

BEYOND REFORM

**Systemic Shifts *Toward*
Personalized Learning**

Lindsay Unified School District

Foreword by Robert J. Marzano



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CHAPTER 1

Preparing for Change



Yesenia

Lindsay High School, Class of 2008

Yesenia, whose parents are migrant workers, finished her required courses in time to graduate in the middle of her senior year. She was full of smiles at the small December ceremony, but soon thereafter her joy turned to anxiety as she realized that she had graduated without purpose or direction and had no idea what her future looked like.

The oldest of seven children, Yesenia felt the weight of being both a role model and a provider for her siblings. Now she was overtaken with despair, worrying that the poverty with which her parents struggled would characterize her own future as well. In January, Yesenia returned to campus at Lindsay High School, asking to see the principal. She sat in one of the blue plastic waiting-room chairs with tears streaming down her face.

"Yesenia, what's wrong?" the principal asked when he saw her. "You just graduated!"

She looked up miserably. "That's just it," she said. "I'm done with school, but I don't know what to do."

Yesenia left the office that day uncertain about what to do, and the principal realized that yet another student had been allowed to graduate without a viable plan for life.

Junior

Lindsay High School, Class of 2007

On a hot day at the end of June, Lindsay High School's newly appointed principal unlocked the door to his office for the very first time. He entered, set down the boxes he was carrying, and began to unpack, until he heard a knock at his door. Looking up, he saw the school secretary, who said, "Mr. Gonzales is here with his son, Junior, to see you."

Smiling, the principal shook hands with them and asked what he could do for them.

"Well, Junior graduated from Lindsay High School just a couple of days ago," Mr. Gonzales began.

Turning to Junior, the principal said, "Congratulations. So what are you going to be doing next?"

"That's the problem," Mr. Gonzales said, shaking his head sadly. Gesturing to the copy of the Foothills Sun-Gazette on a nearby shelf, he asked the principal to hand it to him.

Unsure of what to expect, the principal handed the paper to the father, who, in turn, passed it to Junior.

"Go ahead, son. Read this article in the newspaper."

Junior quietly held the folded newspaper, his eyes downcast and nervous. "You are a graduate of Lindsay High School," urged his father. "Read it."

Junior looked up at his father and, in a low voice, said, "Dad, you know I can't read."

The Lindsay Unified School District Context

Lindsay Unified School District, which serves more than four thousand learners from the city of Lindsay and the surrounding communities, is located in California's agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley. Lindsay is a small, rural community known for its citrus orchards and olive groves. Home to a large population of immigrant families, Lindsay is composed of a high percentage of families living below the federal poverty level, many with low levels of literacy in English and low levels of parent education. Many of the district's learners come

from migrant families who work in the surrounding fields and production areas. In 2016, 83 percent of Lindsay learners were from low-income families, and more than 550 learners were legally considered homeless. Approximately 85 percent of Lindsay learners were eligible for free or reduced-price meals (although in practice, 100 percent of Lindsay learners receive them). Ninety-three percent were Latino, and approximately 50 percent were English learners (California Department of Education, 2016; California Department of Education Data Reporting Office, n.d.).

These statistics are the result of a demographic shift within the district. In the late 1990s, the poverty level began to rise in Lindsay. Middle- and upper-class families began to leave, and the number of immigrant families increased dramatically. As the new community members began enrolling their children in school, Lindsay Unified saw exponential growth in its number of English learners (ELs). This change presented a major dilemma for Lindsay Unified leaders and teachers, most of whom had little or no preparation to teach ELs. Many resisted the idea that they should be required to teach these learners, while others had the will but not the capacity or resources to successfully do so. In reference to this learner population, the superintendent at the time said, “The truth is that back in 1998, we didn’t know how to meet their needs.”

English learners were not the only group that needed to be better served; Lindsay Unified’s overall Academic Performance Index (API) scores were some of the lowest in the state (California Department of Education, 2001). Graduation rates were in the low 70th percentile of California districts, and, between 1999 and 2009, nine of the district’s eleven high school valedictorians required remedial courses in college.

The need to better serve Lindsay learners was obvious, but the system was broken on multiple levels. School facilities were in abysmal shape. Budgetary practices were questionable at best. The district had become a revolving door for teachers; more than half of the staff at any given school were new each year. Lindsay Unified’s board of trustees (that is, its board of education) and the teachers’ union were involved in a dispute over salaries and binding arbitration, and there was talk of a strike. Attracting quality leadership at both the school and district levels had

become almost impossible. These trends painted a clear picture for district leaders: the traditional system was failing Lindsay learners.

Early Transformations

Early efforts to reform the district's education system began in the late 1990s and addressed the immediate systemic and organizational issues that needed to be resolved before the district could effectively grapple with deeper academic challenges. The first steps included building leadership capacity. As a key early strategy, the district hired a new assistant superintendent who could help address the district's cultural and academic challenges and repair relationships among staff. The new assistant superintendent, a Latina educator and a former migrant learner herself, entered the district as an established and well-respected figure in the broader Lindsay community.

In the dispute between the board of trustees and the union, the superintendent acted as a mediator, negotiating a compromise between the two sides. The compromise included the board updating salary schedules to make positions more attractive to outside candidates. The administration also developed a centralized process for new hires that allowed the district to strategically select the right people for pivotal positions, including teachers, vice principals, and district personnel who directly impacted teaching and learning practices. Further changes in leadership included hiring a new chief business officer and a new human relations director. Recognizing that new leadership was needed at the site level, the district replaced several principals with experienced school leaders who had strong instructional backgrounds, were effective problem solvers, and had proven track records of leading substantial and meaningful change. During this same period, board members received training to help them better understand their roles and responsibilities as trustees.

With the intent of helping to build new relationships and trust among staff members, district leaders established informal monthly meetings for discussions with teachers, support personnel, and union representatives. These meetings set the stage for relaxed exchanges of information and ideas. Fostering these new relationships proved to be

essential for establishing the necessary foundation of trust for the next set of changes, which focused on improving academic achievement.

In the early 2000s, additional reform efforts continued, focused on the most pressing academic challenges for Lindsay learners: language acquisition and literacy. Too many learners were not reading at grade level, and too many teachers did not know how to teach them to read. To address this issue, the district adopted Reading Recovery, an individualized literacy intervention program designed to help first graders whose reading skills were below grade level. Reading Recovery instilled in staff a new sense of urgency to improve learner achievement; they began using assessments and data to better understand individual learner needs and to inform instructional practices. Because it is so individualized, Reading Recovery served as a stepping stone toward the Performance Based System that Lindsay Unified had begun envisioning for the whole district. Learners who had previously fallen through the cracks were rapidly improving in their language acquisition and literacy, and, as teachers saw evidence of learner success, resistance to instructional changes began to dissipate.

Although Reading Recovery was yielding results for struggling young readers, the district knew that more improvement was needed for learners across grades and content areas. Lindsay Unified's broader instructional improvement efforts incorporated a set of research-based strategies, which, if implemented correctly, "have a high probability of enhancing student achievement for all students in all subject areas at all grade levels" (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 7). These strategies and their purposes include the following.

- **Identifying similarities and differences:** Fosters more complex thinking through comparison, contrast, and analysis
- **Summarizing and note taking:** Promotes comprehension through analysis, interpretation, and learner language
- **Reinforcing effort and providing recognition:** Supports perseverance and establishes the connection between effort and success

- **Assigning homework and practice:** Cultivates extended learning beyond the classroom that is directly tied to learning from the classroom
- **Nurturing nonlinguistic representations:** Nurtures cognitive capacity and supports academic growth in second language learners
- **Furthering cooperative learning:** Furthers all learning experiences through social interaction, collaborative thinking, and accountability
- **Setting objectives and providing feedback:** Engenders student accountability, awareness of learning purposes and outcomes, and opportunities for formative feedback
- **Generating and testing hypotheses:** Supports inductive and deductive reasoning as well as critical thinking in all subjects
- **Frames cues, questions, and advance organizers:** Frames learning with visual cues and opportunities for critical consideration and reflection

This list of strategies was not meant to be a simple linear checklist of surface-level instructional strategies. Rather, it was intended as a tool for the reflective practice of teachers and as part of a comprehensive framework of instruction (Marzano, Norford, Paynter, Pickering, & Gaddy, 2001). It guided teachers of all grade levels through the thought processes of effective pedagogy and instructional planning. As a critical first step toward a research-based framework of instruction, these strategies governed the shift toward practices that changed the face of instruction in Lindsay. By implementing these strategies, teachers developed more robust and effective instructional skillsets. In addition, teachers challenged their own long-standing notions of educational practices and worked to shift instructional focus from activities to learning outcomes (Marzano, Norford, et al., 2001). This early focus on instruction in Lindsay Unified was the first time that the district had established a moral imperative for teaching and learning, and it eventually led to the deeper transformation to personalized learning.