

The 2012 Broad Prize

About the Finalist

Corona-Norco Unified School District California

DISTRICT PROFILE

Superintendent

Kent Bechler served as superintendent of Corona-Norco Unified School District from July 2007 to June 2012. Prior to joining Corona-Norco, Bechler was superintendent of Walnut Valley Unified School District and Duarte Unified School District, both in California.

Michael Lin was appointed superintendent of Corona-Norco in June 2012. Previously, Lin was deputy superintendent and joined the district in July 2008 as the assistant superintendent of human resources.

Governance

Five-member school board, elected at large to serve staggered four-year terms.

Teachers Union

Corona-Norco Teachers Association



\$383.2 million

Annual Budget



\$6,994

Per Pupil Expenditures



81

Rank Among U.S. School Districts



53,424

Number of Students



2,353

Number of Teachers



49

Number of Schools



14%

Students Designated as English Language Learners



43%

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch



50.9%
Hispanic

10.4%
Asian/
Pacific
Islander

6.2%
African-
American

2.0%
Other

30.5%
White

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A greater percentage of Hispanic and African-American students are reaching advanced academic levels in Corona-Norco than in other urban districts in California.

In 2011, the percentage of Corona-Norco's Hispanic elementary students performing at the highest achievement level (Advanced) in reading, math and science ranked in the top 30 percent statewide compared to other Hispanic students.

In 2011, the percentage of Corona-Norco's African-American students in all applicable school levels (elementary and middle school) performing at the highest achievement level (Advanced) in reading and math ranked in the top 10 percent compared with African-American students statewide and in the top 20 percent in science.

A greater percentage of Corona-Norco students are participating in college readiness exams—and their scores are improving—more than other urban districts nationally.

Between 2008 and 2011, Corona-Norco participation rates and average scores on SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams simultaneously increased for students overall and specifically for Hispanic and African-American students. For example, during this period:

- SAT participation by Hispanic students increased 11 percentage points, while average scores increased 14 points for Hispanic students.
- ACT participation by African-American students increased 20 percentage points, while average scores increased 2 points for African-American students.
- Advanced Placement participation by Hispanic students increased 7 percentage points, while passing rates increased 5 percentage points for Hispanic students.

Corona-Norco is doing a better job of closing achievement gaps than other urban districts in California.

In recent years, Corona-Norco narrowed achievement gaps between African-American and white students in reading and science at all school levels and in math at the high school level. As a result, in 2011, Corona-Norco's African-American achievement gaps were among the smallest in the state in reading, math and science at all school levels (elementary, middle, high school). In recent years, Corona-Norco also narrowed achievement gaps between Hispanic students and the state's white students in math and science at all school levels and in elementary and high school reading.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICES RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The district helps students of all backgrounds learn by emphasizing student engagement and critical thinking skills, bolstered by a robust system for professional development.

District leaders have made a concerted effort to improve students' critical thinking skills, encouraging teachers to offer probing questions and hands-on learning opportunities in place of lectures and rote memorization. Corona-Norco's extensive professional development program has been tailored to help teachers achieve these goals.

This focus on "deep learning" began after a review of achievement data showed that students needed to boost advanced skills such as comprehension, analysis, synthesis and problem-solving. After comprehensively reviewing the latest national research, the district identified best practices in academic engagement, critical thinking and high-yield strategies. It then made these techniques a focus of Corona-Norco's professional development offerings.

In classrooms across the district hangs a poster illustrating these integrated teaching processes, graphically reminding teachers to focus on the most effective strategies. Teachers and administrators report that as a result of the district's efforts, Corona-Norco students have become more active learners, wrestling with problems that require deep thinking and analysis.

The district also sets a benchmark for every teacher in Corona-Norco to complete 30 hours of professional development each year. Teachers don't just attend a training session and then move on. They are required to outline which training strategies they intend to implement in their classrooms. Coaches then track their implementation activities in coaching logs and provide follow-up training. Administrators often visit classrooms to see if new concepts are being properly implemented.

While the district has a comprehensive, district-wide professional development regimen, it also allows individual schools to develop additional training activities tailored to their own particular needs. For example, a school with many English language learners might concentrate on helping teachers find ways to improve their students' writing skills. Individual teachers who want to focus on a particular skill might receive help from a coach, and teams of teachers work together within schools to refine their skills during weekly "professional learning community" meetings.

The district also brings in local and national experts to deliver training, particularly on its priority initiatives, such as those aimed at improving writing skills, implementing professional learning communities, and raising the level of student engagement.

The district empowers teachers to meet student needs by enabling "teachers on special assignment" to coach others and drive professional development.

Corona-Norco makes extensive—and effective—use of district-based coaches known as teachers on special assignment (TOSA). What sets them apart is the long-term nature of their assignments, which sometimes stretch to 10 years. This allows these instructional specialists/experts to become intimately familiar with the needs of the schools they serve.

Each TOSA works with about four schools. If one of their schools has a need in a particular subject—algebra, for example—the TOSA assigned to that school will call upon a fellow TOSA with strength in that subject to help out.

TOSAs model teaching strategies in the classroom, help with lesson plans, observe teachers in action and provide feedback. They are intimately involved in creating, facilitating and evaluating the district's extensive professional development offerings.

Key to the success of the TOSAs is their close collaboration. They meet regularly to brainstorm and share their experiences, which allows them to identify any intra-school issues that might best be handled through district-wide professional development. For example, the district's strong focus on improving rigor and increasing students' critical thinking skills was the result of such discussions.

The district has created a collaborative, relationship-centered culture where leaders go out of their way to make sure teachers and other staff play a meaningful role in decision-making.

One of the special characteristics of CNUSD is its strong emphasis on relationships. Even though the district is large, it has a small-town feel. The district primarily draws its staff from California universities and school districts, but to be hired in Corona-Norco, a teacher or administrator has to be a good fit—that is, have a student-centered philosophy of teaching

and learning; take a collaborative approach to decision making; work well on teams; and be willing to implement the district's instructional approaches, which stress active learning and critical-thinking skills.

When it comes to major decisions such as selecting a new principal, all teachers in a building are invited to provide input, while teacher representatives participate in the interview process. They are given an opportunity to explain their preferences to the superintendent, who gives great weight to their input. Guided by district data, teachers collectively determine the pacing of instruction; topics for professional development; parent-engagement strategies; and the contents of district improvement plans.

Because of its commitment to a collaborative, team-based culture, Corona-Norco has set aside an hour a week for teachers to brainstorm about teaching strategies. The teachers meet by grade level, poring over data, discussing challenges, and sharing effective techniques. To make these weekly sessions possible, Corona-Norco changed school hours and the entire district transportation schedule.

The district has a cohesive, comprehensive, and user-friendly system for assessing and reporting student performance and uses results to make instructional improvements.

CNUSD administers a broad array of assessments to measure student achievement, some required by the state, others developed by the district. They cover math, language arts, writing, history and science.

The district's teachers have designed their own benchmark assessments aligned to the state test to monitor student progress over time. Elementary and intermediate school teachers administer these assessments once per trimester, and high school teachers administer them once per quarter. Many teachers also test students to see how well they have mastered concepts taught within the last week.

The district provides color-coded data reports to help teachers and administrators track progress. At the district level, the data is used to identify strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum and determine whether educational targets are being met. Meanwhile, teachers use the information gleaned from these tests to hone their instructional strategies and focus on students who need extra help. They discuss the results at their weekly professional learning community meetings and immediately provide targeted re-teaching after results are reviewed.

The district has enlisted parents as meaningful partners in its efforts to promote student achievement, college readiness and equal opportunity.

District officials say the active engagement of parents has helped boost the performance of Corona-Norco's African-American students, whose state assessment scores have risen rapidly. A group known as the Corona Parent Advisory Group (CPAG) has worked closely with school and district officials to identify underachieving students and inspire them to fulfill their full potential.

The group's efforts were bolstered by a close review of student grades and assessment data, which they analyzed with assistance from school personnel. To help motivate students, CPAG organized peer-to-peer tutoring sessions, field trips to area universities and awards ceremonies to recognize students who have improved their academic performance. It has also invited guest speakers to give inspirational talks.

District leaders have worked to create a district-wide culture that is student-centered and focused on providing equal opportunities to learn.

Corona-Norco prides itself on having a "kids-first" culture, and nothing underlines this more vividly than the willingness of teachers to accept a 4.97 percent pay cut in order to keep the budget ax away from the district's classrooms. The cuts were approved by a resounding 85-percent majority. The vote had become necessary as a result of California's acute budget problems, which appeared likely to result in teacher layoffs and crowded classrooms.

District employees say that Corona-Norco's leaders would not have been able to win support for the pay cuts if they hadn't first worked hard to establish a culture of collaboration and trust in the district. Because they had done so, they had credibility when they promised to use the resulting savings to protect programs that benefit students. And they delivered on their pledge to keep cuts away from the classroom, cutting central office staff and the transportation budget instead. ■



The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation
10900 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90024
T 310.954.5050
F 310.954.5051
broadprize@broadfoundation.org
www.broadprize.org