

For those who want to understand the vision and the journey toward a whole child education system, this book offers both a comprehensive picture and a vivid roadmap. A must-read for those who want to understand how educational change can connect young people to their community and their futures.

Linda Darling-Hammond

Founding President and Chief Knowledge Officer, Learning Policy Institute
Professor Emeritus, Stanford University
Stanford, California

Strengthening public education is happening now. The work of AUHSD to create safe and welcoming, relevant and engaging schools where people—kids, educators, community—come first is yielding results. Barnett Berry, Mike Matsuda, and Michael Fullan help us see the what and why, along with how we can help it happen in many more communities.

Randi Weingarten

President, American Federation of Teachers
Washington DC

Berry, Matsuda, and Fullan illuminate what's possible when students, teachers, families, and communities work together around shared values and bold vision. Their focus on real-world learning, student voice, teacher leadership, and systemic collaboration offers inspiration and direction for every district.

Rebecca Pringle

President, National Education Association
Washington, D.C.

The *Future of Public Education* is breakthrough work. Berry, Matsuda, and Fullan show us how Anaheim Union High School District is moving beyond incremental reform to genuine system transformation—placing students and teachers at the center, building community partnerships, and redefining success for the future.

David R. Schuler

Executive Director, AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Alexandria, Virginia

Anaheim Union High School District has built partnerships rooted in trust with the community, that ensures high standards in teaching and learning are available to all students. This book examines AUHSD's strategy to improve student outcomes over time. For educators and policy makers seeking to bring similar changes, this book is an invaluable resource.

Pedro Noguera

Dean, Rossier School of Education
Los Angeles, California

The Future of Public Education offers a framework for leaders working to align vision, practice, and purpose in public education. It focuses on real-world implementation—how to create space for innovation, support teacher leadership, and engage students in meaningful learning. This book is a guide for those who shifting from fragmented efforts to coherent, student-centered systems.

Jill Gildea

Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Early Colleges
Fort Collins, Colorado

Berry, Matsuda, and Fullan share a compelling case study of a district taking risks and making progress that has implications for all our collective efforts. While there are many paths to success, common themes scream for our attention and connection to our own work.

Peter Dillon

Superintendent, Berkshire Hills Regional School District
Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Readable, rigorous, and refreshingly practical, this book speaks to everyone who cares about the future of public education. It reminds us that real transformation happens only when we learn from one another, and when teachers and students are engaged as co-pilots, shaping the journey ahead.

Pasi Sahlberg

Author of *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World learn
from Educational Change in Finland*
Albert Park, Victoria, Australia

As the leader of a business-lead collaborative, working to close the talent gap in America, Anaheim Union High School and Michael Matsuda are models of the future. This book is a must read for both educators and business leaders.

Douglas A. Wilson

Chair and CEO, The National Talent Collaborative
Laguna Beach, California

This account of Anaheim Union High School District's transformational journey is inspiring and groundbreaking. This is a system-changing guidebook for those committed to redefining and advancing successful learning in an AI world for all young people, educators, and partners in public education.

Anthony Mackay

Board Co-chair, National Center on Education & the Economy
East Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
Washington DC

Berry, Matsuda, and Fullan remind us that the future of public education depends on cultivating students' deepest capacities for meaning-making, purpose, and contribution. Drawing on the science of learning and development, including new science on the importance of adolescents' opportunities for transcendent thinking, they show how schools can create the conditions for young people to thrive—intellectually, emotionally, and socially—by centering belonging, student voice, and real-world relevance. This inspiring account of Anaheim Union High School District's transformation is a beacon for educators everywhere who are committed to designing learning environments that unlock human potential and prepare students to shape our shared future.

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang,

Professor of Education and Director, USC Center for Affective Neuroscience,
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The Future of Public Education

The Future of Public Education

One District's Journey to
Transform Schools and Systems

Barnett Berry
Michael Matsuda
Michael Fullan

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Foreword

Kent McGuire

Our nation’s public schools face an unprecedented set of challenges. National reading and math scores remain far below pre-pandemic levels. Growing student mental health needs complicate our efforts to improve student learning. So will persistent teacher shortages. Nearly half a million classrooms are unfilled or staffed by underqualified educators. Federal actions have compounded these challenges with the elimination of key education programs and national data sets. Holding back billions in K-12 funding coupled with the reduction of Medicaid and SNAP benefits, which provide school meals and health services, further threatens the education system’s ability to meet the needs of today’s students.

Meanwhile, demographic shifts and changing preferences are contributing to the steepest decline in public school enrollment in decades. The implementation of education savings accounts and tuition tax credits at both federal and state levels is further accelerating these enrollment shifts. These new policies may lead to greater choice and customization in learning opportunities, but they are just as likely to put greater stress on public support for public schools. They may also widen the gap between affluent families and low-income households, bringing about greater inequality in learning opportunities and outcomes.

I wish we were more prepared to meet the challenges of this moment. But our public schools are steeped in tradition. Longstanding practices in teaching and learning as well as in assessment and accountability have proven difficult to change. I fear that we could lose the public education system on which we have long relied and on which the vast majority of children still depend, if we cannot find paths forward that both defend its core purposes while making bold changes in its organization and performance.

This book, *The Future of Public Education: One District’s Journey to Transform Schools and Systems*, offers needed insights into how we might get on this path. Barnett Berry, Mike Matsuda and Michael Fullan chronicle the journey of the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) as it has worked to change its current model of public education from a singular focus on raising test scores to much more purposeful learning. Given our rapidly changing world, one in which artificial intelligence and advances in technology will transform nearly all aspects of society, Anaheim’s focus on the purpose of education and deeper learning offers a window into what is possible when we think systemically about educational improvement.

At the heart of this transformation is a commitment to deeper, purposeful learning—an approach that prioritizes student voice, real-world

skills, and meaningful connections. AUHSD's innovative strategies, from performance-based assessments to community partnerships, show what is possible when educators, students, and communities work together toward a shared vision.

In my own work at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, I have worked for nearly a decade to advance deeper learning across states and school districts in this country. And while we have seen real success through the development of new curriculum and professional learning opportunities for teachers, we lacked an overarching framework to help system leaders to sustain deeper learning policies and practices. The 8-Factor Framework provides a powerful model for thinking about and acting on system change, emphasizing the importance of shared purpose, belonging, time, autonomy, leadership, collaboration, community linkages, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence. These factors, when skillfully integrated, create a dynamic ecosystem where students thrive, teachers lead boldly, and communities are strengthened.

The authors provide plenty of rich narrative, from students and teachers particularly, as well as solid evidence to support this claim. AUHSD reports rising graduation rates (from 85% in 2014 to 93.2% in 2024), improved college readiness (54% of students prepared for college), and growing Career & Technical Education (CTE) pathway completion rates. The district's implementation of Performance Task Assessments (PTAs) and capstone projects is highlighted as a cornerstone of deeper learning, with students demonstrating mastery of both academic content and the 5Cs (communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and compassion). AUHSD leads the state in percentage of students graduating from high school who demonstrate excellence in civics education and an understanding of the US and California Constitutions as well as active engagement in community-addressing projects.

Partnerships with the University of California-Irvine have enabled the district to use AI tools to measure deeper learning, analyze student reflections, and create personalized dashboards for students and teachers. Finally, the district has invested heavily in teacher leadership through initiatives like the 5C coaches, teacher externships, and professional development programs such as LEAD and AIME, which have empowered educators to innovate and lead from the classroom.

Given this evidence, this book is both a story of one district's success and it is a call to action. It challenges educators, policymakers, and community leaders to rethink the role of public education in preparing young people for life, career, and civic engagement. It provides practical insights, evidence-based strategies, and a roadmap for the future, including what a reimagined teaching profession looks like, that is both inspiring and achievable.

As you read, you will discover the power of innovation, the importance of relationships, and the potential of public education to transform lives. I encourage readers of this book to take a serious look at

how AUHSD has tackled obstacles to school transformation—the absence of a shared understanding of the public purpose of our public schools and a long-standing tendency to advance reform efforts without including teachers while building their capacity to adapt and spread the work. In this moment, when skepticism about our public schools is high, AUHSD’s journey reminds us that change is possible.

I am on record that we should re-envision our education system with a civic-minded purpose. At a time when society has forgotten how to constructively disagree and resolve conflict, we need young people to learn how to identify and share their own values while recognizing that others might hold different ones. I also believe strongly that young people must be equipped with the durable skills that help them grapple with tomorrow’s social and economic challenges, such as changing climate, rapid demographic change, population migration and income inequality. These are among the meaningful connections that AUHSD’s focus on purposeful and deeper learning provides for its students.

To be sure, we need multiple routes, perhaps a mosaic of approaches tied to the widely varied contexts in which public education is delivered. Anaheim is proving to be one of these approaches. Barnett, Mike, and Michael offer deep insights and practical steps for other district communities as they transform their system of schooling. The future of public education depends on our commitment to creating these renewed systems, such as what has been happening in Anaheim, where every student can thrive.

Kent McGuire

Senior Advisor to the Stuart Foundation
Visiting Fellow at the Spencer Foundation
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So many students and educators inspired us in writing *The Future of Public Education: One District’s Journey to Transform Schools and Systems*. They taught us much. They stirred our souls. Most importantly, so many—too many to formally acknowledge here—gave us time (and for teachers and administrators they had little to spare) to tell us their story. We do want to offer a special thanks to students Vasu Bagga, Viviana De Rosas, Giselle Guillermo, Matthew Franco, Timothy Han, Dheeraj Koppu, Angelina Lee, Jason Lee, Matthew Rivera, Mollie Saddul, Nathaniel Woo, and Zoe Khum. We also want to thank the Kitchen Cabinet of the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD), an informal group of leading teachers as well as a group of 5C coaches and curriculum specialists: Valerie Armijo, Katie Childers, Jason Coller, Rob Gaudette, Bill Johnson, Mandy Johnson, Bijan Kazerooni, Jae Kim, Jeff Kim, Lindsay Paananen, Ruth Park, Reuben Patino, Clint Perales, Susie Ren, Ann Rice, Tyler Sherman, Teresa Shimogawa, Ray Solorzano, Kasey Spencer, Mike Switzer, Taylor Thorne, and Jessica Yett. The teachers were living examples of how those who teach can and must lead boldly from the classroom—essential for transforming schools and systems. We also want to thank deeply Assistant Superintendent Jaron Fried, Director of Innovative Programs and Instructional Systems Amy Kwon, Coordinator of Professional Development Diana Fujimoto, and Public Communication Officer John Bautista, who pushed our thinking and let us push theirs. We are grateful to David Brazer who penned the first book on Anaheim with Mike Matsuda *Educating for Purposeful Life: A New Conception of Schooling for the 21st Century* (2023). David read early drafts and always had erudite comments. We are so appreciative of Tim Nguyen, founder of eKadence, partner in putting the emotional quotient into the formula for developing and uplifting deeper, purposeful learning.

We are especially grateful to the philanthropies—the Stuart Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York—whose financial support has spurred the documentation of Anaheim’s journey toward systemness. We also appreciate the guidance and enthusiastic backing of our editors at Corwin, Pam Berkman and Desirée Bartlett, who from the start saw the value of our experiences in Anaheim in penning a book about its journey toward school and system change and its implications for the future of public education across the United States and the globe.

From Barnett Berry: It has been a gift to work with Mike Matsuda and Michael Fullan. We have learned so much together. To Art Wise and Linda Darling-Hammond, you launched and sustained my journey. For the teacher leaders from my 20 years leading the Center for Teaching

Quality—way too many to mention here—you have taught me so much about what the teaching profession could be. Our time together in classrooms—and over a good drink and “calamari”—continue to fuel the journey. And then there is Meredith, my wife, and the extraordinary 49 years we have spent together. Her career as an expert teacher has deeply inspired my commitment to reinventing public education and advancing the profession that makes all others possible. And to our grown children, Evan, Joseph, and daughter-in-law Wizzy, and the grandkids, Dov and Zosia—you are making the world a better place for me, and so many others.

From Michael Matsuda: To my wife, Linda, who helps balance my life with love and spirit; my son, Ethan, who has taught me so much about unconditional love; and all the students, families, and staff of the AUHSD, especially our Board of Trustees, who have believed in me all these years.

From Michael Fullan: To all of the above, including my two co-authors, and the AUHSD crowd that spreads like spring flowers that get better each year. To our team who becomes better and better and more expansive each year: Jean Clinton, Claudia Cuttress, Max Drummy, Sarah Fine, Bailey Fullan, Josh Fullan, Mary Jean Gallagher, Bill Hogarth, Terry Jakobsmeier, Lyle Kirtman, Joanne Quinn, and Santiago Rincon-Gallardo. At home Wendy leads, while others benefit and contribute: Michelle, Conor, Cormac—life grows on.

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About the Authors



Barnett Berry is a Senior Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). He previously served as a high school teacher, a professor of education leadership, and a senior policy leader for a state education agency. In the 1990s, he led the state policy and partnership efforts for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (now part of Learning Forward). Building on the Commission's goal to transform the teaching profession, in 1999 he founded the Center for Teaching Quality

(CTQ). For 20 years, he led CTQ, a nonprofit, to advance a bold brand of teacher leadership needed not just to improve teaching and learning, but to transform public education. Two of his books, *Teaching 2030* (2010) and *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave* (2013), frame a bold vision for the profession's future. In 2021, Barnett was honored by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards with the James A. Kelly Award for Advancing Accomplished Teaching. More recently, he began working with the University of Kansas and its Center for Reimagining Education—supporting teachers and students together in using artificial intelligence to reimagine public schools as well as LPI and its Center on School and System Redesign.



Michael Matsuda, the Superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District since 2014, is known for his district's approach to innovation, entrepreneurship, and compassion. He has transformed educational opportunities for students through initiatives like reverse-engineered career pathways and data-sharing agreements with higher education institutions. Mike has been

recognized by Education Week’s Leaders to Learn From, California State University–Fullerton’s Visionary Education Leadership Award, and the University of California–Irvine’s Community Partner of the Year. Mike is also the co-author, alongside David Brazer, of *Educating for Purposeful Life* (2023), which initially uplifted the school district’s efforts to transform public education. Mike developed the AIME (Anaheim Innovative Mentoring Experience) program, creating mentorships for over 10,000 high school students with over 120 business and nonprofit partners. In 2024, he conceptualized the national K–12 AI Summit, drawing leaders from across the country focusing on enhancing human and emotional development through the promise of artificial intelligence. In 2025, he was honored by ConnectED, a national nonprofit focused on bridge efforts to prepare young people for career, college, and life, as one of its **Pathway Trailblazer Award** recipients.



Michael Fullan, Order of Canada, is the former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto. He is co-leader of the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning global initiative. Michael served as Premier Dalton McGuinty’s Special Policy Adviser in Ontario from 2003 to 2013. He received the Order of Canada in December 2012 and holds five honorary doctorates from universities around the world. His “interim autobiography,” *Surreal Change*, covers

his pre-COVID-19 era to 2018. Michael and his colleagues are now working diligently on field-based comprehensive system change in several countries. Under the umbrella of the “humanity paradigm”—equitable-equal deep change that integrates local (school and community), middle (district/regional), and center (policy) entities. Michael’s latest books are *Spirit Work and the Science of Collaboration* (with Mark Edwards, 2022), *The Principal 2.0* (2023), *The Drivers* (with Joanne Quinn, 2023), and *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (6th ed., 2025).

Our Why

We, Barnett Berry, Mike Matsuda, and Michael Fullan, wrote this book as two activist scholars and a practicing superintendent—because we believe public education must have a future. In these rapidly changing and chaotic times, public schooling’s role in preparing *all* young people to thrive in an uncertain world is more important than ever. For democracy. For the economy. For opportunities to thrive.

It is well documented that young people find traditional schooling increasingly uninteresting. By the time students reach Grade 10, only about 20% at best find school worthwhile. Let’s be frank: The factory model of teaching and learning cannot help students find purpose in a world where keeping a job until retirement has become a distant memory.

In 2024, Barnett Berry and Michael Fullan found themselves serendipitously together studying and supporting the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) in its efforts to scale deeper, purposeful learning for every one of its 26,000 students. AUHSD’s unique solution—shaping learning around deeply engaging pathways to societal success—more than intrigued us. We saw large numbers of students engaged in purposeful learning through the 5Cs, introduced in the prologue, including compassion. The district integrated the basics (e.g., literacy and math) and content (or technical) knowledge as a fundamental part of the 5Cs. Here is what’s important: Better test scores were never the goal. Deeper, purposeful learning in preparation for life, for every student, was the ambition.

We learned that AUHSD had powerful examples and evidence for us as researchers and educators to consider in developing a system of what is now called whole child education. We learned that AUHSD had powerful examples and evidence for policy, community, and business leaders to mull over and adapt to their local context to prepare young people for jobs of today and tomorrow.

When they came to know the district, Barnett and Michael were immediately fascinated by AUHSD’s growing success with all types of students, including those who had never shown interest in schooling. Barnett was impressed by the district’s investments in teachers as innovators, and how AUHSD was close to creating the teaching profession that children, and teachers themselves, richly deserve. Michael, who has studied and worked to support public education across the globe, saw a district that was close to putting all the pieces of the educational change puzzle together. Mike Matsuda was proud of what he and his colleagues had accomplished, and also ready to move on to what needed to happen next to transform public education and reinsert the public good in it.

Barnett and Michael were grateful to get to know Mike, first as a colleague and then as a friend. We were taken by Mike's story—of a businessman, a substitute teacher, a credentialed teacher, and then a superintendent—whose leadership for and in public education had been shaped by his parents' imprisonment in Manzanar. In 2017, Mike took two busloads of Anaheim students to the Manzanar World War II concentration camps where over 10,000 Japanese Americans had been imprisoned. Walking through the barracks where families slept, he overheard one student say to another, "These beds look pretty nice since I sleep on the floor in a garage." Hearing this deepened Mike's commitment to create more and better opportunities for deeper, purposeful learning for every student.

Learning about Mike's why reinforced our conviction that the three of us had more work to do together to create a better future for public education in these rapidly changing, chaotic times. That is why we wrote this book—to chronicle lessons learned from one school district so you can build a road map to transform schools and systems in your community.

Prologue

Moving From Aimlessness to Systemness

From Aimlessness: How Have We Missed the Mark?

Over six decades, efforts to reform education—whether driven by governments, philanthropists, or practitioners—have missed the mark. Whether the goal was to close persistent academic achievement gaps or promote deeper learning outcomes, progress has remained elusive.¹ Our book is different. It features how an entire *system*—the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD) in California with its 26,000 students and its community—is bringing about fundamental transformation.

The district began by investing in teachers to lead innovations for deeper, purposeful learning: Focusing on real-world skills, not test scores. Maintaining stability in top-level leadership. Building cross-sector and bipartisan partnerships with government, community, and business. And more of late, developing and elevating new measures of success.

If you are reading this book, you are someone who does not want to give up on public education; you want to reimagine it. We believe you will find it useful. Our book uplifts how one urban, high-need school district, situated in a red county in a blue state, has built strong support for public education. You will learn about AUHSD’s journey to transform schools and systems. You will discover how the district and its community made progress over 10 years (2014 to 2024) anchored in teachers and students working together. You will see what the district needs to do next. We conclude with a road map for reimagining public education for you—the educator, policymaker, and community and business leader—to use in your local context.

Why has school transformation been so difficult? For us, three reasons stand out.

Major Obstacles to School Transformation

1. Stakeholders lack a shared understanding of the public purpose of public schools.
2. Schools operate in silos, as do teachers.
3. Reform efforts are either too top-down or too bottom-up, with no strategy to develop and spread the expertise of teachers from one school to the next.

Public education faces intense challenges: Disengaged students. Depressed, anxious, and troubled youth. Intensified cultural wars and book banning. Expanded efforts to privatize public education. The uncertain impact of rapidly advancing technologies.

Yet in the midst of increasing uncertainty in public education, we see opportunities. We see new coalitions of educators, philanthropies, and civic and industry leaders working together to reinvent public education. We see growing networks of educators seeking to learn from each other. We see an upsurge in interest in CEOs from various industries to engage more deeply with educators in rethinking college and career pathways and education ecosystems. As we finished our manuscript in the summer of 2025, the *New York Times* reported 400,000 open jobs in the new manufacturing sector, as artificial intelligence (AI) is demanding a new kind of skilled tradesperson.² Business leaders need public education.

In Anaheim, we see cross-sector partnerships growing to meet this new demand. AUHSD has been effective in system change as the district steadily moves toward *systemness*—shaped through relationships, conversations, and continuous inquiry *in classrooms, in the district office, and in the community*. As two researchers (Barnett Berry and Michael Fullan) working with the district and the superintendent of AUHSD (Mike Matsuda), we have a story to tell together.

AUHSD has been effective in system change as the district steadily moves toward *systemness*—shaped through relationships, conversations, and continuous inquiry *in classrooms, in the district office, and in the community*.

The Anaheim Story in Brief

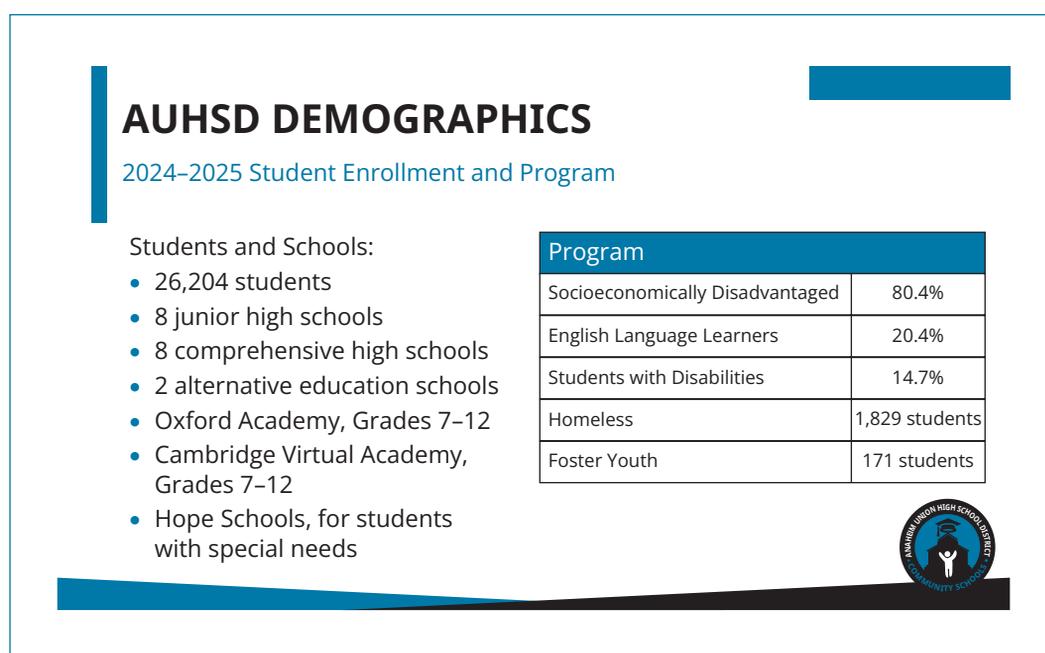
AUHSD, a midsize urban secondary school district, has developed an evolving, interactive strategy for transformation of its system. AUHSD has paid attention to the emotional quotient (EQ) in organizational change—a key to developing *systemness*. The EQ in organizational change means recognizing the role of human emotions, relationships, and psychological safety in transforming strategy, structure, or systems. People must feel safe, heard, and valued if they are to truly adopt new ways of working together.

Granted, the district has more EQ work to do to identify and cultivate more teachers to lead innovation and redesign the factory model of teaching. The district has yet to put all the pieces of the *whole adolescent* education system together. But it is on a trajectory to do so. Most critically, the AUHSD district change strategy is based on the explicit assumption that those on the ground (especially students, teachers, parents, and local community leaders) increasingly understand and influence the main elements of the change model.

Located in northern Orange County, California, a stone's throw from Disneyland, the lives of most AUHSD students stand apart from the glitz and wealth associated with the famed theme park. AUHSD supports 20 schools—8 junior highs, 8 high schools, and 4 specials, including a

magnet, 2 alternatives, and an innovative hybrid, the Cambridge Virtual Academy. Of the 26,000 students across the district, 20% are English language learners (with 66 different languages spoken at home), 15% have disabilities, and 80% are categorized as low socioeconomic status. About 7% of the district’s students experience homelessness, with about 1% in foster homes; and more than 90% are students of color (70% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 8% white, 4% Filipino, 2% Black/African American) (see Figure 0.1). Students from the western side of the county are more likely to come from affluent homes. But most families struggle financially, due to the very high cost of living. Many students need to work in order to make ends meet for their families. Achievement gaps, based on traditional measures, remain persistent although some are lessening.

Figure 0.1 AUHSD at a Glance



Source: AUHSD

Of the district’s 1,200 teachers, 50% have over 20 years of teaching experience—and, of those, 5% have over 30 years’ experience. On the other hand, 25% have less than 9 years of teaching under their belt. Of the 1,200, 43 have earned National Board Certification, and over 100 have participated in some form of teacher externship—matters we will take up later.

The district’s Core Values statement (Figure 0.2) is far more than a nice poster. It is driving the district to *systemness* where the majority of stakeholders—especially students and teachers—embrace, live, and ultimately can explain to each other what they are changing in *their* local system for the better. *With systemness, students and teachers become leaders of the change, not the targets of it.*

Figure 0.2 AUHSD Core Values

AUHSD Core Values

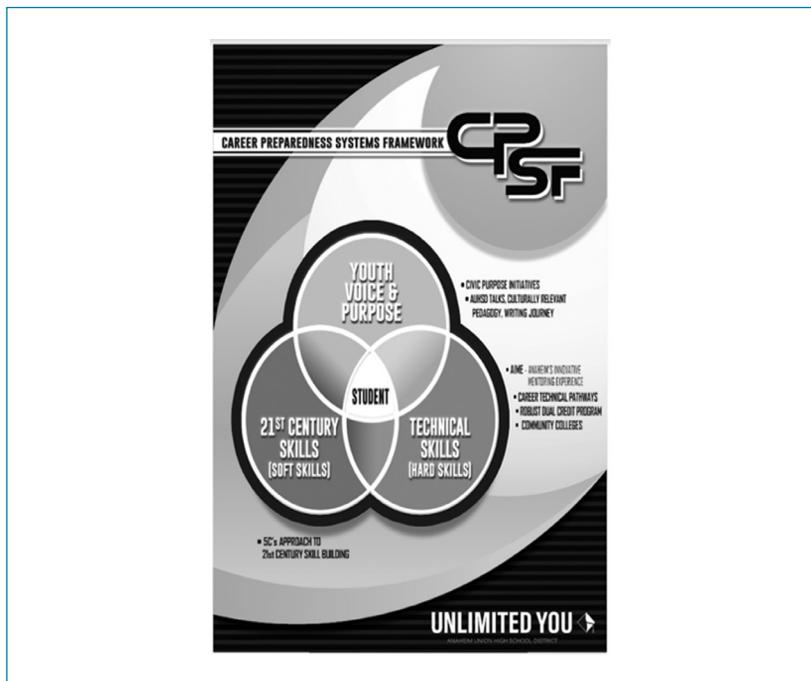
We believe . . .

1. In and model the 5Cs: collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and compassion
2. That education must work for students and not the other way around
3. In an assets-based instructional approach focused on our community's strengths and in nurturing everyone's potential.
4. In moving the needle toward equity and justice
5. That our vision, mission, and core values are delivered primarily through instruction
6. In systems, not silos
7. That public schools should enhance and strengthen democracy through cultivation of student voice and problem solving

Source: AUHSD

The Career Preparedness Systems Framework (Figure 0.3) drives the vision—engaging students in purposeful learning, connected to meaningful careers and life.

Figure 0.3 AUHSD Career Preparedness Systems Framework



Source: AUHSD

The key strategy, beginning a decade ago, was *unyoking* teachers from standardized achievement tests so they can teach with student voice and deeper learning in mind. AUHSD Assistant Superintendent Jaron Fried said many teachers and principals felt like they were “playing the game” with the pacing guide, interim assessments, analysis of standardized test items, and test-prep strategies.³

Community meetings surfaced just how much parents and business leaders, not just educators, wanted to downplay tests and *up-play* the teaching of the durable skills—or the district’s 5Cs of collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and compassion—into *daily* class content. As Jaron told us in April 2025:

The key strategy, beginning a decade ago, was *unyoking* teachers from standardized achievement tests so they can teach with student voice and deeper learning in mind.

You can see why our students have so much agency and ownership over their learning. You can understand why the 5Cs are ingrained into the DNA of our culture. Very powerful!!

The district’s boldest move was to find, support, and unleash the talents of teachers who have permission to innovate—like Mike Switzer, who led the development of the district’s capstone assessment; Kelly Gallagher, who launched the writing journey; John Bautista, who created and institutionalized the Katella Talks (soapbox talks); and Sabina Giakoumis, who turned a small high school biology class garden into a 2.5-acre farm to spur interdisciplinary learning and student entrepreneurship as well as to address the community’s food desert problem.⁴ The Anaheim Collaborative was established in 2015, forging ambitious partnerships among the district and postsecondary, business and industry, and social and health agencies to bolster students in pursuing purposeful, deeper learning; fulfilling work; and engagement in civic life. In doing so, the Anaheim Collaborative has deepened the district’s capacity to educate the whole adolescent through the lens of community well-being as well as economic mobility. The Anaheim Collaborative will be more important for the future of public education, transcending political divides as PK–12 educators work more closely with postsecondary, community, and industry and business partners in creating an education ecosystem found in top-performing jurisdictions across the globe. The district has 120 community, postsecondary, and business partners.

The district’s focus on the whole adolescent has paid off for growing numbers of its students: increasing graduation rates, improved college readiness, and growing career and technical education pathway completion rates; over 3,000 seniors per year graduating with a State Seal of Civic Engagement; and incredibly low teacher turnover rates.

Evidence of Success at AUHSD

- AUHSD graduates have higher persistence rates at the University of California–Irvine than their peers from other school districts.
- The district earned 8 California Civic Learning Awards of Excellence from 2020 to 2024 (the most in the state).
- All 20 AUHSD schools are California Democracy Schools.
 - *AUHSD is the first California Democracy School District!*
- Over 4,500 students annually participate in the Anaheim Innovative Mentoring Experience.
- In the class of 2023, 3,039 AUHSD students earned the State Seal of Civic Engagement.
 - *The class of 2022 earned 2,858 seals (88% of Orange County totals and 28% of the entire state).*
- AUHSD has had an annual teacher turnover rate of 1.5% between 2020 and 2025 (not counting those retiring).

Source: AUHSD Communications and Human Relations

As we will show, more and more students in AUHSD can explain and demonstrate what they are learning. You can find and experience students leading with their ideas in any of the district’s schools. At Walker Junior High School, Timothy Han, a 13-year-old, told us what purposeful, deeper learning looked like for him—with words uttered more powerfully than most adults could articulate:

In our core classes, we are not just learning about our community; we are acting with the community, helping others and making our own calls about how we learn. It’s not just a class where you get all the answers; it is where we create our own answers to different types of problems. I have friends at other junior highs, and even though they do interact with their own community, it’s not as strong as ours. We focus more on how to learn and how to ask or talk about something, or how to make a great speech to make a difference in our community. . . . It’s a really great way to make your own pathway.

In our core classes, we are not just learning about our community; we are acting with the community, helping others and making our own calls about how we learn.

AUHSD is leading on other fronts as well: Beginning in 2023, the district became one of three California school districts that serves as a learning

hub for the state's \$4 billion investment in community schools, integrating academic learning with health and social services as well as youth and community development initiatives. With eKadence—its nonprofit, technology and business partner—and the University of California–Irvine, the district is taking major steps to use AI-enhanced tools to personalize deeper learning for every student. In doing so it has begun to assemble and uplift measures of the durable skills that business leaders want to see in high school graduates. The district is creating usable data dashboards that assemble evidence of impact in ways heretofore unimaginable.

Getting started in a substantial way to alter the daily culture of schooling is the hardest step—when very few teachers are working together in a new way. The key to the district's transformation journey has been to increasingly align the aspirations of stakeholders—what Mike Matsuda calls the values network. Over time the innovative architecture of the district cultivated the *trim tab* people who have been strategically placed to lead transformation. The term *trim tab people* refers to individuals who make small but strategically placed contributions that lead to significant systemic change—often quietly, from within the system.

AUHSD has established important goals to address challenges found in many school districts: deeply understand and fully address chronic absenteeism; close the academic achievement with new measures of competency-based grading; and prepare *every* student for college and/or career, including the most vulnerable. Assistant Superintendent Jaron Fried said it well:

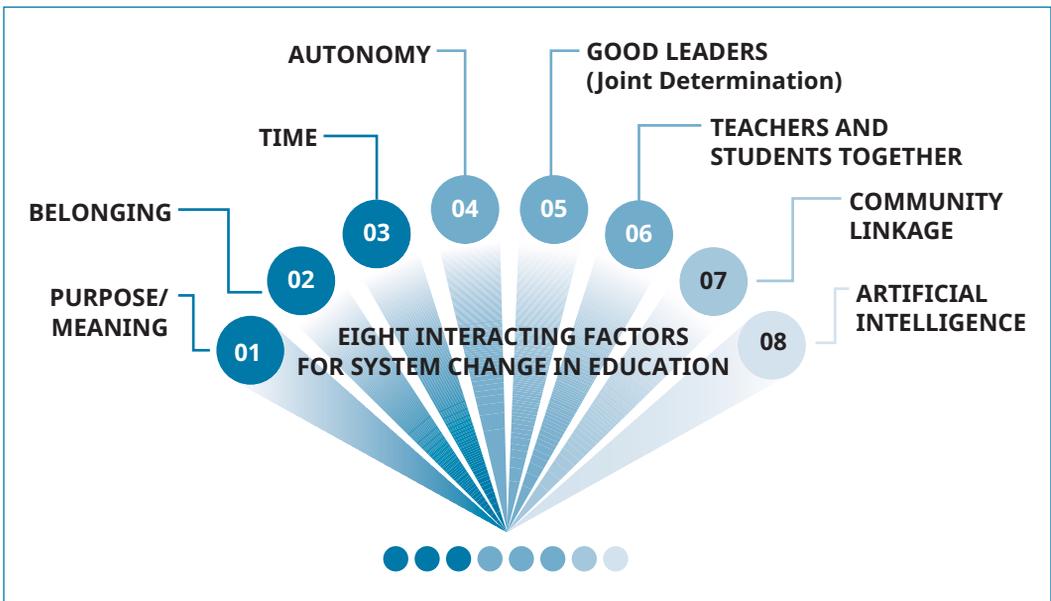
The student voice, the project-based, real-life learning with internships and career pathways with our postsecondary and business partners and the performance tasks assessments, leading to capstones where kids get to show what they really know and can do—all are so critical, because those kinds of things create the space and the energy where kids want to come to school.

Transformation requires learning from others—engaging in lateral capacity building, professional networks, and partnerships beyond their own walls to accelerate internal innovation and coherence. School and system transformation requires systemness. As you will see, AUHSD has redesigned many of its internal systems. However, except for one school, Cambridge Virtual Academy, the district's other 19 junior and senior high schools are organized quite traditionally. Systemness necessitates the jettisoning of the industrial age—factory model of teaching and learning: the rigid school calendar, students grouped by age regardless of mastery or interests, content knowledge defined by discrete subjects taught in separate time blocks, learning assessed by standardized tests, and teachers who teach in isolation from colleagues.⁵

Toward Systemness

The story of AUHSD stands out because its district leaders have developed additional change elements on the ground. Systems also need to change their “structures and cultures” that fuel daily interaction. In this regard we will show how AUHSD has begun to create a dynamic among Michael Fullan’s 8 Factors to Revolutionize Education: (1) shared purpose/meaning (systemness), (2) belonging, (3) time, (4) autonomy, (5) good leaders (joint determination), (6) teachers and students together, (7) community linkage, and (8) artificial intelligence (see Figure 0.4).⁶

Figure 0.4 The 8 Factors for System Change



The 8-Factor model is built upon the conditions under which continuous deep learning prevails for students and the educators who are teaching and supporting them. Fundamentally, systemness requires working on the daily interaction of *culture* and *structure* through the 8 Factors. The big secret of system change is that it occurs through the *interaction effects* of two or more of the 8 Factors in action. So, what do change agents need to consider? Peter Senge says that systemness relies on understanding the relationships and interdependencies between different elements.⁷ And Linda Darling-Hammond, a globally prominent researcher and an eloquent critic of the factory model of education, says schools need to be redesigned around a new set of the 3Rs: relationship-centered, restorative, and responsive.⁸ The story of AUHSD will enlighten our collective journey to systemness in the transformation of schools and systems.

How to Move Toward Systemness

1. Develop shared purpose/meaning.
2. Do only a few things simultaneously.
3. Stay close to the ground.
4. Build from the bottom, strengthen from the middle, and intrigue the top.
5. Base the strategy on a foundation of systemness—remember the emotional quotient in the redesign of schools and systems.
6. Assemble evidence of impact, tell the story, and shape the narrative of public education.

The Flow of the Book

Under the current conditions facing school districts, developing a coherent system policy from the top does not seem possible. It is more productive to forge new elements that enable the change from within while linking to congruent ideas that mobilize action, including ideas outside one's own setting. This is precisely what systemness is, and what AUHSD is working on: open deliberation of how and in what ways education can specifically benefit both the individual and the collectivity. For AUHSD this matter is key and should form the essence of its development, and *everyone* should be in on it! In the pages ahead, we trace how the district has made progress on the 8 Factors as it has been moving from silos to systems. Drawing on a range of evidence, primarily from teachers and students, we point to what the district and its community need to do next, with specificity, from 2025 to 2030 to transform public education, from aimlessness to systemness.

Chapters 1 through 6 take us through the elements of AUHSD's journey especially in relation to key actors and actions—including how *students and teachers together* and how *developing teachers as system thinkers* became the district's change strategy coin of the realm. In Chapter 7, we describe what needs to happen over the next five years as the district breaks through to systemness and every student has the opportunity to thrive in a rapidly changing world. We will point to strategic moves with the 8 Factors, anchored in the neuroscience, what researchers call “transcendent thinking.”⁹ Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and her research colleagues have shown how the potential growth spurt in adolescent brain development can be stimulated by the right pedagogical and school redesign moves.¹⁰ It turns out that AUHSD, at first accidentally and now purposefully, has designed its learning culture to stimulate transcendent thinking through the development of the 5Cs and, more recently, performance task assessments. Developing students' transcendent thinking requires those who teach them to engage

in transcendent thinking. The concept of the neural network, depicted on the front cover, provides a powerful metaphor for designing a system of leading teachers where socially connected professionals lean into transformative pedagogical practices together. We will track this discovery throughout the book. We conclude with a road map for you to use in your journey to transform schools and systems.

Our argument is not just rational. It's experiential, emotional, detailed, and geared to help practitioners and policymakers jointly identify strategies for school and system redesign.

The Moves Ahead

Everything that needs to be done is being done somewhere. But only in bits and pieces. In this book we offer a road map for you to put those pieces together.

The case we make is not just rational. It's experiential, emotional, detailed, and geared to help practitioners and policymakers jointly identify strategies for school and system redesign. Drawing on sound research evidence and rich illustrations from the classroom and community, our model and road map represent a strong and desperately needed solution.

After reading this book, you will have

- concrete evidence for and examples of how to advance a system of deeper, purposeful learning;
- powerful stories of the impact of whole child education that the vast majority of the American public, both conservatives and progressives, embrace; and
- a clear-cut path to move your school, district, and community forward to both improve and transform public education.

In the epilogue, we include recommendations for local and state policy leaders. However, we cannot wait for policy to change. Educators—with parents, students, community leaders, and business leaders—have to change. In the appendix, we include a prototype self-assessment tool for integrating the 8 Factors into school system redesign, anchored in the science of learning and development.¹¹ The tool is designed to assist teachers, administrators, and school board members, with their local partners, in documenting their assets and leveraging them to transform teaching and learning at scale.

In 2025, AUHSD and several other school districts (and nonprofit partners and associations) began planning to launch a network to develop and empower educational leaders—from classrooms to school boards to community and business leaders—to redesign school *systems*—not just schools—that prepare students for real-world skills and purposeful lives.

The challenges facing public education are intense. The slippage of Americans' trust in public institutions is real. So is the erosion of civil society and democracy itself. We want to underscore the urgency for change. All indicators are that society writ large—the globe—is at a dangerous precipice.

New learning and how to get it is the core purpose of this book. We hope you join us on our journey to double down on the promise of public education. As you read this book, consider how you might

- engage others in your community;
- lead an effort to redesign your schools with students and teachers together;
- assemble evidence of deeper, purposeful learning; and
- build momentum in the redesign of schools and systems—through systemness.

Remember this: Most Americans, even those without children or grandchildren in schools, believe in public education. Despite the intense, unprecedented challenges facing public education, the institution has a future and a good one. Our very survival as a democratic society depends on it. Let's now turn to how the journey to transform schools and systems begins with students and teachers—together.

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CHAPTER 1

BEGINNING WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TOGETHER

I had one teacher, Ms. Flores, who was a helping hand throughout everything. I learned a lot from her because she knew my story, and I knew hers. That's how we bonded. That one connection carried forward as a high school sophomore when I was in her class. If there was one reason I ended up at UC Berkeley, it was because I could have a mentor like Ms. Flores.

—Vasu Bagga, 2024 graduate of Western High School, AUHSD

The Challenges in Public Education, 2025

Almost every day news accounts or think tank reports are published about the woes of public education. We keep hearing more about lonely children and teens with mental health issues growing up with poor health, parental instability, and housing insecurity. We learn of schools not changing. We hear about a few successes in education but learn little about ideas for spreading success to the education system in general. In our thinking about how to move from silos to systemness, how can we improve our strategies and tactics to tackle these intractable issues head-on?

Disengaged students. A recent survey found many students are not engaged in school, with just under half of middle and high schoolers agreeing that “my schoolwork challenges me in a good way.” In 2023, 68% of the teenagers polled by Gallup agreed with the statement, “In the last seven days, I have learned something interesting at school.” In 2024, that percentage plunged to 58%. Teens who are not planning to go to college are *far less* engaged.¹

Depressed, anxious, and troubled youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2023, 40% of U.S. teenagers had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and nearly 1 in 10 attempted suicide. Feelings of distress were more common among all students.² Seventy percent of high school teachers and 57% of middle school teachers say anxiety and depression are a major problem.³ In 2022, nearly half of U.S. teens claimed to have been bullied or harassed online, with physical appearance being the most prominent cause, especially for girls.⁴

Intensified cultural wars in public education. National groups such as Moms for Liberty are reshaping state and district curriculum policy and content and impacting the role of teachers.⁵ According to PEN America, between 2023 and 2024 schools saw a 200% increase in attacks on literature. An overwhelming majority of banned literature features stories about people of color or LGBTQ+ people.⁶ As of March 2025, 18 U.S. states had enacted legislation that restricts how topics related to race, racism, and U.S. history can be taught in K–12 public schools. These laws aim to limit discussions on systemic racism and related concepts.⁷

Expanded efforts to take the public out of public education. As of early 2025, 33 states, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, had implemented some form of private school choice program, such as vouchers, education savings accounts, or tax-credit scholarships. Among these, 12 states have enacted universal voucher laws. Arizona expanded vouchers to all students, regardless of income or school performance. Anyone can now use public funds for private schooling—leading to a state budget meltdown.⁸ The Trump administration, in July 2025, informed states of withholding nearly \$7 billion in funding for migrant education, English language services, academic enrichment, professional development, and expanded learning programs “with little explanation.”⁹

The uncertain impact of rapidly advancing technologies. Research shows that digital media can accelerate skill development, but it also can restructure neural pathways in teenagers, particularly in regions related to attention, reward, and emotional processing.¹⁰ While artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to humanize and personalize teaching and learning, it also can dehumanize and depersonalize schooling even more than it is now. One thing is sure (if anything is): There is a compelling need for teachers and students to learn how to use AI tools and critically evaluate AI content in order to identify deepfakes and recognize manipulation on social media.

This book serves as a counterforce to this daunting list of challenges. Our aim is to show that it is possible to achieve system success by showcasing the successes achieved at Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD). It begins with teachers and students together—like Monique Flores and Vasu Bagga.

System Change With Teachers and Students

We begin the story of AUHSD and its journey to systemness with a student and a teacher who demonstrate the emotional side of purposeful, deeper learning. While each district community must find its own path to systemness, AUHSD has taught us much about getting clear on purpose and meaning, beginning with teachers and students together. It is a simple rationale: Students and their parents are most connected to teachers, and parents trust teachers most of any professional or policymaker involved in public education.

For systemness to develop and system changes to be sustained, the work begins with building the bottom (classrooms and schools), strengthening the middle (districts), and intriguing the top (the state). We introduce you to Vasu Bagga, a recent graduate of Western High School, and his most influential teacher, Monique Flores. Their narrative arc helps us set the stage for how school districts and their communities can move beyond the siloed programs, structures, policies, and programs and create coherence and alignment among the various programmatic parts of teaching and learning, both in and out of PK–12 public education. In telling their story, we point to how the genuine connection between just one student and one teacher can inform system change as well as sharpen our attention toward what needs to be done next to ensure every student can thrive in our rapidly changing world.

In telling their story, we point to how the genuine connection between just one student and one teacher can inform system change as well as sharpen our attention toward what needs to be done next to ensure every student can thrive in our rapidly changing world.

Genuine Connections

When we spoke with Bagga (he prefers to be called by his last name) in late October 2024, he was just beginning his freshman year at the University of California–Berkeley, one of the nation’s most revered higher education institutions. At only 18 years of age, he spoke with the wisdom and eloquence of someone twice his age. His story is compelling. A Sikh immigrant, he arrived in the United States as a toddler over 15 years ago. Central to Bagga’s story is Monique, a teacher whose connection with him transformed his view of himself as a student and shaped his path as a learner, mentor, and leader. Monique’s development as a professional teacher is grounded in relationship to her students. She loves history. She loves the content she teaches. She loves the connections to students much more.

Monique does not hold a teacher leadership title. Her influence is felt more informally. She and Bagga express, with exponentially more expressive words, what it means for teachers and students to develop as *copilots* in teaching and learning. Teachers and students together offer a powerful frame for rethinking schooling and the profession. Teachers and students together also present a way to shift the narrative over the purposes of public education—at a time when the United States seems more divided than ever. A 2024 poll found that 83% of Americans reported, “As a country, we are more divided than at any time in my lifetime.”¹¹ Bagga and Monique—together—help us tell the story of how a district can build the base from the bottom (classroom) with teachers and students together as a frame to both mobilize the middle (district) and intrigue the top (state).

Monique’s approach to teaching and learning with students as copilots in shaping their own learning is deeply rooted in the science of learning and development: Warm, caring, consistent, trustful teacher–student relationships matter for the activation of student motivation, self-efficacy, engagement, and academic achievement.¹² Monique told us, “I feel there needs to be a genuine connection so that all students have the opportunity and ability to engage in deeper learning. It’s really simple: Without a connection, learning is impossible.”

Monique’s making “genuine connections” is further grounded in recent research on transcendent thinking and its implications for adolescent brain development (explored later). Her pedagogical tactic begins through the district instructional lens of knowing each student by name and story, and the role of empathy in curriculum design—cultivated by her journey as both a parent and a professional.

Bagga put an exclamation point on the role of connection and relationship in deeper learning that prepares young people for life as well as career and college.

Bagga

“For me,” he said, “having that extra level of support and a reliable mentor to check in with and guide me made all the difference in my success.”

He continued, elevating what deeper learning is all about:

The guidance and relationships I built with impactful teachers like Ms. Flores continue to shape me to this day. Their lessons extended beyond the classroom, influencing my leadership roles, past and present. I’ve taken the mentorship and support I once received and used it to help teach others. Seeing Ms. Flores’s dedication—willingly setting aside her time to help me—was truly inspiring. I applied that same ideology to my mentorship at Fullerton St. Jude Hospital, where I learned to be vulnerable, professional, and make a meaningful impact on my patients.

For Monique, teachers need to serve more than teach. They need to listen more than they talk. Make no mistake about it, Monique loves the social studies subject matter she is asked to teach. However, teachers need to spend less time covering academic content and the California curriculum standards in order for teachers and students to work together. Their story together, if we listen carefully, can inform us how teachers can be prepared, mentored, and organized in schools designed for success—for adults as well as young people.

Monique



Monique and Bagga

Source: Monique Flores

“I remember in my own son’s elementary school, whether you were 5 years old and in kindergarten or 11 years old and in the sixth grade, you would lead student–parent conferences,” she proclaimed. “This is what is needed for teenagers; they need to lead their own learning.” In reflecting on her career, Monique talked about the role Jim Tozzi, her mentor teacher at the time, played in developing a laser-like focus on the needs of her current students. “Jim helped me to see myself not just as a teacher of history or government,” she

asserted, “but as more of a public servant with a focus on the child, not the content.”

“You have to really structure your week so that 20% of it is unstructured enough to ensure you continue to know your students,” she said. “I’ve got to be super intentional with my assignments and be willing to cut back on getting through all the content other teachers believe they must cover.”

For the last 10 years or so, she told us, “I allowed myself to have 20% of my weekly class time to be unstructured. It is a day my students can meet with me on a one-on-one basis, or a day that I set up a writer’s workshop, or a day for them to work on organizing themselves.”

Monique said she always tries to “find a little detail to follow up on,” no matter how brief the conversation. She elaborated:

“I get to have conversations with them about aspirations, dreams, or obstacles that have emerged. They get to share with me, and I share with them. I learn a lot about my students, and they learn to trust me. When we complete simulations or have debates on the most important person in history, they trust me.”

“If you listen every single day, you’re going to open up conversations. . . . I remember when Bagga started sharing about his sister, and then that went to more stories, and we’re like, oh my gosh, we have so much in common, and it just takes off from there. . . . Then we trust each other. We have each other’s backs. This is not easy, especially with the 46 students I had in one of my AP classes this past year.” Monique noted with a smile, yet expressed with some exasperation, it’s “like I am dying, but this is the only way to teach.”

Monique, who has been teaching for 23 years at Western High School, is more than a teacher to Bagga. She is a mentor who believes that breaking down barriers between students and educators is essential for meaningful learning. “If you want to know your student’s story,” Monique told us, “you have to share your story.”

She did not stop there. Monique pointed out, emphatically:

“There can’t be secrets. There can’t be this wall between the students and the adults in their lives.”

Both Bagga and Monique had similar immigration stories. Both faced similar personal challenges of feeling isolated as teenagers. Bagga, because of his ethnicity as a South Asian from India and his Sikh religion, endured much bullying and discrimination; Monique was on her own as a teenager and did not have a family support system. Both had to overcome the fear of failing in front of peers who they thought were smarter than they perceived themselves to be.

If you want to know your student’s story, you have to share your story.

Bagga

Bagga said, “I bonded with her because we had a similar life; we had a lot of the same ups and downs.”

“Many students fear being judged by teachers,” he explained.

“She broke down the usual classroom hierarchy, and then I could no longer be afraid. She treated me like an equal in learning and saw a different part of me that I didn’t realize existed.”

The genuine connection between Bagga and Monique only took hold because the district invests in creating space for teacher innovations, focusing on the “Unlimited You” in students, and places a high value on the emotional side of system change.

Space for Innovations

Since Mike Matsuda became superintendent in 2014, AUHSD has been intentionally building proximity to practice, grounding systemic change efforts in authentic, classroom-level experiences for students. Almost immediately, Mike did away with the required litany of formative and benchmark tests found in most school districts and charter schools, creating mental space for more innovation to emerge. Key strategies for de-siloing people and programs began by elevating 5C coaches as both teachers and leaders, encouraging cross-disciplinary projects in weekly one-hour late starts, and placing a premium on innovation from the classroom, using its substitute budget to free up teachers and recognize (with stipends for) their innovativeness. *Even under tight budgets, when teachers have good ideas, district leaders look for dollars to support them and unleash their talents* (leading Barnett Berry to his collaboration with University of California–Los Angeles colleagues in his initial study of the district).¹³ Without a relentless focus on test score gains, found in so many school districts across America, AUHSD teachers had a kind of psychological legroom to learn, innovate, and design—and teach to a new North Star of deeper, purposeful learning.¹⁴

One part of the district’s big picture was to create a shared vision and an ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship with higher education and business partners aligned to career pathways leading to careers and jobs for students. Another part, initiated by then Chief Academic Officer Manuel Colón, was investing in full-day, community-centered events at every school site designed for students and families, with educators, to continue to reimagine what school should and could be.

As the district deepens and spreads its shared vision, teachers are provided with space to innovate. For several years, the district created a Genius Hour for teachers and students to research, explore, and investigate a topic, passion, or interest that is completely unrelated to the curriculum or their job description. For Monique, she not only led the development of Link Crew for AUHSD, but also discovered and adapted Thrively, a program to identify student strengths, understand their well-being, and help teachers work with them in managing hope as well as making academic progress.

Space for innovation. Permission for teachers to create and adapt. Shared vision—from classroom to community. The outcomes have been noteworthy.

Figure 1.1 AUHSD Learner Progress

| OUR LEARNER PROGRESS  | | | |
|--|---------|---------|--|
| | 2022–23 | 2023–24 | |
| Graduation Rates | 91.0% | 93.2% | Above state average |
| A–G Completion | 54.3% | 54.4% | Above state average |
| AP Course Enrollment/ Pass | 2,216 | 2,516 | More students taking and passing |
| Dual Enrollment | 2,098 | 2,060 | Maintaining and increasing class selection |
| CTE Pathway Completion | 34.6% | 39.7% | Second in county Almost twice state average |
| State Seal of Billiteracy | 23.1% | 25.0% | Second in county |
| State Seal of Civic Engagement | 3,039 | 2,735 | First in county and state |

Source: AUHSD

Graduation rates continue to rise—increasing from 85% in 2014 to 93.2% in 2024—and over half of students (54%) are officially prepared for college. Both of these stats rank above the California state average. AUHSD student A–G completion rates are better than those of a number of Orange County districts. And perhaps, most strikingly, the district’s English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities (SWD) fare far better on A–G completion than their local counterparts (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 A–G Rates in 2022 for Orange County Students

| A-G RATES IN 2022 FOR ORANGE COUNTY STUDENTS | | | | | | |
|--|---------|------|------|------|----------|--------------|
| UNLIMITED YOU ORANGE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT | | | | | | |
| PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS MEETING A–G (COLLEGE ADMISSION STANDARDS) IN 2022 | | | | | | |
| DISTRICT | OVERALL | EL | SWD | SED | HOMELESS | FOSTER YOUTH |
| Anaheim UHSD | 55.9 | 27.7 | 22 | 51.5 | 40.9 | 24.2 |
| Brea OUSD | 62.3 | 17.2 | 15.2 | 43.5 | 53.8 | N/A |
| Fullerton JUHSD | 58.5 | 24.8 | 12.8 | 48.5 | 31.1 | 33.3 |
| Garden Grove USD | 59.4 | 35.3 | 15.5 | 57.4 | 36.6 | 28.6 |
| HB UHSD | 56.1 | 20.6 | 12.6 | 46.8 | 32.7 | N/A |
| Newport Mesa USD | 58.8 | 20 | 17.9 | 42.8 | 34.8 | N/A |
| Orange USD | 49.9 | 15.9 | 10.5 | 32.9 | 12.5 | 9.5 |
| Placentia YLUSD | 56.3 | 24.3 | 15.1 | 42.9 | 25.7 | 44.4 |
| Saddleback USD | 55.5 | 8.2 | 8.9 | 34.1 | 19.6 | N/A |
| Santa Ana USD | 38.3 | 20.9 | 17.8 | 37.5 | 31.6 | 18.5 |

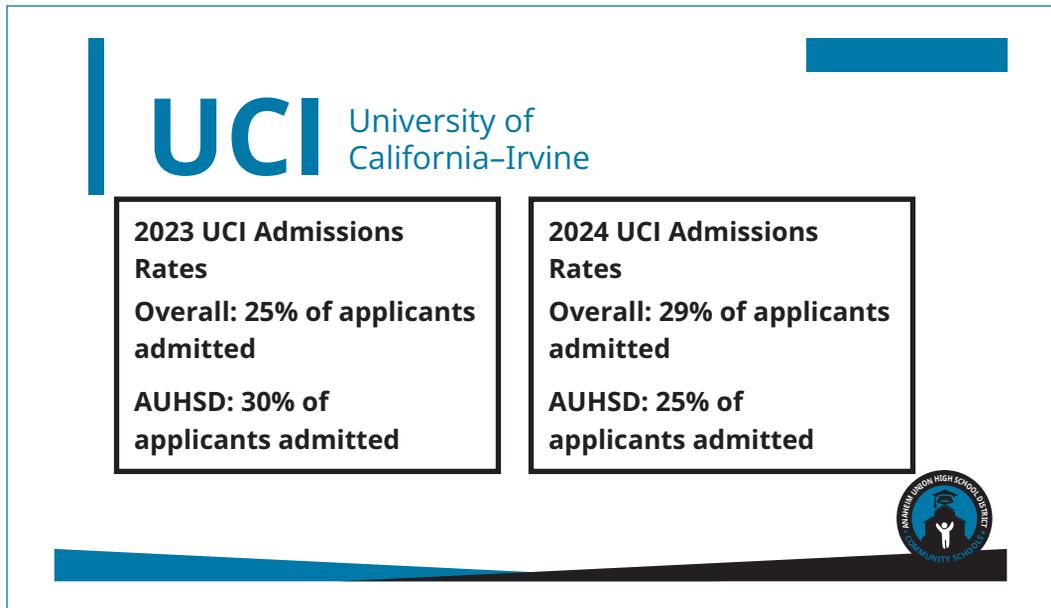
Source: AUHSD

Note: SED = socioeconomically disadvantaged

More students are taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Career and technical education (CTE) pathway completion rates are growing—almost twice the state average. AUHSD is a state leader in the percentage of students earning the Seal of Biliteracy and Seal of Civic Engagement (see Figure 1.1). In addition, all AUHSD schools have been recognized as a California Democracy School, and between 2021 and 2025, the district won eight California Civic Learning Awards of Excellence, the most by any school district in the state.

There is more. The district has made huge strides in its graduates’ transfer rates from community college to universities. AUHSD graduates have impressive admission and persistence rates at the University of California–Irvine (see Figure 1.3), which consistently ranks within the top 10 public universities in the United States.

Figure 1.3 UC Irvine Student Admission Rates



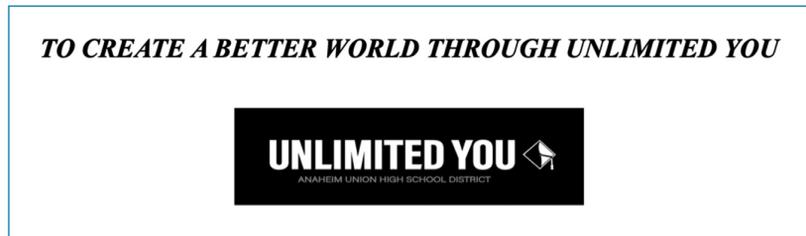
Source: AUHSD

But here is what may be most important. The overall UC Irvine student persistent rate is 87%; for AUHSD graduates attending UC Irvine, it is 94%. UC Irvine Administrator Santana Ruiz told us the district's focus on the 5Cs is the key to AUHSD graduates being college-ready.

According to the California School Dashboard, standardized test scores of AUHSD are not stellar. But they are improving—more so in English language arts than math. Chronic absenteeism is dropping—from 25% in 2023 to 21% in 2025. These student outcomes are not possible without teachers *freed up* for innovation.

The Unlimited You

AUHSD has had an unremitting approach to innovation for purposeful, deeper learning, defined boldly by its districtwide brand, the Unlimited You—a felicitous expression of its commitment to fostering learning environments where students are empowered to explore and realize their full potential (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 The AUHSD Brand: Unlimited You

Source: AUHSD

We have been big fans of Peter Senge’s work, ever since reading the *Fifth Discipline* (1990). One of Senge’s quotes, “The purpose of education is to allow me to become me, within the context of the society in which I exist, so that I can contribute meaningfully to that society,” resonated with Mike, leading him in 2016 to a major branding of the district, with pro bono support from a marketing expert skilled in tapping into the emotional response of potential customers. With the Unlimited You, all of the district’s schools were branded with a common set of values and beliefs. Too often schools within districts are seen as islands, scattered in a body of water.

As we discuss more fully in Chapters 4 and 5, too many AUHSD schools still remain disconnected to each other, and too many teachers lament the heavy hand of the district office in its quest to innovate quickly. “Many times, top-down decisions are made, and our input as teachers is still requested after the fact, and it can be quite frustrating,” Monique said. Yet, she kept coming back to the agency so many teachers have, ruminating about how much opportunity teachers have to lead from the classroom. Maybe this is why so few of the district’s 1,200 teachers leave.

Monique described how Link Crew—a program from the Boomerang Project—was brought to the district by like-minded teachers in their efforts to personalize learning by having 11th and 12th graders serve as peer mentors for younger students.

Monique

“It was built from the ground up. It wasn’t an administrator coming to us and saying this is a program that you have to do. . . . Everyone needs a mentee, and everyone needs a mentor . . . and when administrators change, we make sure they know this is how we envision teaching and learning. Link Crew in our district has always been teacher driven.”

Monique and other teaching partners, like her longtime collaborator, Krisdee Kanaly, had the space and time to reinvent Link Crew with their vision of building student agency through peer mentoring. She pointed out to us,

through the lens of Link Crew, how she would scale a sense of belonging among teachers and students together:

There's an important element to Link Crew, which is what we have in place to help our students build healthy relationships with one another. The key is the mentorship of the older one with the younger one. And always, it needs to be 100% of the time that every student has someone they can turn to. But it's also, again, through activity-based lessons showing how to widen their scope with friends. Because if they feel welcome and they feel like they have a place and they feel like they're missed when they're gone, we're going to see a whole lot more of these academic improvements that we're always looking to measure.

Bagga agreed:

Bagga

"The Link Crew teachers actually knew me for my four years of high school. We had academic checks—and peer advising. You always had someone to talk to. My teachers taught me about mentorship, giving me an idea of the impact we could truly have on each other's lives."

Listening to Monique and Bagga reminds us of the importance of lesson #5 of Charles Leadbeater's "ten lessons in placing student agency at the heart of schools":

Here is the iron law of co-agency: it is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students. Students only become agents when capable teachers do as well.¹⁵

As we thought about Bagga and Monique more, other words by Leadbeater rang loudly for us:

Student agency requires students and teachers to do great work, together. It is *power with*, the power that comes from relationships, rather than *power over* that comes from hierarchy, in action.¹⁶

Here is the iron law of co-agency: it is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students.

Monique has agency to lead from the classroom.

And so does Bagga. As a student ambassador, and now as a graduate intern for the district, Bagga and his friend, Dheeraj Koppu, are a part of the district's strategy to infuse AI into teaching and learning. In AUHSD, student voice is not a slogan, but a strategy. For example, the AUHSD student ambassadors extend well beyond the traditional concept of student body president and officers. The ambassadors, who meet monthly with their principals and the superintendent, are part of a larger student voice strategy that funnels the insights, experiences, and interests of students into top-level decision-making including formal representation at the school board.

We wonder how the same dynamic, rooted in taking time to know each other, to “give up” each other's story, can spark the kind of dynamic with all teachers and students, fueling leadership by both. We wonder how similar mindsets, also grounded in knowing the other, can advance more deeply the collaborative work between the district and its union as well as among the district and its growing numbers of allied partners in both the public and private sectors.

Efforts to create system change in public education, past and present, rarely have taken into account the emotional quotient in the process of changing rules, roles, and relationships. System leaders can learn a lot from Bagga and Monique and how the emotional quotient fuels successful students and effective and joyful teachers.

The Emotional Quotient

Bagga was clear about students building relationships with their teachers. He said, “I believe it all comes down to similarity and comfortability; the reason I was able to form such a strong connection with Ms. Flores was because of the vulnerability and shared experiences we had.”

How unique is Monique and Bagga's student–teacher relationship? We do not know. Mike believes about 25% of the district's teachers are committed to purposeful, deeper learning. Monique estimates about 25% of the teachers at her school teach in innovative, engaging ways. No one has a precise number. Yet, every teacher and administrator we interviewed reported that many more teachers could teach for purposeful, deeper learning—under the right conditions. Monique said, “Another 50% would follow the 25% innovative teachers under the right conditions. The potential is there.”

In the prologue, we pointed out that “systemness” requires that people, at all levels of the system, see themselves, in one way or another, as the system itself. Organizational change is a complex process that involves not only structural shifts but also significant emotional dynamics. And the prospects of change, at the individual or organizational level, are often met with resistance, which is driven by fear, uncertainty, and loss of control.¹⁷

Perhaps this is why Mike turned to Awareness in Motion (AIM), a leadership development company, to bring the emotional quotient into

leading in the journey toward systemness. Since 2017, approximately 500 staff (educators) have been engaged in workshops, retreats, and executive coaching to increase their self-awareness, mindset awareness, relational awareness, and systems awareness.

Sarah Suatoni, managing partner and lead facilitator and coach at AIM, told us:

Too often people start with systems change, and they introduce some new program, and in the case of a school, some new curriculum, without developing the self-awareness tools and the relational tools to roll out that change.

We describe the impact of AIM more fully in Chapter 4. But in the meantime, we want you to consider a bit more of Sarah's sagacity:

When we are talking about scaling up in education, I think about teachers and how we ensure they have confidence and curiosity. Teachers need to believe in themselves and their mission and then be able to stay curious. The aspect that I see most often in human interactions is curiosity—where we pause and we say to the other person, “Hey, what do you think?” Or, “What is happening for you?”

As the district pushes forward in 2025–2026, its leaders are investing in school redesign and educators who can find their own personal mastery, together, in a new grammar of schooling.

The Forward Push

AUHSD has been working toward the ambitious goal of ensuring every one of its 26,000 teenagers is known by name and story. More work needs to be done.

Teachers and administrators report that too many students are disengaged and chronically absent. Graduation rates for English language learners (80%), students with disabilities (76%), and foster youth (78%) are lower than they should be. Not every teacher teaches to the whole adolescent. Too many teachers teach and work in isolation from each other. And as Monique mentioned as her voice lowered with discomfort, “Some teachers have a ridiculously high sink-or-swim philosophy when it comes to grading their students.” Individual teachers have control over how they grade—and the way they grade affects how teachers and students work together.

We wondered how teachers learned from colleagues like Monique. Then we realized how each of the district's 20 schools do not necessarily learn from each other as much as they could or should. Then we thought about how district office administrators lament that they too often work in their professional silos of human relations, professional development,

technology, and community schooling. And then we thought about what so many teachers told us: Too few district office administrators, including the curriculum specialists, have had the recent teaching experiences requisite for assisting them in reaching young people, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. And then there is the district's labor-management contract, which follows the factory model of schooling (addressed in Chapter 6).

Changing the culture of teacher-administrator relationships has been core to the fundamental goals of the AUHSD journey. The district, as you will read more about later, has made considerable progress. But, so far, it has done so without making significant shifts in the grammar of schooling—the bell schedule, the calendar, the teacher contract, and the one-teacher-one-classroom (with 38 students each) factory model of teaching and learning. The district has more work to do to rethink and renew strained relationships between labor (teachers' union) and management (top-level central office administrators). For the time being treat this factor—union-management transformation—as a significant condition of the structure and culture of public schooling. We will take up this aspect in several of the chapters, returning significantly to it in Chapter 6.

Put another way, breaking away from the factory model of schooling requires far more than a series of technical moves. It requires attention to the emotional quotient in the school and system change equation. Leaning into the story of Bagga and Monique, we can be more explicit in fostering the development of deeper learning on a wider basis both within and external to the district. We know the process of change cannot be overly precise and prescriptive, but it needs to be grounded in research evidence and the voices of all stakeholders. Redesigning the system requires leaders—in district office and those who lead the teachers' union—to develop and use a high level of emotional intelligence in successfully engaging each other in how people, resources, and tools are used. The old grammar of schooling must be addressed. And the teaching profession needs considerable reimagination. As we point out later, the district has begun to accelerate efforts to tackle both.

In sum, the story of Bagga and Monique speaks unflinchingly to the human element in public education, and the importance of emotions, particularly at the dawn of the age of AI. Their experiences as a student and teacher, working together, will allow us later in the book to share with our readers how AUHSD has made progress regarding the 8 Factors, and what more needs to be done.

All along in this book we are capturing AUHSD at an acceleration point. Over the past five years, the district co-developed with staff, students, community, and the school board its core driving framework of Vision, Values, and Career Pathways. It has reached a level of collective consciousness as systemwide ownership, participation, and action have deepened. From 2026 to 2030 we believe the Anaheim community is poised to accomplish deep transformation. In Chapter 2, we explore more fully the AUHSD journey to purposeful, deeper learning—with lessons that can help other district communities address, and maybe even transcend, the growing policy and political challenges of our times.

Key Takeaways

- ▶ AUHSD has invested and continues to invest in developing shared-purpose meaning-making with intentional structures through the Anaheim Collaborative, each school's regular visioning days, and permission for any teacher at any time to develop their own ideas for knowing each student by name and story.
- ▶ The genuine connection between teachers and students, like the Monique and Bagga moments, takes hold because AUHSD creates space for innovations, focuses on the Unlimited You in young people, and places a premium on the emotional side of system change.
- ▶ The district places a high priority on the Unlimited You, yet not all teachers place a high priority on knowing each student by name and story or have the mindsets and skills to teach for deeper learning.
- ▶ The district has yet to attend to the grammar of schooling that historically has tamped down the spread of innovative, deeper, purposeful learning practices—*but it is beginning to do so*.

Reflective Questions

- ▶ Where can you find powerful stories of teachers and students working together in your district? How do you measure student and teacher belonging? How extensive is it?
- ▶ How do you attend to the emotional quotient in change management?
- ▶ What tools and processes do you now have in place that you can use to better understand the innovations underway in your district, and how they can move from school to school and teacher to teacher?
- ▶ Do you have a process of documenting your Bagga and Monique moments in telling the larger story of your district to reshape the negative narrative that hovers over public education?

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