

# FactSheet April 2014

## Turning Around a High Poverty District: *Learning from Sanger*

Jane L. David and Joan E. Talbert, the authors of this Cowell Foundation supported study, explore how educators in the Sanger Unified School District helped their students move from achievement that was “near the bottom of the pack to the top.” The authors spent several years studying Sanger as it engaged in this process. They report what worked, why it worked, and how Sanger made it work in their 2013 study: *A High-Poverty District: Learning from Sanger*.

### Lessons from Sanger

While the authors of this volume caution that there is no simple formula and that every district must take its own path to improvement, they offer some important lessons that can be learned from Sanger.

**The first** is that there are no quick or partial fixes: “district leaders need to take on the whole system with a long-term view.” Sanger’s leaders carefully chose some key initiatives and strategies and stuck to these for years.

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

- » Understanding the developmental nature of desired change, whether asked of teachers or administrators: individuals and organizational sectors need varying amounts of time and support to change
- » Grounding decisions in evidence of adult and student learning
- » Over time, building shared commitments and relationships to sustain change

**The third** is that the approach flies in the face of several popular beliefs about district change:

Popular belief:		Belief needed to support change:
Teachers are the problem	vs.	Respect for teachers
Quick fix	vs.	The work is never done
Great leader theory	vs.	Leadership development
What works somewhere else	vs.	Decisions based on local evidence
Innovation	vs.	Common wisdom

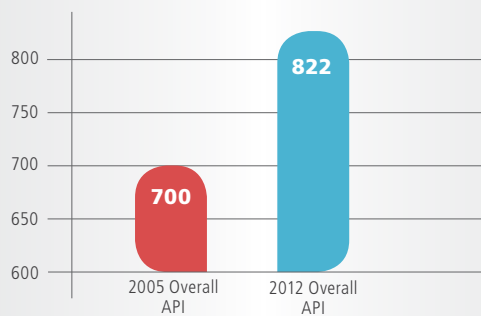
The authors note that although it was not a formal part of the reform agenda in Sanger, the support of both the school board and the teachers’ union were essential to making and sustaining the changes that led to these improvements.

*The superintendent nurtured relationships with the 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 disagreement. Maintaining those relationships helps to nip potentially contentious issues in the bud (p. 33).*

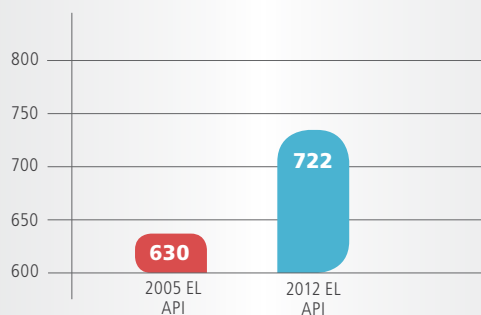
## How Sanger stakeholders worked together to achieve positive change

Over the course of several years, Sanger made fundamental changes that have resulted in significant improvements. These improvements include: (1) higher student test score achievement (Tables 1 and 2), (2) a rise in graduation rates for all students to 97% and for Latinos to 94%, (3) numerous district awards for character education and community involvement, (4) a significant increase in parent approval: more than 90% of the 87% of parent survey respondents now rate their schools as “good” or “excellent,” and, (5) a vastly improved relationship between the district and its teachers.

**Table 1: Sanger USD Overall API 2005 & 2012**



**Table 2: Sanger USD EL API 2005 & 2012**



Sanger’s success was decidedly not the result of a head start. This high-poverty (73%) and high-minority (84%) district began its change process with a long list of challenges common to many districts including poorly performing schools and frayed relationships, the latter characterized by a teachers’ union-sponsored billboard in town which read, “Welcome to the home of 400 unhappy teachers.”

In 2004 when district leaders started to take on the challenge of improving these poor conditions and outcomes, they confronted a culture in which:

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 (p. 7).

District leaders agreed on the need for a significant transformation:

From a culture of:	To a culture of:
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

### Culture shift one: Shift to culture of collaboration—“Together we can”

The strong spirit of collaboration expressed in this slogan took years to develop, involved building relationships at every level, and went hand in hand with other strategic improvement efforts. Professional learning communities (PLCs) at the teacher, principal, and district administrator levels were the framework for the shift to a culture of collaboration:

- » At the teacher level, district leaders established a firm foundation for PLCs by helping teachers learn about PLCs, instituting schedules to allow PLC meeting time, and working with teachers to develop a rubric for tracking each PLC’s progress.

### Sanger USD slogans characterizing district culture:

- “Together we can”
- “Every child, every day, whatever it takes”
- “Hope is not a strategy”
- “Put faces on the numbers”

- › District leaders accepted that different PLCs needed different support and time to coalesce and involved the teams in identifying priorities for their own work and progress.
- » At the site leader level, teams of three or four principals from schools serving similar students formed PLCs that were facilitated by a district academic administrator.
- » District administrator PLCs gelled (after a rocky start) around a focus on using evidence to address student needs.

### Culture shift two: Shift to diagnosing student needs—*“Every child, every day, whatever it takes”*

Using a phased approach, and understanding that the changes would take time, district leaders:

- » Insisted on pushing all students to meet grade level standards
- » Ensured that teachers had the chance to gain the skills to teach grade level standards, offering training to all teachers and principals almost all of whom attended, over several years
- » Involved teachers in developing a rubric to determine their own instructional success
- » Didn't lower expectations for struggling students to meet standards, rather, increased interventions for students based on evidence of who needed what kind and what amount of help
- » Launched pilots based on evidence of local schools' success, enlisted teachers from pilot schools to train their colleagues at other sites, and instituted regular principal meetings to observe, critique, and improve
- » Maximized instructional time by developing complex arrangements to regroup students twice during the day, calling on almost all adults at the school to work with children

### Culture shift three: Shift to leadership for learning—*“Hope is not a strategy”*

District leaders knew that to support a culture shift from teacher isolation to collaboration, principals needed a deep understanding of: (1) the vision for instructional improvement and (2) how to assess and support teacher PLCs. District leaders supported principals to build their instructional knowledge through:

- » Ensuring that principals attended workshops for teachers
- » Implementing district gatherings in which principals used data to focus priorities and improvement efforts
- » Establishing district forums to promote collaboration
- » Instituting walkthroughs to build principals' understanding of instruction and to increase their ability to provide constructive teacher feedback

Teachers also built leadership skills by leading grade or course-level PLCs and school based leadership teams. All of this capacity building resulted in a leadership pipeline. Since 2008 all site and district administrator vacancies have been filled from within as principals and teachers have moved up to greater levels of responsibility.

### Culture shift four: Shift to reciprocal accountability—*“Put faces on the numbers”*

Sanger leaders sought to implement shared reciprocal accountability that was based on professionalism and support with accountability at all levels of the school system. This was a complicated and long-range endeavor that required a delicate balance between pressure to adopt new ways of working and support for implementing those new ways. District leaders fostered this shared accountability by:

- » Insisting that teachers and administrators use evidence to support their decisions in trying to improve student achievement
- » Creating a culture in which using evidence is viewed as a professional responsibility
- » Building teacher and principal ability to use data effectively through principal summits and PLCs
- » Holding district leaders responsible for providing teachers and principals with what they need to succeed

Download the study at <http://bit.ly/1ersLA4>