Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) is located in the agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley in Tulare County, California. Considered to be a fringe town school district at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, LUSD serves approximately 4,100 students in grades K-12.¹ The school district is comprised of one high school serving grades 9-12 and six elementary schools serving grades K-8. An alternative education school provides opportunities for additional students in grades 9-12. Within the school district’s student population, approximately 95% of the students are reported as economically disadvantaged, and 45% are considered English Language Learners.²

Fueled by a desire to shift the existing paradigms of social promotion, low student outcomes, and a trend of graduating students who did not have the skills needed to truly succeed in either college or career, the school district committed to radically re-examine the way they educate students. As Superintendent Tom Rooney stated, “We are not just reforming education. We are completely dismantling the traditional time-based structures and building a learner-centered system of empowerment.”³

**Beyond Reform - Systemic Shifts to Empower Change**

In 2007, LUSD embarked upon a complete strategic redesign. The district engaged stakeholders from all areas, including teachers, district leaders, principals, families, union leaders, community members, and city officials to create a new vision for teaching and learning, all centering on the single question, “What does a Lindsay learner look like?” The mission and vision that emerged from these conversations set the course for the district to pursue a customized learning experience for all students in the district. They named this initiative their “Performance-Based System” (PBS).

LUSD believes that access and all learning should be 24/7 for students as well as adult learners, so building the infrastructure to support that target was one of the first challenges that the district had to overcome. Through the “Lindsay Community Wi-Fi Program,” the district made Internet access for all learners a reality. When the district was unable to get much support from the cell service providers for the area, they developed a unique solution: they networked the town. The district established themselves as their own ISP (Internet Service Provider), set up towers, and knocked on doors to find residents who were willing to host data network signal repeaters on their properties. Today, the system runs through the district’s network and servers and ensures that all district learners, adult and youth alike, have equity of access to online resources and coursework. In addition, all LUSD learners are equipped with digital devices, with the kind of device used varying according to the age and needs of the learner.

**Assessment and Accountability that Works**

LUSD Director of Advancement, Barry Sommer, identified some of the other changes that the district made during the journey towards highly customized, performance-based learning, some of which were perhaps even more radical. The school district is adapting and personalizing the traditional structures such as four-year graduation plans as well as grade levels for its students. Instead, students engage in “Content Levels” in each academic area based on their own academic progression. For example, a student who would ordinarily be in 5th grade in another district - taking 5th grade ELA, math, social studies, and science courses

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² [https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/54719930000000/2018](https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/54719930000000/2018)
regardless of her or his mastery levels of content the previous school year - at LUSD, could be engaging in Content Level 6 science or math while needing Content Level 4 work in the area of ELA.

Not only do grade levels look different at LUSD, but so do students’ grades. Instead of receiving grades on a scale ranging from A through F, students are given feedback on a 0-4 continuum based on the Marzano Proficiency Scale. At Level 0, a student has not yet begun engaging in learning a specific standard, while at Level 2, they have a grasp of the foundational concepts and the academic vocabulary associated with the standard. Level 4 mastery indicates that a student can apply the knowledge learned in a real-world context, can generate or test hypotheses, or can recognize and use the concepts covered even when they are presented in a new or unfamiliar setting. Students at LUSD must attain at least Level 3 mastery of a standard in order to move on to the next learning progression.

The digital platform used to house LUSD’s curriculum (aligned to Common Core State Standards) and standards-aligned playlists is available at all times for students, staff, and parents to access and monitor student progress. As one high school student stated, “I think it is great that we can see how we are doing with our work. Our teachers help us to understand how to track our own learning and take responsibility for it.” One of the parents of a high school student remarked that she was surprised at how engaged her daughter was with monitoring her own progress. “Being able to track her own progress through the computer system has really kept my daughter’s interest in school alive. Having this information available to her and us [parents] is really important.”

The school district’s Curriculum Team invested several years working to build out what they refer to as their Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum (GVC), which ensures the opportunity to learn for all students, providing equal access to highly effective teachers and protected instructional time to allow movement towards those standards. As the team designed the students’ learning progressions, they remained focused on the overarching guiding question, “What are the essential look-fors for highly personalized, mass customized learning?” This became the foundation for the current curriculum playlists along with the rubric-based assessments aligned to specific learning targets.

**Teachers as Architects of Learning**

Teachers at LUSD are true learning facilitators. Class time is dynamic and changes based on ongoing evaluation of student needs. Instructional time may be comprised of small interactive groups, a blended format such as station rotation, or whole group instruction. Students are also exposed to a core of grade-level content within their normal learning cohorts, which helps promote social interactions, generating powerful conversations and allowing students still learning remedial content to continue to show growth towards grade-level standards. Specialized blended learning assistants are also on hand at each school site to support teachers and school leaders in selecting and integrating digital tools into the classroom work.

Along with LUSD’s use of blended learning to customize education for each student, Director Sommer was very clear when he stated, “At Lindsay, we see technology as a tool. It is an accelerant to our work - it helps us build with speed, accuracy, and scale. But it is no replacement for the hard work that our learning facilitators [teachers] do everyday.” In fact, every technology purchase that the district makes must pass a simple test to even be considered for use in the district: will it have a positive impact of students learning? Director of 21st Century Learning Nik Namba elaborated on the high degree of importance the district places on preparing and supporting teachers within the district. “Without a doubt...our learning facilitators are what makes the difference in our model here at Lindsay. They are the reason for our students’ success, and we make learning a priority for everyone [teachers and students alike].”

**Professional Development: Striving for Excellence**

In order to effectively prepare and support teachers working within a performance-based system, school leaders, in partnership with teachers, have designed a professional development structure that provides
the meaningful and relevant knowledge that the teachers need to be successful while also modeling the personalized approach to teaching and learning for the students. Guided by the belief that teachers and administrators are responsible for driving and sustaining success throughout the district, the district holds high expectations for each individual to continually develop themselves as professionals as well as to help nurture the professional growth of their peers. LUSD is committed to deep, sustained, and personalized professional development for all staff on a regular basis.

LUSD maintains a core set of beliefs and guiding principles about teachers and their practice. These beliefs and principles drive the scope of professional development within the school district and are identified as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs and Guiding Principles About Learning Facilitators and Teaching4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators are models of continuous learning and improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators inspire, motivate, and empower learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teaching is collaborative and involves on-going learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators set the conditions for a safe, welcoming, and joyful classroom environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators are knowledgeable and competent in pedagogy and human development</td>
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<td>• Teaching reflects the current research on learning and cognition</td>
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<td>• Learning Facilitators relate to and connect with learners</td>
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<td>• Teaching and learning are a cause and effect relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators are the single most important factor in learners understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learning Facilitators are future-focused</td>
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Specific professional development opportunities made available to teachers and administrators are influenced by teacher evaluations, individual learning goals, and the specific interests of each staff member. Just as the learning experiences for students within the district are personalized, learning opportunities for teachers and administrators are tailored to the specific needs of the individual in an effort to help teachers improve their practice.

Each year, teachers and administrators are offered Summer Institutes (SI) that are frequently facilitated by education partners or internal staff members. During these SIs, staff members participate in a 3-5 day session focused on a particular topic that is relevant to instructional effectiveness or school leadership, in general. Some topics specific to instruction include English Language Development (ELD), Project Based Learning (PBL), Blended Learning, and Using Technology in the Classroom. Leadership topics may include Total Leaders Framework, Servant Leadership, Mass Customized Learning in Leadership, Breakthrough Coach and Evaluation Procedures. School leaders within LUSD determine the actual topics for SIs based on identified needs and interests of teachers and administrators as a way of providing the greatest opportunities for relevance of content and the personalization of learning.

Coupled with attendance at an SI, teachers receive follow-up mentoring and coaching provided by third-party professional development partners of the district. This mentoring is provided through a combination of face-to-face and virtual sessions. In total, LUSD commits annually to approximately 1,000 hours of mentoring and coaching support to teachers districtwide. Administrators are supported in the same manner with mentoring and coaching with approximately 400 hours of support each year. Director Namba made it clear that “investing in our learning facilitators is one of our highest priorities.”

The professional development partners that are selected to work with LUSD teachers and administrators have established credibility and effectiveness with respect to innovative learning models and instructional

4 http://lindsayunified.cyberschool.com/files/user/1364/file/LindsayLeads_StrategicGuide_1_16_2018.pdf
practice. Such partners include Beatrice McGarvey (author of *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning in the Age of Empowerment*), the Mass Customized Learning National Alliance, Technology and Innovation in Education, and the John D. Welty Center for Educational Policy and Leadership. The school district has also developed a partnership with BetterLesson, Inc., which offers teachers and administrators professional development opportunities in the form personalized online coursework supported by instructional coaches that help LUSD staff develop deep understandings of concepts and skills associated with teaching in a performance-based learning environment. Maintaining these partnerships and developing new relationships is a central focus of the school district’s team leading the professional development efforts, and this focus will continue as the district continues to evolve.

**Commitment to Building Capacity**

The development of the LUSD “Performance-Based System” was rooted in the need to help all students within the school community develop the knowledge, skills, and mindset to be successful in their future, whatever that future may be. While the drive to make such a transformative shift in education was truly based on the needs of the specific LUSD community, the significant success that the district has realized has gained national attention. School leaders from across the United States travel to LUSD to learn about the successes and challenges that have shaped the school district’s program. Namba offered, “We open our doors to approximately 300 visitors each year to come and see how our schools work.” One elementary principal elaborated, stating, “Having so many visitors come to our school to see what we are doing and how we are impacting students is very validating.”

Clearly, LUSD is not only committed providing a transformative, world-class education for their own school community, they are also working hard to share their success with other schools as they grow their own personalized or customized learning programs. Moving forward, LUSD school leaders will focus on the ongoing improvement and evolution of their program. To this end, LUSD has developed the capacity of a team of young learners, staff, parents, and board members who serve as external trainers, coaches, and consultants to help others with their school redesigns; this team is called “Lindsay Leads.” The school district also continues to partner with providers of digital content, performance-based data tracking systems, funding partners, and thought leaders to make their program the best that it can be. Lindsay remains committed to accelerating the growth of other schools and districts across the United States as well by sharing their lessons learning widely.

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