

Schools and the Fall: Not the Same!



Tim Taylor
Executive Director
Small School Districts' Association

Generally, the months of September and October were time for school leaders and staff to enjoy the **quiet** Fall time. Schools would have few state and federal deadlines, board meetings were filled with the excitement of small-town football games, harvest festivals were abound and dress up parades were full of smiling student faces around Halloween. Staff was generally fresh from summer break. Leaves turn to striking colors for all of us to enjoy. The September/October time was my favorite for schools.

That has all changed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and with the 5th year of intense wildfires decimating small towns throughout California. There are no "dreamy" months in school settings as each day and week is filled with uncertainty and doubt. This is where your leadership plays such a critical role during this time in California school history. Whether you like it or not as Superintendent, Principal, or a Board Member, staff leadership during multiple crises' is the centerpiece for districts' student/staff wellness, hope and resilience.

It is imperative that district and school leadership focus on the following during this time:

1. Stay student focused. Easier said than done as adults are falling apart around you.
2. Stay in your lane. You have to laser focus on your district and your issues.
3. Put out positive messaging to your school community. What you are doing right and not what you are struggling with as a district.
4. Set your communication to the school and parent community to consistent times (for instance, every day or week you send out update notifications at 10:00 a.m.) This is the time to over communicate.
5. Explain the shocking impact of the Delta variant (and wildfires) on your school.

The hardest part of leading in today's world is discussing the future of your school. It is nearly impossible to talk about 3-year strategic plans or even the end of the school year. However, you can report to your school community that you, your board and all the staff are committed to providing the best education despite all the challenges that this year has presented so far. As THE leader of the district, it is imperative to give the school community confidence in you. You are the right person for the difficult work that is involved in running a district right now.

You got this!

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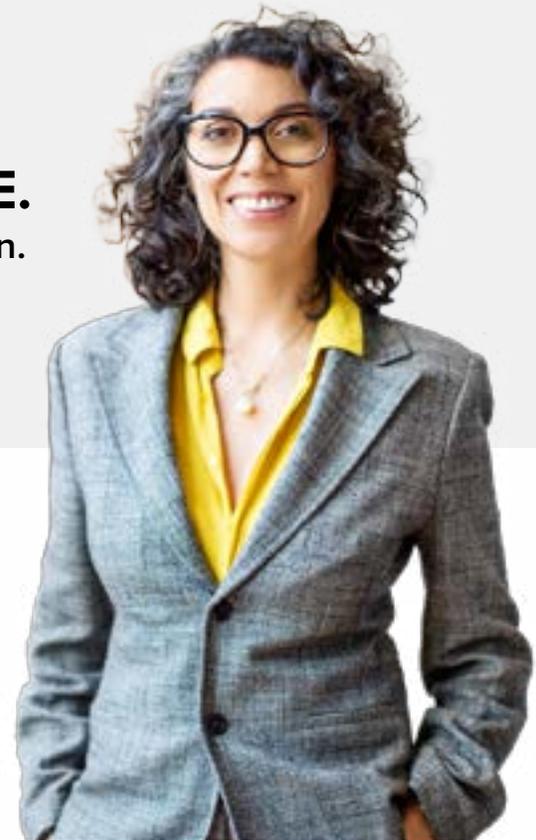
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Newsom Recall: All Eyes on Voter Turnout



Barrett Snider, Partner
Capitol Advisors Group

Polls show a close race on the question of whether to recall Governor Gavin Newsom, driven largely by a contrast of enthusiasm: Republicans are fired up at the prospect of kicking Newsom out of office, while

a lot of Democrats express low enthusiasm on the question. That's bad news for Newsom.

Newsom beat his challenger in 2018 by more than three million votes. The 2020 Presidential election showcased how blue California is, but that was with a foil like Donald Trump on the ballot to drive Democrats to vote. Biden beat Trump in California by 30 percentage points.

With polls showing a close race on September 14, Newsom needs Democrats to cast ballots in order for them to save his job. The open question in Sacramento amongst seasoned campaign

operatives is whether Democrats are engaged and supportive enough – without someone like Trump to get them excited.

Complicating matters for Newsom is a steady drumbeat of bad news: Delta variant spike – particularly as the school year begins, wildfires, power outages, a worsening drought, and even the splash of the debacle in Afghanistan will be a counter current.

Potentially working in Newsom's favor is the fact that the election will be entirely by mail, an advent from COVID-19 that Californians should expect to see more of in the future. That's largely seen as an advantage for him under the circumstances.

In the recall, there are only two questions. First, do voters want Newsom recalled? Second, who should replace him if the answer is yes. If the answer to the first question by a majority of voters is "no," then the second question is moot. If the answer is "yes," then the candidate in question #2 with the most votes (regardless of percentage) is the next Governor of California.

All indications are Democrats are very concerned about how this oddly timed, single-issue election will play out and all eyes will be on California on September 14, 2021.



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Relentless About Reading

Hope ESD uses data-driven methods to raise their ELA scores by more than 13%.



by Corrie Pelc

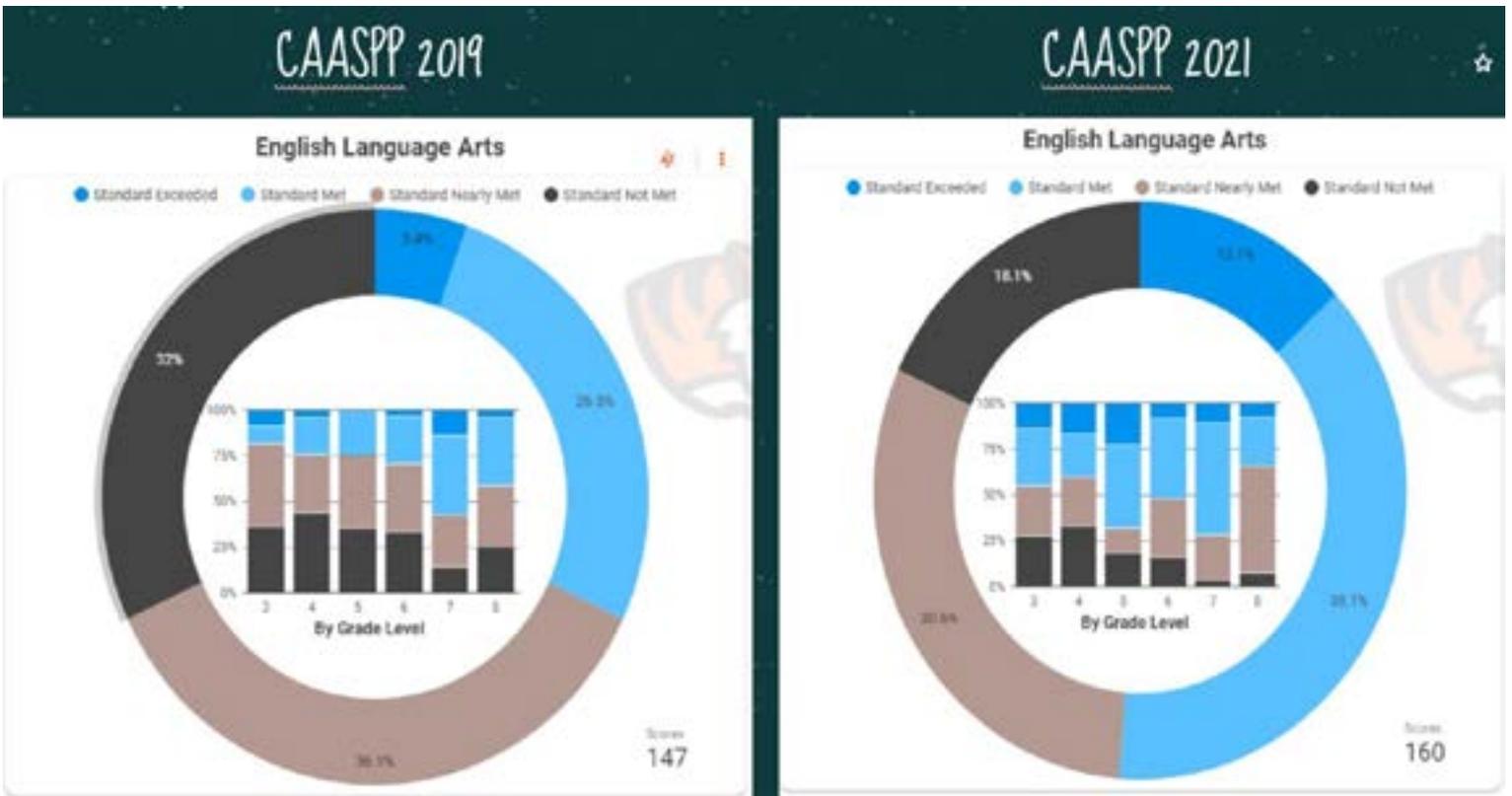
In March 2020, just like all school districts throughout California, Hope Elementary School District (ESD) in Tulare County found themselves needing to close their school and teach their 234 students in grades PreK through eighth at home.

Rather than using the pandemic as an excuse to let their students' learning slide by, Superintendent Melanie Matta and her 11 teachers rallied to keep their students progress at the same pace through constant communication, teamwork and a focus on reading and math.

The result? Hope ESD announced in early August they had achieved a 13.1% increase in their English Language Arts (ELA) scores for their 2021 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CASPP) test, compared to 2019. The district now had 50% of its students meeting or exceeding the state ELA standards, ranking them among the top performing school districts in Tulare County.

Although instructing students on Zoom was tough, Matta says they were able communicate to their students' families the importance of their children logging on every day as they were still in school. "Their kids are still needing to learn no matter what way we deliver it," she explains. "We were incessantly calling parents, calling the kids and talking to them ourselves, so that they knew we still cared, they needed to show up and they still had a job to do because we still had a job to do."

Also during this time, Matta says her teachers were relentless about continuing to teach reading online and having high expectations of their students. She says parents would stop by the school on a regular basis to pick up reading books for their students so they could continue their reading instruction online. And teachers would use a variety of different methods to continue to teach their students reading, from using document cameras to using Zoom breakout



Learning No Matter What

When California went into lockdown in March 2020, Matta says she and her teachers got together and quickly planned the best way for them to deliver instructional materials. They started with packets and within a few weeks had started teaching on Zoom. They continued on Zoom for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, and continued using Zoom when the 2020-2021 school year began.

rooms to take small groups to focus on reading. "We continued to maintain as much as possible our regular instructional day so that we didn't short ourselves on instruction," Matta adds.

Helping Those Behind

Although Hope ESD's teachers had continued their reading instruction online, when some students began coming back to the class-

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Relentless About Reading

Hope ESD uses data-driven methods to raise their ELA scores by more than 13%.



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room in a hybrid model in January 2021, and then almost all returned full-time in March 2021, the teachers could start seeing who was behind, says Glenda Landin — a first grade teacher at Hope ESD who this year will be the district’s reading specialist, focused on the reading skills of students in grades kindergarten through third.

“Zoom is very difficult to teach reading,” Landin explains. “You couldn’t see what reading strategy they were not using through Zoom. You could really see the difference between those kids who had not been in class and those who had.”

As students began coming back to the classroom, Landin says the teachers pushed the students to catch them up to their peers. “A lot of those kids would read twice a day they would read with me, and then they would read with the TA — so they got that extra (help) because they didn’t have the strategies,” she adds.

Data-Driven

Another constant that Hope ESD used to keep their reading levels up to achieve their CASPP test increase was continuing to stay data driven. “Data was still shared with kids as they took assessments — we didn’t relax that at all,” Matta explains. “Every time they took an assessment, the teachers would meet with those kids and say this is where you are, let’s set a goal for the next one.”

Matta says she also sits down with each of her teachers at the beginning of the school year and a few times throughout the year to go over their students’ data. “We look at what kids are growing, which kids are not growing, and then it’s my job to go in and assist,” she says. “Whatever it is, I have to be that leader to help my teacher get through that time.”

Landin says having a running record of data on all her students is crucial to their continued success — even for the younger students. She says through one-on-ones with her students, she benchmarks them so she evaluate where they are and what they might be missing. And now starting the year as the district’s reading specialist, she’s evaluating all students on their reading skills. “Just identifying



and pinpointing where do we need to go in and make sure they understand this leg of reading so they have that good foundation — that’s what I’ll help the teachers with,” Landin adds.

Reading is Fun

For other small school districts looking to increase their reading scores, Matta suggests making sure your teachers have the training they need to teach read-

ing. “Before I came, they had very little training in literacy, and that was huge,” she explains. “Training them in what I want to see out of them and then patting them on the back when they’re having successes, and then coaching them when they’re not having successes — that is really big.”

And creating a culture of trust and commitment is another important piece, Matta says. “Because we built a trust of commitment and culture, during the entire shutdown my staff trusted me to lead them in a way that allowed them flexibility, allowed them a little bit of anonymity,” she details. “It allowed them to relax a little bit in such a high-stress time in all of our lives. They knew that when I popped into their Zooms ... that it wasn’t an evaluative type of situation. Instead it was let me pop on so I can support you in the best way possible.”

Landin says both through the pandemic and into coming to the classroom, she and her fellow teachers did not stop making reading as fun as possible. In Landin’s classroom, she has a reward program where students earn points for different reading activities. Prize range from eating lunch with her in the classroom to gift cards. Many of the prizes she gives out she’s been able to get for free from area businesses, like a local hamburger restaurant that gave her coupons for free kid’s meals. “A lot of times if you ask businesses, they will donate things — you just have to ask,” Landin says.

Landin also has Flashlight Friday in her classroom, where the students have to find a place to stay and read away from their desk. She then turns off the lights and they read their books with flashlights. “Have one little part of your week that’s a fun reading activity,” she adds. “You have to hook them in reading — how can I get them hooked and buy in that this is fun, and we’re going to have fun, and reading is fun.”

Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) Small School District Symposium: A Voice in DC



Dr. Maritza Koeppen

Thursday, July 15th

First, we were welcomed by the incoming President Elect of ALAS, Dr. Francisco Duran from Arlington Public Schools. He spoke about the important work we are all doing and wished us a good two days together.

Keila Rodriguez presented next on the support for Migrant Children and Youth. She did a phenomenal job. One area the group recommended we improve on is courses for migrant children. Perhaps offering a national curriculum for these stu-

dents would be helpful so that they do not lose any credits along their education journey as they move from state to state. I also recommended we move the qualification of services from three years to five years in order to provide longer supports for students because after three years, they get dropped from the program.

We met in small groups to discuss our three biggest challenges and how we plan to address them. I spoke about staffing challenges in small districts for qualified candidates, the cost of goods and services from vendors, and facilities. I also spoke about the challenges of all of the compliance requirements we are required to do.

We had a lunch presentation from Southwest Foodservice Excellence. They discussed their very innovative meal program,

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Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) Small School District Symposium: A Voice in DC

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but they are not in California just yet. They are working on it. They provide fresh, quality food for students and they allow them to preorder their meals using an application for cell phones. Their food has increased lunch participation and attendance overall in many districts.

After lunch we met with Donna Harris-Aiken, Senior Advisor for Policy and Planning and Ian Rosenblum, Acting Assistant Secretary for OESE. He used to be with Ed Trust West. They provided us the information on the direction of the Biden Administration. They are focused on vision and mission of the department. Their immediate initiatives are related to the COVID impact on children, such as health and safety for schools. They also want to build parent confidence again in our school systems. They are working hard to build educational equity throughout our schools and will intentionally listen to stakeholder input.

They recognized the need and desire to listen to the education community. A few recommendations I suggested is having grants available specifically for small districts only. I spoke about a minimum guarantee for smalls since the impact could be minimal to some districts for certain grants. They also stated they have an interest in helping with technical assistance on the front end of a grant application, not just once we receive the grants. We expressed not wanting to compete with large urban districts for funds. We also spoke about the compliance pieces. I commented that my entire Title I, II, III, and Title IV budget is no more than \$100,000. I spend more time writing about the use of these funds, when we could be doing deep equity work for our students. I requested they advocate for infrastructure for schools, especially small districts and some flexibility since it's difficult to follow all of the procurement rules when you are small and rural.

The teacher pipeline was also discussed about the challenges of getting more qualified teachers in the classroom in small districts.

Friday, July 16th

We started the morning with a presentation from Dr. Gustavo Balderas. He is the superintendent of Edmonds School District in Washington state and the former Superintendent of the Year from AASA. He spoke about equity in action. He presented several areas needing an equity lense, such as human resources, instructional services, business departments etc. and walked us through things to consider as we hire individuals to lead the equity work throughout our schools. It was a very powerful presentation and I wish that smalls were able to dedicate as much time to the equity work as he presented, but it's hard with limited staffing. Instead, we spend our time working on compliance.

Afterwards, Emmanuel Caudillo, Senior Advisor, White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative presented about access and opportunity for students. He spoke about some of the programs and initiatives they are developing. He spoke of the need to visit more schools, particularly small districts. Everyone invited them to stop by smalls, not just large, urban districts. He spoke about the initiatives they have brought forward and how some of those initiatives have changed, depending on the administration. Emmanuel has served three different administrations.

We had a presentation from Levered Learning, an online math program designed by a former teacher in California.

After lunch I presented on a superintendent panel. I was asked several questions about my experience this past year with COVID and how the funding and programming has el-

evated the work that we're doing in small districts. We spoke about future programs and opportunities we are looking forward to in the new year.

We had various vendors attend the session and we had a handful of superintendents from Washington, Texas, Illinois, California, and New York. In total there were about less than 10 superintendents invited to this symposium. A total of about 20 people total were present.



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Looking for Ways to Get More Involved? State Commissions and Advisory Groups Currently Looking for New Members



Caitlin Jung, Legislative Counsel
Capitol Advisors Group

While legislative advocacy is incredibly important, participation on state commissions and advisory groups is also another great way for small districts to make sure our voices are heard. As this year’s legislative session comes to a close, we wanted to highlight a few upcoming opportunities for SSDA members looking to get more involved in the state process.

Instructional Quality Commission (IQC)

The State Board of Education (SBE) is currently accepting applications to fill three positions on the 2022 IQC, which, among other things, develops and recommends curriculum frameworks as well as criteria for evaluating instructional materials submitted for adoption. Applicants must be currently practicing teachers and/or leaders with experience and expertise in English language arts/English language development, health/physical education, and mathematics. Applications must be received by 12:00 pm on Friday, September 24, 2021. Additional information about the request for IQC applications can be found here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/ab/iqc-recruitletter.asp>.

Additionally, the SBE is also looking for applicants to serve as the IQC’s 2022-23 Student Member. The IQC student board member serves a one-year term and is a regular voting member. A student applicant must be a California resident who has been enrolled in a public high school for a minimum of two consecutive years and will be a senior in good standing for the 2022-23 school year to be eligible. Applications must be received by 12:00 pm on Friday, September 24, 2021. Additional information about the student application can be found here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/ab/iqc-recruitlettersm.asp>.

California Practitioners Advisory Group (CPAG)

The SBE is also looking for applicants to fill positions on CPAG, the state’s committee of practitioners required by Federal Title I. CPAG members provide input to the Board on the practical implications of items before the Board for action. This includes providing input on the state’s accountability system and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), as well as reviewing state rules and regulations related to Title I. Applicants must

currently meet one of the practitioner categories below:

- LEA Superintendents or other Administrators
- Principals and other school leaders
- Parents of student(s) currently enrolled in the K-12 public education system
- Members of local school boards
- Career and Technical Educators

Additionally, applicants are asked to provide evidence of demonstrated experience with the state’s K-12 public education system, including the LCFF, as well as evidence of familiarity with federal program reporting requirements, like Title I. Applications must be received by 5:00 pm on Friday, September 24, 2021. More information about the application as well as CPAG in general can be found here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/ab/cpag-invitation.asp>.

Advisory Commission on Charter Schools (ACCS)

The SBE is also currently accepting applications from charter school representatives to serve on the state’s ACCS. The ACCS provides recommendations to the Board regarding the establishment and renewal petitions of charter schools as well reviews and recommends appropriate funding levels for non-classroom-based charter schools. The SBE is looking for applicants with “strong knowledge, experience, and interest in effective charter operations and authorization and in charter school policy...”. Applications must be received by 5:00 pm on Friday, September 24, 2021. More information about the application as well as the ACCS in general can be found here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/ab/accs-invitation.asp>.

State Board of Education

Lastly, the SBE is currently accepting applications for their 2022-23 Student Board Member position. The SBE student board member serves a one-year term and is a regular voting member of the Board. In order to be eligible, a student applicant must be a resident of California, be enrolled in a public high school, and be a senior in good standing in the 2022-23 school year to be eligible. Completed applications must be received by 5:00 pm on Friday, October 8, 2021. More information about the Student SBE Member application can be found here: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/ms/mm/sbestudentmember.asp>.

The application forms for all these openings can be found on CDE’s Application webpage, at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/cc/ab/index.asp>. Please consider applying for one of the aforementioned petitions. We need the voices of small districts to be heard in as many policymaking arenas as possible.



Teacher Spotlight

Maria Garcia



As if teaching algebra to eighth graders and being the head of her district's math department wasn't enough, teacher Maria Garcia also works to empower girls to learn coding, gets different grade levels working together through hack-a-thons, and teaches eighth graders how to be assistant teachers in the classroom.

It's no wonder why earlier this year Maria Garcia was [named one of California's Finalists](#) for the 2021 Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST).

A Chance to Share

A teacher for over 20 years, Garcia is currently at Richard Henry Dana Middle School at Wiseburn School District — a district of about 2,500 students in Los Angeles County.

Garcia's instructional philosophy of student empowerment and collaboration came from her experience growing up as an immigrant to the United States. Labeled as an EL student, she recalls being put in front of a computer at school to learn English, rather than being allowed to learn the language in the classroom. "I think it would have been so much more powerful if I had been in the classroom with my peers and my teacher talking, collaborating, reading books, as opposed to not having valued what I could have brought to that classroom," Garcia explains.

"Everybody has something to offer to a classroom, our community or the world, and they just want a chance," she continues. "It might be different for everybody, but I think that everybody deserves that chance to share."

It was this thinking that led Garcia to launch a chapter of the [Girls Who Code](#) program at her school. When first doing her research on the program, Garcia says she read about a young woman with Parkinson's disease who invented a watch that sent sensory signals to her hand. This hit close to home for Garcia, who's mother had recently been diagnosed with the disease. "I said how come I don't empower these girls because you never know — they could be helping someone like my mom or someone else's mom," she adds.

Through her Girls Who Code chapter, Garcia says the students used robots purchased by her district to learn how to code. They also traveled to nearby high schools to learn from other students, and also visited her district's elementary schools to talk to the younger generation about coding. "The girls learned a lot about HTML language, about coding and just amazing things that people were doing," Garcia says.

And Garcia was also asked by her district to become their STEM coordinator, through which she worked closely with fourth and fifth grade teachers. She also wanted to try to have students from different grade levels work together. That formed her idea for the Hack-a-Challenge -- a hack-a-thon where stu-

dents from grades fifth through 12th worked together to create a robot that would help clean their local beach.

Going Full Throttle

Although COVID put what Garcia calls a "minor pause" on these programs over the past year, she says she plans to bring them back "full-throttle" this year. She also is already cooking up new programs to launch for the 2021-2022 school year.

One such program is her Mini Teachers program, which she says she launched briefly prior to COVID. Through the Mini Teacher program, Garcia trains some of her high-achieving eighth grade algebra students to go into younger grade classrooms as a teacher assistant. "I taught them how to ask questions and how to involve themselves with the students in the classroom and be that support for the teachers," she explains.

The program went over so well, it spread to not only algebra teachers in her school, but other subjects as well. And while having the Mini Teachers in the classroom helped the younger students by raising test scores, she says the program also helped the older students develop empathy to how other students learn.

"What we were doing was using our own resources and empowering these kids to become mini teachers, and be okay with the idea of helping their young friends," Garcia says. "From the research I've done there's nothing (like this) out there — it's always peer-to-peer in the classroom collaboration. We've never taken advantage of the resources we have in the classroom and allowing kids to be able to do this, and trusting that they can do this."

And Garcia is also researching a project on executive function coaching for students. During COVID, she says she noticed students were not turning in their work as they had issues with self-managing time and when things were due. She began developing and testing some strategies to help with this, such as having students create a simple todo list on a note they place right on their computer screen, and they cross off each item as they complete it. "It's something that comes natural to adults maybe, but we never thought of the impact this would have on kids and we never taught them how to do certain things like this," Garcia adds.

T is for Trust

As a teacher with two decades of experience coming out of what Garcia refers to as an "emotionally and mentally draining" experience with the pandemic, one of Garcia's biggest pieces of advice for other small school district teachers is make sure to see the classroom as a teaching opportunity not just for the kids, but for yourself as well.

by Corrie Pelc

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