# Expanding Multi-Tiered System of Supports in California

Lessons from Sanger Unified and the Pivot–Sanger Multi-Tiered System of Supports Project

Julia E. Koppich

August 2020

# Expanding Multi-Tiered System of Supports in California: Lessons from Sanger Unified and the Pivot–Sanger Multi-Tiered System of Supports Project

Julia E. Koppich, J. Koppich & Associates

## Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary

Equity is the consistent thread that runs through major California education policies of the last decade, which have focused on providing access and opportunity tailored to students' needs in order to reduce disparities in learning outcomes. Equity challenges, already significant prior to COVID-19, have been exacerbated by the pandemic's education disruptions.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) offers a framework for identifying students who are struggling and who need focused support to meet academic, behavioral, and social-emotional challenges. How can California make MTSS implementation more accessible to school districts as they strive to support all students equitably?

From 2018 to 2020, Pivot Learning led a demonstration project involving the Sanger, Monterey Peninsula, and Lancaster school districts. Sanger has coherently and cohesively implemented MTSS in a way that adapts the framework to the district's culture. The Pivot-led project, with Monterey and Lancaster as pilot sites, sought to determine if direct support by Sanger, based on its expertise, could help Monterey and Lancaster develop their own district-relevant MTSS implementation strategies.

This study combines previous research about Sanger's education improvement efforts with data from the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project to identify a set of lessons learned that might help guide the state's continued expansion of MTSS. Principal findings from this study are as follows:

- Collaborative culture is central to developing the common vision and shared purpose foundational to MTSS implementation. Sanger's improvement path and the trajectory of the pilot districts' MTSS work show that district culture is malleable and is responsive to attention and commitment.
- MTSS implementation requires a careful and simultaneous process of replication and adaptation—fidelity to basic MTSS framework elements and adaptation to a district's context and culture. Sanger consultants' peer-to-peer support offered pilot districts experienced guidance about the MTSS framework and real-world experience developing district-sensitive approaches to MTSS implementation.
- Pivot served as project guide and gentle provocateur. As an outside agency, Pivot was able to: (a) use its knowledge of systems change to spur pilot districts to uncover their strengths and address their challenges; (b) apply appropriate pressure to ensure the pilot districts met milestones and continued moving forward; and (c) develop a project-specific learning network that created space for participating districts to engage in reciprocal learning and mutual problem solving.

# Introduction

California, like much of the rest of the nation, has experienced a whirlwind of education policy activity over the course of the last decade—revised standards; new curricula; a new testing regime; a revamped finance and governance system; and a reformulated approach to accountability. (See the *Significant State Education Policy Milestones* box below.)

## Significant State Education Policy Milestones Since 2010

**2010**—State Board of Education adopts Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in mathematics and English language arts; begins implementing Smarter Balanced testing.

**2013**—Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) shifts control of most education dollars from the state to local school districts. Using stakeholder engagement, districts allocate dollars (base allocation plus added dollars for low-income students, English learners, and foster and homeless[1] youth).

**2017**—California initiates new multimeasure accountability system and statewide system of support. The California School Dashboard, an online tool, provides information on the performance of student subgroups. Based on Dashboard results, districts are identified for targeted support.

Equity—providing access and opportunity tailored to students' needs in order to reduce disparities in learning outcomes—is the consistent thread running through all of these policies. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), implemented in 2013, reinforced the state's perspective that ensuring equity of opportunity requires differential funding and thus targeted more supports and services to historically underserved students: low-income students, English learners, and homeless and foster youth (Humphrey et al., 2017; Koppich et al., 2018).

Equity challenges have been further exacerbated by COVID-19. With schools closed, access for low-income students and English learners as well as foster and homeless youth to school meals, support services, and the safety of the school building

---

[1] Homeless students were not named as a targeted student population in the LCFF. They were added as a result of a budget trailer bill in 2015. For more, see Tully (2015).

during the day has been reduced or eliminated. As education has moved to distance learning, students who lack computers or sufficient internet access have been unable to take advantage of online learning. Many of the school services students with disabilities typically receive do not translate well to an online environment and thus many of these have been diminished or eliminated. In sum, for many students whose engagement with school was tenuous before COVID-19, new barriers created by the pandemic may increase their likelihood of dropping out.

At the same time, teachers have found themselves navigating new professional terrain. Many teachers had insufficient training or preparation to provide materials and lessons online. While most school districts worked diligently in the initial weeks following school closures to ensure students had instruction and curriculum, addressing the needs of students who required specific interventions to catch up to grade-level standards presented an especially daunting challenge—one that is likely to have continuing consequences for some time to come.

## The Role of Multi-Tiered System of Supports

To make progress towards the goal of equitable learning outcomes for all student groups, California has championed continuous improvement; district-led cycles that include setting goals; developing and implementing strategies to meet these goals; using data to assess results and make adjustments; and then beginning the cycle again—a kind of education version of "rinse and repeat." MTSS provides a framework for all students focused on maximizing achievement and success in school by integrating evidence-based instruction with ongoing assessment. By enabling schools to identify and respond quickly and efficiently, MTSS is intended to provide targeted interventions that can eliminate achievement gaps while they are still small.

Using the MTSS framework, all students receive strong core instruction with evidence-based materials and methods (Tier 1). When data show significant numbers of students falling behind, Tier 1 instruction is evaluated for efficacy while students continue to receive appropriate interventions; students who do not make adequate progress in Tier 1 (typically 15 to 20 percent) move to Tier 2. These students receive supplemental interventions that allow for more explicit instruction, added opportunities for practice with feedback, and frequent assessment of growth and progress. Those who do not respond sufficiently to Tier 2 interventions (usually 5 percent or fewer) are provided with more intensive and individualized supports as well as weekly progress monitoring in Tier 3.

MTSS utilizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which encompasses flexible learning environments so that students are able to access material, engage with it, and show what they know in ways that accommodate their individual learning needs (Morin, n.d.).

The MTSS framework is designed to help districts move towards their equity goal by aligning academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning around data-based decision-making to improve outcomes for all students. The anticipated loss of learning that almost surely will result from COVID-19 education disruptions makes the need for MTSS even more urgent.

## About This Report

Many California school districts are in the beginning stages of MTSS implementation. Fresno County's Sanger Unified School District started early on its MTSS path and now, building on the district's well-documented tradition of education improvement, has implemented MTSS as part of its continuous improvement effort.

From 2018 to 2020, Pivot Learning led a demonstration project (called the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project for the purposes of this report) to determine if direct support from Sanger could inform MTSS implementation in other school districts. Specifically, two Sanger staff members with experience implementing that district's MTSS served as consultants to two pilot districts—Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (Monterey County) and Lancaster School District (Los Angeles County)—to help these districts chart their MTSS implementation path.

The project tested the proposition that the kind of direct support provided by Sanger could serve as a model for the state as it seeks to spread MTSS more broadly to districts across California. This report blends previously reported research about Sanger's long-term education improvement efforts with data from the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project to identify a set of lessons learned that might help guide continuing state MTSS implementation efforts.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this report were collected through document review and interviews. Researchers reviewed a range of documents, including previously conducted research on Sanger and results of interviews conducted by Pivot Learning's project team. In addition, researchers conducted supplemental telephone interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes each, between February 2, 2020 and February 20, 2020 with a dozen project principals and participants from Pivot, Sanger, and the Monterey and Lancaster school districts, as well as an email exchange with the Sanger superintendent in May 2020.[2]

_____

[2] Quotations throughout are from these interviews and email exchanges unless otherwise noted.

Interviews probed the roles of the Sanger consultants with the pilot districts, Pivot's function as an outside agency, and tangible results of the project.

## Transformation in Sanger Unified School District

Sanger is neither "special" nor "advantaged" in any traditional sense of the terms. Poverty is a defining characteristic of the district's student population. Of Sanger's 10,782 students, almost three quarters (72 percent) are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, 2019). Yet Sanger boasts a decade-long record of improving student performance and a 97 percent high school graduation rate (California Department of Education, 2019).

The district's upward trajectory was born of humble roots. A rural, agricultural district in Fresno County, in 2004 Sanger was named one of the 98 lowest performing districts in California. Fifteen years later the district was cited as a "positive outlier" in the Learning Policy Institute's report about districts that were beating the odds:

> Positive outlier districts appear to have leveraged the state's updated educational standards, funding, and accountability systems to support students in meeting … more rigorous academic standards. (Podolsky et al., 2019, p. iv)

Sanger's purposeful turnaround was punctuated by focused and deliberate action on the part of Sanger leaders, teachers, and staff. The district's story is well researched and often told (David & Talbert, 2012; Talbert & David, 2019).

Sanger was also an early adopter of MTSS. A core district initiative, MTSS in Sanger incorporates aligned supports and resources in a coherent continuous improvement cycle. At the Tier 1 level, all students, including those with disabilities, English learners, and foster youth, have access to high-quality instruction as well as social-emotional and behavioral supports. Tier 2 offers targeted, supplemental supports to 5 to 15 percent of students. Tier 3 provides intensive supports to 1 to 5 percent of students. (California Department of Education, 2018).

### Sanger's Approach to Improvement

Sanger's approach to improvement is embedded in three core principles: (a) develop a collaborative culture and shared purpose, (b) build on what is and make it your own, and (c) data, data, data.

**Develop a collaborative culture and shared purpose.** Building a collaborative culture is at the heart of Sanger's education improvement efforts. That culture is the product of a web of trusting relationships Sanger has developed over many years. Cooperative relationships are grounded in respect for educators as professionals capable of making good decisions for students. The collaborative culture results in a shared purpose, with everyone pulling in the same direction to reach common goals (David & Talbert, 2012; Talbert & David, 2019).

Sanger found its organizational footing by shifting from a culture of professional isolation (teachers working alone) to one in which teachers work collaboratively with one another and with principals. Professionals share responsibility for the work and its outcomes. Educators shifted their practice from a following-the-textbook approach to one in which diagnosing student needs and adapting practice to meet those needs prevails. Principals are leaders of communities of professionals rather than being school managers. The district administration moved from emphasizing top-down mandates and compliance to focusing on reciprocal accountability and nurturing principal and teacher leadership (David & Talbert, 2012; Talbert & David, 2019).

The hard work that brought about Sanger's collaborative culture allows the district's educators and other employees to live the district's motto: "Every child, every day, whatever it takes."

**Build on what is and make it your own.** Change in Sanger is viewed as a developmental process that takes time. District leaders consistently convey a vision of "weaving" rather than "stacking" (Talbert & David, 2019). As new initiatives are introduced or existing programs revised, the district's message is one of coherence. New work is of a piece with existing work; previous and new improvement efforts meld together. New initiatives are not meant to upend what the district has in place but rather to build on it.

As new initiatives come on line, the district casts them in a "Sanger context"—as a development that is part of the natural order of things and not a new undertaking that has simply been layered upon previous projects. In rolling out Sanger's MTSS initiative, for example, district leaders began by making sure the community and teachers saw the initiative as their own.[3] Part of this process was using a system of pilots and feedback. Pilots were designed to field test the new initiative at a few schools. The district then collected feedback from teachers and principals—"How did it work? What should we change?"—

---

[3] MTSS is not a California state mandate, per se. However, the state strongly encourages districts to develop MTSS implementation strategies. The Orange County Department of Education, in collaboration with the Butte County Office of Education and UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools, receives funding from the California Department of Education through the SUMS (Scaling Up MTSS Statewide) Initiative to develop tools and training to enable educators to further expand MTSS in the state.

to customize MTSS to the district and to individual schools. This strategy of pilots and feedback, used by Sanger long before MTSS, had the salutary effect of increasing educator buy-in, creating demand for effective implementation practices, and intensifying the use of evidence to keep improving and adapting practices (Talbert & David, 2019).

**Data, data, data.** Leaders in Sanger believe that data drive direction; they and their colleagues strive to ground all decisions in evidence. As Talbert and David (2019) noted: "The district [has] invested heavily in improving its [information] infrastructure and capacity to provide educators access to a broad range of student data" (p. 24). Sanger offers ongoing, systematic teacher and administrator professional development and support to equip educators with the tools they need to implement evidence-based strategies and then holds teachers and administrators accountable for using evidence in the decisions they make as they work to improve student learning (David & Talbert, 2012; Talbert & David, 2019).

Sanger is not content to rest on its laurels. The district is public about its belief that improvement is a continuous process.

The COVID-19 crisis has tested Sanger's resiliency. Explains Superintendent Adela Madrigal Jones:

> Never before have our guiding principles regarding how we function as a district been tested like they have through this crisis. Our strong collaborative culture has allowed us to quickly … put into place a distance learning plan, put technology in the hands of students, and provide two meals a day to our families. We don't take for granted that our culture must always be cultivated to stay strong. [Even during this crisis] our collaborative teams meet weekly to discuss results we are seeing and to problem-solve when we don't see the results we want. We continue to make decisions based on data. We celebrate the wins. This crisis has definitely been a huge bump on our journey of continuous improvement but our culture is enabling us to ensure that our decisions focus on what's best for our students.

The superintendent's words display both the strength and fragility of Sanger's improvement principles and its collaborative culture. Steeped in its now-ingrained collaborative way of doing business, Sanger was able quickly to adapt to new demands brought about by COVID-19. Yet, as she notes, the collaborative culture that allows the district to be ready for what comes also requires constant tending. This dual recognition by the district—that what they have is successful but could disappear if they are not vigilant—enables Sanger to continue to make progress even in the face of this unanticipated challenge.

# The Pivot–Sanger Multi-Tiered System of Supports Project

Pivot Learning is a nonprofit organization of K–12 education experts who work with districts to address pressing education challenges, including raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. In recent years, Pivot has engaged with districts to implement Common Core State Standards, develop new LCFF-required budgeting practices, and implement MTSS.[4]

The Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project came about, says Pivot's Chief Executive Officer Arun Ramanathan, because "Pivot [had] a strong desire to scale the MTSS work we saw happening in Sanger." Pivot knew from experience that implementing MTSS is complex. Successful implementation requires understanding how to use the basic elements of the MTSS framework—student screening; targeted support; using data to make decisions about how to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs; monitoring student progress; and engaging families in appropriate aspects of the work—in concert with careful adaptation to local context and culture. Sanger had achieved the goal of making MTSS the district's own.

Pivot posited that other districts might be able to take advantage of Sanger's experience as they developed their own plans for MTSS implementation. Pivot-facilitated technical assistance and guidance might catalyze the kind of systemic change MTSS implementation, sensitive to district variation, requires. District partnerships connected to this facilitated guidance could offer a safe space for mutual learning.

Pivot previously had worked in Monterey County, home to the Monterey Peninsula district, and in Antelope Valley (Northern Los Angeles County), where the Lancaster district is located. With funding from the Stuart Foundation, the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project was launched. The project is particularly salient for California as the state seeks to expand MTSS implementation. Relying on a very broad definition of MTSS that encompasses leadership; school cultures and structures; family and community partnerships; and policy, MTSS implementation in this state can feel overwhelming to some school districts. The Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project, leveraging Sanger experience for peer support alongside Pivot's organizational change expertise, might—Pivot postulated—provide one vehicle for easing that path.

---

[4] Pivot continues to expand its work in prevention and intervention as an extension of its mission to serve the most underserved students in the nation's neediest schools by providing reviews and technical support to departments of special education and by building guidance for supporting students with dyslexia.

**Focus on Homeless and Foster Youth**

Pivot focused the project on ensuring that the needs of foster and homeless youth would be integrated into the pilot districts' MTSS implementation work. Lancaster has an unusually high number of foster youth; Monterey Peninsula has a significant number of homeless youth. (See the boxes below for basic demographic information about these districts.)

## Monterey Peninsula Unified School District[5]

Serves grades K–12

9,636 students

68 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged

27 percent English learners

0.2 percent foster youth

*Source.* California Department of Education (2019)

*Note.* The California Dashboard does not provide statistics on the percentage of students without homes in each district. According to the interview with Monterey Peninsula for this project, 14 percent of the district's students are experiencing homelessness.

## Lancaster School District

Serves grades K–8

14,089 students

90 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged

16 percent English learner

2.9 percent foster youth

*Source.* California Department of Education (2019)

---

[5] For more information, see Melnicoe (2018).

Foster and homeless youth are two student subpopulations widely known to struggle academically and to have significant social and emotional challenges. As Pivot's funding proposal for this project noted:

> Foster youth … often experience poor educational outcomes, including wide achievement gaps, high dropout rates, and low rates of college and career readiness. These outcomes may result from the lack of systemic, timely and effective academic and behavioral interventions (Pivot Learning, 2017).[6]

Homeless students,[7] who face substantial educational challenges, also post consistently subpar outcomes. California is just beginning to come to grips with the number of homeless students in its schools and their immense needs. For example, a 2019 state audit found that California schools significantly undercounted the number of homeless students. Though in 2017–18, schools reported 270,000 homeless students, the state auditor estimated the number to be closer to 370,000—roughly 10 percent of the state's low-income students (Jones, 2019). COVID-19 may exacerbate this situation.

One of the consequences of the pandemic in California is a significant and perhaps long-lasting economic downturn. Already, thousands have lost jobs and many more families are finding themselves experiencing poverty and housing insecurity. Children, especially among the state's most vulnerable, are under increased stress; many are experiencing trauma. COVID-19 mal-effects are likely to mount and last for years.

Districts with a system in place to address surging student needs will be better prepared to deal with the challenges that are sure to become evident in the months and years to come. Though the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project preceded COVID-19, the project seems prescient in its emphasis on developing systems to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable student populations.

## Principal Project Partners

The Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project included four organizational partners: (a) Pivot Learning, (b) Sanger Unified School District through its project consultants, (c) Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, and (d) Lancaster School District.

---

[6] For more information, see Courtney et al. (2011).
[7] The federal McKinney-Vento Act defines "homeless children" as those living in cars, motels, shelters, and campgrounds, or doubled up with other family members (Education for Homeless Children and Youths, 2015).

**Pivot's role.** Pivot provided expertise to the pilot districts in the areas of systems development and MTSS implementation. At the beginning of the project, Pivot conducted a landscape assessment with Monterey Peninsula and Lancaster to ensure project work would be structured around each district's context, strengths, and needs. Pivot then shepherded the work, making sure the project met identified milestones and bringing all three districts (Sanger and the pilot districts) together formally and informally in a learning network where they could share experiences and challenges, and generally find mutual aid and comfort.

To formalize organizational relationships prior to the start of the project, Pivot signed a memorandum of understanding with Sanger "to provide consultation and facilitation to Pivot partner school districts [for] a comprehensive tiered system of support … which strengthens academic and social-emotional learning supports for all students with focused services and supports for foster youth and students experiencing homelessness" (Pivot Learning & Sanger Unified School District, 2017–2018). Pivot paid Sanger for 10 days of each of the consultant's time.[8] Pivot also developed memoranda of understanding with Monterey Peninsula and Lancaster that detailed its responsibilities and the districts' reciprocal obligations.

**The Sanger consultants.** Sanger provided direct support in the form of two staff members designated as project consultants: Amy Williams and Zach Smith in 2018–19 and Nichole Rosales and Ada Wolff in 2019–20.[9] Appointed by Sanger's superintendent,[10] the consultants, all of whom had experience implementing Sanger's MTSS, served as direct contacts with and supports for Monterey Peninsula and Lancaster.

Though they shared duties across districts, Zach Smith was principal consultant to Lancaster and Amy Williams to Monterey Peninsula. According to Williams, "[We] provided anything the districts needed," including coaching, answering questions, offering materials (tools, artifacts, and the like); meeting individually with project leaders and with the district MTSS teams in person and virtually via Zoom; and "just hanging out as a thought partner." Notes Smith: "Our responsibility was to be a support, to get to know the [MTSS] teams, and to bring in the 'user perspective' to the MTSS work."

---

[8] The funds went to the district; the consultants themselves did not see remuneration for their project work.
[9] Williams and Smith left Sanger in the 2018–19 school year to assume new roles elsewhere. Rosales and Wolff's term of service was truncated due to the abrupt end of the 2019–20 school year. As the second team of consultants did not have the time to become as deeply involved in the work as had the first team, the bulk of quotations from Sanger consultants are from Smith and Williams.
[10] Matt Navo at the beginning of the project, Adela Madrigal Jones thereafter.

The Sanger consultants brought a "We're all in this together" attitude and, in keeping with Sanger's organizational belief that there is always more to learn—as Rosales put it: "We [in Sanger] always need to go back and paint the bridge"—the consultants approached their work as a reciprocal learning opportunity. Commented Williams: "Nobody is really the expert in this. We are all plowing through [and] learning together."

Smith and Williams shared Sanger beliefs and values with the pilot districts. They described what had been in place prior to MTSS implementation and how Sanger had adapted the MTSS framework to Sanger's culture and circumstances. The consultants emphasized that their role was not to recreate Sanger in Monterey Peninsula or Lancaster but to provide these districts the information and tools they needed to learn from Sanger how to adapt the MTSS framework to their own contexts.

Smith and Williams were clear-eyed about both their value to the pilot districts and the benefit to Sanger of learning from Monterey Peninsula and Lancaster. "We tried to make sure these districts didn't make the same mistakes Sanger had made," says Smith. "The work also remind[ed] us to go back and rethink things in Sanger."

Sanger is ever mindful of its roots and of what commitment and hard work can accomplish. Says Williams: "We had to eat a big bite of humble pie at the beginning. [This work] is hard and messy but it is doable."

### The Pilot Districts

The superintendent in each pilot district appointed a district project leader: Donnie Everett, Assistant Superintendent for MTSS, in Monterey Peninsula, and Bart Hoffman, Assistant Superintendent for Education Services, in Lancaster. These local leaders—project drivers, as they were called—took responsibility for moving the work forward in their district.

**Monterey Peninsula Unified School District.** When the Pivot project began, says Everett, "Monterey was in the process of developing an organizational culture that enabled teachers and administrators to recognize and embrace the importance of this work." The culture change in process, notes Everett, was meant to engage all students and staff in the work of building more collaboration and inclusiveness.

One of Monterey Peninsula's key challenges was finding a way to serve successfully the academic and social-emotional needs of its homeless students. Everett estimates that as many as 14 percent of the district's students are homeless. Many families work in agriculture or hospitality, earning only modest wages. The high cost of living in Monterey County often leaves these families little choice but to live in hotels or shelters.

District Superintendent P. K. Diffenbaugh described why Monterey Peninsula wanted to participate in the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project: "We were interested in breaking down silos [to develop a] common vision and common purpose. We thought this project would help us move towards that goal."[11] Williams had a slightly more prosaic take: Monterey wanted to build structures so it could be ready to adapt to situations and not always be in crisis mode. "If you don't have the foundational piece in place," she explained, "you're always chasing after a crisis." Constantly reacting to crises does not allow districts to build sustainable systems that are able to meet their students' evolving needs.

The district's MTSS team spanned multiple departments. In addition to Everett, it included the assistant superintendent for secondary education, associate superintendent for education services, homeless liaison, and coordinator of student support services. Williams worked hard to build trusting relationships with these people. "[I] shared some things that Sanger had done that resonated, [including] what had gone well and what hadn't, along with artifacts the [MTSS] team might want to use or consider based on what [Sanger had] learned from the process."

The Monterey MTSS team visited Sanger, where members had an opportunity to talk with educators doing the actual work on the ground, asking questions and getting more details about the mechanics of Sanger's MTSS implementation. In particular, Monterey was impressed with Sanger's data cycles. These focus on a specific data element—discipline referrals, for example. Data from this single element are presented to Sanger teams at the cabinet, school, and classroom levels to analyze and use for decision-making. Monterey adapted Sanger's data cycles as well as continuous examination and use of real-time data to its own context.

Another project outcome for Monterey was a districtwide scope and sequence MTSS tool that schools are able to use as a guide for their own work. Previously, district schools had embraced a number of MTSS-relevant promising practices, but these practices often were site specific and used various data collection systems, criteria for intervention placement, and intervention programs, challenging the district's efforts to understand whether the needs of the most vulnerable students were being met.

Using what they learned as a result of the project, Monterey's MTSS team worked with school leaders to analyze their data in order to better understand the needs of homeless students and develop ways to address these needs. This effort resulted in some new and innovative approaches, including new community partnerships and school-based family resource centers.

---

[11] This statement is from a fall 2018 Pivot-conducted interview.

As a result of the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project, says Everett, Monterey "got better at identifying students experiencing homelessness and wrapping [our] arms around the challenges these students face." Says Diffenbaugh: "[Our] mindset has changed." She explained that school leaders in Monterey have adopted a new sense of responsibility to meet the needs of all of the students on their campus, including the most vulnerable.

When asked if Monterey could provide other districts with the kind of support Sanger provided to them, Everett said he is confident they could. "Though we are still in the beginning stages," he said, "we could provide other districts with an overview of Sanger organizational structures and descriptions of what we took from Sanger and how we adapted it to our needs."

**Lancaster School District.** Lancaster's significant population of homeless and foster youth, says project lead Bart Hoffman, "is related to the high cost of living in Los Angeles County." Foster families who are looking for a place where it is relatively affordable to rent a house with extra bedrooms often choose to live in the Antelope Valley.[12] The financial strain on the district is apparent. Says Hoffman: "Lancaster gets the largest percent of homeless students in the county but most of the resources are devoted to LA proper."

Like Monterey, Lancaster has a diverse, multidepartment MTSS team. Zach Smith, Lancaster's principal Sanger consultant, describes a "general orientation of the group towards what kids need and how to get it to them in [the] most efficient way." This predisposition, he says, created a solid base on which Lancaster could build for the MTSS project.

Smith, as did Williams in Monterey, viewed one of his central tasks as building trusting relationships with key Lancaster players. He shared Sanger experiences—successes and failures—as well as Sanger-generated tools, procedures, and protocols Lancaster might consider for its own MTSS work. Trusting relationships, which allowed Smith to have detailed and substantive discussions with Lancaster's MTSS team, were reinforced by his modeling of the project's reciprocal benefits. Says Hoffman: "Zach always seemed to be learning as much from Lancaster as Lancaster was learning from him."

The Lancaster team, like that of Monterey, was impressed with Sanger's data system, which made data available across the district and to every school leader and teacher. Simple and consistent data displays managed by Sanger's data division ensured that, at any given time, the superintendent, principals, and teachers could refer to and discuss the same data. Student-level data were kept current so determinations could

---

[12] For more, see Steen Mulfinger et al. (2017).

quickly be made about what MTSS tier a student was in and whether he or she might need more or less intensive support. Lancaster (like Monterey) was able to borrow some elements of Sanger's data system and procedures to improve its own data infrastructure and enhance data-based decision-making.[13]

Lancaster, says Hoffman, was also keen to better understand how Sanger communicated MTSS work to the full district. "Sanger is really good at putting systems into place and rolling them out to the whole district. We wanted to be able to replicate that process in our district."

The key learning came during Lancaster's visit to Sanger. The Lancaster team was struck, says Hoffman, when they heard the same message repeated over and over—for example regarding collaboration, adapting systems to local context, and using data for decision-making. The consistency of Sanger messaging reinforced for Lancaster that successful communication about MTSS was in part about the district's key players being on the same page and delivering a coherent and consistent message. Lancaster made the commitment that they too would develop a uniform messaging strategy.

"The project," says Hoffman, "helped us frame [our] MTSS work and bring it together. This showed up in [our] LCAP where we merged the MTSS work and the preexisting district strategic plan." By adding MTSS to the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), Lancaster committed resources to MTSS implementation and stabilized its continuance.

The learning network Pivot created as part of this project also paid dividends to Lancaster. Notes Hoffman, Lancaster appreciated opportunities to interact with Pivot, Monterey, and Sanger in formal and informal settings, learning from and commiserating with others engaged in the same hard work and gaining a firmer grasp of the organizational change on which they had embarked. "No one," he said, "wants to reinvent the wheel."

When asked if he thought Lancaster could extend what it learned from the project to other districts, Hoffman replied in the affirmative: "Yes we could, and are doing some of it already." The Pivot–Sanger Project helped build capacity in Lancaster. As a result, Lancaster was in a position to help other districts do the same.

---

[13] Good data systems present a challenge for many California school districts. Only a few districts have the financial and technical wherewithal to maintain their own comprehensive systems. Making it possible for districts to have access to timely and relevant student data remains an issue the state has yet fully to confront. For more, see Phillips et al. (2018).

## Summing up—Key Findings and Lessons Learned

What are the key findings of this study? What lessons can we take from reviewing Sanger's path to improvement and data from the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project? Three principal findings emerge from these combined data and offer some guidance about potential ways to further California's efforts to broaden MTSS implementation.

1. **Collaborative culture is central to developing the common vision and shared purpose foundational to MTSS implementation. While culture sometimes is considered static, Sanger's improvement path and the trajectory of the pilot districts' MTSS work show that district culture is malleable and is responsive to attention and commitment.**

   Collaborative district culture is key to MTSS implementation. Sanger spent more than a decade shaping and refining its collaborative culture, developing a web of trusting relationships and embedding collaboration in job roles and responsibilities to forge a common district purpose and shared vision. This work ensured Sanger was well positioned both prior to and during MTSS implementation.

   Monterey and Lancaster were able to take advantage of the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project to further cultural changes that had already begun. Both districts established cross-departmental and cross-disciplinary MTSS teams as well as a shared district vision and commitment to improving outcomes for all students, described by one project participant as a "common why" that enabled each district to shape its locally relevant MTSS approach. As Williams noted: "We saw a lot of culture change in those districts."

   Changing district culture, making it more collaborative and its decision-making more inclusive, is important. MTSS implementation requires a fair number of complex technical changes, including new structures, procedures, and protocols. As one of the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project principals noted: "Technical change cannot happen without cultural change."

2. **MTSS implementation requires a careful and simultaneous process of replication and adaptation—fidelity to basic MTSS framework elements and adaptation to a district's context and culture. Sanger consultants' peer-to-peer support offered pilot districts both guidance about the MTSS framework and real-world experience developing district-sensitive approaches to MTSS implementation.**

   MTSS implementation is a balancing act of sorts. Districts need to maintain fidelity to the basic elements of the MTSS framework (student screening; targeted support;

developing evidence-based strategies to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs) while they adapt the framework to local culture and context. In Sanger, this split-screen approach was evident in the use of pilots and feedback that enabled the district to develop a tailored MTSS implementation approach that embodied Sanger's signal belief: "Build on what is and make it your own."

When the project began, Monterey and Lancaster had their own district cultures, climates, systems, and circumstances. With help from Pivot and the Sanger consultants, these districts were able to gain an understanding of the elements of the MTSS framework along with approaches that could tailor MTSS implementation to their own contexts. As a result, MTSS in Monterey and Lancaster, while maintaining basic MTSS elements, has been adapted to fit the local circumstances of each district.

The support central to the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project gave an added boost to the efficacy of peer-to-peer learning. Sanger consultants knew the MTSS ropes. As Williams noted: "With practitioners working with practitioners, there is a closeness to the work, close enough to see the successes and failures and to share with each other in a more timely fashion." The pilot districts were able to take advantage of Sanger's MTSS implementation experience and avoid pitfalls and mistakes it had already encountered.

3. **Pivot served as project guide and gentle provocateur. As an outside agency, Pivot was able to perform a number of critical functions: (a) use its knowledge of systems change to spur pilot districts to uncover their strengths and address their challenges; (b) apply appropriate pressure to ensure the pilot districts met milestones and continued moving forward; and (c) develop a project-specific learning network that created space for participating districts to engage in reciprocal learning and mutual problem solving.**

The early landscape assessment Pivot conducted offered pilot districts a clear picture of both their strengths and weaknesses. Pivot helped challenge beliefs about "what is" as the pilot districts named the issues they needed to address as they began moving into MTSS implementation.

The Pivot-established project network created both pressure on and support for Monterey and Lancaster. Districts had a venue in which to talk about common challenges they were facing in their MTSS work. At the same time, the pilot districts felt pressure to stay on course so they could speak with their network colleagues from a position of knowledge and doing.

Pivot's wide and deep experience meant the organization was able to view work from both the 60,000-foot and ground levels. These dual perspectives helped give the

pilot districts the tools to move from idiosyncratic to systemic responses. Pivot placed project work not as learning to follow a set of predetermined steps but in the frame of collaborative problem-solving.

## Conclusion

Monterey and Lancaster benefited from the Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project in part because they came to it with an openness to change. As Williams put it: "It's about their vulnerability and humility. Districts get stuck when they think they have it all figured out or when they dismiss new ideas with 'We're doing that already.'" The pilot districts approached MTSS implementation ready to accept support from the Sanger consultants and eager to share challenges and dilemmas with their partner districts.

The Pivot–Sanger MTSS Project accelerated MTSS implementation in Monterey and Lancaster. The state might consider this approach or a variant of it—an outside technical assistance provider; peer-to-peer consultants fully cognizant of successful MTSS implementation; and a learning network as a forum for shared ideas and challenges—as it continues to broaden MTSS implementation, especially in the age of COVID-19.

## References

California Department of Education. (2018, June). *Sanger Unified School District model programs and practices*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/sr/cs/documents/ddmpp1062414.pdf

California Department of Education. (2019). *California school dashboard*. https://caschooldashboard.org

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Brown, A., Cary, C., Love, K., & Vorhies, V. (2011). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Midwest-Eval-Outcomes-at-Age-26.pdf

David, J. L., & Talbert, J. E. (2012, October). *Turning around a high-poverty school district: Learning from Sanger Unified's success* [Report]. Bay Area Research Group and Center for Research on the Context of Teaching. https://crceducation.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj8016/f/sanger_turnaround_10-14-12.pdf

Education for Homeless Children and Youths, 42 U.S.C. Chapter 119, Subchapter VI, Part B. (2015). https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim

Humphrey, D., Koppich, J., Lavadenz, M., Marsh, J., O'Day, J., Plank, D., Stokes, L., & Hall, M. (2017, April). *Paving the way to equity and coherence? The Local Control Funding Formula in year 3* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/paving-way-equity-and-coherence

Jones, C. (2019, November 27). Schools fail to identify thousands of homeless children, state audit finds. *EdSource*. https://edsource.org/2019/schools-fail-to-identify-thousands-of-homeless-children-state-audit-finds/620655

Koppich, J., & Humphrey, D. C. (2018, September). *Getting down to facts II: The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF): What have we learned after four years of implementation?* [Technical report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://gettingdowntofacts.com/publications/local-control-funding-formula-lcff-what-have-we-learned-after-four-years

Melnicoe, H. (2018, November). *Crisis on the coast. The Bay Coastal foster youth and homeless student populations* [Report]. Pivot Learning. https://www.pivotlearning.org/crisis-on-the-coast

Morin, A. (n.d.). What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)? *Understood*. https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/universal-design-for-learning-what-it-is-and-how-it-works

Phillips, M., Reber, S., & Rothstein, J. (2018, September). *Getting down to facts II: Making California data more useful for educational improvement* [Research brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/making-california-data-more-useful-educational-improvement

Pivot Learning. (2017, January). *Scaling best practices in prevention and intervention (MTSS) for foster youth: A proposal from Pivot Learning* [Funding proposal submitted to Stuart Foundation].

Pivot Learning & Sanger Unified School District. (2017, November 6–2018, June 30). *Master agreement.*

Podolsky, A., Darling-Hammond, L., Doss, C., & Reardon, S. (2019, May 16). *California's positive outliers: Districts beating the odds* [Report]. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/positive-outliers-districts-beating-odds-report

Steen Mulfinger, L., Carter, A., & Melnicoe, H. (2017, October). *The Antelope Valley: Over the hill and out of sight* [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/antelope-valley

Talbert, J. E., & David, J. L. (2019, September). *Sanger Unified School District: Positive outliers case study.* Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Positive_Outliers_Qualitative_CS_Sanger_REPORT.pdf

Tully, S. (2015, July 19). Homeless students get new attention in school accountability plans. *EdSource*. https://edsource.org/2015/homeless-students-get-new-attention-in-school-accountability-plans/83146

# Author Biography

**Julia E. Koppich** is President of J. Koppich & Associates, a San Francisco-based education-consulting firm. She has served as a policy consultant for numerous state and federal organizations, including the U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Performance Incentives, Education Commission of the States, National Governors' Association, and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Dr. Koppich has been a principal investigator on studies of urban school change, teacher peer review, and the impact of federal policy on states and local school districts. She recently served as a member of the core research team investigating implementation of California's path-breaking school finance law, the Local Control Funding Formula. At this writing, Dr. Koppich is a lead researcher on the PACE study of school governance and stakeholder engagement in the time of COVID-19; she serves as a senior consultant to the California Labor Management Initiative. Her areas of expertise include public sector labor relations and improving teacher effectiveness, with an emphasis on teacher evaluation and compensation. She is the author of numerous articles and co-author of two books: *A Union of Professionals* and *United Mind Workers: Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society*.

# Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

*Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence*

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

1. bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;

2. making research evidence accessible; and

3. leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

**PACE**
*Policy Analysis for California Education*

Stanford Graduate School of Education
520 Galvez Mall, CERAS 401
Stanford, CA 94305-3001
Phone: (650) 724-2832
Fax: (650) 723-9931

**edpolicyinca.org**