



LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

**DECENTRALIZATION AND SYSTEMWIDE  
REFORM:**

**A CASE STUDY OF THE CHULA VISTA ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

A Project of the Learning First Alliance

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Authors

Wendy Togneri  
Lisa F. Lazarus

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## Prologue

The Chula Vista Elementary School District case study is one of five case studies that stem from a two-year study of improving high poverty districts conducted by the Learning First Alliance. The five case studies culminated in an analytical report entitled *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. The report looks at how districtwide strategies to improve instruction have helped the five study districts raise student achievement across races and ethnicities.

More specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided these reform efforts?
- In what ways did districts change their approaches to professional development?
- How did interactions among the stakeholders facilitate or hinder instructional reform?
- How was leadership distributed across stakeholders to facilitate improvement?

To explore the questions, we studied five school districts: the Aldine Independent School District (Texas); the Chula Vista Elementary School District (California); the Kent County Public Schools (Maryland); the Minneapolis Public Schools (Minnesota); and the Providence Public Schools (Rhode Island). We selected the districts based on their ability to exhibit at least three years of improvement in student achievement in mathematics and/or reading across multiple grades and across all races and ethnicities. We also sought districts that represented a cross section of characteristics, including size, region, urbanicity, and union affiliation.

While this case study is largely a story of improvement, a few caveats are in order. First, although the district demonstrated improvements, all students had not achieved high levels of proficiency; instead, the district was on an upward trajectory toward improving student achievement. Second, this study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction. The district employed additional strategies that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study. Finally, this case study represents a snapshot of the district in 2001–2002 and not a longitudinal study of district progress.

We do not presume that Chula Vista or any of the districts in this study has all the answers. Stakeholders we interviewed were candid about the challenges they faced. Nonetheless, we believe this case study and the report of which it is a part provide valuable lessons for districts interested in improving teaching and learning across entire systems.

The individual case studies of the five districts we studied, as well as the analytical report (*Beyond Islands of Excellence*) and a Leadership Brief summarizing its findings, can be downloaded or ordered at <http://www.learningfirst.org/bie/bie.html>.

## Introduction

Located near the United States–Mexican border, the city of Chula Vista lies just south of San Diego and is home to over 150,000 residents. Serving children in grades K–6, the Chula Vista Elementary School District is the largest elementary school district in the state of California. Of the nearly 25,000 students in the district, 62 percent are Latino, 20 percent are white, and the remaining students are Asian and African American. Approximately 45 languages are spoken in the district; 34 percent of students speak English as their second language (See Table 1, page 2).

In the late 1980s the district began to experience significant demographic and financial changes. The economy slowed, and funding from the state declined. Overall student enrollment decreased, yet the number of bilingual and high-poverty children substantially increased. By the early 1990s, Chula Vista found that its resources had dramatically decreased and its student achievement was low.

The board was dissatisfied with the district’s poor performance and sought a new approach to meet the changing needs of Chula Vista’s students. To stimulate change, the board hired Dr. Libia (Libby) Gil as superintendent in 1993. Dr. Gil had previously served as the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Seattle Public Schools and was considered to be an innovator. Explained one board member, “We were looking for someone who matched our values and our focus on kids, someone to inspire and lead educators to perform better.” The board gave Dr. Gil a mandate to increase student achievement and restructure the district in ways that would achieve these objectives.

Historically in Chula Vista, resource allocation and decisionmaking had been based in the central office. Upon Dr. Gil’s arrival, she and the board began to craft a new way of working in Chula Vista — one in which schools and their staffs had more control over resources and decisionmaking. Yet Chula Vista’s story of decentralization was about not only the levers of authority given to schools, but also the influence retained by the district office. District leaders facilitated coherence across schools in several ways, including building and promoting a set of districtwide principles of success, designing an accountability system, holding schools responsible for results, and hiring and supporting a strong cadre of principals.

As reform efforts progressed, the district began to see changes in student achievement. By 2002, for example, more than 50 percent of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Hispanic students rated at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on the state sanctioned Stanford 9 math test, a significant increase from earlier years. Similar gains were made by African American students; in 2002, at least 50 percent of those in second, fifth, and sixth grades scored at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on the Stanford 9 reading test.

In the coming pages, we will outline the Chula Vista story and focus particularly on the work of the central office and its impact on improving instruction in the district.

**Table 1**  
**Chula Vista Elementary School District Statistics**  
**2001-2002**

<b>Total Budget (\$)</b>	182,325,535
<b>Per Pupil Budget (\$)</b>	5,500
<b>Number of Schools</b>	39
<b>Number of students</b>	23,132
<b>Student Racial/Ethnic Distribution (%)</b>	
White	20
African American	5
Hispanic	62
Asian/PI/Filipino	12
Native American/Alaskan Native	1
<b>Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility (%)</b>	44
<b>ESL (%)</b>	33
<b>Number of Full Time Equivalent Teachers</b>	1,122
<b>Average Salary (\$)</b>	48,644
<b>Average Years of Teaching Experience</b>	14
<b>Superintendent – Current and Previous (Tenure in Years)</b>	Lowell Billings (2002-Present);  Libby Gil (1993-2002)
<b>School Board</b>	5-member board elected at-large

## A New Model for Education Success

In the early 1990s, as state funding decreased and the number of children in poverty increased, the Chula Vista Elementary School District began to see declines in student achievement. Leaders were dissatisfied and sought change. Convinced that the district needed to reevaluate its structural and instructional approaches, district leaders conducted a curriculum audit. The audit revealed, in part, that the support services provided by the central office were incongruent with what practitioners wanted and needed. Explained one administrator,

At one time the centralized staff development budget . . . was well over 10 percent of the general fund budget. But as that went away . . . the district didn't really change the [staff development] model. And as a result, the model didn't really work very well. Although people were comfortable with it, they couldn't really recognize that the ship was sinking.

In response to this discontinuity between service and need, the district sought to develop a new model for educational and instructional success. Guided by research on decentralization, district leaders introduced a new theory of change. The theory was based on the notion that while the district would provide support, schools would have extensive autonomy to design and implement reforms appropriate for their students.

Under this theory, the central office was responsible for:

- Creating a central vision focused on student achievement
- Establishing and holding schools accountable for a clear set of outcomes
- Working with sites to hire strong principals and provide them with considerable support
- Operating a lean central office so a majority of funds went directly to the schools

The schools, meanwhile, were responsible for assessing strengths and needs of their students and for implementing strategies best suited to their situations.

To implement this reform plan, district leaders devised a system that emphasized rigorous centralized accountability coupled with significant flexibility at the school level to design and carry out reform. The district would send most financial resources directly to the schools, where principals and staffs would control how monies were spent for hiring, staff development, materials, and the like. Schools would also have the flexibility to craft their own strategies as long as they were able to show results. One board member explained the magnitude of this shift:

A very important piece of the board's work has been moving the decisionmaking to the individual school level. We believe that we are giving sites appropriate respect for their abilities. This type of action is not easy. It requires that the superintendent give up power (or at least perceived power). You have to have a leader who is willing to forgo certain decisionmaking and trust the people making decisions.

As a first step toward reallocating authority and resources to the schools, the district restructured its traditional central office operation by dramatically decreasing the number of central office staff. Noted one administrator, “We eliminated key central office positions and redistributed funds directly to the school sites. [We] maximized the amount of resources that individual schools would have for training purposes.” The scaled-down district staff was comprised of a small corps of instructional and operational leaders and personnel, such as the special education director, mandated by state and federal policy. Four assistant superintendents — known as the superintendent’s cabinet — focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment; human resources; finance; and community relations. This initial central office model remained in place for several years.

As Chula Vista’s reform efforts progressed throughout the 1990s, the district sought to increase support in math and literacy. This objective coincided with funds made available from the state to implement the new state standards in math and literacy. Using state grant funds, Chula Vista added district-level math and literacy specialists to their staff.

In addition to decreasing the number of staff at the district level, district leaders attempted to convey a new sense of purpose by renaming the central office building the Educational Support and Service Center (ESSC). Therefore, we will use the acronym ESSC throughout the remainder of the case to refer to the district’s central office.

Although the number of staff members decreased under this new design, the ESSC’s role in shepherding the effort to improve instruction and achievement was significant. In fact, the district took charge of several fundamental needs that no school could accomplish alone.

First, the district set out to build a collective vision for success among all of its stakeholders, convening community meetings and focus groups to learn more about stakeholder goals and concerns.

A second aspect of the district leaders’ strategy was to establish and implement a districtwide system of accountability. Using multiple test indicators and other performance benchmarks coupled with measurements of student, staff, and parent satisfaction, district leaders worked with stakeholders to set outcome goals.

Third, the ESSC took charge of building a more effective corps of principal leaders. As part of its theory of change, district leaders viewed principals as the major orchestrators of school-level reform. Therefore, the ESSC’s role in this new model was to create a set of expectations for schools and to focus its limited human resources on supporting the work of principals.

In the coming pages we will discuss in greater depth the elements that comprised the new theory of change: collective vision, central accountability, principal support, and school-based action.

## **Building a Collective Vision**

In concert with adjusting the central office structure, district leaders reasoned that if action was to be decentralized, then the vision and operating principles needed to be centralized. Accordingly, in the early years of Dr. Gil's tenure, the district engaged stakeholders in a comprehensive and inclusive strategic planning process. Over the course of a year, district leaders conducted 18 focus groups with students, business groups, church leaders, parents with children in the district and parents of private school students, teachers, and administrators. One administrator explained the process, noting,

We talked to young folks, we talked to old folks, and [we] said, "What is it that we should be doing with kids?" And these answers we used to form our strategic goals and our core values and beliefs.

Another administrator described how the process engaged stakeholders who brought different interests and beliefs to the table:

We went to our internal and external customers and said, "Hey what is it that we should be doing?" We found misalignment with where we were and where people really expected us to be.

Using the information from this consensus-building effort, the board adopted a shared vision and series of core values in the spring of 1995. The vision outlined the notion that the district was "committed to providing a successful, safe, challenging, and nurturing educational experience, while promoting the joy and importance of learning for all [of its] children." The vision statement also conveyed the commitment to working collaboratively and in full partnership with families, staff, and the community to accomplish their goals.

To guide its systemic reform initiative, the district presented five strategic goals in conjunction with a set of shared values from which all members of the district were expected to operate (See Box 1, page 6). The vision and values were reflected in a living policy document that drove work throughout the district.

In 1998, responding to the evolution of thinking and a need for greater clarity, the board adapted the vision statement to include a more explicit student-based decisionmaking model. The model laid out four guiding questions that schools were expected to use in their decisionmaking process:

- How does the decision improve student learning?
- How are individual needs balanced with group needs?
- Is there adverse impact on others?
- Is the decision illegal, unethical, or immoral?

The district intentionally differentiated between “student-based decisionmaking” and “site-based decisionmaking.” District leaders emphasized that decisions were to be based on the best interests of a child’s learning, growth, development, and success. As one teacher noted, “the difference between [student-based and site-based] is subtle, but it’s important and keeps us focused on the students.”

**Box 1**  
**Chula Vista Elementary School District**  
**Strategic Goals and Shared Values**

**Strategic Goals**

1. **Literacy** – All students will exit elementary school as multi-literate, lifelong learners with a mastery of essential skills.
2. **Equity** – All students will have access to academic programs and resources that will enable each child to achieve his or her full potential.
3. **Collaboration** – With the school as the center, the entire community will become full partners in education, responsible for each child’s success.
4. **Technology** – All participants in the educational process will have the resources and knowledge to successfully participate in the information-based society of the twenty-first century.
5. **Safe and Supportive Environment** – All members of the school community will enjoy a safe, caring, and stimulating environment.

**Shared Values**

1. **Equality** – We believe each child is an individual of great worth entitled to develop to his or her full potential. All children can and will learn, and deserve equal access to a quality education.
2. **Equity** – We believe there is no significant difference in educational outcomes based on race, gender, or economic status. Solutions, resources, programs, services, and support are applied in a manner that develops the full potential of each child.
3. **Accountability** – We value and recognize individuals who assume responsibility for and demonstrate commitment and dedication to serving the interests of all children.
4. **Ethical Responsibility** – We value each individual who practices, teaches, and serves as a role model of dignity, respect, honesty, integrity, and trust.
5. **Diversity** – We seek, encourage, and respect each individual’s contributions and value a multicultural perspective.
6. **Teamwork** – We believe that families are the primary role models for our children. We are committed to teamwork and collaboration to provide maximum services for students, staff, and community. This partnership among families, community, and schools is the foundation of our children’s educational success.
7. **Innovation** – We are committed to challenging the status quo and embracing a technological world.
8. **Excellence** – We are committed to high standards of performance throughout the district and continuously seek and utilize new knowledge and skills.

Finally, the ESSC established fundamental beliefs about how the district should operate. While these beliefs were not formally adopted in written documents, they were espoused by leaders and transmitted regularly to principals and teachers. The beliefs included:

- Instructional leadership should be distributed among teachers, parents, and principals and not vested in a single role group.
- Decisions should be driven by needs revealed in data.
- Decisions should be developed by consensus from multiple stakeholders
- Teacher and principal professional development should be ongoing, embedded into the school day, and driven by needs revealed in data.
- Resources were to be allocated based on need and in accordance with where they could do the greatest good to improve instruction and achievement.

These beliefs served as principles for change across the district and were integral to the Chula Vista reform process.

### **Holding Schools and Principals Accountable for Student Learning**

To guide progress toward the vision, outcome goals were established and schools and principals were held accountable for reaching them. Over time, the accountability system measured each school's student achievement in math and reading; student, teacher, and parent satisfaction with the school; and community engagement in the district's efforts. Schools presented their data at school board meetings, and the superintendent and her staff visited schools to discuss the data. A board member explained the importance of the accountability system and using multiple data to assess improvement:

We have presentations from one or two schools every board meeting . . . giving us feedback on . . . the multiple measures of student accomplishment. . . . You cannot measure a school's success by a single measure such as performance on a test. Looking at children's attendance rates and the active involvement of parents in the school is another measure of a school's success.

### **Holding Principals Accountable for Improvement**

Ultimately, principals were responsible for ensuring that school practices responded to students' needs, that school decisions were made based on data, that teacher capacity was built, that leadership was vested in multiple teachers and stakeholders, and that student learning increased. As a result, mechanisms were sought to hold principals accountable for these actions and outcomes.

To define the expectations for principals, Chula Vista leaders —ESSC staff and principals — engaged in a unique process early in Dr. Gil's tenure. Over the course of five years, these leaders came together to develop and revise a peer evaluation process that would define the expectations of the principal's role, or what it meant to be an

instructional and managerial leader in Chula Vista. At the time of this study, the evaluation process consisted of five performance standards expressed through a four-level rubric. As Box 2 illustrates, certain elements were associated with each standard.

<b>Box 2</b>	
<b>PRINCIPAL EVALUATION STANDARDS AND ELEMENTS</b>	
<b>Standard — The principal was accountable for:</b>	<b>Elements Associated with the Standard</b>
Staff performance that impacts student achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supervise/evaluate staff</li> <li>▪ Encourage instructional improvement</li> <li>▪ Implement the change process for continuous student improvement</li> </ul>
Building leadership capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hire personnel with leadership capacity</li> <li>▪ Assess and monitor staff and school capacity for leadership</li> <li>▪ Build student, parent, and community leadership</li> <li>▪ Develop a culture of inquiry</li> <li>▪ Organize school community for collaborative work</li> </ul>
Customer satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Foster an appropriate school culture</li> <li>▪ Cultivate effective communication among all stakeholders</li> <li>▪ Embrace and encourage parent involvement</li> </ul>
Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical and legal manner at all times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Behave ethically</li> <li>▪ Make student-based and ethical decisions</li> <li>▪ Foster shared decisionmaking</li> </ul>
Managing the school site to be a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop and implement schoolwide safety plans</li> <li>▪ Ensure that all stakeholders understand the physical and emotional needs for safety</li> <li>▪ Resolve conflicts</li> <li>▪ Use technology to manage site</li> <li>▪ Operate the school effectively</li> </ul>

In addition to the standards, the principal evaluation process included a peer group evaluation, self-evaluation, and superintendent evaluation. Feedback from peers and district leaders provided principals with ongoing guidance about performance and information about how to improve practice. It also promoted professional growth. Interestingly, the principal accountability process became an important vehicle for the district to transmit the beliefs and practices it promoted and to evaluate their implementation. By embedding district principles for change into the principal

evaluation, the central office developed a critical vehicle for spreading core practices throughout the schools.

### **Supporting Principals**

Under the new Chula Vista vision, principals served many roles. As executive leaders of their buildings, principals were expected to act as instructional leaders, business managers, motivators, innovators, and developers of learning communities. District leaders expected principals to be in classrooms on a daily basis, looking at patterns of student learning and assessing the school's progress toward reaching its goals. In explaining the importance of the role and the expectations placed on the principals in Chula Vista, one district-level administrator stated,

This district has really elevated the role of the principal to CEO of the school, not middle management . . . and with the expectation . . . that there will be significant change over time. People who have proven that they have the mettle and the leadership capability to move a school forward . . . really have, I think, one of the most exciting jobs you could possibly have.

Yet this was not always the case. Not long after Dr. Gil came to Chula Vista in 1993, she observed that the majority of principals in place were working under a strict building manager model.

She understood principals would need significant support to meet the new expectations. To foster that support, the board and superintendent agreed that board policies should focus on building a strong principal corps. First, the board supported the superintendent's proposal to bring strong talent into the district. Members passed policies that increased principals' salaries and gave the superintendent latitude in dismissing principals who, over time, were not performing to the standards. Explained one board member,

No one is going to be asked to leave the district [who] hasn't been given every opportunity to improve. . . But sooner or later, we have to accept that they are just not cutting it.

Next, the superintendent and her cabinet devised a multi-layered support structure that included principal networks and training to help principals build their skills as classroom observers, cultivators of schoolwide collaboration, and data users. For example, the district turned to the Institute for Learning (IFL) at the University of Pittsburgh for help and trained all principals in the IFL "walk through" process, which provided a structure and tools for observing and questioning instructional practices in schools. More specifically, the district instituted a series of supports, including:

- Weekly Principal Meetings. Principals met one morning each week to address administrative and instructional issues. Leadership of the meetings varied. Some were designed and run by principals; other meetings were organized and led by the superintendent and her cabinet.

- Principal Peer Groups. Principals worked throughout the year in a cohort with four to seven peers. The cohorts met regularly according to their own schedules and were expected to establish goals and objectives based on collective interests and needs. They also met periodically with central office leaders to discuss their work and progress.
- Information Packets. The superintendent's office provided principals with a weekly packet of information that included applicable research, data reports, and other relevant information. Speaking of ESSC support, one principal noted, "I've received at least 20 books in the last two years. They are well-chosen and pertinent to the job."
- Peer Evaluation. The reflection processes that were built into the principal evaluation model provided important guidance to principals as they explored and expanded their responsibilities as reform agents.

Principals in Chula Vista were under significant pressure to produce results. More than 60 percent of the principals retired or were replaced during Dr. Gil's tenure. Yet many principals reported that they came explicitly to Chula Vista from other districts to work in what they described as an innovative, supportive, high-stakes system. One principal shared,

In all other districts I have worked in, the commitment to change and innovation ends when [central office leaders] are being challenged by the school board and feel the heat. . . . In this district, I don't see that. What I've seen is a board and a superintendent and a cabinet that when they talk about support for innovation at the site level, I see that support.

Many principals acknowledged the pressure, but also pointed to support within this high-stakes environment. One principal explained, "You make a bad decision and it costs you immensely. . . . You are given a lot of freedom, but there is a lot of liability and responsibility along with that." This principal also explained that he felt very supported by the ESSC to be the strongest leader possible. "The district is very upfront if you are having difficulties. It's not about chopping you up; it's about assisting you to improve. And there are many opportunities to improve."

The district created a bottom-up, top-down system that both challenged and supported stakeholders to perform to high standards. Principals were expected to meet school improvement objectives concerning student achievement, but they were also given the professional autonomy and institutional support to fulfill their responsibilities. A principal who succeeded in raising achievement and meeting achievement objectives received a monetary bonus. If objectives were not met over a period of a few years and after a series of support efforts had been initiated and evaluated, the principal was let go.

The challenge-plus-support model was central and critical to the system of accountability that operated in Chula Vista. From this perspective, decentralization was not freedom without responsibility, nor was it a system whereby the central office divested itself of authority to let schools survive on their own.

## **The District Role in Supporting Teacher Professional Growth**

In accordance with district philosophy, many of the efforts to build teacher capacity were conducted at the school level. While the ESSC served as a guide and resource, the responsibility for determining staff needs and implementing appropriate professional development fell squarely on the schools. We will look first at the Chula Vista ESSC's role in improving instruction through professional development. We will then explore in broad terms the school-based approaches to professional development.

### **Providing Professional Development**

Despite its small size and the focus on school-based professional development, the Chula Vista ESSC played a significant role in providing professional development. While the district's assistance was optional for schools, most principals took advantage of at least some district offerings. The central office conducted workshops and used the train-the-trainer model, asking schools to send a few teachers to district-level training with the understanding that once trained, these teachers would conduct workshops at their home school sites. While teachers and principals spoke highly of the ESSC professional development, it appeared that it was difficult for some to fully implement the train-the-trainer model in their schools.

In the late 1990s, the ESSC sought to augment its capacity to provide training in two key content areas: math and literacy. Capitalizing on new state initiatives, the district applied for and received state grants to hire two teachers as math and literacy specialists. The state awarded Chula Vista a Math Resource Initiative (MRI) grant in 2000 to improve teachers' math skills. Using MRI grant funds, the district hired a math specialist to design and implement a comprehensive initiative that included a three-day summer math retreat with follow-up sessions during the year for all interested teachers. At the time of this study, the district had resource staff in math, literacy, and technology who provided districtwide workshops and worked with individual schools on request. Because these resource staff positions were funded with state grant monies, it was not clear whether they would continue once state funding ended.

### **Brokering Professional Development**

The district viewed itself as both a source of professional development information for schools and an aid in gathering resources. As such, the district played a role in monitoring opportunities, disseminating information, and encouraging schools to work together to leverage funds. The district and its schools were successful in bringing outside resources into the district to assist in school reform and specifically in teacher professional development. While the district had too many externally brokered initiatives to discuss in detail, we have outlined two representative efforts that had a significant presence in and impact on the district.

### *Comprehensive School Reform Models*

As the district began its decentralization process in the mid-1990s, its leaders realized that schools could not dramatically change their approaches to teaching and learning without guidance. As a result, the district encouraged schools to consider implementing comprehensive models of school reform that had shown some success at building consensus and improving outcomes in other schools throughout the country. The district provided information to schools and encouraged school staffs to visit schools outside Chula Vista to investigate several models. With assistance from private and state funds, and by leveraging internal monies, schools throughout the district began to adopt nationally known reform models such as the Comer school development program, Accelerated Schools, Microsociety, and Edison Project. The model implementation brought considerable staff development into many of the schools.

### *Governor's Reading Initiative — Reading Results*

In 1999, ESSC staff learned of a relatively new state initiative to boost literacy among poor elementary school students. Formally called the Governor's Reading Initiative and informally referred to as Results, the program was a system of tools and techniques aimed to help teachers assess students' reading skills and diagnose and address weaknesses. As the program provided significant training and was tied to the California state standards, the district viewed Results as a viable way to train teachers in reading and readily encouraged schools to adopt the program. All teachers in Title I elementary schools were eligible to participate. The state paid teachers significant stipends to attend training workshops and provided resource materials for teachers to use in their classrooms.

The availability of state funding and the district's promotion of it led to the widespread use of the Results process in Chula Vista. In fact, Results guided the language arts efforts of almost a third of the schools in the district. In most Results schools, a majority of teachers participated in a week-long summer training effort, and some teachers participated in year-round follow-up training. One teacher explained,

That week-long training then was followed up by five Saturday workshops, with people from all the way at the top of the state level working with... local teachers. . . . [We had] an enormous amount of materials and ideas to take back to the classroom to help with reading and literacy.

In addition to state-sponsored training, many schools had cadres of Results leaders who conducted ongoing professional development within their schools. One teacher summed up teachers' nearly unanimous praise for the program by saying, "Results has really helped us unify the school because it's given us a common language and a common training. And it's really focused us on data and assessments."

Results enjoyed significant support among teachers and administrators. This may have been attributable to several factors. First, Results training offered concrete tools that provided teachers with mechanisms to assess student learning and modify teaching

practice. Second, these tools could be readily used and easily discussed, and they provided teachers with a sense of efficacy. Third, the state process and local support for the effort ensured that a critical mass of teachers was trained in the Results process. Fourth, since Results was tied to state standards, it directly filled needs for curriculum and instruction that helped teachers teach to the standards. In this way, the structure of the program promoted meaningful, consistent alignment among standards, curriculum, and instructional practice. At the same time, some at the ESSC expressed concern that while Results had been a valuable process, it did not put enough emphasis on balanced literacy: reading, writing, oral, and listening skill development. Yet, despite this challenge, Results appeared to provide guidance on standards implementation and a cohesive process that teachers and principals embraced.

### **Supporting New Teachers**

As the region's economy recovered during the 1990s, the population of Chula Vista began to explode. This growth, combined with a state policy to reduce the teacher–student ratio, caused a dramatic shift in demographics and a tremendous increase in the number of new teachers in Chula Vista. To meet the needs of these new teachers, leaders from the teachers union, the ESSC, and the board developed a new teacher professional development program called Chula Vista Assistance Team (CHAT). At about the same time, the state instituted Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA), a grant program designed to carry out a state policy requiring that all new teachers go through an intensive induction program. Chula Vista combined the resources of BTSA with its own CHAT program to serve all new teachers in the district.

CHAT and BTSA differed in a few important ways. The first difference was eligibility. Approximately half of teachers new to Chula Vista were also new to the profession, and as a result were eligible to take part in the more intensive BTSA program. Since the BTSA program required that teachers possess a preliminary teaching credential, teachers on Emergency Permits did not qualify. By contrast, CHAT provided an avenue of support for all teachers new to the Chula Vista system (approximately 250 each year). Although both programs were optional, over 90 percent of new teachers participated in at least one of the programs.

The programs differed in their intensity. The CHAT staff included five teachers with full-time release to work as mentors and program coordinators. These teacher leaders conducted workshops and regularly visited teachers onsite to discuss challenges, model lessons, and provide resources. While CHAT administrators were proud of their efforts, they were concerned about their capacity to serve the needs of the high numbers of new teachers. Each of the five CHAT teachers held a caseload of about eight schools and over 30 teachers. With the strong backing of the union, they continued to seek funding from the district and external sources to expand the program.

Those who were eligible for and participated in BTSA received intensive mentoring and workshop support. Activities included: the California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers, a reflective assessment and support process designed to meet the

unique needs of new teachers. The California Standards for the Teaching Profession defined the knowledge and skills of what an effective teacher should know and be able to do. Other support activities included workshops such as Classroom Management, English Language Development, Differentiated Classrooms, Language Arts Framework and Content Standards, and Math Framework and Content Standards. Furthermore, BTSA participants were paired with veteran teachers who provided additional support and mentored one or two teachers. In addition, BTSA participants were paired with support providers, with whom they met two or three times a week, attended monthly seminars, and observed various classrooms.

As the support providers suggest, differences between BTSA and CHAT were not always clear; the support providers included regular classroom teachers identified as master level teachers, the full time release CHAT colleagues, the BTSA director, retired teachers, district resource teachers, and professors from district partnerships with institutions of higher education. The CHAT colleagues and the BTSA director were the only full time release teachers. The CHAT colleagues were classroom teachers on special assignment. They coordinated and managed the program under direct supervision of the assistant superintendent of Human Resources. Chula Vista's BTSA program continued to expand. During the 2002–2003 school year, the program served 206 beginning teachers and had 51 support providers.

### **Encouraging Freedom with Responsibility**

Chula Vista schools had significant freedom to develop their school calendars, hire staff, structure the school day, allocate resources, choose curricula, and design professional development efforts.

The ESSC particularly encouraged principals and their staffs to implement innovative schooling structures. For example, in one school, leaders voted to join forces with the for-profit Edison School model. Several other schools took advantage of the provision of California's charter school law to form charter schools. Some schools used flexible scheduling to create calendars that provided teachers with additional professional development time during the school week. A few schools in the district operated on a year-round schedule.

Perhaps the most contentious of the freedoms in Chula Vista was the one that accorded schools staff hiring rights. In 1993, during the first year of Dr. Gil's tenure, the board determined that the ability of schools to hire their own staffs was a critical aspect of school effectiveness. The district pushed to exercise a clause in the union contract that allowed schools and principals to hire their own faculty, regardless of seniority. A new collective agreement specified that a team of teachers and the principal were responsible for hiring decisions. While Chula Vista staff with seniority had to be considered for a position if they applied, a school team decided who was best suited for the position. The negotiations around seniority rules severely strained the relations between union and ESSC leaders.

## Using Data

The ESSC strongly encouraged schools to use a variety of data measures to guide decisionmaking. At the beginning of each school year, the superintendent visited every campus to meet with the principal and teacher leaders. The conversations focused on testing data, satisfaction survey data, and school goals in relation to the data. In explaining these meetings, one principal noted, “[The superintendent will] go over her areas of concern. And then we meet with her as a group . . . to talk about what our goal is as a group.” The district’s educators were well aware of the strong priority the ESSC placed on data analysis to guide the school’s efforts to increase student achievement. They were also aware that principals’ jobs depended on their ability to show progress on improving student outcomes.

Despite the district’s emphasis and reliance on data and its work with principals, it was not clear from this study how many schools used data systematically to make decisions. The ESSC had finite resources to train teachers in the effective use of data, and many teachers noted that they received their most significant training through work with the Results project.

## Professional Development at the School Level

While the district acted as a resource, professional development decisions were almost exclusively made at the school level. The ESSC encouraged principals to engage in a variety of research-based decisionmaking practices. However, schools were given autonomy to review their data and determine how to capitalize on strengths and address weaknesses specific to their settings.

Professional development structures, processes, and approaches varied from school to school; however, some consistent strategies appeared across schools.

### *Peer Support*

Teachers in many schools, for example, conveyed significant mutual support among teachers. Through regular team meetings, peer observation, mentoring, and systematic support from teacher leaders, teachers in Chula Vista highlighted their efforts to support one another. One teacher described peer support in her school as follows:

We look around at our colleagues. . . to see how they do different things in the class. . . .And then after we observe that class we write to our colleagues about what we really liked. Also if. . . we have an idea that they should know about, we write about areas on which they might improve.

In addition, many schools noted that they employed teacher leaders to increase the level of instructional support to teachers. A teacher conveyed the importance of a literacy teacher leader in her school, noting,

[Our language arts teacher leader] is always extremely ready and willing to help. She comes to our classrooms and demonstrates lessons or provides other help that's needed. It's very valuable for us.

### *Collaborative Work*

To organize professional development and foster collaboration, schools used various collegial team structures. These structures varied across schools but had a common goal of fostering deeper collaboration among teachers and involvement in the decisionmaking process. Examples of such structures included grade-level teams, school improvement teams, curriculum and professional development teams, and other specialist groups. One teacher explained her school's dynamic approach to collaborative decisionmaking:

We have a leadership council of the principal, teachers, [and] parents, and basically we have complete control over a large budget. My committee is in charge of organizing the complete professional development calendar for the year and coming up with how much money we will need to get subs, to go to conferences, or whatever we decide we need to do.

Another teacher described the collaborative and deliberate nature of professional development decisions in her school:

We all decide on what types of development we feel we need. If we see there is a need for English language development, then we find out who the experts are in our school and send them to workshops and they train the staff. . . . We also look at our test scores to see what is working and what isn't and what areas the kids are having problems in. . . . For instance, a couple of years ago we ended up choosing a different math book because the one we had wasn't getting us anywhere. And so we all looked at different math options and as a school we decided what math book to use.

To foster collaboration, schools used a variety of approaches to create time for teachers to meet. The majority of schools in the district released students one or two hours early on Thursday afternoons so teachers could remain at school for collaborative work. In addition, all schools in the district had at their disposal what were referred to as "buy back" days. Instead of having districtwide professional development days, Chula Vista schools received funds to pay teachers for three extra days of professional development each year. The three "buy back" days could be used in any configuration — half days, two-hour increments, before or after school, Saturdays, etc. Schools used this time to bring teachers together for workshops, planning time, business meetings, and the like. Since buy back professional development efforts occurred outside of contract hours, attendance was optional.

#### *Funding Professional Development and External Resources*

To support professional development, schools were savvy about finding external resources to enhance their work. District educators agreed that many professional development activities would not have been possible without the significant resources that came from state, federal, and private sources. Such monies paid for teachers to attend workshops or to bring external expertise into the school; often these funds paid for release time for teachers to work together in meetings or to observe each other's classrooms. These resources came to the schools through grant writing assistance from the ESSC, through the schools' own initiatives, through state program opportunities, and as a result of the concentration of funds at the school rather than the district level. Explained one teacher,

We have been meeting before school and after school and on Saturdays. We did curriculum development over the summer — all of which would have been impossible without [external] funding, because without it you are asking the teachers to come in on their own time without providing them any compensation.

## Challenges to Instructional Improvement

While many principals and teachers flourished under the decentralized system in Chula Vista and its focus on school-level innovation, some schools struggled to use the freedoms afforded to them.

While the district's intention was for schools to be innovative and to make decisions that provided the best results for their students, some schools had difficulty using this autonomy. The structure in Chula Vista afforded teachers significant opportunities to engage in the decisionmaking and implementation of reform. The decentralized model required teachers to be significant leaders in the schools and each school to craft its own priorities and implementation strategies. Some teachers relished the opportunity to take on leadership roles and steer the instructional direction of their schools. Others felt overwhelmed by the demands to be both innovators and teachers and by the pressures of state accountability. Furthermore while most teachers and principals praised the quality of the district's workshops and the supportive nature of the ESSC, some expressed concern about the level of district assistance and the pressure placed on schools to devise their own professional development efforts.

Some teachers also reported feelings of isolation and frustration because of limited connection with teachers from other schools and the lack of time for professional collaboration. Collaboration often occurred in hallways, at lunch, and in the staff room. This was due in part to the challenges that principals faced, for while principals in the system received significant support from the central office, it appeared that limited resources and extensive demands made it difficult to create sufficient time and staffing structures to enable frequent collaboration during the school day.

## Distributed Leadership

Chula Vista relied on leadership throughout the system to bring its reforms to life. Leadership was seen as the work of all stakeholders from the classroom to the boardroom.

Three frameworks of thinking could characterize leadership in Chula Vista: comparative advantage, moral purpose, and consensus. The board and other leaders engaged in what Richard Elmore called “leadership of *comparative advantage*.” In accordance with Elmore’s model, leaders in Chula Vista addressed the areas they were best positioned to lead or had a comparative advantage to lead; policymakers set performance targets and held leaders accountable for such targets; central office staff designed systems that helped school-level educators implement high-quality education; and so on. District leaders also drove their efforts under the frame of what change guru Michael Fullan called *moral purpose*. Fullan explains that leaders should have a higher or moral purpose that drives their work. In the case of Chula Vista, this leadership model was illustrated by their efforts to make decisions based on the best interests of children or what Chula Vista leaders called “student-centered” decisionmaking. Furthermore, district leaders focused on *consensus*-built decisionmaking. Board members, central office leaders, and principals attempted to model consensus building throughout their work.

Using these frameworks, we will now look at the roles that individual stakeholder groups played in Chula Vista’s system of distributed leadership.

### Board Leadership

When Dr. Gil came to Chula Vista, she was hired with a mandate to foster change — to bring about a school-focused, student-centered approach to decisionmaking and operation. This was a risky and controversial proposition, and the board never intended that the superintendent would do it alone. Over the course of several years, the board worked closely with the superintendent, reviewing the research and understanding the policy levers that would be necessary to bring about change. Referring to the decentralization effort, one board member explained,

It’s been a team effort in terms of exploring together, looking at research, working together to develop a philosophy and model that could support a decentralized approach. I think initially, it was all of us working together saying, “You know, we’re not getting where we want to go. And we got a lot of people in a lot of places working very hard. But we’re not seeing results.”

Chula Vista board members strove for consensus and collegiality as they focused on setting policy to build student achievement. Although there were philosophical differences among board members, the norm of respect among colleagues guided their efforts to work through differences.

In explaining the moral purpose that drove the district's work, a board member reflected,

We have been fortunate to always have board members who really were there for the right reasons. . . . [Y]ou always knew that [each of the members] really cared about children.

Board members knew where their comparative advantage lay. Rather than stepping into the administrative arena, the board remained focused on setting policy that would continue to guide efforts to increase student achievement. One board member acknowledged this by saying, "The board recognizes its roles as a policy maker. [Board members] are very professional. They have no hidden agendas. The goal is what is best for the children."

### **ESSC Leadership**

ESSC leaders also operated in the frameworks of consensus, comparative advantage, and moral purpose. What was perhaps most striking in Chula Vista was the degree to which the ESSC clearly delineated its leadership role. It saw its comparative advantage in creating a strong corps of principals and modeled best practices for principals to bring to the school level. Through their actions, ESSC leaders showed principals how to set a vision, establish targets for school performance, and hold schools accountable to these targets. The ESSC saw its role as reviewing school data, talking with school administrators and staff about their proposed trajectory, and asking probing questions to push school leaders in their thinking. ESSC leaders worked with site leaders to bring together stakeholders to build consensus and to use various forms of data to guide their decisionmaking. However, the ESSC did not dictate how a school should build consensus or use data.

The practice of devolving control to principals and teachers was based on the premise of giving certain authority to those whom ESSC leaders believed were best positioned to use it. And as we have described throughout this narrative, district leaders expected the majority of decisions about school operations to be made at the school level. Interestingly, some suggested that the district might have been better situated to make certain policy and practice decisions such as aligning standards and curriculum. At the time of the study, the district did not have a voluntary or mandatory districtwide curriculum. In 2003, however, the district adopted an aligned district-based standardized curriculum that schools may choose but are not mandated to use.

### **Union Leadership**

Over the course of reforms, the district and union leadership struggled to find common ground. Yet one important joint venture focused on building the support structure for new teachers in the district. Together, the leaders of both groups crafted the CHAT program to provide mentoring and training to the district's new teachers. Both groups sought to sustain funding for the program, seeking a combination of external state grants and local district funding. To support the program, the union also included provisions in the

teachers contract to allow teachers to work at the ESSC as teacher leaders and to continue to reap the benefits of union membership.

Yet the relationship between the ESSC and union leadership was marked by contention. While the union played a crucial role in supporting and building the CHAT program, at the time of the study there was little collaboration on other instructional matters.

### **State Leadership**

The state played a complicated role in Chula Vista's reform. While the district leveraged a significant amount of state resources to enhance its professional development efforts, district leaders almost unanimously agreed that state policymakers did not always lead what they were best positioned to lead. Explained one administrator, "I think the state department spends too much time dealing with all of the elements of education when their main concern should be about results." Some district leaders also believed that state policies constricted their values. "Our response has been that we're not going to let the state define us," explained one administrator. For example, the district used a variety of accountability measures to monitor progress and measure success rather than relying on the single, norm-referenced test required by the state. In addition, while the state required standardized tests only in English, Chula Vista administered a Spanish language version to determine the reading comprehension of its Limited English Proficient students.

District leaders also expressed the notion that state policy and practice was at times counterproductive. One administrator said, "I'm not sure the state is focused on the right targets." The administrator used the state accountability system as an example. "[T]he state system has introduced a level of accountability. They have selected an off-the-shelf norm-referenced test that isn't aligned with standards. Only about 40 percent of the standards are reflected on the test."

On the other hand, many Chula Vista schools relied on state programs and state funds to enhance their professional development efforts. As previously mentioned, many of Chula Vista's high poverty schools used the state Results reading program as their primary reading focus. The state funded both the training and stipends for teachers. In addition, some schools deemed low performing according to the state received state monies that were used in large part for staff development needs, such as funds for substitutes so teachers could meet in teams. State funding also provided a significant resource for district-level professional development efforts, including resources to enhance the district's CHAT induction program and resources to fully fund district-level specialists in math and reading.

### **Community and Parent Leadership**

The Chula Vista story of reform included an important community component. While this study did not deeply explore community-school district relations, a few key issues are important to explain the Chula Vista context for reform. The district called upon and received considerable support from local businesses and parent leaders in its efforts to

fund district programs and take on its instructional reforms. Additionally, the district provided considerable support to children and families. All parents had access to family resource centers, which were housed at five of the district's schools. The centers provided after-school tutoring and care, health resources, and adult education. Chula Vista's focus on being a comprehensive support system to its children and their families was an important ethos of the district. While these efforts were not a direct part of the instructional story, they were certainly attached to the district's story of overall reform and success in raising student achievement.

## Conclusion

This case has illustrated the importance of discovering the balance of support and freedom in a decentralized model of district governance. Chula Vista's decentralized system did not translate into a disengaged central office. Rather, the ESSC oversaw several key issues, including leading the creation of a collective vision, establishing and holding schools accountable for a clear set of outcomes, and hiring and supporting instructionally focused principals. This system required trust, open communication, and a clear sense of shared purpose, roles, and responsibilities across all stakeholder groups.

A centerpiece of the Chula Vista reform effort was the role of the principal and the support provided by district leaders. The district created structures and processes that placed principals at the center of the change. As such, principals were handed considerable power to run their schools as they saw fit. This freedom included hiring staff, creating collaborative cultures of change, and exploring comprehensive school reform models and private management alternatives. According to Chula Vista's strategy, principals' competence as knowledgeable change agents and effectiveness as instructional leaders determined the success of deep school reform. Therefore, ESSC leaders channeled considerable resources into principal networking and professional development, and principals generally reported high levels of support from the ESSC. The decentralized system also provided teachers with opportunities and freedoms in decisionmaking and design.

The case revealed considerable strength in the principal ranks and innovation among some schools. Yet evidence also suggested some challenges to the reform. For example, teachers and principals experienced increasing challenges due to the multiple demands that were being placed on them. Along with school-level freedom came increased challenges to keep many balls in the air. Teachers felt they needed to take on more responsibility with limited time to complete all that was asked of them.

Despite the challenges, the district experienced increasing student achievement, and the board remained committed to policies and practices that had generated initial success. When Libby Gil left Chula Vista in 2002, the board appointed Lowell Billings, a former Chula Vista assistant superintendent for both curriculum and finance, to replace her. By appointing someone from within the district, and specifically someone with curricular experience, the board emphasized its desire to continue the district's current path of reforms and focus on instruction.

**Appendix I**  
**Chula Vista Elementary School District**  
**Achievement Data**

**Table A.1 Chula Vista Elementary School District**

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the Stanford 9—Reading—1999–2002

	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
<b>READING, Grade 2</b>					
Asian	67	66	70	71	4
Filipino	71	64	75	81	10
White	59	62	67	67	8
Hispanic	28	33	41	39	11
African American	39	39	43	51	12
<b>READING, Grade 3</b>					
Asian	51	53	54	65	14
Filipino	63	68	63	69	6
White	59	65	67	65	6
Hispanic	27	27	33	36	9
African American	36	42	41	42	6
<b>READING, Grade 4</b>					
Asian	53	59	63	71	18
Filipino	61	64	72	72	11
White	60	63	67	69	9
Hispanic	29	29	34	36	7
African American	36	36	48	42	6
<b>READING, Grade 5</b>					
Asian	58	52	60	59	1
Filipino	58	52	71	71	13
White	60	59	68	71	11
Hispanic	31	30	32	35	4
African American	36	43	46	50	14
<b>READING, Grade 6</b>					
Asian	61	64	63	59	-2
Filipino	67	66	73	74	7
White	65	64	67	69	4
Hispanic	34	35	39	35	1
African American	45	36	45	52	7

*Notes:* Chula Vista was originally selected based on disaggregated data from 1998–2000. Due to changes in the state’s methods for disaggregating data, data prior to 1999 are no longer used.

*Source:* These data were provided by the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

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**Table A.2 Chula Vista Elementary School District**

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the Stanford 9—Mathematics—1999–2002

	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
<b>MATHEMATICS, Grade 2</b>					
Asian	77	85	90	89	12
Filipino	73	71	84	85	12
White	64	74	75	77	13
Hispanic	37	51	55	55	18
African American	45	52	51	59	14
<b>MATHEMATICS, Grade 3</b>					
Asian	80	84	85	92	12
Filipino	74	78	82	85	11
White	65	77	76	77	12
Hispanic	37	47	56	54	17
African American	36	59	56	52	16
<b>MATHEMATICS, Grade 4</b>					
Asian	74	83	85	85	11
Filipino	66	77	80	82	16
White	61	69	76	73	12
Hispanic	38	44	50	49	11
African American	36	39	53	49	13
<b>MATHEMATICS, Grade 5</b>					
Asian	78	75	85	84	6
Filipino	70	75	82	81	11
White	64	65	76	77	13
Hispanic	39	46	50	50	11
African American	33	44	52	60	27
<b>MATHEMATICS, Grade 6</b>					
Asian	84	88	91	93	9
Filipino	76	80	87	87	11
White	69	72	77	81	12
Hispanic	45	52	58	58	13
African American	49	48	56	62	13

*Notes:* Chula Vista was originally selected based on disaggregated data from 1998–2000. Due to changes in the state’s methods for disaggregating data, data prior to 1999 are no longer used.

*Source:* These data were provided by the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

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For more information about Chula Vista Elementary School District, please contact:

Dennis Doyle  
84 East J Street  
Chula Vista, CA 91910  
Tel: 619.425.9600, extension 1325  
[ddoyle@cvesd.k12.ca.us](mailto:ddoyle@cvesd.k12.ca.us)

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