

Insights from a Strategic District Realignment

Interview from Sunnyside Unified School District, Tucson, AZ | December 2014

Change for a district can be very disruptive and is never easy. The administration at Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) understood the task they had in front of them and carefully planned to meet the needs of all stakeholders — including students, parents and staff — to ensure the most ideal outcome possible.

Challenge

Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD), located near Tucson, AZ, serves nearly 18,000 students and enrollment is steady. In the fall of 2013, when the override election for additional funding didn't pass, administrators were forced to take a hard look at their budget. Several options were developed and after many different stakeholder meetings, a plan of action was selected. It was determined that the district was going to have to make several potentially difficult changes due to the new budget realities and a few positive improvements, one of which, the temporary closing of Chaparral Middle School, had already been included in a previous bond. The previous bond would allow for the renovation and reopening of the campus as a state-of-the-art performing arts center in the coming years. This closure would inevitably require realignment of boundaries for a number of schools.

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After much consideration, the administration determined that a second school would be closed and sixth grade moved back into the feeder elementary schools, leaving all middle schools as seventh- and eighth-grade buildings. Sunnyside USD decided to make these necessary changes in one big step rather than a series of changes over a couple of years.

To add to the level of difficulty, these discussions began in January 2014 and the goal was to have the changes communicated and in place for school opening in the fall.

These changes represented a major enrollment shift that would affect all nine elementary and four middle school buildings, impacting over 50% of the entire student population. The SUSD team had the foresight to approach each of these changes in a thoughtful and strategic manner, and more importantly, to implement these changes as transparently as possible to ensure that all stakeholders were informed and to garner community support. All of these changes needed to be ready for a smooth start to the 2014-2015 school year.

The first step forward in the process was to select a strong leader with deep roots in SUSD, 25-year district veteran Pam Betten. Currently, Betten is the Director of Middle Schools and 1:1 Computing. Her previous experience with boundary changes as a principal made this an easy choice for the administration. They also sought key cross-functional team members to be sure all aspects of the project were closely considered. Mary Veres, Director of Public Information became a key part of the communication process.

Creating a Communications Plan

“The process started with extensive research to ensure that we compiled a strategic and comprehensive communication plan, making certain stakeholders were accurately informed of any and all proposed changes. This was of the utmost importance. With so many proposed changes affecting so many of our students, we needed everyone to know *what* we were doing, *why* the changes were happening, what the benefits were, and who would be impacted,” shared Betten. “We recognized these changes could be disruptive to the families of our students, so our focus needed to be on both the outcomes for the families as well as the cost savings for the district. The needs of the students and families were put first and foremost throughout the process.”

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SUSD believes there is no such thing as over communicating. There were multiple meetings of varying types: board meetings where the public was invited, meetings with students, parents, and staff at each building affected. It was important to the administration to have meetings at the buildings that were receiving the new sixth grade students to set the tone. This type of change needed to be strategic, community-focused, and not just operationally driven.

“Increased class size was a concern for all families within the district. It was important to us that we address this issue immediately and communicate to families that class size would remain the same in the face of any proposed change,” stated Betten. “By repeating this

several times from the start, it reduced many parents' fears and allowed for better dialogue moving forward."

Deploying the Right Tools and Technology

SUSD had purchased GuideK12, a geovisual analytic software, determining that the platform would be instrumental for scenario planning. The district liked the idea of visualizing student data mapped against the school boundaries for planning, analysis in real-time, and scenario comparisons. They knew the power of data in pictures for communicating.

"We did not push the use of GuideK12 in to our day-to-day operation when first implemented; however, GuideK12 has since become the foundation for driving all of these changes and we use it daily," said Mary Veres, SUSD Director of Public Information. "GuideK12 makes it so easy to understand our district from a geographic perspective, which is extremely powerful."

Designing a New Culture

The district faced an extremely interesting dynamic while considering which schools to close. The plan involved consolidating two arch-rival middle schools. For months prior to the change, the student councils at each school worked together, creating a design for what the new school culture would look like. The team was focused on a successful blend of the best of both schools. Both schools had uniforms in place, so to immediately unify the consolidated rivals, the decision was made to move to new uniforms. There was a considerable amount of attention paid to student needs and perceptions, as well as a focus on details to ensure students and their families felt welcome and comfortable with the consolidation.

"Change is hard, so it is never flawless, but by continuing to focus on how to best serve the needs of the families and students within our district, we made the implementation of these changes go as smoothly as possible," said Betten.

Understanding Needs of All Stakeholders

GuideK12 was used to help SUSD determine projected enrollment and student characteristics, allowing the district to assess staffing levels and specialties currently in each school as they determined the impact from the building closure. The ability to understand every student's needs geographically was vitally important for a comprehensive plan. The HR component was also given careful consideration while creating the overall communications plan. Teachers were told very early on that no

positions would be eliminated due to the proposed closure. By understanding the concerns of each individual group and addressing them early on, SUSD was successful in keeping teacher support for the changes strong and relieving unneeded stress. There were a number of other elements that needed to be given additional consideration during the planning phases, including open enrollment, student needs, and ensuring that students with special education needs were being taken care of as well. Understanding and addressing which of these students would be included in any boundary change was crucial to the planning process.

"I cannot imagine how long it would have taken us, or if it would have even been feasible to determine who was open enrolled and who wasn't by hand. GuideK12 really opened this up for us and made these decision much easier for us," said Betten. "Going through similar changes as a principal, I know firsthand just how difficult that could have been; GuideK12 made that process easy and clear."

The district was very careful to determine the needs of the special education families and their proximity to the new buildings, and to analyze the best location for each to attend based on the resources across the district. If their current building was affected by the change and the student would need to change schools, GuideK12 helped determine which school in the district was best equipped to serve that student's needs.

The process was completed in five months. By most districts' standards, this is an extremely aggressive timeline for such extensive change. By utilizing GuideK12's visualization tools, administrators were able to shorten these once tedious and time-consuming tasks by showing scenarios and potential changes to the board visually on maps with the click of a button.

"We could not have done what we did so quickly, efficiently, or transparently without having the images from GuideK12 to share with our board and other stakeholders, which ensured their understanding of the process and ultimately secured their support for the changes," said Mary Veres.

Facing Opposition

The district did face opposition to the proposed changes at times. Administrators proposed the conversion of one middle school to a 2nd–8th grade campus, which created concern. 950 students at that particular building would be affected and there was no space to make room for an additional 500. The district readjusted and moved many middle school students to another middle school to allow the change to happen. Realignment will always be confusing to students, but the district chose to grandfather many families as needed and had a multi-year roll out approach.

Insights From Experience

Advice to other districts:

1. Create a cross-functional team of people (PR, Operations, Curricula, Transportation, etc.).
2. Keep students and their academic goals front and center.
3. Include people on the team who understand the culture of the district. Have a historical perspective and know the personality of the community stakeholders.
4. Create a communication plan to clearly communicate and address the concerns of each group of stakeholders.
5. Clearly define the what, why, and who of your strategic plan and determine the benefits and risks.
6. Be sure you have solid data and excellent systems to analyze data and make decisions.
7. Think through all the affected areas: Food Service, Transportation, HR, Academic Performance, Special Ed., etc.
8. Address each group of stakeholders early on in the process.
9. Communicate frequently and clearly about “why” the changes are needed to parents, students, school board, faculty, community, and all affected stakeholders.
10. Enable the organization to work as a team without silos.

“One plus one doesn’t always equal two when making these types of changes. You need to be comfortable with it being a little messy, especially if that means it is going to be better for the community. Looking solely at the numbers is not how these types of decisions should be made,” said Pam Betten. “We could have just divided up the students evenly and sent them to their closest school, but we went much deeper than that. We moved quickly, thoughtfully, and with community input and support. It was hard, but it was well executed and the fall semester started smoothly.”