Valley. After the housing bubble burst in 2007, there were high rates of housing foreclosures, unemployment, and crime. In 2012, Stockton became the largest city in the U.S. to declare bankruptcy.



Photo courtesy of Stockton Unified School District.

Stockton is a mid-size community of 300,000 in California's northern San Joaquin Valley. With abundant and inexpensive land, and its proximity to Silicon Valley, it became a prime expansion site for high-tech manufacturers in the 1990s. Salaries, pensions and home prices exploded and then crashed when the housing bubble burst in 2007, leading to staggeringly high rates of housing foreclosures, unemployment, and crime. In 2012, Stockton became the largest city in the U.S. to declare bankruptcy.

As the community struggles to recover from these hard economic times, the students of SUSD continue to face many barriers to their academic success. Ninety percent of SUSD's 40,000 students are low-income, learning English, or living in foster care. The majority of students are struggling academically: Only 12 percent of third-graders are at grade level, according to the 2013 state English language arts exam; 45 percent of ninth-graders are proficient in English language arts; and nearly 17 percent of SUSD's high school students do not graduate within four years.

These are exactly the types of challenges the new Local Control Funding Formula was designed to address. The district's high-need student population generates considerable revenue under LCFF, creating expansive opportunities to improve the academic trajectories of its students.

BY LENI WOLF

With editorial support provided by Kathy Baron and research support provided by Julia Thomas. Leni Wolf is a Data and Policy Analyst at The Education Trust—West.

Sources that informed this case study include: district board meeting documents; district webpages; news articles; LCAP and related documents; and interviews

with Tom Amato (*People and Congregations Together*), Vanessa Elledge (parent), Alejandra Gutierrez and Sammy Nuñez (*Fathers and Families of San Joaquin*), Vicki Cody and Cynthia Chagolla (*California Rural Legal Assistance*), Diane Barth, Michele Huntoon, Steve Lowder, and Julie Penn (*Fresno Unified School District*).

This case study was made possible by generous support from The California Endowment and the Walton Family Foundation.



Photo courtesy of Stockton Unified School District.

FUNDING SHIFT LEADS TO CONFUSION

Stockton Unified was slow to transition to a new way of budgeting and planning when LCFF became law in summer 2013. An article published in the Stockton Record in early June 2013 captured the confusion that many district officials, including those in Stockton, felt at the time about LCFF.

When asked about the possible implications of the new law, Wayne Martin, Executive Director of Business Services for SUSD, responded “What we’ve learned is that we’re still confused.”¹

District officials continued to express frustration about their rapidly shifting budget model. “The dollars actually won’t come until the end of the (fiscal) year. It’s just not feasible for some state agencies to turn on a dime and change their model that they’ve had in place for more than 30 years,” said Michele Huntoon, Chief Business Officer, a few months later.²

The district held an informational meeting on LCFF in September 2013, after which there was a lull in public

Impressions of the engagement process were mixed. While some stakeholders believe the district tried to meaningfully engage parents, others said the public comments process was wrought with problems.

LCFF-related activity until December. Over the holiday break, then-Superintendent Steve Lowder sent a letter to parents outlining the basics of LCFF and providing an overview of SUSD’s plans for engaging the community in the coming months.

DESPITE NUMEROUS COMMUNITY MEETINGS, TENSIONS RISE BETWEEN THE DISTRICT AND STAKEHOLDERS

To involve its stakeholders in LCFF planning, the district held over 20 parent meetings during the early winter months. Stockton Unified also reached out to students, holding five meetings that brought out about 500 high school students. Stakeholders who attended the meetings were invited to respond to a survey that asked them to rank the state’s eight priority areas and prioritize district programs.

Tom Amato, Director of People and Congregations Together, said he believes the district tried to meaningfully engage parents and should build on that effort going forward. “The district should make sure additional parents are engaged in the process and partner with community groups to do further outreach.”³

Other community-based organizations said the district’s outreach efforts were lacking and that the public comment process was wrought with problems. The Stockton Education Equity Coalition (SEEC)⁴ said the district conducted insufficient outreach to diverse community groups, didn’t adequately inform the public about district committee meetings, and did not translate all meeting materials and LCAP documents.

“It’s one thing to have these mandatory meetings and hearings, but they don’t do any good if they’re not pushing the community to attend those meetings and really get involved,” said Alejandra Gutierrez, Program Manager with Fathers and Families of San Joaquin.⁵

A director working on behalf of another community group agrees that there could have been more of an effort to creatively reach out to parents beyond the traditional methods of calling, emailing, and sending home flyers.⁶

Under LCFF, parent advisory committees must provide feedback on the LCAP. To satisfy this requirement, the district utilized its existing District Advisory Committee and District English Learner Advisory Committee. But SEEC members claim SUSD’s decision to use these

District leaders say a focus on academic supports, including those that were lost when the recession hit, must be central to the district's improvement efforts, and they say parents agree.

committees to review the LCAP was not made clear to the public and that many parents did not know when or where DAC and DELAC meetings were being held. And final stages of community input for the LCAP occurred over a short period of time. The committees had only one week to comment on the draft.

District representatives countered that they met the letter and spirit of the law. "The process was very good, especially given limited guidance," said Lowder.⁷

District officials also noted that they received no negative feedback from parents through the two committees and said they worked with other community organizations that were optimistic about the district's process.

DESPITE LCAP'S FOCUS ON ACADEMIC SUPPORTS, FUNDING AND ACTIONS ARE NOT ALWAYS CLEAR

Stockton Unified's first LCAP is based on the district's strategic plan developed four years ago, *Blueprint for Student Achievement*, and its three primary goals: 1) reading proficiency by the end of third grade, 2) algebra mastery by the end of eighth grade, and 3) college and career readiness by high school graduation. District leaders say that a focus on academic supports, including those that were lost when the recession hit, must be central to the district's improvement efforts in the coming years, and they say parents agree.

"Most of what the community requested was included in the LCAP," said Vanessa Elledge, a parent and DELAC member.⁸ She shared that, at the LCAP public hearing, a number of parents clapped in support when they heard about programs and services for the 2014–15 year.

The LCAP shows that Stockton Unified's academic supports will include teacher professional development focused on the Common Core State Standards, a "rigorous curriculum design" process, the addition of college and career counselors, and extended learning opportunities.

School sites received a total of \$9.3 million, with each school's exact amount determined by how many high-need students it serves. Schools will use these funds to select from a broad yet vaguely defined menu of options that includes a "safe learning environment," "increased engagement via improved attendance," restoration of academic support staff, and an array of English learner services.

Understanding what some of these supports are is challenging. In its LCAP, SUSD often lists vague actions and services. For example, the district proposes to "provide increased access to English language arts curriculum, evaluation and intervention through enhanced supplemental academic and counseling services." But the district does not explain how academic services will be "enhanced" or what it means to increase access to ELA curriculum—which is arguably a core service that all students should already have. This ambiguity makes it difficult to decipher not only what programs and services students will receive but also how those services will be delivered.

The district's LCAP is also fuzzy regarding expenditures. For some actions, the district lists the funding source and cost as "\$N/A." LCFF dollars are often lumped with other funding sources, such as Title I and Special Education funds, making it impossible to know how much money from LCFF is going toward each action and service. Additionally, the LCAP doesn't specify whether funding is coming from the base LCFF funds or from supplemental or concentration grants.

In November 2014, the district revised its LCAP and budget, which were initially approved in June 2014, after the district and Stockton Teachers Association failed to reach an agreement on \$3 million originally set aside for teacher collaboration.⁹

The revised LCAP puts that money toward after-school tutoring and enrichment programs, professional development for substitutes, additional support for English learners, music, physical education, hiring more



Photo courtesy of Stockton Unified School District.



Photo courtesy of Stockton Unified School District.



Photo courtesy of Stockton Unified School District.

social workers, nurses, computer technicians and custodians, and buying new equipment and cars for the district police.¹⁰

But SEEC raised concerns about the lack of community input accompanying these decisions. “Revisions were made to the LCAP after it was approved by the board back in May, but the district didn’t comply with public notice and input requirements,” said Cynthia Chagolla, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance. Because the LCFF statute requires that any changes made to the LCAP follow the original LCAP adoption process, SEEC has called into question the validity of the revised LCAP.

Interim Superintendent Julie Penn said the district has already begun planning for the next LCAP. She expects the process will be similar to the process for the first year, but with fewer meetings and better communication about those meetings. The district will continue to post information on its website and conduct surveys—“so doing the same thing but keeping our community stakeholders informed,” said Penn. “We just want to make sure that everyone is heard.”

Whether or not all community stakeholders will feel the district has accomplished this goal in the coming year remains to be seen.

NOTES

¹ Roger Phillips. “School Districts in Wait-and-See Mode,” *Recordnet.org*, June 13, 2013, http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130613/A_NEWS/306130324/-1/A_SPECIAL45.

² Roger Phillips. “More Power, More Responsibility,” *Recordnet.org*, Sept. 7, 2013, http://www.recordnet.com/article/20130907/A_NEWS/309070315?template=printart.

³ Interview with Tom Amato, director, *Parents and Congregations Together*, December 5, 2014.

⁴ Member organizations of SEEC are: ACLU of Northern California, California Rural Legal Assistance, Coalition of Mexican American Organizations, Fathers and Families of San Joaquin, and San Joaquin Boys and Men of Color Alliance.

⁵ Interview with Sammy Nuñez, Executive Director and Alejandra Gutierrez, Program Manager of Fathers and Families of San Joaquin; Vicki Cody, Former Directing Attorney and Cynthia Chagolla, Staff Attorney at California Rural Legal Assistance, April 4, 2014. Other SEEC perspectives presented in this case

study are from this interview as well. Also see June 9, 2014 letter from Coalition to the district, https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/June_9_2014_Letter_to_Stockton_Unified.pdf.

⁶ Interview with anonymous program director of community-based organization, Dec. 11, 2014.

⁷ Interview with Dianne Barth, Communications Director; Michele Huntoon, Chief Business Official; Steve Lowder, former Superintendent; and Julie Penn, Interim Superintendent of Stockton Unified School District, Aug. 25, 2014. Other district perspectives presented in this case study are also from this interview.

⁸ Interview with Vanessa Elledge, DELAC parent, Dec. 5, 2014.

⁹ Elizabeth Roberts, “Trustees Approve Spending Plan,” *Recordnet.org*, Nov. 19, 2014, <http://www.recordnet.com/article/20141119/News/141119513>.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Roberts, “SUSD Reveals Proposals for Spending,” *Recordnet.org*, Nov. 13, 2014, <http://www.recordnet.com/article/20141113/NEWS/141119804>.



The Education Trust–West

510.465.6444 | 1814 Franklin Street, Suite 220 | Oakland, California 94612

www.edtrustwest.org