In 2013, Fresno Unified’s highest-poverty elementary schools performed in the bottom 30 percent of all schools in California. Students’ average proficiency in math and ELA lagged behind more affluent schools in the district and the state—but teachers didn’t have enough time or support to catch their students up.

Fresno Unified leveraged an infusion of state funding to add intervention time for students and professional learning time for teachers. The district worked hard to align everyone—teachers, principals, and the central office—on how this additional time could translate into improved instruction.

Five years later, the same group of elementary schools has improved performance among low-income students at nearly double the rate of other elementary schools in the district! One-third of these schools now meet or exceed the district’s average performance in math—and together, their progress far outpaces average progress statewide.
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TAKE ACTION IN YOUR DISTRICT!

Dig deeper.
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Don’t beat the odds—change them.
Go to bit.ly/snapshotmini to take our System Snapshot Mini, a brief self-assessment tool designed to help your team explore how to take strategic approaches to the work happening in your district.

What are the gears of change in my district? Where are our gears getting stuck? Where do we need one gear to push another to enable meaningful change?

Get support.
For more than a decade, ERS has worked with school systems to transform how they use resources. We are ready to partner with your school system or connect you with other service providers. Send an email to contact@erstrategies.org to talk to us directly.

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ERS Districts at Work Framework

We studied eight school districts that struggled with the same challenges as many urban systems around the country—and like many others, the eight districts we studied set strategic priorities that they hoped would address their challenges. **What sets these eight districts apart is that they didn’t stop there.**

Think of these strategic priorities as a gear—without focusing on what is needed to power it, the gear stays stationary. Just setting the right strategic priorities is not enough to produce or sustain the results district and school leaders hope for.

Leaders from Fresno Unified School District (FUSD) and the other districts we studied rolled up their sleeves to carefully and collaboratively construct three other gears that effectively powered their strategic priorities. They developed a clear theory of action by identifying: (A) the big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities, and (B) how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. To power their theory of action, these districts made tough trade-offs in a series of resource shifts, and they made process shifts to ensure central office management structures enabled schools to efficiently, effectively, and sustainably implement the changes.
Education Resource Strategies

Fresno Unified: Strategic Priorities

To address the student performance challenges, FUSD set a goal: accelerate the growth of the district’s highest-need elementary school students to level the playing field early in their academic careers and to provide a strong foundation for the secondary grades. District and school leaders identified two strategic priorities to achieve this:

Support teachers in improving instructional quality.
FUSD set up job-embedded, curriculum-connected professional learning communities (PLCs). In schools with the highest concentrations of poverty, the district dramatically increased time for these PLCs and layered on additional supports to help teachers get the most out of this time.

Provide differentiated instruction for students.
FUSD increased student learning time, targeted intervention strategies to meet students’ needs, and provided more opportunities for students to access rigorous instruction both during and beyond the school day.

Fresno Unified: District at a Glance²

District leaders knew that high-needs students who began elementary school behind grade level did not have access to the time and support they needed to catch up. Additionally, teachers faced the steep challenge of teaching rigorous, grade-level content and meeting each individual student where they were—all while implementing new standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latinx* Students (2017-18)</th>
<th>Black Students (2017-18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>67%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Learners (2017-18)</th>
<th>Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch (2017-18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>88%</td>
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</table>

*“Latinx” is the gender-neutral alternative to “Latino” or “Latina,” meaning a person of Latin American origin or descent. Common pronunciation is “lah-TEEN-ex” or “lah-teen-EX.” ERS chose to study districts with high populations of black, Latinx, and low-income students to highlight school systems that are actively addressing longstanding inequities.

Education Resource Strategies | 4
Fresno Unified: Theory of Action

FUSD leaders didn’t stop after setting the district’s two strategic priorities: First, they identified big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities. Then, they identified how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. Together, these school-level changes and central office supports formed the district’s theory of action. To power their theory of action, FUSD made a series of resource shifts and process shifts. Going beyond initial strategic priorities by developing and powering this theory of action is what sets FUSD apart.

FUSD’s theory of action was composed of three major parts:

#1 Extend the length of the school day in targeted elementary schools.

Why?
District leaders realized that the school day and year in FUSD did not allow enough time for teachers to invest in their professional learning, and it limited opportunities for students who were far behind to catch up.

#2 Build the capacity of principals and central office staff to serve as instructional leaders for teacher PLCs and student intervention time.

Why?
Because the move to Common Core State Standards required huge shifts in how teachers were asked to teach, schools needed everyone in the district—from the superintendent, to principals, to teachers—to get on the same page about what good instruction looked like to maximize the impact of PLCs for teachers and intervention time for students.

#3 Prioritize professional learning time and content.

Why?
By studying other districts, FUSD learned that many professional learning initiatives fail because districts and schools provide time for collaboration, but don’t support teacher teams in figuring out how to effectively use that time. This meant schools needed to ensure that teacher teams had instructional experts to help facilitate their meetings, training on the new standards, and clear protocols for how to use their time. Schools also needed to figure out how to ensure teacher teams integrated these elements into structures that worked for them.
Extend the length of the school day in targeted elementary schools.

FUSD's academics and human resources (HR) teams compared the district’s academic schedule to high-performing peer districts across the state and country and discovered that in comparison, the school day for their teachers and students was significantly shorter. For example, kindergarten students in FUSD received approximately five fewer weeks of instruction than a peer district in the region. District leaders concluded that the schedule did not provide sufficient time for teacher collaboration or for students who were behind grade level to catch up, so they decided to extend the teacher and student day in 40 elementary schools with high concentrations of poverty, while ensuring that teachers and community members understood the effects of this change and could track progress over time.

Resource Shifts

**Time**

In collaboration with the Fresno Teachers Association (FTA), FUSD’s academics and HR teams **developed a plan to compensate teachers in the highest-need elementary schools to teach students for 30 extra minutes per day and participate in PLCs for 80 additional hours per year.** Teachers received a 10.6 percent salary increase to compensate them for this extra time.³ The district first funded this in four pilot schools using a federal School Improvement Grant. Based on promising student growth results, the district expanded the program to a total of 40 elementary schools (called Designated Schools) by using approximately $18.9 million (5 percent of their total budget) from California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).³ LCFF’s requirement to invest funds in low-income students, English language learners (ELL students), and students in foster care provided a transparent way to select schools with the highest-need student populations. FUSD’s targeted spending approach contrasted with the way many other California districts used LCFF funds to pay for across-the-board compensation increases with no change in time or responsibilities, or for programmatic investments that layered onto the existing school day.

Beyond this significant investment in 40 Designated Schools, FUSD also increased all students’ learning time by expanding pre-K access and changing summer school programming to “opt-out,” rather than “opt-in.”

“I’ve seen how our performance growth has continued. First, we focused on analyzing student data. Then, we focused on grade-level math instruction. Now, we’re bringing in a whole other layer of social-emotional learning and growth mindset. That’s how I see it, it’s adding layer upon layer. We’re not being asked to do more, we’re just being asked to go deeper.”

—Janet Wolf, vice principal
Process Shifts

Roles
FUSD’s academics and HR teams worked to ensure that teachers in Designated Schools understood the new expectations for their role and partnered with FTA to embed these new expectations into the bargaining agreement. FTA and district leadership created communications materials to explain the “why and how” around the newly differentiated compensation structure. These materials included information sheets, talking points, and FAQs for principals to use with their staff. Additionally, HR created a preferential annual transfer process for any teacher who wished to transfer from a Designated School to another school within the district. Though few teachers ultimately took advantage of this transfer option, it provided a safe environment for teachers to test out the extended day.

Artifact #1: Explanation of Compensation Structure

Data & Tools
To measure the impact of the extended day and allow for continuous improvement over time, the academics team rolled out the changes in three stages: 10 schools in year one, 20 schools in year two, and 10 more schools in year three. The team collected teacher and family satisfaction data, teacher retention data, and student performance results annually for each cohort of schools.

- FUSD teacher
Build the capacity of principals and central office staff to serve as instructional leaders for teacher PLCs and student intervention time.

Because the significant increase in teachers’ professional development time in Designated Schools coincided with the implementation of Common Core State Standards, principals and their supervisors needed to grow their own instructional leadership abilities to better provide teachers with support and direction. FUSD’s central office paid for additional principal training and adjusted job requirements for both principals and school supervisors to ensure leaders could focus their time and attention on the success of the extended-day initiative.

Resource Shifts

Money
To build their content expertise, FUSD’s academics team paid for 16 principals and teachers from the first cohort of Designated Schools to attend Solution Tree’s “Professional Learning Communities at Work” institute. Using the Solution Tree model, leaders of Designated Schools invested their own time and resources each year to build teachers’ capacity. The district also sent teams of teachers and administrators to UnBoundEd’s Standards Institute. The conference helped the district efficiently build a critical mass of leaders and teachers who deeply understood the fundamentals of Common Core-aligned, grade-level instruction, therefore increasing buy-in for additional professional learning time to extend this learning across the district. To keep central office spending sustainable, the academics team only funded the conference for one year per school team but allowed principals to use their own discretionary budget to pay for continued attendance. Four school leadership teams chose to pay independently in subsequent years. Including school and central office budgets, FUSD spent $66,000 on standards-based professional learning during the 2017-18 school year.5

People
To honor the additional time that principals and school supervisors needed to devote to implementing additional professional learning time, FUSD added two types of support staff: (1) The finance team added a full-time position to all Designated Schools’ budgets. This gave schools the flexibility to decide how to best mobilize an additional staff member to help teachers and principals fulfill the additional work of a Designated School. Most schools added a position called “teacher on special assignment” to serve as both an instructional coach and intervention teacher. (2) The central office hired seven additional staff in the School Leadership Department, including a new manager for constituent services to work on community engagement, and six principals/vice principals on special assignment, who took on principal support responsibilities. This expanded staff allowed assistant superintendents to focus solely on providing instructional support to principals in Designated and Non-Designated Schools. As an added benefit, these new staff members also provided more dedicated and responsive services to schools and families in need of logistical or operational support from a central office representative.
Process Shifts

Roles
The School Leadership Department formally transitioned the title of the assistant superintendent (school support) role to instructional superintendent, with expectations that the role would focus solely on instruction and content. In many districts, school supervisors spend the majority of their time “putting out fires” at the school level, leaving limited time and attention to help principals lead instructional change. Systems working to increase principal support have two options: hire additional supervisors or narrow the existing supervisors’ role; FUSD chose to narrow the role. As the district updated the job descriptions, the instructional superintendents created a new normal by serving as “goalkeepers” for their schools. They requested that other departments channel any requests through them that would ultimately impact student, teacher, or principal time in schools. This process allowed instructional superintendents to give input on whether a given initiative met a school’s needs and aligned with the school’s instructional vision.

In addition, FUSD asked principals and teachers from the first cohort of Designated Schools to serve as mentors for their colleagues in subsequent cohorts. The district held quarterly meetings with Designated Schools to focus on implementation of the extended teacher and student day and to connect mentors with mentees. Mentors then provided one-on-one support to their mentees as needed. FUSD’s central office facilitated cross-school partnerships for teachers and leaders to visit other Designated Schools to see how they functioned.

Artifact #2: Instructional Superintendent Job Description

They really work to make the instructional superintendent [role] be just about instruction. So, when he or she is coming in, we’re really talking about where the students are at, where the teachers are at, what our leadership moves are, and what we need help or support with. It’s been good to have that sole focus with them.

-Kali Isom-Moore, principal

Data & Tools
As a first step in supporting both ongoing capacity-building for principals and instructional superintendents—and ensuring alignment at all levels—the academics team created an Instructional Practice Guide for ELA and math to serve as a simple yet comprehensive reference document during teacher observations, coaching sessions, and evaluation cycles. Instructional superintendents took principals on monthly “norming walks,” where groups of 10-15 leaders observed classrooms together and used the standards-aligned resource to discuss and build consensus about what they observed.

Artifact #3: Instructional Practice Guide (Literacy)
#3 Prioritize professional learning time and content.

In many districts, teachers’ professional development is based around one-off workshops, university classes, conferences, and online modules that are disconnected from real-life practice. More job-embedded approaches, such as professional learning communities, can still fall short of supporting teachers’ core work of helping students learn if they lack a clear purpose, support systems, or facilitation plans. As FUSD rolled out the significant expansion of teachers’ professional learning time in schools, district leadership worked with teachers and principals to understand what additional supports would be needed for teacher PLCs to have maximum impact on instruction, especially during the new, daily 30-minute intervention block. Then, they worked to put these new investments, support structures, and norms in place.

## Resource Shifts

### Money

The district invested in rigorous, standards-aligned curricula. During adoption of the Common Core State Standards, it made sense for the district to purchase externally created curricula that had been independently evaluated for alignment in core subjects across all grade levels. This investment decision was not driven solely by implementation of PLCs, but having these materials available significantly freed up teachers’ time to enable higher-impact, collaborative activities, such as analyzing student data, differentiating materials for student needs, and planning for the use of intervention time. FUSD staggered the curriculum rollout between 2015 and 2018 by beginning with the math curriculum and then introducing ELA. The academics team worked with teachers to create scope-and-sequence documents, and then layered districtwide professional learning onto the job-embedded PLCs already taking place in Designated Schools.

## Process Shifts

### Roles

FUSD and FTA leadership thought it was crucial to give teachers in Designated Schools ownership over designing the use of time for the purpose of both increasing buy-in and maximizing usefulness, so the district gave teachers flexibility (with support) over use of student intervention time and teacher PLC time.

The district embedded a few core guidelines for use of PLC time within the bargaining agreement with FTA—however, teachers had the authority to decide how to organize their teams (for example, by grade level versus by content area) and how to distribute the 80 hours across the school year. Most teams chose to distribute the time into weekly two-hour collaborative meetings after school, but some teams chose to invest in longer “data days” after student assessments or to allocate days before the school year to focus on goal-setting or school culture. Because the district implemented extended time gradually, teacher teams relied on guidance from the first Designated Schools.

Each grade-level team chose when to situate intervention within the day and which content
area to focus on. Teachers were given the flexibility to control the timing, content focus, and student groupings of each daily 30-minute intervention block. This flexibility allowed teachers to react in real time to the data analysis taking place during their PLCs by tailoring interventions to students’ current needs and adjusting them throughout the year.

- Artifact #4: PLC Foundations Guidance
- Artifact #5: Designated Schools Use of Time Guidance
- Artifact #6: Sample Elementary School PLC Calendar

**Data & Tools**

Instructional superintendents and principals closely monitored PLC implementation and linked activities to student performance. First, instructional superintendents created a PLC implementation rubric that they used to train teachers and principals on strong PLC behaviors and track results over time. Next, instructional superintendents required principals to create “eight-week action plans” focused on improving a specific dimension of student performance. These plans identified actions for the upcoming weeks that would drive student performance improvement—including PLC and intervention block activities and schoolwide strategies. With both of these data collection structures in place, principals were better able to help teachers prioritize PLC focus areas, and teachers were more likely to see the connection between their work and schoolwide student goals.

- Artifact #7: PLC Implementation Rubric
- Artifact #8: Sample Eight-Week Action Plan

**Mindsets**

Instructional superintendents worked to integrate PLC values into broader district culture. To facilitate widespread adoption of the PLC values of continuous improvement and frequent use of data, instructional superintendents updated the structure of weekly professional learning meetings for both themselves and principals to focus on incorporating data analysis into progress monitoring. This practice aligned with the new job description for instructional superintendents, which now included an expectation to “analyze, interpret, and monitor performance management across the district in the areas of academic performance, academic growth, academic completion and retention, social-emotional learning, and culture and climate.” Principals were held accountable for analyzing teacher and student data in parallel to their teacher teams. Central office and school leaders created data walls; during monthly Instructional Leadership Team meetings, principals used these data walls to compare performance data across classrooms, while instructional superintendents and the chief academic officer looked across schools. Additionally, FUSD encouraged district and school leaders to think creatively about qualitative data sources to include in their progress monitoring efforts.

- Artifact #9: Data Wall Photo A and Photo B (Elementary School)
Results: Changes to the Teacher Experience

Teachers in Designated Schools now participate in 80 additional hours of professional learning time per year and are able to tailor this extra time to meet their school’s unique needs.

Teachers value this investment: during the 2016-17 school year, 99.4 percent of teachers in Designated Schools chose to stay at their school during the district’s internal transfer period (although some may have left the district at the end of the year)—compared to 96.8 percent of teachers in Non-Designated Schools.\(^6\)

Results: Changes to the Student Experience

Students in Designated Schools now participate in 30 minutes of intervention time five days per week—even without including the additional learning students can now access via expanded pre-K and summer school opportunities. This adds up to 26 additional weeks of core instruction by the end of grade six!\(^8\) During this intervention time, students receive instruction that is more tailored to their learning needs because teachers are able to plan for differentiated instruction during their PLC time.

Results: Student Performance Outcomes

FUSD is steadily closing performance gaps with the rest of California. During the last five years, more than half of Designated Schools improved their math performance ranking relative to other schools in the state. Additionally, every year since FUSD began implementation of the extended day, student growth in both math and ELA in Designated Schools has outpaced Non-Designated Schools:

### Increase in Average Scaled Score Points Among Low-Income Students Between 2016-17 and 2017-18:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FUSD's Designated Schools</th>
<th>FUSD's Non-Designated Schools</th>
<th>Statewide Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>9.1 points</td>
<td>5.2 points</td>
<td>2.3 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>10.1 points</td>
<td>9.7 points</td>
<td>4.0 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 2016-17 and 2017-18, 14 Designated Schools in FUSD made significant progress (15+ points) in math and/or ELA.\(^{10}\)

Key: The California Department of Education defines performance categories as follows...

- \(<3\) points is considered “maintained performance.”
- \(3-14\) points is considered “increased performance.”
- \(15+\) points is considered “significantly increased performance.”
What’s Next for Fresno Unified?

The district focused efforts thus far in elementary schools because of the significance of early learning and the greater flexibility around teacher and student scheduling that elementary schools afford. Now, leaders in schools and the central office are focusing on ensuring that students successfully transition to middle and high school.

Sources

1 Email from Bryan Wells, executive officer for the instructional division in Fresno Unified School District; 2017-18 data pulled by his team from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASP) data portal in 2019.

2 All data from Bryan Wells, executive officer for the instructional division in Fresno Unified School District, sourced from the California Department of Education.

3 Email from Deputy Superintendent and CFO Ruthie Quinto.

4 “Local Control Accountability Plan and Annual Template.” Fresno Unified School District.

5 Email from Deputy Superintendent and CFO Ruthie Quinto.

6 Email from Bryan Wells, executive officer for the instructional division in Fresno Unified School District.

7 Public FUSD Board Presentation on November 8, 2017 (Agenda Item B9).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Email from Bryan Wells, executive officer for the instructional division in Fresno Unified School District; 2017-18 data pulled by his team from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASSP) data portal in 2019.

Note: Most of the content featured in this case study comes from interviews and email correspondence with FUSD district and school leaders. Unless otherwise noted, all facts and data points are drawn from this qualitative data set.

Photos courtesy of Fresno Unified School District.

Acknowledgements

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