

**TURNING AROUND
A HIGH POVERTY DISTRICT:**



**Learning
from
Sanger**

Jane L. David & Joan E. Talbert

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Foreword

by Ken Doane, Program Director, S.H. Cowell Foundation

AMONG THE SIMPLEST yet most profound statements I've heard about school reform is "it has to be something that ordinary people can do." It was the mid-1990s; in the genealogy of school reform, after *A Nation at Risk*, before *No Child Left Behind*, long before the *Common Core*. The university research center where I worked had convened stakeholders to hear the results of our federally-funded study, and the speaker of those words was a senior representative of a national teachers' union. Our study looked for links between the way schools are organized and the character of teaching and learning they produce. As usual for that kind of research, our finding was "it depends."

What it depended on, we found, were qualities such as community, coherence and authenticity. If educators were inspired by and guided toward such qualities, then structural changes might be a means to achieve them; but, on their own, structural changes were immaterial. It seemed to our union leader that we were describing an ideal world peopled by extraordinary, intellectual and apolitical beings.

The town of Sanger, in California's broad, flat Central Valley, is an ordinary place where educators are learning to do the extraordinary. It's the ordinary that strikes you as the town comes into view, 12 miles east of Fresno, farmers' fields and orchards giving way to a low line of buildings under a classic metal water-tower. Sanger Unified School District also is ordinary in most respects. Although the district operates a couple of charters, most of its 20 schools are traditional neighborhood schools. Most teachers earned their credentials at the State college in Fresno. The superintendent came up through the ranks and answers to an elected school board whose members are indistinguishable from those of other local boards. Sanger High School opened a new site in the early 2000s, with classroom pods spread about the campus in the California style, but there's nothing "alternative" or high-tech about the place. The old high school now houses a middle school with 1,500 students. There's a Lincoln elementary and a Jefferson and a Madison. On football Fridays, everyone wears school colors.

In 2007, when the S. H. Cowell Foundation made the grant that ultimately resulted in this book, standardized test scores for Sanger — where more than 70%

of students live in poverty and nearly 40% start their schooling as English Language Learners — had already surpassed the State average. But those were merely test scores. Visiting classrooms, joining teachers' meetings and talking with principals and district leaders, as well as students, what I observed was more jarring than the scores. Flexible use of time, roles and resources; whatever students needed. Yet, also consistency: a common language about instruction, and a ritual concern to check students' emergent understandings of key concepts. And above all, teamwork; a school spirit that had nothing to do with football.

In the pages that follow, two deeply knowledgeable and accomplished scholars, Jane David and Joan Talbert, explain in clear terms how this ordinary district became so extraordinary. Drawing on four years of close study in Sanger Unified and on their long, varied careers in education research, the authors distill a set of simple, weighty and genuinely challenging lessons for anyone who works in public education.

Their intention in writing the book, and Cowell's purpose in publishing it, is not to encourage others to "replicate" Sanger. Rather, we invite you to follow Sanger by focusing on learning. Because learning is what happens in Sanger: adults open themselves to learning so they can better facilitate children's learning, and then the adults reflect on that process to understand how further learning could occur. So, as you read, consider what you may be able to learn about your own district, school or classroom, and how you can engage your colleagues in reflection on the lessons and principles that our authors illuminate.

As we enter a promising new generation of reform shaped by the Common Core State Standards, it's my hope that the Sanger story will also remind us that progress still depends more on human qualities than on any policy, procedure or technology. There are more than three million public school teachers in the US today. By definition, most members of any group that large will be "ordinary." Working in isolation, without time or meaningful support for their professional development, most teachers will produce mundane results. But if schools become places of professional learning and practice for teachers, then teachers, collectively, can enable students to thrive. The final aim of school reform must be to create *learning organizations*, in both senses of that term: organizations for which learning is both the end and the means. As the Sanger story richly demonstrates, a school system with those qualities can develop anywhere. It will take time, and it won't look the same in every place. But I believe it is something that ordinary people can do.

San Francisco
August, 2013

1. Understanding the path to success

THE PAST DECADE OF EDUCATION REFORM has pressed districts to increase test scores each year and close gaps between subgroups of students. Few have succeeded over the long haul, particularly those serving large proportions of students in poverty and not fluent in English. The story we tell here is an exception—a district that transformed itself from a traditional bureaucratic system into a learning organization able to continuously improve. First some background.

Policy architects assume that setting standards and holding schools accountable with sanctions is sufficient to bring about improvement. Experience proves otherwise. Few local systems are able to respond effectively. Under the time pressure of annual judgments based on test scores, school districts often respond by grabbing what they hope will be a quick fix. They look for programs or structures to adopt and assume they can be put in place quickly. Government agencies and private foundations fuel this approach by seeking "innovations" and "best practices" that will show results quickly.

District leaders and funders typically focus on the question "What works?" Rarely do they ask "Why does this work? How did you make it work?" Researchers fall into a similar trap, seeking to identify characteristics of successful districts but rarely going into enough depth over a long period of time to understand what it takes to bring about success that lasts. All tip their hats to the need for "building capacity" but few have identified effective strategies for doing so.

Every district wants to know how to become a system that keeps improving results for students. The answer is not a simple one. Achieving real and continuous improvement demands organizational conditions rare in school systems. Creating a professional culture focused on student learning, with leaders at every level working to build a strong teaching force, are not quick fixes.

Yet some districts have achieved this. We hone in on one such district, Sanger Unified in California's Central Valley. Based on our four-year study, we sketch the story

of how the district managed to transform its culture and reverse declining outcomes.¹ Moreover, by creating a system that continuously gathers evidence to identify and solve problems, Sanger is well-positioned for upcoming shifts in policy. Key are the transitions to national Common Core State Standards (CCSS), new state standards for measuring and classifying English learners, and new CCSS-aligned assessments intended to capture deeper thinking and learning.

2. Why Sanger?

IN 1999, APPLICANTS FOR POSITIONS in the Sanger Unified School District saw a billboard as they drove into town: “Welcome to the Home of 400 Unhappy Teachers.” The billboard was sponsored by the teachers’ union. The billboard was sponsored by the teachers’ union. Ten years later, a teacher active in union leadership said: “There is not one principal in this town I would not work for.”

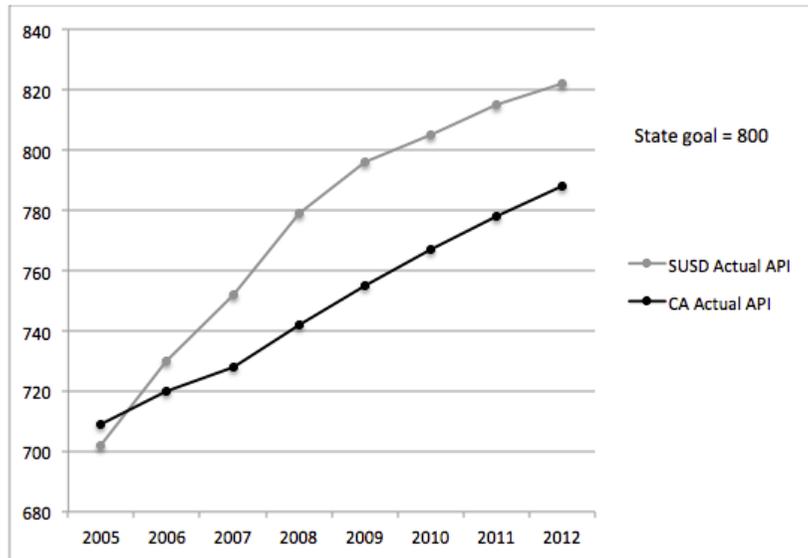
This shift in teachers’ attitude is just one of many indicators of the district’s transformation. Today hundreds of visitors walk through classrooms each year in this overwhelmingly poor and minority district. They see students engaged in lessons and teachers unruffled by unexpected visitors. Sanger’s test score gains for all students and for English learners have surpassed average state gains each year since testing began under No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Located in California’s Central Valley, noted for its extreme poverty and prevalence of students who are English learners, Sanger Unified is recognized nationally as an exceptional “turnaround district.” It stands out for having made steady improvement in student achievement across the district since 2004, when it was named as one of the 98 lowest performing districts in the state and seven schools were subject to Program Improvement (PI) requirements under federal law. Within a few years, all seven moved out of PI status and four of them went on to achieve State Distinguished Schools status.

Sanger at a glance

20 schools	73% low income
10,800 students	84% minority
PPE \$8,174	71% Hispanic
	22% English learners

Sanger Students Outpace the State on the API

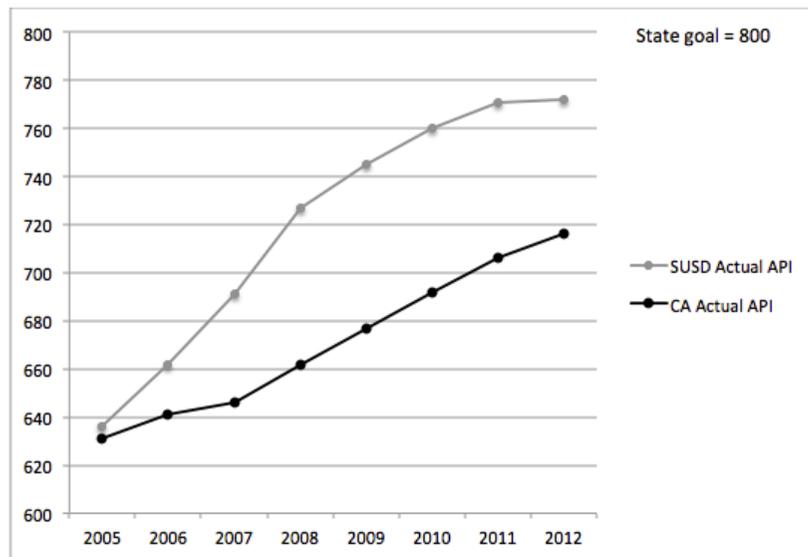


By the end of the 2011-12 school year the district’s Academic Performance Index (API) of 822 met the state target of 800 and was substantially higher than the statewide average of 788.² Sanger’s English learners also surpassed the state’s API by a wide margin: 772 versus 716 statewide.³ Increases in percent of students proficient on the California Standards Test display the same pattern. In 2004 Sanger students, including English learners, scored below the state average by 10 percentage points. By 2012 Sanger exceeded the state for all students and for English learners in both reading and math, with 64 percent of English learners scoring proficient in math.

Sanger has a high-school graduation rate of 94 percent for Latinos, close to the 97 percent rate for all students. When Sanger’s schools are compared to demographically similar schools across the state, the majority rank 10 of 10, the highest possible rank. In addition to academic success, Sanger has received numerous honors for character education and community involvement. Visiting educators often say they are amazed by students’ orderly and respectful behavior. On the 2012 annual survey of parents completed by 87 percent of all parents, 91 percent rated the overall quality of their child’s school as excellent or good.⁴

These impressive accomplishments have piqued considerable interest in Sanger. What did the district do to achieve continuous improvement? Our research was designed to unpack the Sanger story — how did they move from the bottom of the pack to the top? We have uncovered a story that is both simple and complex. It’s simple because district leaders have stuck to a vision of what their learning organization would look like and a few principles for moving the system in that direction. It’s complex because it interweaves many pieces at many levels.

Sanger English Learners Outpace the State on the API



3. Overview of Sanger's path to continuous improvement

WHEN SUPERINTENDENT Marc Johnson and Deputy Superintendent Rich Smith took on the challenge of turning around their district's failing schools in 2004, they confronted a culture designed to perpetuate the status quo. The way they talk now about "business as usual" in those days is pretty much the way critics describe school districts. Adult interests were put first, teachers worked in isolation behind closed classroom doors, instruction centered on following textbooks and pacing guides whether or not students were learning, principals were essentially building managers, and the notion of accountability meant complying with external regulations.

Johnson and Smith agreed that nothing short of transforming the district culture would work to improve student success. Focus on adult interests would be replaced by focus on student learning and commitment to their success.

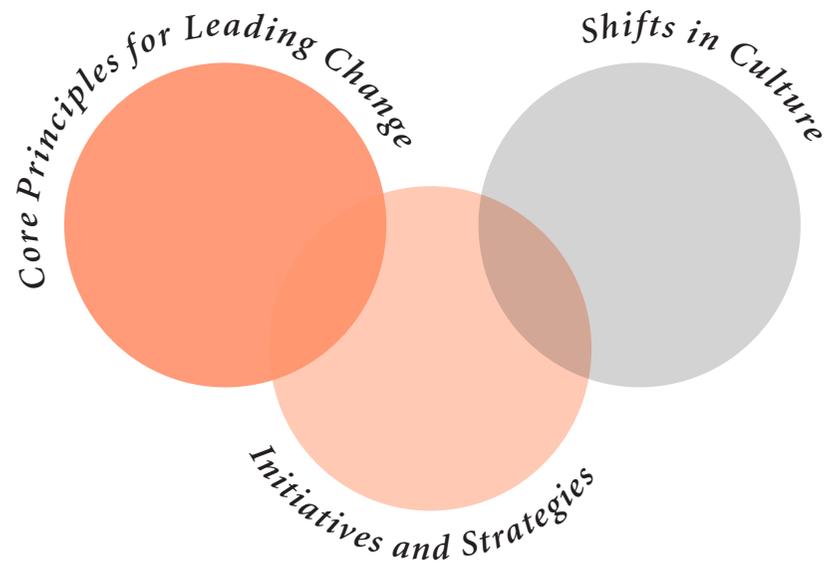
"Every Child, Every Day, Whatever It Takes"

District leaders' emerging view of the key elements of the district culture that had to change led to four shifts they saw as the underpinnings of continuous improvement.

<i>SHIFTING THE DISTRICT CULTURE</i>	
<i>From</i>	<i>To</i>
Professional isolation	Collaboration and shared responsibility
Following the textbook	Diagnosing student learning needs
Principals as managers	Principals as leaders of adult learning
Top-down mandates and compliance	Reciprocal accountability

Success would require collaborating, diagnosing student learning needs, learning from their efforts, and sharing accountability for results. Although these conditions might sound like good common sense, they push against what is typical in school districts. Sanger leaders thus took on the challenge of changing people’s minds and habits.

In bringing about these fundamental shifts, district leaders – and a growing cadre of leaders across the schools — followed three core principles for leading change. The first is the fundamental idea that *change is developmental* — it takes time and moves through stages. The second is that decisions must be *grounded in evidence*, from decisions about individual students to those about district wide practices. The third is that building a collaborative culture requires leadership that understands the importance of the human side of the district system with emphasis on *relationships and respect* for adults as well as students and their families. What the Sanger leaders actually did — the particular initiatives and strategies they pursued over time — both leveraged the desired culture shifts and followed the core leadership principles.



This approach to district reform is a significant departure from typical reform efforts. It’s not one school at a time or one piece at a time. It’s not a particular program or a particular curriculum. It’s not Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) by themselves. It doesn’t rely on outside vendors. Instead, Sanger leaders took on the daunting challenge of shifting assumptions and routines in ways intended to build a learning culture for adults and students. Fundamental to their vision and leadership is a respect for educators as professionals capable of making good decisions for kids. The challenge was harnessing and building that potential.

Sanger’s history poses a challenge: How can other districts learn from it? Much of what they did sounds sensible and familiar because the buzzwords are everywhere: professional learning communities, data-based decision making, instructional leadership, reciprocal accountability. What’s unusual about Sanger is not the particular strategies they chose to further their goals, it’s how they pulled it off—how they used a set of beliefs, a vision of a learning organization, and a set of principles for leading change to transform their culture.

In the following sections we first describe Sanger’s core principles for leading change. We trace the evolution of Sanger’s primary initiatives and strategies, grouped under collaboration, instruction, leadership, and accountability. Describing what Sanger actually did illuminates how district leaders worked systematically over time to create conditions for success and continuous learning for adults and students.

4. Core principles for changing district culture

SANGER LEADERS did not say, “Let’s make a plan for changing the culture of the district.” They understood the importance of shifting the norms, beliefs and values of educators in the district. But not by conducting business as usual. No strategic plans, no endless meetings, no search for specific programs or other magic bullets.

Instead Sanger leaders had conversations inside and outside of the district about how they might bring about the desired changes. They began to act on a set of core principles that would eventually guide all of their work. The principles were never written down nor explicated in the way we describe them here. But they are captured in district slogans and consistently conveyed through leaders’ actions.

“It’s All About Student Learning”

“Don’t Blame the Kids”

“Together We Can”

Principle 1: Take a developmental approach to change

Sanger leaders knew that significant change — in beliefs, in practices, in relationships — takes time. Like students, adults start at different places and learn in different ways. Taking a developmental approach means starting small and building over time, giving adults repeated opportunities to learn from formal training, from coaching, and from colleagues. Whether the change is about relationships, or beliefs, or teaching strategies, Sanger’s approach was to select a few complementary strategies and stay focused year after year. They assumed gradual change and, using evidence from experience, described typical developmental phases for each focus area.

Principle 2: Ground decisions in evidence

The idea of data-driven decision making has swept the nation's schools. Advances in data technology, a proliferation of books, and district policies push educators to use data of all sorts — rapid compilation of teacher-made test results, data walls, progress charts for students, grade levels, schools — to improve instruction. But translating data into action that improves student achievement is no simple matter. Sanger supports educators at all levels of the system to do just this. The emphasis is on how data are used and what happens as a result. Whether the data are the results of a weekly teacher-made math test or a survey of high school teachers on their instructional concerns or classroom walkthroughs to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses, Sanger expects decisions to be grounded in evidence of what needs to improve. This means:

- looking closely at student data of all sorts to define priorities and approaches to improvement,
- using feedback loops to test out and improve the approaches,
- using evidence from pilot projects to ground district wide choices and create an appetite for the initiative.

Evidence is the backbone of feedback that informs teacher, principal, and district administrator judgments about where to focus attention, where to increase or decrease support, and how to refine district strategies based on experiences inside schools and classrooms.⁵

Principle 3: Build shared commitments and relationships to sustain change

Bringing about change in “the way we do business” is dramatically different from asking educators to implement a particular program. It depends on communicating purpose, building trusting relationships among people, and fostering ownership of the reform vision. Sanger's superintendent was able to translate his personal passion about each child reaching full potential into a public passion. His moral leadership was certainly not the whole story but it provided the foundation on which social trust and shared commitment were built. The “Sanger way” of leading and sustaining change is rooted in principles for organizational change developed by management consultants through their work in the private sector. Sanger leaders often refer to working “Below the green line,” by which they mean being transparent in communications and paying attention to building relationships to support change. This means developing the human and social infrastructure fundamental to real and lasting change as well as system structures and operations.⁶

5. Shift to a collaboration culture

“TOGETHER WE CAN!” captures the beliefs and actions that sustain Sanger's continuous improvement. But creating a strong spirit of collaboration — among teachers, principals, and central office staff — didn't happen over night. Shifting the district professional culture from isolation and protected turf took several years and went hand in hand with other strategic improvement efforts. Superintendent Johnson saw collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs) as “the framework of our work. All the pieces that we are trying to do flow into that.” In time PLCs at all district levels became skilled in using evidence to focus, evaluate and refine their efforts to improve student achievement.

Teacher PLCs. Visitors to Sanger are struck by its collaborative teaching culture. Following the DuFour PLC model, teachers in grade-level or course teams use four questions to determine specific standards and goals for student learning, assess results of instruction for each class and student, and decide how to respond to students who did not meet the standards and to those who did. They openly share results of their students' performance on common formative assessments and look to one another for advice on how to improve instruction.

The four questions that guide PLCs:

- 1) “*What do we want students to learn?*”
- 2) “*How will we know when they have learned it?*”
- 3) “*How will we respond if they have not learned it?*”
- 4) “*How will we respond when learning has already occurred?*”

Visiting educators, especially high school teachers, often ask why and how Sanger teachers came to do these things. The answer, in part, is that district leaders

through their actions convey their respect for educators as professionals who daily make key decisions about teaching and learning. They charged teams of teachers with students at the same grade level or in the same middle or high school courses with the authority and responsibility to use evidence to improve their results. After mandating PLC structures and routines, district and school leaders worked to support each teacher team in developing trusting relationships, skills in using common formative assessments, transparency in sharing results and information about their teaching, and mutual accountability for the success of all students.

District policies and supports for change evolved to meet developmental needs. First Sanger made sure that educators learned about and committed to PLCs, sending waves of school teams to DuFour conferences (more than half participated during the first five years). And they created necessary conditions for PLCs, requiring each school to devote a “late start” or “early release” time every other week and each teacher team to turn in an agenda and minutes for each meeting to their principal.

Gradually, Sanger leaders developed a “spectrum of learning” rubric to track each PLC’s progress on a developmental continuum and focus strategic support. They recognized that teacher teams and schools are not uniform in developmental trajectories. Some teams struggle with teacher turnover (retirements, moves to another school or district, moves to another grade level in the school) and the need to reestablish trusting relationships and routines. Some were stymied by philosophical differences that take time to work through. Others dealt with challenges of size – including too many or too few teachers. Taking a developmental approach to leading change, district and school leaders use evidence and involve the teams in identifying priorities for their progress.

Teachers look back on their journey toward a PLC culture:

- * “During the first year, there was not necessarily resistance, but people were unsure. Now we really want PLC time.” (*Veteran middle school teacher*)
- * “[Being in a PLC] shifted the focus away from me closing the door on my classroom to looking at the kids.” (*Veteran high school teacher*)
- * “I couldn’t have made it through these first three years without my grade level partners.... The PLCs really help you work together to be sure all the kids are getting it [standards] and see what one teacher is doing who is successful.” (*New elementary school teacher*)

Central office collaboration. District administrators who oversee schools came up through the ranks in Sanger so they know firsthand what it means to develop and support a collaborative culture. Now they lead cross-school PLCs and direct various district improvement initiatives. Together they form a learning community that uses evidence from their work with schools to improve their practice, deliberates over how to address internal and external challenges, and learns through their daily interactions. This is a far cry from the mid-2000s when nine departments were run by directors who avoided interaction and competed for resources.

District leaders shifted the culture by forging dialogue and insisting on an imperative of working together to improve student success. The first convening was “horrendous” but district leadership meetings gradually developed into a problem-solving forum focused on evidence of student needs. A notable outcome was collaboration between the Special Education department and other units responsible for instruction, notoriously divided over preferences for assessments, as they came to share the view that “all kids are our kids.”

Cross-school and school-district collaboration. Sanger principals and school leaders participate in teams of three or four schools that serve similar student populations and grade levels and are facilitated by one of four district academic administrators. In the current design each school PLC decides a focus for the year and meets monthly to do classroom walkthroughs, rotating schools and sharing observations of patterns of strength and areas for improvement relevant to the focus. For example, one team of principals from schools with the most English Learners spent two years focusing on English Language Development (ELD) instruction and developed guidelines and tools to support improvement. This work evolved into a district ELD pilot, supported by foundation funding, which involved all district schools in the third year. Such teams support school administrators and provide district administrators with a sense of what is going on in classrooms and what principals are concerned about. Over time the teams evolved into principal PLCs that meet informally.

“All Kids Are Our Kids”

District-community collaboration. From the start district leaders worked with the school board to develop strong relationships of mutual respect, shared vision, and commitment to sustaining the district’s approach to continuous improvement. Sanger’s success reflects and reinforces solid board support. The broader Sanger community comes together to support youth through its Community of Caring Task

Force, initiated by the district and local clergy in response to gang violence. The task force — including representatives of civic, religious, and community agencies — convenes twice monthly to share information and plan joint efforts. The district partners with parents directly through: 1) a Family Resource Center located at one of the highest-poverty schools; 2) the PIQE (Parent Involvement in Quality Education) program that teaches parents how to support their children’s academic success and graduated 1500 parents during 2006-2012; and 3) proactive parent engagement at each school. In the 2012 survey 81 percent of district parents gave their school ratings of excellent or good on “efforts to involve parents.”

6. Shift to diagnosing student needs

SANGER LEADERS USED A PHASED APPROACH to improving instruction that evolved as needs became more clearly defined and external demands changed course. They began by adopting an approach to instruction intended to ensure that students are pushed to master grade-level standards and that all teachers have a set of instructional strategies to accomplish this goal. As teachers developed new skills and got better at understanding grade level standards and identifying student needs, the district adapted the special education model of RTI (Response to Intervention) for *all* students, creating a pyramid of interventions targeted to three broad levels of student need. The third phase focuses on English learners, strengthening their English Language Development (ELD) instruction and integrating ELD into core classroom instruction. With Common Core on the way, a new phase is underway analyzing and experimenting with instructional strategies and lessons that reflect the more demanding standards.

Classroom instruction. As a starting point, Sanger adopted an instructional approach that had proved successful at its poorest rural elementary school with a Latino student body, half of whom were English learners. This local evidence helped pave the way for its acceptance at other schools. Rather than providing a pre-specified curriculum, the approach — adapted from Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) — defines a set of key instructional principles designed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of instruction, especially for low-performing students. They include: 1) making learning objectives explicit for students, 2) checking for understanding by calling on students randomly and having students hold up whiteboards, 3) reinforcing learning through student interaction in pairs, and 4) closely monitoring each student’s progress towards grade-level standards.

“We knew what the standards were but we didn’t know how to define them for 7 year olds.”

Elementary teacher

The district offered training to all teachers and their principals and, over a period of several years, almost all attended one or more multi-day training sessions. With input from teachers, district leaders created a rubric that allows teachers, PLCs, and principals to view a continuum of progress and judge where they stand. This sent the message that EDI was a high-priority expectation for all teachers, reinforced by the district expectation that principals would lead and support these changes in instruction and be accountable for making progress. In fact, principals were required to teach at least one EDI lesson in order to develop and demonstrate their understanding of EDI.

Sanger’s developmental approach framed how principals introduced instructional changes in each school, resulting in different strategies for sequencing implementation. For example, one principal asked teachers to choose which elements of EDI they would tackle first. It also influenced their shift from using external EDI trainers after the early years to using their own staff, tailoring the training to their specific needs.

Bumps in the Road

Pressing for new instructional practices wasn’t all smooth sailing:

- Teachers, especially secondary, did not believe the new approach worked well for more complex content, straining relationships with district staff and requiring a renegotiation of expectations.
- Across grade levels, teachers struggled with having enough time at the end of class for independent practice, freeing them to work with struggling students.

Instructional interventions. Targeting classroom instruction to grade-level standards means that many students, especially English learners, need considerable scaffolding and re-teaching to reach the goal. Rather than lowering expectations for grade-level work, district leaders embraced RTI. With origins in special education, RTI defines a Pyramid of Interventions which begins with the classroom teacher and moves to successively more intensive interventions as students’ needs require. Along with instructional interventions, Sanger teachers created tiered behavioral interventions. Together, their structured approach to instruction and the districtwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support approach created an atmosphere conducive to learning that is striking to outside visitors who serve similar students.

Collaborating with their special education leaders who were already ahead of the curve in implementing full inclusion and RTI, Sanger leaders embraced the model as appropriate for all students, not only those who were candidates for special education. This conception of interventions fits well with 1) the focus on data in EDI and in PLCs to identify skill weaknesses, 2) with their fundamental belief that all children should be helped to reach their potential, and 3) with their culture of collaboration. It also reflects an unusual level of close relationships and shared responsibility between classroom teachers and special education teachers crossing departmental boundaries. Realizing the claim that “all kids are our kids” is in stark contrast to many districts around the country which interpret RTI as a federal mandate for special education and approach it with a compliance mentality.

“Every Child, Every Day, Whatever It Takes”

District leaders began the push for interventions by asking schools to develop their own approaches. A few years in they saw too many schools struggling and shifted to a development strategy that has worked well in a number of contexts: 1) fact finding to identify the nature of the problem, 2) launching a small pilot with a couple of schools showing promise, and 3) ultimately having the pilot schools train the others in successful practices. Two schools collaborated to develop specific forms, tests, and structures to ensure that interventions would not only serve their instructional goals but would also meet federal requirements for evidence identifying students for special education. Once the pilot schools completed their task with time dedicated to reviewing research and collaborating with a district RTI support person, they trained teams from every school sharing all the tools they had developed.

“All hands on deck”

While slow to develop, most elementary schools have designed complex arrangements that permit reorganizing students twice during the school day: (1) to work in small groups by performance level made possible by having most adults in the building teach an intervention class, and (2) deploying students by language level for ELD instruction. The middle school sets aside time after lunch for “academic seminars” which range from remedial to enrichment. The high school has few degrees of freedom and struggles to get students to come after school.

Renewed focus on English Language Development. Although Sanger’s English learners were successful in comparison to statewide averages and comparable schools and districts, several pieces of evidence suggested that ELD instructional approaches merited a closer look. District leaders observed that ELD practices varied widely across schools providing further impetus to sharpen instruction for English learners which, as they discovered, has implications for English speaking students as well.

Three elementary schools whose principals were a PLC agreed to become an ELD pilot, joined by others in the district with ELD expertise. For two years, the group met monthly, rotating among their three schools where they observed instruction and student work as a basis for their discussions. Their work uncovered the finding that direct instruction was limiting student conversation — critical for language learners — and that teachers needed to ask questions that would provoke thoughtful conversations. They observed that ELD was disconnected from core classroom instruction so their work included ways of linking the two, including the use of ELD time to foreshadow vocabulary and skills in upcoming core lessons.

At the end of two years, the pilot participants presented their findings to principals and other representatives from all district schools. Explaining the collaborative work they had done and what they had learned, they invited the other schools to “join the pilot” as a way to communicate that this is still a work in progress that will benefit from experiences of all the schools.

Preparing for Common Core. Sanger has done an extraordinary job of meeting the goals and demands put forth by current state and federal requirements. As in most districts, Sanger has given top priority to raising test scores, which means paying close attention to the standards that are tested and the form in which they are presented on the annual State test. These drive the curriculum and become primary measures of success for every student, classroom, and school. Criticisms of the California Standards Test are widespread, yet they define the system in which the state’s school districts operate.

District leaders are hopeful that the new Common Core standards will provide the needed external signal for developing curriculum and assessments that require more higher-order thinking. Already many steps are underway. Teacher representatives from each school in each subject have volunteered for multiple training sessions. After each, they take back information and resources to their PLCs and collect student work to bring to subsequent sessions. Other teachers have volunteered for cross-grade lesson study teams to design sample lessons that build across the grades.

So begins a new chapter in Sanger’s continuous improvement journey, this one prompted by the confluence of a diagnosed need and the potential opportunity afforded by more demanding standards.

7. Shift to leadership for learning

WHEN SUPERINTENDENT JOHNSON and Deputy Superintendent Smith launched the PLC initiative in the early days of Sanger’s reform, they knew that creating a culture of teacher collaboration depended on all principals having deep understanding of the vision for instructional improvement and knowing how to assess and support each teacher team’s progress. Sanger’s vision of continuous improvement and approach to leading change attracted professionals who were ready to commit to an agenda focused on adult learning and collaboration. Today Sanger district and school leaders have been steeped in the district culture and principles for leading change.

Principal leadership. Sanger’s reform turned principals into leaders of teacher learning. District leaders shifted the focus from managing the school building to supporting progress on the culture reform agenda. They did this by building the instructional knowledge of principals and assistant principals — going well beyond the typical workshops or exhortations to principals to become instructional leaders. They held principals accountable for tracking progress on key initiatives, and required that principals teach EDI lessons to develop their understanding of what teachers were being asked to do.

“Hope Is Not a Strategy”

In the early days of Sanger’s reform, district leaders invested heavily in developing principals’ clear understanding of what the district was asking of teachers. Principals are the first to be sent to workshops for teacher training and they develop leadership skills through various district forums that call on them to use evidence to focus priorities or that support their learning through collaboration. Walkthroughs deepened principals’ understanding of classroom instruction and honed their skills in evaluating and providing constructive feedback to teachers. Principal Summit presentations were a

key strategy for developing principals' use of data to focus improvement efforts as described in the next section.

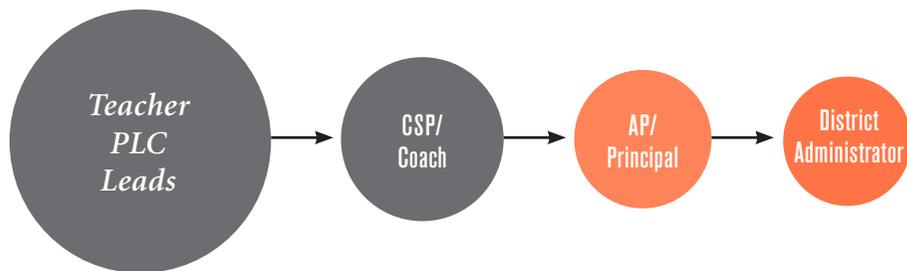
Teacher leadership. In every school, teachers lead the grade level or course group PLCs. This is often the first opportunity teachers have to take on leadership responsibilities. To carry out this role, they must understand the purpose and function of PLCs as well as develop interpersonal skills to facilitate their teams through bumps in the road. Teacher leadership grows too through school-based leadership teams that span grade levels and content areas. Each school's leadership team attends district wide training sessions throughout the year and teachers are responsible for sharing what they have learned with their grade level team. Initially, training sessions built school leaders' expertise in the core reform initiatives. Each year the training delved more deeply into particular aspects of each initiative. For example, the focus for 2011-12 was developing students' academic language and writing; the following year the focus was on language development in the context of the Common Core standards.

Leadership pipeline. Since 2008 not one principal or district administrator was brought in from outside when vacancies were created as principals moved up or on to new frontiers. This speaks volumes about the district's success in growing leadership for the culture of continuous improvement its leaders envisioned nearly a decade ago.

Inevitably, administrators leave. One downside of success is that other districts seek to hire your staff. Also, leaders seek district office positions elsewhere since Sanger has a limited number. Although few if any have left Sanger because they are dissatisfied, personal reasons and retirement also account for leadership vacancies.

Typically, when a district loses strong leaders, it launches a search for outside candidates. Sanger leaders made a conscious decision instead to "grow their own," believing that Sanger's culture and practices are best preserved by those already familiar with them. Sanger leaders are confident that they can develop their own staff to become leaders. To date they have demonstrated that this approach works well: school coaches, called Curriculum Service Providers (CSPs), rise from the ranks of teachers with encouragement and support from their principals and peers. Strong CSPs and even teachers become assistant principals first or move directly into principalships. Teachers who desire to move to administrative positions are helped by a collaborative arrangement between Sanger and Fresno State University. FSU brings its administration credentialing program to Sanger so teachers and CSPs can sign up and attend classes in the district. This arrangement is not only convenient, but it creates a support group among those enrolled in the program — a natural PLC.

Growing our own: Sanger's leadership pipeline



8. Shift to reciprocal accountability

SANGER LEADERS sought a balanced notion of accountability — one grounded in professionalism and support rather than mandates and punishments. They did not shy away from accountability. Quite the contrary. Sanger leaders built mechanisms for evidence-based accountability throughout the school system, for teachers and administrators and staff. Each aims to balance demands on educators with the supports needed to succeed.

Sanger’s approach is unusual because it: (1) holds teachers and administrators accountable for using evidence in the decisions they make in their quest to improve student achievement, (2) creates a culture in which doing so is viewed as a professional responsibility, and (3) holds district leaders responsible for providing teachers and principals what they need to succeed. This conception of accountability is consonant with Sanger’s culture of shared responsibility and is undergirded by technical and moral support from district leaders.

“If I have an expectation for or from you, then I have an obligation to provide you with whatever it will take for you to succeed. You must hold me accountable as well because if not, you didn’t fail, I did.” — Superintendent Johnson

The accountability mechanisms they created embody this balance. Annual Principal Summits, frequent classroom walkthroughs by teams of district and school leaders, and homegrown Alternative Governance Boards (AGBs) for schools at risk of state sanctions are all formal structures designed to look closely at evidence and implications for action.

Principal Summits exemplify Sanger’s accountability philosophy. They require that principals use student achievement data to identify targets for their school’s improvement — they literally must render an accounting publicly each year. And they

create channels of communication and evidence that district leaders need to set priorities to support schools. When Principal Summits were introduced in the early days of Sanger reform, they were a dramatic departure from anything principals had been asked to do, and the developmental path was rocky in the early years. Principals had no formal training in locating and analyzing their school's test score data. They stumbled over the first year's request to present three years of API data, not knowing where to find the data or put it in a presentable form.

Principal Summits

Each fall principals have an hour to present their school's data to district administrators, observed by the superintendent, and open to the public. The Deputy Superintendent who designed the process prescribes the data to be presented, the number of slides, and allocates the last 15 minutes to questions. Recent data requests include: 5 years of API data, AYP levels for all sub-groups and achievement gaps, movement across CELDT levels including number of students who advanced, regressed, or stayed the same, percent and number of students moving up or down on performance bands, aggregate assessments of teachers' performance levels on rubrics for key initiatives (EDI, RTI, PLC, ELD) and next steps.

Principal on Principal Summits: "At the core the important questions were being asked: show us what you know, how you know it is working, and how you will help your site get better."

When Principal Summits were introduced in the early days of Sanger reform, they were a dramatic departure from anything principals had been asked to do, and the developmental path was rocky in the early years. Principals had no formal training in locating and analyzing their school's test score data. They stumbled over the first year's request to present three years of API data, not knowing where to find the data or how to put it in a presentable form.

Yet, over time as district leaders' requests became more and more sophisticated, the principals became skilled at disaggregating and presenting their data for all student subgroups by subjects. They learned by doing and sharing, through asking questions of each other and of district administrators, and from observing each other's presentations. The Deputy Superintendent who designed the Summits saw the structure as a way to create the "need to learn."

As principals' skills in data-based accountability developed, and as their trust in district administrators' commitment to support their school's success grew, their views of the summits became positive. Many principals began giving their Summit presentations to their faculties. During Sanger High School schoolwide faculty meetings, PLCs present 'mini-summits' following the district's model.

"Put Faces on the Numbers"

The simplicity of the phrase "reciprocal accountability" belies the complexity of putting it into action. Visitors have flocked to Sanger to observe the Summits mistakenly believing they can transplant a structure which took years — and many parallel shifts — to develop.

Creating a balance between pressure to adopt new ways of working and support for implementing the new ways requires vigilance and constant adjustments. When Sanger translated their rubric for instructional practices into an observation form which was then uploaded to iPads that administrators used during walkthroughs, high school teachers perceived them as "gotchas." Teachers' concerns erupted and were brought to the Board by the union president. District administrators working with the high school had seen their reactions and already were working with PLC leaders to engage teachers in designing a new system. They worked long and hard to regain their trust.

Just as principals and teachers learn from feedback, district administrators have seen first hand how good intentions can go awry. Still, most Sanger educators came to feel safe in sharing their shortcomings as they began to see increased support rather than criticism in response.

In a different context, teachers and principals might see the structures in place for tracking progress and reporting findings publicly as heavy-handed. But in Sanger, these mechanisms have become part of a culture of transparency and shared commitment to improving student achievement. They reflect a culture of personal and professional trust that was built over the years through conversations and demonstrations that the goal of accountability is to ensure that students succeed, not to sanction adults. District leaders consistently expressed respect for school administrators and teachers at the same time as they pushed them to improve results. In spite of missteps, reciprocal accountability in Sanger became fundamentally rooted in its commitment to serving all students.

9. Learning from Sanger

SANGER'S CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT is dramatic, with scores rising each year for every student subgroup at rates surpassing the state. The multitude of visitors to Sanger attests to widespread interest in learning what they can do to achieve similar outcomes. Yet they are seeing where Sanger is now, not how they got there. That is where the important lessons lie.

How can other districts create a culture that values student learning above all and builds the professional knowledge of teachers and principals? In fact, no simple formula exists for this approach. Yet Sanger's history offers some important lessons.

The first is that district leaders need to *take on the whole system with a long-term view*. Embedded in this ambitious agenda are Sanger's careful choices of a few initiatives and strategies—designed to fit together-- and their willingness to stick with them for many years.

A second is the *power of three principles* for leading district change:

- Understanding the developmental nature of desired changes whether asked of teachers or administrators
- Grounding decisions in evidence of adult and student learning
- Building shared commitments and relationships to sustain change.

A third is that the approach flies in the face of several popular beliefs about district change. For example:

- *Respect for teachers vs. Teachers are the problem.* Respect for teachers (and administrators) as professionals and learners is key to motivating collaboration and sustained effort to change instruction to improve student learning. Carrots like merit pay or performance pressures that convey a deficit view of educators fail to leverage improvement.

- o *The work is never done vs. Quick fix.* Continuous improvement means always getting better. Rather than resting on their laurels, Sanger leaders and educators see their improvement as “work in progress.” Never satisfied with how far they have brought their students, they look carefully to see where and how they can bring them farther along. The notion that some program or practice can be implemented quickly to make big improvements is correctly seen in Sanger as ‘wishful thinking.’
- o *Leadership development vs. Great leader theory.* Without question Sanger’s top leaders were crucial in setting the direction and managing early stages of the district’s turnaround. And they brought a passion for student learning to their jobs. But they also worked from the beginning to build commitments to the goals and create a culture of leadership. They now have a growing cadre of district leaders immersed in “the Sanger way” and a solid pipeline of principals and teacher leaders moving up the system, ready to step in.
- o *Decisions based on local evidence vs What works somewhere else.* Looking back on their reform journey, Sanger leaders point to decision points where the success of a strategy in one of their own schools prompted a move in that direction. In contrast, a program touted as “evidence-based” that has been designed and tested elsewhere may well not work in another context with different students and reform histories. Piloting new improvement ideas that have a track record and adapting them to fit school and student needs is central in the district’s evidence-based culture. Adopting a program wholesale without trying it out is not.
- o *Common wisdom vs innovation.* The “Sanger way” is good common sense about how an organization can make steady improvement – by working together on a set of goals and being on the alert to where things go wrong or can be better. District leaders aren’t looking for the latest hot idea or innovation; rather they work to put into practice the good ideas that have been around for a long time. Professional learning community, for example, is a set of ideas put forth decades ago and commonly practiced in business; PLC is a label and set of routines Sanger uses to act on the ideas.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle is moving past the contradictory beliefs: “It can’t work here” or “We’re already doing that.” For some districts, Sanger is too small to appear relevant. For others, it is too big. Still others believe they are already doing what Sanger does — they require teacher PLCs, for example, or have a sophisticated

student data system, or call for shared accountability. From Sanger’s partnership with a much smaller district, we’ve observed that it’s essential for districts emulating Sanger to adapt their strategies to their own contexts. PLCs look different in a small high school but the principles are the same. Principal summits play a different role in a district with just one school at each level. And the same holds true for larger districts. Strategies that work in Sanger require adjustment to systems with more layers and many more schools, but the principles undergirding them remain the same.

Although not an explicit part of Sanger’s reform agenda, support from the school board and teachers’ union—or at a minimum, lack of obstruction—are both essential to sustaining improvement. The superintendent nurtured relationships with the teachers’ union and the school board through ongoing, transparent communication. Commitments to working together over the long haul are rooted in mutual respect and trust and ongoing communication, especially around points of disagreements. Staying in touch helps to nip potentially contentious issues in the bud.



Can Sanger sustain its improvement trajectory now that Marc Johnson and Rich Smith are gone? Is this a story of reaching low-level state standards, and will the district be able to say the course after new Common Core assessments are implemented? Sanger’s track record, robust culture, and dynamic problem-solving approach to improvement bode well for the future. Sanger’s investment in building leadership succession and engaging teachers in preparing for the Common Core standards give it a strong foundation for meeting new challenges. *Together we can!* isn’t just a mantra; it actually works.

“The Work Is Never Done”

Acronyms

AGB	Alternative Governance Board (external oversight group mandated by state for schools in need of improvement for four consecutive years)
API	Academic Performance Index (based on multiple CA test results for all subgroups and grade levels)
CCSS	Common Core State Standards (national standards for grade-level learning, adopted by 45 states)
CELDT	California English Language Development Test (administered annually to students classified as English learners)
CFA	Common Formative Assessment (teacher-made tests tied to instruction)
CSP	Curriculum Support Provider (school instructional coach)
CST	California Standards Test (administered annually to grades 2-11)
EDI	Explicit Direct Instruction (principles and routines for classroom instruction)
EL and ELL	English learners and English Language learners. Interchangeable terms. (classification based on CELDT scores)
ELD	English Language Development (state-required instruction targeted to ELs)
NCLB	No Child Left Behind (federal Title I compensatory education law)
PI	Program Improvement (status assigned by the state to schools and districts that fall short of NCLB-specified gains for all student subgroups; sanctions apply to schools designated PI for 4 years)
PIQE	Parent Involvement in Quality Education (adopted national/regional program to train and certify parents in supporting their children’s educational success)
PLC	Professional Learning Communities (teacher teams by grade level in elementary schools; course groups in secondary schools; concept extended to include all collaborative teams in the district.)
ROLA	Reading and Oral Language Assessment (district-adopted test of fluency, administered individually as needed)
RTI	Response to Intervention (tiered approach to addressing student needs, from classroom responses to special programs; federally mandated for Special Education and adopted for all students in Sanger)

End Notes

- ¹ See About the study, p.
- ² The Academic Performance Index (API) is California’s measure of each school’s progress, including all students and subgroups. It’s based on multiple tests with results ranging from 200-1000. The state target for all schools is 800.
- ³ English learners make up 35 percent of students with API scores.
- ⁴ This strikingly high response rate for parents in a high-poverty district is indicative of the power of district expectations for school leaders which includes ensuring at least an 80 percent response rate from parents over a two-week period.
- ⁵ Sanger district leaders see the question of what should be “tight” and “loose”, in current lingo, as an empirical question rooted in phases of a given change effort.
- ⁶ District leaders have worked closely with Steve Zuieback, a management consultant, who introduced the model of the “green line” to Sanger which symbolizes the distinction between creating structures and policies to support change (“above the green line”) and developing clear communication and building relationships (“below the green line”).
- ⁷ In academic parlance this translates to “collective efficacy,” a strong predictor of school success. See Roger K. Goddard, Wayne K. Hoy, and Anita Woolfolk Hoy, “Collective Efficacy: Theoretical Developments, Empirical Evidence, and Future Directions,” *Educational Researcher*, 33:2-13.
- ⁸ Sanger district leaders launched the PLC initiative after attending a Spring 2005 conference run by Rick and Becky DuFour in Riverside County and succeeded in creating a collaborative teaching culture by making this a top, sustained priority. The DuFours point to Sanger Unified School District as an exemplar of a districtwide PLC (Richard Dufour, Rebecca Dufour, Robert Eaker and Gayle Karhanek, “Under No Circumstances Blame the Kids: Sanger Unified School District,” *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes* (Bloomington, IN: solution Tree, 2006).
- ⁹ The state of California requires schools to provide supplementary language instruction, called English Language Development (ELD), to all students classified as English learners.

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Many people contributed to the research for this book. Foremost are the district and school administrators and teachers who opened their doors and practice to us. From the moment we began our study in the fall of 2008 everyone in Sanger Unified welcomed us with open arms. From top district administrators and staff to principals and coaches to teachers in all district schools, people supported our efforts to learn about what makes Sanger tick. Without their trust and candor, we could not have written their story.

We single out several district leaders and staff who went out of their way to support our study and make it go smoothly. Superintendent Marc Johnson and Deputy Superintendent Rich Smith not only spoke with us several times a year when we visited the district, but they made sure that district and school administrators and staff understood the purpose of our research and would support it. Steve Carlson, Sanger's grants administrator, was our extraordinary liaison person who countless times each year created schedules for our requested interviews and observations spanning several days and multiple schools. He was proactive in this role, setting up interviews with people he thought we should talk with and providing us with a trove of historical information.

Special thanks goes also to the cadre of district administrators who came into the central office from school principalships during our four-year study — Matt Navo (Superintendent as of 2013-14), Jon Yost (Assistant Superintendent as of 2012-13) and Tim Lopez and Adela Jones (Area Administrators). Each met with us several times a year for interviews and together they invited us to sit on several of their team meetings and various sessions they led with principals and teachers.

We are grateful to each and every school principal, assistant principal, CSP/coach, and teacher who devoted precious time to our interviews — some of whom talked with us more than once a year. By observing teachers' PLCs and classrooms we learned what Sanger's improvement efforts look like on the ground from day to day. We thank you all for sharing your practice and helping us to see and appreciate how students benefit from your passion, collaboration, and hard work.

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Last but not least, we thank S.H. Cowell Foundation for funding us to document and tell the Sanger story. Ken Doane, our program officer, was a true colleague in the effort from start to finish. He knew that a careful study was needed to unpack Sanger's dramatic success, was a critical reader of our annual reports and valued sounding board for emerging ideas. He was key in helping us conceive and execute a product — this brief book — that could be read quickly and spread widely

Jane L. David

Joan E. Talbert

About the study

At the request of S.H. Cowell Foundation, the authors undertook a four-year study of Sanger Unified School District's improvement efforts inspired by their dramatic turnaround in student achievement from 2004 to 2008. Our study set out to explain how the district brought about these changes and to document their trajectory from 2008 to 2012 — a trajectory which continued its earlier rise in student achievement.

We started with three broad research questions:

- What initiatives, strategies and professional practices are in place, especially in schools serving majority poor English learners, and how do they influence Sanger students and educators?
- What norms, expectations, and beliefs are prevalent among Sanger professionals and how do they shape behavior?
- How did the district launch improvement efforts and create conditions that sustain continuous improvement?

To create a full picture of Sanger's practices and how they came about, we used multiple measures including interviews, observations, surveys, and document review.

Repeated interviews with district and school administrators and staff provided insights on choices of district initiatives and strategies before and during our study and how they unfolded in the central office and in schools. Informal observations in classrooms and PLC meetings across multiple schools, elementary and secondary, provided first-hand data on new professional practices in action and served as a basis for follow-up interviews. In addition to casual conversations with students during school visits, we conducted a focus group with high school students on their experiences with instructional initiatives.

To capture key district-level strategies, we observed formal events including annual Principal Summits, professional development sessions, district-led school walkthroughs, Alternative Governance Board meetings, and district leadership team meetings. We also reviewed a broad range of documents from the district office and individual schools, including Principal Summit presentations from all schools, test score reports, continua of learning rubrics for each initiative as well as artifacts representing each initiative.

To measure and track changes in teachers' perceptions of Sanger's professional culture we administered surveys that asked teachers to rate conditions in their PLC, their school, and the district. The online surveys were administered to all teachers in spring 2009 and again in spring 2011 with response rates over 70 percent in both years. Survey questions were designed to measure core features of Sanger's culture – collaboration, data use to diagnose student learning needs, principal leadership of teacher learning, and district leadership and shared accountability for results.

As the study progressed and student achievement continued to rise year after year, we paid increasing attention to how Sanger's top leaders adapted and refined initiatives to deepen understanding among school leaders and strengthen teachers' practice. In the fourth year we formalized our hypotheses into the set of principles, which we then discussed with key district and school leaders to corroborate our understandings.

To link district improvement efforts and culture shifts to student outcomes we tracked annual student achievement data for all students and all subgroups from 2003 to 2012 on the California Standards Test, the state's Academic Performance Index, and metrics designed to meet federal requirements for school progress under No Child Left Behind legislation.

About the authors

Jane L. David received a doctorate in education and social policy from Harvard University in 1974 after teaching high school mathematics in Washington, DC. Since then, her career in research and evaluation has focused on the connections between education policy and how districts and schools improve, particularly those serving children at risk of failure. She directs the Bay Area Research Group in Palo Alto, CA, a small consulting firm with clients ranging from government agencies, universities, and school districts to foundations and non-profit organizations. She has authored over a hundred reports, book chapters, articles, and commissioned papers, and authored a bimonthly research column for *Educational Leadership* from 2007-2010. She is the author (with Larry Cuban) of *Cutting Through the Hype: The Essential Guide to School Reform* (Harvard Education Press, 2010).

Joan E. Talbert is Senior Research Scholar Emerita in Stanford University's School of Education and founding Co-director (with Milbrey McLaughlin) of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC). She has a doctorate in sociology from the University of Washington. Talbert's research centers on school-based professional communities and the contexts and initiatives that shape them. For the past two decades, she has studied multiple approaches to fostering teacher learning communities that improve student achievement in school districts across the country. Her books include *Strategic Inquiry: Starting Small to Get Big Results in Education*, co-authored with Nell Scharff Panero (Harvard Education Press, 2013), *Building School-based Teacher Learning Communities in Schools: Professional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement*, co-authored with Milbrey W. McLaughlin (Teachers College Press, 2006), and *Professional Communities and the Work of High School Teaching*, co-authored with Milbrey W. McLaughlin (University of Chicago Press, 2001). Recent chapters are: "Collaborative inquiry to expand student achievement in New York City Schools," *Education Reform in New York City: Ambitious Change in the Nation's Most Complex School System*, edited by O'Day, J., Bitter. C. & Gomez, L. (Harvard Education Press, 2011) and "Professional learning communities at the crossroads: How systems hinder or engender change," *International Handbook of Educational Change, Volume 2* (Springer Press, 2010).

About the publisher

The S.H. Cowell Foundation works to improve the quality of life of children living in poverty in Northern and Central California by providing grants to public-benefit organizations that work to strengthen families and communities. The Foundation was established in 1956 through a bequest from S.H. Cowell.

The Foundation makes grants in five primary Program Areas:

- Family Resource Centers
- K-12 Public Education
- Youth Development
- Affordable Housing
- Leadership Development

Since 2001, Cowell has pursued a complementary, place-based grants strategy. The Foundation seeks out low-income communities across Northern and Central California where there is a shared commitment and a readiness to improve conditions and opportunities for children. Some communities are neighborhoods within urban centers, some are small towns and others are large, sparsely-populated regions. Within each community, the Foundation makes clusters of grants to support projects, programs and initiatives that touch the lives of children and their families at home, at school, in the workplace and in civic spaces, wherever a focused effort and innovation may increase the likelihood of lasting, positive community change.

Since 2007, Cowell has made 19 grants totaling approximately \$2.2 million to organizations and agencies in the town of Sanger.

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