

## *Family and Community Collaboration in Practice:* **Moreno Valley Unified School District**

Research demonstrates the importance of family and community collaboration (FCC), yet for many school districts, things can get in the way of realizing it. This profile describes Moreno Valley Unified School District's (MVUSD) innovative and successful approaches to overcoming challenges to FCC, specifically as it relates to building trust with families and creating staff capacity to maintain strong relationships. To achieve FCC, MVUSD used a few key strategies:

### *Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities*

Communication is critical to building trust, fostering engagement, and facilitating collaborative decision-making. MVUSD staff consistently message the district-wide vision and goals for FCC in a way that is inclusive and fosters buy-in. To build trust, staff form relationships with families and learn about their perspectives through recurring meetings, emails, and community events. Communication is ongoing, multi-directional, and accessible to all families.

### *Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships*

When serving families who need basic services such as food, housing, and health care, it can be challenging to find the resources to meet all needs. As part of their approach, MVUSD operates a Community Wellness Center, a one-stop shop for food, clothing, housing, mental health resources, and more. MVUSD also hosts events with community partners and service providers to meet urgent health and material needs.

### *Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff*

Families and staff need support and training to fully collaborate in district decision-making. MVUSD facilitates multiple task forces and committees to ensure they are engaging specific communities, including African Americans, English Learners (Emergent Bilinguals), and students. These structures develop participants' knowledge and skills related to district processes and give them opportunities to collaborate with the district. MVUSD also employs a part-time grant writer to find additional resources to support innovation and FCC services.

### *Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition*

District leaders show they value students, families, and partners by attending community and school events, responding promptly to concerns, and regularly celebrating all groups' achievements and progress through awards and verbal recognition. Staff know their families personally, and families feel deeply connected to staff.





Photo courtesy of Moreno Valley Unified School District

## INTRODUCTION

Moreno Valley Unified School District (MVUSD) sits within the “Inland Empire” of Southern California — about 60 miles east of Los Angeles in a predominantly Hispanic community. MVUSD has committed to build staff capacity to strengthen relationships with families. Their efforts support district-wide family and community collaboration (FCC). As a result of staff engaging in strategic two-way communication, meeting families’ basic needs, and strengthening partnerships with community groups, more families and students now feel valued and supported.

As a California school district, MVUSD is required to create a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). The LCAP details every district’s goals for student achievement, funding, and family engagement initiatives. The LCAP is an important component of MVUSD’s largest funding source, the Local Control Funding Formula (about \$104 million in 2023). Among other things, this money is used to support family engagement by financing staff, professional development, and events.

## District details

Moreno Valley Unified School District (MVUSD) is a large school district serving the predominantly Hispanic suburban community near Riverside, CA. As of 2021, there were more than 190,000 residents in Moreno Valley. Approximately 14 percent of residents live below the poverty level and 78 percent of students enrolled in MVUSD qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. MVUSD is supported by nearly 4,000 permanent employees, 1,000 substitutes, and dozens of community partners in California’s “Inland Empire,” a region of expansive cities and towns east of Los Angeles. Large local industries include agriculture, distribution centers, and manufacturing. The community also has a sizable military population due to the March Air Reserve Base.

MVUSD ramped up its collaborative decision-making process in 2019 in creating their most recent strategic plan. Highlights of the 2021-2016 strategic plan include:

- **Vision:** To empower students to become future-ready and positively impact the world.
- **Mission:** We will provide an equitable education for all students to be prepared for college and/or a viable career path.
- **Portrait of a Graduate:** MVUSD’s vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, character traits, and/or social-emotional competencies that students need to succeed in college, career, and live. The six competencies include: adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity, and perseverance.

The district goals to ensure the vision and mission are met include:

- Promote academic growth for every student.
- Establish college and career readiness for every student.
- Ensure equitable opportunities for every student.
- Provide a safe, welcoming, respectful, and rigorous learning environment for every member of the school community.
- Support effective communication throughout the district.

Districts are required to ask for family and student feedback as part of the LCAP development process, but MVUSD goes beyond most districts' interpretation of this requirement. MVUSD holds ongoing student and parent advisory committees in which students and caregivers are trained on the process and offered meaningful, repeated opportunities to provide feedback directly to the Superintendent.

With the investment from the federal and state funding streams, FCC duties are led and guided by the superintendent. Many additional district leaders also have FCC responsibilities, including the chief academic officer and directors of communications; wellness, mental health, and community outreach; student services; equity and access; and English Learners. As an extension of the superintendent's office, the district hires parent volunteers to serve as parent ambassadors at each school site to connect with families. The district also has two social workers at each school, 25 mental health therapists, and two parent engagement specialists. These staff members, along with all participants of student and family committees, receive professional development at the district and state level that is encouraged and funded by the district.

“We’re going to invest as much time and resources as we can because, in the end, it’s for our students. We care about our students, and we want to make sure that they have resources and tools available to them.”

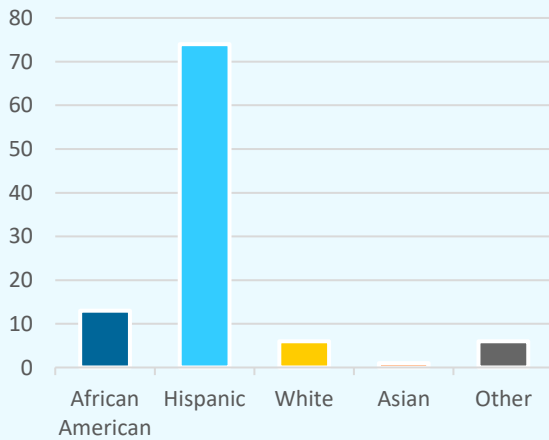
– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

### District characteristics (2021-2022)

**31,600**  
Students

**40**  
Schools

Percentage of students by race/ethnicity



**20%**

English Learners



**78%**

Free and Reduced Lunch



**14%**

Students with a disability



**100%**

Title I eligibility



**91%**

Graduation rate

## Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities

Like many districts, MVUSD has experienced challenges in its community. In ways that can inspire other districts, MVUSD has turned these challenges into opportunities to innovate, reform, and improve FCC practices.

For example, amid concerns in the community about bullying and anti-bullying efforts during the 2019-2020 school year, MVUSD created a kindness campaign called HeartsYOUUnited. The campaign's goals included inspiring youth to stand up and speak out against bullying and violence, increasing awareness of available support programs and services, and fostering a safe learning environment in collaboration with staff and caregivers. MVUSD **clearly communicated these goals** to students and the community through district-wide emails, phone calls, and announcements, while also opening communication channels on the district website to hear directly from students and families. MVUSD also created a group of clergy members and other community leaders to support the initiative and provide supportive services.

As part of the HeartsYOUUnited campaign, MVUSD created special business cards for every student, teacher, administrator, and district staff member. The cards included a QR code that anyone could scan to access an online form to report instances of bullying. The form was made available on all school and district websites, as well as added as a shortcut on students' laptops. Staff were asked to keep the link and card readily available to support students who want to report a bullying incident; this served as a way to immediately create a record and take necessary action.

These multi-directional and district-wide communication practices became permanent in MVUSD and provided a helpful communication infrastructure when the COVID-19 pandemic started. MVUSD was affected by COVID-19 earlier than other districts because the first group of travelers who were possibly affected were transported to the local military base. MVUSD worked with other districts and the local health department to share daily updates with the community. The superintendent sent **voicemails** to every student, staff, and family member along with **email updates** containing more information for their specific situation. District staff also coordinated consistent messaging by sending principals previews of the information families would receive, along with a list of resources to help principals answer questions that families might have.



TO REPORT **BULLYING** YOU CAN:

- Call 951-571-7630
- Visit [bit.ly/mvusdbullying](https://bit.ly/mvusdbullying)
- Scan the QR code below

**STAND UP AGAINST BULLYING**

**IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING.**

*Be an **UPSTANDER**, not a bystander!*



**SCAN ME**

MORENO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT  
EXCELLENCE ON PURPOSE  
WARRIOR DESIGNER



**HOW TO BE AN UPSTANDER**



- *If I see something, I will say something.*
- *I will be kind to others.*
- *I will be an **UPSTANDER**, not a bystander.*
- *I will stand up for what is right.*
- *I will respect my classmates, teachers, school community, and myself.*

MVUSD provided business cards to all students and staff to support the HeartsYOUUnited initiative and provide a QR code for reporting instances of bullying.

Even when regular COVID updates were no longer needed, the district continued **weekly calls and newsletters from the superintendent**. The district office formally and informally obtained feedback on the weekly calls, newsletters, and texts, and learned that respondents appreciated being informed. Calls from the superintendent were a particular favorite. Multiple community members and staff said the calls, which included anecdotes and details about the superintendent's family and life, made community members feel as if they know him and can approach him.

All forms of communication incorporate aspects of the strategic plan in what the superintendent calls "**agenda linking**." For example, when a student voiced concerns about the quality of the cafeteria food during a board meeting, the superintendent encouraged the student to work with the food services director because the issue related to the district goal of supporting a safe and respectful learning environment.

Each meeting on existing and potentially new initiatives starts with a reminder of district goals and commitments. These reminders ensure that all aspects of the district work together to improve on their established path.

"Text doesn't convey tone or your feelings ... so even when people are mad at me, they're not as mad at me because they know I care about them, they care about me, and we care about the school district."

- MVUSD Superintendent

## PROMISING PRACTICES: Communication

How other districts can *coordinate communication* in their own communities

- + Create a district-wide **communication calendar** and schedule so families know what messaging to expect, from whom, and when. For example: Principals email school communities on Mondays and the superintendent sends a community-wide voicemail and electronic newsletter on Fridays.
- + Appoint district-level staff to **promptly respond** to student and caregiver feedback. Whether via email, in-person meeting, school visit, or other means, district staff must demonstrate to all groups that feedback is heard and valued. Provide clear information about expected response times in handbooks and on communication platforms (e.g., automatic email replies, survey headers).
- + Use "**agenda linking**" and tie messaging to strategic goals in meetings and everyday communication. Reminding students, families, and staff about goals and progress can support a district-wide shared vision of success.

## Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships

MVUSD has long recognized that for students to be successful in school, the district must address students' social, emotional, and physical well-being as much as their academic well-being. Before designing specific programs to support families, MVUSD began by working to understand families' needs. The district turned to one of its 11 commitments: *listen to understand*. This commitment asks MVUSD staff, students, and families to listen openly and practice empathy before trying to come up with a response. One initiative exemplifying this commitment is the Community Wellness Center, a one-stop shop for a range of supports. The Community Wellness Center staff act on the district-wide commitment to **identify students and family needs first** and provide supportive services in response.

To illustrate, MVUSD learned that many students frequently miss school because they lack basic necessities, including transportation, housing, clothes, and basic health care. The Community Wellness Center starts by creating a welcoming environment for students and families. All center staff emphasize to families that there is no shame in coming for resources. One wellness liaison said, "I can totally relate to what they're going through, and I share my story with them. I share that we are all in this together." **Using empathy** to understand the families' situations helps staff meet their specific needs.

The center also collects data and examines trends, particularly regarding students who are chronically absent. After identifying needs, the Center then creates the infrastructure needed to meet them. In many cases, MVUSD or its community partners already have the resources that families need the most, but families may not know about them or have easy access. To make sure everyone could get what they need, MVUSD **mapped the assets that existed in the community** and then created the relationships to bring vital services to MVUSD students and families.

As part of this work, MVUSD hosts an annual **Health and Resource Fair** to meet all back-to-school needs. Each year more than 2,000 families come to receive free immunizations, dental and physical checkups, backpacks, clothes, haircuts, and food to ensure all students are ready for their first day of school. The center works with its community partners to meet these immediate needs and share information with families about services they can turn to throughout the year.

"It really starts with having a relationship with your families, because they don't just come out and tell you [what they need]. Once you have that relationship and build that trust, you determine what's needed and then I channel my focus on getting those resources."

– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

## Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff

All districts need resources to meet the needs of their students and families, including money, time, supplies, and people. MVUSD works to incorporate FCC through multiple positions at the district level, and they use innovative strategies to find more resources when needed. Using these resources, MVUSD builds staff knowledge and skills through creating family and student coalitions.

### Grant-writing to fund innovation

MVUSD hired a part-time **grant-writing consultant** as a strategy to obtain more funding to meet district priorities. Specifically, the Superintendent uses the grant-writer to identify and secure funding that can spur innovation and creativity among staff, rather than only filling in gaps in existing services. In collaboration with the Superintendent's office and other interested district personnel, the grant writer finds federal, state, and local grant opportunities and leads the writing of each proposal. This grant writer, who primarily works remotely in another state, has won multiple million-dollar grants to support identified needs.

### Students and caregivers as district leaders

As part of the LCAP process, all California school districts are required to listen to and incorporate student and caregiver voices into their planning process. To accomplish this task, MVUSD created **LCAP committees** that meet monthly, online and in person. These committees are facilitated by the superintendent, chief academic officer, and the director of equity and access.

In each LCAP meeting, district staff create a classroom-like environment to break down complex funding and legal requirements for caregiver and student audiences. For example, in the first student LCAP meeting

“If we look at just outcomes, we miss the heart of what we're doing here, and that is providing care for our families, human to human. Our district really looks beyond the numbers. We look at the stories.”

– MVUSD Community Wellness Center staff

### PROMISING PRACTICES: Task forces and committees

How other districts can *build the capacity* of students, families, and teachers

- + Train **parent ambassadors** in district policies and collaborate with them to share messaging with other families. Example: Provide training to ambassadors about completing the FAFSA to answer questions and encourage completion in the spring.
- + Facilitate ongoing **committee meetings** to provide recurring opportunities for students, families, and teachers to share ideas and concerns. Monthly (virtual) meetings can include a reminder about district goals and regular feedback about those goals.

of 2023, district staff created a scavenger hunt to teach students about district goals. At each meeting, district staff review the goals and reinforce the point of the LCAP feedback process. These goals are put into student- and caregiver-friendly language, and staff provide analogies for these goals that relate to their lives (e.g., their goals for their tennis serve). Staff also update students and families on what MVUSD already provides regarding that goal. As one staff said during a meeting, “You can’t give us feedback on something that you don’t know anything about.” Students and families are asked for their thoughts about how well the district is meeting its goals and what suggestions they have for improvement. Meeting attendance and feedback are recorded and those who stay until the end get a chance to win a gift card for their time and contributions.

MVUSD also facilitates **leadership councils** for communities that experience barriers to participation. For example, when data confirmed that African American students had lower graduation rates than their peers, the district began **African American Parent Advisory Councils (AAPACs)**. AAPACs operated similarly to the **District English Learner Advisory Committees (DELACs)**, which are federally mandated and designed for multilingual families (primarily Spanish speakers). The AAPACs serve as a forum for caregivers, students, teachers, and administrators to share concerns and resources. As one parent described their AAPAC, “it’s like a collaborative platform for parents to be heard, for students to be heard, for teachers to share concerns.” Now, after 11 years of facilitating district- and school-level AAPACs, MVUSD has African American graduation rates higher than the state and national average.

Another capacity-building strategy that MVUSD uses to collaborate with families is its **Parent Ambassador Program**. Parent ambassadors are parents from each school site who act as “an extension of the Superintendent’s office.” Parent ambassadors dedicate 20 hours each month to serve as a bridge between staff and families through communicating district messages and resources to the families at their school. Parent ambassadors also support other caregivers in navigating the educational system, such as understanding the IEP process, finding tutoring for students, bringing families to district events, and connecting families facing housing insecurity to the Community Wellness Center. Parent ambassadors have monthly trainings to learn from district departments and local partners and then share that information with other families. At these meetings, ambassadors also provide feedback to the district about the needs that the community still has. Ambassadors receive a monthly stipend of \$500.

“It's really a two-way street. It is very inclusive and collaborative. It's not just an open-door policy, but we want to also enter their door and go into their realm so we can learn more about what they can offer to our community.”

– Moreno caregiver



## Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition

District staff make a concerted effort to show they care about each student and family. To demonstrate this care, district leaders frequent school hallways and classrooms, sporting events, and local activities. As a result, families and students described MVUSD staff as approachable and open to hearing all concerns. District staff also promise to **respond quickly** to feedback. For example, after a student shared concerns about a school's lunch offerings at a 2023 board meeting, the Superintendent visited that school the next morning to learn more about that student's concerns and promptly connected them with other district staff to discuss possible solutions.

**Celebrations and personal recognition** are other effective strategies that MVUSD uses to show they care about their students, families, and partners. These celebrations occur frequently and in multiple ways. For example, the superintendent's office honors achievements through district-wide weekly voicemails and newsletters, during in-person ceremonial events, at school board meetings, and through a "Year in Review" book that highlights successes at every school. These achievements are often not "typical" achievements — rather, they are everyday examples of how students exemplify any of the six core competencies of the district's Portrait of a Graduate (see page 2).

"We all matter. No matter your culture, no matter your race, there is a little bit of something for everyone. It's noticed and it's not watered down."

– MVUSD caregiver

Showing care and consideration is also important for maintaining MVUSD's **reciprocal relationships with community partners**. Leaders from local businesses, organizations, and faith groups mentioned how they appreciate that MVUSD returns the favor by attending their events, providing event space when possible, participating on leadership committees or event panels, recruiting students to engage in local youth initiatives, and recognizing partners through award ceremonies.

### PROMISING PRACTICES: Recognition and reciprocity

How other districts can *nurture relationships among* students, families, and partners

- + Identify district-wide core values and design **frequent opportunities** to recognize students, families, and partners who illustrate these qualities. Examples include award ceremonies, community banquets, social media, and newsletters.
- + Offer **continued support** to community partners to express gratitude and show a commitment to reciprocity. Attend their events, share their flyers, and provide space, if necessary, to strengthen the partnership. It is important to be visible and valuable to partners.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Though MVUSD is unique in many regards, other districts can learn from a few key innovative strategies and evidence-based practices and can customize them for their own local contexts.

- **Sustaining ongoing, two-way communication opportunities**  
Districts should build relationships to learn about students' and families' stories, create a response based on heard needs, and consistently reiterate the district's goals and mission through coordinated district- and school-level messaging platforms.
- **Providing services directly and through sustained partnerships**  
Strategies for finding resources should begin with mapping community assets and building partnerships for funding, time, volunteers, and other support. Create physical places that welcome families, along with regular, robust ways for families to conveniently access those resources.
- **Building capacity of parents, students, and district staff**  
Districts can build the capacity of students and families by including them in leadership and feedback committees. Ensure they receive acknowledgment and support, such as through stipends or professional development opportunities. Districts can also hire experts, such as grant writers, to help fund councils' ideas and fill funding and resource gaps.
- **Demonstrating care through building relationships and recognition**  
District leaders can demonstrate authenticity by spending time in the community and on school campuses, talking with students and families, and building relationships beyond formal communication channels. Districts and schools should frequently honor the strengths that students, families, and community organizations add to the district through awards and other expressions of gratitude.

### About Connected & Engaged

This initiative investigates common barriers to achieving authentic partnerships between school districts and families and offers research-based strategies to address those challenges. This initiative aims to support school districts, community-based organizations, and caregivers as they consider their own challenges and work to nurture and promote a connected and engaged school community.

### About FHI 360

FHI 360's U.S. Programs work to improve the well-being of all Americans throughout their lifetimes by focusing on the three main drivers of success—health, education, and employment. Our projects **promote equity** to ensure that people from diverse backgrounds and experiences are empowered to reach their full potential and live productive and healthy lives.

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