ERS *Districts at Work*

# San Diego Unified School District:

## Building Paths to Graduation for Every Student

### Common Challenge

In 2014, black and Latinx* students and English-learners who attended San Diego Unified were significantly less likely to graduate than their peers, and many students who *did* graduate did not leave the district with a clear postsecondary plan in place.[1] Despite tight resources due to years of budget cuts, district leaders were determined to do better.

### San Diego's Approach

To transform graduation patterns, the district expanded equitable access to coursework, tackled the longstanding practices and mindsets that limited students' opportunities, and leveraged community resources to help all students develop a meaningful postsecondary plan for themselves.

### San Diego's Results

Three years later, *all* students who graduate have passed the course requirements for entry into the University of California system. 9 percent more black students and 10 percent more Latinx students were on track to graduate in 2016 than in 2014, and an increasing number of students are exploring postsecondary options.[2]

*"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."

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Visit **bit.ly/sandiegoartifacts** or look for the **artifact icon** throughout this case study to access tangible materials—such as templates and tools—that leaders in San Diego Unified created to guide their work.

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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.

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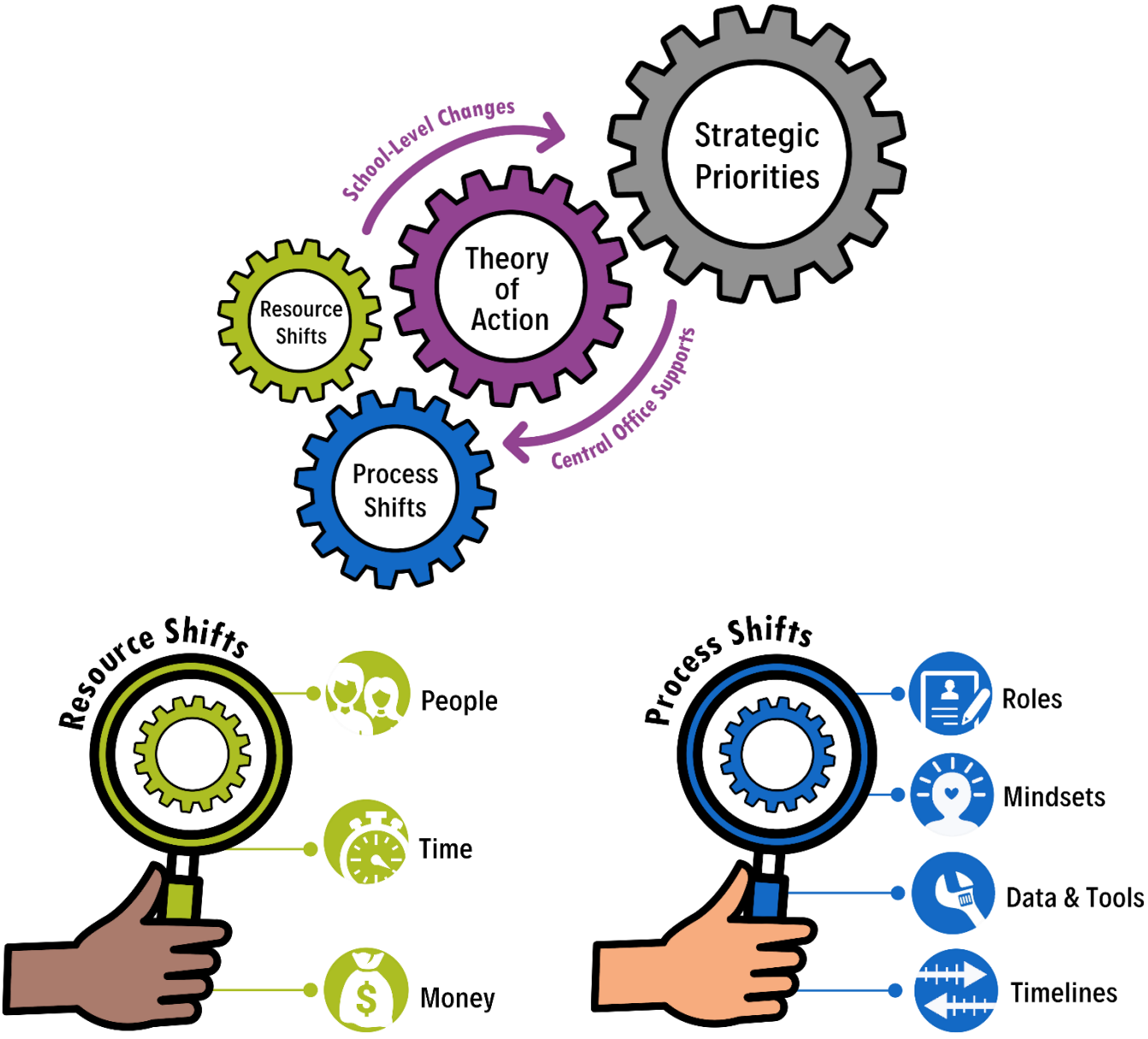
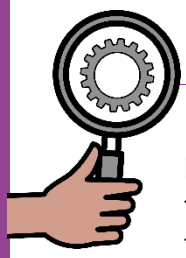
# ERS *Districts at Work* Framework

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 San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) 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.





# San Diego Unified: **Strategic Priorities**

In 2009, SDUSD began to explore graduation trends across the district. Then, in 2012, central office leaders began to transform the system around a goal of **meaningful graduation for all**—meaning that every student in the district would graduate having passed the courses required for admission to the University of California (UC) system and with a clear postsecondary plan to pursue.[3] This was a big challenge—at the time, only 50 percent of the class of 2014 was on track to meet this goal.[4] System leaders began by identifying the two **strategic priorities** needed to make progress:

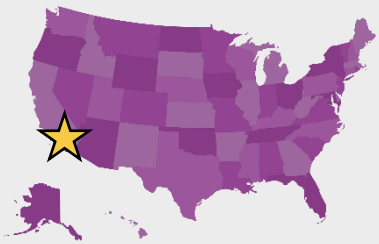
## Ensure all students have equitable access to the coursework they need to succeed.

The district set up systems to expand access to coursework, so all students spent their time in a sequence of classes that optimized their chances of graduating on time.

## Leverage community resources to help students develop meaningful plans for life, post-SDUSD.

District leaders created community partnerships to help students explore postsecondary options and plan for their lives after graduation.

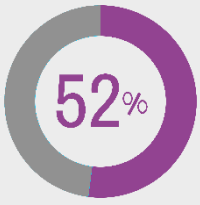
## **San Diego Unified:** District at a Glance



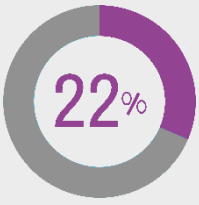
*SDUSD underwent years of budget shortfalls as costs for healthcare, pensions, and annual raises increased. The district implemented $25 million in budget cuts for the 2016-17 school year, and $124 million for the 2017-18 school year—and it faces continued cuts because of these rising costs.*

104,000 Students
200+ Schools
(2018)

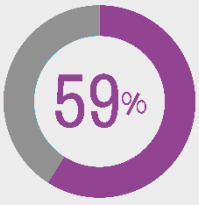
Black and Latinx Students (2018)*




English Language Learners (2018)[5]



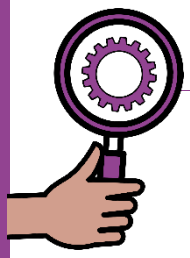

Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch (2018)




After launching efforts to remove barriers to meaningful graduation, substantially more students in SDUSD completed all courses required for admission to the UC system with grades of C or better.[6]

| | 2013-14 | 2015-16 |
|---|---|---|
| **All Students** | 48% | 60% |
| **Black Students** | 38% | 53% |
| **Latinx Students** | 36% | 51% |

**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.*



# San Diego Unified: **Theory of Action**

SDUSD 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, SDUSD 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 SDUSD apart.**

SDUSD's theory of action was composed of four major parts:

#1

## Create a system for school leaders to identify off-track students and assign them to graduation-track classes.

Why?

Without an efficient system to monitor students' course pathways, school staff often did not know students were off track until it was already too late for them to graduate on time. By understanding which problematic course-taking patterns to be on the lookout for, they could make adjustments to a student's schedule to ensure they had time to complete the courses necessary for graduation.

**Resource Shifts**
- ☐ People
- ☑ Time
- ☐ Money

**Process Shifts**
- ☐ Roles
- ☐ Mindsets
- ☑ Data & Tools
- ☐ Timelines

#2

## Change "gatekeeping" policies and practices.

Why?

Oftentimes, districts are not aware of, or do not address, the way systemic culture and mindset translate to policies and practices that unintentionally prevent students from achieving their full potential. SDUSD leaders worked to change policies and attitudes both in the central office and in schools to transform students' experiences. They eliminated barriers that: gave struggling students inadequate course schedules, barred students from college-level coursework, and prevented English-learners from accessing grade-level content.

**Resource Shifts**
- ☑ People
- ☑ Time
- ☐ Money

**Process Shifts**
- ☐ Roles
- ☑ Mindsets
- ☐ Data & Tools
- ☐ Timelines

#3

## Adapt the central office's structures and operations to facilitate successful school-level efforts.

Why?

SDUSD redesigned school planning timelines and staffing to ensure students had access to needed courses. The district restructured central office teams to address equity issues—such as counseling and discipline—that disproportionally affected disadvantaged subgroups of students.

**Resource Shifts**
- ☑ People
- ☐ Time
- ☑ Money

**Process Shifts**
- ☑ Roles
- ☐ Mindsets
- ☐ Data & Tools
- ☑ Timelines

#4

## Involve the community to help students explore options for meaningful postsecondary plans.

Why?

Despite a tight budget, SDUSD leaders needed to help students develop plans for their lives after high school. To do this, they built relationships with local community members and businesses to provide students with more opportunities to explore career options.

**Resource Shifts**
- ☐ People
- ☑ Time
- ☑ Money

**Process Shifts**
- ☐ Roles
- ☐ Mindsets
- ☐ Data & Tools
- ☐ Timelines

#1

# Create a system for school leaders to identify off-track students and assign them to graduation-track classes.

*Getting students on track to meaningful graduation started with knowing which students were off track. But, like staff in many school districts, SDUSD leaders, central office staff, and school counselors often didn't know whether, for example, a student who failed 10th grade math would be able to graduate two years later. SDUSD leaders set out to identify and understand the patterns that held their students back and how they could adjust students' schedules to get them back on track for graduation.*

## Process Shifts

### Data & Tools

*Transcript Review Process*

During the fall of 2014, the newly formed Office of Secondary Schools **spent several weeks reviewing the transcripts of SDUSD's high school students, including approximately 8,000 high school seniors**.[7] This investment of time paid off; the team gained a deep understanding of both the patterns and trends that pushed students off track *and* the steps required to run an effective transcript-check process. They **used this knowledge to begin building the political will—both inside and outside of the central office—to make critical changes**.

The Instructional Executive Leadership Team **developed a list of expectations to identify students who were not on track to meet the UC system's A-G admissions requirements, based on patterns across students' transcripts**. School counselors used these expectations to conduct a quick scan of students' schedules at the start of each academic quarter and identify off-track students; for example, a student whose journalism class didn't meet the UC English requirement was at risk of being unable to graduate on time.

| UC System A-G Admissions Requirements | |
|---|---|
| A | **History/Social Science:** 2 years |
| B | **English:** 4 years |
| C | **Math:** 3 years |
| D | **Laboratory Science:** 2 years |
| E | **Language Other Than English:** 2 years |
| F | **Visual and Performing Arts:** 1 year |
| G | **College Preparatory Elective:** 1 year |

**Artifact #1: A-G "Broad and Challenging Curriculum" Presentation**

*Class Assignment System*

The Office of Secondary Schools partnered with a SDUSD computer science teacher to develop a software platform, called the Online Student Profile System (OSPS). OSPS instantly **evaluated a student's transcript and course schedule** based on the rules developed by the Instructional Executive Leadership Team. School counselors throughout the district began to use OSPS to ensure all students in their school were assigned to classes that put them on a path toward graduation. This enabled school counselors to instantaneously intervene with off-track students. The system **generated reports that allowed users to make more informed decisions about altering class assignments when necessary**. For example, in the past, students

repeated courses unnecessarily because the district did not have a systematic way to identify students who re-enrolled in a class they already passed. To avoid wasting the time students spent repeating courses, OSPS alerted school counselors in time for them to make necessary changes. OSPS allowed each school counselor to redistribute over 50 hours per school year from completing transcript evaluations to engaging with students to identify coursework that aligned with their postsecondary plans.[8]

- **Artifact #2: Online Student Profile System Training Presentation**

> **The master schedule is a significant driver of equity** at the high school level. Course decisions that are made about students as they enter the ninth grade determine whether they are ability-sorted or supported to access content that will allow for **a variety of postsecondary options**.
>
> -Cheryl Hibbeln,
> School Innovation and Integrated Youth Services Division

## Resource Shifts

### Time

Once SDUSD developed a process for identifying off-track students, principal supervisors (called area superintendents) and the Office of Secondary Schools **shifted their focus to helping school leaders proactively design schedules that *kept* students on track**. Instructional Support Officer Genevieve Clark explained, "When we look at a school's master schedule, we can tell that this kid entering the ninth grade isn't going to graduate. You know how I know? He doesn't even have access to all the classes he needs. He literally can't get four years of English in because of the way the master schedule is structured."[9] In many schools, SDUSD's own scheduling tools are sufficient for helping principals redesign their schedules to avoid these barriers. But, in two schools with particularly complex schedules, school leadership teams piloted scheduling software from Always Be Learning to develop schedules that met their students' needs. Principals appreciated the way the tool showed how their scheduling decisions affected different groups of students. For example, principals looked specifically at the schedules of their English language learners (ELL students) to get important metrics, such as class size and percent of time spent in each subject.

- **Artifact #3: Master Schedule Expectations (High Schools, 2019)**
- **Artifact #4: Master Schedule Expectations (Middle Schools, 2019)**

> The master schedule is the MRI of the school. [It shows] the skeleton of the school. **[It's] the structure of the school that provides access to students.**
>
> -Noemi Villegas
> Integrated Youth Services Division

#2

# Change "gatekeeping" policies and practices.

*As the Office of Secondary Schools worked to fix inefficient course progressions, they realized that some scheduling patterns were actually symptoms of systemic mindset problems. To change these mindsets in ways that improved the student experience, they had to address longstanding district policies and practices that prevented students, especially ELL students, from being assigned to graduation-track courses.*

## Process Shifts

### Mindsets

*At Central Office: Centering Individual Students*

School staff and central office leaders **rallied around the idea that "there is no acceptable number of casualties"**—every student deserved to achieve meaningful graduation, so the district had to serve *every* student. During a central office discussion about changing scheduling practices, the team **placed photos on the table of the students who hadn't graduated, to remind themselves of who was affected by their decisions**. Several central office departments even revamped their coaching practices to reinforce this point; for example, the support teams for the Office of Language Acquisition (OLA), Student Services, and counseling and academic subject matter experts collaborated to adopt student-centered coaching cycles. Instead of visiting classrooms to observe the teacher, the teams focused on observing individual students who they knew from their analysis were at risk of not graduating. Then, using their observations of the student's experience, the team spent four to six weeks working with teachers and staff in the student's school to make changes to improve the student's experience.

To bear out their "no acceptable number of casualties" mindset, SDUSD leaders changed districtwide policies that limited students' opportunities. For example, the Office of Secondary Schools applied to the UC system for more career and technical education courses that were eligible for admissions requirement credit so students could move toward graduation and explore postsecondary possibilities at the same time. Additionally, the district encouraged students to take college exams after completing corresponding high school courses to inspire students to see themselves as college students and begin college with some credits already earned.

*In Schools: Focusing on Equity*

The team **led professional learning sessions with school counselors** to show them how to check transcripts, make corrections, and recognize biases that could interfere with ensuring equitable access for students. They showed principals how scheduling students with the greatest academic needs first during the process would result in better student experiences. They also pointed out examples in their schools' schedules that were not optimized for a good student experience—such as a specialty physical education class that served only five students but required 32 ELL students to crowd into one ELA class in the same period.[10]

### *In Schools: Improving Support for English Language Learners*

The team discovered that widespread low expectations for ELL students often resulted in them being disproportionately placed in classes that were not eligible for graduation credit. To address this, the Office of Language Acquisition first set goals for every school around the number of ELL students who should be reclassified as fluent each year, based on their students' most recent performance. Then, they **worked with schools to reach these new expectations for their students' growth**. OLA changed longstanding practices to promote this mindset; for example, they required schools to provide individual rationales for any ELL student who passed their English Language Development (ELD) course but was not reclassified as fluent. OLA saw the impact of these efforts for ELL students—after moving to the much more rigorous English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) exam for reclassification, they maintained their rate of 14 percent of ELL students annually reclassified as fluent according to state standards.[11]

### *In the Community: Gathering Board Support*

The superintendent took steps to shift mindsets among the school board, principals, counselors, the San Diego community, and their own central office team. The team built a shared understanding with school board and community members by presenting their analysis of student assignment and graduation trends. These conversations helped stakeholders understand why SDUSD needed to fix school structure and mindset barriers, in addition to improving instruction.

**Artifact #5: EdTrust West "Equity Audits" Presentation**

## Resource Shifts

### Time

Schools that served large numbers of new international students used to house New Arrival Centers for students who were learning English. Previously, students in these New Arrival Centers spent 75 percent of their day in mixed-age groups that consisted of only ELL students. An unintentional consequence of this structure was that many students were not accessing rigorous, grade-level content. During the 2015-16 school year, OLA analyzed data on these students' grades and graduation rates and found that only 63 percent of students at New Arrival Centers graduated, compared with 83 percent of ELL students in other high schools. The biggest contributor to this discrepancy was a lack of opportunities for students to take graduation-credit classes. So, during the 2016-17 school year, SDUSD **piloted an alternative International Center program**, in which students spent 25 percent of their time in ELD classes and the other 75 percent in credit-bearing, grade-level courses with both a general education teacher and ELD coach in the classroom. The International Center program now serves students in five high schools and two middle schools. OLA continues to track these students' grades and will track their graduation rates when the first cohort reaches their senior year.[12]

### People

Because students in International Centers were learning new content in English at the same time they learned the language, OLA **assigned a coach to each school to support ELL students during their grade-level classes**. To fit the needs of this new model, OLA changed job descriptions to create ELD coach positions and moved staff among schools so that each ELD coach served 25-30 students.[13]

#3

# Adapt the central office's structures and operations to facilitate successful school-level efforts.

*As SDUSD worked to change gatekeeping policies at schools, they realized there were also processes they could change in the central office to make schools' work more successful. By changing processes—such as hiring, district budgeting, and school planning—central office leaders helped schools make the most of their new data about students' needs.*

## Process Shifts

### Timelines

District leaders realized that schools could schedule more students into the right classes if they used students' course needs to inform planning. To do this, they **changed the school planning process** to begin by analyzing students' academic needs and possible root causes for why those needs weren't being met. Principals worked with their supervisors to identify which students weren't succeeding in their current school structure, determine what factors were limiting those students, and redesign their school schedules to address those factors. For example, in a school where classroom instruction wasn't setting students up to succeed, principal and teacher teams focused on improving lesson plans during their professional learning time.

Leaders in the Human Resources Department (HR) knew that teaching credential subject constraints often limited schools. Because flexibility to schedule students into the classes they needed to graduate was a top priority for every school, HR collaborated with principals to examine students' needs and understand which additional courses across all subjects should be added to the schedule. Then, HR leaders **made recommendations about how multi-certified teachers at the school could staff those needed courses, and, when necessary, made plans to hire additional teachers in high-need subjects**.

**Artifact #6: School Planning Timeline "Placemat"**

### Roles

After considering the best ways to support schools, some central office **departments reorganized to promote true cross-department collaboration**. For example, the Integrated Youth Services Division brought together staff members from other departments—including Counseling and Guidance, Restorative Justice Practices, and Before and After School Care—to work together to address equity issues that disproportionately affected disadvantaged subgroups of students. The district held weekly Instructional Cabinet meetings for leaders from the student support, instructional support, HR, and finance teams to coordinate approaches to new initiatives that affected schools. Their close relationships with schools helped the Instructional Cabinet learn key details necessary for effectively implementing their plans. The district also deepened its awareness of school-level needs by hiring several formal school leaders—such as principals, resource teachers, and counselors—into central office roles.

## Resource Shifts

### People

While restructuring existing departments to advance the strategic priority of meaningful graduation for all students, SDUSD **created a team of six central office counselors who supported schools to identify off-track students**. The district also created roles for two site operations specialists—one for master scheduling and one for graduation, who supported school-level efforts to establish structures that created more opportunities for students.[14]

### Money

SDUSD leaders supported schools by making the difficult financial decision to shift resources to the highest-need schools, even during a time of significant budget cuts. First, SDUSD **changed its school funding model to account for student needs that were not accounted for in the statewide funding model**. The updated funding formula "duplicated the unduplicated count," by providing additional funding to schools to serve students who are, for example, identified as both English-learners *and* students with disabilities. SDUSD surveyed the community to prioritize services and used this feedback to decide how to manage the district's recent $124 million budget gap.

**Artifact #7: Community Survey Results**

> **There is no acceptable number of casualties.** We might have a really high graduation rate, but we had 312 kids that didn't graduate. We can serve them. It's not okay. It's great that we have 92 percent—but we don't have 8 percent.
>
> -Genevieve Clark, instructional support officer

#4

# Involve the community to help students explore options for meaningful postsecondary plans.

*Due to ongoing budget cuts, SDUSD did not have the resources to provide all students with experiences that would help them explore potential postsecondary plans, such as college credit-bearing classes, elective courses, or science camps. To remedy this, district leaders engaged the San Diego community to offer these opportunities to students.*

## Resource Shifts

### Money

To equip students with early college experiences, the district **leveraged a state funding rule that allowed both SDUSD and local community colleges to receive funding for students who took classes in both places**. SDUSD capitalized on this rule to increase the number of students taking college classes without increasing the cost to the district.

### Time

To help students in all grade levels learn about a variety of career options, SDUSD **added enrichment partnerships with area businesses and foundations to create opportunities**, such as one-day science labs and computer science summer camps. They discovered, however, that high school students' time to explore career options was often limited by their course schedule. For example, some students who were fluent in two languages spent time in additional world language classes, which limited the time they then had available to take elective courses. To give these bilingual students greater flexibility over their course schedule, the district **partnered with local colleges and native speakers in the San Diego community to increase the number of languages that students could test in** to fulfill UC's Language Other Than English requirement from 5 languages to 23 languages.[15]

"How do we shift from schools seeing English-learners as just that teacher's responsibility or the responsibility of the Office of Language Acquisition…to **everyone in the school community taking responsibility for the well-being and the academic success of our English-learners**?"

-Sandra Cephas
Office of Language Acquisition

# **Results:** Changes to the Student Experience

By changing how students spend their time prior to graduation, SDUSD changed what students accomplished:

- Students who are new to the United States spend more time in credit-bearing classes.
  Because of the district's changes to its International Centers, 200-300 newly arrived ELL students have tripled the amount of time they spend learning grade-level content.[16]

- More students are on track to graduate.
  In their third year of high school, the 2016 class had 9 percent more students on track overall than the 2014 class, including 9 percent more black students and 10 percent more Latinx students.[17]

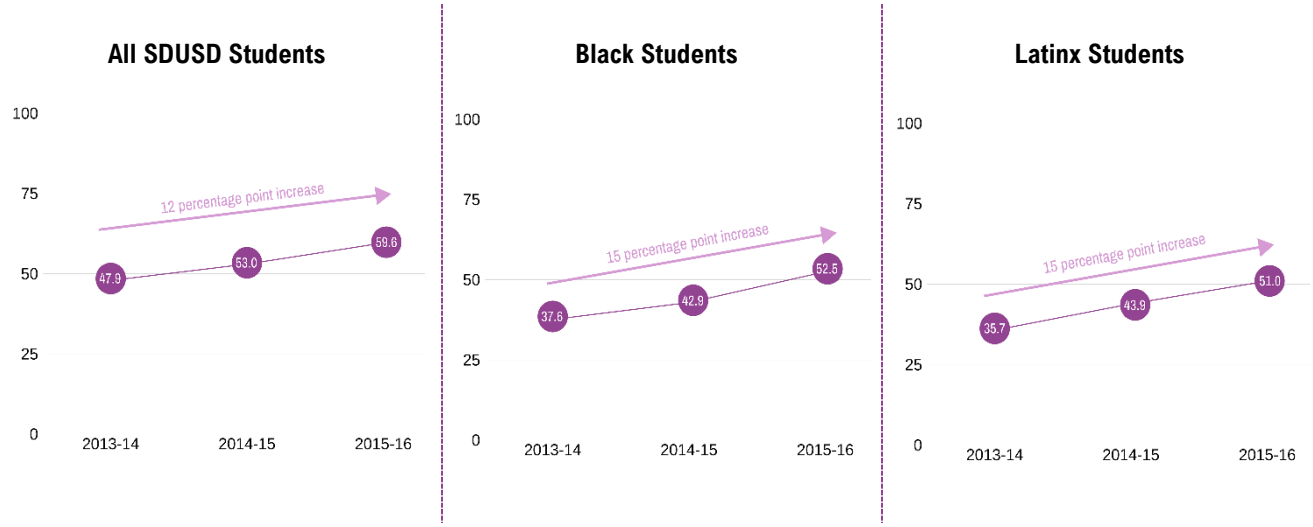
- Students spend more time in graduation-track classes; as a result, more students are graduating.
  Between 2014 and 2016, graduation rates grew slightly: from 90 percent to 91 percent overall, and from 82 percent to 88 percent for Latinx students.

- Students have more time to explore career options both in school and out in their community.
  In 2017, 76 percent of SDUSD graduates went on to attend college, including 72 percent of black students and 68 percent of Latinx students.[18]

Students are increasingly exploring postsecondary options while in high school. 5,900 additional high schoolers earned over 6,000 college credits during the 2017-18 school year than during the 2015-16 school year, more than doubling their enrollment in college courses during that time.[19]

- More students meet entry requirements for the UC system.

**Percent of Students Who Graduated With a Grade of C or Better in Courses Required for Entry into the UC System**[20]




Although California's calculations for graduation requirements changed in 2017, the percent of graduates who earned a grade of C or better in courses required for entry into the UC system increased another 5 percentage points between 2016 and 2018, to 71 percent.[21] [22]

# What's Next for San Diego Unified?

SDUSD has tackled many of the structural and systemic cultural barriers that stood in the way of meaningful graduation. District leaders are continuing their structural work—for example, adding class periods, so students have more changes to get back on track. They are also expanding their focus on instructional improvements: The Instructional Leadership Team recently led their schools to transition to a "guaranteed viable curriculum" that covers key state standards for all subjects. In collaboration with the data department, area superintendents are now developing common formative assessments that include question banks to make it easier for teachers to administer aligned assessments and easier for principals to compare results with peer schools. By cohesively improving structures, mindsets, and instruction, SDUSD staff continue to work hard to support every student through graduation.

# Sources

[1] Ed-Data. *District Summary: San Diego Unified*. www.ed-data.org/district/San-Diego/San-Diego-Unified.

[2] Email from Teri Curl, Administrative Support, Office of Secondary Schools.

[3] San Diego Unified School District. *Demographic Data*. www.sandiegounified.org/demographic_data.

[4] "Equity Audits: Why San Diego Unified Decided to Offer Orange Juice, not Orange Drink." Presentation from The Education Trust-West. Presented at the 2017 Ed Equity Forum.

[5] "Broad and Challenging Curriculum." Presentation from the SDUSD Board of Education. Presented October 28, 2014.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Email from Executive Director of School Innovation and Integrated Youth Services Cheryl Hibbeln.

[8] Email from District Head Counselor Jason Maher.

[9] Interview with Instructional Support Officer Genevieve Clark.

[10] Interview with Executive Director of School Innovation and Integrated Youth Services Cheryl Hibbeln.

[11] Email from Director of the Office of Language Acquisition Sandra Cephas. The 2015-16 reclassification rate under the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) was 14 percent. The 2016-17 transition year rate under district criteria was 17 percent. The 2017-18 reclassification rate under the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) was 14 percent.

[12] Email from Director of the Office of Language Acquisition Sandra Cephas.

[13] Interview with Director of the Office of Language Acquisition Sandra Cephas.

[14] Email from Executive Director of School Innovation and Integrated Youth Services Cheryl Hibbeln.

[15] Interview with Executive Director of School Innovation and Integrated Youth Services Cheryl Hibbeln.

[16] Email from Director of the Office of Language Acquisition Sandra Cephas.

[17] "Broad and Challenging Curriculum." Presentation from the SDUSD Board of Education. Presented October 28, 2014.

[18] *Post-Secondary Enrollment Data on District Graduates Based on Data from the National Student Clearinghouse, Graduation Years 2014 to 2017.* San Diego Unified School District. www-classic.sandi.net/DAR/R_R/Reports/NSC_14to17Grads.pdf.

[19] Email from Teri Curl, Administrative Support, Office of Secondary Schools.

[20] "Equity Audits: Why San Diego Unified Decided to Offer Orange Juice, not Orange Drink." Presentation from The Education Trust-West. Presented at the 2017 Ed Equity Forum.

[21] Beginning in 2017, state cohort graduation rates only considered regular diploma graduates and no longer included California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE) and Joint Diploma Program (JDP) completers. www-classic.sandi.net/dar/R_R/SpecialProcedures/Exits/StateExitCodes.pdf

[22] Email from Teri Curl, Administrative Support, Office of Secondary Schools.

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

*Photos courtesy of San Diego Unified School District.*

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