

# Improvement for Equity

## Pivot Learning Bridge Professional Learning Network Impact Report

Pivot Learning | July 2020



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Over the School Year 2019-20, Pivot Learning hosted a Bridge Professional Learning Network (PLN) sponsored by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE). Building on the success of our 2017-19 PLN, this Bridge PLN focused on strengthening equity-focused continuous improvement efforts in three California school districts. Facilitating equity-centered capacity building in participating districts, we leveraged expertise and experience – both externally and within our network through consultancy protocols and site visits – to ultimately support greater student learning and social and emotional success.

### Partners

[Pivot Learning](#) is an Oakland-based national nonprofit that partners with educators to design and implement solutions to their greatest challenges in achieving educational justice. Pivot Learning's Prevention and Intervention Team facilitated the Bridge PLN and worked directly with districts to support their improvement efforts.



The Bridge PLN was facilitated by Dr. Joyce Highhouse, Director of Education Programs at Pivot Learning. At Pivot Learning, Dr. Highhouse has lead multiple continuous improvement networks, including supporting districts in the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support, and provides leadership in the facilitation of equity work and systems improvement. Dr. Highhouse has almost 15 years of experience in education and over 15 years of business experience. She began her career in education through The Broad Residency in Urban Education. Dr. Highhouse completed her residency with Durham Public Schools, serving as Administrative Services Analyst and Special Assistant for Planning and Performance Management. Dr. Highhouse's school district-level work also includes Special Assistant to the Chief Academic Officer of Baltimore City Public Schools as well as independent consulting engagements. Joyce Highhouse received her doctorate in Education from Columbia University's Teachers College. She earned her M.B.A. from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and received her B.A. from Tufts University in Massachusetts.

The [California Collaborative for Educational Excellence](#) is a statewide agency designed to help deliver on California's promise of a quality, equitable education for every student. The CCEE organized and funded this effort.

## District Participants



**Lancaster Elementary School District (LSD)** believes higher expectations result in higher achievement, in treating everyone with respect, and that every person has unique strengths. Their goal is to create options and excellence in education, empowering all students to reach their full potential. LSD provides a relevant, high-quality education within an inclusive and culturally respectful environment, preparing all students for personal and professional success.

**Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD)** envisions a school system that serves all students well and engages each student in deep learning that prepares them to solve the challenges of the 21st century. MPUSD is built on a solid foundation of effective instruction, positive school culture, systems of supports, and collaborative leadership.

**Sanger Unified School District (SUSD)** believes the future of Sanger, California, and our country are in our classrooms. As a team of educators, SUSD seeks to produce students who have educational opportunities and options for their future.

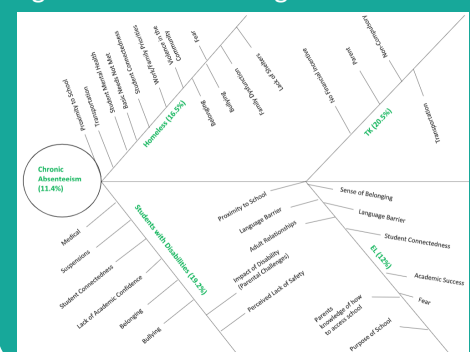
## About Our Bridge PLN

The Bridge PLN focused on strengthening continuous improvement efforts within three school districts, centering on capacity-building for engagement in equity-focused decision-making that ultimately increases student outcomes. Pivot Learning supported participant districts as they focused on authentic problems of practice rooted in their district's outcome data and using a common equity lens. ***Our approach included:***

- Effective use of data
- Assessment of existing district approaches to fostering equity
- Protocols designed to strengthen thought partnership
- Improvement Science design and facilitation
- Change Design facilitation and support

The partners and participants met together for seven in-person meetings and one virtual meeting, including rotations to each of the participating districts. Pivot Learning facilitated these convenings and supported participating district teams through in-person meetings and one-on-one phone calls. Participating district teams used improvement tools, including Fishbone Diagrams (see Figure 1.) and high-quality prototypes to test and refine change ideas throughout improvement cycles. Two districts were able to implement pilots and began collecting evidence of impact. One district is poised to launch a cycle of improvement in the coming school year.

### Figure 1. Fishbone Diagram





# Educational Equity

Our Bridge PLN collaborated around district improvement rooted in equity. We began by developing a common understanding of equity, iterating on the definition from the National Equity Project:

Educational equity means that each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential. Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system means: (1) Removing the predictability of success or failures that correlates with any social or cultural factors; (2) Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children; and (3) Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents, and interests that every human possesses.

From there, we envisioned how equity might look, feel, and sound in context, given their focus of improvement. For each district's improvement focus, we inquired:

- How each district community was talking about educational equity?
- What were the specific disparities/inequities each district sought to eliminate? For whom and specifically where?
- What must change in each district to improve inequitable outcomes?
- What will equity "look," "sound," and "feel" like when it is achieved in each district?

## Our Theory of Action

### If...

The PLN focuses on foregrounding **equity** in improvement work



### And...

uses content, tools, and processes related to ***understanding the problem and surrounding systems***, including:

- Research knowledge related to solving each district's problem of practice;
- Practice knowledge specific to what other organizations in the field have done to solve identified problems of practice;
- Creative Design Thinking to develop new solutions that might address identified problems of practice; and
- Analysis of problems of practice, including analysis of possible solutions.



### Then...

Changes in participant district practices will be equity focused, evidenced-based, and will engage a wider set of more informed stakeholders



### And...

student outcomes will be indirectly positively impacted as determined by local district assessments.

# Underlying Frameworks

## Improvement Science

The Improvement Science principles, adapted from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, informed our approach, including these elements of our work:

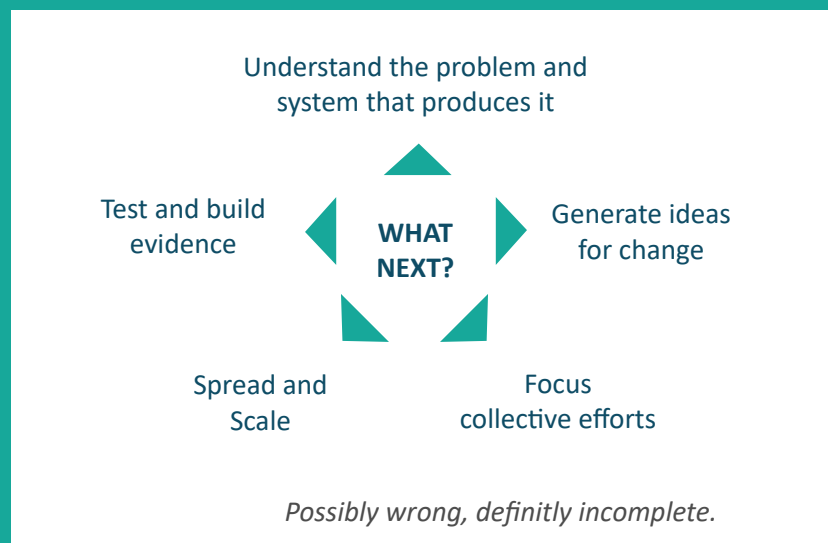
- Building competency and capacity to address educational equity issues
- Identifying improvement tools, strategies, and change management processes to address inequities
- Planning, strategizing, problem-solving, and communicating district implementation

## Networks in Education

Rincón & Fullan's Networks in Education framework also informed our work, including these Eight Essential Features of Effective Networks:

- Focusing on ambitious student learning outcomes linked to effective pedagogy
- Developing strong relationships of trust and internal accountability
- Continuously improving practice and systems through cycles of collaborative inquiry
- Using deliberate leadership and skilled facilitation within flat power structures
- Frequently interacting and learning inwards
- Connecting outwards to learn from others
- Forming new partnerships among students, teachers, families, and communities
- Securing adequate resources to sustain the work

Figure 2. Improvement Science Cheat Sheet



# About Our Bridge PLN Districts

## LSD

LSD is located in the high desert about 60 miles northeast of Los Angeles and serves students in preschool through eighth grade. The district schools include one alternative education, one 6-8 STEAM, four middle, and fourteen elementary schools. In addition, the district offers a preschool program to over 900 students.

Total enrollment

**15,477**

Socioeconomic Disadvantaged

**90%**

English Learners

**16%**

Students with Disabilities

**14%**

Foster Youth

**3%**

Students Experiencing Homelessness

**6%**

Student/Teacher Ratio

**24:1**

## MPUSD

The Monterey Peninsula Unified School District was established July 1, 1961, and is nestled along the Monterey Bay. MPUSD stretches from the city of Marina to the north to the city of Monterey to the south and encompasses the communities of Del Rey Oaks, Marina, Monterey, Sand City, and Seaside.

Total enrollment

**10,526**

Socioeconomic Disadvantaged

**66%**

English Learners

**27.1%**

Students with Disabilities

**11%**

Foster Youth

**<1%**

Students Experiencing Homelessness

**9%**

Student/Teacher Ratio

**20:1**

## SUSD

Located in Fresno County in the Central Valley and covering 180 square miles, SUSD is made up of twenty-one schools, including fourteen elementary sites and one K-12 charter school. An early adopter of Response to Intervention (RTI), SUSD has garnered statewide and national acclaim for their system of supports for students.

Total enrollment

**10,782**

Socioeconomic Disadvantaged

**66%**

English Learners

**14%**

Students with Disabilities

**9%**

Foster Youth

**<1%**

Students Experiencing Homelessness

**<1%**

Student/Teacher Ratio

**23:1**

<https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>  
Lancaster School District

# Focus of Improvement

Pivot Learning supported districts by providing the roadmap to identify a focus of improvement and facilitated space to engage thoughtfully in cycles of continuous improvement intended to foster greater and more equitable student outcomes. Each district was encouraged and supported in developing potential solutions to their identified “Problem of Practice” through district visitation as well as consultancy protocols.

## LSD

Lancaster focused on creating a systems approach to the multi-tiered needs of students across the district especially in the areas of behavior and social-emotional support. The team sought to identify tools within the current PBIS structure in order to help sites respond to the behavioral and social-emotional needs of their students. This began with a review of the level of implementation of programs well established in the district in order to determine what additional support may be needed and which sites needed more intensive support. The team is currently in the process of refinement to better focus on equitable implementation support and specific tools for measuring success.

“Our team learned that there is a process for change to happen and it takes time to see and measure growth. With the support of the Pivot Learning Bridge PLN, we were able to gain insight and collaborate with other districts to help with the improvement of our own district. With the focus on equity, we were able to see different possibilities of how to best serve our students and bring back ideas to our district.”

– Lancaster Unified School District

## MPUSD

MPUSD sought to increase equitable access to a high-quality education for students by reducing absenteeism. By implementing consistent, equitable practices promoting engagement and community, they sought to decrease absenteeism as measured by Attention 2 Attendance data and Schoolzilla (data dashboard). These equitable practices include restorative practices (e.g. community building circles) and family outreach. To make sure that their efforts were rooted in an equitable approach, they worked hard to identify the changes in practice that would have the greatest effect on sub-groups who showed the highest percentage of chronic absenteeism, including students experiencing housing insecurity, English Learners, and students with disabilities.

“The involvement of our District team with the PLN Bridge Network has provided the opportunity for us to rethink and re-shape our process in strengthening and developing our Multi-Tiered Systems of Support with a lens around equity. The PLN allowed for our team to engage with other district colleagues in sharing our ideas and learning best practices, especially when it comes to addressing our sites systems to address and respond to absenteeism and student engagement.”

– Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

## SUSD

SUSD sought to improve school connectedness for their more than 1,000 6th grade students, looking to align and integrate improvement efforts into existing initiatives. From existing work, they learned that 79-90% of students perceived that teachers cared for them, recognized their performance, and created an environment conducive to feelings of connectedness to the adults at school. To address the need for greater school connectedness, the district piloted implementation of AHA!, a youth empowerment and engagement program, in three schools, tracking its effect on 6th grade students' (1) sense of belonging, (2) student teacher relationship, and (3) self-efficacy.

"The Pivot Bridge PLN helped us increase Social-Emotional learning (SEL) opportunities and support across our district. Our equity conversations, cross-district visits, sharing of resources, problem of practice, and data analysis led to increased awareness, attention, & advocacy..."

– Sanger Unified School District



# Pivot Bridge PLN Impact

Through problem-solving to address variance in student performance, each district's decision-making and actions ultimately support the equitable improvement of student outcomes. Each of the Bridge PLN districts sought evidence of (1) systems change, (2) improved student outcomes, and (3) connections across the network that enhance continuous improvement efforts.

## Outcomes

### Bridge PLN

As reported during check-in interviews and through facilitator session observations, PLN participants reported transference of learning/work from the PLN to their districts, leveraging tools and solutions offered within the PLN. Participants considered the impact of initiatives/programs intended as LCAP actions (e.g. initiative charter and metric template) to investigate effectiveness, and used enhanced, disciplined inquiry with a focus on equity for all students to support their continuous improvement moving forward.

### LSD

Developing systems change in LSD was the district team's focus during the course of this project. The LSD team worked to hone their problem of practice using improvement tools and processes (e.g. Fishbone Diagrams, Change Ideas) focused on differentiated learning support to sites across the district. They improved their knowledge of Improvement Science through implementation of the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle, while keeping equity at the forefront, leading to plans for a system to provide equitable support to school sites.

### MPUSD

Within the work of strengthening and developing their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) with a lens around equity, MPUSD engaged with other district colleagues to share and improve best practices for site systems to address and respond to absenteeism through student engagement. To track student outcomes, MPUSD implemented a data cycle process with an equity lens that engaged stakeholders internally, focusing on YouthTruth student voice data related to student connectedness with another adult on campus. They also worked with Attention 2 Attendance to initiate and track quick and efficient communication to home when absences were detected. Using this collected data, the MPUSD Bridge PLN team theorized that by increasing restorative practices, as well as engagement and connectedness fostered within the classroom environment, absenteeism would decrease across specific target subgroups identified through data analysis.

## Outcomes

### SUSD

SUSD's equity conversations, cross-district visits, sharing of resources, problem of practice, and data analysis led to increased awareness, attention, and advocacy around:

- Increased frequency of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) conversations, collaboration, and planning with district and site leadership teams
- Cross-department data analysis of SEL assessment data
- Cross-site collaboration with SEL lessons, resources, student data, problem-solving & progress
- Cross-district sharing of SEL resources and ideas to support students & families
- Targeted SEL support for our 6th graders who experienced an abrupt change in their educational placement when K-5 schools added 6th grade to support our growing district population and overcrowding at our comprehensive middle school (WAMS)

The SUSD team screened for three high leverage areas – sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and teacher-student relationships – using Panorama among 6th graders in the fall of 2019. They also looked at site-specific data, including behavioral referrals, suspensions, Panorama 4th-12th data, Special Friends & Friendship Club data to track their progress in improving student outcomes at their pilot sites. At the district level, they shared best practices for school psychologists and counselors relative to AHA! and group counseling processes, deepening connections among their essential staff and their work.

# Key Learnings from the Network



**A Focus of Improvement must be addressed through an equity lens.** Working to support districts in evidence-focused, equity-focused decision-making indirectly influences students outcomes by fostering disciplined inquiry, thought partnership, and positive peer accountability.



**Stakeholder connections are invaluable for ensuring continuous improvement and impact.** For example, through the Bridge PLN, the MPUSD team highlighted insights on the importance of family connection in reducing chronic absenteeism.



**Student Voice is essential.** District participants used empathy interviews and/or student focus groups to ensure that student voice was incorporated into decision-making and planning. Our student voice work was essential for participating districts' understanding of their improvement focus, problems of practice, root cause analysis, and data-based, equity-focused solutions aimed at improving student outcomes.



**Flexibility is key.** While COVID-19 disrupted our schedule of meetings, it brought about insights regarding the opportunities for virtual connection and collaboration to disrupt inequities. Additionally, at the district level, flexibility in implementation of programming is important for sustainable impact – for example, some of SUSD's sites required AHA! Program flexibility to meet the needs of their students.



**Leadership, participation, and time are essential.** Dedicated staff at both the district and site level are essential for sustainable, meaningful implementation of new programs, practices, or systems – not only the investment of time, but investment in the work of mindset shifting. The superintendent sponsorship, leadership, and communication are critical to prioritizing the space as well as time required to focus on improvement.



**Funding is vital for sustainability.** Despite the value derived from our Bridge PLN, participants reported that the uncertainty of budget constraints – especially in the new COVID-19 environment – may constitute a barrier to sustaining the network into the upcoming school year. In discussions with the leaders of participating districts, there is a desire to continue our network as they all grapple with recovering and designing what reinvention looks like, but they are all facing budget shortfalls. An argument could be made for extending networks as a means of supporting districts in responding, recovering, and reinventing in response to challenges as well as opportunities in a COVID world.

# Next Steps for Participants

As we wrapped up the Bridge PLN sessions our participants were forced to contend with the realities of COVID-19. In *Three Jobs That Matter for School Communities Navigating a COVID World*, Transcend noted: "...a school community's readiness to respond is partly a function of all they are doing now but even more a function of choices made months and years ago about the foundational design of their learning model." This resonates with what we are observing with our participants.

## LSD

LSD has been focusing on reaching their students and families and providing needed resources online and through direct mail. During the recent COVID-19 school closures, the LSD team helped direct the outreach to students and families in support of social-emotional learning needs. A website was developed in conjunction with school counselors to provide ongoing SEL lessons and support, and a self-referral system was created for students to be able to receive individualized support from trained district staff. Parents and teachers were also provided access to make student referrals as needed.

## MPUSD

MPUSD is responding to the COVID-19 crisis by putting together district-specific, responsive resources, and has developed a system of tracking student engagement in distance learning to ensure equitable access to curriculum. They have identified needs of students, including access to internet, and have begun to ensure more equitable access to WiFi in the school district communities. Through the course of the Bridge PLN, the district team began developing a data-based strategic and consistent system to increase and improve their positive communication with families through engagement opportunities with families, especially for those students who were chronically absent. For example, through their Attention 2 Attendance initiative they developed a cohesive and intentional messaging campaign to keep families informed of their child's attendance and the important aspect it plays in successful student outcomes.

## SUSD

SUSD, during the present COVID crisis has been offering social-emotional support and resources for distance learning through its Pupil Services Sanger Learns. The SUSD Bridge PLN team began planning for vertical articulation of the district's 6th grade AHA! Initiative and anticipates wider-spread implementation next year as their principals champion the AHA! program.

Contact Us at [info@pivotlearning.org](mailto:info@pivotlearning.org).





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