

A Wide and Inclusive Network: Stakeholder Engagement at Vista Unified School District

March 2022

Chief among the defining characteristics of Vista Unified School District (VUSD) is a commitment to continuous learning and improvement in service to their mission. In the district's work to create the kind of learning that "will inspire every student to persevere as a critical thinker to solve real world problems," VUSD leaders and educators are supported by robust social networks and positive relationships with local stakeholders and members of the broader community. Nationally recognized experts and thought partners, workforce and industry organizations, families and community members, and those within the school community—adults and learners alike—all help to guide and shape VUSD's ongoing transformation.

In keeping with their district's learning culture, VUSD is a community made up of avid readers, listeners, and thinkers. Whether the form of communication is a blog post by a district leader or an informal discussion with a classroom educator, educators at VUSD will almost invariably share reflections about a recent book, a research report, or an insightful comment from a student, parent, or industry leader. As a result, the district's network of partners is almost as varied as it is vast. Nevertheless, three key stakeholder groups are helping to transform the learning experience at VUSD:



Learners

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and districts are framing "student engagement" as a challenge—especially in terms of motivation to recoup lost learning. However, schools and districts that have embraced student voice and agency as an essential element of their learning transformation tend to frame student engagement not so much as a problem to be solved but as a solution in its own right. For example, long before COVID, VUSD was engaging learners authentically as partners, co-designers, and change agents in the district's personal learning (PL) journey. Not only do students have the ability to make choices about their own learning, but they also work alongside adults to shape the identity of their schools and the entire district. In many ways, students are seen as primary stakeholders in VUSD's work to transform learning for equity and lifelong success.

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Parents and Families

According to Jacqueline "Kiki" Bispo, the family and community engagement lead at VUSD, the district firmly believes that meaningful partnerships and authentic family engagement are critical factors for student success. To promote this shared responsibility for the success of all children, VUSD formed the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Network, with Kiki, a district science teacher, as its founder. The FACE network focuses on building and strengthening relationships with families and making sure "families don't just feel, but truly are, partners with the school in raising and educating their children," says Kiki.

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External Partners

At VUSD, "relevance" has been the rallying cry since the start of the transformation to personalize student learning for lifelong success. According to Superintendent Matt Doyle, making learning relevant has necessitated changes in both practice and mindset. Educators, he argues, need to "see learning as a lifelong, continuous, dynamic process that directly aligns with the strengths of the learner and is relevant to the changing world around them." To prepare young people to thrive in a time of accelerating change, VUSD works to break down the barriers between schools and the wider world, starting with the adults in the system. Modeling the kind of curiosity and growth mindsets they hope to instill in their students, VUSD educators seek out and build relationships with experts and leaders in education, equity, transformational change, and business and industry.

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Students as Stakeholders and Co-Designers at VUSD

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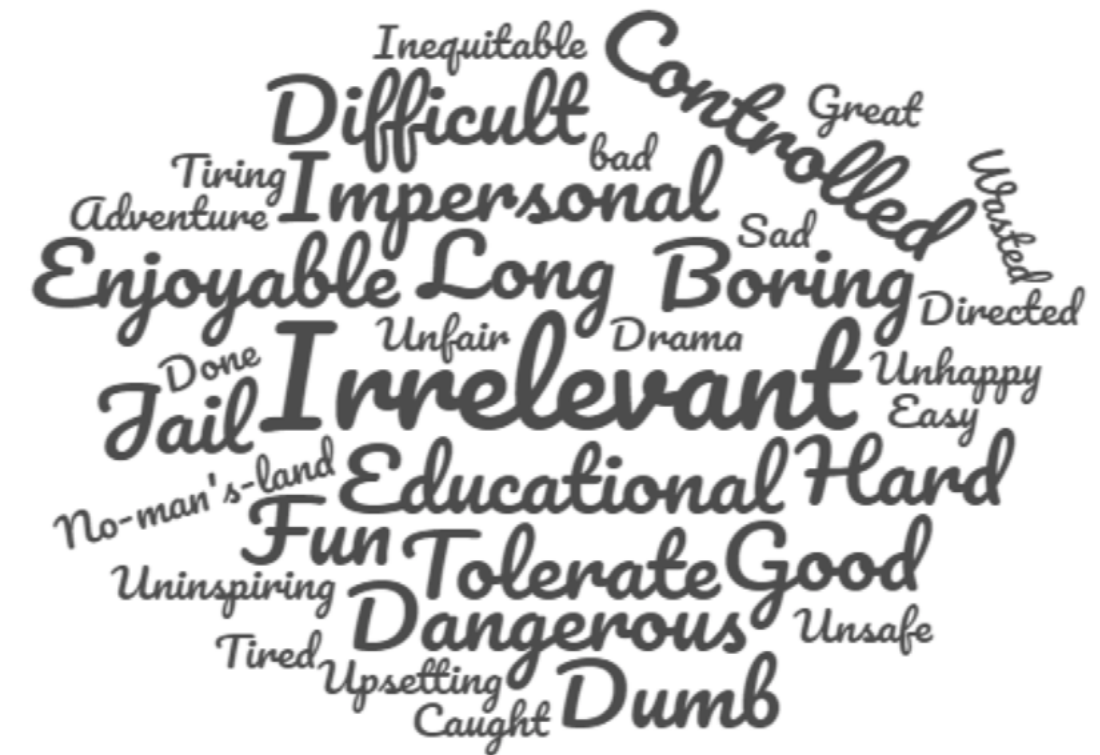
Catalysts for Change.

Many external factors contributed to VUSD's decision to transform learning, but district leaders always point to students as the primary catalysts for change. Matt Doyle, the district's superintendent, tells the story of the listening tour he and

Devin Vodicka, who was superintendent at the time, conducted in 2014. “We had 29 schools, and we divided the district in half,” he recalls. “We interviewed a large group of students, more than 2,000 students, over the course of five months.”

Nicole Allard, the district's executive director of educational excellence and innovation, describes how Matt and Devin actively sought diverse voices and framed their requests for interviews accordingly: "They would talk to the principal and say, 'Could you get a group of 20 or 30 kids? And we want a group of all of the kids represented. So we want special education and English language learners. We want AP students and we want athletes. We want drama kids. We want your mathletes and computer kids. Get them all in a room. And we're just going to have an honest conversation with them.'" According to Nicole, Matt and Devin visited every school and spoke to learners in fourth to twelfth grade. "They asked a few key questions like 'What does school mean to you? What does Vista mean to you?' and just jotted down the notes."

At the end of the five months, the story goes, as Matt and Devin were reviewing





and analyzing their copious interview notes, Matt proposed an idea for surfacing key themes: “Why don’t we just take all of our notes and throw it into Wordle?” As he explains, “Wordle takes all the words and shows you the words that are used the most as the biggest. And we did. The word that came out the largest was ‘irrelevant.’”

For Nicole, listening to students in this way provided essential data that traditional measures had missed. Referring to Mission Vista High School (MVHS), where she served as principal, she recalls, “We were one of the top performing high schools, probably in the area, to be honest with you. If you looked at our data, there was no reason to transform.”

So, as VUSD educators tell it, this Wordle graphic served as the “gut punch” that set the transformation in motion. As Matt recalls, “It was like, ‘Wow, our kids basically think what we’re doing is irrelevant. So how do we make it relevant?’” This question prompted VUSD’s transformation to personalize learning and built the

foundation for what the district strives for today. “We believe in the infinite capacity of all students to do great things,” he says, “and it’s our job to create the environment for students to discover their strengths and their interests, what they’re passionate about.”

Because transforming the student experience to make it relevant to learners, their lives, and their future success is the goal, Nicole adds, students have continued to serve as partners and co-designers of that transformation ever since. For example, she credits student voice as the driver for changes to the curriculum, such as the co-creation of new math and history courses based on learners’ goals and interests.

Structures to Support Learner Engagement.

In some cases, students provide input and feedback as a bloc. For example, Nicole describes structures like Student Senate, in which representatives from each class are nominated by their peers to represent the student body. In her role as principal at MVHS, she recalls, she would meet with these student representatives once a month. Some topics, like graduation planning and student parking, are similar to those addressed by traditional student councils. However, according to Nicole, the Student Senate's mandate is much broader, and its impact is greater:

"There was only me and one of my assistant principals in those meetings as adults, because we wanted to create a safe space. So either Jeremy (Walden) or Amy (Zilk) would come with me to take notes so I could facilitate. We'd talk about personalized learning and transforming the school. They would provide a lot of feedback. Some of it—a lot of it—was about teaching and learning, and we wanted to make sure that that got heard. We would type up notes, so I was able to

share that out with department chairs, our leadership team, or our staff, and say, 'This is what we're hearing.' We would also create posters to disseminate that way. We try to do student voice as much as we can, and those Student Senate meetings were key."

Learners also provide input and feedback through working groups or committees related to school and district initiatives. For example, groups of students are brought together on a regular basis to give input on the district's [Blueprint for Educational Excellence and Innovation](#), VUSD's plan to transform teaching and learning into an engaging, relevant, and personal learning journey. Learners also speak on behalf of the district by serving as ambassadors and participating in student panels when educators and prospective families tour their schools.

Senior Olivia Song, a school ambassador for MVHS, identifies some of the ways she and other students have been engaged as leaders and co-designers. "I get to be involved in the WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) meetings, where all the teachers and departments come

together and talk about ways to improve. I get to participate in that and have student voice within those groups." Drawing upon her own experiences as a freshman, for example, Olivia suggested improvements to the freshman seminar to benefit ninth graders next year and in the future.

Olivia also points to a recent experience participating in one of many student forums related to VUSD's transformation. "Our district's redesigning our mission and vision," she explains. "A big focus of the meeting was how much things have

changed from 10 years ago to now. And how many—and how fast—things will change from now to another 10 years. It was about preparing for the future because everything is happening so fast. We got to talk about what we need in order to adapt to that change, things like having open-mindedness and communication and understanding each other."



Partners in the Personal Learning Transformation.

VUSD's engagement with learners as stakeholders is not limited to committees and activities created specifically for student voice and input, however. In addition to those structures, learners participate alongside adults as part of the district's [inclusive approach to change](#). According to Nicole, educators at VUSD view learners as partners and act accordingly as a matter of course. For example, students participate in community forums like those for the district's Career Superhighway initiative, and advisory bodies, like the Superintendent's Council for Innovative Learning, the group tasked with establishing priorities for teaching and learning during the pandemic, as well as the Council for Equity and Anti-Racism.

According to Amy Zilk, who co-led the Council for Equity and Anti-Racism, student voices were instrumental in identifying priorities and recommendations to the school board around what it would take to make schools more equitable. "What they really wanted to see," she says, "was representation in the staff and representation in their instructional

materials. They wanted their cultures brought into the curriculum to be honored just as much as anyone else's."

Matt recalls that, before COVID, learners, as well as educators and staff, were invited to give presentations to the school board. He describes the effect it had on the meetings: "I introduce them, and they present. I don't present. So it's more authentic. Interestingly," he notes, "when we do this, we have hundreds of people at board meetings. It's an interesting way to get people to the board meetings for the right reasons, and we kind of celebrate."

Nicole also points to surveys as a powerful tool for soliciting a wide range of student voices. For example, she says, "Right now we are focusing on Title IX, so we are asking about equity and access." She also describes a recent survey of high school students that addresses topics like care and connection and well-being during the pandemic. According to Nicole, learners complete the survey during class to encourage broad participation and inclusion of many voices. "We're taking time in class for students to do them so that the results can drive our decisions."

What is also striking about VUSD's approach to change is the degree to which adult practices and student experiences mirror one another. A prevailing mindset at VUSD is that the term "learner" applies equally to adults and students. Learner engagement, therefore, includes teachers, leaders, and staff, as well as students, because they are partners and co-designers of the district transformation, learning together as they go.

Learn More

About school leaders and educators as change agents >>



Partnering with Families for Learner Success and Wellbeing

Vista Unified School District (VUSD) engages with families as partners and fellow stakeholders in the success of all learners. Through their Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Network, VUSD is building authentic relationships with students' families and the community—and they are seeing the impact it is making in meeting the needs of all students.

VUSD's "Why" for Partnering with Families.

According to Jacqueline "Kiki" Bispo, the family and community engagement lead at VUSD, the district firmly believes that meaningful partnerships and authentic family engagement are critical factors for student success. To promote this shared responsibility for the success of all children, VUSD formed the FACE Network, with Kiki, a district science teacher, as its founder. The FACE network focuses on building and strengthening relationships with families and making sure "families don't just feel, but truly are, partners with the school in raising and educating their children," says Kiki.

Oftentimes, Kiki observes, schools and families exist in relatively separate silos,

except for the few minutes each day when parents drop students off at school or on specific occasions like conferences that are set aside for speaking to teachers. As Kiki explains it, "The children wake up at home with family, and they enter this second world with school. And when school is over, they enter their third world in the community and then they go back home. So they've lived in three different worlds throughout the day." The FACE Network goal is to break down those silos.

The network is a team of 18 district employees—many of them native speakers of Spanish—who serve as school site liaisons. The role of the liaison is to build relationships with parents and caregivers by serving specific needs of families, providing appropriate resources, breaking down barriers to engagement, strengthening school-home communication, advocating for families, and promoting the goals and efforts of the schools—all in the name of student health and happiness.

"What's always made us successful," says Kiki, "is true love and care and, simply, relationships above all. It's the fact that we have very positive, trusting relationships with families and staff." As a network, the





team collaborates to serve all families, including those whose children are not yet enrolled in school. As Superintendent Matt Doyle points out, at VUSD early education is a priority lever for closing achievement gaps. “The purpose of our P-3 (prenatal to third grade) continuum,” he says, “is to close the achievement gap before it opens.” Network outreach therefore involves early education providers, as well as healthcare and county service organizations, to create initial connections with families throughout the district, including an annual early education fair.

The FACE Network’s Origins.

The FACE Network’s origin story begins in 2008. At the time, VUSD held a series of community forums to help rebrand their mission statement and vision values, and they sought the input of the community. The district’s questions for the community were simple: *What do you need? What do you want?* And, according to Kiki, the resounding answer was a plea for a better relationship with the school district. “You know, we had all taken a hit during the 2008 economic crisis. And so schools lost

arts and some really critical services. And the community said, ‘We don’t feel like we’re partners with you anymore. We don’t feel supported and loved, not necessarily because you don’t support and love us, but you may not have the resources to show us.’ And so they said, ‘We want a better relationship with you.’” VUSD listened to their community, and the FACE Network was born.

Culture, Identity, and Mindsets for Family Partnerships.

One key task for the FACE Network’s first year was to determine the culture and identity for the network. Inspired by the concept of the [Four Agreements](#) from author Don Miguel Ruiz’s work, the group of eleven—Kiki and ten community liaisons—adopted these norms for their meetings:

1. Be impeccable with your word.
2. Don’t take anything personally.
3. Don’t make assumptions.
4. Always do your best.

Since then, an additional mindset that has set the tone for the work together is one of servant leadership, says Matt. An important concept for all of VUSD, servant leadership means leading through service, supporting the growth and well-being of people and their communities.

According to Kiki, providing meaningful and diverse engagement opportunities sometimes includes holding meetings at 8:00 a.m. or at 6:30 p.m. “We hold home visits in the middle of the day and sometimes later in the evening,” she explains. “Often, we repeat activities to provide them at different times and days of the week, as well as in different locations around the school district.”

Ways the FACE Network Engages Families.

In the 2018-2019 school year, before COVID, the FACE Network helped coordinate over 2,100 events, meetings, and workshops, with 46,742 attendees. In response to the kind of support and connection the VUSD community had requested, the network organized 130 different kinds of events large and small throughout the year. For example, there were small-scale events at individual schools, such as “Coffee with the Principal” sessions, family and parent book clubs, and school tours. On a larger scale, the network coordinated weekly food distribution, technology workshops, and language classes to promote dual-literacy and facilitate communication. The FACE Network also supported efforts to engage and partner with the broader community via college field trips and work with the University of California San Diego’s #USvsHate project. This activity

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SOLO POR AUTO
SIN CONTACTO PERSONAL:
DISTRIBUCIÓN DE
ALIMENTOS**

**SÁBADO, 12 DE JUNIO
DE LAS 9-10:30 AM
PALOMAR COLLEGE
(COMET CIRCLE, SAN MARCOS)**

**PRÓXIMAS DISTRIBUCIONES:
10 DE JULIO**

**PRODUCTOS
FRESCOS,
CARNES Y NO
PERECEDEROS**

CCE PALOMAR COLLEGE
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AFT LOCAL #4522

UNION COUNTY
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Virtual Zoom

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MIDDLE SCHOOL
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Transitioning from Elementary to Middle school

**WEDNESDAY
MAY 26, 2021**

**5:30 - 6:30 ENGLISH
6:30 - 7:30 SPANISH**

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evolved into weekly "Community Unity Conversations" with parents and staff to build dialogue and strengthen school and community climates. Longer-term projects also included parent institutes and a "Family Habits of Mind" workshop series to support learner success.

How FACE Adapted during the Pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kiki explains, family and community engagement looked very different. As soon as schools closed in March 2020, Kiki and the community liaisons realized they would have to find new ways to provide support and connection and to make sure families had the resources they needed. The first step was getting food to families who needed it, she says. The network partnered with school social workers and the San Diego Food Bank to pick up school meals and consolidate them so families had a central point for food distribution and places to access critical home resources like wipes, diapers, cleaning supplies, and toilet paper.

Once the basics were taken care of, Kiki recalls, families could begin to move their attention back to their children's

Listen to the Podcast



Listen for more on how Vista Unified partners with parents and families to support students.

education. In addition to organizing dry erase boards, markers, and other school supplies at centralized distribution centers, the network began making home visits (masked and gloved) to deliver technology resources and teach families how to access the apps and programs that students would now be expected to use. Kiki explains that FACE during COVID looked like "a ton of one-on-one phone calls. Just a ton. Our team went from coordinating in-person events to being on the phone for an hour to two hours. 'Okay, this is how you navigate this online world.'"

In tandem with the technology tutorials, educators offered coaching for parents on how to effectively support and enhance their children's online learning by creating quiet environments where their children could access their online platforms. It was a challenge, Kiki observes, to support

families in figuring out “how to switch their living space to a learning space,” such as remembering to remain off camera (and keep their vacuum cleaners off) while their children are learning in the next room. “It was about trying to teach people balance while honoring the spaces they were in and the overarching pandemic space we were all in—just teaching them how to survive.”

As Kiki recalls, that emotional dimension—surviving amidst the pandemic—became the heart of the FACE Network’s partnership with families. Wearing masks, Zooming instead of face-to-face conversations, social isolation, and the increasingly harrowing news reports took a toll on everyone, she recalls. Kiki and her colleagues had to remain positive while “most of us don’t feel positive in a lot of ways.” A few months into the pandemic, some of the district leaders texted the network about the daunting tasks ahead of them. Kiki’s response was, “This is what we trained for. Literally, what we teach our students to do is to be able to adapt to the unexpected. We just didn’t actually think we were going to have to adapt to the unexpected. This is our ultimate test.”

As schools began to settle into the “new normal” of online learning during the pandemic, Kiki set up the [Vista Institute for Parents](#) (VIP) website. A collaborative effort to engage and empower families as partners in education, VIP bolsters family and community engagement by maintaining a calendar of all school events (live and virtual), facilitating access to academic supports, prioritizing care and connection, building technology literacy, and helping families effectively navigate the education system.

The FACE Network’s VIP site also includes an ever-expanding collection of mini videos covering a wide variety of subjects. The videos are very short—just a minute or two long—and give clear, easy-to-follow demonstrations on everything from using a specific app, to finding a login code, to accessing final grades. Spanish language videos increase accessibility, and the video scripts are also posted, so viewers can read the directions as an alternative to watching the video.

COVID might have been the ultimate example of how the bridge between

home and school has to get tighter. “In the pandemic’s case it left us no choice,” says Kiki. “The FACE Network luckily was already in place to provide the structure necessary for families to work through this challenge.” Now that school is back in session face-to-face, the network continues to do its job, helping families through the years of school one student at a time.





External Partners

Learning from the Wider World

At Vista Unified School District (VUSD), “relevance” has been the rallying cry since the start of the transformation to personalize student learning for lifelong success. According to Superintendent Matt Doyle, making learning relevant has necessitated changes in both practice and mindset. Educators, he argues, need to “see learning as a lifelong, continuous, dynamic process that directly aligns with the strengths of the learner and is relevant to the changing world around them.” To prepare young people to thrive in a time of accelerating change, VUSD works to break down the barriers between schools and the wider world, starting with the adults in the system. Modeling the kind of curiosity and growth mindsets they hope to instill in their students, VUSD educators seek out and build relationships with experts and leaders in education, equity, transformational change, and business and industry.

Experts and Thought Partners.


To support them on their learning transformation journey, the district has partnered with experts in personalized learning (PL) and teacher professional learning, such as Allison Zmuda, Bena Kallick, and Heidi Hayes Jacobs. For over five years, Matt reports, consultants like these have supported district schools to define PL for themselves and redesign teaching and learning accordingly.

Nicole Allard, executive director of educational excellence and innovation, points to the importance of partnerships with higher education. In particular, she describes the nine-year relationship between VUSD and the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). For example, Alan Daly, a professor and director in UCSD’s department of education studies and author of [*Social Network Theory and Educational Change*](#), provides professional learning and coaching to district principals on building social capital and a culture of trust where innovation can flourish.

“The best way to improve the learning environment for students is to look beyond education... Most of my professional reading and growth happens outside of the school environment—it is a way to guard against blind spots in my own thinking and work.”

— Matt Doyle, Superintendent,
Vista Unified School District,
in [“Creativity is the Currency of Learning”](#)





“I think it’s really easy in a district or a school to become siloed in your work, to just be stuck within it when you make decisions. You can’t transform without looking out. And so I think the biggest gift that any partnership gave us, whether it was San Diego Workforce Partnership or colleges and universities or NGLC, was the gift of a broader lens of what is happening in the world, in the nation, what’s happening with our workforce, what’s happening with the world that our students will enter.”

— Nicole Allard, Executive Director of Educational Excellence and Innovation, Vista Unified School District

Amanda Datnow, also a professor in UCSD’s department of education studies and associate dean in the division of social sciences, currently co-chairs the Superintendent’s Council for Innovative Learning with Nicole. Especially as VUSD was responding to the teaching and learning challenges during the pandemic, district leaders relied on the global perspective of experts like Amanda. “She would give a presentation of what’s happening in Switzerland and the Netherlands or here’s what’s happening in China,” Nicole recalls. “So I think we’re challenged by conversations that we have with her to look throughout the world to see what’s happening with transformation or innovative practices.”

Similar to Nicole’s partnership with Amanda, Amy Zilk, the principal of Roosevelt Middle School, co-chairs the Superintendent’s Council for Equity and Anti-Racism with Francesca Lopez, a professor of education at Penn State. “At each council meeting, we learn and grow together on different topics,” Amy explains. “We looked at district policies and talked about biases. For example, I would present our data around discipline, and Dr. Lopez brought in that research lens and a national perspective.”

National and International Organizations.

In addition to thought partners from higher education, Matt and Nicole were inspired to transform education by what they were hearing from organizations across the world. Reports from the [World Economic Forum](#), the [National Network of Business and Industry Associations](#), and the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) about the changing employment landscape prompted district educators to rethink their definitions of student success. Across the board, these organizations were spotlighting competencies like communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and cognitive flexibility.

According to Nicole, the partnerships they formed with organizations like the OECD spurred them “to look beyond our data” and consider whether or not learners were prepared based on “what the world or the nation or area was expecting of our students when they entered the workforce.” When Nicole looked beyond narrow definitions of success, like test scores, she realized, “You can do traditional school really well as a student and not feel prepared for the world.”

For Matt, the purpose of education became “creating the conditions for learners to discover their strengths and interests, and then, through the active support of teachers, develop these into talents that have direct application to the contemporary world of work.” To put these new mindsets into practice, VUSD has incorporated “talent development” into their mandate to personalize learning, “reimagin[ing] our school system as a superhighway that is a network of career development pathways.”

Building a Career Superhighway.

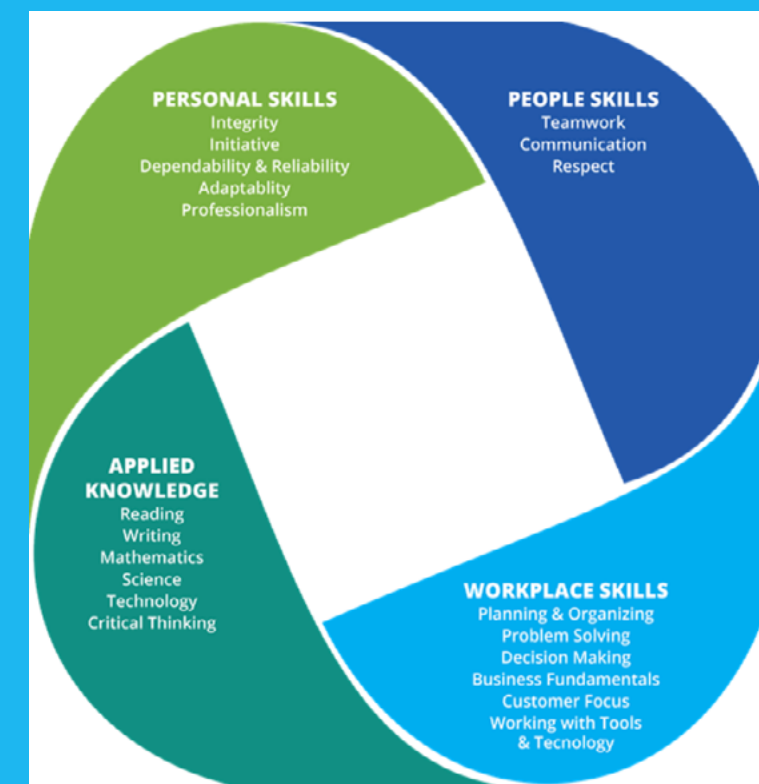
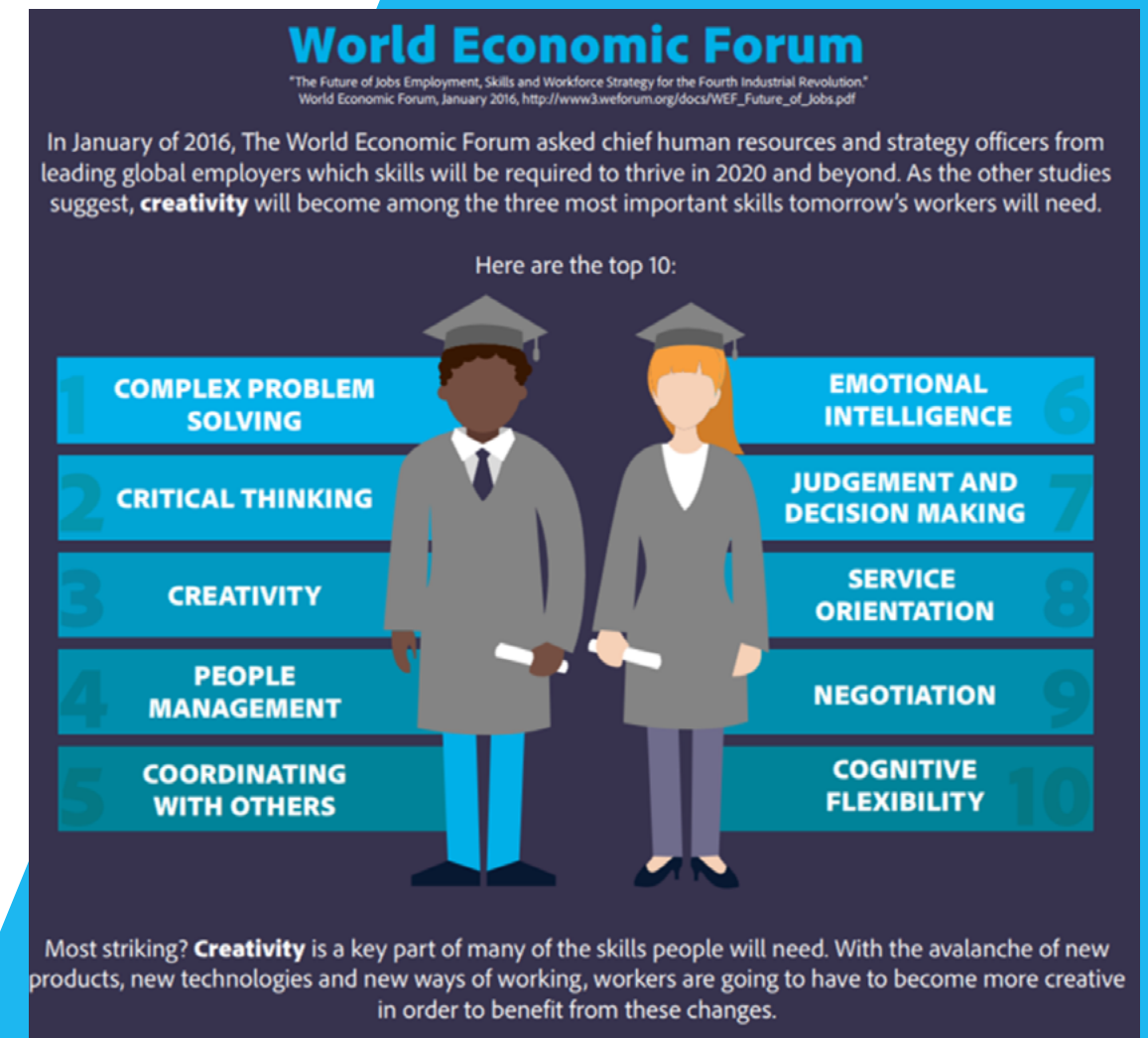
To realize this vision of education as a personalized pathway for lifelong learning and success in the workplace, the International Center for Educational Research and Practice (iCERP), an organization led by Matt and housed at VUSD, has been building what they call a Career Superhighway that spans all subjects and grade levels. According to Matt, the superhighway is “a metaphor for creating an uninterrupted career development pathway for students to discover their strengths and interests and transform these into talent capital

that aligns to the demands of the global marketplace.”

Matt explains, “As with any complex project, the design process is intended to be inclusive of a variety of stakeholders so that the vision and design of the project represents the aspirations and interests of the people who will operationalize them: students, teachers, community leaders, and business leaders.”

Building a talent pipeline is a community-wide endeavor, and VUSD serves as a partner by engaging with San Diego Workforce Partnership, of which Matt is a member, the Vista Chamber of Commerce, local businesses like Solatube International, and national businesses with a local presence, such as Walmart Labs and Microsoft.

When she was principal of Mission Vista High School (MVHS), Nicole co-led this work with Eric Chagala, the principal at Vista Innovation & Design Academy (VIDA). According to Nicole, school and district leaders met monthly with San Diego Workforce Partnership to track the region’s career trends and available internships in



This graphic presents highlights of what VUSD learned about preparing students for the future of work by engaging with experts and stakeholders from business and industry.

Talent Cities®

Reshaping our community by developing ready talent



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Infographic by Robert Crowell

A cohesive integrated approach to workforce development involving Vista Unified, The Vista Chamber, San Diego Workforce Partnership, local businesses, and the City of Vista

key industry sectors, as well as to explore ways to communicate about the future of work to learners and their families. As a moderator of empathy panels with members of the business community, she recalls listening deeply as industry leaders described what skills, mindsets, and capabilities a VUSD graduate really needs.

Talent Cities.

Another way the district engages stakeholders from business and industry is through [Talent Cities](#), a partnership between VUSD, New Learning Ventures, the Vista Chamber of Commerce, and local businesses. The goal is to expand young people's vision of themselves in the world of work. In contrast with career pathway programs geared toward high school students, Talent Cities brings middle school learners into the workplace, where they can speak to employers and employees and see for themselves what it takes to be successful. In addition, students engage in self-exploration activities and assessments, conduct research into priority industry sectors, and develop the background knowledge to make the most of their field experiences. As partners and stakeholders, local businesses can help

shape what young people are learning and experiencing, as well as gather valuable analytics about their future talent pool.

Impacts of COVID.

Nicole acknowledges that the pandemic has paused or curtailed some partnership-based activities, like internships and field experiences for learners and in-person learning excursions for adults. However, partnerships with external stakeholders remains a priority, and district leaders are exploring ways to adapt, such as by using technology.

For example, senior Olivia Song, who is pursuing a biomedical pathway at MVHS, describes ways her school is connecting her with experts via technology. "We get to learn about different careers from professionals by having webinars and presentations from them. We've done [virtual] ones with an audiologist and a genetic counselor. It's nice to get that insight into medicine, which has helped me solidify my path."

Another pivot, Nicole reports, relates to how the district is continuing its long tradition of hosting learning excursions,

such as those NGLC has organized since 2014 for educators in their national network to visit district schools. Because traveling safely is a challenge, VUSD and NGLC, with funding from the [Barr Foundation](#), are co-creating Virtual Learning Excursions made up of multimedia content, like stories and podcasts, along with synchronous, web-based [panels](#) and presentations with members of the VUSD learning community.

“Those visits,” says Nicole, “move our work forward. Telling our story over and over strengthens our brand identity and our work. And it also validates. I didn’t realize the gift it would give to teachers, how validated and supported they felt by those learning excursions.”

Like the complex task of transforming learning, building and maintaining social and professional networks with external stakeholders takes effort. However, to VUSD educators, this work is essential if the goal is to make learning relevant to learners and their lives. As Nicole observes, “Sometimes transformation can be very emotional and very personal, and [with thought partners] we are able to have this very objective person to provide an alternative viewpoint, to push back lovingly on some of our ideas or the ways we’ve always done it, address any fears that we have, and by always challenging us to think bigger.”





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