

WEST CONTRA COSTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

CONTENTIOUS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LEADS TO A MORE OPEN AND CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE DISTRICT AND ITS STAKEHOLDERS

Life hasn't been easy for the West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD). After exiting a 21-year state receivership that began with a bankruptcy in 1991, the district is again under financial scrutiny — this time from federal authorities over alleged lax oversight of a \$1.6 billion construction bond program. Although there are pockets of affluence in the small cities and communities WCCUSD serves, more than 70 percent of students come from low-income families, the highest rate in five years. The economic conditions are a factor in the district's teacher salaries, which average about \$15,000 below the state average.¹

As is the case with many poor neighborhoods, environmental pollution is a serious problem. Flare-ups at local oil refineries are not uncommon, and a huge fire at the Chevron refinery two years ago sent hundreds of residents to the hospital with breathing difficulties and

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Photo courtesy of the Healthy Richmond.

eye irritation. A quarter of West Contra Costa County's children suffer from asthma, one of the top three reasons students miss school.² To mitigate some of the harm it has caused, Chevron has become a community partner. For example, the company has invested millions in the district in recent years, including \$50,000 for the robotics program at Richmond High and nearly \$1.6 million for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) initiatives. It also provided funding for the district to redo its strategic plan, which created the foundation for the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP).

In the midst of these challenges, many students struggle academically. Just 36 percent of third-graders and 45 percent of ninth-graders are proficient in English language arts, and 76 percent of high school students graduate.

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) gives the district a chance to focus on student needs. Because English learners, foster youth, and low-income children account for 75 percent of WCCUSD's students, the district received \$23.2 million in supplemental and concentration funds in 2014–15 on top of the \$189 million in base grant dollars.

with Yuritzzy Gomez (Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community) and Katherine Rife and Roxanne Carrillo Garza (Bay Area Local Initiatives Support Corporation).

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A BUMPY START TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Shortly after California enacted LCFF, West Contra Costa's Community Budget Advisory Committee (CBAC) began discussing the implications of the new law, including its effect on district revenues and spending requirements. The CBAC recognized that even with the additional funding and freedom to make local spending decisions, there still wouldn't be an adequate level of per-pupil funding to meet the needs of the district's students. Unfortunately, the committee didn't make that known to parents, students, and community organizations.

The rollout of the LCAP community engagement process started with a misstep. WCCUSD began holding community meetings in November 2013. At these meetings, district officials asked attendees for their suggestions on the services and programs students needed. The district received a laundry list of suggestions, but because officials didn't explain that even with LCFF, funding would not dramatically increase from previous years, they kindled tensions that would escalate as the year progressed.

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Later, WCCUSD held six large town hall-style community meetings at which Superintendent Bruce Harter made presentations. However, no meeting took place in the district's most impoverished neighborhood, known as the Iron Triangle. Criticized by some local community groups for this decision, WCCUSD made up for this early oversight by opening parent advisory committee (PAC) and district English learner advisory committee (DELAC) meetings to the public.

As required by LCFF, the district had to have the PAC and DELAC review and provide feedback on a draft of its LCAP. The district asked a number of community organizations to nominate one member from each of their groups to sit on the PAC.³ In addition to these members, the PAC included parent leaders nominated by principals, high school students chosen from the district's youth commission, union representatives, and district employee association members.

Community groups were upset about other district interactions as well. Several community groups formed the LCFF Strategy Team to collectively engage in LCFF-related issues in WCCUSD. This strategy team included Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), Building Blocks for Kids Richmond Collaborative, Youth Together, RYSE Youth Center, Youth Empowerment Strategies, and the Latina Center. LCFF Strategy Team representatives asked Superintendent Harter if they could train PAC and DELAC members on the basics of LCFF and the LCAP process. Community organizations in other districts had done this with successful results. In West Contra Costa Unified, they were harshly rebuffed, according to CCISCO organizer Yuritzzy Gomez. She said Harter questioned their competence, asking "What makes you think you're qualified to train our parents?"

He eventually gave the strategy team a reluctant go-ahead, but said the district would not sponsor the sessions, telling them, "If you want to use our facilities, you have to pay for the janitorial services and sound system."

The strategy team held two trainings that received positive feedback from parents, who Gomez said told her they "felt more confident to speak up in the [PAC] meetings"—and to ask tough questions.⁴ One of those questions was why the district failed to provide Spanish translation at meetings and why it did not translate the LCAP drafts, which are both required by law. They also

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argued that early drafts lacked the details necessary to give a clear picture of the district's plans.

To West Contra Costa Unified's credit, it responded by translating future LCAP drafts and sharing more data and budgetary information with the PAC. As Superintendent Harter explained, "We are trying to unpack this information a little bit more so people get a picture of what's going on."⁵

This extra information included revenue projections of supplemental and concentration funds for the next three years, a breakdown of 2014–15 supplemental and concentration spending, and more detailed explanations of LCAP expenditures.

Additionally, the district's LCAP website contains years of student data broken down by ethnic group on many of the metrics related to the LCFF state priorities. The district also published a table showing the percentage of foster youth, English learners, and low-income students at each school and the services each school was set to receive.

By the end of the community engagement process, community advocates felt that WCCUSD leaders seemed humbled by the experience and ready to build stronger ties to the community.

"They said they'd learned a lot from the community's input, and they asked us to be patient with them as the relationship develops," said CCISCO's Gomez. The district strengthened its commitment by hiring a full-time community liaison to coordinate community engagement.

THE FIRST LCAP IS A MIXED BAG

In preparing and writing the LCAP, WCCUSD borrowed heavily from the strategic plan approved by the school board a few months before the LCAP community engagement process began.

While this helped the district shape the LCAP, community members found the plan to be too vague to understand. West Contra Costa parent Giorgio Consentino told EdSource, "Parents want more specifics regarding where exactly the money is going. General spending categories, such as 'extracurricular activities,' are not specific enough."⁶

For example, for the goal of improving student achievement for all students, the LCAP's action plan says it will "continue to provide, and expand and improve college and career ready programs and services," through "college counseling and support for college going culture and linked learning implementation." From that description, it is unclear what steps the district will actually take to expand and improve those services.

On the other hand, community advocates are pleased that they can trace how supplemental and concentration funds are being spent by the district. Each LCFF expenditure included in the plan indicates whether it comes out of base funding or supplemental and concentration grants.

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The district also plans to use \$2.7 million in supplemental and concentration funds for discretionary spending at the school site level. These funds will be distributed to schools based on the percentage of students who are low income, learning English, or in foster care. The district plans to increase this amount to \$3 million in 2015–16, and \$3.4 million in 2016–17.

The largest single investment in the district's LCAP is nearly \$7 million to "provide for basic student safety and emotional support." This includes hiring



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psychologists, school resource officers, and campus safety officers, and implementing the Safe Supportive Schools Program, which is aimed at improving school climate. However, the LCAP doesn't specify how much of the \$7 million will be devoted to each of those investments.

Equally unclear is why WCCUSD lumped these particular expenditures together. This heavy spending on campus security has drawn considerable criticism from advocacy groups in the area.

"What we know to be the case as an empirical fact is that increased police on campus leads to an increase

in citations and arrests of students, and those citations and arrests disproportionately affect high-needs student groups," said Dave Sapp of the American Civil Liberties Union–Southern California.⁷

Although the first year of LCFF for West Contra Costa Unified has been contentious, with both community members and the district committed to serving the needs of students, these contentions are beginning to evolve into compromise. The LCAP process in West Contra Costa Unified provides a valuable lesson in community engagement both for WCCUSD and for other districts and community groups as the LCAP process moves forward.

NOTES

¹ School Accountability Report Card, Richmond High School, West Contra Costa Unified School District. http://www.wccusd.net/cms/lib/03/CA01001466/Centricity/domain/96/sarc/SARC%202012-2013/English/2012_School_Accountability_Report_Card_9-12_Richmond_High_School_20130131.pdf.

² The Northern California Breathmobile Program. <http://www.ncabreathmobile.com>.

³ Community groups invited to nominate a member to sit on the PAC were: Alternative Education, Bayside Council of PTAs, Building Blocks for Kids, Citizens Budget Advisory Committee, Concilio Latino, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization), Multilingual District Advisory Committee, NAACP, North Richmond Network, Public Employees Local 1, School Supervisors Association, Special Education CAC, Strategic Planning Steering Committee, United Teachers of Richmond, and a student from each high school.

⁴ Interview with Yuritz Gomez, Community Organizer, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, October 20, 2014. Other comments from this interviewee are from the same date.

⁵ Alex Gronke, "West Contra Costa school officials attempt to clarify draft accountability plan for parents," EdSource, May 1, 2014, http://edsources.org/2014/west-contra-costa-school-officials-attempt-to-clarify-draft-accountability-plan-for-parents/63554#.VHJ_xfnF8Sk.

⁶ Alex Gronke, "Parent committee questions West Contra Costa school officials about draft accountability plan," EdSource, April 23, 2014, <http://edsources.org/2014/parent-committee-questions-west-contra-costa-school-officials-about-draft-accountability-plan/63539#.VH4rOjHF-k4>.

⁷ Alex Gronke, "Citing Safety, Districts Use State Funds for High Needs Students to Pay for Campus Cops," EdSource, May 22, 2014. <http://edsources.org/2014/citing-safety-districts-use-state-funds-for-high-needs-students-to-pay-for-campus-cops/62251#.VH4qUzHF-k4>.



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