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Leveraging a Flexible Contract to Do Right by Learners and Learning Facilitators

Lindsay, CA

In recent years, Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) has made its name as home to a highly differentiated, student-centered school district. Located just southeast of Fresno, California, LUSD serves approximately 4,000 students, 95% of whom are Latino, 34% of whom are English Language Learners, and the majority of whom qualify for free and reduced-price meals.¹ LUSD's increased graduation rates and academic achievement² demonstrate what is possible when strong working relationships and earned organizational trust translate to flexible contracts that enable a vision of improved, responsive teaching and learning.

Lindsay's Challenge and a New Path Forward

In the early 2000s, LUSD felt the consequences of an education system ill-fitted to serve its students' needs: high dropout rates, classes and materials inaccessible to English Language Learner students, and low academic performance.³ As longtime Superintendent Thomas Rooney stated, "We have sent forth a lot of kids and young adults into the world who are not ready to be effective contributors to society."⁴ This problem, according to Rooney, had plagued the district "for decades."⁵

In 2007, Superintendent Rooney launched a district-wide strategic redesign⁶ focused on empowering LUSD students as agents driving their own learning.⁷ Rooney sought to "completely dismantl[e] the traditional time-based structures and build . . . a learner-centered system of empowerment," activating the broader community to strengthen high school retention and graduation, support English Language Learners, and boost overall academic performance.⁸

Fortunately, Rooney and his team launched the redesign with a number of helpful conditions in place. Rooney was a trusted, longstanding district leader; at the time of the redesign, he had already worked for LUSD as the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, an elementary school Principal and Assistant Principal, and a teacher. As Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Brian Griffin explained, "[W]e've had continuity in executive leadership. Our super[intendent] has been with us for 10-plus years . . . I've been on the cabinet for the last 10 years. And we've had . . . continuity of site-level leadership." This leadership stability provided Lindsay with a strong foundation to incubate innovation.

Lindsay's Teacher Contract

The teacher contract between LUSD and the Lindsay Teachers Association (LTA), including the most recent 2022-25 contract (the CBA), has helped create and sustain the conditions needed for long-term implementation of the redesign. The CBA allows for flexibility and is sometimes silent on issues commonly spelled out in many teacher contracts. For example, where some contracts limit district-union negotiations to a restricted collective bargaining period, the CBA leaves space and time for ongoing collaboration and problem-solving. As another example, Article 12.3.4 of the CBA, which addresses additional pay for teachers who complete duties outside their expected responsibilities, creates an opportunity for district-union discussions as needs arise. And, Article 19.7 establishes a district-union committee to define standards for student achievement, but does so broadly, leaving room for ground-level autonomy: “When establishing standards for student achievement, the District shall seek input from a committee made up of Bargaining Unit Members and administrators.”

Driven by a Shared, Student-Centered Vision

Commenting on the factors within LUSD that make a flexible teacher contract tenable, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources Brian Griffin noted that LUSD “has high levels of integrity [as guardrails], core values that are outlined in the strategic design, and clear guiding principles about what we believe about education.”

According to Griffin, the redesign's systems and policies, while important, are not the crux of Lindsay's success. Rather, it is the cultivation of a learner-centered culture that reshaped the district. He said, “We've been hiring people that share our core values. . . . [I]t is a unique thing in Lindsay—95% of the time, it is really about the Learner and what is in the best interest of Learners and learning. There may be some philosophical nuance, but everyone can come together around something being in the best interest of the kids.” Griffin sees this universal philosophy as one of several factors enabling such flexibility within the district's CBA.

“We know as a district . . . we need to allow ourselves flexibility and we also know that [contract] language will restrict that flexibility. . . . We balance that flexibility with high levels of integrity. We [the district] invest a tremendous amount [] in professional learning. Everyone is consistently improving, and everyone knows we're investing in human capital, not only by paying well, but also through a tremendous amount of investment in our people.”

- **Brian Griffin, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources at LUSD**

Complementing a flexible contract is LUSD's investment in their teachers—what LUSD calls “Learning Facilitators.” Griffin reflected, “We [LUSD] are rural. . . . People don't typically relocate to this area. So within our pool of the Central Valley, we knew we needed to separate ourselves. . . . The work we were asking people to do to put Learners at the center—it's difficult [because] it's challenging the status quo. Anytime you

challenge or transform, it requires more work.” As such, LUSD offers competitive salaries, with additional pay for certain extra-duty work. “[W]e believe the teacher is the single most important factor in learning. We have extremely high regard for their voice and create conditions for them to be successful,” Griffin stated.

LUSD’s long line of committed leaders, attention to and investment in its teaching workforce, and definition and affirmation of its Learner-centered values have established a landscape in which its flexible CBA can enable strong teaching and learning to flourish. While the Strategic Design brought LUSD staff new responsibilities, few of its hallmark policies are codified in the CBA. In fact, LUSD and LTA elected to keep the CBA silent on many of the advancements made through the redesign. Griffin explained that his team prefers “to handle [as much as possible] at the local level.”

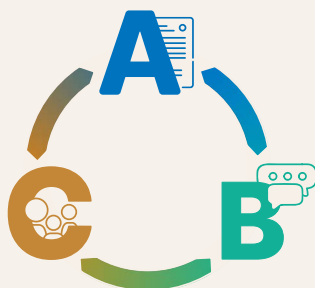
The ABCs of CBAs in Action

CPRL and E4E’s research “Designing Contracts for the Modern Classroom: The ABCs of CBAs” explores what is possible when teachers contracts—both what they contain and how they are built—are aligned to the modern classroom such that they are motivated by a shared, student-focused purpose; leverage flexible, transparent design; and enable authentic stakeholder participation.

The LUSD approach, in many respects, embodies the design principles of the ABCs of CBAs. Its CBA is built to allow for flexibility and local autonomy, with its community guided by a strong, principled, district-wide culture that prioritizes the best interests of students. The bargaining process in LUSD also benefits from this value alignment, not to mention regular communication between district and union, as well as empathy and respect for its teachers and the profession more broadly.

To read more about the ABCs of CBAs, [click here](#).

What are the ABCs of CBAs?



Agreements that are backed by research, keep students at the center, and promote shared decision-making and problem-solving.

Bargaining, both formal and informal, that encourages transparency, collaboration around shared interests, joint problem-solving, and building stronger relationships among people working together to educate students.

A **Collective** that is inclusive, supported, and strategically engaged through a diversity of opportunities for participation in the building, implementation, and improvement of teacher contracts for the modern classroom.

LUSD Results

Since the implementation of the district's Strategic Design framework in 2007, high school graduation rates rose from 67% to over 90% in 2019-20;¹⁰ the number of LUSD Learners attending four-year college increased from 21% to 56% in 2017-18;¹¹ and grades two through 11 Learners' proficiency rates in English Language Arts, math, and science have nearly reached the statewide average.¹²

Looking Ahead

Lindsay's unique approach—reliance on a Strategic Design rather than a series of prescriptive, legally enforceable, contract provisions—has resulted in Learning Facilitators working with LUSD as partners. With a CBA providing flexibility around issues like class size and teaching hours, LUSD and LTA have space to maneuver, all the while guided by a strong sense of integrity and responsibility towards its students and communities. Though LUSD still sees room to grow, especially in the wake of COVID-19, school leaders feel its student outcome improvements are “indicators that students see school as a place for opportunity, support, and hope.”⁹ And as LUSD and LTA prepare to tackle new challenges, LUSD and LTA together provide a positive example of how a flexible contract, complemented by a strong union-district partnership and shared core values, can bring an ambitious learner-centered vision to life.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cds=54719930000000>; <https://www.ppic.org/blog/lessons-in-innovation-from-lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 2 Mary Severance & Niu Gao, “Lessons in Innovation from Lindsay Unified School District,” PPIC (blog), Public Policy Institute of California, July 6, 2022, <https://www.ppic.org/blog/lessons-in-innovation-from-lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Quattrocchi, “How Lindsay Unified Redesigned Itself from the Ground Up,” <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2014-06-17-how-lindsay-unified-redesigned-itself-from-the-ground-up>.
- 5 Severance & Gao, “Lessons in Innovation from Lindsay Unified School District,” <https://www.ppic.org/blog/lessons-in-innovation-from-lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 6 Lindsay Unified School District Strategic Design: https://drive.google.com/file/d/13bvPv8i5jokusKKyGHw9BakJCW_5rBsC/view.
- 7 Severance & Gao, “Lessons in Innovation from Lindsay Unified School District,” <https://www.ppic.org/blog/lessons-in-innovation-from-lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 8 Ibid; “Lindsay Unified School District: Lindsay, CA,” <https://education-reimagined.org/map/lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 9 Quattrocchi, “How Lindsay Unified Redesigned Itself from the Ground Up,” <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2014-06-17-how-lindsay-unified-redesigned-itself-from-the-ground-up>.
- 10 Severance & Gao, “Lessons in Innovation from Lindsay Unified School District,” <https://www.ppic.org/blog/lessons-in-innovation-from-lindsay-unified-school-district/>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.