

You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers

The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development

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In recent years, education stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels have increasingly turned to human resources policies on teacher tenure, compensation, and evaluation as leverage points for improving teaching quality in classrooms. Although these efforts appropriately aim to improve the quality of the teaching force, they too often seek silver-bullet solutions applied in isolation from other improvement strategies. Moreover, many proposed strategies treat quality as a largely static characteristic to be better distributed rather than an area for ongoing development and do little to address the performance of teachers who occupy the vast middle ground between excellence and harmfulness. Emerging attention to entire systems of human capital management, however, appropriately recognizes the need for a comprehensive approach to improving teaching quality. Garden Grove Unified School District, a large urban district in California, provides a compelling example of what such a system looks like in practice.

Introducing Garden Grove

Garden Grove has demonstrated success in improving student performance for more than a decade. Its measures of college preparedness and academic proficiency rank among the best of similar districts, indicators of success the district

has achieved while serving a high proportion of low-income students, English learners, and students of color. This track record has earned Garden Grove the 2004 Broad Prize as the nation's best urban school system and the esteem of peer district leaders throughout California. With the goal of articulating and sharing the best practices of a high-performing urban school district, this report describes the ways in which Garden Grove seeks to attract and maximize teaching talent through a comprehensive system of human capital development. Garden Grove district leaders see teachers and teaching as the fundamental drivers of student success. As outgoing superintendent Laura Schwalm explains, "You're never going to be a better district than the teachers in your classrooms." To that end, the central office sees two paths to improving instructional quality: (1) getting the best teachers and (2) building the capacity of the teachers it has.

Getting the Best Teachers

Essential strategies for getting the best teachers include the following:

- Approaches to **recruitment and student teaching** that give district leaders extensive opportunities to prepare, observe, and assess the quality and potential of teaching candidates

- A **hiring and placement** process that emphasizes skills and dispositions that will enable teachers to work collaboratively, constantly improve their craft, and contribute successfully to student learning in the district
- An **induction** program that prepares new teachers for the district's expectations for instruction and professional culture, including multiple opportunities to receive feedback
- An affirmative approach to **granting tenure** that actively selects quality teachers to remain in the district after their second year, rather than retain by default the teachers who simply continue teaching
- A **compensation** system that attracts quality candidates by offering competitive salaries and rewarding teachers for contributions to improved instruction in the district
- An approach to **working with struggling teachers** that provides extensive opportunities to improve and, in the cases where these efforts are unsuccessful, a commitment to removing teachers from the classroom who are actively harming student learning opportunities
- Opportunities for **teacher leadership** through which the district can leverage the human capital of its teachers while nurturing their professional growth

Building the Capacity of Teachers You Have

Likewise, key strategies for building teacher capacity include these:

- A comprehensive approach to **professional learning** that provides opportunities for training and collaboration at the district, school, and individual level, with an emphasis on what takes place in the classroom
- A model of **instructional supervision** that emphasizes the importance of ongoing feedback in enhancing teacher performance
- An **evaluation** system that strategically connects with the district's efforts to monitor and improve teaching quality

Building a Culture and Approach to Improvement That Enable Strategies to Succeed

These strategies for human capital development are essential components of the way the district pursues improvement. The story of Garden Grove is less about what it does, however, than how it approaches its work. Underlying all district efforts is a strong culture, driven fundamentally by the needs of students and the work of teachers, that prioritizes personal relationships, that reflects a philosophy of service from the central office to the schools, that trusts and empowers teachers to drive the work of student learning, and that features a commitment to continuous improvement. It is from this culture that effective practices of human capital development emerge, and it is within this culture that the practices can achieve success.

In addition to the district culture, Garden Grove seamlessly integrates human capital strategies into an overall approach to district improvement. Human capital is not an end in itself; it is only in relation to the district's goal of maximizing outcomes for students that the human capital system takes on true meaning. The district's problem-based approach to initiating and managing change





produces and supports the strategies of human capital development described in this report. At the same time, sound fiscal management, a collaborative relationship with the teacher union, and stable superintendent leadership have helped create the conditions for sustained growth.

Applying Lessons to Other Districts

What can we learn from the Garden Grove story? With regard to human capital development, Garden Grove provides compelling evidence that a comprehensive approach can help facilitate high-quality instruction and student learning. Educators and policymakers need not be swayed by the false promise of a silver-bullet approach to school improvement. Furthermore, the Garden Grove story provides concrete examples that other district leaders might consider in advancing their own approaches to human capital development—provided that they appropriately evaluate and adapt these strategies to meet the needs of their local context. At the same time, the most powerful lessons from Garden Grove may not emerge from the strategies themselves but from the processes through which they are created—a collaborative process that puts people at the center.

Perhaps the strongest lessons from Garden Grove, however, are about district improvement overall and developing ways to maintain discipline and focus on the right goal, student learning. District efforts may be most likely to succeed when leaders set clear expectations, communicate extensively about them, and establish strong support mechanisms. The Garden Grove story is one of discipline to avoid the allure of every good idea, and thus protect the system from what district leaders label “the constant swirling of reform.” Finally, the Garden Grove story is one of consistent improvement through the ongoing pursuit of promising practice and the relentless refining of those things that are most effective at attaining the desired results. The results attained by placing a primacy on students and teachers within Garden Grove suggest that valuing people and the interactions among them may be particularly important in driving the coherence and stability needed to achieve the student outcomes district leaders seek.

To access the full *You’ll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers* report, please visit <http://www.cacollaborative.org/publication/youll-never-be-better-your-teachers-garden-grove-approach-human-capital-development>



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