

## **Jurisdictional Learning: Garden Grove Unified School District**

**By: Dr. Steven Reid, Dr. Kathy Witherow, and Scott Yake**

The YRDSB continues to look beyond its borders to learn from high-performing school districts. Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) in Southern California is a school district that has shown excellent progress based on intentional continuous improvement strategies aimed at closing the opportunity gap for all students. There are 50,000 students in Garden Grove's 46 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 7 secondary schools, 2 special education schools and 2 continuation schools. A majority of the districts' students are Hispanic (54%) and Vietnamese (33%). Garden Grove serves an economically challenged community with a large percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches. GGUSD performance on mathematics state-wide assessments places it above the state average. While performance in both literacy and mathematics has improved, GGUSD has placed a focus on closing the gap between Latino and non-Latino students. A focus on equity was evident in each school visited during the jurisdictional learning experience.

The visit to Garden Grove included three main components: engaging with union leaders; visiting various schools; and meeting with key system leaders to review system practices that led to the success of staff, students, and communities. During this time, the YRDSB team sensed an unyielding pursuit of knowledge, strategies, and actions to raise the bar for all students regardless of cultural or financial background. No door would be closed along the learning journey for any individual or group. Students and families would be engaged to envision not only graduation, but continued success during postsecondary studies. Upon reflection, the visiting team identified five key themes further described in this jurisdictional overview: 1) connection to research; 2) professional learning 3) relationships with unions; 4) intentional strategies to support students at-risk; and 5) expanded definition of student success.

### **Connection to Research**

It did not take long for the YRDSB team to note the importance of research as a foundation for the actions plans of Garden Grove. From union leaders, teachers, principals, and systems leaders, the interrelation between research-based approaches and the actions within schools was consistently noted. We were provided with a copy of *You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers: The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development*. Written by Joel Nudson (2013) from American Institutes for Research, this report chronicles the districts fundamental belief that teachers make the difference when considering student achievement and well-being. An integral part of the district's success includes taking the time to identify its most critical challenges, then reviewing research to strategically plan and resource district initiatives.

Having deeply explored a problem, district leaders strategically identify opportunities to address the root causes they have identified. Possible solutions draw on shared reading, research, and the practices of peers in other California districts, as well as extensive discussion among central office leaders. Because they relate to challenges of human capital, the solutions often involve professional learning opportunities and work with teachers to address student needs.

Comments from teachers reflect a strong district orientation in these approaches toward innovation and research-based strategies. (Knudson, 2013, p. 34)

Throughout our visit, individuals and groups discussed that resource allocation and professional learning opportunities were evidence-based. This provided the impetus and expectation for all staff to engage in district supported initiatives.

Garden Grove is also involved in research through the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, Stanford Graduate School of Education (<http://jgc.stanford.edu/>). The system leadership team of Garden Grove has identified the importance of research; however, fiscal constraints make internal use of data a difficult task. Within this partnership, the district is able to access a large data base called Youth Data Archive (YDA). This archive ... “links data across schools, public agencies, and community based organizations and works with partners to ask and answer key questions about youth” ([http://jgc.stanford.edu/our\\_work/yda.html](http://jgc.stanford.edu/our_work/yda.html), para. 1). Two Garden Grove research questions have been developed to focus current and future research work: 1) Are students’ course placements in math predictive of their failure to meet graduation requirements? 2) What kind of classroom- and school-level practices can help cultivate students’ motivation to learn and academic engagement? The connection between research, policy, and practice was observed at the classroom level as principals and teachers discussed math initiatives that have brought improved achievement. Furthermore, the district is considering the next practices to promote deeper levels of mathematical learning for students as some achievement indicators have recently leveled. This continuous monitoring of student achievement, instructional practice, and research findings demonstrates a genuine commitment to the success of all students.

### **Professional Learning**

We heard several times during our visit to Garden Grove that “*you’ll never be better than your teachers*”. The Superintendent of GGUSD, Gabriela Mafi, and her senior staff shared with us their focus on building the capacity of teachers and school leaders. They use a *wrap around* approach to continuous improvement that focused the professional learning of teachers and school leaders. There is intentionality and purpose in all district initiatives. Capacity building opportunities emerge from an examination of their student achievement data and from input from their teachers. The district central office develops a comprehensive suite of supports that focuses on instructional practice. The following components are part of the comprehensive approach:

1. **Super Week:** A week-long series of workshops, held the week before school begins at the end of August, aimed at addressing specific topics to support teachers in the implementation of new system initiatives. These workshops are designed with teachers and central staff and focus on key elements of the Effective Instruction Framework and Common Core Curriculum that must be implemented in each classroom. Teachers are paid an hourly rate to attend any of these sessions. These sessions are also offered throughout the school year to accommodate teachers not able to attend the before the start of the school year.
2. **Central Office Support:** Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSA) are an integral piece of the GGUSD strategy. Each school has a TOSA assigned to support teachers in classrooms. The focus of the work of TOSAs is determined by the area identified by each school. TOSA engage in co-planning and co-teaching with classroom teachers, develop coaching and training sessions at the school, and work closely with the school Principal to support the instructional leadership needs of the school team. Schools are given regular collaboration time built into the school schedule and the TOSAs may be asked to facilitate professional learning with the staff. TOSAs also will accompany teachers on the demonstration classroom visits to act as facilitator and support the debriefing back at their own schools.
3. **Demonstration Classrooms:** The district has identified designated classrooms throughout the district as demonstration classrooms based on the initiatives that are being implemented in that school year. Every teacher is given release time to visit a

demonstration classroom to observe teachers in other schools implement specific instructional strategies. Demonstration classrooms are seen as an opportunity for leadership beyond the classroom. Demonstration teachers receive additional professional learning on the instructional strategies that are being implemented and have opportunities to work with TOSAs prior to opening their classrooms for visits.

4. In-school Support: Professional learning starts at the school level. There is an emphasis placed on collaboration among teachers. Time is provided for teachers to work together on co-planning and co-teaching, lesson study, and workshops. Principals and TOSAs are co-learners in the process. Key strategies are identified based on school-level data and input from staff.
5. Instructional Supervision: Principals are expected to visit classrooms on a regular basis and give teachers non-evaluative feedback based on observations. It was evident during our visit that Principals were regular visitors in classrooms and were seen as partners by teachers in developing instructional strategies.

This comprehensive wrap around approach to professional learning has led to uncompromised consistency and coherence in instructional practice. We saw a fidelity in the implementation of many of the initiatives identified by the district leadership as essential practice. A focus on mathematics and the implementation of the Effective Instruction Framework were just two of the areas that were evident in each of the classrooms we visited.

### **Relationships with Union**

As noted in the research report written by the *California Collaborative on District Reform* titled “*You’ll Never be Better Than Your Teachers*”, the Garden Grove Unified School District ‘sees teachers as the individuals most essential to the success of the Garden Grove students’. As a result, the Garden Grove office staff work intentionally and collaboratively with their local teacher union – the Garden Grove Education Association (GGEA) – in the relentless pursuit of teacher development. Whereas relationships between district management and labor unions often become adversarial in other districts, the district-union relationship in Garden Grove is anything but. Interactions are respectful, asset-based, and in alignment with district-union engagement protocols. The protocols were developed collectively and supported by district wide school-based Union Representative/Principal training. Such protocols help establish the foundational relationships in schools and are characterized as open and supportive. The protocols are modeled by district and union leadership when they meet, and have moved conversations from “contract maintenance” to ones directly related to teacher development and the professionalization of practice.

At the district level, the GGEA plays an active role in both district and local school improvement opportunities – a responsibility embedded in their local collective agreements as well as in the practices at both the school and district level. The collective overall goal is to improve teacher capacity. This re-conceptualization of a district-union relationship is best characterized by a statement made by Garden Grove’s Assistant Superintendent of Personnel, Joli Armitage: “Our union is our partner and I see them as an advocate, not an adversary. We’re all teachers; they’re just teacher leaders.”

For further reading around Garden Grove's approach to human capital development see the report titled *"You'll Never be Better Than Your Teachers"* at [http://www.cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA\\_Collaborative\\_Garden\\_Grove.pdf](http://www.cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA_Collaborative_Garden_Grove.pdf)

### **Intentional Strategies to Support Students At-Risk**

The focus on the success of all students required the Garden Grove staff at all levels of the organization to specifically identify strategies to support students at-risk of not succeeding in and beyond school. Due to the low socio-economic factors confronting many students and families, system leaders considered programs that would result in closing the achievement gap, for example, traditionally lower success of Hispanic students. As a foundational component of her vision, Gabriela Mafi continues to promote a belief that envisions success inclusive of all students regardless of their racial or financial background. Several strategies have been enacted as part of a strategic action plan, including the following:

1. **AVID: Advancement Via Individual Determination** began in 1980 and now supports over 700,000 students in many countries. Garden Grove has not only engaged in this mentor program, the specific context of the district has been considered to meet the needs of specific students. In grade 6, students who are "on the bubble" are identified, that is, those students who may or may not be successful in middle and secondary school. If students join this program, they partake in an AVID elective from grade 7 to graduation. The course focuses on higher-order thinking, study skills, self advocacy, and other skills found in successful students. The success rate of the program worldwide is exciting, for example, 98 % of seniors were on track to graduate and 90% were planning on attending a postsecondary institution ([http://www.avid.org/abo\\_whatisavid.html](http://www.avid.org/abo_whatisavid.html)). An important component of AVID includes the involvement of mentors from postsecondary in the elective courses. Garden Grove staff were very strategic in identifying the AVID mentors, encouraging current graduating students to come back as mentors. During our visit, it could be seen that the postsecondary mentors came from the same communities of the students, thereby providing a clear message that everyone can be successful.
2. **Parent Liaison Workers/Parent Greeters:** Due to the demographics of Garden Grove, many parents and students who enter the district do not speak English as a first language. In fact, the acquisition of English may be minimal or non-existent upon entrance. To build relationships with parents and the surrounding communities, GGUSD hires Parent Liaison Workers. During our visit, we met Parent Liaison Workers who came to the school for a half day. They would help parents navigate the education system during enrolment, as well as provide guidance concerning the culture of the school (e.g., homework expectations, communication with teacher). The Parent Liaison Workers would also support the families in navigating other community systems external to the school. Schools also accessed Parent Greeters based on the demographics of the student population. If the school had a high proportion of Hispanic or Vietnamese students, Parent Greeters who speak the language would be at the school entrance to welcome parents. This informal process provided parents with a smile and someone who could readily answer parental questions.
3. **Caring and Motivating Classrooms:** In attempts to promote the success of students, the concept of meeting the needs of the "entire" student was mentioned several times during our visit. Research involving the care for and motivation of students was noted as a continued focus in the district. For example, system leaders were utilizing research from the

John W. Gardner Center, *Caring and Motivating Middle School Classrooms* (<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/resources/publications/Motivation%20-%20Feb%202012.pdf>). Based on this research, the motivation of students to learn is critical to their current and continued success:

- All types of students benefit from caring practices in the classroom;
- Students' achievement histories and demographics do not determine their future academic trajectories; and
- Research that captures current practices provides a unique and valuable lens.

(Strobel & Borsato, 2012, p. 6)

Throughout our visit to Garden Grove, the importance of caring perceptions was highlighted. The belief systems of educators and leaders were being challenged to ensure that all students were respected, valued, and provided with a challenging educational environment.

The intentionality of focus was evident throughout GGUSD. This focus included a concentrated effort to engage students at-risk of not graduating and/or being able to access post-secondary education. Although student achievement was a vital part of their mandate, GGUSD acknowledged that the well-being of students could not and would not be ignored. Thereby, staff engaged in providing respectful environments for both students and parents; parents as the first educator of their child.

## **Conclusion**

There were many key jurisdictional lessons that can be taken away from Garden Grove. Their relentless focus on student achievement and well-being to ensure the district meets the needs of all students, especially students at-risk, is underscored in discussions and visitations. The coherence and consistency in instructional practice was evident throughout each school, and can be attributed to a comprehensive wrap around approach to professional learning and focus on the importance of strong school and system leadership. The cornerstone of Garden Grove's approach; however, is the importance they place on cultivating strong relationships throughout the district. The culture driven by the district's leadership is based on collaborating and giving voice to teachers and parents. The relationship with the teacher union was particularly inspiring as all levels of the organization worked to further understand and promote teacher professionalism.