

Purpose

The purpose of the systemic instructional review is to help support a local educational agency (LEA) in the identification of strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (SWOT) in the implementation of instructional initiatives and practices. Data are collected through focus group interviews, individual interviews, observations of all aspects of the instructional program, artifact reviews, and data analysis. Stakeholders at multiple levels (students, parents, teachers, school site staff and administration, governance members, and district office leadership) are involved throughout the data collection process. The review culminates in suggested actions designed to assist districts in creating coherence throughout the system by supporting a strong focus on instruction, developing collaborative cultures, enhancing deeper learning, and establishing accountability throughout the system. Actions are given with a specified 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, 120 days and beyond timeline, in which it is recommended the LEA is to have the action completed.

Data Collection

Data collection for this review began in early November 2019 and consisted of classroom observations, a comprehensive document review of instructional artifacts and policy documents, individual interviews, focus groups with multiple stakeholder groups, site principal interviews, and observation of recorded school board meetings. In this manner, CCEE staff were able to triangulate multiple data points in an effort to validate the collected data set and individual items.

Over the course of seven weeks, teams of CCEE staff members visited every VCUSD school and 150 classrooms, focusing on instruction in ELA and math in grades 1, 3, 5, and 6, as well as on math instruction in grades 9 and 11. In addition, special day classes were observed and all alternative education programs were observed.

During the initial SIR planning meeting, the 6 instructional components were selected by VCUSD as focus components, in response, the CCEE collected items from VCUSD around these components and included in the document review.

Prior to site visits, CCEE staff reviewed all documents submitted by VCUSD to support instructional efforts. Additional documents were added and reviewed during the period of classroom visits. Site visits were conducted by CCEE teams working in pairs and visits typically began with a 20-30 minute interview of principals, during which they were provided an opportunity to give a general overview of their schools, and to present their site's areas of instructional focus.

Focus groups were conducted with all stakeholder groups including elementary students, middle school students, high school students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. In addition to principal interviews conducted during site visits, individual interviews were conducted with the Superintendent, board members, the Chief Academic Officer, all division directors, elementary and secondary instructional directors, district instructional personnel, and union members.

VCUSD Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

Strengths

- The district has some strong leaders at every level of the system, from the Governing Board to the school site. These leaders are supported by an energetic and focused superintendent.
- The Governing Board and the Superintendent are attempting to provide a laser-like focus on instruction through the use of the LCAP. This particularly evidenced in the area of social emotional and behavioral well-being of the child.
- In all levels of the system, there is strong pride in the community, as well as multiple instances of deep long-standing individual connections to the school district.

Weaknesses

- Clearly articulated expectations for all stakeholders in the system were inconsistent, resulting in a lack of system coherence.
- Systemic continuous improvement practices are not generally utilized or developed within the system, creating an unreliable picture of the current impact of the work.
- Clearly articulated policies around curriculum, instruction, and assessment, including instruction for English learners and students with disabilities were not evident.

Threats

- A culture of skepticism exists in the district's ability to shift beliefs around students' and staff's expectations, that is exacerbated by frequent turnover at all levels and by long-standing issues of mutual trust.
- There is a need for a comprehensive, long-term instructional plan grounded in effective use of data to support a unifying message around curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- Staffing challenges including unfilled positions, teacher absenteeism, reductions in force, etc. poses a significant threat to a coherent instructional program.

Opportunities

- The Superintendent's relationship building with the unions provides an opportunity to reexamine the teachers' contract to explore increased options for teacher collaboration around the use of assessment data and professional learning opportunities.
- Engagement in the implementation of the MTSS framework, grounded in the continuous improvement cycle, frames the work in a way that naturally builds trust and accountability.
- The connectedness to the community provides a rich opportunity for district branding and messaging.

VCUSD 30 Day Actions

Action Number	Action	Timeline
1.1	Develop a multi-pronged approach to create communication systems that promote an inclusive and equitable teaching culture that embodies a collective belief in high expectations.	30 Days & Ongoing (March 2020)
1.2	Establish and communicate the expectation for continuous improvement practices.	30 Days & Ongoing (March 2020)
3.1	Deepen understanding of the key instructional practices to be used by all teachers in all classrooms and in all disciplines by clearly identifying each practice and articulating how the practice is expected to be used. Provide corresponding professional learning for teachers on how to implement the strategies using their instructional tools.	30 Days & Ongoing (March,2020 start)
4.1	Provide school site leaders and teachers with a guiding document that clearly states district expectations regarding: a) criteria for their selection of SEL programs, b) how teachers are to implement the selected program, and c) how sites are to engage in SEL data analysis.	30 Days & Ongoing (March 2020)
4.2	Continue to model and refine professional learning opportunities for site leaders that focuses on how to lead educators' learning about SEL data analysis practices through the use of specific protocols.	30 Days & Ongoing (March 2020)
8.1	Train administrators on how to facilitate data analysis for teachers, using a specific district-selected protocol. Provide written expectations as to how and when this work is to be facilitated at the school sites.	30 Days (March, 2020)
11.1	Establish a timeline for time sensitive information and communication provided to schools and community, and hold personnel accountable for meeting the timelines including evaluation requirements.	30 Days & Ongoing (March 2020)
9.1	Continue and expand the initiative to train TLs in Cognitive Coaching. (Summary Finding 3: Multi-year Professional Learning) (Supports IC11 District Leadership and Capacity)	Ongoing