

Cajon Valley Union School District: Changing the Culture of Learning to Empower Students

This interactive video profile is the second in a series of real-life practical stories about how district and school leaders are improving student learning outcomes through the effective use of digital learning. Much more than “online learning,” digital learning is defined as “any instructional practice that effectively uses technology to strengthen a student’s learning experience,” and encompasses a wide spectrum of tools and practices. Critical elements include an emphasis on high-quality instruction and access to challenging content, feedback through formative assessment, opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere, and individualized instruction to ensure that all students reach their full potential to succeed in college and a career. It is important to note that the strategies will look different in each district setting, and that they are constantly evolving.

Just a few years ago, the Cajon Valley Union School District (Cajon Valley USD) was challenged by ethnic differences, poverty, inequity between schools, and low achievement. Today, academic achievement is on the rise, students are leaders of learning, and the district has received multiple awards and recognition for its efforts. This video profile examines how this small urban school district and one of its middle schools have made dramatic strides through the effective implementation of digital learning paired with other major types of support for students and teachers. The Cajon Valley USD utilizes a wide range of strategies—mobile learning, an innovative creative writing initiative, increased use of data on student performance, and increased opportunities for students to create digital media—to better meet the learning needs of all students. Throughout this profile are short videos from district and school practitioners describing how they addressed specific issues. Click on the video icons to hear their stories.



Digital Learning Day 2013: Cajon Valley Overview

“The whole goal of the program was to get one-on-one mobile technology in the hands of kids for the purpose of supporting instruction, and getting kids to be producers of content.”

– Stephen Mahoney,
Assistant Superintendent for Instruction,
Cajon Valley USD

The K–8 Cajon Valley USD is one of forty-two school districts in the greater San Diego, California metropolitan area. Serving approximately 16,000 students,¹ the Cajon Valley USD is extremely diverse; 36 percent of students are Hispanic, 46 percent are white, 7 percent are African American, and many students are recent immigrants from countries including Malaysia, Syria, Iran, and others.

In 2008, after decades of challenging budget times and limitations on the extent to which localities could raise funds, the district conducted a thorough needs assessment. The assessment results indicated that significant inequities between schools required major shifts in school culture, capital improvements for old and outdated buildings, and investing in digital technology. Voters approved a new bond, Proposition D, enabling significant renovations and updates to schools in the district, including a new building and additional technology at Cajon Valley Middle School (CVMS).² CVMS is the focus of this video profile.

As shown in Figure 1 chart, CVMS’s student body exemplifies even greater diversity than its overall district. Students at CVMS come from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds; languages spoken include Spanish, Arabic, Chaldean, Kurdish, Tagalog, Burmese, Assyrian, Farsi, and Khmer. Eighty-two percent receive free or reduced-price lunches.

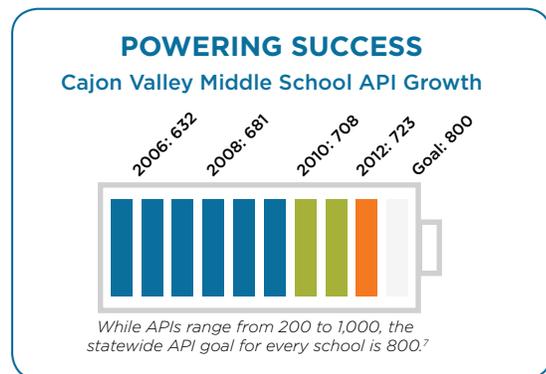
The culture at the school, fueled in part by the challenges new immigrant students faced, deteriorated to where 300 fights took place a year.⁴ Suspensions and truancy rates were high, and too many students were chronically absent.

In 2009, only 27 percent of California’s middle schools met all of their No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets.⁵ By 2011, that number dropped to just 12 percent.⁶ Like much of California, CVMS struggles to keep up with rising standards for student achievement.

Figure 1
Student Demographics: Cajon Valley Middle School (CVMS)
and Cajon Valley Union School District (Cajon Valley USD)³

Demographics	CVMS	Cajon Valley USD
Enrollment	774	16,059
White, Non-Hispanic	26%	46%
African American	13%	7%
Hispanic or Latino	53%	37%
Asian	4%	3%
English language learners	59%	41%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	82%	59%

While the school still has progress to make before making overall AYP, its increasing numbers of subgroups now achieve AYP under the safe harbor provision and the school met the state’s goals for growth of improving its Academic Performance Index (API). Additionally, the school’s API increased by 20 points in just one year, by 30 points in three years, and by more than 90 points in six years. (APIs range from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000.)⁷



The school’s transformation strategy focused on:

- ✓ changing the culture of the school;
- ✓ emphasizing twenty-first-century skills and access to twenty-first-century technology twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; and
- ✓ shifting from students as consumers of content to students as creators of content.

These areas were supported by major instructional changes, including increases in challenge-based learning⁸ and early implementation of the Common Core State Standards and partnerships with groups such as the San Diego Area Writing Project (SDAWP). With this comprehensive improvement strategy and implementation joined with the additional boost from Proposition D bond revenues, CVMS has seen impressive results in student behavior, student engagement, and student achievement.



ACADEMIC SUPPORTS: CHANGING THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

Early in their improvement efforts, CVMS leaders recognized that changing the school’s culture was essential for progress to be achieved in other key areas. Research confirms that successful school turnaround efforts require that principals take steps to refocus school culture on core beliefs, values, and attitudes toward learning and success.⁹ Attendance and discipline rates needed to improve to foster a culture of learning. Fights between students from different ethnicities and cultures were commonplace, and the suspension rate was 26.8 percent (number of incidents divided by number of students enrolled) compared to the district’s overall rate of just 6.2 percent.¹⁰



As part of its improvement efforts, and soon after moving into the renovated building, all teachers and students went through a training process to begin shifting the culture. Teachers received training on how to build relationships with students, build a sense of community, and use a wide range of learning strategies to ensure active participation from all students. Students, in turn, learned about the different levels of skill development—academic or otherwise. They learned how to set goals, find solutions to problems, and overcome obstacles. Through a wide range of activities including music, physical activity, role playing, and drawing, students were encouraged to take more responsibility for their own growth and development.





The middle school then built on a previously employed emphasis on character traits, such as loyalty, empathy, or respect, and took that work to a new level. Each month, a different character trait is

explored and reinforced through student writing, student-produced public service announcements, and a schoolwide writing prompt at the end of the month. CVMS also made an effort to integrate new students more effectively by assigning them to classrooms and groups where they would encounter not just students of their own ethnicity but other groups as well. Through this process, the school began creating instructional opportunities that increased students' opportunities to collaborate with each other.

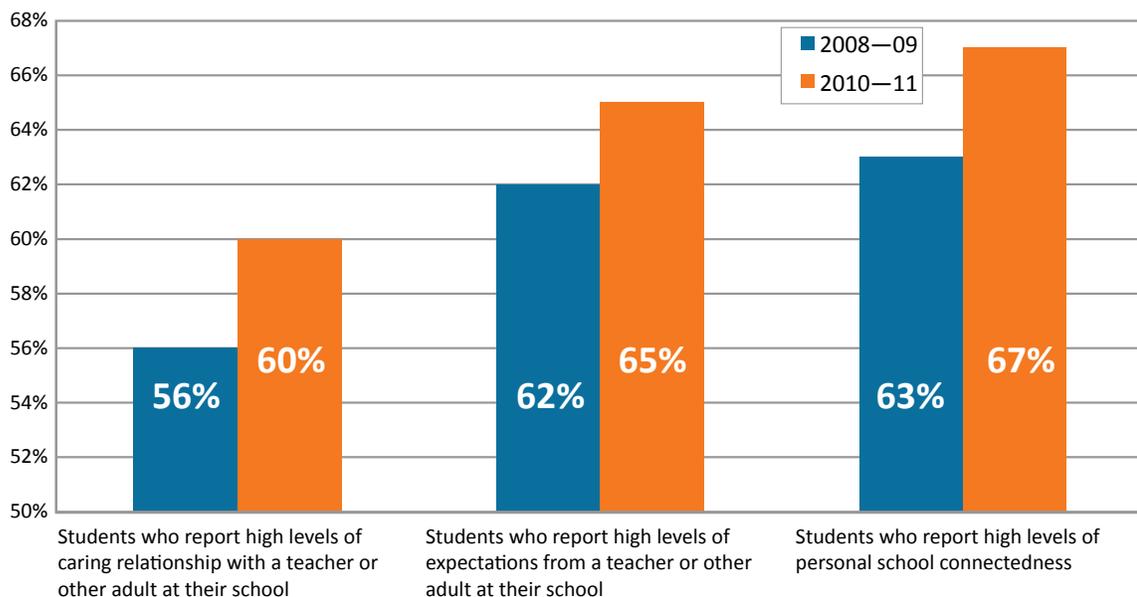
The results following this intense focus on character and leadership were significant. The number of fights at CVMS went from 300 to just three.¹¹ The suspension rate dropped from 26.83 in School Year (SY) 2009–10 to 15.12 percent in SY 2011–12.¹² Additionally, districtwide student results from the California Healthy Kids Survey indicate increases in all developmental assets in a wide range of social and emotional areas.¹³ The survey assesses the number of students who indicated that teachers and other adults at the school care about them, that adults at the school listen to them, believe they can do a good job, whether students feel close to others at the school and feel happy at the school, and the number of students who feel they are able to be helpful at school and contribute to class rules.

When I came to the school three years ago, we set out with a goal to decide what we could be the best in the world at, and bringing technology into the hands of our students was one of those areas, but we found an even larger, more encompassing goal and that was to train student leaders to make a difference in our community.

- Don Hohimer, Principal, CVMS



Figure 2 — California Healthy Kids Survey, Cajon Valley Union School District¹⁴



CVMS also implemented a program to provide breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of income level, to ensure that every child came to class ready to learn. Students do not need to provide verified income or show a card, which helps eliminate time-consuming paperwork for families. The California Healthy Kids Survey indicates that 32.4 percent of students statewide did not eat breakfast on a given day between SYs 2008–10, compared to 30.4 percent for San Diego County.¹⁵



INFRASTRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

The shift in culture was supported by Cajon Valley USD's efforts to empower all students with access to technology tools. The district built a strategic plan that seeks to provide students with the skills they need to be successful in high school and in life. Specifically, the district's strategic plan specifies the following goals:

- Students master skills, gain knowledge, and develop personal attributes to be competitive in a global society.
- Students actively engage in a balanced program using strategies that address their needs and interests.
- Resources are allocated in an equitable manner to support learning.
- Technology is used to advance learning and support efficiency.
- Positive relationships are developed among students, staff members, families, and members of the community.



Pivotal to this plan was ensuring that teachers and students had access to technology tools twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The district utilizes International Society for Technology in Education's National Educational Technology Standards for teachers and for students.

Proposition D provided an opportunity for the Cajon Valley USD to undertake much-needed infrastructure improvements, including upgraded cabling, upgraded data storage and management, equipment room modifications, campuswide wireless internet access at all schools, infrastructure for internet-accessible projectors, and Voice Over Internet Protocol phone systems.¹⁶

With the new building in place, CVMS began to build its arsenal of tools for students and teachers, including iPod Touch devices. While small, these devices still allowed students to use a wide variety of tools to expand their options for writing, using images, accessing the internet, and include more creativity in their work. The goal was to provide as many students as possible with access to tools that would allow them to practice and acquire the skills necessary to be ready for college and a career.

The Cajon Valley USD has a goal of reaching a 1:1 student-to-device ratio by 2014. CVMS uses a range of tools including MP3 players, tablets, laptops, desktops, and other devices. Some of the most frequently used digital strategies in CVMS include the following:

- **Blended learning.** Math students use online videos, practice sets, tutorials, and quizzes to practice and master math skills and supplement classroom instruction; data provided by the system shows that students are able to make the most of out-of-school time by practicing at home.
- **Mobile learning.** In English class, students use iPod Touch devices to be creative, practice writing, and engage in deeper analysis of what they are reading. For example, students use their devices to create comic strips based on the stories they are reading.

- **Teacher-developed resources.** Teachers develop project-based learning experiences by creating their own websites and using QR (quick response) codes to direct students to the information they need.
- **Electronic response devices.** Students use electronic response devices to take quizzes and tests.
- **Social learning platforms.** English language learners (ELLs) use a social learning platform as a blogging space to practice writing on topics of interest.

The Cajon Valley USD and CVMS are still in the early stages of implementing digital learning systemwide, but both the quality of the infrastructure and the availability of digital tools are expanding rapidly.



CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Supporting Student Learning

Throughout the Proposition D bond campaign and subsequent planning, the Cajon Valley USD examined instructional needs and challenges and the best means for helping schools meet those needs. In addition to a strategic technology plan developed by the district in collaboration with teachers, community members, and district staff, the district also looks to its Citizen's Oversight Committee for input and feedback on the process of implementing Proposition D.

An instructional challenge that teachers at CVMS face is the learning needs of ELLs who have been in the country for three or more years but are not yet proficient in English. Some students have been in the United States for many years, but they have been highly mobile, transitioning across states and school systems. Others have had their education disrupted during moves away from their country of origin and some have struggled in the system since kindergarten. For these students, empowerment through writing is encouraged through classroom blogs that allow students to grow their writing skills while also developing their own voice and gaining confidence in their writing. This work is aligned with the National Writing Project's Writing for Change project in partnership with the SDAWP.

The SDAWP provides professional development and a professional learning community for teachers across San Diego County. Areas of emphasis include the theory and practice of teaching writing and socially responsible approaches for supporting the success of a culturally diverse population. The SDAWP's summer program, the Young Writers' Camp,¹⁷ gives students opportunities to explore different writing styles and methods of self-reflection. Students also develop their own style, voice, and potential. After participating in some of SDAWP's institutes and seeing the impact on her students who participated in the summer experience, CVMS teacher Janet Ilko felt compelled to explore how she could use digital tools to support her ELLs.

**It's the idea of student voice ...
what you have to say matters.
I wanted to find a way to bring
that into the classroom.**

- Janet Ilko, Teacher, CVMS

While she considered herself a rookie when she started, Ilko quickly saw the power and potential of digital learning for writing. Her class is now engaged in a research-in-practice project to explore if writing blog posts contributes to their writing skills. Through blog posts, students write on subjects they care about and are interested in. Given freedom to choose whatever they wanted, students chose topics ranging from homelessness,

immigration, soccer, video games, and music. The blog also serves as an e-portfolio to allow Ilko to see how her students' writing skills develop over the course of the year, and she uses the blog to teach key skills, such as citing sources, writing academically, academic vocabulary, and research. Because students can see and comment on each other's blog posts, their writing is more public and takes on greater importance to the students, motivating them to become better writers. Ilko continues to work closely with her colleagues at the SDAWP to get their feedback and support on her work.



Students as Creators of Content

CVMS also embraces twenty-first-century skills in its curriculum and instructional strategies by placing an emphasis on students' creation and ownership of content. The school is especially proud of its video production class and live morning broadcasts, produced by and for students. These broadcasts features more than typical daily announcements; they build on the schoolwide leadership training through student-produced character trait messages.

Each month, the middle school focuses on a different character trait. In recognition of these traits, students in CVMS teacher Ruth Maas's video production class make short public service announcements (PSAs) or commercials about the spotlighted character trait. These PSAs are then aired during the morning broadcast(s). This helps increase ownership of the traits and again encourages students to be producers, not just consumers, of content. At the end of each month, the principal leads schoolwide writing sessions via the daily broadcasts, in which all students write about the month's character trait. To reinforce the positive culture in the school, perfect attendance winners, academic contest winners, student artwork, and student-created digital projects are also highlighted during the daily morning broadcasts.



Video production class is just one example of how students at CVMS have gone from passive consumers of content to active creators of content. Rather than simply watching mass-produced PSAs, students at CVMS feel ownership of their work and are rewarded with a sense of pride when their commercial airs. Through this kind of work, students develop deeper learning competencies and are better prepared for the challenges of life after high school.

DEEPER LEARNING

Deeper Learning is about delivering rigorous core content to students in innovative ways that allow them to learn, apply what they have learned, and demonstrate mastery. Deeper learning prepares students to

- know and master core academic content;
- think critically and solve complex problems;
- work collaboratively;
- communicate effectively; and
- be self-directed and incorporate feedback.

www.deeperlearning4all.org

Time

USE OF TIME: MAKING THE MOST OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL AND BEFORE-SCHOOL TIME

During the middle school years, student engagement becomes more challenging just as students are becoming increasingly independent and involved in more out-of-school activities. Therefore, finding ways to increase learning opportunities before and after school became an important part of CVMS's digital learning strategies.

As part of her efforts to encourage digital writing with her English language development students, Ilko also runs a before-school writing club, which gives students additional chances to engage in creative writing and receive feedback from each other. This opportunity provides students with additional support, both academically and personally. For example, one student with a difficult home life eventually became homeless, shuffling between hotels, relatives' and friends' homes, and shelters. However, the sense of community and empowerment she developed in the writing club inspired her to continue to log in to the club's social media platform to check in with her former classmates and share her writing. For this student, digital tools created a constant element in her learning environment. Additionally, several of Ilko's students participated in a summer writing camp that helped them continue to develop their writing skills during a time when many students suffer from summer learning loss.

Janet Ilko

Homeless Student

Math teacher Karen Kill was able to improve and expand the use of time through online math videos, practice problems, and tutorials with her students. Initially, students made the trip down the hall to a computer lab to get practice time. However, despite high poverty levels, most of Kill's students had access to computers and internet at home, and she was delighted to notice that many students were taking the time at home to continue to practice their math. The online system's back-end support for teachers provided Kill with real-time data so she could see which students had done additional work at home on their own time and where they were in their skill practice.

Karen Kill

Can We Do This at Home?

Prof. Learning

TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Cajon Valley USD leaders recognized that simply deploying technology devices would not generate learning gains; teaching and learning must be at the core of the work, and teachers would need training and support. The district utilized a cohort approach to get teachers up to speed on using technology to improve teaching and learning. The initial goal was to form a group of at least ten teachers to work with iPods; however, the cohort ended up with thirty-eight enthusiastic participants. In the second year, eighty additional teachers were trained. Carmen Restrepo, coordinator of educational technology for the Cajon Valley USD, works particularly hard to meet each individual teacher's learning needs. "We break into groups," she said, "and we give teachers options." Participating teachers range from those who are fearless and jump right in to those who need more specific training.

The district also trains cadres of teachers on cloud-based platforms, creates short online training videos, and encourages teachers to turn to other teachers and students for tips on how to utilize tools. One of Restrepo's objectives was to make technology accessible to teachers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. District trainings also emphasize collaboration among staff, including lesson sharing, and social media platform groups. Restrepo sought to make the technology meaningful to the teachers, so that they, in turn, could make it meaningful for their students.

Carmen Restrepo & Holly French

Professional Development



DATA AND ASSESSMENT

Both CVMS and the district have a number of tools in place to better utilize student learning data to improve student outcomes, and is currently exploring the use of many more. The middle school uses digital tools and student information systems that allow teachers, parents, and other involved parties to access and use student data. Results from the district's 2010 survey of teachers indicates that 78 percent of survey participants identified themselves as proficient in those student information systems and used them regularly. Another 50 percent used an online resource or program specific to a particular subject area, such as reading or math, and 20 percent of those teachers identified themselves as proficient, regular users. CVMS also employed an online assessment system that documents student academic progress, designs instruction, develops assessments, reviews student assessment data, and communicates with parents regarding student progress in school. The online system includes California Standards Test (CST) data as well as local benchmarks, and the system allows teachers to group students by needs and create their own assessments.¹⁸

The Cajon Valley USD also tracks data related to students' use of technology, such as student and teacher usage logs, teacher lesson plans, teacher training logs, and other sources and evaluates them quarterly. Classroom observations are used in addition to profile assessments of teachers to evaluate the extent to which technology is being effectively used in the classroom, and rubrics are used to evaluate the quality of students' digital work. Teachers are surveyed every year, and the district continues to explore other ways to integrate student data and feedback.

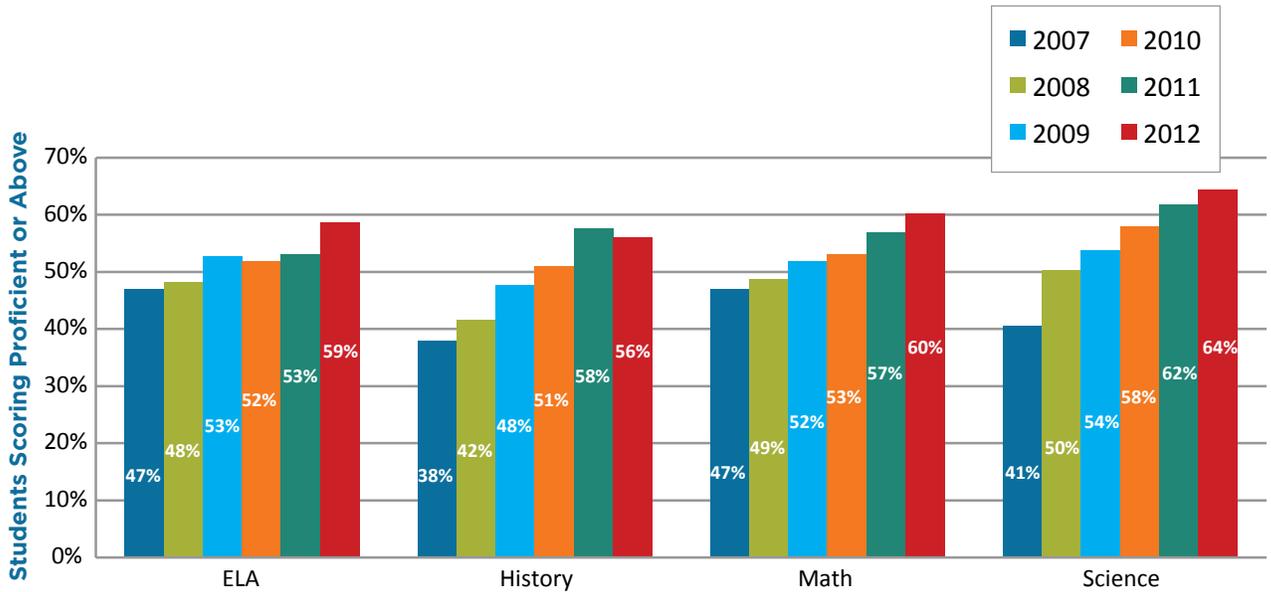


RESULTS

After moving into the newly renovated building, upgrading the school's technology, and working to change the culture of the school, CVMS's data showed extremely positive outcomes. Student test scores improved, as did the levels of student engagement and school climate. In one year, fights dropped from 300 to just three. The number of students attending less than 95 percent of school days dropped 37 percentage points, and disrespect/defiance episodes dropped 79 percentage points. The scale scores in writing for ELLs are increasing and overall student performance has increased, with significant gains for African American students, Hispanic students, and other subgroups.

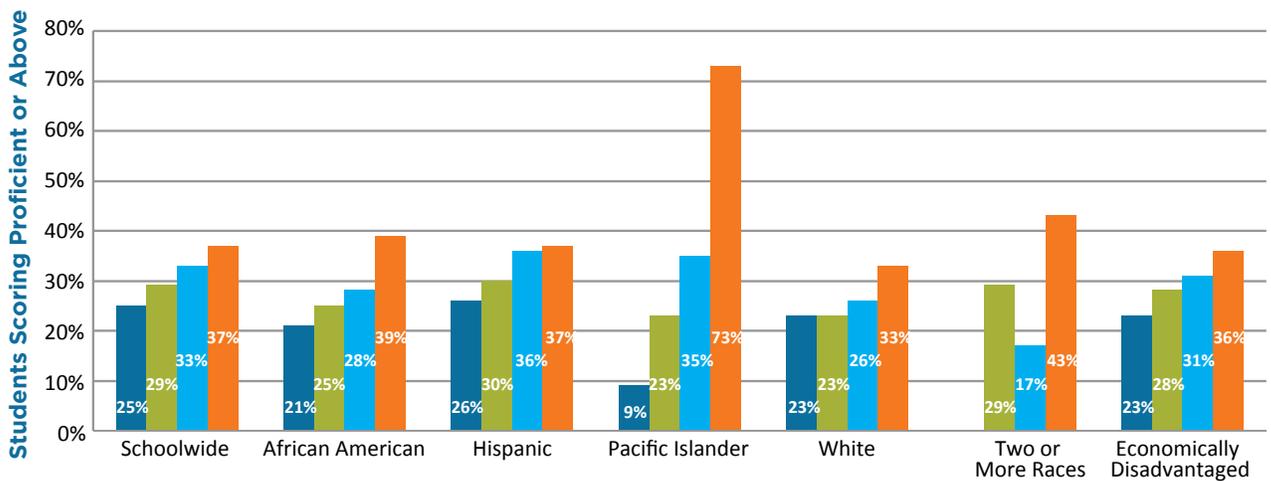
Student achievement data also indicates improvement. While neither the district nor CVMS have made AYP and are still at an early stage in the technology implementation process, early indicators are promising. As illustrated in Figure 3, the Cajon Valley USD has seen steady increases in achievement in all subject areas on the CST, increasing an impressive 24 percentage points in science and 13 percentage points in math since 2007.¹⁹ Additionally, black and Hispanic students experienced increases in the number of students scoring at proficient and advanced levels. Black students more than doubled the number of students scoring at proficient and advanced levels between 2008 and 2012. In fact, in 2009, zero black students scored at the advanced level, but by 2012, 14 percent scored at the advanced level. Hispanic students also saw major increases, going from just 30 percent of students scoring at proficient or advanced levels in 2009 to 50 percent in 2012.²⁰

Figure 3 — California Standards Tests Combined Results by Subject, Cajon Valley USD²¹

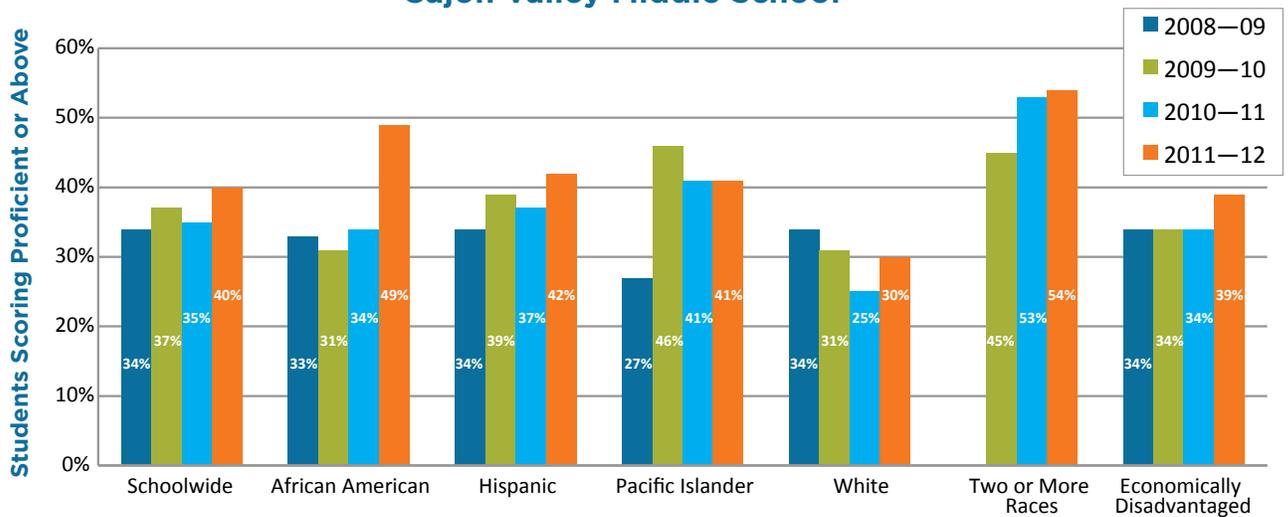


Additionally, as noted in Figures 4 and 5, CVMS has also seen improvements in state’s Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program test results, which incorporate CST results in all grades. Of particular note are the continual increases by economically disadvantaged students and the gains made by African American students in English language arts (16 percentage points) and math (18 percentage points).

Figure 4 — Math Star Results Overall and by Subgroup, Cajon Valley Middle school²²



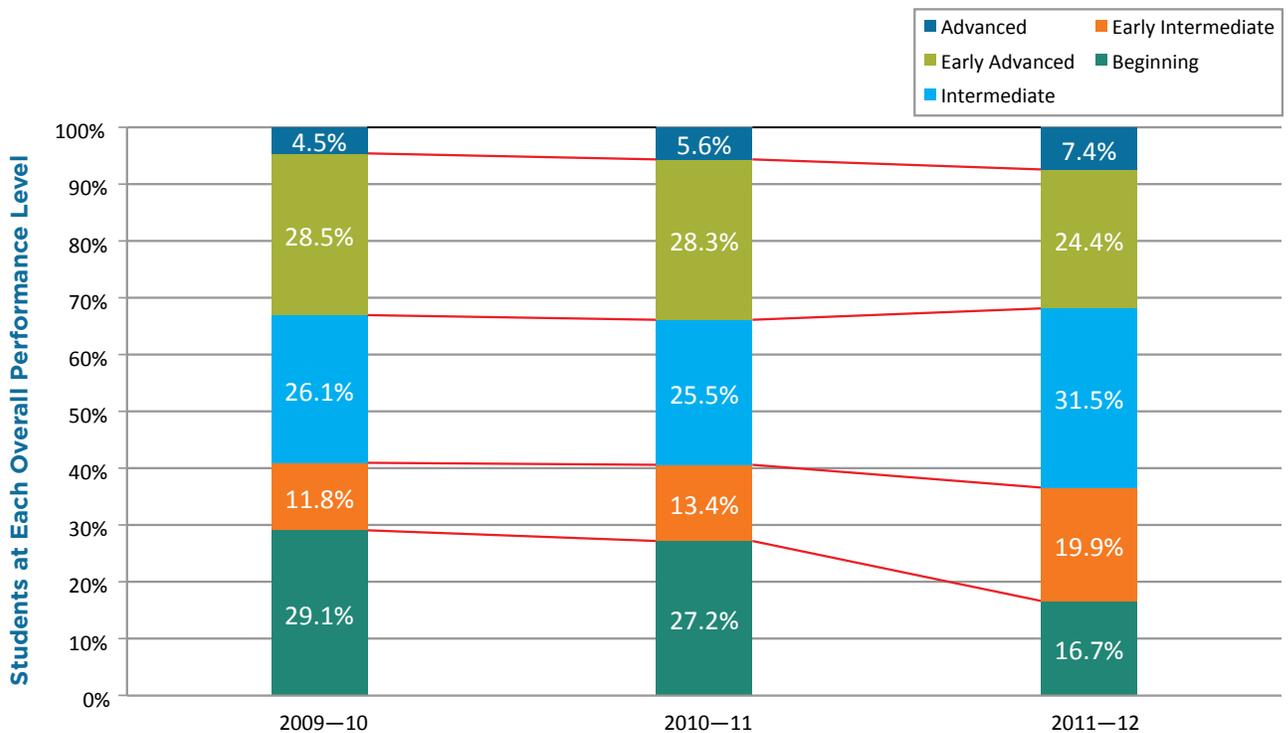
**Figure 5 – English Language Arts STAR Results
Cajon Valley Middle School²³**



Since many of CVMS’s digital efforts are centered on writing, it is encouraging to see that the middle school’s writing scale scores on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) have also taken an upward turn, with eighth-grade students gaining 38 points, going from 500.9 to 538.9 (on a scale of 550) between SYs 2008–09 and 2012–13.

Overall, CVMS’s ELLs are making improvements, with increasing numbers of students scoring at the intermediate proficiency or higher levels: from 59.1 percent to 63.3. Additionally, there has been a decrease in the percentage of students who scored at the lowest proficiency level on the CELDT, from 29.1 percent in 2009–10 to 16.7 percent in 2011–12 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 – California English Language Development Test (CELDT)²⁴



Also important to note is the increase in CVMS’s Academic Performance Indicator (API) score, a numeric index that is unique to California and the cornerstone of the state’s accountability system. According to the California Department of Education’s website, “The API . . . ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000. A school’s score or placement on the API is an indicator of the school’s performance level. The statewide API performance target for all schools is 800. A school’s growth is measured by how well the school is moving toward or past that goal.”²⁵ The API is based on multiple measures, including the STAR program and the California High School Exit Examination for English language arts and mathematics.²⁶



CVMS increased its API index by 20 points in just one year, by 30 points in three years, and by more than 90 points in six years—from 632 in 2006 to 723 in 2012.²⁷ By comparison, the average increase in the last year of data available for the Cajon Valley USD was 16 points; statewide it was just 10 points.²⁸



BUDGET AND RESOURCES

Like many other states, California has been plagued by budget challenges that have hit districts and schools particularly hard. In 2010, the state’s per-student spending was just \$8,482—ranking it forty-nine out of fifty-one, according to *Education Week’s Quality Counts* report.²⁹ The state also ranked low on the measure looking at the percentage of state and local taxable resources spent on education—just 2.9 percent.³⁰ In SY 2011–12, Cajon Valley USD’s per-pupil spending was \$8,187, which was less than the state average of \$8,382.³¹

Estimated costs of implementation of Cajon Valley USD’s education technology plan are approximately \$2 million per year, including staffing and professional development.³² The district has also developed partnerships with state and local organizations that provide additional funding, including foundations and local companies. The district is able to keep some costs down is by using a range of devices, including MP3 players, tablets, laptops, and desktops.

Federal Title II funds, including Part D,³³ also support many of Cajon Valley USD’s professional development efforts around technology. In SY 2010–11, the district’s Title II Part D technology budget was just \$15,416, but with flexibility, the district was able to transfer an additional \$297,502 from Title II–Teacher Quality³⁴ program to support district efforts. Additionally, Title I, EIA-SCE (Economic Impact Aid–State Compensatory Education), and SIP (School Improvement Program) funds have helped support the district’s digital learning efforts.³⁵



MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

During the past several years, the Cajon Valley USD has seen marked improvements in both student behavior and student achievement, and it has built and supported a teaching staff that collaborates to meet the needs of their students. The cultural changes at CVMS, linked to and supported by the effective and innovative use of digital learning strategies, has resulted in both teachers and students who are more empowered in their learning.

The Cajon Valley USD and its schools have received several awards that demonstrate such improvements. In 2011, the district received the Innovation in Education “Achieve” award³⁶ from the local Classroom of the Future Foundation,³⁷ and CVMS’s writing program received the “Inspire Honorable Mention” award in 2013.³⁸ The district was also presented with an Apple Distinguished Program award in 2012 for its Enhancing Instruction Through Education program.³⁹

Members of the CVMS school community now see themselves as active creators of rich learning experiences rather than simply receptors of academic content. As California continues to implement the new and more challenging Common Core State Standards and tests that measure those standards, the district is well-positioned to continue to improve outcomes for all students to be prepared for high school, college, and a career.



CREDITS

This case study was written by Terri Duggan Schwartzbeck, a senior digital outreach associate at the Alliance for Excellent Education.



The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal education policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. www.all4ed.org

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Kim Douillard, San Diego Area Writing Project

Holly French, Teacher, CVMS

Don Hohimer, Principal, CVMS

Janet Ilko, Teacher, CVMS

Rigoberto Jimenez, Teacher, CVMS

Karen Kill, Math Teacher, CVMS

Ruth Maas, Teacher, CVMS

Stephen Mahoney, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Cajon Valley USD

Carmen Restrepo, Coordinator of Educational Technology, Cajon Valley USD

Carol Schrammel, San Diego Area Writing Project

ENDNOTES

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