

**Meeting 50 Summary**  
**Preparing Students, Educators, and Systems for the Future:**  
**Transformational Change in Santa Ana**

May 3–4, 2023

Prepared by Linda Choi and Joel Knudson, American Institutes for Research®<sup>1</sup>

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***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly and to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).*

In May 2023, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in Santa Ana, California, to continue a yearlong focus on systemic coherence in the face of continuing pressures and priorities that threaten to fragment and distract improvement efforts. Participants examined efforts to develop a graduate profile as an anchor for focusing district-level strategies to strengthen student learning. The convening was also an opportunity for Collaborative members and guests to step back and examine the evolving world for which schools need to prepare young people to thrive. The meeting enabled participants to explore ideas about the future of education and how school systems can best adapt to and prepare for changes in the learning environment and the broader world in which we live.

### **Envisioning the Future of K–12 Education**

A growing body of research and a community of thought leaders have begun to articulate the evolving demands for K–12 education. As environmental, technological, and geopolitical change reshapes the circumstances in which schools operate, education is more important than ever to prepare students for a new world and to combat disparities that threaten equitable access to opportunity and success.

As Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) has pursued solutions to best serve students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, district leaders have pursued solutions and inspiration from individuals in non-education fields to explore aspects of the current approach to public education that are critical to preserve, as well as those aspects that

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Marina Castro, Mary Louise Baez, Emily Agopian, and Crystal Aguilera for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

must change to best meet student needs. One of these individuals, Sabba Quidwai from Designing Schools, joined the meeting to identify key trends and emerging priorities in the upcoming decades, not only in public education but in the broader context in which our education systems sit.

### ***The Changing Landscape of Technology and Its Implications for Education***

Quidwai began with an overview of technological change during the past 2 decades, pointing out the giant leaps in the technology available to students today. For example, today's high school students have lived their whole lives after the launch of Twitter and Spotify, developments that began before today's middle school students were born. And 5G internet access predates the birth of today's elementary school students. Children born today will only know of a world where artificial intelligence (AI) can be controlled by the power of their own voice. Given that schools are one of the few institutions that all children pass through, adults must design schools in a way that ensures equitable access to rapidly changing technologies and that provides the necessary education for students today to ensure the world we want for tomorrow.

Meeting participants walked through an exercise to think about technology as an equalizer to help design the kind of education system needed to create the world we want. Quidwai challenged meeting participants to "take the time to let go of what you do day in and day out. Use the power of AI technology to think as big as you want."

The exercise revealed a range of prior exposure to ChatGPT among participants, and, regardless of previous knowledge and experience levels, more time, reflection, and practice will be necessary to better understand the power and limitations of AI. Nevertheless, after walking through the exercise, multiple meeting participants shared that their perspectives about AI and its potential had shifted. Some emerging and persistent concerns include bias, equity, questioning sources, evaluating information, and creating safeguards. Nevertheless, meeting participants are also more open to the potential of AI and the importance of exposing students to technology that is changing how we think and work.

### **Creating Shared Expectations for Student Success Today and Tomorrow**

To ground the conversation about designing an education system today that meets students' needs for tomorrow, the meeting shifted to consider SAUSD's recently adopted graduate profile. The graduate profile outlines eight aspirational characteristics for students who exit the district after successfully navigating the K-12 experience. SAUSD leaders see the profile as the primary driver of coherence for the district, reasoning that all improvement efforts should clearly and explicitly tie directly to the system's desired student outcomes. Although the graduate profile represents an important first step in articulating the district community's goals for its students, early implementation efforts revealed the need for greater clarity for the profile in order to achieve shared understanding and commitment across the system. Meeting participants examined the ongoing ways in which district leaders are working to make improvements in the profile's clarity and alignment.

### ***Orientation to SAUSD and the Graduate Profile***

The second largest school district in Orange County, SAUSD enrolls approximately 45,000 students across 47 schools. Ninety-six percent of the students are classified as Hispanic/Latina, 2% are classified as Asian, and 2% are classified as Other. Eighty-one percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and nearly 45% of the students are English learners, with Spanish, Vietnamese, and Khmer the most common languages spoken at home.

District leaders and school board members recalled internal conversations about how best to emerge from the pandemic better than they entered it, including a commitment to ensure high levels of mastery for every learner. The district also engaged the parent community through study sessions and provided Spanish language translators so that non-English-speaking parents could provide input as well. One of these parents spoke at the Collaborative's meeting using a district translator and shared her reasons for participating in the stakeholder discussions: "Before this process, I didn't speak or advocate for my kids. I was here even though I didn't speak English because I want a better future for them and for the community of Santa Ana and all the district students . . . I am involved in all of the meeting and workshops the district facilitates. Thank you for continuing to involve our parents; our voices are important in this conversation."

These discussions led to the creation of the SAUSD graduate profile, which identifies the following eight characteristics. Graduates:

- (1) are architects of their life and learning, experiencing autonomy while persisting in the development of their life's goals;
- (2) have a confident spirit of inquiry and think of themselves as resilient, lifelong learners who have agency in their learning and achievement;
- (3) commit to become moral and ethical leaders who seek to build their life in the service of others;
- (4) develop skill sets in these areas—career, communication, cultural self-awareness, collaboration/teamwork, financial literacy, and technology—that help them compete/succeed locally and globally, now and in the future;
- (5) adapt and persist to overcome academic and personal barriers to maintain a state of complete physical, mental, and social/emotional well-being while achieving their full potential;
- (6) demonstrate their college and career readiness through work-based experiential-service learning and internship experiences within the local community;
- (7) demonstrate mastery in literacy, numeracy, and reasoning to address complex real-world problems in an increasingly demanding 21st century; and
- (8) apply their knowledge, values, and ethics gained to participate and innovate in a global and culturally diverse world.

## ***Reflections on SAUSD Listening Sessions From Various Stakeholder Groups***

Early implementation efforts revealed the need for greater clarity in order to achieve shared understanding and commitment across the system. District leaders began holding a series of listening sessions to better understand and respond to the perspectives of students, families, and staff. The first set of listening sessions targeted students and took place during the 2021–22 school year. A second set of sessions involved both certificated and classified district employees during the 2022–23 school year. A third set of sessions will seek to gather input from parents during the 2023–24 school year.

### ***Reflections From District Staff***

A panel of district employees joined the meeting to share their experiences and key takeaways from participating in the district listening sessions. First, panelists reported learning about the intricacies and the purpose of the graduate profile in a way they had not understood prior to the listening session. Based on this observation, it became clear that there is much to do to support the entire system in understanding the graduate profile and how to actualize the work without making it seem like this is “just another initiative.” Meeting participants voiced the importance of harnessing the power of narrative to spread the word about the purpose of the graduate profile. Second, panelists raised the issue of how to quantify and measure progress toward each of these eight characteristics. With clearer metrics of success, the district can help clarify the meaning of the dimensions and offer a way to gauge progress toward district goals.

### ***Student Listening Session Simulation***

Meeting participants next observed a group of randomly sampled SAUSD students who participated in a live and abbreviated listening session modeled after the general approach the district has taken with its students and employees. District leaders highlighted the decision to randomize student participants as a way of hearing from a full range of students, including students who are not typically invited to share their experiences. Facilitators asked the students the following questions: (1) Think about a class you had in school that was helpful to you outside of school. (2) What do you wish your teacher knew about you? (3) What are some of the goals you set for yourself? (4) What would you like to see adults do more or less of?

District leaders shared that they heard such powerful statements from students throughout the various listening sessions that really made them think about how they can improve the system for students, such as, “I wish my teacher would pronounce my name correctly,” and “They could just ask me how I’m doing.” Some things students shared during the listening session Collaborative members and guests observed were: “I wish my teachers knew that I get unmotivated easily and I give up when things get hard,” and “I wish my teachers knew I had great potential and that I’m a good student.”

After hearing from students, meeting participants had a chance to debrief their observations. Several of them noted how uncomfortable the students appeared throughout the listening session. The district leaders shared that the level of discomfort is expected

because adults in the system rarely ask for students to share their opinions, so students are not accustomed to being in this situation. Additionally, despite the level of discomfort, SAUSD leaders noted that students became more comfortable as the session went on, a dynamic they described as consistent with the other listening sessions this year. Furthermore, students encouraged the district to continue to create opportunities for hearing student voices.

### ***Next Steps for SAUSD and the Graduate Profile***

District leaders emphasized that the work with the graduate profile is still in the early stages. Additional listening sessions are still underway, and central office leaders are considering how to embed the eight characteristics into their hiring and retention policies while determining how best to roll out the profile to schools across the district.

### **Building Leadership Capacity to Meet Expectations for Student Success**

To achieve the aspirations articulated in the graduate profile, SAUSD has focused intently on leadership development. The district has sought to build the capacity of central office leaders so that they can both understand and model the kinds of behaviors needed in the district. These capacity-building efforts are now extending to principals, in attempting to better understand their experiences and in seeking to build the skills and mindsets needed to better serve educators and students at school sites.

Meeting participants explored the role of principals in advancing work related to the graduate profile in two ways. First, a panel of principal leaders from SAUSD provided perspectives about addressing needs in the district, including the coherence principals perceive about the graduate profile and the degree to which they feel equipped to lead at their school sites employing them. Second, meeting participants broke into smaller groups so that SAUSD leaders could gather feedback regarding the challenges of building principal capacity to implement the graduate profile at their school sites.

### ***School Leaders Feel Equipped but Require Additional and Aligned Resources***

When asked about the degree to which they feel equipped to roll out the graduate profile at their school sites, the principals on the panel described feeling well equipped and ready because of the strong and transparent relationships they have developed with their staffs. One panelist described the culture at her school: “It goes a long way to allow people to feel like they can take risks. It allows space for creativity, and people know that I will support them. If we fail, that’s okay, and we will try again.” However, several of the school leaders said the teachers would need additional resources, such as professional development days and substitutes, to work through how to implement and integrate the graduate profile in their work.

### ***School Leaders Have Taken Steps to Come to a Common Understanding***

Of the eight characteristics laid out in the graduate profile, district leaders asked school leaders to choose three to focus on during the 2022–23 school year. Panelists shared their

reasons for selecting various characteristics at their sites, but all panelists spoke about preparing their students for career and college and for developing into local and global thinkers. One principal shared that, despite some initial grumbling that the graduate profile was just another initiative that would come and go, upon careful examination, teachers and leaders came to the understanding that the graduate profile consists of “what we want for all our kids.” He went on to add, “It was a great experience in patience and listening, and it is important to listen to teachers and staff to get their feedback.”

### ***Additional Clarity About the Graduate Profile Characteristics Is Still Needed to Achieve Shared Expectations***

In their efforts to create systemwide clarity about and commitment to the graduate profile, district leaders have recognized that both central office and site administrators play critical roles. However, additional work is still needed to gain clarity about the eight characteristics. SAUSD leaders sought feedback from Collaborative members and guests about building clarity, leadership capacity, and strategies to coherently communicate and implement the profile throughout the district schools.

### ***Leaders Need Structured and Protected Time and Space Together***

The district is contemplating creating modules to clarify each characteristic of the graduate profile and providing those modules as resources to school leaders in the rollout process. Meeting participants provided feedback that, in addition to leaders having this resource, for leaders to truly build the necessary capacity, they need structured time to absorb the material in the module and practice it together. Communities of principals who can make sense of the resources together and support one another’s learning can help prepare them more effectively to lead at their own sites. One person stated, “We don’t want them to leave it on the desk and walk away because they are so busy. This will give them time to think about it and ensure follow-through.”

### ***Develop Common Metrics for the Graduate Profile***

Echoing insights raised earlier by multiple central office leaders, many meeting participants raised the question of how the district plans to measure progress toward the eight characteristics. Responses from various district leaders indicated this is an area for further planning and decision making. Nevertheless, their reflections suggested a preference for leveraging existing metrics that are already used to collect data about system progress. One meeting participant encouraged the district to think more critically about this piece and how to communicate the metrics because it would help roll out implementation as well: “Thinking about developing common metrics for the graduate profile is something to think about because people will do what they are held accountable for.”

### ***Go Slow to Go Fast***

One piece of advice that comes up frequently in Collaborative meetings is the idea of going slow to go fast. Several meeting participants made this suggestion with respect to the

graduate profile, noting that carefully laying a foundation during the early stages of implementing the graduate profile will equip the system to move forward more efficiently and effectively. One member stated, “Maybe they don’t have to roll out all eight characteristics at once. Maybe just focus on one at a time and roll it out slowly. They don’t need to speed through something they are trying to embed in the culture.”

## **Preparing School Districts for the Future of Education**

The final session sought to connect the dots across various discussions and areas of focus throughout the meeting. First, extending the discussions of principal capacity to implement the SAUSD graduate profile, district leaders identified leaders’ abilities to anticipate and prepare for upcoming changes to our environment as a critical skill set for their success. District leaders are seeking ways to embed the mindsets and practices of strategic foresight into the work of leaders in the central office and at school sites. Second, participants considered the role that social media can play in advancing understanding and commitment toward the kind of vision laid out in a strategic plan or graduate profile.

### ***Orientation to Strategic Foresight***

Strategic foresight is an approach to thinking about the future in a way that helps organizations prepare for change. The goal is not to predict exactly what will happen tomorrow or even years from now. Rather, in an environment of ongoing change and unpredictability, strategic foresight seeks to anticipate and prepare for multiple possible futures. Leaders who engage in futures thinking analyze trends, signals, and drivers of change to consider what these alternative pathways might look like and to prepare accordingly.

Through a presentation about strategic foresight and dialogue among participants, several principles emerged that characterize the approach. For example, considering a range of possible scenarios works best when informed with a diversity of thoughts and perspectives. Stakeholder engagement therefore plays a key role in bringing multiple sources of insight and expertise to the table in mapping potential future states. Effective planning for the future also draws on lessons from history and the ways in which they can shape and predict what will happen down the road. One presenter on strategic foresight observed, “Some of the best futurists are the best historians.” Exploring multiple possible future states also requires navigating an environment of uncertainty and ambiguity. The same presenter noted, “Futurists have the ability to make themselves uncomfortable.” Finally, the process of strategic foresight is ongoing and involves constant adaptation to new ideas and pieces of evidence about what the future holds.

Several tools and resources can support individuals and organizations in embracing a strategic foresight approach. One of these is the process of environmental scanning, which can be pursued through a STEEP analysis. In this exercise, participants consider the Social, Technical, Economic, Ecological, and Political trends that are likely to shape their work. Meeting participants engaged in a brief STEEP analysis to identify likely influences on the future of K–12 education. For example, the trend of greater isolation with only like-minded groups will shape the degree to which individuals have access to competing sources of

information. This trend also underscores the vital role of education in preparing youth to embrace and navigate differences of opinion. From an economic standpoint, growing wealth inequality threatens to exacerbate disparities in access to resources and opportunities; attention to matters of equity will carry increased importance if and as this trend continues. Ecological patterns—from issues that are currently local, like the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, to threats like increased wildfires that are byproducts of global warming—might significantly disrupt patterns of migration, as well as perpetuate resource gaps among segments of the population. The technical changes underway through developments in AI, discussed at greater length earlier in the meeting, represent another pattern that will significantly impact schools and school systems.

For each of these trends, several questions can guide a process of reflection and planning: What kind of change is this representing? What is driving the change? And what would the world look like in 10 years if this got bigger? By identifying and preparing for these changes, education leaders can prepare their schools and school systems to meet the needs of an evolving environment.

Participant discussion raised questions about the time required to engage in strategic foresight. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, central office and site leaders report feeling more overwhelmed than ever before by the demands of their jobs and the needs of their students. The process of scanning and preparation, however vital to the success of our schools, adds one more responsibility to their plates. Participants suggested that it may be necessary to redesign existing meeting approaches—for example, with ongoing experiences like the executive cabinet retreats and principals' meetings—to create space for these discussions. Some organizations have even developed a foresight division to prioritize and protect these kinds of activities; some comparable form of specialization could be promising in some educational settings. Some participants also noted that some existing practices—for example, the listening sessions underway in SAUSD—can inform the scanning process; leveraging these practices as part of a futures mindset can equip districts to better prepare for the future.

### ***Leading Through Social Influence***

The meeting closed with a discussion about ways that districts can leverage social media to foster coherence and connection with members of the district community. Social media access and use is widespread among parents: According to Common Sense Media, 71% of parents with students 8 years old or older access information from social media about their children's schools; the same is true for 75% of parents with students under age 8. Social media therefore represents a critical opportunity for districts to connect with parents and community members through channels where they already seek information. Meeting participants also emphasized the opportunities for educators to shape the narrative about the work they do in service of young people. One SAUSD representative explained, "As a district, you can't rely on anyone else to tell your story." Another veteran district leader echoed this perspective: "I learned the hard way; you have to tell your story or no one else will." These observations underscored a broader set of observations from throughout the meeting about the importance of narrative in building understanding and support around a district's mission and vision.



In SAUSD, some key tactics define an approach to leading through social influence. The district features 46 schools, nearly 45,000 students, almost 5,000 employees, and more than 250 social media accounts affiliated with the district in some way. A small central office team could not possibly achieve the same reach as the district's teachers and students could, so SAUSD has strategically expanded the group of messengers charged with spreading the word about positive developments across the district. SAUSD's brand ambassador program recruits and trains community members to post about the district's work on social media to create a positive image, raise awareness about district and school activities and accomplishments, build equity of information by ensuring that all schools receive attention, and support superintendent and board policies. Since the program launched in 2021, 135 brand ambassadors have signed on to support the district's social media presence. The hashtag #SAUSDgraduateprofile helps to draw attention to developments in the district that are aligned with its goals for students.

District leaders and brand ambassadors can craft a messaging strategy to directly address issues of importance to parents and other community members. For example, when parents were worried about school cleanliness early during the COVID-19 pandemic, videos of sites being cleaned helped to publicize district actions and alleviate concerns. Now, as SAUSD seeks to build understanding of and commitment to the graduate profile, district leaders aim to tie social media posts directly to the competencies laid out in the profile. One district leader explained, "We are moving towards having that message be more intentional, having the photo describe what they are learning, and telling the short story." For any district, making the alignment between system goals and community-facing messaging explicit can serve broader attempts to build and maintain coherence in a district's work.

Representatives from SAUSD described some of the benefits from their social media strategy. Instagram posts since the brand ambassador program began, for example, have increased 377%, with a 22% increase in total followers. Social media activity also enables the district to inform and draw positive attention to district leaders—including board members—and community leaders who contribute to the development of the SAUSD graduate profile by tagging them in posts. Building on earlier points about controlling one's own narrative, district leaders further noted that, in contrast to historical interactions with traditional media, which were driven by media outlets and typically put districts in a reactive role, social media enables districts to share content that helps to shape the narrative about their work.

Discussion about approaches to social media highlighted some areas for further attention from education leaders. District leaders are seeking to become more strategic in their use of social media to successfully navigate the current environment. They might also seek opportunities to teach social media skills in a way that empowers themselves and simultaneously exercises caution and thoughtful behavior. Participants also drew attention to the temporal nature of most social media activity and recommended care about archiving historical knowledge. Finally, some participants drew attention to the negativity and vitriol that too often characterize the behavior and output of some social media

contributors. Such activity can complicate and can even undermine district attempts to engage with and build connections with community members. Savvy use of social media platforms is essential. Some participants further noted that having an established social media presence in which an organization's values are clearly articulated over time and that builds a coalition of support for the district's work can help school systems weather inevitable storms when they occur.

### **Next Steps for the Collaborative**

The Collaborative will meet next in fall 2023 in Elk Grove, California. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to share key lessons and takeaways from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. For example, a May 2023 webinar on district strategies for advancing equity highlighted lessons from a newly released Collaborative brief and features insights and examples from Superintendents Jill Baker and Matt Hill. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at [www.cacollaborative.org](http://www.cacollaborative.org).