POSITIVE OUTLIERS SERIES

Gridley Unified School District

Positive Outliers Case Study

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Executive Summary

Gridley Unified School District serves just over 2,000 students across five schools in a small rural town in the upper Sacramento Valley. The median annual household income in Gridley is just over 60% of the state average. Farming and agriculture are central to the town's economy—almost half of all Gridley High School students take Career Technical Education classes, and many also belong to agriculture-related organizations.

Gridley Unified is one of seven districts studied by researchers at the Learning Policy Institute in a mixed-methods study that sought to learn from positive outlier districts in which African American, Latino/a, and White students did better than predicted on California's mathematics and English language arts tests from 2015 through 2017, after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status. This in-depth case study describes the critical practices and policies within Gridley Unified that have promoted student learning, especially among students of color, in the context of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the deeper learning they seek to foster.

Through an analysis of interview, documentary, and observational evidence, this case study describes key factors that helped support student success in Gridley Unified:

1. **Gridley Unified's adaptation to CCSS built on past supports that helped teachers identify standards for teaching and develop an aligned program of instruction.**

   Before the arrival of CCSS, the district received outside support for developing these teacher competencies, contracting with the education research and implementation agency WestEd to hold training sessions throughout 2005 and 2006. This foundational work involved three stages. First, k–12 teachers engaged in reading education research. Second, WestEd led teachers through a process of understanding the curricular standards and identifying several essential standards—those that were both fundamental to accessing other parts of the curriculum and areas of important skill development for Gridley Unified students. Third, WestEd taught teachers how to build benchmark assessments, such that teachers could measure student progress against those standards at regular intervals. This process helped district educators build knowledge of the standards and increased alignment among the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

2. **Gridley Unified teachers actively engaged in adapting curricular materials to CCSS and capitalized on institutional knowledge of how to approach deconstructing and identifying standards.**

   The transition to CCSS began with a districtwide training session led by an external consultant at the beginning of the 2012 school year. As with the earlier WestEd training, the session focused on helping staff unpack the standards and understand their expectations for each subject area. After training, implementation took place at the school level. Schools were able to undertake the familiar process of identifying essential CCSS standards and then incorporating them into existing standards, materials, pacing, and assessments. Across Gridley Unified, teachers participated in the process of deconstructing the curricula standards, which gave them opportunity to gain deep familiarity with their aims.

Although this change in the standards took place largely at the school level, there was also a commonality of approach. At each level, teachers' efforts focused the curriculum on essential standards and aligned these with resources and assessments to bring coherence.

3. **Gridley Unified educators reported a variety of changes in instructional practice to help students acquire the competencies required under CCSS.**

   Across each school in Gridley Unified, the arrival of CCSS corresponded with changes in instructional practice. A focus on communication and literacy skills at the elementary level developed into a focus on explicitly developing students' vocabulary and writing in middle school, with the goal of progressively developing the skills of connecting claims with evidence and reasoning. At Gridley High, the mathematics department emphasized active student engagement and higher-level thinking skills, with instruction focused on developing conceptual understanding rather than simply procedural approaches.

   However, such changes in instructional practice varied by teacher and school. This variation is consistent with an approach to instructional change that gives significant autonomy to schools and teachers, who may adopt things at different times. Although the approach differed across Gridley Unified schools, pedagogy had shifted toward greater opportunity for students to develop collaboration and communication skills.

4. **Gridley Unified's teachers had ample access to professional development to support instructional changes.**

   Professional development was typically led at the school level and often initiated by teacher interest, with teachers encouraged to identify and seek out professional learning relevant to their students' needs or the way they wanted to transform their teaching practice. There were also several district-led professional development initiatives, including training for curricular rollouts that often involved bringing in outside trainers or sending groups of teachers to conferences. District leaders said that other factors contributing to Gridley Unified's professional development system included its professional learning communities (PLCs), which aimed to shift instructional practice and identify students who might need additional support.

5. **Gridley Unified maintained a stable and experienced teacher workforce.**

   A stable teacher workforce was particularly important to a small district like Gridley Unified, where relatively modest turnover could have a significant impact on students. District and school representatives indicated that, unlike many districts in the state, Gridley Unified had not faced teacher shortages and has had relatively low teacher turnover, especially at the elementary level.

   District leaders attributed workforce stability to a variety of factors. They said that approximately one third of teachers live locally, and another third commute from nearby Chico. Gridley Unified has strong teacher pay—salaries for certificated staff in Gridley Unified were reported to be the highest in Butte County and competitive with those in Chico, the largest nearby urban center. In addition, the district's proximity to university teacher preparation programs encouraged a pipeline of teachers. Another contributing factor to teacher stability was that teachers generally said they were well

supported—they had considerable autonomy in their teaching, received day-to-day support and the resources they needed, and had few additional time commitments and after-school responsibilities.

6. **Gridley Unified teachers and administrators emphasized the importance of identifying and supporting struggling students before they fall behind.**

   This strategy included a range of benchmark assessments to guide instruction and well-established strategies for intervention at the elementary and middle schools, where particular attention was paid to students' reading. At Gridley Unified, the foundation for intervention and support began with 1st-graders at **McKinley Primary**. The school year starts with an initial assessment of every student to gauge their reading levels and identify issues and continues with assessments each trimester to measure student progress against benchmarks. At **Wilson Elementary**, a two-person reading specialist team assesses every student in grades 2–5 three times a year, helping to normalize the process of reading intervention and building trust and a safe learning environment for students. At **Sycamore Middle School**, students receive learning support depending on their needs—additional subject support, enrichment opportunities, support with organization and study habits, or additional support in English language arts. Considerable thought goes into making sure the intervention options are fluid so that students who progress can move out of intervention.

   In addition to the range of interventions and supports for student learning in Gridley Unified's schools, around 80 students receive additional tutoring at the **Mi C.A.S.A. after-school program**, located in Gridley Unified's Farm Labor Housing Development, a county-run camp primarily for migrant workers and their families.

7. **Teachers and schools in Gridley Unified use several types of data and evidence to identify students in need of support and to inform instruction.**

   Given the small size of the district office, the analysis and use of data and evidence were primarily conducted at the school level. Gridley Unified educators initially received training in the use of benchmark assessments districtwide when the district established PLCs in 2005–06. Since then, PLCs have typically used evidence from these assessments to identify students in need of extra support and to inform instruction. Teachers and schools in Gridley Unified also collected other forms of data and assessment to identify needs and to inform instruction, including several periodic assessments of literacy.

8. **Gridley Unified managed finances conservatively and invested in technology and personnel.**

   Leaders said the district has a history of financial stability, even during the 2008 recession. District staff ascribed this in part to lean operating costs at the district level and to a broader community culture oriented toward conservative spending. Recently, the state's transition to the Local Control Funding Formula increased the district's overall funding, based on the needs of its student population. Gridley Unified also has considerable site-based flexibility, with principals indicating that they could adopt different spending priorities as they saw necessary to support student learning at their schools and in the

community. The community in turn invested back in the schools in several ways, including with fundraisers. Shepherding their finances allowed school leaders to invest in personnel to give students more attention from adults and enhance in-class learning time.

9. **Gridley Unified sustains a positive learning culture and community.**

   Gridley Unified's leaders said that several school- and teacher-led social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives contributed to providing students with tools to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers. More fundamentally, teachers often referred to the daily act of building personal relationships with their students as key to SEL and creating a positive learning environment.

   The atmosphere of support for students may be in part attributable to the small size and stability of the district and community. However, school and district administrators said teachers also contributed to sustaining this culture by being visible and participating in the community. The closeness of the community thus contributed to teachers knowing their students well, and to students feeling more comfortable in seeking support.

Introduction

The California Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represent a sea change in education for the state. Signed into law in 2010, the standards were intended to bring attention to the skills, knowledge, and abilities that students need in the 21st-century workplace by specifying what students should know and be able to do in each grade. Teaching to develop the competencies outlined in the standards—often referred to as the "deeper learning" skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and teamwork—required a shift in instructional practice away from the emphasis on memory and recall and toward activities such as small-group discussions that engage students in productive struggle, dialogue, and problem-solving. A new assessment system was introduced in 2014 to measure student achievement against these standards.

An important consideration with new curriculum, pedagogies, and assessments is the extent to which all students have access to opportunities to learn at new and deeper levels. Teachers may need support to make instructional shifts that help students develop these competencies, and districts may require additional supports to develop their instructional capacity.

In implementing CCSS, some districts have experienced higher student achievement on the new assessments than predicted, particularly for traditionally underserved students. These "positive outlier" districts in California are those in which—controlling for differences in their families' socioeconomic status—students across racial/ethnic groups consistently performed above expectations on California's new assessments.[1] In this case study, we profile a small, rural positive outlier district—Gridley Unified—whose students of color achieve at rates greater than those of similar students statewide, when accounting for socioeconomic differences. This case study is part of a larger quantitative study of positive outliers in California[2] and part of a larger qualitative study that examines trends across seven case studies of positive outlier districts.[3] In Gridley's case study, we seek to understand the policies and practices that have helped make Gridley a positive outlier. More information about the case study methods is contained in Appendix B.

Context

Gridley is a small town of around 6,500 in Butte County, located in the upper Sacramento Valley. The median annual household income in Gridley is approximately $40,000, just over 60% of the state average.[4] Farming and agriculture are central to the town's economy. Almost half of all Gridley's high school students take classes in the school's Career Technical Education (CTE) department, and many also belong to agriculture-related organizations, such as Future Farmers of America.

Gridley Unified School District comprises just over 2,000 students enrolled in five schools. Such small districts (fewer than 2,500 students) account for around 59% of all school districts in California (and 7% of the state's students).[5] Thus, the way Gridley has responded to the implementation of CCSS and new state assessments while achieving at better-than-predicted rates for its students may hold particular relevance for the many similar districts in the state.

Small and rural districts typically face challenges in attracting and retaining strong leaders and staff, and limited central office capacity can create challenges in supporting the implementation of new standards.[6] Due in part to its approach to fiscal management (discussed later in this report), Gridley has been fortunate in avoiding the significant teacher layoffs and other financial challenges experienced by many California districts during the Great Recession.[7]

As in many small districts, there is one school choice for students in a given grade. Gridley has four main schools. Elementary education is split across two schools: McKinley Primary covers grades k and 1, and children in grades 2–5 attend Wilson Elementary. In addition to Sycamore Middle (grades 6–8) and Gridley High (grades 9–12), 24 students attend a continuation high school, Esperanza Alternative. Student and teacher numbers for each school are shown in Table 1.[8]

Table 1
Gridley Unified Student Population 2016–17

School	Grade	Number of Students	Number of Teachers
McKinley Primary	K	164	16
	1	162	
Wilson Elementary	2	138	29
	3	143	
	4	147	
	5	153	
Sycamore Middle	6	150	25
	7	157	
	8	166	
Gridley High/Esperanza Alternative High	9	170	35
	10	180	
	11	142	
	12	149	
Total		2,021	102[a]

[a] The total is not the sum of the column because teachers may work in more than one school or may have left or joined the school mid-year.

Data source: California Department of Education. (n.d.). DataQuest. http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/.

During the time of this study, the district's student population was majority Hispanic (57%), with White students (35%) comprising the next largest racial or ethnic group, and a smaller percentage of students identifying as being of Asian descent (3%). The remaining 5% of students were African American or Native American students, students from two or more racial backgrounds, or those who did not report their racial or ethnic background. As with many districts statewide, Gridley's teacher demographics do not match those of its students, with 93% of teachers listed as non-Hispanic White and 7% as either Hispanic or Asian.

Gridley has a sizeable portion of students who are English learners, 17% (slightly lower than the statewide average of 21%). Approximately 95% of the district's English learners identify as Hispanic and are concentrated in the elementary grades. However, as discussed in the sections below, teachers reported that developing the more advanced vocabulary expected with CCSS is a focus area for both English learners and first-language English speakers.

A significant number of Gridley students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Although stable at 66% from 2009 to 2012, the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has since increased to 73% in 2017–18.[9] This proportion is higher among the district's Hispanic students. Students who identify as Hispanic represent 67% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.[10] However, issues of poverty are not restricted to one racial or ethnic group.

Student Achievement

Although overall student achievement in Gridley is comparable with state averages in English language arts and slightly below averages in mathematics, the district's Hispanic and socioeconomically disadvantaged students achieve at rates that exceed those of similar students on the state's CCSS-aligned California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), as shown in Appendix A.

There is also variation across grades within Gridley, with overall performance exceeding state averages in grades 4 and 5 of elementary school and grade 11 in high school, but trailing state averages in middle school grades. However, the small size of Gridley, with around 155 students per grade, means that these differences could be reflective of differences among cohorts of students within Gridley, rather than differences in instruction in Gridley's schools. The district's 2017–18 Local Control Accountability Plan also noted that progress has been made in raising achievement at the elementary level and with English learners among middle school grades. However, performance gaps among student groups remain, particularly in mathematics at the middle school level. Nonetheless, overall achievement rates in Gridley exceed those predicted based on the district's demographic and socioeconomic status. This means that there may be lessons learned at Gridley that would be useful for other districts, but there may also be areas in which further efforts are needed to improve overall achievement.

Findings

As with many small, rural districts, Gridley operates with a small number of district office personnel. In addition to the superintendent, there are just two district staff who have a role in curriculum and instruction. The locus of decision-making thus sits largely with schools and their principals. The district provides support to schools and principals as instructional leaders and undertakes a limited number of initiatives in curricular and technology rollout in addition to facilities management. Teachers in Gridley also have significant autonomy in decisions that impact student learning. This is due in part to the strength and stability of the teacher workforce and the culture of trust and respect among adults in this small district, but also to recent leadership changes.

Our findings identified several criteria that may account for the success of all students in the district and the success of students of color in particular. In the sections that follow, we first look at some of the initiatives in the district that established a strong foundation for learning prior to the adoption of CCSS. We then discuss approaches within the district to adapt curricula, as well as shifts in instructional practice, stimulated by CCSS-aligned professional learning and furthered in professional learning communities at each school. We also highlight the district's success in attracting and retaining teachers, how these teachers intervene early to support student learning, and how these teachers have used data to inform teaching and learning. Finally, we discuss the use of financial resources and the district culture, both of which have shaped the conditions for learning in the district.

Foundations for Learning

A core part of the approach to CCSS in Gridley stems from work that began several years before CCSS implementation. This work supported teachers' facility in identifying standards for teaching and developing an aligned program of instruction and assessment. Principals and teachers described how the district received outside support for developing these teacher competencies, contracting with the education research and implementation agency WestEd. This began in the summer of 2005 with a weeklong, districtwide training session, followed by several training sessions during 2005 and 2006 and further elaborated at school sites through grade-level or department teams.

This foundational work involved three stages. First, k–12 teachers engaged in reading education research. Second, WestEd led teachers through a process of unpacking the curriculum; understanding the curricular standards and what they entailed; and identifying several essential, or "power," standards—those that were both fundamental to accessing other parts of the curriculum and areas of important skill development for Gridley students. Given the challenge of covering the many standards in the curriculum in a single school year,[11] WestEd guided the district to identify several essential standards to help focus teaching. Third, WestEd taught teachers how to build benchmark assessments, such that teachers could measure student progress against those standards at regular intervals. At the elementary school level, teachers gave formal assessments three times per year, with several smaller assessments in between. At McKinley and Wilson schools, the schools developed report cards based on the essential standards and the benchmark level that they expected students to reach. In sum, this process helped build district educators' knowledge of the standards and increased alignment of the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

A second part of the foundation was a strong base for early literacy. The district has a long history with Reading Recovery, a program providing one-on-one tutoring for students over a defined period. Gridley first implemented Reading Recovery in 1998, and the program continues at McKinley Primary to the present.

The district experienced success in raising elementary student performance on the earlier California Standardized Tests (CSTs) in the years before the arrival of CCSS. For example, scores for Wilson Elementary on the state's Annual Performance Index, a now discontinued accountability measure composed of CST scores, grew from 764 in 2008 to 850 in 2013. (See Table 2.) There was also a positive trend for most student groups, including English learners and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, with these student groups exceeding the target Annual Performance Index score of 800.

Table 2
Wilson Elementary School Annual Performance Index School Trends

Demographic	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Overall	764	814	825	834	844	850
Hispanic or Latino/a	730	772	797	810	822	828
White	815	873	860	866	856	878
English Learner	733	769	794	801	814	816
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	742	790	809	815	828	840

Data source: California Department of Education. (n.d.). API data files. https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pr/api.asp (accessed 04/02/19).

Adapting Curricula to Common Core

The district undertook a similar approach to that described above in its adoption of CCSS. Given that many district teachers participated in the earlier work with WestEd, there was considerable institutional knowledge of how to approach deconstructing and identifying standards.

Gridley adopted its CCSS-aligned English language arts curriculum in 2015. At the time of this research, the district had yet to formally adopt a mathematics curriculum, with most teachers using the free-to-download Engage New York materials that were granted interim approval by the Gridley school board. Yet this delay in the formal adoption of a curriculum also provided freedom for Gridley's teachers to take initiative in their use of curricular resources.

Transition to CCSS began with a districtwide training session led by an external consultant. This took place during 1.5 days of district professional learning at the beginning of the 2012 school year. As with the earlier WestEd training, the 2012 session focused on helping staff unpack the standards and understand their expectations for each subject area. As a former history teacher described the process:

> We took a focus on unpacking those ancillary standards.... We chose the reading of history and the writing of historical pieces as what we were going to do to help support Common Core implementation, since there were no Common Core history standards per se.

Thereafter, the balance of implementation took place at the school level. A high school counselor provided a vivid description of how his colleagues reorganized science materials to focus on the essential standards and align them with state assessments:

> There were some teachers that would take a textbook a year before implementation and just rip it apart, literally rip it chapter to chapter and re-establish those chapters and how they were going to teach those.
>
> [My colleague said] "I'm going to systematically reorganize the chapters in a binder. I'm still going to cover the material, but I'm not going to follow [in numerical order] Chapter 1 through Chapter 17. And Chapters 18 and 19 we don't need because it's not being addressed in the assessments, so I'm going to replace that with information they will need next year."

At the elementary level, the process of transition to CCSS was generally smooth, in part because the same principal led both the primary and elementary schools during the transition. As one McKinley Reading Recovery teacher described, the schools were able to undertake the same process of identification of essential standards under CCSS and cross-reference these with their existing standards:

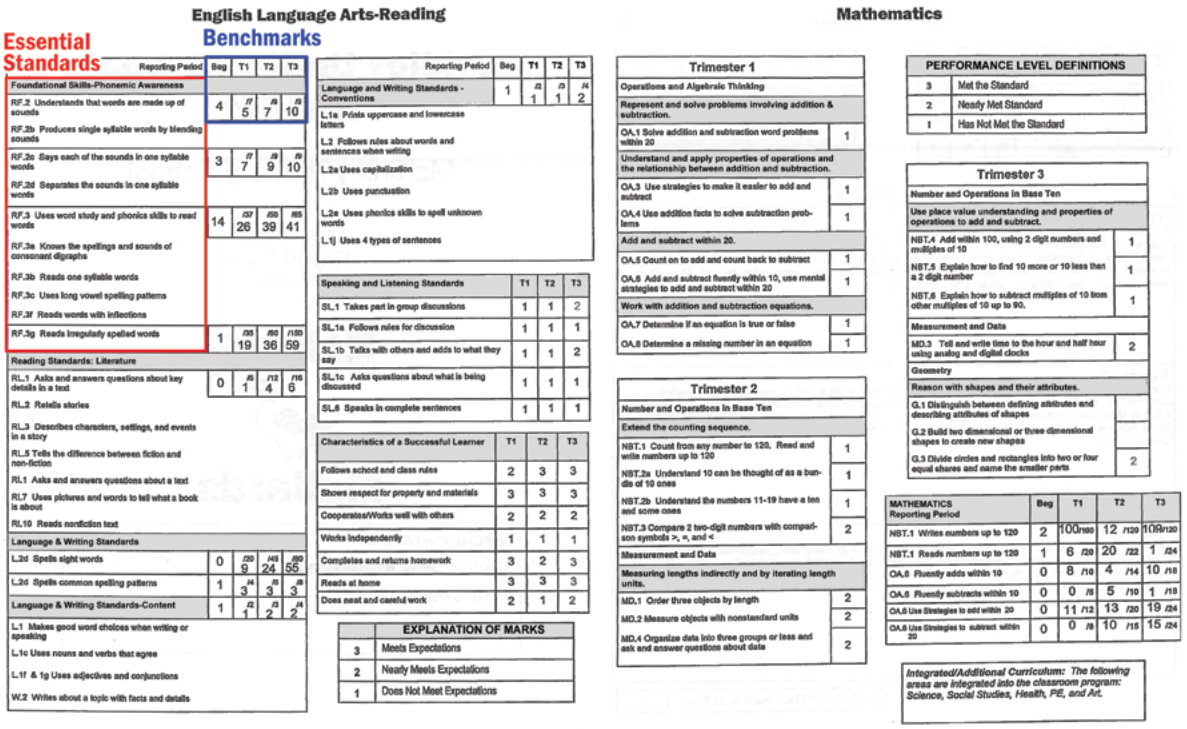
> We haven't had WestEd, but we had that knowledge of WestEd. And there [were] enough of us still around here that remembered what that looked like. We have matched them.... We started with the old standards and then the new standards, and we kind of cross-referenced them. Then we picked our essential standards ... and then made new standards. These are our essential standards now, but we cross-referenced them to the old standards and ... also with the [English Language Development] standards.

She further explained that these essential standards were then paired with key items in their reading materials and adapted to meet their pacing schedule:

> We had to make sure what they [the reading texts] were teaching ... was what we [the teachers] were teaching. We cross-referenced all of that [with the standards].... If we saw [a standard] in the series many, many, many times, then we knew that it was a focus. [We know] we can't teach all the standards. We can't master [them all]. We want them to master the essential standards.

The schools then took those standards and created new report cards, listing essential standards and benchmarks for each school trimester. An example is shown in Figure 1. In creating a new report card, the schools brought alignment between curriculum and assessment and made expectations for learning transparent to staff and the community.

Figure 1
McKinley Primary, 1st-Grade Student Report Card



English Language Arts-Reading

Essential Standards

Reporting Period	Beg	T1	T2	T3
Foundational Skills-Phonemic Awareness				
RF.2 Understands that words are made up of sounds	4	/7 5	/9 7	/9 10
RF.2b Produces single syllable words by blending sounds				
RF.2c Says each of the sounds in one syllable words	3	/7 7	/9 9	/9 10
RF.2d Separates the sounds in one syllable words				
RF.3 Uses word study and phonics skills to read words	14	/37 26	/50 39	/65 41
RF.3e Knows the spellings and sounds of consonant digraphs				
RF.3b Reads one syllable words				
RF.3c Uses long vowel spelling patterns				
RF.3f Reads words with inflections				
RF.3g Reads irregularly spelled words	1	/35 19	/50 36	/150 59
Reading Standards: Literature				
RL.1 Asks and answers questions about key details in a text	0	/6 1	/12 4	/16 6
RL.2 Retells stories				
RL.3 Describes characters, settings, and events in a story				
RL.5 Tells the difference between fiction and non-fiction				
RI.1 Asks and answers questions about a text				
RL7 Uses pictures and words to tell what a book is about				
RL.10 Reads nonfiction text				
Language & Writing Standards				
L.2d Spells sight words	0	/20 9	/45 24	/60 55
L.2d Spells common spelling patterns	1	/4 3	/8 3	/8 3
Language & Writing Standards-Content	1	/3 1	/3 2	/4 2
L.1 Makes good word choices when writing or speaking				
L.1c Uses nouns and verbs that agree				
L.1f & 1g Uses adjectives and conjunctions				
W.2 Writes about a topic with facts and details				

Benchmarks

Reporting Period	Beg	T1	T2	T3
Language and Writing Standards - Conventions	1	/3 1	/3 1	/4 2
L.1a Prints uppercase and lowercase letters				
L.2 Follows rules about words and sentences when writing				
L.2a Uses capitalization				
L.2b Uses punctuation				
L.2e Uses phonics skills to spell unknown words				
L.1j Uses 4 types of sentences				

Speaking and Listening Standards	T1	T2	T3
SL.1 Takes part in group discussions	1	1	2
SL.1a Follows rules for discussion	1	1	1
SL.1b Talks with others and adds to what they say	1	1	2
SL.1c Asks questions about what is being discussed	1	1	1
SL.6 Speaks in complete sentences	1	1	1

Characteristics of a Successful Learner	T1	T2	T3
Follows school and class rules	2	3	3
Shows respect for property and materials	3	3	3
Cooperates/Works well with others	2	2	2
Works independently	1	1	1
Completes and returns homework	3	2	3
Reads at home	3	3	3
Does neat and careful work	2	1	2

EXPLANATION OF MARKS	
3	Meets Expectations
2	Nearly Meets Expectations
1	Does Not Meet Expectations

Mathematics

Trimester 1	
Operations and Algebraic Thinking	
Represent and solve problems involving addition & subtraction.	
OA.1 Solve addition and subtraction word problems within 20	1
Understand and apply properties of operations and the relationship between addition and subtraction.	
OA.3 Use strategies to make it easier to add and subtract	1
OA.4 Use addition facts to solve subtraction problems	1
Add and subtract within 20.	
OA.5 Count on to add and count back to subtract	1
OA.6 Add and subtract fluently within 10, use mental strategies to add and subtract within 20	1
Work with addition and subtraction equations.	
OA.7 Determine if an equation is true or false	1
OA.8 Determine a missing number in an equation	1

Trimester 2	
Number and Operations in Base Ten	
Extend the counting sequence.	
NBT.1 Count from any number to 120. Read and write numbers up to 120	1
NBT.2a Understand 10 can be thought of as a bundle of 10 ones	1
NBT.2b Understand the numbers 11-19 have a ten and some ones	1
NBT.3 Compare 2 two-digit numbers with comparison symbols >, =, and <	2
Measurement and Data	
Measuring lengths indirectly and by iterating length units.	
MD.1 Order three objects by length	2
MD.2 Measure objects with nonstandard units	2
MD.4 Organize data into three groups or less and ask and answer questions about data	2

PERFORMANCE LEVEL DEFINITIONS	
3	Met the Standard
2	Nearly Met Standard
1	Has Not Met the Standard

Trimester 3	
Number and Operations in Base Ten	
Use place value understanding and properties of operations to add and subtract.	
NBT.4 Add within 100, using 2 digit numbers and multiples of 10	1
NBT.5 Explain how to find 10 more or 10 less than a 2 digit number	1
NBT.6 Explain how to subtract multiples of 10 from other multiples of 10 up to 90.	1
Measurement and Data	
MD.3 Tell and write time to the hour and half hour using analog and digital clocks	2
Geometry	
Reason with shapes and their attributes.	
G.1 Distinguish between defining attributes and describing attributes of shapes	
G.2 Build two dimensional or three dimensional shapes to create new shapes	
G.3 Divide circles and rectangles into two or four equal shares and name the smaller parts	2

MATHEMATICS Reporting Period	Beg	T1	T2	T3
NBT.1 Writes numbers up to 120	2	100/100	12 /120	109/120
NBT.1 Reads numbers up to 120	1	6 /20	20 /22	1 /24
OA.6 Fluently adds within 10	0	8 /10	4 /14	10 /18
OA.6 Fluently subtracts within 10	0	0 /5	5 /10	1 /18
OA.6 Use Strategies to add within 20	0	11 /12	13 /20	19 /24
OA.6 Use Strategies to subtract within 20	0	0 /8	10 /15	15 /24

Integrated/Additional Curriculum: The following areas are integrated into the classroom program: Science, Social Studies, Health, PE, and Art.

Source: Provided to the Learning Policy Institute research team by Gridley district staff members.

At the middle school level, adaptation to CCSS presented some challenges. As one teacher explained,

> We'd give benchmarks every trimester.... For a couple of years, we did it religiously and our CST scores would go up. That was back in the day of all-skills.... And as Common Core hit, pacing really got jacked up for a year, because nobody really knew how fast you had to go or what you could and couldn't cover. We had a hard time pulling out the essential standards and what we wanted to focus on or not. We realized there were certain things our kids weren't quite ready for.

A related issue was that of alignment across subjects. In 2005 and 2006, Sycamore Middle School had created a common schedule of assessments related to the essential standards under the previous curriculum. In part because of the differing timelines for the district's adoption of English and mathematics texts, in 2017–18 middle school departments were still working on coordinating the different assessment schedules they had adopted under CCSS.

At Gridley High, the most substantial work has been done in mathematics. The district gave the department funding for an additional 30 hours each summer over 3 years to collaborate and reform its existing curricula. This enabled the school to transition its offerings from a traditional math sequence—Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II—to a three-course sequence of Integrated Math I–III over the 3 years from 2015–16 to 2017–18 and to create a series of aligned curriculum guides for the new courses. As the mathematics department head noted, the department followed the same

process as its elementary colleagues of deconstructing standards, identifying essential standards, and aligning these with resources and across grade levels to ensure that they would segue smoothly across the course sequence:

> [The textbooks] helped us frame our notes, but we have all written our own graphic organizer notes that we're going to work with students, and then we've selected the homework. We've all gone through one by one and said, "These are the problems, these are the 10," because we don't really do the, "Hey, we're going to do 1 to 39 odd [numbers] tonight." Those days are gone. There [are] reasons why I pick the 10 I pick for their learning.

> [Course restructuring] is a lot of work the first year, but once we're done it's a little bit less [work] for a teacher. But I think just that planning and that curriculum.... You just can't teach everything that's in the book. There are modules that we don't actually get to. But we really strengthen some of our more essential key standards.

Implementation of CCSS was ongoing in Gridley High's English department, where staff had identified essential standards and, at the time of this study, were still working to align resources and assessments. The department head said that the CCSS transition had produced valuable learning conversations and resource sharing among colleagues.

The transition of curricula to CCSS was reported to be smooth in the school's Career Technical Education (CTE) department. There, teachers were employing project-based learning in which they were already focusing on deep concepts and having the students collaborate on their work. A teacher explained:

> We began by identifying the core concept, and then we'd take a look at what we were already doing and what we needed to do moving forward to match the Common Core curriculum.... [W]ith a lot of our curriculum, we were already doing it. It might've been a matter of tweaking something a little to make it happen, particularly in the newer courses. We had a soil science chemistry class that was newer to us, and we had a couple of animal science classes that were newer to our curriculum, but a lot of the curriculum that we've been running for a while has fit it really well. It wasn't these huge curriculum changes in order to use a Common Core standard.

With around half of all students in the high school taking CTE classes, a substantial proportion of students in Gridley experienced some form of project-based learning, and thus the kind of instruction aligned to CCSS.

As shown in CTE and across Gridley schools, teachers were involved in the process of deconstructing the curricular standards, which gave them opportunity to gain familiarity with the standards' aims. Even though this process took place largely at the school level, there was a commonality of approach. At each level, teachers' efforts focused the curriculum on essential standards and aligned these with resources and assessments to bring coherence.

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Instructional Shifts

Most Gridley teachers told us that they had made changes in their instructional practice to help students acquire the competencies required under CCSS. Beginning as early as kindergarten, teachers established patterns of classroom interaction that fostered communication skills, such as turn taking, that would scaffold into small-group discussion in later grades. A kindergarten teacher described how the goal of shifting their instructional practice was to help students develop communication skills from the kindergarten level:

> Peer collaboration, that's what it is. That is hard with 5-year-olds, so we right now are teaching them how to turn to each other and look at each other. And if you're not talking, you're supposed to be listening and then to be able to know what the other kid said. That has been a challenge, but I think it's good, too.

Likewise at Wilson Elementary, 2nd-grade teachers made significant changes in their approach to teaching reading, accelerated by a shift to the Benchmark Advance curriculum. The approach sought to teach reading and writing in a more integrated way. As a 2nd-grade teacher noted, "I don't give a spelling test anymore. I don't send home a spelling packet. We just do it all within the context." The structure of the curriculum allowed each teacher to deepen students' engagement with the text and use it in multiple ways across the course of a 3-week unit. The teacher explained:

> We do one extended read throughout the week that we do multiple times. We use it to teach grammar and spelling within the context of reading. We also use it for our writing.... So, one week we're focusing [on] narrative, the next week we're focused on informative [text], and then the third week we're focusing on opinion writing. We're constantly cycling through it instead of, "This is our narrative trimester, this is our opinion trimester, and this is our informative write trimester." It's constantly going back and cycling through the different types of writing. I've seen a huge improvement in their writing with that.

These elementary-level communication and literacy skills developed into a focus on writing in middle school. As one middle school English teacher noted, "I don't think a class period goes by where they don't write something." A goal for the use of writing was to progressively develop the skills of connecting claims with evidence and reasoning—skills that are common to CCSS in English and mathematics, and to the Next Generation Science Standards—across grades 6 through 8.

A shift in instructional practice at the middle school was the increased use of strategies that explicitly develop students' vocabulary. Teachers had to be consistent in their own use of academic language in the classroom as well as providing scaffolds such as sentence frames to develop students' abilities. One teacher explained, "Instead of saying, 'Look at your partner's paper and see that they're on the right page,' I say, 'Can you please turn to your peer and verify that they're on the correct page?'"

The middle school also adapted a very structured pre-CCSS teaching method to the instructional shifts intended under the new standards. When CCSS was being introduced, Gridley's previous superintendent had invested in professional development in Explicit Direct Instruction.[12] The

district offered it to all interested staff in the district, and it was adopted sitewide at the middle school. The school's principal described how teachers used elements of this method to support certain aspects of instruction, even as they moved instruction to align with CCSS:

> [We] looked at the EDI [Explicit Direct Instruction] strategies in relation to the Common Core's focus on deeper critical thinking and higher depth of knowledge and found it to be something of a disparity. We found that EDI looked like it really worked very well for surface-level pieces but not as well for the deep critical thinking pieces. But you can't do critical thinking all the time. That's why there are some elements of [EDI] that are still very effective.... The teachers who adopted it found it to be extremely effective in helping focus what they did in their classroom and forcing them to check for student understanding during instruction.

Teachers also described changes in instruction at the high school level. At Gridley High, the mathematics department head said that while his department already emphasized active student engagement and higher-level thinking skills, the transition to CCSS and to an integrated mathematics curriculum allowed them to extend that work. He described how instruction developed conceptual understanding rather than simply procedural approaches and how it focused on a smaller number of problems with greater depth and multiple opportunities for students to gain mastery. For example, classroom instruction often involved "standing whiteboards" at which students worked in small groups on one of five key problems that were central to the lesson. The teacher described how the lesson structure allowed the students to discuss and articulate their thinking:

> That's huge engagement. That's huge teaching that I like to use in my classroom because a lot of times some students might say things better than I—or just in another way that some kids can grasp.... It's [also] rather loud in my classroom. I promote talking and engagement.

The mathematics department chair added that he now also uses peer tutoring both to give students who may need additional support further opportunities to articulate their reasoning and to allow others to hear alternative explanations for solving a problem.

To support these shifts in academic instruction, some teachers reported that they made changes in technology and the classroom environment. In some 2nd-grade classrooms, for example, desks were replaced with height-adjustable furniture organized into pods, and chairs were replaced with "wobble seats" that allowed children to move their bodies as they worked. A 2nd-grade teacher noted how she used the changed classroom environment to facilitate greater student collaboration:

> My classroom looks a lot different than your traditional classroom. I don't have any desks in there. The kids sit in groups of four and it's completely flexible seating, so they choose their seat. They switch seats three different times a day, so they're always working with a different group of four. They have to problem-solve together throughout whatever we're doing, whether it's math or language arts.

She further highlighted the contrast between the more active instruction in her present class and her previous teaching practices:

> Before then, it was old school. I didn't even have an overhead projector, and we had old math workbooks. We did the old workbook page and they sat on the carpet and I was drawing it up on the whiteboard, and then they'd go do the workbook page on their own before that. It was very "I do, you do" 4 years ago. Now it's more, "We start together, give them a little bit, problem-solve together, [and] then they have to come up with it on their own."

However, such changes were not universal. One elementary school teacher described placing emphasis, both before and after the arrival of CCSS, on effective classroom management and giving clarity to students about the standards and learning objectives of each lesson, but had not made significant changes in pedagogical approach. Similarly, at the high school, an English teacher noted that although teachers in the department made changes in their instruction and piloted the use of different technologies, it was not done systematically. This variation is consistent with an approach to instructional change that gives significant autonomy to schools and teachers, who may adopt things at different times.

Changes in instructional practice were gradually filtering through Wilson Elementary. Several enthusiastic teachers led the way with increased use of technology and changes in classroom furniture. For example, two teachers were early adopters, piloting increased use of technology and working on how to integrate their approach throughout the curriculum. Through strategies such as partnering a novice technology user with a more capable partner, this early work was subsequently picked up by other teachers in their grade. The principal, new to the school that year, commented on the teachers' considerable skill and willingness to adapt their practice, adding that as they strengthened communication processes in the school, teachers would continue to share innovative teaching practices.

Across each of the schools in Gridley, the arrival of CCSS corresponded with changes in instructional practice. By focusing on a smaller number of essential standards, teachers placed greater emphasis on problem-solving. Although the approach differed across Gridley schools, pedagogy had shifted toward greater opportunity for students to develop collaboration and communication skills.

Targeting Professional Development Opportunities

Gridley's professional development was designed to support instructional changes. Professional development was typically led at the school level and often initiated by teacher interest, but there were also several district-led professional development initiatives. As with many districts, Gridley has professional development days built into the calendar: three "buy back" days scheduled in the week directly preceding the start of the school year and additional release time provided during the school year for specific training initiatives. There are also early release days each Wednesday, which are typically used for grade- and department-level team meetings but can also be used for other professional learning opportunities.

District-led initiatives included training for curricular rollouts, such as for the Benchmark Advance English language arts curriculum, as well as professional learning in literacy to address the needs of long-term English learners.[13] These often involved bringing in outside trainers. In other cases, teachers were sent in groups to conferences. "When Common Core was brand new," one teacher explained, "we were going to conferences once a month, and we were being subbed out of the classroom a lot to try to help teachers learn the new standards."

Another district-led initiative was the technology rollout from 2012 to 2016, in which the district went "one-to-one" in supplying classrooms with Chromebooks for every student, as part of the district's Local Control Accountability Plan. All teachers in the district undertook daylong training to become Google certified to support Chromebook use. This initiative involved ongoing district support, with one district staff member noting that much of her work now involved functioning as a "technology coach" for teachers.

The district also sent a group of teachers for professional development in the then-superintendent's former district of Martinez, where they received instruction and observed teachers using technology in the classroom to support teaching CCSS. From this visit, several teachers from Wilson Elementary were able to form an enduring network with colleagues in Martinez, and this has supported ongoing changes in instructional practice for those teachers. As a 2nd-grade teacher explained:

> We connected with them on Twitter and were able to collaborate and create this professional learning network and then meet up with them at conferences, too. Now when we go to the CUE [Computer-Using Educators] conferences,[14] you either get to meet them in person or see them again.… It's been a really good connection that we've made.
>
> I follow their classrooms.… [T]hey usually tweet one or two things that are going on in the classroom. We were tweeting one or two things that go on in our classrooms. And then, just messaging back and forth. "Hey, that was great. Where's that resource?" Or they tweeted out the link to the resource, or we saw what they were doing and looked it up and connected that way.

Other professional learning was school-based. As one administrator said, "Some districts are very top down in their professional development and what it's going to look like. This district has had a long history of site-based decision-making, for the most part."

Teachers were encouraged to identify professional learning needs to support their work. As one noted, "A lot of what we've done is outside of the school, and it's whatever we seek out and want to do." The utility of this is that teachers tended to seek out professional learning opportunities that were relevant to the way they wanted to transform their teaching practice. For example, the efforts made by one 2nd-grade teacher to integrate technology in the classroom had been supported by self-selected professional development:

> I just kind of jumped feet first into that and went to every training I could think of. Really pushed that innovation within the classroom. A lot of that was just coding, teaching computer science, teaching computer skills, [and] a lot of problem-solving, setting up classrooms a little bit different.

Consistent with this, teachers at Sycamore Middle School had sought out professional learning to bolster the school's ability to support literacy for English learners. A team of middle school teachers responsible for English Language Development (ELD) undertook several trainings over a 2-year period with an expert from San Francisco State University to promote vocabulary development and academic language, a competency common to CCSS in both English language arts and mathematics as well as to the Next Generation Science Standards. At the time of this research, the team was discussing how to expand the use of these instructional strategies to other teachers and teams in the school.

Similarly, at Gridley High, a teacher explained that although professional development for a small number of schoolwide initiatives came from school administration, teachers in the CTE department tended to identify and seek out professional learning needs to keep their program current with the technologies and practices used in the workforce:

> In [CTE], we've needed a lot of professional development for different emerging technologies or new software that comes out or [we've] done a lot with local businesses to try and get our curriculum more aligned with what's going on with local business, so that our kids are employable when they leave here. It's been pretty open the last couple years with us just [saying], "This is something we need to be better," and [administrators] saying, "Yeah, OK, go do it."

Professional learning communities

In addition to professional development, professional learning communities (PLCs) were designed to aid shifts in instructional practice and identify students who might need additional support. The district's PLC structure was established in Gridley during the training on the previous California standards that took place in 2005–06. All schools in the district had, and continue to have, early release on Wednesdays, with these afternoons designated for PLC time. An exception is kindergarten at McKinley Primary, which operates half-day instruction both mornings and afternoons, with overlapping teaching schedules. Monthly release time is used to enable PLC meetings for this grade.

First-grade PLCs at McKinley take place on alternate Wednesdays. Wednesdays that are not slated for PLCs may also be used for teacher-led professional development, with teachers drawing on each other's expertise to develop their teaching practice. As a Reading Recovery teacher described:

> Every 1st-grade teacher really has a specific [role].... They're our trainer/coach for something. One is our technology expert, and she guides us with technology. So, on that Wednesday, she might be helping somebody put technology into the classrooms. We have a science guru, we call her, and she's helping people build their science lessons. I'm the literacy coach, so I'm helping people with Running Records or analyzing their Running Records. We have an ELD expert. Everybody kind of has a role.

Administrators at each school influenced the format and use of time for PLCs. Recently, Wilson Elementary began to formalize PLC processes. PLCs were expected to set S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound) goals for student learning, and Wilson's new principal indicated that she would be taking 10–12 teachers (around one third of the staff) to a professional learning conference to further these efforts. Describing the school as operating "collaboratively in isolation," she noted that a challenge for the school was to increase linkages across grade-level PLCs to harness their effectiveness.

Gridley also had teacher-led professional learning initiatives that took place outside the regular PLC time. For example, several teachers from two grades at Wilson had been early adopters of integrating technology into the classroom and met informally to share practices and techniques. In another grade, two teachers met apart from their grade-level colleagues to help shape their grade's curriculum and adapt it to the CCSS-aligned Engage New York curriculum.

At Sycamore Middle School, intervention staff met both as a team and with teachers from across grades to increase connections within the school. An intervention teacher said that this, coupled with the small size of the school and community, allowed them to analyze data, discuss individual student needs, and identify areas for additional support:

> We'll have a content meeting or grade-level meeting. Maybe because we're 8th grade, we're always looking at graduation, who's going to pass, and how are they doing. We'll break down our grades, and who's got a kid they're troubled with? What's working for this kid? How's he doing in your class? Oh, I didn't know mom was getting divorced, [etc.]. We almost case manage all of our kids who are struggling.… Does he need a new class? Does he need support? Does he need to call home? Do we need to do academic probation meetings where we bring parents in? Does he need an SST [Student Study Team]? How are we not meeting this kid's needs? Why is he failing? We have those conversations. I feel like we're successful in that way.

Yet the small size of schools such as McKinley and Sycamore also posed some challenges. Specific grade- and subject-level curricular or pedagogical discussions were particularly difficult. As one Sycamore teacher said, "We're a small school, so if we have one [English language arts] teacher in 6th grade, who does he or she collaborate with? Who do you have that conversation with?" Another noted that as Sycamore teachers variously met at grade level, at subject level, or as an intervention team, it could be a challenge to establish an effective PLC culture in each.

As with many schools and districts, the utility of PLCs in Gridley to shape instruction depended to a considerable extent on individual relationships.[15] Differences in experiences with CCSS between earlier and later adopters and infrequent communication between grade- or subject-level PLCs contributed to challenges in spreading CCSS-aligned instructional practices. Nonetheless, the nature of Gridley as a small and interconnected community helped create a strong environment of trust and respect between teachers. As one teacher put it:

> And we trust each other too.… I've just got my own unique personality. If another teacher has theirs, but they're getting the same results and they're doing it their way, who am I to say that's not working for them?

This sentiment of respect for teaching colleagues was echoed by teachers at the high school. One teacher described an acknowledgment and appreciation of each other's differences as teachers as a potential strength:

> We've got a group that has very different styles and different amounts of experience.... As collaborators, that can make it a challenge. I've wondered if that's one of the real benefits here at this school, though, because students tend to get at least a few of us over time. Rather than getting a homogenized, one-size-fits-all, they get this spattering of people with really different strengths and different passions.

Building connections across grades

The small and interconnected nature of the district has supported several efforts to improve connections between school grades and departments and, thus, alignment of standards and learning expectations. These efforts were described as teacher driven, historically with support from administration.

In the elementary grades, this interconnectedness has been aided by two factors: consistent leadership and teacher experience. McKinley's principal simultaneously served that role at Wilson Elementary from 2008 to 2012, facilitating consistency of several practices across the two schools. This consistency manifested in greater emphasis on small-group instruction and guided reading and in the use of data to identify students in need of intervention (discussed later in this report). Additionally, several teachers at Wilson had previously taught 1st grade, giving them an appreciation of skill development across grades.

High school departments were encouraged to use PLC time for dialogue with 8th-grade teachers at the middle school to build their collective understanding of expectations at each grade level. PLC time also provided opportunities to discuss placement in high school courses and students' particular social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Sycamore's principal, a former high school teacher, described collaboration between middle and high school mathematics teachers as particularly successful, with the high school's new Integrated Math I class offered as an advanced option in middle school. He added that principals typically responded positively to teachers who asked for additional opportunities for collaboration between grades and schools, noting:

> Every principal that I've ever worked with has been very giving when there is a grade level or a department that wants to take a day or two per semester to work on articulating the curriculum within the department, within the grade level, or ... if we wanted to work with people at another school to try to do some vertical articulation school to school.

District office staff signaled that improving vertical articulation was also a primary goal of the district going forward, with 3 teacher-release days provided in 2017–18 for this purpose and more planned in 2018–19.

Hiring and Retaining Quality Teachers

An experienced teacher workforce may be one of the keys to Gridley's success. District data show that just 7 of the district's 102 teachers have fewer than 3 years of teaching experience.[16]

The overall stability of the teaching force may also be an important contributing factor. Although there has been some teacher turnover at the high school, district staff indicated that across the two elementary schools, they rarely lost more than one teacher a year.

School and district leadership have historically also been relatively stable, although this has changed in recent years. At the time of this research, there were new principals at three of the district's four main schools, and the high school had had three principals in the span of 5 years. The district has also had periods of stability in the position of superintendent. The present superintendent was appointed in 2016 following his two predecessors' 4- and 8-year tenures, respectively.

Contributing to the overall personnel stability, approximately one third of teachers live locally, in Gridley or in neighboring communities, such as Live Oak. This proportion is greater at the elementary and middle school levels than at the high school. According to participants, another third of teachers, consisting mostly of teachers from the high school, commute south from Chico, about a 35-minute drive.

District and school representatives indicated that, unlike many districts in the state, Gridley has not faced teacher shortages. As McKinley's principal explained, this was aided by the district's relative proximity to university teacher preparation programs:

> Well, the other thing that we really have in our favor in this district is we're very close to UC Davis and Chico State … and people love living in Chico. It's a pretty neat place to live. A large percentage of our teachers live in Chico and they commute. And so we get very good, qualified teachers. I mean, I can't remember hiring one that did not have a credential.

Stability of the teaching force is further supported by strong teacher pay. Salaries for certificated staff in Gridley were reported to be the highest in Butte County and competitive with those in Chico, the largest nearby urban center. (See Table 3.) Salaries in Gridley were also higher than those in districts that did not receive concentration funds under the Local Control Funding Formula, such as nearby Durham Unified.

Table 3
Teacher Salaries in Gridley and Neighboring Districts, 2017–18

Teacher Experience and Graduate Units	Gridley	Chico	Percentage Difference	Yuba	Percentage Difference	Durham	Percentage Difference
6 yrs + 30 units	$54,716	$50,152	−8.3%	$51,800	−5.3%	$49,634	−9.3%
10 yrs + 45 units	$64,204	$58,337	−9.1%	$63,769	−0.7%	$56,678	−11.7%
20 yrs + 60 units	$82,925	$78,935	−4.8%	$79,137	−4.6%	$75,721	−8.7%

Data source: Salary data drawn from union-negotiated contracts available on district websites.

The higher salaries relative to Chico were generally enough to offset the cost and inconvenience of the commute, giving Gridley an advantage in attracting and retaining teachers compared to other, more remote, rural districts. For example, one Chico-based teacher had spent his entire 18-year career in Gridley. However, several participants noted that some teachers eventually left Gridley for positions in Chico, particularly when they had their own families and the commute became inconvenient.

Another contributing factor to teacher stability was that teachers generally felt well supported by the district. Several elements influenced teachers' sense of support. First, leadership in the district tended to reside at school sites, as reflected in the hiring process. Although hiring was a district responsibility and the district screened initial applications, schools could make recommendations through panel interviews and occasionally through demonstration lessons. Schools thus had a voice in selecting a candidate who would be a good fit for the school and the students. The newly appointed Gridley High principal noted that the superintendent was open to conferring with principals before making a formal offer, given that principals and staff were the people who would work with new teachers.

Teachers also reported experiencing little top-down pressure from the district or site administrators. In contrast, teachers expressed considerable autonomy in their teaching and noted that requests to the district for resources were well received. A longtime teacher and recently appointed middle school principal noted:

Teachers expressed considerable autonomy in their teaching and noted that requests to the district for resources were well received.

> I think it is that small-town piece, that we have a fair amount of longevity in our teaching staff here. When you come to Gridley, it's hard to leave.... I've always told people who interviewed for jobs here: I don't ever feel like I've been unsupported by any of my administrators. There's nothing I've asked for, for my classroom, to do what's good for kids, that I've been denied in all those years.

Second, teachers expressed having day-to-day support in their work. At the elementary level, this came in the form of instructional aides. At McKinley and Wilson schools, there were aides available for every classroom in grades k–3. In grades 2–3, this averaged 60–90 minutes per class each day. Wilson received additional support from two full-time reading specialists who provided pull-out services for students. A McKinley kindergarten teacher described the importance of this teacher aide support to her work:

> What I want to emphasize is the support that we have. [At my] last two schools..., I had an aide for like an hour, and I wasn't able to do what I can do here even in a shorter amount of time. I only have three and a half hours with the kids, and when we do our stations, it's pretty much an academic station, four stations a day, plus the whole-group stuff. And without the support that we have here, there is no way I could get done what we get done.

At Wilson, a 2nd-grade teacher explained how having an aide in the classroom each afternoon enabled her to address specific skills, noting, "I have the flexibility to switch my groups up a little bit. If I need to pull two or three kids to go over a math concept, that's [the] time I'm doing it."

Third, teachers had few additional time commitments and after-school responsibilities at their sites, which allowed them to focus on their teaching. At Gridley High, a classified staff member regularly organized most school activities and class functions, alleviating some of the extracurricular load from teachers. As the deputy principal noted:

> Where I was from [previously], my teachers were on the verge of burnout because they were so busy taking care of everything in the school.... And at Gridley, one thing I found interesting, and I think contributes to the teachers' willingness to be available at lunch and be available after school, is that really our teachers don't have a lot of additional assignments. They come to school, they're assigned as teachers. That's pretty much it.... I think that Gridley does a really good job of not overburdening teachers with many, many other assigned duties. I think that contributes to their availability to their kids.

The support felt by teachers contributed to an overall positive community spirit, with implications in turn for supporting students.

The support felt by teachers contributed to an overall positive community spirit, with implications in turn for supporting students.

Fourth, smaller class sizes were regarded as a contributing factor to teacher support and modest turnover. The district sought to keep average class sizes lower than the 24-to-1 contracted ratio. McKinley's principal said that Gridley had been financially stable during periods of economic unrest. As a result, it had been able to maintain low class sizes relative to other districts: "We kept class size reduction, but neighboring districts gave it up...."

The value of a stable teacher workforce was particularly important to a small district such as Gridley, where relatively modest turnover could have a significant impact on students. For example, despite generally low turnover overall, the middle school had recently seen two mathematics teachers come and go in the space of 2 years. As one longtime teacher noted, "They were 'one and done,' and that touched 40% of our students."

Intervening Early to Support Student Learning

Gridley's teachers and administrators emphasized the importance of identifying and supporting struggling students before they fall behind. This strategy included a range of benchmark assessments to guide instruction. There were also well-established strategies for intervention at the elementary and middle schools, which paid particular attention to students' reading. Teachers and administrators saw both general reading abilities and a facility with academic vocabulary as important to increasing performance. Consequently, administrators at the high school reported high levels of English proficiency of students entering 9th grade, while noting that more work was needed for vertical alignment in mathematics.

The support for learning and intervention strategies requires data and accountability systems and training as well as the organization of schedules to accommodate intervention or guide instruction. Below, we discuss the strategies used for intervening early at the elementary and middle school levels.

McKinley Primary School

The foundation for intervention and support begins with 1st-graders at McKinley Primary. McKinley's 1st-grade program has a strong base in Reading Recovery adapted to meet the school's needs. There is one full-time Reading Recovery teacher and three additional teachers who spend half of each day in the program. In addition, there are teacher aides available to each 1st-grade class for 2.5 hours daily to provide additional support and to pull students aside to work on specific skills.

The school year starts with an initial assessment to gauge every student's reading level and to identify any issues early on. Students need to have reached a certain level to be ready for Reading Recovery, and thus students who are having trouble with more foundational skills, such as awareness of letter sounds, will automatically receive targeted attention. As one 1st-grade teacher explained:

> Sometimes [at] one of our very first PLC meetings, we'll all sit down, all the 1st-grade teachers with their data, and we'll say, "All right, how many kids do you have that aren't meeting the phonemic awareness or the phonics benchmark?" And then we'll say, "OK, I have two, I have one," and then we'll go, "OK, my aide can grab your two, your one, my two, and do a 15- or 20-minute group right away in the morning as soon as the bell rings."
>
> We kind of attack that, and then once those kids have mastered those areas, we'll do it with the next step. We just work our way through phonemic awareness into the phonics, and then if they're not picking up high-frequency words, we'll grab a little group, and we'll work on those high-frequency words.

The next level of support, Reading Recovery, is provided to approximately 35 students each year. This represents a little more than one in five 1st-grade students at the school. Students in the program receive 30-minute one-on-one reading instruction sessions with one of the four Reading Recovery teachers.

McKinley sets clear benchmarks for student learning each trimester and in each of the skill areas identified by the essential standards and listed on student report cards. For example, another 1st-grade teacher described their goals for learning by year's end as follows:

> By the end of 1st grade, you want them here in this proficient area, writing a variety of coherent, grammatically correct sentences, simple descriptive words. In expository, we want them to use a topic sentence, transitions, conclusions, non-narrative.… They're writing probably eight-sentence paragraphs by the end of 1st grade, which we judge to be proficient.

Teachers give periodic benchmark assessments and the Basic Phonics Skills Test (BPST), and they report the data from each assessment to the school principal, who monitors student progress against the standards. Between trimester assessments, Running Records are used as a method of formative assessment. All teachers are trained in Running Records, which they are expected to do once a month to see that students are reading books at an appropriate level.

Perhaps the most visual example of McKinley's emphasis on early identification and support for learning is the school's "intervention wall." The wall provides an important structure for teacher collaboration within and between grade levels to meet student needs. In a private area, visible only to staff, is a wall with plastic pockets, each of which contains a card with a student's name, BPST score, and Rigby level (a measure of complexity of text that a student can read). The cards are sorted into four categories from left to right, labeled "Below Basic," "Basic," "Proficient," and "Advanced." As students progress in their reading abilities, their cards are moved toward the right side of the wall. The intervention wall serves as a mechanism for both transparency and collective accountability by assisting teachers in identifying students who need support and ensuring no one falls through the cracks. One 1st-grade teacher commented:

> The nice thing about that wall, too, is we'll look at it every other month when we're at a grade-level meeting in that room. We'll go back there and take a look at it, and then if one of those kids [is] stuck way back here [on the left], I can say, "Hey, I can't move this kid. I need some help. What are you guys doing? What do you suggest? This is what I've tried. What else can we do?" We just have such a nice team that we can kind of rely on each other to help buffer. If I'm not getting it done, what can somebody else do to help me out with this one?

Another piece of the focus on reading is establishing a culture of reading early on. This involves engaging parents and creating habits at home, the importance of which was underscored by McKinley's principal:

> We set the tone early.… In 1st grade they have to go home and read 20 minutes a night. They need to practice.… We just kind of build that in, … that [reading] is just what we do here. This is what we do in Gridley.
>
> And I've had parents write notes that [say], "My kid will not read. That is [family] time," and I call them right in my office, and we have another chat, and then if that doesn't work, I bring them [to the district office and] we have another chat. I'm not saying we [push] them into it, but [reading is] just what we do here. This is what we do in Gridley.

The principal described reading as both a gift teachers can give to students and an essential skill for survival in the world. McKinley's philosophy is that a strong foundation in reading by the end of 1st grade is critical to students' educational pathway, and failure to address difficulties before that time may result in increasing challenges later on.

Wilson Elementary School

In addition to a firm foundation in grades k–1 at McKinley, an ongoing and comprehensive reading support program has been built in grades 2–5 at Wilson since 2014. The school hired a two-person reading specialist team from a neighboring district. The duo assesses every student in the school three times a year. To date, the main tool has been AIMSweb Maze, an assessment that measures fluency and comprehension. The initial screening includes a 3-minute reading with each student. Following this initial screening, the team conducts additional assessments to identify the needs or skill sets—such as phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, comprehension, or writing—for targeted intervention or instruction. In addition, the reading specialist team offers designated ELD instruction.

The reading specialists have aligned their resources to address the competencies of CCSS curricula and recently purchased HMH Decoding Power texts, a phonics intervention based on CCSS statements, to add to their suite of intervention materials. In 2017–18, they shifted to the CCSS-aligned i-Ready system for screening, progress monitoring, and assessment.

The literacy screenings served additional purposes beyond identification of students for reading support. Screenings helped normalize the process of reading intervention. Because every student is screened each trimester, a visit to the reading specialist is a usual part of the student experience at Wilson. Additionally, the individualized nature of each screening, with one student and one reading specialist, enabled the reading specialists to develop relationships with the students. The reading specialist team's goal was to work with as many students at Wilson as was possible, from helping with small improvements in fluency to developing more foundational reading skills. They estimated that they worked, on average, with 150 of the school's 600 students annually.

As a result, the reading team said that they were in a position to build trust with students and create a safe environment for learning. This allowed them to work with small groups of students to address a specific skill or set of skills. As one reading specialist said:

> Because we touched base with the entire school, we were kind of this familiar face walking around the campus like, "Oh! When do I get to come read for you again?" or "When do I get to come?" [We] felt like we had this positive connection with the kids, being able to just know them personally and [they knew] us.
>
> Students particularly in grades 4 and 5 know when they're struggling. And yet, we probably get the best cooperation from our 4th- and 5th-graders because I think they feel very safe where they are. It's small, they know others that are with them or struggling with similar type skills, and I just think they feel more comfortable working in that small group.

Teachers we spoke with at Wilson credited the reading support program as an important element in supporting students in their class. One teacher said that the program identified students earlier, in grades 2 and 3, and addressed many issues before they arrived in 4th grade. Another teacher described how classroom teachers communicated with the reading team to gauge student progress and support student learning:

> The [reading team] worked really closely [with us.] They gave us progress reports of any students that were going to intervention. If we were seeing anybody decline, they were really accommodating to make a spot for that student.

Sycamore Middle School

At Sycamore Middle School, the schedule is organized to provide for several different forms of learning support based on individual students' needs. For example, the school's "fifth period," initiated in 2014, is part of its approach to a multi-tiered system of supports. All students receive one of three forms of learning support during this period. For most students, this involves additional support in either mathematics or English language arts. The small number of students who are meeting benchmark standards in mathematics and English language arts (around 15) take either enrichment classes in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or "Inquiry" classes. A third form of fifth-period learning support is known as Multi Support, in which students receive support in organization and study habits and practices. This was primarily, but not exclusively, targeted at students who were achieving at a lower level or those with special education needs.

Sycamore's fifth period also highlights the importance of CCSS-aligned benchmark assessments. Based on students' performance on these assessments, teachers analyze the data and determine the particular standards and skills for which students need additional support. They are then placed into a fifth-period intervention class to work on these skills. Students receive an assessment after about 4 weeks to check their progress, and they may rotate among fifth-period classes every 6 to 8 weeks as they make progress. Fifth period has been a successful innovation for Sycamore, which was recognized as a California Gold Ribbon School for this program in 2015.

A second form of intervention at the school creates tiered levels of support for those students who need additional support in English language arts. Whereas English language arts is typically one period in the morning, the intervention takes place as a two-period block (periods 2 and 3). The intervention program uses the same study materials as the regular English language arts class but covers them at a different pace and depth.

There are also designated ELD classes available for students with greater language needs. These take place during the first period of the day, and students are assigned to these classes based on level of need rather than grade. The first level addresses skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and "word attack" strategies for reading unknown words. The second level is a blend of word attack strategies and reading comprehension, while level 3 focuses primarily on reading comprehension and developing advanced vocabulary.

Staff at Sycamore were optimistic about the school's impact on ELD. Approximately 10% of the school's student population is classified as English learners. In the past 5 years, the number of students redesignated has varied from a low of two students in 2013–14 to a high of 19 students in 2016–17, or 40% of the English learner population. Nonetheless, the school was concerned about the number of long-term English learners.

A fourth form of learning support comes in the form of the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program. AVID classes are scheduled throughout the regular school day. AVID had a presence at Sycamore Middle School but was not present at Gridley High School, due to the existence of similar college-focused programs at the school, such as Upward Bound.

With these many intervention classes available at Sycamore, considerable thought goes into student scheduling. Intervention options are designed to be fluid, such that students who made progress in a particular learning area can move out of intervention. In many cases, intervention classes take the

place of an elective subject, so there is incentive for students to move out of intervention to be able to engage in other subjects. A challenge is that in scheduling English language arts intervention in parallel with mainstream English language arts, the school is aware that it risks creating a de facto tracking system for students. Sycamore's new principal explained that, although de facto tracking is undesirable, the school needs to provide students the flexibility to receive the learning supports they need and to transition out of these classes into more advanced classes.

Intervention beyond the district: Mi C.A.S.A.

In addition to the range of interventions and supports for student learning in Gridley's schools, the Mi C.A.S.A. after-school program provides additional tutoring to approximately 80 students. Mi C.A.S.A. is located in Gridley's Farm Labor Housing Development, a county-run camp primarily for migrant workers and their families. Initially funded by Gridley Unified School District and, for a time, through the county office of education, the Mi C.A.S.A. program began in 2000, motivated by the need to address the persistently low levels of achievement of students living at the camp.[17] Since 2004, the program has been supported by the Butte County Housing Authority and a range of community and private sources. There is also some federal funding for students classified as migrants, administered by the Butte County Office of Education.

Learning support at Mi C.A.S.A. is well positioned to align with the support provided in Gridley's schools. It is staffed by retired teachers from the district and by volunteers that include some current teachers. Instruction is further supported by peer mentors who are high school juniors or seniors and have been screened based on their own academic performance, attendance, and reliability. In most cases, peer tutors are from the same neighborhood and have familiarity with the students and their families. The facility has its own library and an internet-connected computer lab that uses several of the same software applications as those used in local schools, such as IXL. The Mi C.A.S.A. program also offers summer school options and conducts learning field trips to San Francisco Bay Area science facilities. Local newspaper reports credit the program with helping to reduce gang activity in the area by providing students from the camp with engaging after-school activities.[18]

Many of the students in the Mi C.A.S.A. program come from families in which English is not spoken in the home. A teacher whose pupils attend the program said that it provided valuable support by offering CCSS-aligned after-school instruction in English. A high school counselor and former resident of the camp described the effect this has had on student engagement and efficacy: "You start noticing students who were disenfranchised at times feeling like they do have services available if … [there are] some struggles academically." He added that students who participated in the program felt more confident in seeking out other support opportunities as they progressed in their schooling.

The program has also reported academic successes. For the past 5 years, at least one student from Mi C.A.S.A. has earned high school valedictorian honors by achieving a 4.0 or better high school GPA.[19] A former resident of the housing authority neighborhood and Gridley High alumnus is seeking to further stimulate students' academic success through a foundation.[20] It offers Mi C.A.S.A. students a $25 stipend for every A grade earned on school semester report cards and matches the total of these earned during middle school and high school with a college scholarship of an equivalent amount.

Using Data and Evidence to Inform Instruction

Teachers and schools in Gridley used several types of data and evidence both to identify students in need of support and to inform instruction. Given the small size of the district office, the analysis and use of data and evidence were generally made at the school level. The role of the district office was investing in systems, training for the collection and use of data, undertaking analyses for reporting, and providing information to inform the Local Control Accountability Plan.

At the elementary level, benchmark assessments represented the key evidence for informing instruction. These standards-based assessments allowed schools to align written curricula with classroom instruction, assessment, and reporting to parents. At McKinley, for example, initial assessments, given at the start of the school year, provided valuable information regarding students who might need intervention or additional support, and further benchmark assessments were given at the end of each trimester.

Gridley teachers initially received training in the use of benchmark assessments districtwide with the establishment of the PLC structure in 2005 and 2006. PLCs typically used evidence from these assessments to inform instruction, although this emphasis varied over time with changes in school administrators. A former high school teacher noted that several high school departments were granted autonomy to shift toward the use of common formative assessments and shorter summative assessments, so that teachers could feed this evidence back to PLCs more quickly to allow for revision and reteaching as needed.

Teachers and schools in Gridley collected other forms of data to inform instruction. A 1st-grade teacher described McKinley Primary as taking a "multiple measures" approach to monitoring student progress. Beyond the benchmark reading test and BPST, the school used several periodic assessments, including a primary spelling inventory of high-frequency words. Another test targeted the orthographic features of words, which allowed teachers to target instruction to the specific skills, as one McKinley teacher explained:

> You can look at that spreadsheet from just that spelling test and say, "OK, they have beginning sounds, ending sounds, and short vowels. Now we really need to focus on long vowels with these kiddos or maybe diagraphs with these kiddos," or, "Now they're ready to move forward into vowel teams." That's a really nice black and white spreadsheet once we score those tests.

This teacher also underscored the importance of being selective in the use of assessments to focus on instruction:

> We use our data like crazy here to guide instruction and to build our interventions, and so it's important that we have functional assessments that give us information that we can use. We've stayed away from certain assessments. If it's not an assessment that we can use directly to help that child move forward, then it's kind of a waste of our time to give it.

Teachers collected a variety of additional formative assessment data to guide instruction. For example, the Engage New York mathematics curriculum contained mid- and end-of-module assessments as well as daily "exit tickets" that teachers could use to track student progress.

To support the collection and use of data, Gridley Unified has made investments in data systems. For example, the district recently purchased i-Ready, a computer adaptive system that provides for instruction, assessment, and tracking of student data. Gridley also purchased the Illuminate system and provided training for all teachers in its use. Illuminate is a piece of proprietary software that allows teachers to store a range of student test data—including those from AIMSweb, i-Ready, and other software tools used within the district—and monitor student progress. The system also allows access to item banks and formative assessment tools, with some teachers using these to create their own standards-aligned benchmark assessments mid-trimester.

At Gridley High, the mathematics department jointly created standards-aligned unit assessments to determine which modules to revisit. As the department head described:

> After teaching modules 4, 5, 6, we did the unit exam and then we'll come together and we'll compare: "What were the five problems that were most missed in your class? What were the five most missed in your class?" And then we'll have those kinds of conversations about it. And usually we build those as a team with the essential power standards in mind.
>
> These are the questions that we really want them to know and be able to understand. That would probably lend itself to looking or feeling like a CAASPP-type situation so that we're helping them practice those types of questions.

Similarly, the history and social sciences department at Gridley High discussed data from the Illuminate system at weekly PLC meetings to help drive their common assessments and improve consistency across grades.

Managing Resources

An important aspect of Gridley's success may be due to the district's ability to make significant financial investments in recent years. This included investments in technology, with digital licenses for software at the high school and purchases of Chromebooks for every student. The district has also invested in personnel. Salaries for teachers are competitive with neighboring districts, albeit with capped benefits, and adequate resources are available for professional development. Teachers indicated they were rarely, if ever, denied requests to attend conferences or professional learning events.

The district's overall finances were buoyed by an increase of funds with the state's transition to the Local Control Funding Formula, attracting concentration funds based on its student population. Gridley was also described as a financially stable district, even during the 2008 recession when many education budgets were reduced. District staff ascribed this in part to lean operating costs at the district level. The small size of the district meant that some employees had more than one role. For example, McKinley's principal also held responsibility for being the district's facilities manager. At the district office, the Chief Business Officer (CBO) described this as a conscious choice:

> If you come out to our district office, I can tell you where we're saving money. Because we are so slim at the district office level, it's unbelievable. We task our people with tasks that are almost undoable, but then we say, "But this is what's best for kids." We want the money in the classroom.

Moreover, the superintendent felt that the small size of the district facilitated communication among district staff regarding finances. He noted that with the CBO located just down the hall, it was easy to stop in for a few minutes to check in on financial matters.

A further part of the district's solvency was attributed to a broader culture of conservative spending. As the superintendent explained, the overall community culture is oriented toward living within one's means:

> I think we go back to the culture. I think there [are] very simple needs. Kind of, "I drive a truck. I don't need more than a truck," and there's the mentality of, "Drive a dirty truck."

The superintendent explained that this culture sometimes manifested in the district having to remind school sites to use their allocated funding in accordance with their designated spending plan.

Consequently, the district has been able to gather reserve funds over time to prepare for upcoming large investments in facilities. District staff were proud that they had not used mortgages or the refinancing of school buildings to make these investments. As the CBO said, "It's one-time expenditures with one-time money."

Coupled with its conservative spending, the district took a stance of operating with transparency, which the CBO credited with helping build and maintain trust with the community. Gridley is a small community with a lot of opportunity for interaction between district office staff, teachers, and the community. The CBO said that maintaining a transparent stance about the district's finances and spending intentions had contributed to an amicable relationship between the teachers union and the district and, thus, facilitated smoother contract negotiations.

The district's relationship with the teachers was further supported by planning for changes in enrollment, with the superintendent describing "MYP" (multiyear projection) as "very important letters in our vocabulary." Gridley's total student enrollment was expected to flatten or gradually decline, as it had in recent years. Thus, because it was still meeting its class size obligations, the district chose not to immediately hire additional teachers so as to avoid terminating extra teachers in subsequent years.

Beyond the amount and stability of funding in the district, how money is spent was also key in providing the conditions for student learning. Gridley has considerable site-based flexibility, with principals indicating that control over spending sits largely with them, one commenting that there was "a lot of latitude." This was verified by the CBO:

> We take care of all their staffing. I do all the staffing ratios. They then get their allocation through LCAP [Local Control Accountability Plan], when they may decide to [hire] more staff. They may decide to buy more supplies, or whatever that site needs.... Once the money's doled out, we're done. As long as they spend it within reason, I do not stop any expenditures.

The small size of the district, the relative ease of access to the superintendent and CBO, and an open and transparent accounting system meant that principals could easily check whether an expense could be made within the guidelines of a particular allocation. This meant that schools could adopt different spending priorities as they saw necessary to support student learning. At McKinley and Wilson—and, to a lesser extent, at Sycamore—school leaders chose to invest more heavily in personnel, including classroom aides and intervention staff, and to maintain smaller class sizes. By contrast, at Gridley High, the school leaders had more recently invested in digital licenses for products such as IXL that allowed students to gain additional practice in mathematics and English language arts fundamentals.

However, administrators also recognized the trade-offs in how to spend available funds. A Sycamore administrator noted that the emphasis on spending on personnel over programs meant the school took longer than the high school in achieving the goal of a Chromebook for every student. McKinley's principal observed that he had not made a significant furniture order for around 2 decades but felt that investing in staff for programs that promote early reading was more valuable for student learning and deserving of greater priority.

Resourcing for schools was also connected to the needs of the community. The district CBO said that with a high number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, she believed the district office's role was to provide everything children needed to learn, especially in kindergarten and the lower elementary grades. In kindergarten, for example, the district provided teachers with a set of materials for the classroom, such as crayons, scissors, and workbooks, and a second set that students could take home.

The community in turn invested back in the schools in several ways. For example, Wilson Elementary held an annual jog-a-thon that brought in around $16,000 to the school each year. Likewise, students from Career Technical Education (CTE) classes at Gridley High were very visible in the community, with a significant number belonging to the local Future Farmers of America. Students from the program raised animals to sell at the county fair, and the community responded by purchasing the animals, providing valuable revenue that was returned directly to these programs. This community involvement further supported student learning.

Sustaining a Positive Learning Culture and Community

Strategies for social and emotional learning (SEL) can help increase student engagement and create a supportive and safe environment for student learning. In Gridley, several school and teacher initiatives for SEL contributed to providing students with the tools required to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers.

At McKinley Primary, the school used Kelso's Choices, a program that fosters young children's ability to resolve conflict. At Wilson Elementary, the school used Bucket Fillers, which encourages students to be aware of and support each other's emotional well-being. Each Friday, two students were recognized for positive actions in "filling the bucket" of a peer. At Sycamore Middle, representatives from the Butte County Office of Education trained teachers in the Nurtured Heart program, designed to help teachers deal with challenging behaviors. The district also increased the availability of counseling services at Wilson, with a full-time counselor appointed for the 2017–18 school year.

In addition to school-led initiatives, some teachers used their own SEL program or practice. One 1st-grade teacher had for several years used the Conscious Discipline approach for dealing with challenging behaviors. A 2nd-grade teacher had incorporated the principles of Growth Mindset into her classroom teaching practice:

> Right now, in my classroom, we are really focused on growth mindset and grit. We have a grit chant anytime a kid's feeling down or they can't do it, we try to cheer them up by chanting. We all get really jazzed about it. It's just creating that positive learning environment inside your classroom. We've also started a huge kindness initiative, so we now have a kindness song we sing every morning. I always try to keep it light and fun. We start with a dance party. We had a good-morning song up until now, and now it's our kindness song we've been singing every morning … [a] reminder to be kind and treat each other with respect.

Despite these teacher and school initiatives, the daily act of building personal relationships with students is what teachers described as key to SEL and creating a positive learning environment. For example, teachers indicated that they regularly checked in with students on their emotional well-being. An elementary teacher explained:

> It's every day I look at the kids as I greet them coming in the classroom. How're they feeling? What do they look like? How are they? Are they well rested? Did they have breakfast? What's going on in their mind? Are they having a good day? Are they having a bad day? I do a lot of that. I do a lot of one-on-one.

Gridley's superintendent described the attitude of teachers as one of care and responsibility for all students:

> No matter what, these kids are their kids. They take responsibility. I noticed that right away. They view every kid here as theirs. They don't view them as, "Oh, they're from the migrant camp" or "they live in town" or "they're a rich farmer's kid." They're their kids. Gridley kids are Gridley kids. I think that is one of those immeasurable, intangible things that plays into the equation.

Gridley High teachers commented that many students were proactive about seeking out support from teachers, including asking teachers for additional tutoring outside of class. A high school history teacher said, "I have found to a significant degree, those students will make themselves known … the students that are not extroverts, those I think are discovered only through developing relationships." This was echoed by the school's English department head, who said, "I don't know that there's a great substitute for teachers just trying to pay attention and trying to check in with students and build relationships."

"[Gridley teachers] take responsibility. I noticed that right away.... Gridley kids are Gridley kids. That is one of those immeasurable, intangible things that plays into the equation."

The atmosphere of support for students may also be attributable in part to the small size and stability of Gridley, with many intergenerational families in the district and relatively little turnover of teachers and students. However, teachers also contribute to sustaining this culture by being visible and participating in the community, as a Sycamore teacher described:

> It's not like a "within these four walls" of your classroom. We go to their games. We support them in the community. We show up to their events. They ask us to, and we're there. They know that we care about them. And it translates in the classroom. They're more motivated, they're more willing.... I'm sure there's research out there that shows that [when] teachers … care about their kids … they're going to want to learn, they're going to want to do better.

Similarly, teachers at Gridley High said that tutoring students during lunchtime and after school was commonplace. A teacher described how colleagues in the CTE department often worked late to support students:

> Our staff is pretty approachable for those kids to come in before school, at lunch, after school and get that extra help that they need. For instance, in [one] shop, every Monday or Wednesday, depending on what time of year, [the teacher] stays until kids leave. It'll be 9:00 or 10:00 at night sometimes and they're just working on their projects, or coming for extra time, or something. [We] call it "open shop" nights. Different teachers on campus have something different … they do for kids to come in … for their projects that they have going or other things that are outside the normal school day.

The closeness of the community has thus contributed to teachers knowing their students well and, in turn, to students feeling more comfortable in seeking out support, which creates a more personalized learning experience.

Discussion and Conclusion: Building on Strengths to Support Learning in Gridley

Our research identified several factors that help explain Gridley's greater-than-predicted success for its students and the narrower achievement gaps between Hispanic and White students. These factors include a stable, experienced teacher workforce; past experience working with standards; multiple early interventions for struggling students; and local community support.

Although we identified several clear strengths, each of these factors also highlights important dilemmas or tensions within the district, which may be reflective of challenges faced by similar small, rural districts statewide. These dilemmas and tensions also point to areas that Gridley may continue to address in the future as educators work to reach all students. Challenges include increasing connections among grade-level PLCs at the elementary level and vertical alignment between schools in some subject areas.

Gridley's performance appears to be buoyed by the experience and stability of its teacher workforce. At the elementary level, it was rare to lose more than one teacher a year. Just seven of the district's 102 teachers had less than 3 years of experience—meaning valuable time is not consumed training and enculturating new teachers.

Many on the teaching staff were from Gridley or neighboring towns and were, thus, deeply invested in the community and students. Gridley also benefits from its proximity to two strong teacher preparation programs at UC Davis and Chico State. Furthermore, for teachers coming from outside Gridley, competitive salaries made Gridley an attractive place to work.

Gridley's teachers had past experience, before CCSS, with the strategies of decoding curricula and identifying "power standards." A preponderance of teachers, particularly veteran teachers (with more than 10 years of experience), reported that these strategies, along with benchmark assessments and reporting against the standards, were key to aligning curricula, teaching, and assessments with CCSS. Working to understand the alignment of curricula, teaching, and assessments also served as an important form of professional learning for Gridley teachers. The strategies were most capably implemented in the grades and departments whose teachers had experienced the original training.

Indeed, Gridley teachers were given considerable flexibility to seek out professional learning, take on new teaching strategies and tools, and meet with colleagues to create further alignment across or between grades. Teachers sought professional development according to their interests or students' learning needs, whether through increased use of technology in instruction, as reported by teachers at Wilson Elementary, or through academic language workshops attended by teachers at Sycamore Middle.

There was also a commitment to identifying and intervening early with students who lacked key foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. Strong performance on the state's CAASPP assessments requires students to read word problems, decode key vocabulary, and unpack questions that encompass several parts of varying complexity. Gridley invested considerable resources in personnel at the elementary and middle schools to screen every student, identify their learning

needs, and provide targeted support. Intervention strategies to promote literacy, in particular, were highly prevalent and may have contributed to Gridley's better-than-predicted performance on CAASPP.

An intervention wall at McKinley Primary and the reading screening of every student at Wilson Elementary may help ensure that students do not fall through the cracks. Furthermore, Wilson teachers said that assessing all students three times a year allowed them to build relationships with students that supported learning.

Other factors contributing to Gridley's success may be specific to the local context. Multiple participants said that the small size of the district in terms of the number of schools (and principals), number of district personnel, and geographic proximity facilitated close communication among members of the district office and between the district and school administrators. With just one major high school of modest size in the district, and with almost half of its students in CTE environments, many students have access to instruction that promotes the deeper learning competencies of CCSS. Moreover, with a significant number of students in programs such as Future Farmers of America, there is close connection between the school and the local community, offering further opportunities to build a supportive learning culture.

The case of Gridley highlights several factors in supporting higher and more equitable learning. The role of site-based leadership and the close connection between administrators, teachers, students, and community may resonate with, and provide insights for, other small rural districts in transitioning instruction in alignment with CCSS.

Appendix A: Gridley Unified's Achievement and Climate Data

Table A1
CAASPP Test Results

Demographic	Residual	Proficient and Above in District (%)	Proficient and Above in California (%)
2014–15			
Math All Students	**0.166**	**27**	**34**
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	22	21
Math African American	N/A	N/A	16
Math Latino/a	0.262	22	21
Math White	0.085	35	49
ELA All Students	**0.154**	**42**	**44**
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	36	31
ELA African American	N/A	N/A	28
ELA Latino/a	0.257	37	32
ELA White	0.056	48	61
2015–16			
Math All Students	**0.188**	**34**	**37**
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	30	24
Math African American	N/A	N/A	18
Math Latino/a	0.234	31	24
Math White	0.144	39	53
ELA All Students	**0.216**	**48**	**48**
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	44	35
ELA African American	N/A	N/A	31
ELA Latino/a	0.280	45	37
ELA White	0.147	53	64
2016–17			
Math All Students	**0.095**	**31**	**38**
Math Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	26	25
Math African American	N/A	N/A	19
Math Latino/a	0.167	27	25
Math White	0.038	39	53
ELA All Students	**0.135**	**47**	**49**
ELA Economically Disadvantaged	N/A	40	36
ELA African American	N/A	N/A	31
ELA Latino/a	0.213	41	37
ELA White	0.039	56	64

Notes: "Residual" represents the difference, measured in standard deviations, between the actual average performance of a district's students in a given racial/ethnic group and the predicted performance of the district's students in the given group based on the socioeconomic status of each group's families in the district. The residual for economically disadvantaged students was not calculated. "Proficient and Above" represents the percentage of students in a given group who met or exceeded the grade and subject standards on CAASPP, averaged across grades.

Source: LPI analysis of data from California Department of Education. (n.d.). California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) results. https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/ (accessed 08/24/18).

Table A2
Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2017

Demographic	Rate in Gridley	Rate in California
African American	N/A	73%
Latino/a	80%	80%
White	81%	87%
All Students	77%	83%

Data source: California Department of Education. (n.d.). DataQuest. https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/.

Table A3
Suspension Rates, 2016–17

Demographic	Rate in Gridley	Rate in California
African American	0.0%	9.8%
Latino/a	3.1%	3.7%
White	6.3%	3.2%
All Students	4.5%	3.6%

Data source: California Department of Education. (n.d.). DataQuest. https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/.

Appendix B: Methods

This individual case study of Gridley Unified School District is part of a larger, three-part, mixed-methods study that includes a quantitative analysis of district performance in California,[21] six additional individual case studies of positive outlier districts conducted from fall 2017 through winter 2018,[22] and a cross-case study that synthesizes findings from all seven individual cases.[23]

Site Selection

Results from a multivariate, quantitative study of positive outlier districts in California identified districts eligible for the individual case studies. As described more fully in a separate report,[24] the quantitative study used a statistical regression model for predicting and measuring student achievement to identify positive outlier districts in which scores on CAASPP were greater than predicted for African American, Latino/a, and White student groups from 2015 to 2017. For each racial/ethnic group, the model accounted for indicators of family socioeconomic status, including household income, parent education, family structure, and parent employment, all of which are factors that are beyond the district's control and that typically influence student performance. We used the size of the residual scores (the difference between the predicted and actual scores for each group) as the measure of performance for each district. This analysis both identified positive outlier districts and examined predictors of achievement at the district level.

In the second part of the project, we selected a demographically and geographically diverse set of seven districts from among the positive outliers in which we conducted individual case studies to examine the factors associated with their strong outcomes. To select districts for these individual case studies, we began with the group of districts that we had identified by our quantitative study in which African American, Latino/a, and White students consistently achieved at higher-than-predicted rates from 2015 to 2017 in both English language arts and mathematics. This reduced the sample to districts in which there were at least 200 African American and/or Latino/a students and at least 200 White students, to ensure adequate sample sizes and stability of the predictor variables.[25] Then we considered additional criteria—graduation rates, suspension rates, and relative rank on English language arts and mathematics test score residuals from the regression analyses both overall and for African American, Latino/a, and White groups individually. These criteria helped ensure that we selected districts that had positive outcomes on additional measures. We also intentionally selected districts that offered different levels of urbanicity, were from different geographic regions, and were of different sizes.

Data Collection Methods

The overarching research question for this case study was:

> **In Gridley, what factors may account for the success of all students in the district and for that of students of color in particular?**

We used a case study approach to address this question. Case studies allow researchers to investigate real-life phenomena in context, generating understandings of a phenomenon and its interplay with its environment.[26] A two-person research team was assigned to the district. We used

a multi-method research design, with data from a range of sources, including documents, district data, and interviews with a range of personnel at the district and school levels. We examined the following aspects of district and school operations:

- approaches to instruction and instructional improvement;
- approaches to curriculum and assessment;
- strategies for hiring, developing, and retaining staff;
- supports for school climate or social-emotional learning;
- supports for students with additional learning or out-of-school needs;
- provision of wraparound services;
- outreach to families and communities; and
- approaches to continuous improvement, including uses of data to focus efforts.

The research team conducted a screening phone call with senior district leaders to gain an initial understanding of factors that districts identified as relevant to their success in supporting student achievement, to learn important background information, and to generate an initial list of potential sites and interviewees.

We also reviewed data and documents prior to on-site field research. Among the sources were the California School Dashboard, Local Control Accountability Plans, Local Control Funding Formula data, and school Single Plans for Student Achievement. Research teams also reviewed documents provided during district and school visits, including professional learning communities. Researchers also drew on additional data sources as needed, including those from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, the California School Climate Survey, and the California Healthy Kids Survey.

During 2-day site visits in winter 2017–18, researchers conducted 30- to 60-minute interviews at district central offices and school sites with district leaders, principals, coaches, teachers, and other staff and community members. The research team identified potential sites for school-level interviews through discussions with district offices. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify interviewees. In other words, researchers selected and interviewed several participants based on their positions and responsibilities and then asked those participants to recommend others well placed to speak to instructional strategies, change processes, and other factors supporting greater-than-predicted outcomes for African American, Latino/a, and White students in the district. In addition, researchers sought to visit schools serving students of color and students from low-income backgrounds and to interview staff who could speak to programs that supported achievement and increased equity in the district. They conducted a total of 26 interviews. Participants included 17 teachers, five school administrators, the superintendent, and three additional district personnel. They also conducted brief observations of three professional learning community meetings at Wilson Elementary School.

Interviews with district administrators and senior staff focused on strategies, steps, and tools they were using to shift instruction to the in-depth learning required under CCSS, to support teacher and administrator learning, to use data to monitor and support school progress, to meet student needs, to engage the community, and to allocate resources to support their improvement efforts. Interviewers also asked district leaders about challenges to this work and how they overcame

these challenges. We tailored the interview protocol based on the role of the interviewee and their tenure in the district. This differentiation ensured that some questions could be explored in more depth with respondents who were most likely to hold relevant and reliable knowledge on the topic of discussion. Each interview was audio recorded for transcription purposes if the respondent gave consent.

Analysis

Case study analysis addressed themes identified from the literature and those that arose from the research data. These themes included human capital issues, resources, instruction, curriculum, professional learning, social and emotional learning, data and accountability, culture, parents and community, schedules, and organization. The research team triangulated findings across multiple data sources and sought both confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence to develop illustrations of the key factors that emerged as well grounded from the evidence. Each case study draft was reviewed internally by two members of the research team, checked by a district leader for accuracy, and revised based on feedback by two expert peer reviewers.

Endnotes

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