

East Side Alliance: Schools forge bold new model for student success

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A few months ago, school administrators from San Jose's East Side Union High School District and its seven elementary feeder districts joined forces to create a bold new model for student success.

Called the East Side Alliance, its goal is to improve academic achievement for all students, but particularly some of the county's poorest performing students, and set them on a path to college, careers or both.

The elementary districts and East Side Union together serve 85,000 students. If they were one district, they would be the third largest in California, with more kids than San Francisco Unified or Oakland Unified.

Historically, each of the East Side's K-8 districts has operated independently, with little or no effort to align goals, standards, courses or instructional approaches with one another or with the 11 high schools they feed into.

As a result, student performance has suffered and the troubling achievement gap between different racial groups has persisted. This needs to change if we want to improve graduation rates and get students on a path to succeed in life.

Facilitated by the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, the East Side Alliance creates a formal partnership between the high school district and elementary districts to offer students a seamless path toward graduation and career readiness.

San Jose State University and Evergreen Community College are partners. And we plan to engage the business community, which will help define college and career skills students will need to succeed in the workforce.

The idea is to establish common standards, course content and instructional practices

among the elementary and middle schools feeding into the same high school district and to track student progress starting in the elementary grades. That makes it easier to guide students as they move into high school and to coordinate intervention plans for struggling students.

The alliance will be among the first multi-district systems to align student placement practices in math -- specifically in middle school algebra and 9th grade geometry, both of which now vary across districts. It combines resources from this diverse region to create large-scale change in education, particularly to close that achievement gap.

In the 2012 academic year, the completion rate of the A-G requirements -- the minimum course standards needed to enter a four-year public university in California -- was only 33 percent for all East Side Union High students and a grim 16 percent for Hispanic students. When you realize Hispanics comprise nearly half of the East Side high school population, the gap becomes even more stark.

The alliance also is helping teachers prepare to integrate the new Common Core math standards into the curriculum. Already it has sponsored six symposiums bringing together teachers from all the member districts to align mathematical practices with the Common Core and with one another.

It encourages teachers from the seven elementary districts -- Alum Rock, Berryessa, Evergreen, Franklin-McKinley, Mt. Pleasant, Oak Grove and Orchard -- to work together and visit one another's classrooms to see different learning environments.

Teachers also will work to align their use of technology, especially in the critical area of data collection and analysis of student progress. Through economies of scale, this is expected to save money in IT infrastructure and data analysis.

While we have already begun this work, the official kickoff is Friday. We are excited about the possibilities and look forward to reporting our progress.

John Porter is superintendent of the Franklin-McKinley School District. Manny Barbara is Vice President for Advocacy and Thought Leadership of the Silicon Valley Education Foundation. They wrote this for this newspaper.