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Let’s Support Our Educators and Leaders to Accelerate Student Learning, and Hold Those Accountable Who Put Up Barriers for our Youth.
This winter will mark three years since COVID-19 caused a seismic disruption in education across the country, including here in San Joaquin County. Since then, we’ve seen school districts in our region face down a series of challenges that many others are facing across the country. Lost learning time. Teacher burnout and staffing shortages. A mental health crisis among students. Despite many examples of herculean efforts by educators, school staff, and community members, all of these challenges will linger for years to come.

There is another crisis facing the largest school district in our county that hasn’t received the same level of attention as COVID, but may arguably create even more lasting challenges for the students and families of the Stockton Unified School District: the inept governance of the Stockton Unified School Board.

Stockton is currently led by its sixth superintendent in as many years. Not one, but two grand jury investigations have called out the Board for failing to effectively lead the district, while highlighting disturbing incidents of financial mismanagement.

These dueling crises will each require unique solutions. On COVID recovery, we see innovative solutions being proposed and funded across San Joaquin County. The $250 million in federal American Rescue Plan funding being sent to SUSD alone must be used to fund and scale innovative solutions to our most pressing challenges - like providing high-dosage tutoring to catch students up after two years of learning loss and prioritizing student social and emotional health and safety in doing so.

As for Stockton’s school governance - this will require more fundamental change, but it must start with Stockton community members demanding better from their school board.

Ultimately, while many educators, school leaders and staff have gone above and beyond to help our children over the last two years, the exhaustion from those efforts combined with the myriad challenges our schools are facing has left many of us feeling like we are stuck in neutral. In order to accelerate out of our current state, we’ve got to make sure we take a moment to understand the challenges, build on progress being made, and invest in long-term solutions for our students.
Like most public schools across the country, schools in San Joaquin County have endured an immensely challenging two years. Remote learning, canceled classes, teacher shortages, and the digital divide have left students in a precarious position.

On some of the most challenging issues facing schools in San Joaquin County and across the country, school districts, nonprofits and communities writ large have rallied behind students to support their learning in new and innovative ways.

*Here are just a few ways that communities are rising to meet these challenges:*

### 1. Lodi Unified School District is Using COVID Relief Money to Catch Students Up

In Lodi USD, efforts to catch students up have been featured in a multi-part series on the non-profit statewide news site Ed Source, where they highlight a few core ways they are investing in students to help them rebound from the pandemic.

The series first highlights their efforts to invest in activities that boost the social and emotional learning of students to help them prepare mentally to re engage productively with academics.

We also learn that Lodi USD has invested its Covid funds in literacy, boosting student achievement — and morale - by investing to place a new literacy program across schools that had shown large gains for students in a pilot.

Most recently, administrators used nearly $800,000 of their COVID relief funding to send students to the University of the Pacific’s Summer High School Institute. 250 students got a taste of college life, including classes in music production, filmmaking, investment, and 3-D animation. The district has currently spent more than half of the $124 million it received from the federal government to remediate learning loss and invest in education.

These are just a few examples of what districts can do to use COVID relief money to help students, and we commend Lodi USD for leading the way in our region and sharing their stories. We welcome others to share success stories with us at admin@sjaplus.org.
San Joaquin County is Thinking Long-Term to Prepare More Teachers with Early College High Schools

One of the remaining challenges mentioned in articles highlighting Lodi’s work, are the on-going staffing and teacher shortages they face in staffing new programs.

As a long-term plan to help solve this problem, TEACH! Academy opened this year as a joint effort by the San Joaquin County Office of Education, Venture Academy Family of Schools, Teachers College of San Joaquin, and San Joaquin Delta College on the campus of the Teachers College of San Joaquin in Stockton. The TEACH! program is designed to provide students with a free associate degree in elementary education from Delta College by the time they graduate high school, as well as an affordable pathway to complete their bachelor’s degree at Humphreys University.

While TEACH! is the first local early college high school focused on the teaching profession, it won’t be the only one. Following closely is ABLE Charter partnering with Humphreys University to add numbers of local youth who choose teaching as a career. They are launching this year and momentum is building to grow more local educators.

These innovative partnerships not only provide San Joaquin County students with a clear and affordable path to get their college degree, but will help grow the profession locally with a new generation of teachers who reflect the diversity and cultural perspectives of the students in the San Joaquin County region they hope to serve.
During the Pandemic, the City of Stockton surveyed households, and found 35.7% of Stockton households didn’t have reliable broadband service, and 8% of households didn’t have a computer at all.

In response, the city allocated $2.9 million from its $78 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds for connectivity support, funding the Digital Equity Project. Since mid-May, the city has distributed about 500 devices in targeted census tracts around the city and is now opening the program to anyone eligible within Stockton city limits.

Residents are eligible to receive a free laptop or tablet with three years of free internet at upcoming events. The city purchased about 2000 devices total - 1,550 Chromebooks with hotspots and 500 data-enabled tablets, all equipped with three years of prepaid internet access.
Lastly, a local coalition applied for and received funds to pilot a program that will help thousands of students save money for college. Thanks to a $4.6 million grant from the California Student Aid Commission, College Savings Accounts (CSAs) are now available to families across San Joaquin County. These tax-advantaged savings accounts, which offer families a $750 initial deposit, aim to boost college enrollment across San Joaquin County by reducing the burden on students to take on student loan debt.

In San Joaquin County, 51% of residents have attended some college, with only 18% of those individuals finishing and earning a bachelor’s degree. Studies have found that children from low-income backgrounds that have $500 or less in a CSA are three times more likely to attend college and four times more likely to graduate, compared to those with no college savings. These benefits don’t just stop at college, either. Studies have also shown that students with CSAs are two times more likely to have their own savings accounts later in life.

San Joaquin A+ is now the lead partner in the outreach and implementation of this CSA program, and we welcome you to learn more at https://csaplus.org/
Systemic Challenges
Putting Children in Reverse?

While there are pockets of progress, we cannot ignore the reality that our region’s largest school district is being held back by leadership failures at the school board level.

Consider the following:

- Stockton Unified School District (SUSD) has had six superintendents in six years;
- There have been two grand jury investigations into SUSD operations in the last year, citing not only failure to effectively fulfill basic governance responsibilities and protocols, but also identifying lack of transparency and conflicts of interest around the use of public dollars;
- As of 2019 - still the most recent reliable data - Just 30% of Stockton students are reading and 21% are doing math on grade level;

While at San Joaquin A+ we prefer to focus on progress and solutions for students, we believe a fair and unbiased review of the district must also acknowledge the detrimental impact of near-constant leadership change and incompetent fiscal management which merits further review and understanding so we can learn from this moment.
A Failure of Governance

SUSD has been led by six superintendents in six years - an unprecedented level of turnover. The leadership changes themselves are a window into the management crisis perpetuated by the SUSD school board.

Last year, a local Grand Jury weighed in on this destructive trend. Their report found “there is widespread concern about the short tenure of SUSD superintendents, especially in the last 15 years. This turnover rate, which is as high as anywhere in California, is a foremost indication that the trustees have failed, and will continue to fail, to effectively lead the district.”

In August 2022, the San Joaquin County Office of Education issued a letter ordering SUSD Trustees to remedy Brown Act violations that occurred when accepting the resignation of the most recent Superintendent and appointing him to a $285,000 role for one year as ‘Emeritus Superintendent’ without notifying the public. Regardless of what the remedy looks like, these mistakes continue to hurt not only the students and families of SUSD, but the Superintendents and leaders left to pick up the pieces. As a community, we must continue to support the hard working educators and leaders of our district, while ensuring the board is following the law and engaging the public appropriately on how they govern Superintendents and their staff.

### Stockton Unified Superintendent Hiring 2016-2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year Hired</th>
<th>Year Departed</th>
<th>Reason for Departure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliseo Davalos</td>
<td>6/16</td>
<td>12/17</td>
<td>Resignation: Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Wright (Interim)</td>
<td>1/18</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>Was not selected as Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Deasy</td>
<td>6/18</td>
<td>6/20</td>
<td>Resignation: Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Biedermann (Interim)</td>
<td>7/20</td>
<td>1/21</td>
<td>Resignation: Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Ramirez Jr.</td>
<td>1/21</td>
<td>6/22</td>
<td>Resignation: Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francine Baird (Interim)</td>
<td>6/22</td>
<td>7/22</td>
<td>Resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Traci Miller (Interim)</td>
<td>7/22</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Financial Red Flags

This year, the Grand Jury issued a second report, this time honing in on poor business practices, conflicts of interest, a lack of transparency, and a budget shortfall of at least $30 million by 2024.

A few of the issues named in the report include:

• The district is using federal COVID-19 relief funding to cover everyday expenses like salaries and benefits
• The district’s business services department lost track of millions of dollars in spending;
• Board members cannot provide an itemized list of how $241 million in federal funding was allocated or will be spent;
• Massive cost overruns have plagued district projects - including more than $6 million in overruns for a project at Franklin High School with no associated change orders, and a $7 million contract that did not follow proper bidding protocols for a disinfectant technology vendor.

These troubling instances may be attributed to incompetent fiscal management. They may also be something worse: recent reporting has noted that there are active investigations by the FBI and District Attorney.

In August, the board issued a response disputing nearly half of the grand jury report’s findings. At the meeting where this was approved Trustee Angel Ann Flores, who has consistently been the lone dissenter in many of this current school board’s actions, shared publicly, “We did not follow protocols … We did not go through the due protocol process for hiring our CBO (Chief Business Officer Marcus Battle). We did not go through the due process of hiring directors. We did not receive public input in a lot of the business that this district has done,” Flores said. “This grand jury report is valid. I thank the community for coming, speaking up and having the courage to speak on your behalf.”

This last comment raises an important point. Not all seven board members voted for or agree with the actions that have taken place over the last year, just as we continue to note that there are many district, school, and classroom educators who continue to work tirelessly to support students and focus on ways to help increase their learning during these difficult years.
Lack of Academic Data Continues

All of this has taken place at a time with limited transparency or information about how students are performing. In 2020, all academic standardized assessments were canceled in California, and at the end of the 2021 school year the tests were deemed optional, with participation rates so low that results are essentially meaningless.

Only approximately 744,000 of 3.1 million students in grades three to eight and 11 took and completed the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CASPP tests in spring of 2021. In Stockton, students in grades 3 - 8 did not take the assessment at all, with only Grade 11 students participating in the Smarter Balanced Assessment. However, only 55% of 11th grade students completed the assessment in ELA, and 50% completed it in Math; therefore, even in 11th grade where students participated, we don’t have enough information about what kinds of students participated and those that didn’t, and how that might impact proficiency percentages to use for any significant purpose.

2022 testing data, which should have higher participation rates and offer a better insight into how students are doing, will not likely be available until December 2022.

See the graphic for participation rates across all grades in ELA and Math tests in SUSD compared with the county and state. Prior to 2021, these participation rates were all very similar; however, given that 11th graders were the only students that participated in the assessment for SUSD in 2021, overall participation rates were very low.

And while there is no reliable local assessment results, according to just released data from the national assessment of education progress (pictured here as well - also known as the NAEP assessment, or nation’s report card) is showing the greatest loss in learning in English and Math in recent memory, with nearly 20 years of progress being erased by the two years of learning loss during the pandemic.
Moving Ahead
How Do We Help Students Accelerate Forward?

As we confront the challenges of returning to some degree of normalcy in our schools, we must continue to innovate and scale up what’s working, while holding leaders accountable to redouble efforts to help students catch up. It’s our only hope to ensure that our schools deliver on their promise to families.

There are a few clear ways we believe schools across San Joaquin County can get out of neutral and accelerate forward for students.

Invest in High-Dosage Tutoring

For our students to have a brighter future they need high dosage tutoring right now. The learning losses from the pandemic are well-noted and they are huge. What can anyone do? To start, get to know The Calculator (Calculator - Edunomics Lab). The Calculator is the creation of Edunomics and their Director, Marguerite Roza.

Dr. Roza and her team have taken the first step to “ballpark” the costs to help students recover academically from Covid. She’s taken 8000 school districts across the country and calculated lost weeks of learning in Math and reading, the number of students in each system and the magnitude of the investment of high dosage needed to bring students back to “grade level.”

Here’s a local example of what it’s going to take over the next two years:

- Dr. Roza and her team estimate that kids in Stockton Unified lost 23 weeks of learning in math and 21 weeks in reading.
- The estimated costs for high dosage tutoring was $67,842,482 in Math and $41,919,892 in reading, or a total of roughly $109 million dollars.

The good news as the calculator shows, is that United States government provided $156 million in ESSER III funds (part of the total $250 million Stockton Unified received for COVID relief in total) for tutoring and other needs through 2021 that needs to be spent over the next several years. Some of this money has been committed - with a large amount of the SUSD ESSER plan showing it allocated to ‘facility improvements’ - but significant dollars remain unallocated. These federal funds should be directed right into high dosage tutoring strategies to catch students up and accelerate their learning.

If tutor staffing and capacity is considered an issue, there are solutions for that too. Right here in Stockton we have a nationally recognized high dosage tutoring organization, founded by a Stockton resident named Hasan Ali who founded Air Tutors (https://airtutors.org/).

Let’s hope Air Tutors and other high quality tutoring organizations are finding their way to our San Joaquin County youth. The funds and the talent are available. Let’s match them with our youth... and for all you finance wonks, you can use The Calculator to see the tutoring costs for other districts in the area.
Prioritize Student Social and Emotional Health and Safety to Support their Learning

In order to catch students up on what they missed, it will take more than just tutoring. While we know students fell behind academically during the pandemic, we also know that the pandemic took a toll on students’ social and emotional well-being.

Research shows that more children felt depression and anxiety during the pandemic - with a 70% increase in California children according to the 2022 Kids County Report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This has revealed itself in different ways in school buildings, with absentee rates increasing in most school districts, suspensions going up, along with other disciplinary incidents.

With these facts in mind, it is imperative that schools do not simply throw academic content at students, but think creatively about how they can use dollars to make students feel more comfortable, connected and supported as they work to catch up. The Lodi USD example in our pockets of progress section provides an example where investment in clubs and extracurricular activities can help reengage students, but districts also need to ensure that there is enough counseling support and capacity to provide students with extra help where they need it; that health and safety protocols are up to date; and that they have plans to keep students safe moving to and from schools during these early months back in buildings.
While many districts, school boards, and cities have struggled with leadership in the last two years, the Stockton Board of Trustees leadership challenges stand out. Like many other elected bodies, when the pandemic arrived, the school board began meeting remotely in March of 2020; however, the SUSD board continued to meet remotely for two years during a time that students and schools returned to in-person learning. While they were meeting remotely - often with no video available during meetings, taking limited public comment, and providing limited transparency into their practices - the board accepted the resignations of two different superintendents, conducted mass lay-offs of central office staff, approved major contracts with no explanation, and spent millions of taxpayer dollars in the process.

All of this was done with little public conversation about student learning or needs, during a time where students and their families were struggling to keep up with school work, along with increased mental and emotional needs through the covid-19 pandemic.

And while the board has since resumed meeting in-person, the second grand jury report is an example of what public engagement has looked like under this school board’s leadership. After the report was released in June, the board held a single town hall, where after attempting to limit public comment, sat and listened silently to an upset crowd without response or engagement.

In response to complaints about the board’s engagement, according to the Stockton Record, board member Rico responded that she would not partake in any town halls after she heard the audio from the last meeting. “They’re asking for respect, transparency – they’re asking for everything. What did we get back?” Rico said. She continued, “This is not the community we need.” Board President Cecilia Mendez stated: “No town halls. We’re not having any more town halls right now.”

As noted, shortly after these statements the board issued a report refuting many of the Grand Jury’s recommendations with the board majority taking no responsibility for the oversight and errors cited.

This is not the community we need.

– Alicia Rico Board Member
Conclusion

Let’s Support Our Educators and Leaders to Accelerate Student Learning, and Hold Those Accountable Who Put Up Barriers for our Youth.

As a community, we must be ready to both hold Board members accountable to engage with the public on these important issues, while also acknowledging and supporting those leaders and educators who are focused on helping students catch up. For example, the board has just appointed a new Superintendent who has a track record as an educator and school leader in Stockton. We can support the current Superintendent and collaborate on important initiatives for students while demanding better of the board.

With this in mind, we are cheering on our school leaders to help students get “unstuck” in the early months of this school year; by using any dollars, resources, and capacity currently available to get creative about how we can help students make up for lost time right now.

In parallel to this, as we approach election season this November, we urge SUSD families and community members to engage with any potential school board candidates who will prioritize the challenge ahead by transparently and urgently putting federal funding to work to help our students. And in doing so - will engage with our community, listen to their needs, be consistently transparent in how they are spending the public’s money, and are focused ultimately on hiring more district leaders and engaged educators who will put our children first.