

SAN BERNARDINO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

LCFF EXPANDS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISTRICT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, BUT UNANSWERED FUNDING QUESTIONS REMAIN

Few places needed a new school funding formula to help improve the odds for disadvantaged students as much as San Bernardino City Unified School District. Located about 60 miles east of Los Angeles in an arid region known as the Inland Empire, SBCUSD is the eighth-largest school district in California and serves the second-poorest city in the country.

San Bernardino City Unified School District contains 54,000 students; nearly three-quarters are Latino, 15% are African American, and 8% are white. 95% fall within at least one of the categories for which the Local Control Funding Formula provides additional funding: low-income students, English learners, and foster youth.

BY LENI WOLF

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Sources that informed this case study include: district board meeting documents; district webpages; news articles; LCAP and related documents; and interviews with Reverend Samuel Casey, Dr. Lori Collins, and Felicia Jones (Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement), Tom Dolan and Sergio Luna (Inland



Photo courtesy of Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (COPE).

Out of the 54,000 students in the district, nearly three-quarters are Latino, 15 percent are African American, and 8 percent are white. And 95 percent fall within at least one of the categories for which the Local Control Funding Formula provides additional funding: low-income students, English learners, and foster youth.

San Bernardino City schools face many challenges associated with poverty, revealing an urgent need to support students' intensive socio-emotional and academic needs. At 75 percent, the district's graduation rate lags behind the state average, and fewer than 1 in 3 third-graders scored proficient on the state English language arts assessment in 2013.

Fortunately, the district's student population generates significant supplemental and concentration funding under the Local Control Funding Formula — \$52 million in 2014–15. Conversations are still under way to determine how these funds can best be used to improve student outcomes. But stakeholders already acknowledge that LCFF has sparked important dialogue about how best to engage the community and tackle the myriad challenges facing its students.

Congregations United for Change), Joseph Williams (Youth Action Project), Dina Walker (BLU Educational Foundation), Erika Delgado (parent), Teresa Alba (District English Learner Advisory Committee chair), Dr. Matty Zamora and Dr. Kennon Mitchell (San Bernardino City Unified School District), and the District Superintendent's Cabinet.

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Photo courtesy of San Bernardino City Unified School District.

LCFF APPEARS EARLY ON DISTRICT'S RADAR, IMPACTS 2013–14 BUDGET

Conversations about LCFF began early in SBCUSD, particularly at school board meetings, where the new funding formula was a frequent topic of conversation. In January 2014, Superintendent Dale Marsden said the district had been “fully engaged with the school board” and anticipated that the broader community engagement process would involve over one thousand community members and district staff.¹

In August 2013, the school board passed a \$19 million resolution to restore positions and programs that had been eliminated during the recession. Three months later, the board approved a \$3 million salary restoration for certificated staff, a year earlier than originally planned.

The choices rankled some community partners. Some groups were confused about how much LCFF money the district received in 2013–14 and how it spent those funds. They were also concerned that these decisions might encumber future LCFF dollars.

“We know they brought back teachers this year and encumbered the money,” said Dr. Lori Collins of Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (COPE).²

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THE DISTRICT MAKES EXTENSIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Despite these early spending decisions, the district pivoted to an extensive and more inclusive engagement strategy in the following months. In a March 2014 interview posted on Facebook, Marsden said the district was committed to ensuring that the final Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) truly reflected the community’s priorities.³ After holding meetings with community members that drew several hundred people, Marsden said the district would create a group of parents, community members, and possibly students “that will actually help us write ...[a] local control accountability plan that’s been drafted by the people of our community.”

The district’s first community LCAP meeting, in November 2013, included a presentation by WestEd on the state’s new funding formula and engaged parents in an activity to align community priorities with the district’s strategic plan.

SBCUSD held dozens of meetings and received feedback from thousands of participants in multiple formats. Stakeholders were kept informed about meetings via the district website, e-mails, newspaper, radio announcements, and auto-dialer calls.

Representatives of community-based organizations COPE, Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC), and Youth Action Project (YAP) acknowledged that the district had generally done “a good job with their messaging and holding general meetings and subcommittee meetings.”

District officials also met with these groups, which work to engage parents and community stakeholders around issues affecting high-need students — particularly African-American students and English learners — to get their thoughts on the LCAP process and content.

These groups provided parents with information about LCFF, asked parents to help set priorities for LCFF spending, and convened forums with board members. They also brought stakeholders to Sacramento to advocate for better transparency and accountability in the LCFF regulations.

Numerous other community organizations worked closely with the district throughout the LCAP process as well. One of these groups, BLU Educational Foundation, agreed that the district’s efforts were commendable. “They did an excellent job, especially for a large district.

Not all parents and community members have experienced community engagement in the same way. As site-level stakeholders make spending decisions, some community members feel the participatory purpose of the law hasn't been met.



Photo courtesy of Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (COPE).

I've been doing parent and community engagement for 13 years, and this set a precedent," shared Dina Walker, the president and CEO.⁴

While some community groups worked together throughout the LCAP development process, not all groups agreed about how and where funds should be directed. The school board determined that actions and services must also target African-American and Latino students (beyond the three subgroups called out in LCFF legislation), sparking a dialogue within the community about equitable (versus equal) distribution of dollars. While some groups felt funding should be distributed proportionally on the basis of subgroup size, others felt that greater sums of money should be directed toward subgroups with the lowest achievement outcomes.

REFLECTIONS OF ENGAGEMENT PROCESS REVEAL A FEW CONCERNS

Despite its extensive engagement efforts, some concerns surfaced about how inclusive and productive the district's efforts were.

"Our concern is that the historical pattern of parent engagement in the district is being repeated," said Sergio Luna of ICUC.⁵

Teresa Alba, chair of the District English Learner Advisory Committee, shared that often the same individuals came to community meetings and that many community members didn't feel persuaded to participate. She attributed this to a lack of confidence in a system in which their voices hadn't traditionally been heard. Alba suggested the district be more conscious of language barriers and hold separate English and Spanish meetings rather than translate English-dominant meetings for Spanish speakers.⁶

The overall praise for the district's outreach efforts is also clouded by worries that SBCUSD spent too much time providing LCFF background information and soliciting stakeholder input to the detriment of determining specific goals, actions, and expenditures in the LCAP. Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services Dr. Matty Zamora describes the emphasis as a deliberate effort to authentically gather community input, guided by the notion that progress sometimes requires "going slow to go fast."⁷

Some community groups experienced frustration with this approach, however. "The district's message was 'Wait until we get the [LCAP] template from the state before doing anything,' but our push was to begin the conversation sooner rather than later," said Dr. Collins.

Some groups, like ICUC, fear that the LCAP process at the school level has negatively impacted parental participation. "In repeating a similar process [now] that they did for the LCAP, it feels like we're going around in circles. Parents are feeling frustrated, like they shouldn't come to future meetings," said Sergio Luna, suggesting that despite the number of stakeholder input sessions, they haven't produced the right outcomes.

Not all parents and community members have experienced community engagement in the same way. While the majority of individuals feel the district has taken on a sincere effort to authentically engage the community, as site-level stakeholders make spending decisions, some community members feel the participatory purpose of the law hasn't been met.

"The LCAP process has been implemented with varying levels of quality at the site level," acknowledged Dr. Kennon Mitchell, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services. "I think we need to better train and model this new process for site leaders."⁸



Photo courtesy of San Bernardino City Unified School District.



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SOME FUNDING ALLOCATIONS STILL UNDETERMINED

Some LCAP expenditures were earmarked for general investments to be specified through a process that is currently unfolding. For example, the district explains that LCAP funding devoted to “African-American achievement services” is being informed by and vetted with groups advocating for black students’ success, in order to create performance indicators and identify the programs and services necessary to help students reach those goals.

But with the 2014–15 school year past the halfway mark, some community members are concerned that programs are not yet determined and want specifics on how LCFF dollars are currently benefiting students who are the furthest behind academically. Community members are still left to wonder if and how the district has completed the process of identifying programs and services within targeted investment areas.

“Even today, we’re still asking the district what they did with some of the funding,” stated Ms. Alba. “If any money is left over, what will happen to those unspent funds?” she asked, noting that district representatives said a final plan would be presented sometime this spring.

Ms. Walker added “I don’t know if there’s continued engagement around what is actually being done with all of the money. I haven’t received emails about any more meetings, and I was on the LCAP subcommittee.”

In striving to be “the best at getting better,” district leaders acknowledged that they have learned valuable lessons from the first year of LCFF implementation. And despite some differing perspectives, many stakeholders engaged in the LCFF implementation process agree that monitoring student outcomes is critical to evaluating current LCAP investments.

“Ultimately, we want to make sure LCFF funds reach targeted student populations and make a positive difference in their lives as a result of those focused resources,” shared Joseph Williams of YAP.

NOTES

¹ Alex Gronke, “San Bernardino City Unified School District,” EdSource, March 20, 2014, <http://edsources.org/2014/san-bernardino-city-unified-school-district/59641>.

² Interview with Lori Collins and Felicia Jones of Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement, Sergio Luna of Inland Congregations United for Change, and Joseph Williams of Youth Action Project, April 4, 2014. Other community perspectives presented in this case study are also from this interview unless noted.

³ Superintendent Dale Marsden, YouTube, March 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Marsden/posts/660973513963109>.

⁴ Interview with Dina Walker, president, BLU Educational Foundation, February 2, 2015.

⁵ Interview with Sergio Luna and Tom Dolan of Inland Congregations United for Change, December 5, 2014. Other comments from this interview are from the same date.

⁶ Interview with Teresa Alba, DELAC chair, January 22, 2015. Other comments from this interview are from the same date.

⁷ Interview with Matty Zamora, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, SBCUSD, December 5, 2014.

⁸ Interview with Kennon Mitchell, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, SBCUSD, January 15, 2015.



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