

*An excerpt from **Cooperation: The Key
to Successful Schools and Communities***

**A NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
SCHOOL DISTRICT**

CASE STUDY

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A Northern California School District Case Study

This case study is based on a Northern California school district that was failing and underfunded in an economically depressed and high-crime area. The superintendent was determined to set in motion change that would begin to turn around these intractable hurdles for students, parents, and the surrounding community. One of her strategies was to launch a new and exciting K-8 school for the following reasons:

1. Student academic performance was poor and deteriorating
2. Many students were enrolling in private schools and other school districts
3. Bold action was needed to stem the flow of students leaving the district

This undertaking would be a monumental task and would require a tremendous amount of planning, expense, and persuasion.

The problems confronting the creation of a new K-8 experimental school were overwhelming. However, the school board and the parents were the first that had to be convinced to go forward. The immediate priority was to locate a suitable building, and they chose a school that had been closed for several years.

Other challenges included:

1. Refurbishing the school building and its library
2. Finding the right principal, teachers, and staff
3. Factoring in what resources would be needed to create an engaging curriculum
4. Acquiring instructional materials and equipment for the science lab
5. Addressing safety and behavioral issues, transportation, and non-English learners.
6. Recruiting district students to attend the new school.

The project required a coordinated effort involving social services, businesses, higher education, and donors coming in to help. The school district team began drawing up their action plan and identifying needed resources and other stakeholders to assist.

The superintendent and district office administration engaged interested local businesses, philanthropists, and other stakeholders in helping to develop the new Science and Technology project. The school board and parents, seeing the assemblage of partners, became fully supportive of the plans for the new school. It took time and many adjustments to get all the plan's elements functioning and into action.

1. The plan included reopening a formerly closed district school as a Science and Technology Magnet School and was designed to attract students to remain in or return to the district.
2. The superintendent handpicked the principal, teachers, and even the school secretary and custodian.
3. At the end of the first year, the parent group felt the school was not meeting their expectations and let the superintendent know their feelings.
4. In the second year, a new principal was hired whose aspirations for the school mirrored and only slightly exceeded the superintendent's. The principal's personal goal was to earn a California Distinguished School Award.

Before opening the school's second year, the new principal held a private meeting with each staff member to hear their concerns and goals and share hers with them. When the principal discussed her future interest in having the school apply and win a California Distinguished School award, staff, and parents were very receptive, and their work together became increasingly guided by that goal. The school board, superintendent, and district staff supported this goal and actively participated. The school hired an expert grant writer to help with the application. She also happened to be a parent of children attending the magnet school.

A core group of teachers often worked with the principal after school hours to help complete the detailed and comprehensive Distinguished School application. As the application process progressed, teachers were eager to try and share new teaching ideas and discuss the outcomes with others. They employed suggested modifications made by colleagues when the original ideas they described didn't work out as planned.

This team of motivated educators had now reached a high level of performance and commitment, which enabled them to offer a safe, supportive and engaging environment for both staff and students. As a result, student achievement scores rose, and parents saw that student learning, polite behavior, and a willingness to discover their children's strengths were encouraged at this school. This motivated parents to embrace the idea of volunteering a minimum of ten hours a month to the school, and a number of them exceeded that requirement.

When a complicated issue arose, the principal of the magnet school had to depend on two crucial school community groups to address the situation; the school board with its entrenched ideas and the Parent-Teacher Organization.

The magnet school was growing, and students were enrolling from across the district. The economic disparity between students was apparent, particularly the differences in students' clothing. The principal and parents believed school uniforms would maintain the appearance of a socioeconomic balance, enhance unity, and be less costly for parents. This decision could not be unilateral and would need to have the school board's approval.

After two unsuccessful attempts by the principal for School Board approval, Parent Teacher Organization members went to a School Board meeting and were successful in getting permission for the uniforms. Shortly after that, many of the other district schools encouraged their students to wear uniforms as well.

A local school uniform company got involved and offered substantial discounts to the families as this was one of the first public schools to require uniforms for students.

Before the Science and Technology Magnet School opened, the teachers received onsite professional development to augment their science knowledge and to learn how to use technology with their students.

The district received additional funds for more comprehensive training in the second year. During that summer training session, the new principal and all teachers began planning the instructional, social, emotional, and behavioral elements for an integrated curriculum for each grade level. And their plans reflected the district and magnet school's mission and goals. This professional development and teaming opportunity fostered camaraderie, collaboration, and the use of a common language, all of which served to inspire staff, students, and parents.

Throughout each school year, teachers provided workshops for parents to help support their children's learning experience in the new environment. Also, the principal and teachers led information sessions for interested groups and orientation meetings for community members and other stakeholders who wanted to participate.

The superintendent, district leaders, principal, and parents worked well together and realized the continual need to develop new partnerships. They also nurtured the coalitions already in place with higher education, businesses, and philanthropic organizations that believed in the superintendent's vision.

Two global IT companies provided a state-of-the-art science lab, funded science, and technology training for teachers, and donated a thirty-student computer lab.

A major university's graduate school of business became captivated by the growing success of the Science and Technology Magnet school and wanted to get involved. They agreed to create a support program and fund a coordinator to manage the Magnet school's site project. They recruited graduate students who adopted third and fourth-grade students, served as mentors, chaperoned on field trips, and pledged to support them through high school.

And to the surprise of everyone, a generous donor guaranteed the fourth-grade class financial support through four years of college. These generous in-kind contributions made an enormous impact on the school's success.

The principal's strategy was to make this a welcoming, respectful, and courteous environment for all who attended worked at or visited the school. She understood that effective communications were more than just talking or sharing current information but were rooted in the perceptions of others both inside and outside of the school.

The Science and Technology Magnet School became adept at using the media to share information about the school. This approach garnered broader community support for the school and contributed to a positive reputation and a showcase for the district. The Oprah Winfrey show extended an invitation to the principal to appear with the CEO of a tech giant who had donated one of the school's computer labs. This televised opportunity had the added benefit of increasing school pride.

The principal of this school interviewed new parents and students and provided them with a Student Handbook. Annually on Back-to-School Night, students and parents were required to review the handbook and sign the school contract indicating they understood the contents and expectations. Students were also assigned to write letters to parents reminding them about meetings and events.

The school community stepped up and filled leadership roles across multiple undertakings, and they were the difference-makers in the school's success. Here are a few stories that exemplify what they contributed:

- One of the most indispensable leaders was the school secretary. She was the welcoming face of the school, the go-to person for parents, teachers, and staff, and plus the principal could rely on her to handle anything. She provided the ultimate concierge service to everyone.
- An extremely competent and cooperative parent was elected to be the president of the Parent Teacher Organization. She worked well with the school, district leaders, and parents. Meetings were productive and conducted in a respectful tone, and ideas spurred action on how best to continue the school's positive promotion and upward trajectory.
- During the complex and detailed application process for a California Distinguished School Award, selected teachers were assigned to lead different application sections. The questions posed in the application required them to formulate answers with inputs from other teachers that best described the education processes they had developed, how they were working, and the results.
- The school custodian was without peers and kept the school in pristine condition. He came in on Saturdays to direct parent volunteers who helped maintain the school

grounds as part of their service commitment. During the week, he taught the students how to take care of their gardens.

Building an active community coalition was essential for the magnet school's plan. Elected officials and professional athletes were invited and were involved in school events and fundraising activities. These types of activities plus multicultural events facilitated by parents and teachers attracted community participation, newspaper articles, and television exposure. Media attention and presentations to local businesses generated interest, in-kind contributions, and professional science and technology volunteers.

The principal invited local companies to visit the school and learn about the program. Several companies helped build school and classroom gardens and donated new equipment to upgrade the playground. On a family stargazing night, volunteers brought telescopes for viewing. Other examples of volunteering included field trips to symphonies, helping younger students perform poetry, and supporting the upper-grade students who put on a Shakespeare play. As the school's positive reputation blossomed, other partners came forward to help enhance the program.

In addition, several private high schools in the area offered a summer program for sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students and provided scholarships for interested students who wanted to attend their schools.

The magnet school thrived due to the combined efforts and coordinated engagement of the school leaders, teachers, staff, local companies, parents, volunteers, and involvement from a top-tier university. As a result, student test scores rose, enrollments increased, the waiting list grew, the daily attendance rate was 90 percent or higher, disciplinary issues were rare, and teacher satisfaction was high and unwavering.

The school's third-graders placed third in the county with their test scores, nearly catching up to the number one and number two public schools in wealthy districts. One of the hallmark practices introduced by teachers was to remain with their classes for a minimum of two years to help establish a relationship and continuity with students and parents.

The school was flourishing and received several local and county awards for its innovative programs. At this point, the district, principal, staff, and parents felt confident they could win a California Distinguished School Award. And two years later, they achieved their goal. The school also received a state grant to share information about its school reform measures and high-performance success with others in the state.

The magnet school emphasized life skills, such as cooperation, responsibility, caring, perseverance, effort, problem-solving, teamwork, initiative, motivation, and common sense.

Such skills are essential for helping citizens young and old practice self-control, active listening, working with others, and discussing and debating issues intelligently and respectfully. This set of behavioral guidelines was required practice for staff, students, and parents and was the expected standard of behavior for everyone.

These life skills were also included in the School Handbook and reviewed with the entire school community. The students and parents were required to sign a contract of agreement, acknowledging they understood and would adhere to school rules and expectations. This approach helped reduce the number of behavior-related calls to parents, and negative comments in student records and improved relations between all school community members.

One of the civic exercises promoted during national and local elections was students casting ballots for the candidate of their choice. Students voted in mock voting booths to give them a real-life experience of one of the most important responsibilities of citizenship.

SCHOOL CONTRACT SIGNATURE PAGE	
<p>We agree to abide by the school requirements set forth in the 20_ Handbook.</p>	
<p>We understand the importance of and will demonstrate polite behavior in our interactions with others. We recognize the power and benefit of being educated.</p>	
<p>We also understand the individual power of choice and will act with self-control and agree to take advantage of the learning opportunities presented by the school.</p>	
<p>We believe that relationships matter and will do our part to create positive outcomes with those we come in contact with during the school day.</p>	
<p>We, as a Cooperative School Community, will do our best to "Make Every School Day Count."</p>	
_____	_____
Student Signature	Date
_____	_____
Parent Signature	Date
_____	_____
Teacher Signature	Date
_____	_____
Principal Signature	Date

Case Study Conclusion

In its sixth year of continuous operational and student achievements, change came to call at the Science and Technology Magnet School. The forward-looking superintendent retired, and the principal left for an overseas assignment. The once-successful award-winning school and community lost its momentum, never recovered, and the school eventually closed. Perhaps, this may have been avoided with more foresight and contingency planning by the school board, incoming superintendent, district staff, and parents to address these significant leadership changes.

Changing dynamics altered the course of this innovative and popular school, and this is why it's crucial to build and nurture a sustainable cooperative school community.

Think of this study as a cautionary tale but an inspiring story of what a school and community can achieve.

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