

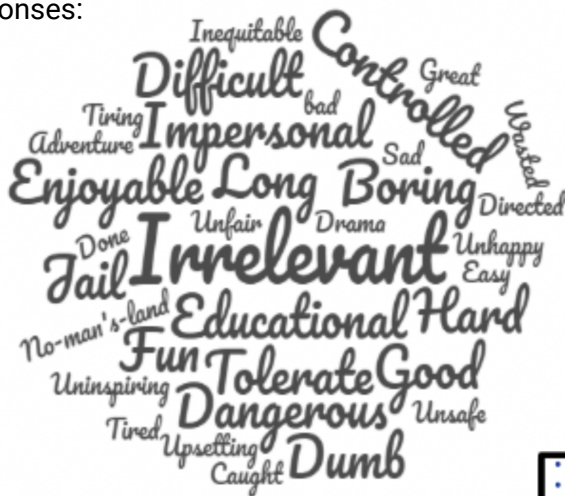
PRACTICE & POLICY BRIEF 2023: BRINGING A GRADUATE PROFILE TO LIFE

VISTA USD: REALIZING THE PROMISE OF A GRADUATE PROFILE

"The 20th century approach to teaching and learning is obsolete ... at some point someone has a responsibility for bringing schools into the 21st century. The 21st century is not high stakes tests ... it's about how we inspire kids to want to be drivers of their own education. And that's a pretty big mindset shift."

- Matt Doyle,
Superintendent, Vista Unified School District

Vista Unified School District has been in a process of transformation for almost a decade. In 2014, two district leaders went on a listening tour and interviewed over 2,000 students in grades 4-12. They asked them for a word that came to mind when they hear "school" and created the following Wordle of their responses:



Needless to say, this was a call to action. It was clear that, while some students gave positive responses, the majority did not. This reflects the views of many students across the United States: they are not engaged by school and don't see its value for their futures. Changing this reality is one of the primary goals of efforts to create a Graduate Profile (or Portrait of a Graduate) and then do the hard work of moving them from "poster to practice."

Then-superintendent Devin Vodicka brought all administrators together to rethink their mission and vision, and the district pursued several reforms. It took a "strengths-based" approach to students, emphasizing personal relationships, student voice and choice, and connections to the world of work. It succeeded; in a 2019 student forum, students described their experience in school very differently, as shown at the right:



VISTA USD'S FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

In 2021, with support from the San Diego County Office of Education and San Francisco-based [Prospect Studio](#) and led by Superintendent Matt Doyle, the district conducted a year-long, community-wide process that resulted in the creation of a "[Framework for the Future](#)," adopted by the school board in June 2022. The Framework includes a Learner Portrait, Adult Portrait, and System Portrait, plus a vision statement, vision statement, and a set of core values.

The Framework includes all these components because the district wanted to emphasize the point that the Framework was intended to guide fundamental change; it was not simply about adding a nice-sounding layer of student outcomes on top of a traditional approach to education. Accordingly, the Adult Portrait articulates the qualities and competencies that educators need in order to foster student development of their learner competencies, and the System Portrait describes the culture and conditions that enable the adults to do the work they need to do to support students.

The process of developing the Framework was intentionally inclusive, designed to generate a variety of ideas and give a sense of ownership to all stakeholders in the community. A total of 540 people were involved, including students, family members, teachers, business partners, local and regional elected officials, community partners, school and district staff and administrators, school board members, and representatives of the University of California, San Diego.

A core team met weekly to guide the effort, and a larger core group of 80-100 members met in two-day events three times over the year. The team conducted a forum at each school site to share ideas and gather input, and a group of students at each school also gave their feedback on the draft Portrait of a Graduate. Interestingly, the Framework wound up using the term "Learner Portrait" because students requested it, arguing that it should represent goals for all learners in the system, and not just apply to 12th-grade graduates.

VISTA USD AT A GLANCE

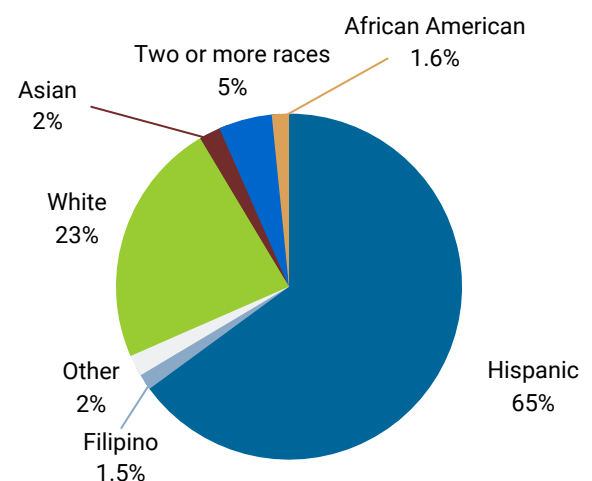
Vista Unified School District is about an hour's drive north of San Diego and includes the city of Vista, part of nearby Oceanside, and unincorporated areas of San Diego County. The city of Vista is home to just over 100,000 people. It has an agricultural past—it was once named "Avocado Capital of the World"—and is now a community of suburban houses and apartments, business parks, and a recently revitalized downtown.

STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS:

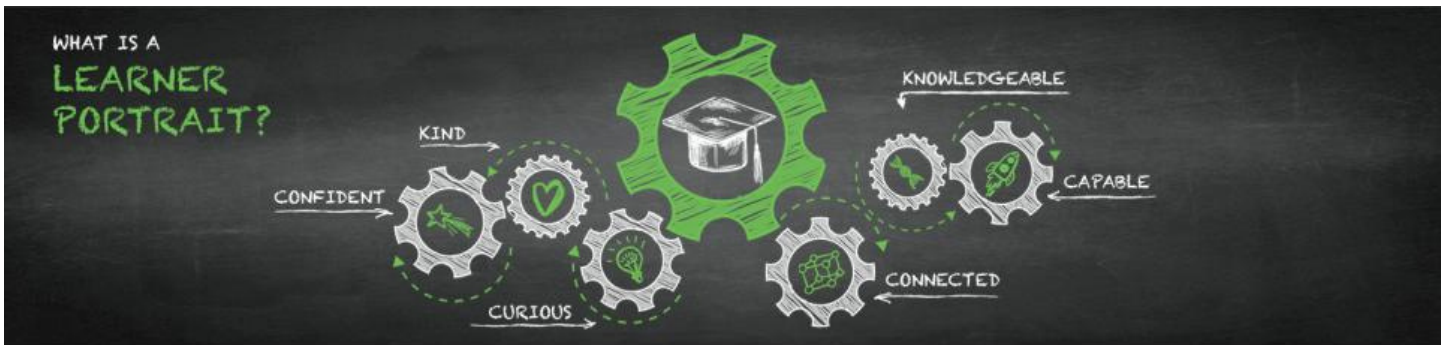
- 19,000 students
- Pre-K – 12th grade
- 15 elementary schools
- 5 middle schools
- 3 comprehensive high schools
- 2 alternative high schools

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:

- 63% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 17% English Learners
- 5% Homeless



Source: [VUSD at a Glance](#)



VISTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT: LEARNER PORTRAIT

The Learner Portrait envisions the outcomes for students. It describes the community's aspirations for what learners will know, be, and be able to do, in order to thrive in their lives and careers.

Kind and Confident

- Students are positive, patient, appreciative, reliable, and responsible.
- Students are resilient, self-directed learners who are self-aware and focused on a hopeful future.

Curious and Connected

- Students are inquisitive, innovative, and able to adapt to new ideas, and situations.
- Students are committed to positively impacting their family, their community, and the world.

Capable and Knowledgeable

- Students develop and apply deep core academic knowledge and skills and can make connections across subjects.
- Students know how to purposefully adapt communication to deliver information.





VISTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT: ADULT PORTRAIT

The Adult Portrait articulates the qualities that all adults working in the school district - not just classroom teachers - will demonstrate in order to support each student's journey toward realizing the Learner Portrait.

Compassionate Champion

- Adults are motivating, inspiring, kind, compassionate, and empathetic champions for all students.
- Adults see and support all students, family members, and co-workers from a strength-based perspective, including inherent cultural wealth and identity.
- Adults hold high expectations for all students (just hard enough) while feeding aspirations and possibility-thinking (future self).

Flexible and Innovative Facilitator

- Adults work well together, are trustworthy, honest, and committed to collaborate and to build connections with students, families, and other staff.
- Adults support learning that is student-centered, innovative, and tailored to meet the individual strengths, interests, aspirations, and needs of students.

Open-Minded and Equity-Centered Learner

- Adults are learners open to new ideas, strategies, and practices that lead to continuous improvement in order to serve each and every student well.
- Adults engage in practices that are free from bias, are anti racist, and build on the unique strengths each learner brings to the classroom or each colleague brings to their role.





VISTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT: SYSTEM PORTRAIT

The System Portrait outlines what the system needs to do to create the conditions that will enable the adults in the system to support every student to successfully attain the Learner Portrait.

Inclusive Culture Focused on Growth

- Our system builds a culture that fosters equity, empathy, and inclusion.
- Our system reinforces a values and strengths-based culture of growth.

Joyful, Innovative, Rigorous, and Equitable Learning Environments

- Our system supports a culture of joyful learning, educational rigor, and innovation.
- Our system promotes care, belonging, and connection.
- Our system fosters creativity, curiosity, and engagement.

Future-Oriented, Forward Thinking

- Our system is designed to be future-oriented and aligned to a dynamic, fast-paced global ecosystem.
- Our system creates sustainably designed, future-focused learning environments.

WHY VUSD'S LEARNER PORTRAIT IS ATYPICAL: THE COVID CONNECTION

Vista's Learner Portrait's third category, "Capable and Knowledgeable" covers the more traditional academic outcomes of education. The first two, "Kind and Confident" and "Curious and Connected" are not typically seen on [other school district Portraits across California](#).

"According to Nicole Allard, the district's (former) executive director of educational excellence and innovation, this was the direct result of the Covid pandemic, which showed so clearly the importance of relationships, kindness, and the social and emotional aspects of education. With remote learning and the disruption of relationships, she notes, "Kids were unsure of who they are, of social settings." In the community meetings in 2021, during the creation of the Framework for the Future, people really wanted to acknowledge this. "Kindness came out so strong - now it's one of our core values. We wouldn't have seen that in 2019."

The community strongly supported the idea of being curious—the importance of "wanting to seek out information, people, voices." The value of a network was also apparent during remote learning. Nicole points out, "If they don't feel like they have a network—especially kids from certain zip codes—how can we show them the power of networks and help them create them?"

BUILDING ON ASSETS

It always makes sense, in any education reform effort, to build upon existing assets. Because VUSD had been pursuing change for almost a decade, it had put into place many practices and programs that were already connected to the goals of its Framework for the Future—and more are now underway.

Each school in the district has a theme or special focus, and the district emphasized that the Learner Portrait was not meant to become “an additional thing” put on teachers’ plates. It asked each school to decide how their “unique brand” supports the Learner Portrait. For example, two high schools and one middle school feature the International Baccalaureate program. The staff at those schools mapped the district’s Learner Portrait to the [IB Learner Profile](#), reflecting on what they were already doing and what they could add to their practice.

Another middle school, Vista Innovation and Design Academy (VIDA), is a magnet school whose theme is, “to nourish the creative thinking skills of students and approach learning through the Design Thinking process that will empower students to take what they have learned and apply those skills to create non-traditional solutions...” The student-centered, experiential learning approach at VIDA provides students with regular opportunities to practice and demonstrate the Learner Portrait competencies.



Its program embraces several promising educational practices, including:

- Interdisciplinary connections across subjects
- Inquiry-based design challenges, deeper learning, project-based learning
- Project Lead the Way Gateway STEM curriculum
- Several “Design Lab” electives, e.g., robotics, fashion design, and video production
- Holistic evaluation of students by teams of teachers

Mission Vista High School (MVHS) is a dual magnet school for arts/communication and science/technology. It features a 4X4 block schedule, which allows it to offer more courses during the school year in a “personalized pathway” for students. MVHS offers nearly 40 “prescribed” growth pathways (e.g., Graphic Design 1, Graphic Design 2, etc.), along with a variety of opportunities for students to mix and match course sequences to align with their interests and strengths. “We want to ensure every student has a clear path forward after graduation,” says principal Jeremy Walden.

In 2017 MVHS adopted “[habits of mind](#)” that align well with the new Learner Portrait’s “kind and confident” and “curious and connected” descriptors. It also features some use of project-based learning and authentic assessment in all subject areas, and a 12th-grade spring semester, student-designed “capstone” project that includes all aspects of the Learner Portrait. The school is now planning a parent survey, asking them to report examples of how their children are demonstrating Learner Portrait qualities and competencies.



THE COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING CONNECTION

The VUSD has in recent years promoted the use of competency-based learning, one of only a handful of districts in California who have adopted the concept, and they link it directly to their Learner Portrait. In essence, it makes learning the constant and time the variable, rather than time the constant and learning the variable. According to the [Aurora Institute](#), competency-based education is a system in which:

- Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
- Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
- Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
- Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
- Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
- Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
- Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable.

As of the 2022-2023 school year, two middle schools have completely moved to a competency-based approach to instruction, assessment and reporting. The district's 15 elementary schools are likewise shifting to a competency-based report card which, rather than letter grades, uses a 1-4 rating, with 3 marking a standards-based level of competence.

In a competency-based system, students continue pursuing a standard until they demonstrate mastery. In this way, no one fails (unless they simply refuse to try).

Mission Vista HS began promoting and providing professional learning for competency-based instruction and grading a few years ago, and more and more teachers are adopting it. Similar efforts are underway at the other high schools and middle schools.

According to principal Jeremy Walden, the school decided, in response to the Covid pandemic, that “feedback” was the aspect of competency-based learning it would use to foster more personalized relationships between teachers and students. The emphasis on feedback also builds student agency, as they make decisions on what feedback they need on their work and how they will act on it.

Nicole Allard also sees feedback and student agency as a key connection between competency-based instruction and the Learner Portrait. She notes that students are partners in the process of deciding whether they have met academic standards. They meet with their teacher to discuss their work and progress—and even challenge a grade—based on evidence they’ve collected in a portfolio. She points to language in the Learner Portrait about agency (“self-directed learners who are self-aware”) and achievement (“develop and apply deep core academic knowledge and skills”).



FROM POSTER TO PRACTICE

Recent decades have seen several efforts in forward-thinking schools and districts to define what a graduate should know, be able to do, and be like in terms of personal qualities, which have sometimes been called school-wide outcomes or descriptions of an “ideal graduate.” In most cases, these efforts have fallen short of practical implementation. Special programs like service learning, “maker spaces” or “genius hours” might have been offered, but most teaching and learning continued to emphasize traditional academic subject-area knowledge and skills.

In contrast, Vista USD is determined to shift its whole approach to teaching and learning to make its Learner Portrait a reality. Nicole Allard puts it this way: “We didn’t want it to be that curled-up poster in the back of the room that everybody has but nobody knows.”

The district has recently taken several more steps to move from poster to practice.

In 2022, as part of the Framework for the Future, it created two versions of its Learner Portrait. The version shown earlier was intentionally kept short and sweet, because they want it to be clear and appealing to the entire community. The second version is called the “[Detailed Elements of the Learner Portrait](#)” and it is intended for educators. It is being used for professional learning for teachers and principals, which began with two full professional learning days for all K-12 teachers in the district in August 2022 and January 2023.

As described by Nicole Allard, teachers at each school site, led by their principals, looked at the Detailed Elements and “personalized it to their sites” by discussing what it looked like in practice. They noted, first, what moves they could make—what “little things” they could do—to support the Portrait. Second, they noted what “larger pedagogical moves” they could make. They also looked at the Adult Portrait and discussed how it supported their goals for students.

These discussions led to the creation of a soon-to-be-released “Guidebook” for secondary teachers. After gathering all the input from teachers, “sprint teams” composed of middle school and high school teachers were formed to carry out the process of writing the Guidebook. The teams were facilitated by a consultant, Matt Coleman from [Inflexion.org](https://inflexion.org).

The next step after the Guidebook will be the creation of a “Learner Progression” planning guide to go with it, to help teachers plan lessons that support the Learner Portrait. Consultant Allison Zmuda of [Learning Personalized](#) has been facilitating the process, with input from the sprint teams.

VUSD is introducing a student self-assessment survey in the spring of 2023, asking them to report on how they’re doing in terms of the Portrait, as well as the opportunities they’ve been given to build the qualities and competencies it contains. This will augment the data they already get four times a year from a “connection, belonging, and engagement” survey, done by the [Intellispark](#) company. Additional plans include a system for gathering assessment data on individual students from teachers, parents, employers, and internship coordinators on how well the student is demonstrating the personal qualities and competencies in the Learner Portrait.

The School Board’s Role

The VUSD board has been highly involved in the effort to rethink education and meet the goals of the Learner Portrait. It took part in developing the Framework for the Future, and in October 2022, approved a new strategic plan that incorporates the Framework’s goals and requisite changes in relationships, roles, and teaching and learning. The board has not (yet) made policy changes or asked the state for waivers on regulations or requirements. “We’re still coloring within the lines,” says Nicole Allard.

LESSONS LEARNED – AND WHY IT’S WORTHWHILE

Matt Doyle, Nicole Allard, and Jeremy Walden offer words of advice and encouragement to other educators interested in leading similar efforts to transform teaching and learning and actualize a Learner Portrait. Here are six interconnected recommendations that can be gleaned from their experience:

1 Start with the why.

“Ensure every single adult understands the “why” and reiterate it, always come back to it,” says Jeremy.

“Always start with the why. Having clear goals and expectations for what we expect of students when they graduate allows us to look at what we’re doing with kindergarteners, third graders, fifth graders, ninth graders...” says Nicole.

2 Go slow.

“Understand that it takes time,” notes Jeremy.

“It may feel like it’s slow—we honestly could have done it in a month with a bunch of really smart people sitting in a room—but we took a year, and now we know it’s truly representative of our community,” Nicole explains. “We rush so much in education, because you feel compelled to DO something, but the talking and the noticing and the empathy is more important because it gives you a better product, and greater ownership.”

3 Connect the dots.

“As the work evolves, connect the dots, so it doesn’t feel like the initiative du jour,” advises Jeremy.

4 Include the community.

“Our vision, our Portrait were a manifestation of very authentic, meaningful engagement for an entire year with our community, so it’s the voice of our community. And if the scope is large enough to have meaning - we were over 500 people - then people will tend to get excited about moving education into the 21st century,” Matt says. “Any school district can do that; the scope has to be big enough, so it is truly representative of the community.”



5 Prepare students for the world of the future, and for success in college.

"What does the world expect of our students? Very little of it is academic skills; it's problem-solving, communication, it's critical thinking, being creative, being flexible, knowing how to work with different people," Nicole says. "If all we give students are academics, we're not preparing them for the world beyond school. The learner portrait gives us an opportunity to have a united front and say this is what we believe in, this is what we know will prepare our students for the world of the future, this is what we're committed to."

"We got no pushback from parents who are happy with the status quo. They saw kids even in our AP and IB programs go away to college and not be successful, because they were too lock-step; study this, take a test, get good grades. But colleges are beginning to shift in terms of what they expect learners should know & be able to do," Matt points out. "Students were not prepared because they weren't flexible, innovative, adaptable – they were not co-creators, (just) a receptor—everything you need to be in order to be successful in a complex global environment."

6 A mindset shift is needed.

"Anytime I'm in a room full of superintendents, anytime in education you try and innovate, you're asked, 'how do you measure it?' So my challenge to that thinking is yeah, no one would begrudge measurement, but prior to measurement you need a mindset shift," Matt argues. "Because if you want to talk about a Learner Portrait, and flexible, nimble thinking, those types of things, before we can measure it, we have to ask, 'are we willing to let some things go?' and let our brains soak in and accept a completely different approach to our classrooms."

"But if we say we're going to measure it like this: a, b, and c and here's your rubric, it's going to fail, because you haven't addressed the main event, which is, are we willing to let go of the old system and adopt a new system?" Matt continues. "Because the old system is all about how are you going to test people, rank people by GPA, show the winners and the losers. Our approach is yes, clearly we need to show evidence that we're successful, but if we start innovation off with the question, 'how are you going to measure it?' you haven't outrun your own shadow - you're still in the old world."



JOIN THE MOVEMENT

Scaling Student Success is a California partnership dedicated to educating the whole child. With our many partners, we embrace school districts that have engaged their local communities to create a Graduate Profile (or Portrait of a Graduate) as a means of articulating a whole child vision and more holistically and equitably defining student success.

Through our **Community of Practice (CoP)** we support districts to move “from poster to practice,” i.e., fully operationalizing their Graduate Profiles as a promise to their students, families, and communities to move beyond the current outdated metrics of our accountability system and embrace outcomes that better represent the values and priorities of their local communities – its employers, civic and community leaders, educators, parents and students.

Please join us! We welcome any school district, charter school or county office interested in joining the movement to realize its whole child vision and redefine student success. To learn more, please visit our [website](#) and/or see the [invitation](#) to join our CoP.

The **Reimagining CA Schools Innovation Pilot** represents a subset of five (CoP) districts aggressively pursuing a journey to realize their Graduate Profiles, eager to go deeper for greater impact on the student experience, learner outcomes, and systems change. Together, over a period of several years, we are determined to establish proof points to demonstrate to the state – its educational agencies, associations, policymakers and LEAs – the power and potential of a Graduate Profile to drive transformational change in order to more holistically prepare young people for future success.

The school districts involved in the innovation pilot include:

- Anaheim Union High School District
- Cajon Valley Union School District
- Davis Joint Unified School District
- Lindsay Unified School District
- Vista Unified School District

The four **Practice & Policy Briefs** (combined with a [case study of Lindsay USD](#) published earlier this year by NGLC) are intended to tell the real-world stories of California districts participating in the innovation pilot – their journeys to realize their whole child visions, the strategies they have opted to pursue, their lessons learned and challenges faced. Please feel free to share them widely.

In publishing these briefs, our goals are to:

- Embolden school district leaders to pursue a similar vision and path
- Entice policymakers and funders to incentivize these efforts
- Encourage state educational agencies and associations to join the movement

Special thanks to our writer/storyteller, [John Larmer](#), and designer, [Kimberly Rachelle Ranalla](#).

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