

Folsom Cordova Unified School District



37
schools

22,500+
students

Vision

Empowering all students to thrive through educational excellence.

Mission

To ensure all students demonstrate high levels of learning through continuous improvement, transformative social-emotional learning, and engaging, culturally responsive instruction.

Background

The Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD) serves a diverse community, stretching from the affluent and middle class Folsom area to the working class city of Rancho Cordova. Its 37 schools serve 22,509 students, 36% of whom qualify for free and reduced price meals (FRPM), ranging from 8% at Vista del Lago High School in Folsom to 88% at Cordova Meadows Elementary School in Rancho Cordova.¹ With this high level of diversity, the district has a deep commitment to allocating resources (programming, staffing, funding) equitably across its schools.

¹ CDE Dataquest, 2025-26

Interviews

This profile draws on interviews with six district staff members:

Stephanie Cecil-Spaulling, Student Support Specialist, Mills Middle School

Leslee Cottrell, Principal, Williamson Elementary School

Emma Falcon, Community Schools Facilitator, Kinney High School

Carla Gaymon-Davis, Community Schools Coordinator

Kate Hazarian, Executive Director

Nathaly Rodriguez, Community Schools Facilitator, Williamson Elementary School

Strategies for Coherence

FCUSD implements multiple statewide initiatives simultaneously - Community Schools, Positive Behavior and Intervention Systems (PBIS), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL) and Expanded Learning, among others. Five strategies help the district stay focused and aligned across these efforts:



Focused Priorities

- (1) Modeling and communicating coherence from district leadership



Capacity Building

- (2) Creating space for school administrators to focus on instruction



Collaborative Structures

- (3) Leveraging Community Schools as a coherence driver
- (4) Prioritizing collaboration through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
- (5) Strengthening Coordination of Cost Team (COST) structures

The district has developed these areas through its commitment to continuous improvement. Staff at all levels of the system are willing to ask hard questions and have uncomfortable conversations about what is not working in the system - for example, disproportionate suspensions of Black and Brown scholars. Digging into root causes has allowed the district to continuously identify and try out new approaches, helping them to land on changes that are having real impacts on schools and students.

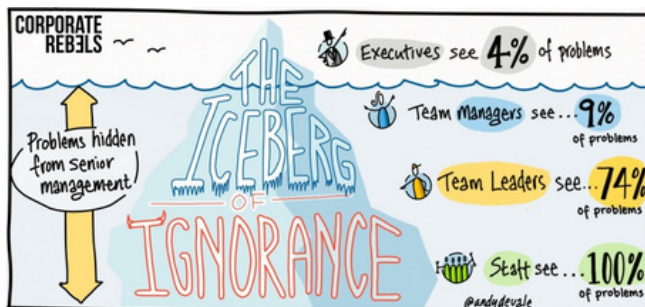
1. Modeling and communicating coherence from district leadership

This looks like...

- Staying on message about the importance of “Connectedness”
- Encouraging communication through “Rounding”
- Defining and sharing collective commitments and performance/process targets that guide decision-making
- Committing a senior position to guide coherence

In his second year at FCUSD, Superintendent Erik Swanson has established a districtwide priority around “**Connectedness**” that is reiterated frequently and serves as the grounding rationale for multiple structures and actions across the district. He models this priority by being engaged and present in many spaces, including listening authentically to site administrators, Community Schools facilitators, teachers, and students.

This listening practice - referred to as “**Rounding**” - is not just for the Superintendent. Introduced at the start of the 2025–26 school year, all managers now use Rounding to connect with staff, students, families, and partners. They ask consistent questions about what’s working, what challenges exist, and what support is needed. They listen to understand, identify patterns, and follow up with actions to remove barriers. The practice is designed to combat what Carla Gaymon-Davis, Community Schools Coordinator, calls the “Iceberg of Ignorance” - the tendency for senior leaders to understand only a fraction of what is happening at the front lines. Regular conversations up and down and across the organizational chart build shared understanding and break through silos created by departments, roles, and funding streams. These connections have enabled quick responses to identified needs: a food drive for Rancho Cordova schools, for example, drew an unprecedented response from district employees and Folsom schools.



“The Iceberg of Ignorance,” from [Corporate Rebels](#)

The District Leadership Team - 127 certificated and classified managers from the district office, principals and assistant principals - co-created a set of **Collective Commitments** that serve as a promise to the community to deliver excellent education.

To operationalize these commitments, the district defined a small number of **performance and process targets** that will remain the district's focus until they are reached.

These priorities are integrated into decision-making and processes - job descriptions and interviews explicitly reflect the district's collective commitments, including its commitment to equity and an assets-based approach to students and families, so that alignment begins at the point of hire.

Performance and Process Targets, FCUSD

Performance Targets:

- 3rd Grade Literacy
- 5-8th Grade Math
- College & Career Readiness/A-G
- Systemwide Connectedness

Process Targets:

- Continuous Improvement
- Coaching
- PLC Process

FCUSD also communicates coherence through its organizational structure. **A senior position that embodies coherence** was created specifically to oversee and create connections between various initiatives - Community Schools, PBIS, School Culture, MTSS, mental health services, CYBHI, Family Engagement, and Community Partnerships. Kate Hazarian, who holds this position, brings expertise in systems-thinking, continuous improvement, and whole child development. She is currently developing guidelines that explicitly connect Community Schools, PBIS, and other school culture efforts, and is working with district Community Schools staff to become certified wellness coaches to seek reimbursement for emotional and behavioral services through the CYBHI multi-payer fee schedule.

Capacity Building



2. Creating space for school administrators to focus on instruction

This looks like...

- Training administrative assistants to guard principals' time
- Reducing the number of principal meetings
- Streamlining communication from the district to principals
- Creating time to partner on schoolwide collaborative efforts
- Supporting principals in their role as instructional coaches

FCUSD is investing time and resources to make the principals' job sustainable, collaborative and focused on instructional practice. They do this because principals are critically important to coherence. Principal Leslee Cottrell describes her role as chief communicator and translator: "Initiatives rain down, and I am required to sort through and find threads and pull on them so

that staff feels comfortable picking them up and running with them.” Principals are essential for identifying and adopting the common language that helps staff and parents feel comfortable with new initiatives and smooths their implementation.

In the past, principals have been overwhelmed by meetings, last-minute demands and overlapping responsibilities. The district is addressing these challenges through several structural changes. First, **administrative assistants** have been trained to be the first line of communication for principals, screening emails, scheduling tasks and guarding calendar space so principals have protected time for instructional leadership and coaching on their campuses.

Second, the district **reduced the number of district-wide principal meetings** each month by strictly limiting the number of agenda items. Prospective presenters must demonstrate that a topic is timely, relevant, engaging, usable and cannot be conveyed in an email. Principals meet as a full group once per month and in smaller cohorts a second time. In place of administrative tasks, the meetings focus on building capacity as instructional leaders - including regular classroom walks as a small group, used as an opportunity to coach each other on how they would coach teachers. To further support principals, the district added two new directors who provide individual principal coaching and surface common issues for the monthly group meetings.

The third change is **streamlining communication**, due dates and expectations from the central office. The district now sends all messages through one weekly site administrators’ bulletin - rather than multiple emails from multiple departments - and asks departments to coordinate due dates so principals are not deluged with overlapping central office demands. These changes require significant planning and a shift in how the operations and academic sides of the district office work together.

With a lighter administrative load, principals have **more capacity to partner** with other staff on schoolwide collaborative efforts. The Community Schools Facilitator, for example, is a key partner - identifying and coordinating student supports across initiatives and partners. Nathaly Rodriguez, Community Schools Facilitator at Williamson Elementary, works closely with the principal to map school and community resources, run the COST process, and improve school climate.

Principals also have more time to focus on their core role as instructional leaders, which is where coherence matters most. They receive **training and coaching from their peers and district supervisors to build their skills as instructional coaches**. Administrative assistants protect two days per week for principals to do instructional rounds. This hands-on approach means teachers are supported to deliver high-quality instruction and create positive learning environments for all students.



3. Leveraging Community Schools as a driver of coherence

This looks like...

- Implementing Community Schools districtwide
- Communicating a whole child approach through aligned LCAP and SPSAs
- Partnering with the certificated and classified labor unions

In 2023, FCUSD became a Community Schools district through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). While only nine of its schools receive the grant, the district has used **Community Schools strategies** to create coherence across initiatives at all its school sites. As stated on the [FCUSD Community Schools webpage](#): “Becoming a Community School is equity-focused and ties together all school and district initiatives into a sustainable, student-centered safety net. It is the lens through which we operate our schools based on the needs of each community.” With this commitment, Community Schools is a central strategy for aligning programs, resources, and structures to create positive conditions for student learning.

The Community Schools’ whole child approach is reflected in both the district’s **Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)** and each school’s **Single Plans for Student Achievement (SPSAs)**, which are aligned. School administrators are given sample language around whole child goals in the SPSA to create consistency across sites and with the LCAP.

FCUSD’s **certificated and classified labor unions** have been integrally involved in planning the Community Schools initiative from the beginning and have been highly supportive of the approach. The presidents of both unions serve on the districtwide Community Schools Steering Committee. Collaborative planning allows for flexibility in staffing, so the district is able to hire both certificated and classified staff as site-level Community Schools Facilitators.

4. Prioritizing collaboration through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

This looks like...

- Using district-level PLCs to address districtwide challenges and opportunities
- Training teachers to lead grade-level PLCs

FCUSD has embraced **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** as a formal structure for learning, collaboration, and quality improvement at different levels of the system. **District-level**

PLCs, which include members across departments and roles, are convened to address challenges and opportunities that impact the whole district - including, for example, middle school math, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and the district's focus on "Connectedness." As one example, [Welcoming School District Guidelines](#), co-developed with front office teams, classified staff, and principals, are now widely adopted and create consistency across the district.

At school sites, **grade-level PLCs** allow teachers to work in teams on instructional practices that respond to data from shared assessments. Most teachers have been trained to lead and participate in PLCs through Solution Tree and Marzano Resources' High Reliability Schools. The structure helps teachers collaborate on integrating new strategies and initiatives. Leadership emphasizes that these practices build on what teachers already do - not a "whole new thing" - which reduces resistance and makes integration feel manageable.

5. Strengthening Coordination of Services Team (COST) structures by building adult skills

This looks like...

- Providing training and coaching to improve the COST process
- Addressing a mix of academic, social-emotional, health, and basic needs
- Following a pre-planned agenda and consistent set of steps
- Focusing on changing adult actions

Over the past year and with Community Schools resources, FCUSD has strengthened its COST process, which brings together staff across multiple initiatives to focus on students who need extra support. COST is a manifestation of the district's commitment to coherence and to leveraging time, staffing, and money effectively for students and families. The evolution of the COST process is documented in this video, [Building Student Success through Collaborative Leadership](#), and described in these [COST workshop slides](#). The Community Schools District Coordinator provides **training and coaching to improve each school site's COST process**, helping teams set agendas, establish meeting norms, and clarify participant roles. Staff report that visuals and templates are helpful, as is the flexibility to adapt them at the site level. The result is a more coherent and stable school environment. Rather than scattershot hallway conversations about specific students, staff know where and how to access supports and feel confident that students' needs will be met.

COST membership may vary by school site but often includes a site administrator, intervention teacher, Community Schools Facilitator, psychologist, county and/or district clinicians, school nurse, and attendance clerk. With this diverse membership, the team addresses multiple issues that students and families present - **academic, social-emotional, behavior, health, mental health, and basic needs**.

Each COST meeting follows a **pre-planned agenda and set of steps**. The referring teacher or staff member provides information about the student, and the team looks at the student's data. A point person is assigned to each student based on their role and the student's biggest need. The group circles back to check on the student in three, six, and eight week cycles. Referring staff are updated with notes in their boxes. While the process has become more orderly, everyone understands that addressing student and family issues is complex and non-linear. A visual of the COST Team process describes the range of issues addressed and acknowledges the "bounceback" that happens across areas of need.

An important shift in the COST process is **focusing on changing adults' actions**, rather than simply assigning supports to students. This shift involves examining the training and resources staff may need - teacher coaching or support from a behavior specialist - based on the referrals coming in. The team also reviews data from the PBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory, breaking it down month by month to implement a digestible improvement plan. The team looks for trends across classrooms and other school environments to identify where coaching or professional learning could support teacher practice and the whole school.

Challenges

- **Change is hard.** People need to get comfortable being uncomfortable with the new dynamics that surface when things change. There are trust issues as people work to figure out their position on shifting terrain. Principal Cottrell says, “When people feel like something is new, we can expect that they will push back. We need to consistently communicate how things connect and lift up internal examples so people can see what’s already happening and learn from colleagues.” Leaders need to stay steady through the transition and create opportunities for people’s work to be seen and voices heard.
- **Time is limited.** There is a constant need to balance the urgency to make progress against the reality of limited capacity. When actions feel rushed, people miss the opportunity to make connections and support a sense of belonging. For example, COST meetings run in a highly efficient manner may lose time for check-ins and personal connection. Coordinator Gaymon-Davis says, “People can get focused on compliance at the expense of humanity. We need to remember to be patient, build timelines, and save space for reflection.”
- **Coherence is counter-cultural.** Executive Director Kate Hazarian says, “We all know that group projects are harder than individual projects. This has not changed from middle school.” The state budget with its separate initiative funding streams creates silos. Districts need to prioritize and weave opportunities together toward a shared vision. Leaders must build trust, model collaboration, and remove barriers to shift people’s mindsets toward collective action.

Impacts

Staff describe improved principal job satisfaction, stronger site teams, and less time spent putting out fires. The focus on building adult capacity has encouraged “good risk-taking,” resulting in learning environments that set students up for success. Across the district, there is a strong sense of connectedness - “It’s ALL of us” - a meaningful shift from previous experience.

Student outcome data backs up these staff outcomes. FCUSD has seen improvements in average daily attendance and English language proficiency, and reductions in suspensions and chronic absenteeism, with CCSPF-funded sites outpacing comparable Title I schools on all measures. A May 2026 Community Schools update to the FCUSD

Board of Education states that chronic absenteeism went down from 32% to 20% from 2023-2026, with Community Schools seeing a 12% reduction compared to 4% in non-funded schools. Increases in average daily attendance at Community Schools have yielded close to \$1 million in revenue over the past three years.

“The goal is to have kids engaged in great instruction so that they are excited to come to school and to learn.”

- Kate Hazarian, Executive Director