

**FO•RUM** *n.* an assembly for the discussion of questions of public interest. **YOUTH** *n.* the time of being young; early life; the period of life from puberty to the attainment of full growth. **IN •VEST •MENT** *n.* a devoting, using or giving of time, talent, emotional energy, etc., as for a purpose to achieve something; the investing of money or capital in order to secure profitable returns. **FO•RUM** *n.* an assembly for the discussion of questions of public interest. **YOUTH** *n.* the time of being young; early life; the period of life from puberty to the attainment of full growth. **IN •VEST •MENT** *n.* a devoting, using or giving of time, talent, emotional energy, etc., as for a purpose to achieve something; the investing of money or capital in order to secure profitable returns. **FO•RUM** *n.* an assembly for the discussion of questions of public interest. **YOUTH** *n.* the time of being young; early life; the period of life from puberty to the attainment of full growth. **IN •VEST •MENT** *n.* a devoting, using or giving of time, talent, emotional energy, etc., as for a purpose to achieve something; the investing of money or capital in order to secure profitable returns.

# District/Community Alliances to Transform High Schools

## Lessons Learned from California's High School Pupil Success Act

*by*

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The High School Pupil Success Act (HSPSA), a unique public-private partnership between the State of California, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with additional support from the Walter S. Johnson and Hewlett Foundations, provided funds, a framework and a support structure for eleven very different school districts<sup>1</sup> and their community partners to develop plans for high school transformation. HSPSA districts varied greatly in size and context, encompassing rural, urban and suburban communities. The range included a rural, one high school district on an Indian Reservation in Northern California, a largely suburban, two high school district near the Bay area, and two “mini” districts within the state’s largest school district in Southern California. HSPSA was inspired by the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s *Schools for a New Society Initiative*, a five-year large-scale effort that began in 2001 to reinvent secondary schools in seven urban communities.

The High School Pupil Success Act (HSPSA), passed by the California Legislature in 2003, was intended to facilitate increased high school student achievement by supporting the development of district-community partnerships, public engagement, school transformation, and systemic district reform. The Act called for a reform and redesign plan that applied to all high schools within a district as well as the central administration functions needed to support reform at the site level.

The HSPSA was designed as a two-phase approach. In Phase I, school districts formed a "district-community partnership" with a community-based organization. Together with the involvement of the whole school community, including parents, teachers, pupils, and other community stakeholders, the district-community partnership was charged with creating a five-year reform and redesign plan for the development of effective high schools for all pupils in the district. The hope was to have these district-community partnerships serve as models for high school reform and reinvention efforts throughout California. The result of Phase I was a Five-Year Reform and Redesign Plan intended to fully describe how districts would achieve high school transformation and systemic district-wide reform. The legislation required the plans to be completed by June 30, 2004.

In Phase II, school districts were to implement their plans. However, due to California's budget crisis, no additional funding was available and district-community partnerships were encouraged to focus their plans on how to best utilize existing resources so they could be implemented independent of any additional HSPSA funds.

The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) partnered with the Office of the Secretary of Education and the California Department of Education to provide support and technical assistance to district-community alliances. The emphasis of the technical assistance was on partnership development, stakeholder involvement, public engagement and community planning, with less emphasis on the implementation of specific educational reform strategies.

During the closing weeks of the project, staff from the Forum and the California Department of Education talked with representatives from all 11 districts and community partners to seek their insights on the successes and challenges of the past year. Based on those conversations and our own observations over the past year, we have distilled some lessons that we hope contribute to the vital discussion underway in the field about the incentives for high school transformation and the role of community partners in this work.

This document is organized into two distinct but overlapping sections — 1) our reflections on the process and structure of the HSPSA initiative; and 2) a discussion of key successes and challenges as they played out

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<sup>1</sup> Calipatria Unified, Emery Unified, Fresno Unified, Grossmont Unified, Inglewood Unified, Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified, Local District 2 -Los Angeles Unified, Local District 5- Los Angeles Unified, Petaluma Joint Union District, Washington Unified, West Contra Costa Unified

on the ground. (We have also included an Appendix which summarizes what each site considers their major accomplishments.) In reflecting on the initiative we describe the fairly unique niche that HSPSA occupies in the landscape of school reform efforts, and discuss those features of the process we feel contributed to site successes. In highlighting the work of individual sites, our goal is not to portray them as up as ideal examples of district level reform but rather to illustrate the complexity of the work and in the process, recognize the successes and challenges that these very different districts faced along the way.

The good news is that all eleven district/community alliances made significant strides over the past year in terms of forging and strengthening alliances with key community partners; engaging key stakeholders including teachers, students, administrators, parents, the business community, elected officials and the nonprofit sector in the work of the schools; developing a vision for high school transformation that is shared by a range of stakeholders; and identifying and in many cases, implementing specific structural and pedagogical changes designed to increase student success. While dedicated funding for HSPSA implementation was not secured, nearly every site has put structures in place to move the work forward in the coming year, in some cases with, but in many cases without, additional outside resources<sup>2</sup>.

## I. Reflections on the Process

HSPSA occupies what we believe is a fairly unique niche in the sprawling space of education reform. It was not an expensive, foundation-driven redesign initiative, nor was it a prescriptive school-level reform model. HSPSA was a public/private partnership which focused on high school transformation but emphasized district-level change; and required planning but encouraged action. From a very rough cost-benefit perspective, we are quite encouraged by the level of response compared with the level of investment.<sup>3</sup>

The HSPSA experience has reinforced what research, experience and common sense tell us — that improving educational outcomes requires finding better, more powerful and more permanent ways for school districts and community stakeholders to work together, for districts and state departments to work together, for private foundations to partner with districts and collaboratives seeking long-term change, and for technical assistance providers to work with districts and schools in ways that provide relevant lessons and strategies that help accelerate the change process.

The core assumptions driving HSPSA<sup>4</sup> were developed through a process that involved Forum staff, representatives from the California Department of Education, the Office of the Secretary of Education, and individuals involved in the Carnegie Foundations' Schools for a New Society Initiative<sup>5</sup> at the local and national levels. After reflecting with individual sites and as a TA team, our sense is that many features of the initiative that seemed critical during the design phase did in fact prove to be important in moving the work forward:

- **The key role of community partners.** Community partners are critical in generating and sustaining the momentum for the change process.

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<sup>2</sup> Five of the eleven sites were able to secure federal Small Learning Communities grants that are allowing them to carry the work they did this year forward.

<sup>3</sup> Districts received anywhere from \$50,000 to \$250,000, based on the number of eligible high schools in the district, with a maximum of \$250,000; community partners received \$97,250.

<sup>4</sup> The six core assumptions framed the technical assistance for HSPSA sites and together exemplified what we believed were the core components necessary to support systematic district wide high school reform. They are 1) school/community alliance; 2) shared vision; 3) broad based demand and support; 4) engaging students, families, teachers and other school/district staff; 5) utilize all available resources; and 6) define education improvement strategies.

<sup>5</sup> A district wide high school reform initiative “designed to help reinvent and reimagine the high school experience for American students” in seven urban school districts.

- **Balance of power.** Separate funding streams for the district and community partner are essential in developing a balance of power and establishing equity in the working relationship.
- **Flexibility.** Not prescribing the “what” or the “how” is important: Flexibility in the planning process allows sites to develop plans in accordance with local momentum and need.
- **A plan, not a proposal.** Requiring a plan and not a proposal allows districts to use the planning process to develop a long term vision for the work and identify things they could do, rather than things they would do if they had additional resources.
- **Customized, flexible technical assistance.** Providing support, resources and coaching to meet the needs of individual districts stood out to districts and community partners as useful and unique.
- **District and school level change within a state context.** Intersection between state policy and both district and school level change was an essential ingredient to the work.
- **Emphasis on youth engagement.** By challenging sites to engage young people in the planning process, sites had rethink assumptions about the roles and capacities of young people.

### ***The Key Role of Community Partners***

The primary goal of HSPSA was to build or strengthen district/community relationships in support of high school transformation and student success. As stated in the Request for Applications, “Together with the involvement of the whole school community including parents, teachers, pupils, and other community stakeholders, the district-community partnership shall develop a five-year reform and redesign plan for the development of effective high schools for all pupils in their district.” This charge reflects a growing understanding among educators, reformers, and community leaders that schools in fact “can not do it alone” and that a range of organizations and institutions in communities can be leveraged to support student learning.

Implementing and sustaining systemic educational change is a slow and challenging process, and for districts to engage in that process in conjunction with a community partner represents a fundamental shift in the way most have traditionally done business. This kind of change requires profound shifts in both community expectations and participation as well as school and district operations. It challenges district, school board and teacher leadership to overcome resistance and systemic barriers and create alternatives to current administrative and institutional arrangements.

As a one year planning grant, the goal of HSPSA was for districts and community partners to create the conditions necessary to facilitate long-term systemic change by developing the partnerships and identifying the structures or mechanisms necessary to support the difficult work of high school transformation. However, unlike some traditional “planning grants,” participating teams were also expected to begin *taking action* over the course of the year, piloting or adjusting specific strategies in the areas of public and stakeholder engagement and school transformation in order to ensure the long-term success of their high school reform initiative.

The role of the community partner was to help districts mobilize (and sustain) available resources to support high school improvement and student success. The importance of these partnerships was reinforced from the start and throughout the year, by engaging both district and community leadership in all events, conversations and correspondence related to the project.

Every community needs mechanisms for identifying key assets (individuals, organizations, businesses, funders, and government agencies) and developing and maintaining relationships and partnerships that can inform the vision, generate demand, secure resources, and plan and/or implement strategies for school change. With the support and often guidance of the community partner, districts sought to generate both

support and input from the community on their evolving high school reform initiatives. “This has been about rebuilding trust both within the district and with civic leaders, the parent community, etc. and reactivating resources that had been lying dormant,” said Tammy Dowley-Blackman, HSPSA Coordinator for West-Contra Costa Unified.

**The most important resource we bring to the table is sustainability. It’s too easy for education reform to become the idea of the moment when things get tough. When leadership changes or parents protest or funding disappears it’s easy to say — well now is not really the right time for this. Without someone pushing from the outside, without someone holding the district and city leadership accountable, the end result ...would have been very different.**

— Deanna Hanson, CEO of LEED Sacramento,  
community partner to both Washington Unified School District and Sac-City Unified

Tasked with developing plans to improve high schools, district and community partners were expected to work collaboratively both within the school system and the community. “The most important resource we bring to the table is sustainability. It’s too easy for education reform to become the idea of the moment when things get tough. When leadership changes or parents protest or funding disappears it’s easy to say - well now is not really the right time for this. Without someone pushing from the outside, without someone holding the district and city leadership accountable, the end result ...would have been very different,” said Deanna Hanson, CEO of LEED Sacramento, community partner to both Washington Unified School District and Sac-City Unified. “So, I get to play the role of bad guy. I say what no one else wants to say - we have to do this and if we don’t make a decision soon we will lose the money. As the community partner I am often the buffer between the schools, the School Board, the district, the city and the community.”

The HSPSA experience reinforced the notion that external partners are critical in generating and sustaining momentum for the change process. While schools play a critical role in young people’s lives and need to be held responsible for improving student outcomes, there are social, cultural and economic forces outside of schools that create disparities in achievement and there are resources and learning opportunities outside of school that can reduce those disparities.

“It was the voices outside of the district that really brought the energy and gave us some new life. When I talked with secondary personnel initially, it was ‘yeah right, another reform strategy.’ The fact that the community partners had a real voice and a presence with us made it look and feel different,” said P.J. Machado, Coordinator of High School Programs at Fresno Unified.

## ***Balance of Power***

HSPSA funding came from two sources — California Department of Education funds which flowed to most participating districts<sup>6</sup> and funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation flowed to lead community partner organizations. Having two distinct funding streams helped to balance a power dynamic that might otherwise favor school districts. David Rattray, Executive Director of UNITE-LA, the community partner for LA Local districts 2 and 5, underscored the importance of this strategy. “I’d say the fact that it’s co-funded...made it so much easier for us to both feel like we had some resources to help each other and help the common project. That was incredibly helpful on a practical level and a real added resource for both parties. When something is singly funded, even if there’s a history of working together, the reality is that there’s a fixed pie.”

Because community partners had a formal role in the process, districts had to work closely with them to establish mechanisms for joint decision-making and information sharing, to jointly define roles and responsibilities, and to develop systems to hold one another accountable. By managing funds, community partners can pressure districts to stay the course.

“For us what was different about HSPSA wasn’t the concept of a community partner, but rather the equity in funding, which led to a partnership that was more fixed and structured. We’ve had a lot of partnerships in the past, but we’ve never been in a position where all parties were funded creating a need to truly collaborate and maintain that relationship in such an open way,” said Sue Olds, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction for Petaluma City Schools. “It turned out to be very positive as it shared both responsibility and leadership, and clearly resulted in a more shared vision for our community.”

Timeliness of funding was another critical issue, and a place where the HSPSA process created an obstacle for many sites. Due to state budget challenges the state funds were not available to the districts until January 2004. “It was a challenge for us that the state money came after the Gates money. It delayed our ability to get buy-in from the teachers early on,” said Olds. While this reality did slow momentum in many districts, the presence of the second funding stream directed at community partners did help keep the work moving in several cases.

## ***Flexibility***

Few would argue with the assertion that there is no one-fix solution for transforming high schools. Change in all 11 HSPSA districts moved at a different pace in accordance with local momentum and need. Flexibility was built into the initiative and particularly the technical assistance, such that workshops and other supports could be tailored to meet the specific and evolving needs of the sites.

“I was impressed that you were not asking us to build new buildings or rearrange things that could be very costly for us, but rather to rearrange our thinking and our processes. One of the things I hear from the community is ‘so, you’re going to do this massive change in facilities, or materials, but what is the change for the students?’ HSPSA started with how can we change things for the students, and what do we need to do to get there,” said Pat Barr, School Board President in Fresno Unified.

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<sup>6</sup> State funding was based on the number of non-IIUSP and non-High Priority funded high schools in the districts. If all district high schools were IIUSP or High Priority high schools the district did not received HSPSA state funds.

While there was some emphasis within the HSPSA framework on personalization and smaller learning communities, no single reform model or strategy was held up as a common solution that all sites needed to adopt. Sites were encouraged to document and reflect on reform efforts or innovation already underway, to connect the dots between efforts happening across the district, and to work backwards from a common vision in order to identify what strategies made the most sense to move forward.

“This process has given us a vehicle to do research, identify effective practices, and lay the seeds for implementation,” said Paul Johnson, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction for Washington Unified School District. “Prior to this our high school was stuck in the mud. It was designated an underperforming school, it was traditional, and they hadn’t really had any serious change take place. Now you have the staff chomping at the bit, ready to do the work, asking ‘when can we break into small learning communities? We weren’t here a year ago.’”

### ***Requiring a Plan, Not a Proposal***

The HSPSA legislation called for each district to submit a five-year plan for high school reform. Because implementation dollars were not guaranteed, however, those plans were not focused on identifying things districts would do if they had additional resources but rather what they could do to hold themselves accountable for improving high schools for all students. By framing the work this way, our goal was to help districts and partners build the relationships and structures necessary to develop long term strategies to sustain the work well beyond the planning phase.

**HSPSA gave us an opportunity to focus on our efforts, to step back and look at the things that were in process, assess them and then develop them more fully. We had a lot of things in place but this grant allowed us to develop the support structures to do this work in areas like thematic small learning communities and advisories. Now when we look at our plan we have something that is practical and workable.**

— Virginia Calsada-Medina, Principal, Calipatria High School, Calipatria Unified School District.

“HSPSA gave us an opportunity to focus on our efforts, to step back and look at the things that were in process, assess them and then develop them more fully” said Virginia Calsada-Medina, Principal, Calipatria High School, Calipatria Unified School District. “We had a lot of things in place but this grant allowed us to develop the support structures to do this work in areas like thematic small learning communities and advisories. Now when we look at our plan we have something that is practical and workable.”

In recognition of the variety of circumstances in the eleven districts, HSPSA encouraged sites to take a step back, take stock of what was already in place and develop a plan that built on existing work, structures and relationships. And, while all HSPSA sites developed five-year plans, many were also successful at using the planning process as an opportunity to begin the process of transforming high schools.

“I really appreciated that we didn’t need to focus on the problem areas but on the vision of where do we want our high school to be five or ten years from now. It really helped us frame our conversation in Hoopa, and it became the outline that we followed to gain input from parents, community members and students. By focusing on what could be rather than on the problems we have, we were able to get unstuck,” said Marcellene Norton, Education Director, Hoopa Valley Tribe, Community Partner, Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified School District.

For some districts, requiring a five-year plan without the promise of implementation dollars felt burdensome. In the end, however, most sites agreed that the concrete nature of the planning process was useful, and that regardless of the question of additional resources, having a long-term vision and plan in place is critical in order to make change. Some districts were simultaneously tasked with developing multiple distinct (but related) plans. While we made efforts to align those planning processes, some frustration remained. “One thing that was valuable about having to develop a five-year plan was that we developed goals and we have disseminated those throughout the community. But it was frustrating that it wasn’t possible to better align the HSPSA five-year plan with these other two planning process - the WASC and single-student plan,” said Joe Franz, Director of Curriculum & Instruction, Emery Unified School District.

### ***Flexible, Personalized Technical Assistance***

District and community leaders felt that the personalization of technical assistance and the accessibility of ongoing support and feedback helped create a safe space within which to honestly assess their strengths and weaknesses and grapple with complex strategies. “I really appreciated the TA — having a person to connect with, who came down and met with us. I’ve never had a critical friend in that way, and it was very helpful to us and our schools,” said Kirsten Hibert, Director of Instructional Services for Local District 5, LAUSD.

David Rattray described how the TA felt different from other initiatives he had been involved in. “From the get go, you were more interested in helping us and working with us than what sometimes happens when you have someone monitoring you. I think you kept us accountable but did so with a light hand, and with a much heavier hand you were critical friends. That was immensely positive and helpful.” Districts were also strategic about utilizing the TA team to advance local goals and processes. “When someone from somewhere else shows up and says to your school board member that you’re doing great work, it adds to your credibility within the community. He represented something. That’s always valuable,” said Sue Olds.

All sites considered technical assistance an essential element of the HSPSA process. In terms of content, the emphasis of TA was on partnership development, stakeholder involvement, public engagement and community planning, with some but less emphasis on specific educational reform strategies. TA strategies included a two-day kick-off institute last fall and four workshops based on locally defined needs over the course of the year, a web site and electronic newsletter, visits to participating districts, visits to other districts to observe promising practices, customized support via email and phone, and referrals and relationship brokering with other sites, consultants and resources. Of these strategies, the customized support and visits to other districts stood out as most useful.

In addition to site visits and workshops, sites received intensive support from the statewide coordinator, Forum staff, and each other through a dedicated e-list, an e-list newsletter, a dedicated web site, conference calls, and emails, as well as tool and publication development.

In addition to appreciating the flexible and personalized ongoing support, several sites found visiting other districts to be extremely powerful. “The most important single energizing process for us was exposure to areas that have actually done it. Exposing people to success was the most important energizing element. There was a big rush of energy from community partners, teachers and administrators every time you folks provided that experience,” said John Boogaert, business partner in Fresno Unified.

## ***District and School-Level Change within a State Context***

The kind of transformation supported by HSPSA requires profound changes at the community, school and district levels; changes that can be facilitated or complicated by state policies and structures. HSPSA intentionally acknowledged the importance of activities occurring at all of these levels yet focused in on district-level change.

This focus on the important role of districts in the change process is one of the hallmarks of the *Schools for a New Society* Initiative. Constanca Warren of the Carnegie Corporation described the importance of district level change in this way. “Districts create the conditions for teaching and learning, by setting policy and expectations, allocating resources, hiring and deploying staff, assigning students, and holding schools accountable.” Ignoring the importance of the district’s role in school change can undermine innovation efforts at the school level and thwart the possibility of scaling up effective practices that develop locally.

One of the core questions driving the development of the HSPSA legislation was whether the momentum around high school reform that began building in Sacramento and San Diego as part of Carnegie’s national initiative could be effectively leveraged across the state. The answer appears to be yes - without awarding large grants but by giving districts essentially the same challenge, deep technical assistance and access to a network of peers, eleven districts stepped up to the plate and made significant strides. As a partnership between private philanthropy and the California Department of Education, HSPSA strengthened relationships between districts and the state and opened the door for common state-level policy challenges to be addressed.

The fact that HSPSA was a statewide as opposed to national effort clearly facilitated the consistency, frequency and depth of TA support sites received. The technical assistance point person was located in the state and knew the state education context quite well, having served as a teacher, principal and superintendent; this made cross-site learning feasible and relatively easy to facilitate within the state. In addition, a close working relationship with a point-person at CDE gave both HSPSA sites and the initiative’s TA provider’s direct access and support at the state level.

While district level change is critical, it alone can not necessarily ensure effective school level reform. School level personnel-administrators, teachers and students- and local communities must be simultaneously engaged in the process and given the flexibility to make localized reform decisions based on the needs of their particular student community. While districts provide the supports and structures to facilitate the reform process, school level personnel are the ones who are charged with implementing the changes in the midst of running a schools and meeting the day to day needs of their students. In this context, where the role of district level reform was most effective was when districts were able to develop a reform process (or a planning process) broad enough to accommodate and support the needs of a diverse student population served by diverse range of high schools; and where districts had the support of either an external partner or a technical assistance provider who had the capacity to work directly with schools.

## *The Emphasis on Youth Engagement*

Over the course of the year, HSPSA challenged districts and school site leadership to develop inclusive and collaborative planning processes for high school reform. Engaging each different stakeholder group including teachers, parents, administrators, the business community and other local organizations is critical and represents difficult, important work that all sites continue to grapple with. But finding meaningful ways to engage students as a stakeholder group probably represented the biggest learning curve for everyone involved.

**The greatest challenges for me as a superintendent were letting go of power and sharing it more equally, and becoming an active listener. Getting to the point where I listen to students at the same level and find ways to incorporate their interests, desires and the services they request, and integrating these pieces into a coherent reform effort. I have to let go of some of the control. I've been watching myself, how I react to this. Sometimes I have a hard time, but it has been very good for me.**

— Arturo Vasquez, Superintendent of Klamath-Trinity School District

“We get student input all the time. The problem is we are just beginning to plan a systematic way to hold onto that information and act on it. Issues kept coming up, but we hadn't figured out how to act on them,” said Arturo Vasquez, Superintendent of Klamath-Trinity School District.

From the beginning, participating districts were challenged to incorporate students into the planning process, both as leaders and advisors. However, to engage them effectively, adults had to revisit their definition of student engagement and challenge their own assumptions about leadership and power. “The greatest challenges for me as a superintendent were letting go of power and sharing it more equally, and becoming an active listener,” said Mr. Vasquez. “Getting to the point where I listen to students at the same level and find ways to incorporate their interests, desires and the services they request, and integrating these pieces into a coherent reform effort. I have to let go of some of the control. I've been watching myself, how I react to this. Sometimes I have a hard time, but it has been very good for me.”

Through technical assistance and a series of hands-on workshops most sites came to agree that students need meaningful roles in the reform process.

“Having youth voice has helped us. It has encouraged us to slow down and examine how we support youth (at stakeholders meetings, etc.), how we make them feel valued and how we reach out to them,” said Ellen Lewis of Petaluma City Schools.

While most participating districts were willing to make some commitment to young people as stakeholders in school reform processes — through youth summits or panels, focus groups, or student surveys— many expressed challenges and some experienced resistance as they thought about youth engagement as an institutionalized element of the district's ongoing work.

And although we highlighted the need to engage young people in this process, our ability to provide the type of in-depth support to do so did meet this expectation. However, through this process we were able to identify the lack of concrete tools to support this work and in turn developed an observation and discussion

guide to help youth and adults build a common language around this difficult work.<sup>7</sup> With input from both youth and adults doing this work, the tool was created to serve as a foundation for those conversations with the goal of making it easier for young people and adults to have conversations about how to improve their own schools.

## II. Successes and Challenges on the Ground

With the charge described above and a range of supports in place, significant, encouraging movement has taken place over the course of the year in each of the eleven school districts that received funding. All districts have, to varying degrees, made progress in one or more of the following core areas used as a framework for HSPSA:

1. Strengthening district-community alliances
2. Increasing public and key stakeholder engagement
3. Creating a shared vision for student success
4. Identifying and implementing effective educational improvement strategies

### *Strengthening District-Community Relationships*

All 11 sites reinforced the notion that the presence of a community partner and equity in funding for that organization ensured that partnerships were balanced. “For me the partnership mandate was the strongest part of HSPSA. It really solidified our relationship with the community partner in a way that is different and changed the way we work together. In the past our relationship did not feel as authentic. We would see the partner once a month, etc., but now it feels connected and real. I think the equity in funding really helped,” said Kirsten Hibert, Director of Instructional Services, Local District 5, LAUSD.

And, despite some initial bumps in the start-up process, the value added by the community partnership helped build a system of accountability and support that brought in resources, services, expertise and sometimes funds to sustain the work.

The following themes emerged in talking with participants about the value of district-community partnerships:

- Funding to the community partner created equity and changed the nature of the partnership to one of co-management, shared responsibility and accountability.
- Effective partnerships call for a shift in business as usual from the district and a willingness on the part of “internal” leadership to work collaboratively with external partners while championing reform from the inside.
- Community partners need help building their capacity to do this work. Opportunities to network and learn from others in the field proved valuable in developing this capacity.

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<sup>7</sup> *Creating “Good” Schools Observation and Discussion Tool: Helping Young People and Adults Have Conversations about What Makes a “Good” Youth-Centered School.* This tool was created in order to help young people and adults develop a common language for talking about how to improve schools. The tool provides educators, young people, administrators, policy makers, parents, community members and other stakeholders with a common lens for reflecting on their schools and for planning change. It can also be useful in assessing the range of reform models and change strategies underway in a district or school at any given time. [www.forumfyi.org/Files/ObsDiscTool.pdf](http://www.forumfyi.org/Files/ObsDiscTool.pdf)

“This is a brand new world for the community partners; most have not been involved with this level of depth in education reform. It really is learn as you go, and we need to develop our capacity to do this work. With the support of a couple of national networks we have had access to others around the country struggling with similar issues, and sharing our challenges and strategizing together has helped us develop our capacity,” said Deanna Hanson, CEO, LEED Sacramento, Community Partner, Washington Unified.

## ***Increasing Public and Key Stakeholder Engagement***

Students, teachers, families and other key non-classroom personnel have to be a part of the high school transformation process. These are the people who not only feel the change (if and when it reaches them), but can embrace or resist it. More important, these are the people who understand, more than anyone else, why change is needed, what works and what doesn't work.

To engage these key stakeholders, sites established mechanisms for informing and engaging them in assessment, planning, decision-making and implementation processes. For schools, who have seen far too many reform efforts come and go, having external partners who could support them in the process was one way to ensure both sustainability and accountability. “HSPSA has given us an impetus to work with the community as stakeholders in public education. I have to say I think it's changed the way we work. There's much more openness to the concept that this is not about people asking teachers to do more, but people actually stepping up to help,” said Sue Olds, Assistant Superintendent Curriculum and Instruction, Petaluma City Schools.

**We made some real inroads, through a process that we hadn't done across the district before, let alone in individual schools. It made people hungry for more. Community forums gave people a reality check by helping them understand what makes a district work — how you open schools, how you open schools with a deficit, dealing with layoffs. People got a chance to see things first hand. They had never been able to do that, and understand these issues in a substantial way.**

— Tammy Dowley-Blackman, HSPSA Coordinator, Stupski Family Foundation, Community Partner, West Contra Costa Unified.

Sharing and collecting information with the community was a key lever for beginning a dialogue where none existed, and many sites developed innovative and effective strategies to authentically engage and activate a variety of stakeholders. Traditionally, efforts to “reach out” to communities have been framed as the schools' responsibility, yet they often lack the resources or capacity to effectively connect with community stakeholders in a comprehensive and consistent way. Collaborating with a community partners shifts the burden and begins a process of building support structures that will scaffold the school's reform efforts.

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While engaging the community is essential, so is targeting key stakeholder groups—teachers, parents and students— in an intentional and continuous effort. All sites agree that it is essential that teachers be involved at

all stages of the high school reform planning and implementation process, and that “selling” a selected strategy to teachers or trying to create “buy-in” after decisions have been made can potentially derail the process. As Tony Wagner puts it, “most teachers are neither stubborn nor indifferent, but they do resist change for reasons that [others] must understand.” He describes why the training and working conditions of teachers have reinforced a sense of “risk aversion,” as well as how their work environment, often one of isolation and autonomy, can limit their capacity for change.<sup>8</sup>

Teacher union involvement can also be a critical step in creating the conditions for effective teacher engagement. “Washington Unified had a very powerful strategy that got them teacher union support right at the beginning. Different teachers and union representatives were invited to all of the various conferences, meetings and site visitations and then were given a forum to present their learning’s and insights back to their peers. This made a huge difference at the school and district level,” said Deanna Hanson.

Sites also agreed that engagement strategies for parents, caregivers and family members needed to be intentional and continuous as they have the power to reinforce the educational vision and values in both the home and in the community. Several sites found families can be powerful voices of support with political bodies and elected officials, but that in order for them to be successful advocates they must understand the urgency for reform and be intricately involved in decision making. “Getting parents more involved in the school was a major strategic initiative that we had this year. We also bought in volunteers in to provide more resources, reinforcing the notion that the work of the school is not just the district’s responsibility but the entire community’s,” said Joe Frantz, of Emery Unified.

- Although sites are at different places in building these structures, the following themes emerged in talking with participants about engaging and activating key stakeholders:
- Teachers need to be the first stakeholder group engaged in the process.
- To effectively engage communities in this process it is essential that they feel as though they are moving the process forward and not just engaging in open-ended dialogue. This requires consistency, follow-up and action.
- Visitations to successful high schools are a powerful strategy for engagement and buy-in. Sites that made the most progress in key stakeholder engagement took a broad range of people on study tours including school board members, parent, students, business representative, union reps, teachers and principals.
- While finding meaningful ways to engage students as a stakeholder group probably represented the biggest learning curve for everyone involved, most sites have taken important steps in this area and have recognized that students can be powerful allies in the high school transformation process.

## ***Creating a Shared Vision***

Every community needs a core vision of student success that is broad (beyond test scores, beyond academic success), specific (defined in ways that identify indicators and address achievement gaps), and shared (discussed, understood and owned by key stakeholders). Predicated on the assumption that all students can succeed, HSPSA asked sites to reassess their efforts to support student success by engaging a broad range of stakeholders in developing a shared vision.

“We worked closely with our community to develop a broad vision of success for our youth. By doing this the community had an opportunity to think about what we needed in our schools, our neighborhoods, our

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<sup>8</sup> *Leadership for Learning: An Action Theory of School Change*. Wagner, T. (2001). Phi Delta Kappan.

businesses, and our community networks to ensure success for all students,” Pat Landrum, Executive Director, Healthy Community Consortium, Community Partner, Petaluma City Schools.

By engaging a broad range of stakeholders in defining student success, many districts were challenged to think beyond the traditional boundaries of academic achievement and develop comprehensive definitions that linked academic outcomes to skills and competencies more closely aligned to community and employer needs. “Bringing in the business community as partners in this process really gave us a broadened perspective and challenged us to think about how we defined a successful student,” said Virginia Calsada-Medina, Calipatria High School. “The school had always been so focused on academic achievement that we didn’t even consider the personal goals and interpersonal skills the community expected us to address.”

Many sites invited in key stakeholders and the community at large to work with them to develop a shared vision for student success. In doing so, several common themes emerged:

- Many community and school stakeholders hold different ideas about the purpose of high school. Dialogue is essential in order to flesh out these expectations and articulate a shared vision for all high school students.
- A vision of student success that is shared by community stakeholders must be broad, including but extending beyond academic achievement.
- Students need to have an explicit role in defining student success and shaping the joint vision.

## ***Identifying and Implementing Effective Educational Strategies***

The focus of HSPSA was not to implement specific strategies related to instruction, curriculum, or school design. The charge, rather, was to work collaboratively to investigate a range of strategies and to ensure that the structures and supports are in place for teachers and administrators to make and sustain real change.

The last decade has seen a proliferation of school reform models. Rather than endorse one, the goal of HSPSA was to provide a broad framework within which districts and community partners could organize their ideas, seek input from stakeholders, identify promising innovations to pursue, and align current efforts. This looked different in each of the eleven HSPSA districts. “The HSPSA opportunity helped us begin to develop a foundation for improving instruction in the district by creating an environment for structural change...so we’ve made progress with in the structure of schools and set up a mechanism for all schools to work together,” said Howard Cohen, Regional Superintendent, West Contra Costa Unified.

**At McLean we’re talking about changing the way we do business in the classroom. It’s opened up that door to have conversations with our teachers about what academic rigor looks like and how to raise expectations for students. Structure is just a piece of this; it’s really change in the classroom that’s going to make the biggest impact.**

— Frank Silvestro, Principal, McLane High School, Fresno Unified.

In Petaluma, the nature of the district level work focused on 9th grade transition. “We conducted dialogues in the schools to increase understanding and awareness of achievement gaps. Out of that came a real focus on the success of 9th graders, initiating support structures and ladders of support early. Both schools are working on that this year and both are working on literacy plans. At one school they’re working on deliberately constructing career pathways for all students. The other is looking at the advisory model as a way of engaging all students,” said Sue Olds, Assistant Superintendent Curriculum and Instruction, Petaluma City Schools.

For other districts, the charge of HSPSA allowed schools that were ready to begin looking at instruction and curriculum at the school level. “At McLean we’re talking about changing the way we do business in the classroom. It’s opened up that door to have conversations with our teachers about what academic rigor looks like and how to raise expectations for students. Structure is just a piece of this; it’s really change in the classroom that’s going to make the biggest impact,” said Frank Silvestro, Principal, McLane High School, Fresno Unified.

In terms of school design and structure, HSPSA provided a useful mechanism for bringing stakeholders on board before implementing drastic changes. “I’ve given leadership over to the teachers because they’re closest to the problem. I have to have buy-in from my whole staff if I’m going to move forward with SLCs or whatever. You concentrate on change at a district level, but teachers concentrate on teaching. You can give leadership over to them, but you have to have a lot of patience. They’re learning how to think outside of the classroom and look school wide. They’ll get there, but it takes time, support and professional development,” added Frank Silvestro.

As expected, change in all 11 HSPSA districts moved at a different pace, in accordance with local momentum and need. The following common themes emerged in talking with participants about identifying and implementing educational reform strategies.

- Not having a prescribed education reform strategy as part of HSPSA was very helpful as it left room for authentic inquiry and discovery.
- After much investigation, all sites are discussing personalization as a strategy to engage and retain students.
- Real change happens in the classroom. Without a focus on teaching and learning, structural changes will not necessarily translate to improved outcomes for students.

## ***Common Challenges***

All participating districts began at different starting points and developed their process according to their local needs and context.

For most sites, facilitating an inclusive planning process which builds engagement and capacity was a challenging task. “Bringing key stakeholders to the table proved to be a difficult goal to accomplish,” said Sandra Chefney, Director of Curriculum and Staff Development, at Inglewood Unified School District. “With such a limited timeframe, our biggest challenge was time. Finding time, to both really investigate all our options and fully involve all levels of staff.”

Compounding this is a culture of isolation faced by many school leaders. “Overall the schools (in our district) have very different types of challenges. Most significant across the board is overall improving school climate. Getting folks to work together is asking them to take on a huge paradigm shift. It’s daunting,” said Alma Salazar, UNITE-LA, Community Partner, LAUSD Local District 5. “So it comes down to the folks doing this work and keeping them energized around why we’re doing it, the common purpose. For me that was the most challenging.”

And, while community partners are at the table to support districts in overcoming these challenges, having districts recognize that other organizations can be substantive allies in this process is itself a challenge. According to Deanna Hanson one of the biggest hurdles community partners face is convincing districts that they have something of value to bring to the table. “In my experience,” she said, “this takes time, dialogue and action.”

Despite the variations in process, several common organizational and cultural challenges were identified across sites:

- Changing district budget, human resource policies and district office processes to support school/principal autonomy and change;
- Productively engaging teachers and teacher unions in a culture shift of working with communities and students;
- Democratizing schools to include teachers, parents and students in teaching and learning;
- Having school boards and superintendents assume leadership for high school change;
- Implementing a high school change initiative while facing budget cuts and policy pressures.

## Appendix: Key Accomplishments According to Sites

From our perspective, the long-term success of HSPSA at each site will depend on their ability to develop and institutionalize strong alliances and stakeholder engagement strategies, an area where many sites made significant strides over the course of the year. But progress occurred at a range of levels, and success may be best understood from the perspective of those most involved in and affected by the work. The following chart summarizes what each site identified as their key accomplishments over the year:

District/Community	Major Accomplishments
<p><b>Calipatria</b></p>	<p>Established a community and business partnerships that will continue well beyond the HSPSA planning year.</p> <p>Broadened the vision and definition of student success to include academic and non-academic outcomes</p> <p>Aligned numerous education improvement efforts under one vision and implemented several new strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clarify and implement career pathway strategies</li> <li>▪ Develop grade level projects- including a senior project</li> <li>▪ Implement advisories this year</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emery</b></p>	<p>Improvement in the affective domain is impressive: dozens of adult tutors, almost a quarter of a million dollars in private support and improved image in the community; ultimately this is about student achievement as measured primarily by state tests.</p> <p>In increase in the percentage of students passing the math portion of the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) from 25% in S-2002 to 47% in S-2003 to 66% in S-2004</p> <p>After a drop in API over the last three year period, and facing SAIT sanctions for failure to improve as a II/USP chort 1 school, we improved out API by 89 points. This was the largest, significant gain, by any locally attended comprehensive high school in the State of California.</p>
<p><b>Fresno</b></p>	<p><b>The Business Connecton.</b> The Fresno Business Council (<a href="http://www.fresnobc.org">www.fresnobc.org</a>) led the charge for civic and urban renewal in Fresno. Utilizing the additional concept of a Kitchen Cabinet, Dr. John Boogaert, (<a href="http://www.panagraph.com">www.panagraph.com</a>) has gathered a group of business leaders to partner directly with each of our 8 comprehensive and 3 alternative high school programs.</p> <p><b>The Leadership Connection.</b> Fresno Unified School District has formed a collaborative partnership with the Central Valley Educational Leadership Institute, located at CSUF and the Fresno Business Council , designed to eliminate the achievement gap in the secondary schools in Fresno (<a href="http://www.csufresno.edu/cveli">www.csufresno.edu/cveli</a>)</p> <p><b>The Instructional Connection.</b> Our teachers are going to be involved in continuous professional development. Collaboration and leadership will be the focus of their work. Authentic instruction and assessment involves a focus on academic literacy, rigor, continuity and time. (<a href="http://www.just4kids.org">www.just4kids.org</a>), (<a href="http://www.basrc.org">www.basrc.org</a>)</p> <p><b>9th Grade Engagement Study.</b> In an effort to explore more effective ways to engage and retain incoming 9th graders in November and December 2004 the district conducted a 9th grade engagement study consisting of student interviews of a representative sample of first time 9th graders at each of the eight comprehensive high schools. The results both reveal promising practices and have helped shape next years personalization plans.</p>

District/Community	Major Accomplishments
<b>Grossmont HS</b>	<p><b>Focus Groups with Parents, Teachers, Students &amp; Community Leaders</b></p> <p><b>Purpose of Community Focus Groups:</b> Input from community and disunites leaders is a vital resource in better understanding how our students can be successful.</p> <p><b>Goals:</b> To better understand how businesses define high school success and achievement; What skills businesses are looking for when hiring, What skills they are actually seeing; and What community members can do to enhance high school success</p> <p><b>Key Shared Outcomes:</b> <i>Moving toward creating a shared vision for student success</i></p> <p><i>Students need to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Be better prepared for the realities of life; Adaptable; Technology-oriented; Show Value for tolerance; Embrace teamwork, and Have a willingness and enthusiasm for work.</li> </ul>
<b>Inglewood</b>	<p>Received a Federal SLC Implementation Grant for Morningside High School</p> <p>Created a long-term vision of student success for the district to work off of</p> <p>Created strong relationships with some teachers and certain district leaders will be crucial to future success</p>
<b>Klamath-Trinity</b>	<p><b>Community Engagement:</b> Town hall meetings at all five schools; community voice in 5-year plan.</p> <p><b>Youth Engagement:</b> Preparing students to be active participants in designing the type of reform model that would draw on the strength of our unique cultural and social diversity</p> <p><b>The Alaskan Quality Schools Model:</b> Two visits to Alaska- parents, students, teachers, administrators, community members</p> <p><b>Klamath-Trinity Learning Alliance</b></p> <p><b>Circle of Courage</b></p> <p><b>A Small School Answer to a Small Learning Community Model</b></p>
<b>Los Angeles District B</b>	<p><b>North Hollywood High School.</b> Awarded a Federal Implementation Grant to continue their reform efforts to convert to wall-to-wall SSLCs. Successful in planning and implementing new communities this year and developed a three-year plan for full implementation. HSPSA enabled staff to be trained in engagement and collaboration and visit other school districts to see successful programs.</p> <p><b>Verdugo Hills High School.</b> Making significant progress this year by implementing advisories. Utilized HSPSA funding to have key teachers and other personnel attend study tours with a focus on advisories. . In addition, the school has ninth-grade houses to personalize the transition from middle school to high school. Each year, the staff plans to add and grow the grade-level houses until fully implemented.</p> <p><b>San Fernando High School.</b> Implemented a SSLC stakeholder task force to lead the school in this reform. Awarded a Federal Implementation Grant. The school is a multi-track year-round school with over 5,000 students. The SSLCs, which are being implemented, have made a significant difference in the opinion of the students.</p> <p><b>Francis Polytechnic High School.</b> Implemented a ninth-grade house based on the Talent Development Model from John Hopkins University. In one year, the staff has been able to implement this community and has personalized the instruction by converting to a 4 x 4 block scheduling. The collaboration and the efforts of the leadership team have made all the transitions successful. The teams have many opportunities to visit existing SSLC programs and visit schools with alternative schedules. Teachers, administrators, community partners and parents worked side-by-side to implement this reform effort.</p> <p><b>Sylmar High School.</b> Had many programs at the school. The programs were independent of each other and did not have large enrollment. This year, the staff has revamped the programs to umbrella the programs under SSLCs. The staff was able to visit schools to explore changing the bell schedule and the implementation of advisories. The staff is still in the planning process for these next steps, but is expected to fully implement within the next three to four years.</p>

District/Community	Major Accomplishments
<b>Los Angeles District H</b>	<p><b>Received Federal SLC grant for one high school</b></p> <p><b>Best Practice Site Visits:</b> Provided concrete ways for teachers to learn about and see SLCs.</p> <p><b>Helped us to get focused as a local district.</b></p> <p><b>Created a long-term vision for the Local District.</b></p> <p><b>Brought the 3 high schools together</b></p> <p><b>Student Voice: Successful engagement of students in two of the high schools</b></p>
<b>Petaluma HS</b>	<p><b>Federal SLC Grant</b></p> <p><b>Community Partner/District Relationship:</b> Equity, co-management and shared responsibility</p> <p><b>Kept momentum going, created continuity</b></p> <p><b>Community Engagement:</b> Worked with the public as true stakeholders in public education</p> <p><b>Youth Engagement:</b> Trained 25 youth to facilitate community conversation and lead youth focus groups</p>
<b>Washington</b>	<p><b>Federal SLC Grant</b></p> <p><b>Best Practice Site Visits</b></p> <p><b>Curriculum and Instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personalization</li> <li>▪ SLC/Small School Structure</li> </ul> <p><b>Community Involvement</b></p> <p><b>Youth Engagement</b></p> <p><b>Partnerships</b></p> <p><b>Teacher, Union and Board Support</b></p>
<b>West Contra Costa</b>	<p><b>Blue Ribbon Committee:</b> Representing various stakeholders; guided the work; work will continue beyond the grant</p> <p><b>Creation of the West County United Business &amp; Education Foundation:</b> An idea that had been considered for years was finally galvanized through HSPSA. Corporate community members have come together to support the efforts in the district and to leverage larger support.</p> <p><b>Community Forums representing all five cities:</b> This is the first time all 5 cities that make-up West Contra Costa Unified School District have come together to discuss educational issues and transformation. The forums will be continued by the Board of Education through it's' "Prepared for a Lifetime" Campaign and through the new business and education foundation.</p> <p><b>Alignment within the School District:</b> The Regional Superintendent had begun work with secondary schools on curriculum alignment. HSPSA assisted in this work by creating a specific structure with each school site Instructional Leadership Team to work on and gain agreement on special projects.</p>