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Letter from the County Superintendent

I am proud to present the **Santa Cruz County Office of Education's (Santa Cruz COE) 2019 – 2024 Strategic Plan**, the roadmap that will guide our work for the next five years. This plan builds on the successes of both our past and current initiatives, and reflects Santa Cruz COE's commitment to ensuring all learners have educational opportunities and the support they need to succeed and prosper. I am grateful to all the students, families, teachers, administrators, district leaders, community partners, and Santa Cruz COE staff and managers who have contributed their wisdom and ideas to this strategic plan.

The promise of public education is for every learner to achieve and thrive in school and in life. To realize this promise, every student must be immersed in a supportive learning environment that builds on their strengths and expands their opportunities. We recognize that significant disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes exist among students in Santa Cruz County based on race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, special needs, immigration status, English learner proficiency, sexual orientation, and geography, which result from a legacy of systemic, economic, and political inequity. We believe we have to be deliberate in confronting and dismantling these systems of power and privilege to succeed in our mission. To this end, we are committed to listening to the diverse voices of our educational community in order to gain a clear understanding of their needs. Our process to develop this plan has involved a series of meetings where a variety of stakeholders from different sectors provided their feedback to design solutions to address these needs, and moreover hold us accountable in this effort.

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While equity has been a deeply-held value within the Santa Cruz COE for many years, our new strategic plan calls out our commitment to equity more explicitly. This is reflected in our new mission: **To lead an equitable and innovative learner-centered education system.** We take this responsibility seriously, as our whole community will benefit when we fulfill this mission and achieve our new vision of success: **Engaged learners and leaders who have the social, emotional, academic, and technical skills to thrive in a changing world**

The Santa Cruz COE is eager to begin aligning our efforts to this new 5-year strategic plan. We feel this ambitious plan accurately reflects our deeply held commitment to equity, excellence, and innovation. The Santa Cruz COE needs committed, engaged partners to fulfill this vision, as systemic inequities cannot be solved by one organization or system alone. We look forward to deepening our collaboration with our many partners, as well as continuing to develop best practices internally, as we work together to achieve our mission **to lead an equitable and innovative learner-centered education system.**



Dr. Faris Sabbah



Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools

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Santa Cruz COE's Strategic Planning Process & Needs Assessment

This strategic plan reflects a 6-month planning process designed to update the Santa Cruz COE's strategic framework (vision, mission, values, and priorities) and develop a roadmap that will guide our strategic initiatives, partnerships, and supports for districts and students over the next five years.

We began with a needs assessment in the fall of 2018. With the assistance of Applied Survey Research (ASR) and Optimal Solutions Consulting (OSC), we were able to hear the perspectives of hundreds of stakeholders within and outside of the Santa Cruz COE through:

- ✓ Listening sessions with students and parents/guardians
- ✓ Key informant interviews with district superintendents and community leaders
- ✓ Focus groups with district personnel and representatives from public and nonprofit partners
- ✓ Input sessions with stakeholders groups
- ✓ An online survey
- ✓ Input sessions with Santa Cruz COE staff, managers, and the County Board of Education

These diverse stakeholders shared their perspectives about our strengths and areas to improve as an organization, as well as opportunities to achieve greater impact. Key themes included:

Strengths to Build On

- ✓ The Santa Cruz COE's intentional focus on equity, which is a shared value among many stakeholders;
- ✓ The range and quality of Santa Cruz COE's programs for students and districts, and the responsiveness and expertise of staff;
- ✓ Strong, effective partnerships with districts, community-based agencies, and public agencies;
- ✓ Santa Cruz COE's role as a central hub and convener that brokers collaborative opportunities, creates systems, leverages resources, and shares and spreads best practices;

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- ✓ The increased focus on early childhood education, LGBTQ students, social emotional learning (SEL), implementation of science standards, environmental literacy, and special education services;
- ✓ Santa Cruz COE's influence on local and state policy.

Areas for Improvement

- ✓ Increase cross-district collaboration and foster a collective mindset of, "All 40,000 students in the county are our kids;"
- ✓ Tailor communication, services, and support to match districts' varying needs and contexts;
- ✓ Increase the Santa Cruz COE's presence in south county;
- ✓ Communicate clearly and proactively to all stakeholders within and outside of the Santa Cruz COE about the organization's strategic direction and its role, initiatives, partnerships and accomplishments.

Opportunities to Achieve Greater Impact

- ✓ Enhance Santa Cruz COE's role as a central hub and convener to increase visibility, funding, coordination, and access to countywide programs and professional development;
- ✓ Use the Santa Cruz COE's visibility and credibility to elevate expectations and systemic practices that support the whole learner;
- ✓ Dedicate attention, resources, and support to address students' social-emotional and behavioral health;
- ✓ Develop deep expertise in a few areas, such as trauma-informed care and culturally competent teaching practices, then teach others;
- ✓ Systematize and replicate effective initiatives that benefit all districts, such as the Countywide Science Initiative (implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards), the Equity Institute, the Whole Child Approach, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support;
- ✓ Work with schools and community partners to foster youth leadership and civic engagement;
- ✓ Sustain and scale effective programs;
- ✓ Increase the Santa Cruz COE's leadership, civic engagement, and advocacy at the local, regional, state, and national levels on broader community issues that affect learning, such as housing, transportation, food, health care, early care and education, environmental justice, safety, social support, and discrimination and racism.

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Countywide Data

ASR also reviewed countywide data that highlight some hopeful trends, as well as differences in educational opportunities and outcomes that warrant a systems-level response —i.e. changes in policies and practices and greater collaboration — from the Santa Cruz COE, districts, and other community partners. For example:



Only half of all children ages 3-4 were enrolled in preschool or Transitional Kindergarten in 2017



3rd grade students that meet or exceed ELA standards



Asian



White



Black



Latinx

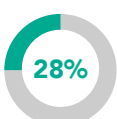
On average, less than half (40%) of 3rd grade students met or exceeded the English Language Arts (ELA) standard in 2018. **This percentage has steadily increased since 2016**, but was still below the statewide percentage (48%). There was a significant difference in percentages when broken out by race and ethnicity. A higher percentage of Asian and white 3rd graders met or exceeded standards (69% and 64%, respectively) than African American/Black and Latinx students (45% and 25%, respectively).



3rd grade students that meet or exceed math standards



Asian



Latinx

In 2018, only 43% of 3rd grade students met or exceeded math standards (below California's average of 49%) and the percentages varied significantly by race and ethnicity, ranging from 75% of Asian students to 28% of Latinx students.

Similar patterns were seen in countywide data on the percentage of 8th and 11th grade students meeting or exceeding standards in ELA and math.

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Felt safe in their school

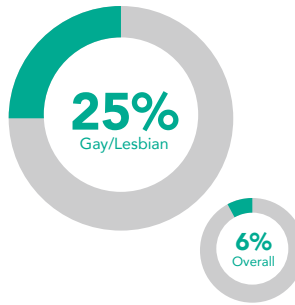


Felt part of their school

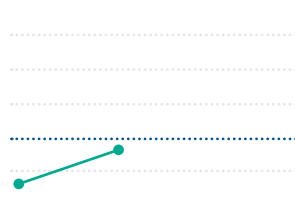


Had caring relationships with adults

Overall, 69% of students who responded to the 2016-17 California Healthy Kids Survey said they felt safe in their schools, and 59% said they felt like they were a part of their schools. However, only 32% of students said they had a caring relationship with adults at school, with noticeable differences between Asian (27%), Latinx (28%), and African American/Black (29%) students, compared to white students (39%).



Students who self-identified as gay or lesbian experienced verbal and physical abuse, or the threat of physical harm, at a disproportionately higher rate than students overall. For example, 25% of gay and lesbian students had been threatened with harm or injury, compared to 6% of students overall.



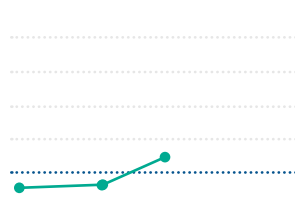
● SCC suspension rate

● California suspension rate



% of suspensions, Latinx students

Santa Cruz County's suspension rate has been lower than California's since 2014-15, but has begun rising in recent years. In 2017-18, the county's suspension rate rose from 1.7% to 3.1%, only slightly lower than California's rate of 3.5%. Latinx students accounted for 75% of all suspensions in the county in 2017-18.



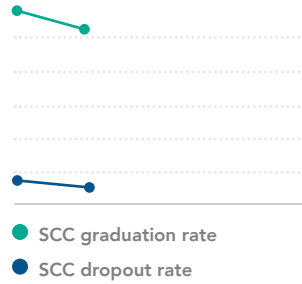
● SCC expulsion rate

● California expulsion rate

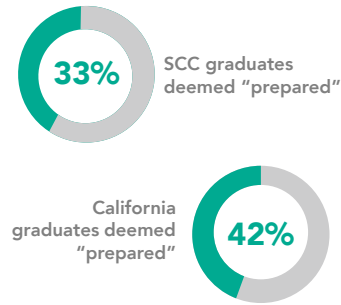
Similarly, Santa Cruz County's expulsion rate had remained low (.02% - .05%) and below California's rate until 2017-18, when the county rate jumped to .12%, which was higher than California's rate of .08%. This data should be interpreted with caution, since a small change in the number of suspensions and expulsions can cause a significant increase in the percentage.

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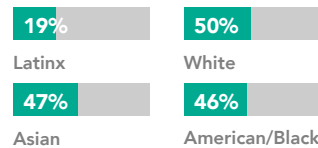
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Santa Cruz County's graduation rate decreased slightly between 2014-15 (87%) and 2017-18 (82%), but the **dropout rate also declined** in that same period from 2.3% to 1.8%.



While the **decline in the dropout rate is good news**, only one-third (33%) of Santa Cruz County's high school graduation cohort were deemed "Prepared" for postsecondary education or careers in 2018, according to the new College and Career Indicator (CCI). The CCI is a combined measure that accounts for preparedness for both college and career. This percentage trailed California (42%) and varied by students' race and ethnicity – from 19% of Latinx students to 50% of white students. A similar percentage of Asian students (47%) and African American/Black students (46%) were Prepared for college/career.



We cannot afford to dismiss or downplay the importance of these data, particularly the concerning trends. "Research demonstrates that inequalities in both opportunity and outcomes along the lines of race and social class begin early and often persist throughout students' K–12 years and beyond, and that they are much larger in the United States than in comparable countries (Bradbury et al. 2015; Putnam 2015)."¹

1 Garcia, E. and Weiss, E. (2017). Education Inequalities at the School Starting Gate: Gaps, Trends, and Strategies to Address Them. Retrieved from Economic Policy Institute <https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/>

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The Santa Cruz COE will not accept inequities in access, opportunities, and outcomes as inevitable. These data have informed our strategic plan, which serves as a **call for collective action to:**

1. **Create integrated systems of support** that address the **social determinants of health** (the social, economic, political, and physical environments in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age) that impact our learners' educational opportunities and outcomes; and
2. **Eliminate the structural and systemic gaps and barriers** (institutional norms, practices, and policies) that create the **opportunity gap** (inequitable access to opportunities, resources, and supports for learners) that contributes to **inequitable outcomes**—the differences in health, social, educational, and economic status that are too often predictable by race, cultural or ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, family income, home language, immigration status, learning differences, and other characteristics.



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Equity: The Foundation for Success

Our society is rapidly and constantly changing, with new jobs and career paths emerging — often faster than our country's education system has been able to respond. While social and technological advances present exciting educational and career opportunities, we also face daunting challenges that threaten intergenerational well-being, such as the housing crisis, climate change, poverty, and persistent injustices against our LGBTQ, immigrant, and ethnically diverse communities. These challenges are inextricably linked to the social and emotional health of our learners and educators, and therefore inextricably linked to the quality of our county's education system and academic outcomes.

Education is often viewed as the great equalizer that “levels the playing field” and creates equal opportunities for all to succeed in life. While this is true for many people, we know we still have much work to do to make this a reality for all learners in our community. Educational systems throughout the country are not just imperfect and chronically underfunded, but have been built on a legacy of laws, policies, and practices (e.g., segregation, disinvestment in low-income communities, disproportionate use of harsh discipline for students of color) that create and reinforce the opportunity gap that contributes to inequitable life outcomes.

The Santa Cruz COE is driven by a deep sense of urgency to transform educational systems and practices so that all learners, with diverse and unique backgrounds and circumstances, have opportunities and access to supports and resources that enable them to achieve and thrive, from birth through adulthood. This strategic plan is an explicit statement of our enduring commitment to equity for all learners. We invite all our partners—learners, families, schools, districts, public and non-profit community partners, businesses, and our staff—to join us in fulfilling our vision.

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Our Strategic Framework

Our Vision

We envision a community with engaged learners and leaders who have the social, emotional, academic, and technical skills to thrive in a changing world.

Our Mission

To lead an equitable and innovative learner-centered educational system.

Our Values

Equity – We create or improve programs, practices, and policies to ensure that every learner has opportunities, experiences, and support systems that address their educational goals and needs.

Innovation – We foster communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking to generate new ideas and solutions.

Partnership – We listen to the needs of our learners, families, educators, and the community, and work with our partners to create networks of support and opportunities so all our learners can achieve and thrive.

Excellence – We hold ourselves to high standards of quality and professionalism and aim to exceed the expectations of our learners, community, partners, and staff.

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The Role of the Santa Cruz COE

The Santa Cruz COE is a public agency charged with providing educational leadership, resources, and services to ensure quality educational opportunities for all learners. We accomplish this through our three primary roles:

- ✓ **Convene leaders & catalyze systems change:** The Santa Cruz COE leads and participates in community-wide initiatives that transform policies, practices, and systems that impact students' educational opportunities and outcomes.
- ✓ **Provide support & oversight for districts:** The Santa Cruz COE offers programmatic and business services, supports, and oversight to the 10 school districts in Santa Cruz County. These services and supports — including professional learning, curriculum and instructional support, human resources, payroll, technology, budget approval and monitoring, data reporting, and Local Control Accountability Plan approval and monitoring — complement districts' efforts or provide resources that would not otherwise exist, particularly for small school districts.
- ✓ **Provide services & programs for students and families:** The Santa Cruz COE coordinates and offers a range of arts, environmental education, child development, career and technical education, and instructional programs and services for students, from birth through age 24 and beyond, and their families. Instructional programs are offered directly by the Santa Cruz COE through Alternative Education, Special Education, Outdoor Science School, Career Technical Education Partnership, and Student Services programs.



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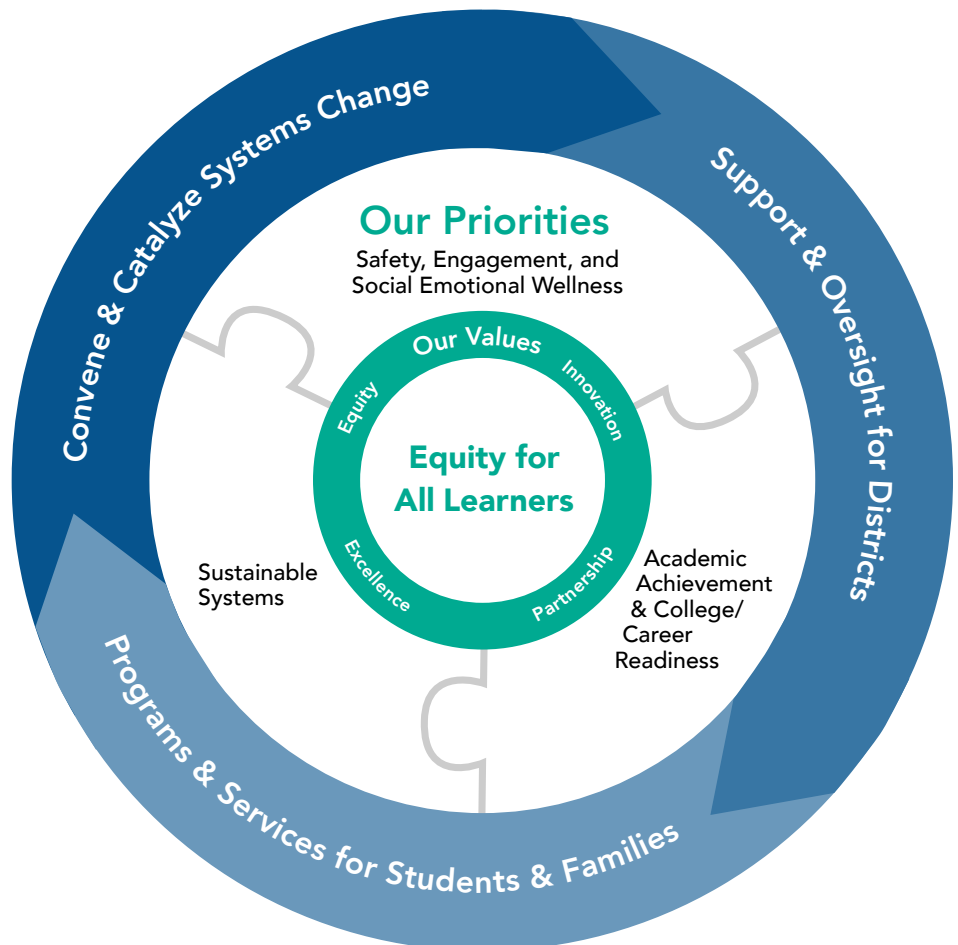
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Our Strategic Priorities

Our review of stakeholder input and community data led us to identify the following three strategic priorities to focus on over the next five years:

1. **Safety, Engagement, Social-Emotional Wellness**
2. **Academic Achievement & College/Career Readiness**
3. **Sustainable Systems**

The strategic priorities are overlapping and interrelated, but are described here as distinct priorities for planning purposes. We have identified an aspirational goal, strategies (broad approaches), and key indicators of progress for each strategic priority. Over the next five years, we will implement these strategies through our programs and partnerships. Specific activities and initiatives may vary each year, depending on our community's needs, and will be defined on an annual basis as part of the Santa Cruz COE's annual action planning and progress report.



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Strategic Priority 1: Safety, Engagement, and Social-Emotional Wellness

Our Goal: Every learner is safe, connected, supported, and socially and emotionally healthy.

Why this Matters: Many of our students face daunting challenges on a daily basis in their homes, schools, and communities. The stress of economic instability, homelessness, family violence, bullying, discrimination, racism, fear of deportation, and other forms of trauma takes its toll on the health and well-being of learners of all ages. Educators are often the “first responders” who see the symptoms of chronic stress and trauma in students’ behaviors or learning difficulties.

A growing body of research shows that teaching social-emotional skills, such as managing emotions, practicing compassion and empathy, handling conflict, and making responsible decisions is just as critical to students’ success as teaching academic skills, such as reading, writing, and math. In addition, teaching critical thinking, leadership, and civic engagement skills provides learners with tools to be active agents of change in their homes, schools, and communities. When social-emotional learning (SEL) and civic engagement are integrated into academic instruction, and other trauma-informed and healing-centered resources are available to support safety and social and emotional well-being, students typically have fewer behavioral issues and can focus on learning. This can contribute to improved academic outcomes and increased engagement and action at school and in the community.²³

While the Santa Cruz COE alone cannot solve all the complex circumstances in our students’ lives, we can use our leadership, partnerships, cross-sector initiatives, internal programs, and resources to create learning environments that foster safety, belonging, purpose, and engagement — essential conditions for teaching the whole learner.

Strategies: In addition to the Santa Cruz COE’s ongoing services, programs and initiatives, we will focus on implementing these strategies over the next five years, in support of our strategic goal.

2 Taylor, Rebecca D., Oberle, E., Durlak, Joseph A., Weissberg, Roger P. 2017. “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects.” *Journal of Child Development*, 88 (4): 1156-1171.

3 Cress, Christine M. 2012. “Civic Engagement and Student Success: Leveraging Multiple Degrees of Achievement.” *Diversity and Democracy*, 15 (3).

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Convene & Catalyze Systems Change

- ✓ Convene cross-sector partners to create **integrated systems of supports** that promote safety, engagement, behavioral health, wellness, and social emotional learning
- ✓ Increase **inclusion of student and family voices** in program and policy decisions
- ✓ Build **integrated data systems** and processes to support **data-driven decision-making**

Support & Oversight for Districts

- ✓ Support countywide implementation of **safety protocols**
- ✓ Support districts to integrate **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** with academic instruction
- ✓ Support districts to implement **strategic intervention systems**
- ✓ Provide ongoing **professional learning** for districts, schools, community partners, and Santa Cruz COE staff

Programs & Services for Students & Families

- ✓ Partner with businesses, nonprofits, and public agencies to increase the **availability** of high-quality, affordable early care and education
- ✓ Increase **enrollment** in high-quality early care and education
- ✓ Increase student access to ongoing, standards-based **programs in the Arts**
- ✓ Increase opportunities and student access to **outdoor learning and environmental literacy programs**
- ✓ Enhance student/family **engagement and leadership** programs

Key Indicators of Progress:

- ✓ Preschool and Transitional Kindergarten enrollment
- ✓ Family engagement levels
- ✓ Postsecondary completion
- ✓ Student leadership
- ✓ School attendance, with focus on chronic absenteeism
- ✓ School climate and safety survey results
- ✓ Suspension, expulsion, and drop-out rates

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Strategic Priority 2: Academic Achievement and College/Career Readiness

Goal: All learners have the academic and non-academic skills and supports to be actively engaged and successful in careers, further education, and their communities.

Why This Matters: High-quality education and lifelong learning opportunities continue to be key drivers of economic security and mobility. Individuals with college degrees or higher are more likely to earn higher incomes than people who do not graduate from high school,⁴ which increases their opportunities to earn higher incomes, build wealth (assets), and experience social mobility. In addition, changes in the global economy, innovations in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) industries, the emergence of the “gig economy,” and the aging Baby Boomer population have driven changes in workforce needs. Nationwide, many employers report difficulty hiring workers who have the necessary knowledge and skills for today’s jobs.⁵ The combined effect of opportunity gaps in educational attainment, income, and employability reinforces the social and economic inequities that perpetuate intergenerational disparities.

The Santa Cruz COE recognizes there are multiple pathways to achieving college, career and community success, all of which begin at birth and are part of a lifelong learning process. We work in partnership with students, families, schools, districts, and community partners to provide educational opportunities and support so that all learners can achieve and thrive, no matter which pathway they choose. Modern career opportunities require us to offer innovative and challenging learning experiences, starting in the earliest years of childhood, to ensure that our learners develop the academic, career, technical, and social-emotional skills required to succeed today and in the future.

Strategies: In addition to our ongoing services, programs and initiatives, we will focus on implementing these strategies over the next five years, in support of our strategic goal.

4 Pew Research Center (2014). The Rising Cost of Not Going to College. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>

5 Employers Globally Struggle to Find Workers With the Right Skills. 2018. Retrieved from <https://www2.staffingindustry.com/Editorial/Daily-News/Employers-globally-struggle-to-find-workers-with-the-right-skills-46531>

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Convene & Catalyze Systems Change

- ✓ **Integrate data systems** across districts
- ✓ Establish or improve processes to ensure **equitable distribution of resources**, based on the diverse needs of districts/schools and student groups
- ✓ Deepen **partnerships with community colleges and institutes of higher education** to connect students to future possibilities and pathways
- ✓ Partner with businesses, nonprofits, and public agencies to connect **internships and work-based learning** with CTE programs
- ✓ Advocate for state adoption of a **CTE requirement for graduation**

Support & Oversight for Districts

- ✓ Provide guidance, technical assistance, and oversight for districts' **Local Control Accountability Plans**
- ✓ Address academic **achievement gaps**
- ✓ Support students and teachers in achieving **increased rigor**
- ✓ Provide leadership and guidance to districts on implementing **new standards, curricula and/or instructional practices**
- ✓ Establish a **professional learning system** to ensure all district/school staff have the skills and capacity to meet the needs of all learners
- ✓ Convene **communities of practice** to support content acquisition
- ✓ Partner with districts and schools to develop relevant opportunities and **college/career pathways** that match student needs and interests
- ✓ Develop **additional career pathways** – e.g. early childhood education, K-12 education, public safety, health and medical, green jobs, and the arts

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Programs & Services for Students & Families

- ✓ Increase enrollment in high-quality, affordable **early care and education**
- ✓ Support ongoing, **standards-based Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Math (STEAM)** programs
- ✓ Provide quality instruction and learning experiences to students in Santa Cruz COE's **Alternative Education, Special Education, and Environmental Literacy programs**
- ✓ Increase Career and Technical Education Partnership (CTEP) in **middle and high schools**
- ✓ Offer **dual enrollment and articulated courses** at the community college level all schools

Key Indicators of Progress:

- ✓ Kindergarten Readiness
- ✓ Students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards
- ✓ Emerging Multilingual Redesignation rates
- ✓ Number of students with Seal of Biliteracy
- ✓ Graduation rate
- ✓ College/Career Readiness
- ✓ Successful transition to independent living and employment for Special Education students

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Strategic Priority 3: Sustainable Systems

Goal: The education system in Santa Cruz County is cohesive, effective, and equitable.

Why This Matters: Achieving equity for all learners will require multiple partners across multiple systems to work together to create the conditions that support equitable opportunities for lifelong learning and education. This typically requires institutional changes in policies and practices that do not happen in isolation or on their own. As the leader of a countywide educational system that intersects with health, human services, child welfare, juvenile justice, government, private sector, and higher education systems, the Santa Cruz COE can provide resources, leadership, and “backbone support” to facilitate systems-level changes that improve all learners’ safety, engagement, social-emotional wellness, academic achievement, and college/career readiness. In addition, the Santa Cruz COE’s support and oversight for districts helps enhance their fiscal health, business processes, data-driven decision-making, and technology infrastructure, which are essential to providing high-quality education to all learners.

Strategies: In addition to our ongoing services, programs and initiatives, we will focus on implementing these strategies over the next five years, in support of our strategic goal.

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Convene & Catalyze Systems Change

- ✓ **Integrate data systems** and establish **data-sharing agreements** within and across sectors
- ✓ **Convene cross-sector/ system partners** and facilitate systems changes that align with the Santa Cruz COE's strategic priorities
- ✓ **Participate in cross-sector/system initiatives** that align with the Santa Cruz COE's strategic priorities

Support & Oversight for Districts

- ✓ Provide **business, human resources, and technology services** to districts
- ✓ Provide guidance, technical assistance, and oversight for districts' **Local Control Accountability Plans**
- ✓ Partner with districts to implement strategies to decrease **teacher shortages** and increase **retention of highly effective teachers**
- ✓ Support districts in pursuing **grants and other funding opportunities** for key programs and services

Programs & Services for Students & Families

- ✓ Pursue **grants and other sustainable funding opportunities** to maintain and/or expand key Santa Cruz COE programs and services

Key Indicators of Progress:

- ✓ Qualified, stable teacher workforce
- ✓ Staff retention
- ✓ Positive certification of district budgets
- ✓ LCAP approvals
- ✓ Grants and other funding acquired
- ✓ Maintenance of Santa Cruz COE services

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Our Implementation Plan

This plan articulates our strategic direction for the next five years, which will require ongoing partnerships with stakeholders inside and outside of the Santa Cruz COE to achieve progress. We are committed to taking the following steps to implement and adapt our strategic plan in response to changing conditions:

- ✓ Each Santa Cruz COE department will develop annual action plans with specific activities, roles, timelines, and metrics that are aligned with the strategic plan and other departmental plans.
- ✓ These action plans will inform the Santa Cruz COE's evaluation plan and annual progress report.
- ✓ The Santa Cruz COE will conduct an annual review of the strategic plan and update annual action plans based on the data collected and analyzed in the annual progress report.
- ✓ The Santa Cruz COE will continue to engage learners, families, districts, schools, community partners, businesses, higher education, and other stakeholders in implementing and adapting our strategic plan, in response to community needs.

