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Five Ways That LA Unified Can Ensure New State and Federal School Funding Will Have a Lasting Impact

With a return to in-person schooling and the infusion of funding to school districts, the tendency we are observing in districts across the state is to invest quickly in targeted, yet often fragmented, approaches. There is zero doubt that investments in areas like safety, mental health supports and technology are essential to support student learning in this moment. At the same time, we offer a perspective rooted in systems-building that calls us to attend to the systems that will implement these resources and support our students holistically and sustainably.

The Los Angeles Unified School District's (LA Unified) budget has been boosted by about \$5.5 billion in state and federal pandemic relief (with Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief III funds still to be allocated and potentially more on the horizon). This represents a once in a generation opportunity to improve public education and make a lasting impact beyond the 2024 spending deadline. Our organization — the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools — was created more than a decade ago to close opportunity and achievement gaps by managing a network of high-need schools and working as an in-district partner with LA Unified. Based on this experience, we know that providing more resources directly to schools with a focus on equity, as the District has done by expanding the Student Equity Needs Index (SENI), is essential. However, we also know that these investments will have the greatest impact if the District also does the work to design and implement equitable systems that surround and support our schools and communities. Investments in systems can promote ongoing success because strong systems facilitate coherence and sustainable impact beyond the efforts of specific individuals or specific resources.

We have identified five high-leverage systems and offer specific recommendations for how LA Unified could invest in these systems now to establish a foundation for long-term sustainable impact for students. We look forward to our continued partnership with LA Unified's leadership in support of these high-leverage systems for school transformation and greater equity.

1. Talent: Invest in strategic recruitment, development, and retention of the most qualified and well-matched talent, particularly for high-need schools.

LA Unified, like many school systems, is currently experiencing high levels of vacancies (particularly at high-need schools) as it seeks to expand supports for returning students. We commend the District for its recent efforts to meet the sweeping demand for new hires, including the District's recent hiring bonus for teachers to go to high-need schools, and we recommend that the District also prioritize forward-looking investments in the pipelines and systems needed to recruit, develop and retain the

District's workforce for years to come. We see a particular opportunity to invest in diversifying the workforce through pipeline and retention efforts focused on staff of color. We urge LA Unified to invest in talent and human resource systems with equity in mind, differentiating supports for high-need schools.

2. School leadership capacity: Invest in the capacity of school administrators and teacher leaders to build and sustain equitable school site systems.

In order for District investments in students to have their intended impact, they have to be implemented through effective school staff teams and systems. Investments in school leaders are too often fragmented and driven by the major issues of the moment. For school administrators and teacher leaders to lead and sustain shifts in school culture and instructional practice, they need coherent professional learning opportunities, coaching, and time for planning and collaboration in teams. All of this capacity-building work must be rooted in an [equitable and coherent vision of student success](#) that wraps around systems of teaching and learning, instructional and organizational leadership, data-driven instruction, school culture, and family engagement.

3. Curriculum implementation: Pair curricular investments with coherent instructional support systems, including planning time, professional development, and coaching.

High-quality curriculum, implemented well with culturally responsive pedagogy, is a tremendous lever for equity. We commend the District for its efforts to build a strong foundation for literacy and mathematics instruction by increasingly adopting and implementing the highest-quality curricula available. Adopting any new curriculum is a strategy that must be paired with more planning time for teachers as well as robust, coherent professional development and coaching systems from top to bottom — spanning the Central Office's Division of Instruction, through the Local Districts and communities of schools, down to individual schools — to embed the effective instruction of rigorous curricula as the bedrock for student achievement. At the same time, we believe that publishers of these curricula can and must do better to ensure that instructional materials are also culturally relevant and reflect the lived experiences and histories of the students and families we serve no matter their race, ethnicity, gender, language of origin and zip code. As the second-largest district in the nation, LA Unified has a tremendous leadership opportunity to influence publishers to do better, and to model strong curriculum adoption and implementation for its students.

4. Family engagement: Build strong family engagement systems that engage families as partners.

This pandemic has made clear once again that families are essential partners in education. Our experience shows us that family engagement must go beyond the transactional to build authentic

partnerships between school and home in which families have real opportunities to shape their students' experiences in school, receive accurate and helpful information about their students' progress and unique needs, and play a significant role in decision-making at school sites. Systems that serve as a foundation for transformational family engagement at school sites should include designated staffing, support and planning time for classroom teachers to connect with families, and aligned professional development and coaching systems in service of meaningful two-way communication between school and home. Teachers and administrators should be supported in connecting one-on-one with families and implementing best practice models like Family Action Teams or Academic Parent-Teacher Teams that create a consistent feedback loop between school and home and actively seek the input of families on students' academic experiences and goals. The District should also invest in Community Representatives as full-time roles focused on supporting and strengthening school-to-home connections.

5. Community partnerships: Invest in systems for stronger collective impact.

As the District increasingly invests in community schools and wraparound services, the staff capacity and systems to align and manage the collective impact of partners will be vital. This will require intentionally aligning the work of partners with school visions and strategies for impact. Schools will need support to manage the collective impact work, including data systems, communication and clearly designated roles and responsibilities. While much of this work is held at the school site, the District can create the tools to connect partners with schools and to establish strong systems of collaboration.

Conclusion: Invest in equitable systems.

LA Unified has a pivotal opportunity to deliver on its promise to students and families by investing in coherent systems-building across all levels of the District from the Central Office down to individual classrooms. These investments should be made equitably, not evenly, and this will call for courageous leadership willing to invest the greatest amount of resources and supports in service of schools where the need is greatest. As it receives substantial extra funding from state and federal sources, LA Unified should use equity-driven, student-centered approaches like SENI to guide resource allocation and investments. LA Unified must seize this opportunity to invest in systems that will deliver the most impact for students.