Excellence and Innovation: Vista Unified School District

March 2022
“What we believe in is the infinite capacity of all students to do great things, and it’s our job to create the environment for students to discover their strengths and their interests—what they’re passionate about—at very early ages: ‘Who am I, and what can I become if I’m surrounded by people who really want to serve that purpose?’”

— Matt Doyle, Superintendent, Vista Unified School District
Vista Unified School District
Fast Facts

29 Schools
- 15 elementary schools
- 5 middle schools
- 3 comprehensive high schools
- 2 alternative high schools
- 1 early childhood special education center
- 1 blended learning/independent study middle/high school
- 1 adult school
- 1 adult transition center serving students with special needs

20,000 Students

The House of Learning is a visual representation of VUSD’s blueprint for educational excellence and innovation. This graphic depicts family and community engagement as the foundation and personalized learning as the apex. It also expresses the district’s theory of action, highlighting the importance of many systems working together to create the right conditions to transform teaching and learning into an engaging, relevant, and personal learning journey.
Moving beyond traditional, one-size-fits-all pedagogy, VUSD educators have embraced personal learning (PL), a personalized approach to teaching and learning that is captured in the district’s five-pointed PL Star. Inspired by five key elements of personal learning, students and teachers are co-creating seamless pathways that align to each learner’s unique combination of strengths, interests, and values. At the same time, educators are innovating to design flexible and personalized learning environments and experiences that can support all students to reach their individual goals for college, career, and lifelong success. Moreover, as stewards of their own learning, students in VUSD schools exercise choice and agency over how they develop and demonstrate essential knowledge and skills as they pursue their pathways.

As expressed in the district’s mission statement, the purpose of education in Vista Unified School District (VUSD) in Vista, California is to “inspire every student to persevere as a critical thinker who collaborates to solve real world problems.” To empower all learners to achieve this shared definition of success, VUSD and its 29 schools are on a multi-year journey to transform the student experience for the 20,000 diverse learners the district serves.

VUSD refers to the district’s strategic plan as a Blueprint for Learning because, as Superintendent Matt Doyle says, it conveys the idea of transforming and creating “a blueprint for the future” of education. Since the blueprint document is more than 300 pages long, he and other district leaders use a metaphor of a house with seven rooms to communicate the seven strategies of the blueprint.
Nicole Allard, the district’s executive director of educational excellence and innovation, points to engagement with a wide network of stakeholders as a necessity for the transformation work. Noting that schools and districts can become siloed and inward-focused over time, she values external partners for “providing another option or an alternative viewpoint, pushing back lovingly on how we’ve always done it, or [addressing] any fear we might have. They challenge us to think bigger.” Whether the partners are learners, parents, or experts from industry or higher education, VUSD educators rely on their network to inspire them to new thinking and bold action to ensure that learning is equitable, academically rigorous, and relevant to learners and their futures.

In addition to creating learning experiences and environments that are personalized, VUSD is committed to preparing all learners to thrive in a changing world. As reflected in the district logo, members of the VUSD community share the belief that educational excellence is inextricably linked with innovation. Inspired by a shared commitment to continuous improvement, district educators cultivate a learning stance and partner with diverse stakeholders to support growth and guide the transformation of teaching and learning.

A foundational belief underlying the transformation of teaching and learning at VUSD is that innovation and creativity promote engagement, self-direction, and success. District leaders often cite Gallup poll results to show how learners’ engagement declines over the course of their K-12 experience. For Matt, the source of this disengagement lies not with the learners but in the nature of schooling. “Our traditional model of education was laser focused on wringing out just about every modicum of expression from students in the spirit of compliance and control,” he points out.

Moreover, he observes that this quashing of creativity applies equally to educators: “Every teacher I have come into contact with over the past 30 years wants to be actively engaged in teaching and learning; however, their enthusiasm is often tempered, even snuffed out, when faced with a myriad of procedures, protocols, and compliance expectations.”

Instead of a compliance-oriented approach, VUSD has made innovation a vital part of the culture for adults as well as for students, and this shared value is reflected in how the district operates—its systems and structures and the balance it achieves between autonomy and accountability.

District leaders believe that, for creativity to flourish, school leaders and educators need space and support to take risks and pilot new practices. However, to foster coherence and continuous improvement, members of the community also need shared vision and responsibility for what they are innovating toward. VUSD strives to achieve this balance through “change agent leadership,” an inclusive and empowering approach to change, growth, and governance.

Listen to the Podcast

Hear about VUSD’s Family and Community Engagement Network.

Learn about the ways VUSD engages with diverse stakeholders from higher education, business and industry, parents and families, and learners themselves in “A Wide and Inclusive Network: Stakeholder Engagement at VUSD.”

To learn about why VUSD has embraced PL as its “moonshot” and what that looks like in schools and classrooms, read “Reaching for the Personal Learning Star at Vista Unified.”
To find out about what distributed leadership looks like in adult practices like goal-setting and decision-making, read “Sharing Power for a Shared Vision: Change Agent Leadership at VUSD.”

Given the district’s commitment to innovation and creative freedom, it should come as no surprise that VUSD schools are far from cookie-cutter versions of one another. Mirroring the aspirations educators hold for their learners, adults in VUSD schools draw upon their communities’ collective strengths, interests, and values to create unique school identities or—to use the term favored by many district educators—their “brands.”

Expanding on an analogy coined by Matt and former superintendent Devin Vodicka, Nicole explains that, in terms of branding, district schools are similar to Disney theme parks like Disneyland or Disney World. “Every single land looks different, but when you walk in, no matter where you are, you know you’re in Disney,” she says. “So we want everybody to know you’re in Vista Unified, but every school needs to have its unique identity.”

The brand identity for all of VUSD includes shared values like equity, creative and forward-looking mindsets, and inclusive adult practices like change agent leadership and stakeholder engagement. Above all, a significant element of VUSD’s shared identity is the district-wide commitment to personal learning. Although participation has always been voluntary, all 29 of the district’s schools are now part of VUSD’s PL Challenge to provide equitable, learner-centered, strengths-based learning that prepares all students to succeed in future learning and the workplace.

However, even though all school sites are guided by the same PL Star, the transformation process is designed to avoid uniformity. In fact, after joining the PL Challenge, educators from each school spend considerable time—often a year or more—defining what PL means for that community and what “learning engines”—instructional approaches—are the best fit for the school’s identity. The result is a tapestry of very diverse schools, learning models, and approaches, including dual language schools, an IB middle school with a focus on community service projects, and other schools organized around leadership skills, the arts, design thinking, early college, and career and technical education.
Our Vision: The VISTA Unified School District is committed to providing a safe and nurturing learning environment that fosters academic excellence and personal growth. We are dedicated to nurturing student leaders who are prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

Our Mission: Our mission is to inspire lifelong learning for all students with an emphasis on the arts. We believe in developing students who are academically prepared for college and career after high school graduation. We are proud of the variety of learning opportunities for students to explore. We value and appreciate a high level of parental involvement as well as the additional funding received from our AP Education Foundation and Parent Teacher Association.

Our Promise: We are honored to provide the Whole Child approach to education for each of our students. We use Restorative Practices and Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, which drive our discipline policy and leadership program that supports our safe school environment. In addition to daily rigorous classroom instruction, students enjoy choral music education, art, coding, Engineering is Elementary, and maker-space design labs. With an emphasis on building capacity for students to become academically prepared for college and career after high school graduation, student learning is enriched with the variety of learning opportunities for students to explore. We value and appreciate a high level of parental involvement as well as the additional funding received from our AP Education Foundation and Parent Teacher Association.

Our Mindset: We are committed to providing a positive school climate where students can thrive. Being student-centered is a concept deeply embedded in our school culture and educational philosophy.

Our Instructonal Approach: We believe students need to develop leadership skills. By teaching students leadership through the Seven Habits, or “leader in me,” students learn 21st century leadership and life skills that create a culture of student empowerment based on the belief that EVERY child can be a leader. With every month dedicated to students learning one of the seven leadership habits, Alamosa Park students develop effective leadership skills that will help them in middle school, high school, and beyond.

Leadership: We believe students need to develop leadership skills. By teaching students leadership through the Seven Habits, or “leader in me,” students learn 21st century leadership and life skills that create a culture of student empowerment based on the belief that EVERY child can be a leader. With every month dedicated to students learning one of the seven leadership habits, Alamosa Park students develop effective leadership skills that will help them in middle school, high school, and beyond.

Unique Learning: We believe in developing students who are exposed to a wide variety of learning opportunities. Throughout the school year, students are engaged in Community Service Learning Projects that help them learn leadership, organization, and empathy. We also believe that health and fitness play a vital role in learning. This is why Alamosa Park students are exposed to several co-curricular events such as Healthy Hawk Week, Lunchtime Intramural Athletics, Hawk Track Team, and after school clubs such as cooking, dance, aerobics, fitness, nutrition, and gardening club.

Follow Our Leaders: We believe students need to develop leadership skills. By teaching students leadership through the Seven Habits, or “leader in me,” students learn 21st century leadership and life skills that create a culture of student empowerment based on the belief that EVERY child can be a leader. With every month dedicated to students learning one of the seven leadership habits, Alamosa Park students develop effective leadership skills that will help them in middle school, high school, and beyond.

Design Thinking: We believe in developing students who are exposed to a wide variety of learning opportunities. Throughout the school year, students are engaged in Community Service Learning Projects that help them learn leadership, organization, and empathy. We also believe that health and fitness play a vital role in learning. This is why Alamosa Park students are exposed to several co-curricular events such as Healthy Hawk Week, Lunchtime Intramural Athletics, Hawk Track Team, and after school clubs such as cooking, dance, aerobics, fitness, nutrition, and gardening club.

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Balanced Literacy & Math: We believe students need to develop leadership skills. By teaching students leadership through the Seven Habits, or “leader in me,” students learn 21st century leadership and life skills that create a culture of student empowerment based on the belief that EVERY child can be a leader. With every month dedicated to students learning one of the seven leadership habits, Alamosa Park students develop effective leadership skills that will help them in middle school, high school, and beyond.

Performing Arts: Integrating the visual and performing arts into students’ lives is the foundation of what it means to be an Empres a Knight. We embrace ways to incorporate music, singing, and performing into every lesson. We encourage students to explore their interests in the arts and to display their learning through this creative outlet.

Culture: At Empres a, we thrive on connections and foster strong, positive relationships among all members of our school community. We believe in developing students who are exposed to a wide variety of learning opportunities. Throughout the school year, students are engaged in Community Service Learning Projects that help them learn leadership, organization, and empathy. We also believe that health and fitness play a vital role in learning. This is why Alamosa Park students are exposed to several co-curricular events such as Healthy Hawk Week, Lunchtime Intramural Athletics, Hawk Track Team, and after school clubs such as cooking, dance, aerobics, fitness, nutrition, and gardening club.

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To define and communicate their brands, VUSD schools work with a designer to create logos and “one-pagers.” The content and the design reflect both the shared district identity and the unique features of the individual school.
VUSD leaders credit the district’s Blueprint for Excellence with their students’ impressive postsecondary success. For example, this poster depicts the colleges VUSD scholars attend, as well as the number of students who met the rigorous WavePact benchmarks for guaranteed admission at California State University San Marcos.