

Fresno Unified School District Graduation Task Force

June, 2012

FUSD CORE BELIEFS

Student Learning

Every student can and must learn at grade level and beyond

High Quality Instruction

Teachers must demonstrate the ability and desire to educate each child at a high level

Leadership

Leaders must perform courageously and ethically to accomplish stated goals

Safety

A safe learning and working environment is crucial to student learning

Culture

Fresno Unified is a place where:

- Diversity is valued
- Educational excellence and equity are expected
- Individual responsibility and participation by all is required
- Collaborative adult relationships are essential
- Parents, students and the community as a whole are vital partners

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SUPERINTENDENT

Michael E. Hanson

Superintendent Michael E. Hanson commissioned the FUSD Graduation Task Force to examine the dropout issue and recommend strategies for keeping all students in school on target to graduate.

The scope of the problem

Fresno Unified School District, with an enrollment of more than 70,000, graduates nearly 4,000 students each year. But over the course of elementary, middle and high school, far too many students leave school or don't complete the requirements to graduate. The state currently recognizes a graduation rate in the Fresno Unified School District of 70.8 percent. This means that three out of 10 students who begin ninth grade do not graduate four years later. While there is debate in the community about how to calculate the graduation rate – and what it actually is – this is certain: Just one dropout is one dropout too many.

Graduating from high school is a stepping stone to a brighter future for students and their families. It is also critical to the community. In addition to the effect of dropping out on the individual student, each dropout has a far-reaching consequence for our community from lost tax revenue to increased expenses for social services. Holding children and adults to high expectations is not only the right thing to do, it's essential for the economic stability and well-being of a community plagued by poverty and unemployment.

Community issue

The issues at the core of the dropout problem go beyond the walls of the classroom. They are rooted in the community, and get expressed in schools when students are disengaged, fail classes, or don't pass the high school exit exam. This is not a new problem for this community or for large urban school districts throughout the country. Fresno Unified has been dealing with the dropout crisis for many decades.

Fresno has a high rate of poverty, but what does that really mean for schools and students? The task force met with more than 500 at-risk teens and young adults, the vast majority of whom have difficult lives. Poverty, drug use and crime permeate many of their neighborhoods. In many households, parents are working at two or three jobs to make ends meet. This means that some students do not have an adult checking their homework, getting them to school on time, or making sure they stay out of trouble. Only by partnering with families, the community and other stakeholders can the district fully provide the support that all students need to stay in school on target to graduate.

Expectations matter

With student voices at the center of the task force's work, it was clear that the impact of teachers cannot be overstated. Their teaching skills, expectations, and commitment to truly connecting with individual students are at the core of Fresno Unified's efforts to ensure all students stay engaged in school and

graduate. A number of students suggested that adults must take care to express high expectations for all students – even those from impoverished families.

Listening to the voices of our community

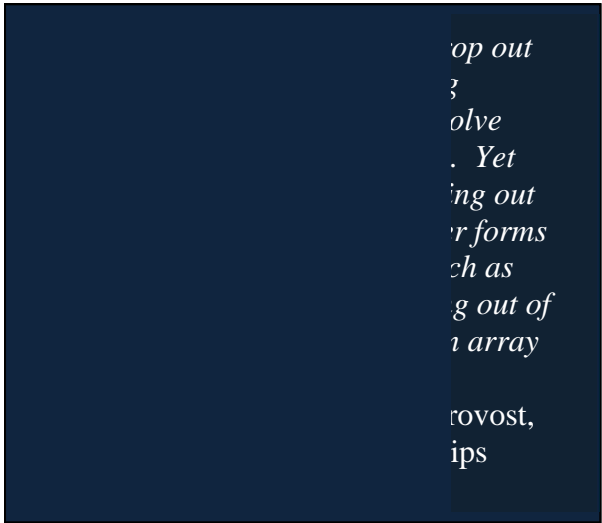
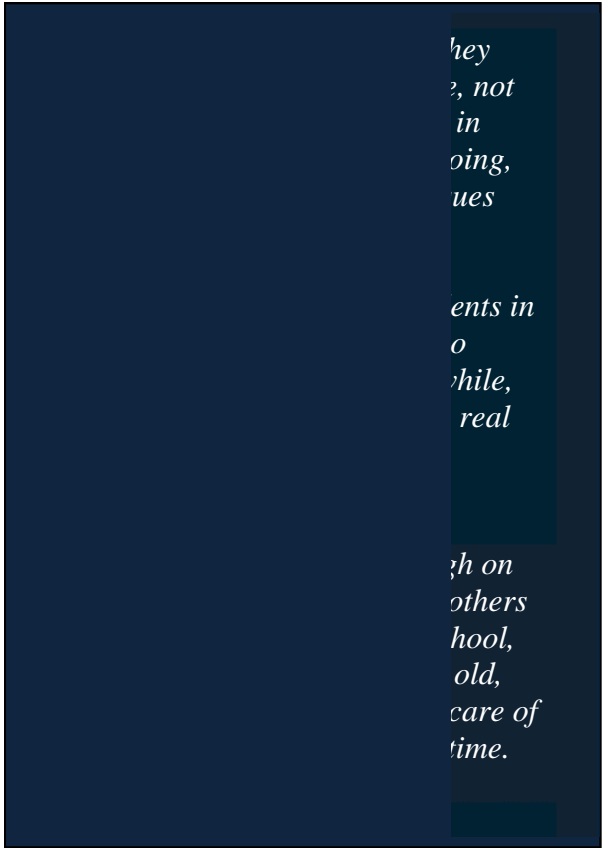
In total, the task force, made up of students, teachers, parents, community leaders and other stakeholders, heard from national experts, reviewed local data, hosted 35 community listening sessions, heard from more than 1,000 stakeholders and met as a group over a three-month period. The task force’s report includes 16 requirements to keep all students in school and 103 recommendations to ensure the requirements are met.

While the task force met with high achieving students who were on track to graduate, the majority of the teens members met with had attendance issues, behavior problems, and low academic performance. The task force also met with dropouts, homeless teens, foster youth, and incarcerated teens at the Fresno County Juvenile Justice Campus. The task force purposefully oversampled for at-risk students because members wanted to hear about the challenges and obstacles they face, and the reality of their lives.

Two major themes emerged during the task force meetings. First, good teaching and support from school staff for students matter immensely. Second, the district and community must take ownership of the dropout problem if students are to succeed. The task force heard a consistent echo that the district’s strategies – though well meaning – are not working.

About this report

The tone of this report is direct. The Fresno Unified Graduation Task Force must serve as an advocate for the children of Fresno because it’s the right thing to do for each child and it’s the right thing to do for the prosperity of the entire community. This report is about holding all stakeholders accountable for finding solutions for this community-wide problem. While the work ahead is difficult, this report outlines recommendations and charts a path towards a significantly higher graduation rate.

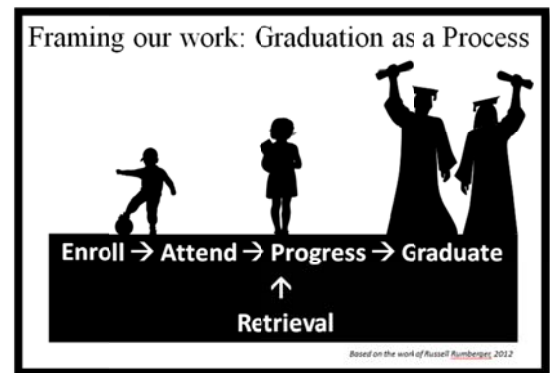


Task Force Process

The FUSD Graduation Task Force is a diverse group of community members representing students, educators, parents, social services, law enforcement, and volunteer organizations.

The task force chairman Juan Arambula, is a former member of the state Assembly, FUSD Board of Education Trustee and member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors. The task force first met on March 1, 2012 and met seven more times over the next three months. Meetings focused on understanding the reasons students drop out and exploring solutions for increasing the graduation rate.

Fueled by data from the California Dropout Research Project, WestEd, and the Fresno Unified School District, the task force examined current realities in FUSD as well as best practices here and elsewhere. In total, the members of the task force spent more than 2,000 hours, heard from more than 600 students, more than 200 teachers and district staff, and met with more than 400 community members. Following is a list of the meetings and listening sessions held by the task force:



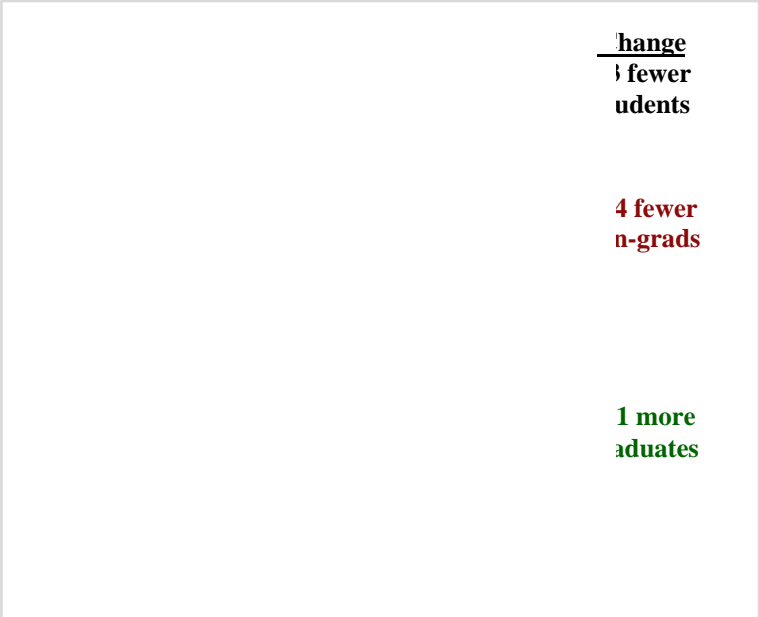
Date	Meeting	Date	Meeting
March 1	TF Meeting	April 24	Kings Canyon MS Students
March 15	TF Meeting	April 24	FUSD Teachers
March 29	TF Meeting	April 25	Dewolf Continuation HS Students
April 10	High School Student Advisory Board	April 25	FUSD Counselors
April 10	Cambridge Continuation HS Students	April 25	FUSD Teachers
April 11	Tehipite MS Students	April 26	Fresno HS 9 th grade IB students
April 11	Community-based organizations	April 26	Fresno HS Students
April 12	Ahwahnee MS Students	April 26	TF Meeting
April 12	TF Meeting	April 27	Bullard HS Students
April 13	Sequoia MS Students	May 1	Incarcerated teens at the Fresno JCC
April 13	Scandinavian MS Students	May 1	Cesar Chavez Adult School Students
April 16	McLane HS Students	May 1	Sanctuary Transitional Living Center
April 17	Sunnyside HS Students	May 2	JE Young Independent Study Students
April 17	Edison HS Students	May 3	Incarcerated teens at the Fresno JCC
April 18	Community Meeting at Roosevelt HS	May 3	Design Science HS Students
April 18	Duncan HS Students	May 10	TF meeting
April 18	Roosevelt HS Students	May 24	TF meeting
April 19	Men's Alliance students at Edison HS	May 29	Draft recommendations published
April 19	Men's Alliance students at Hoover HS	May 29	Community Meeting
April 19	Community Meeting at Hoover HS	May 30	Community Meeting
April 21	Fencepost Project Students	May 31	Community Meeting hosted by Building Healthy Communities
April 23	Lawless MS Students		
April 23	FUSD Teachers	June 6	Board presentation

Findings

The task force learned a great deal about what leads students to drop out of school as well what keeps students on target to graduate. Families, communities, and schools contribute to this complex problem, and must all be part of the solution.

The Fresno Unified School District’s graduation rate has steadily improved over the past few years, but more work is needed. In the 2009-2010 school year, 3,470 students graduated from FUSD, followed by 3,671 students in 2010-11. There were 201 more graduates and 254 fewer dropouts in 2010-2011 than in 2009-2010 though there were 54 fewer students in that class.

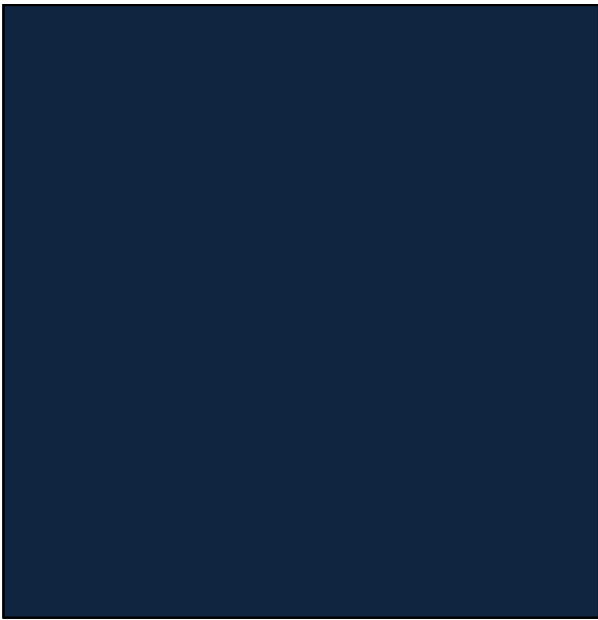
While this improvement is an encouraging indicator that the Fresno Unified School District is making headway on the dropout issue, the progress is not sufficient. Every time a student drops out of school there are consequences for that student and their family, and the community suffers as well. Because dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, poor, incarcerated, and unhealthy, each dropout costs the local community more than \$200,000 over their lifetime. Decreasing the dropout rate in the city of Fresno by 50 percent would equate to saving more than \$160 million over the lifetime of just one graduating class of students.



Attendance matters

Regular attendance is crucial for all students. Simply put, if a student is not in school and in class, they aren’t learning. Unfortunately, not all families get their young children to school each day or to school on time. Additionally, as students get older and are more likely to get to school on their own, some parents are unaware of their children’s poor attendance patterns. There may be a legal difference between an excused and unexcused absence, but the result is the same for the student: poor attendance leads to lower achievement and higher dropout rates.

The task force was alarmed to learn that kindergarteners have some of the highest absence rates among all students. An FUSD study found that kindergarten students with poor attendance performed lower on third grade reading and math



tests than those with satisfactory attendance – an indication of the lasting effects of poor attendance.

Other research supports the connection between attendance and academic achievement as well. A Chicago study found that ninth grade attendance was a greater predictor of graduation than eighth grade test scores, and a Baltimore study found that sixth graders with chronic absences were twice as likely to drop out as their peers. Missing just one day of school per month, regardless of the reason, causes students to fall behind academically, making them less likely to graduate.

The task force also discovered that not all teachers take attendance each period or each day. This is a significant problem because office employees need accurate and timely information to track truant students and get them back into school. In addition, not all teachers communicate with their students' families about attendance problems.

Students also miss out on learning when they are removed from class for behavioral, academic or personal issues. While there are times when students need to be removed from class, the goal should be to return every student to class as soon as possible so they can learn with their teacher.

Academic progress matters

To graduate from the Fresno Unified School District, students are required to pass multiple classes in English, math, science, social science, arts, foreign language, and physical education. Students need to receive a grade of “D” or higher to earn credits. Many high school students, however, fall short of even this minimal standard, and fail classes as early as ninth grade, putting them in jeopardy of not graduating. During the first semester of the 2011-12 school year, more than 1,400 ninth grade students failed two or more classes. This means that more than one in four students began their high school career behind on credits – already at risk of not graduating.

For many students, the downward spiral starts even earlier, in elementary and middle school. The foundation for academic success is built in elementary school when students learn how to read and then read to learn. If the community is going to improve the graduation rate, it must begin by ensuring that all third graders can read and write. Across the district in all grade levels, fewer than half of students read and write proficiently and the results are even lower for students of color and students from poverty.

Problems are compounded by middle school. A study by the California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) at the University of California at Santa Barbara found that failing three classes in middle school reduced the chances of graduating high school by 50 percent.

The task force learned from students, their families, and staff that when students struggle, many do not receive the support they need in a timely manner. It does little good to wait for quarter or semester grades to determine whether students need academic interventions. Teachers and other school staff must respond daily to the needs of students to ensure students don't fall behind.

Some students reported that some of their teachers were unwilling to take time to help them learn. A number of students stated that they need more time to learn the material, that they wanted more hands-on learning opportunities, or that they were bored in class. At the same time, the district does offer multiple and varied opportunities to recover credits once behind in school, but too few students take advantage of these second chances.

Guidance counseling is a critical component of a high school program to ensure that students and their families have information about graduation requirements and postsecondary options. It is unclear how often students meet with their counselors because that information is not yet tracked by the district, but most of the students the task force talked with reported not having enough time with their counselors.

Campus Climate Matters

Students in specialized career technical education programs, athletes, and student leaders almost universally felt connected to their school, teachers, and peers. In sharp contrast, a characteristic of students at-risk was that they did not feel supported or welcomed on campus.

The campus climate is particularly important for Fresno students because so many of them live in poor neighborhoods. Fresno tops the list of cities in the United States with the highest levels of concentrated poverty. This means that many students live in unsafe neighborhoods with crime, gangs, and drugs. It also means they are less likely to have parents or other role models at home pushing them to excel. When task force members spoke with incarcerated teens at the Fresno County Juvenile Justice Campus, they learned that not one of them grew up in a traditional two-parent household. In contrast, they spoke about drug dealers as mentors, gang members as family, and work as a necessity to survive. For them, school was not as high a priority as figuring out where the next meal was coming from.

These factors are not excuses for bad behavior or low academic achievement, but they do add up to a bleak reality for many students in Fresno Unified. The challenge for teachers and other adults on campus is to continue to hold these students to high expectations while also exhibiting patience and compassion toward them each day. Finding this balance can be difficult for teachers and staff, but critical if the district is to help all students stay in school on target to graduate.

Most students told the task force that it was important for adults to be caring, understanding, and empathetic. For example, one female student shared a story about a chemistry teacher who had a

significant impact on helping her stay in school. Though this teacher was a different gender and ethnicity, he made a significant impact on her because of his high expectations for her, displayed compassion for her life circumstances, and became her favorite teacher.

Another important issue is how adults on campus talk to students about their future after high school. The task force heard from students that some teachers painted dismal pictures of their future should they fail to meet the academic or behavioral expectations of the school staff. A few students described situations in which teachers, trying to be humorous, told them they would have to work in fast food restaurants for the rest of their lives if they didn't do better in school. This sarcasm fell flat, however, as students interpreted the message as "my teacher thinks I'm stupid."

Task force members talked with too many students who told similar stories of teachers and other adults telling them that they didn't have what it takes to graduate high school. In fact, one elementary teacher shared a situation in which her own son who struggled academically was told by a high school teacher, "I could care less if he graduates from high school."

When teachers have low expectations for what students can achieve, it decreases students' efficacy and may also decrease their motivation to behave well in school. When students have low expectations for their future, they are less likely to graduate. Students said they were motivated by teachers who were willing to provide extra academic help, knew all their students' names, allowed students to learn from mistakes, and offered incentives for reaching goals.

Discipline policies and practices set a tone for student and adult behavior in the classroom and on campus that have importance impacts on the culture and climate of a school. Many teachers identified the need for families to hold their children accountable for their behavior, and many families identified the need for schools to set clear rules, administer appropriate discipline to maintain order, and provide effective means for students to return to their classroom to learn. Concerns were expressed by many people that disciplinary practices are not uniformly applied at all schools in the district. Discipline done well can restore healthy school climates and keep students engaged academically. Done poorly, however, discipline can have an adverse effect, and can initiate a downward spiral leading to low engagement, low attendance, and low achievement.

Solutions in other communities

The problems facing Fresno Unified are not unique. Other communities have been plagued with even lower graduation rates, and have successfully tackled the problem. Across the country, there are many examples of successful efforts to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate. For example, Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS), which originated in a Los Angeles middle school, employs counselors to coordinate supports for students and parents and keeps teachers informed about student progress. The program includes attendance monitoring, social emotional support, parent education, student recognition, and community engagement. Like other successful programs, the foundation of ALAS is the rapport built through relationships between students, families, schools, and the community.

In Phoenix, an innovative program called Academic Parent-Teacher Teams replaces traditional parent-teacher conferences with three classroom team meetings for parents and one 30-minute individual parent-teacher conference. Teachers present academic performance data for their class, give parents information about their own child's performance, and share activities that parents can do to help their children be successful in school.

Other tools to keep students in school include community referrals for personal and medical support, discipline processes that emphasize reconciliation, early warning systems, close attendance monitoring, and extended learning time aligned to college/career standards.

Summary of Findings

Based on all of the feedback, review of research and data, and multiple discussions between task force members the task force summarized the findings into the following 16 summary statements, organized by areas of responsibility.

Students

1. Not all students attend school every day, pass all of their classes, or behave appropriately all of the time.

Teachers, School Staff, and School Administrators

2. Not all adults who work with students treat them with care and respect and hold them to high expectations.
3. Not all teachers provide the support to ensure that every student learns what they need to learn.
4. Not all schools systematically address absenteeism to get students to class each day.
5. Not all students can read and write by 3rd grade.
6. Not all schools identify and intervene to keep students who are at-risk of dropping out, in school.
7. Not all schools ensure that every student is engaged in the arts, music, athletics, or CTE.

District

8. The current discipline system does not restore healthy interactions or help people learn from their mistakes.
9. The district's grading systems and graduation requirements may impede some students from graduating.
10. The district's transfer procedures do not always keep all students in school on target to graduate.
11. Some students struggle to adjust to new schools and the district can do more to support these transitions.
12. The district has not done enough to help all families to successfully support their children in school.
13. The district's alternative education programs do not provide effective paths to graduation.

Community

14. Not everyone in our community is committed to keeping all students in school on target to graduate.
15. Community organizations, businesses, and government agencies are not always aligned to support our schools.

Families

16. Not all parents hold their children accountable to attend school, behave well, or perform academically.

Requirements and Recommendations

There are many things we must do in our community to keep all students in school on target to graduate. Following the relational model, presented by Dr. Russel Rumberger, the task force organized the recommendations into five categories or areas of responsibility including students; teachers; administrators and school staff; district, community, and families.

The task force identified 16 requirements to keep all students in school on target to graduate. There are a total of 103 recommendations to meet each of the requirements. To meet these requirements, all stakeholders must collaborate by working together, sharing information, meeting regularly, and above all remaining steadfast on the intention that every student can and should graduate from high school.

On each of the following pages, one of the 16 requirements is presented. Above each requirement is a problem statement that defines the current situation. Below each requirement are a set of numbered recommendations. Next to each set of recommendations are supporting evidence in the form of quotes from students, families, staff, community members, and members of the task force.

Not all students attend school every day, pass all of their classes, or behave appropriately all of the time. Students need the support of their families, teachers, school, and community to be successful, but the ultimate responsibility to excel rests with them. The Student Code of Honor, created by students as a framework for success in the classroom and at school, was used as a reference in the recommendations below.

1. Students must follow the *Student Code of Honor* and stay in school on target to graduate.

- 1.1 Students must follow through with all of their responsibilities including: attending school every day, successfully completing coursework, and staying in school on target to graduate.
- 1.2 Students must represent themselves, their school, and their community with honor.
- 1.3 Students must abide by the rules.
- 1.4 Students must be compassionate toward others.
- 1.5 Students must think before they act or speak.
- 1.6 Students must respect others as they would want to be respected.

Two of the keys in keeping students in school is for students not only to recognize that school is worthwhile, but also to feel that they have a real opportunity to be successful.

- Teacher

You can't make students learn if they don't want to learn.

- Student

Students should follow school rules.

- Parent

Students need to be responsible, do their work, study hard at school and home and ask for help.

- Parent

Students need to be tenacious and hard working. They need to be respectful of themselves, others students, and adults.

- Parent

Have kids like us talk to younger teens so we can tell them they don't want to get locked up. You have to want to change to get an education.

- Incarcerated Teen

Not all adults who work with students treat them with care and respect and hold them to high expectations. All students, especially those at risk of dropping out, need adults who are caring and empathetic and who challenge and support them to reach their goals. There is no place in our schools for adults who discourage or disrespect students.

2. Every adult who works with students must treat students with care and respect, and maintain a culture of high expectations for their academic success.

- 2.1. Support and provide ongoing professional development for teachers, staff, and other adults to treat all students with care and respect.
- 2.2. Clearly communicate with all staff and families how to maintain a culture of high expectations for the academic success of all students.
- 2.3. Identify and intervene to eliminate bullying and other abusive behaviors in all relationships.
- 2.4. Hire and evaluate staff and companies who work with the district based on how they treat students with care and respect, and how well they maintain a culture of high expectations for student success.
- 2.5. Review campus climate regularly using the input of students, families, and staff.
- 2.6. Build relationships with students that foster their engagement, performance, and achievement.
- 2.7. Identify and address school climate issues and conditions that contribute to disproportionate dropout rates at certain schools or within certain groups of students.

We have one teacher who is here early in the morning and he stays late...he's always available to help us...he's like a second dad or a dad for people who don't have dads...he's the first male person in my life that I feel like I can trust.

- Student

Some teachers need to be reminded that what they are doing is also hindering students' potentials and abilities and limits their equal access to a decent education.

- Parent

Teachers need to be a positive role model because we don't have them. I grew up on the streets and my dad and brothers were all in gangs so that's what they taught me.

- Incarcerated Teen

A big reason kids don't come to school or drop out is not having an adult who cares if they are present or not.

- Principal

Students tell me that some teachers curse at some of their students in the classroom. There's a way to gain respect without having to be mean.

- Paraeducator

Not all teachers provide the support to ensure that every student learns what they need to learn. Students

need every opportunity to learn what their teachers expect them to know and every opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned.

3. The role of teachers is to facilitate student learning by using a variety of strategies and resources that meet the needs of every student, regardless of their ability, language, race, or ethnicity.

- 3.1. Train teachers to differentiate instructional practices so that all students – especially English Learners, Special Education students, and other at-risk students – learn what is expected; can demonstrate their knowledge; and stay in school on target to graduate.
- 3.2. Continue the full implementation of the recommendations of the English Learners Task Force to keep students engaged and learning at high levels.
- 3.3. Provide academic interventions during the regular school day to keep students engaged and learning.
- 3.4. Students need more time with their teachers so they can advance their learning.
- 3.5. Hold teachers accountable for creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning to keep students in school on target to graduate.

Some teachers have a tendency to give up on those students that have difficulties in grasping the curriculum, which leads to the students who are having problems to be disconnected from school because they believe no one cares.

- Parent

Kids in the middle don't get any attention, and then they're dropping out because teachers focus on the kids at the bottom or the kids at the top.

- Parent

Our students are far brighter than they are given credit, and they need to be pushed harder by all of their instructors. They need real solid work that is aligned with our standards, and the testing needs to be a part of this. Better assessments will allow more teachers to get on board with this program. And teachers need to be pushed and we need to push ourselves. Our standards need to be raised.

- HS Teacher

Not all schools systematically address absenteeism to get students to class each day. Regardless of the reason, absences have a negative impact on student learning. The goal for every adult who works with students should be for students to be in their classrooms, learning with their teachers.

4. Teachers and school staff must work with families to ensure that every student is in school, in class, and engaged in learning every day.

- 4.1. Monitor student attendance every day and intervene immediately when students are absent.
- 4.2. Require teachers to take roll during the first five minutes of each period/day.
- 4.3. Ensure that family contact information is accurate.
- 4.4. Implement new methods to communicate with families to ensure that they receive important information in a timely manner.
- 4.5. Coordinate response teams at each school using data to reduce absenteeism.
- 4.6. Provide incentives for students to attend school consistently.
- 4.7. Redesign the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) process to reduce student absences.
- 4.8. Include an attendance plan as a part of every School Site Plan and ensure that school policies support and encourage consistent school attendance.

The child that misses 20 or 30 days of school in kindergarten and first grade seems to continue this pattern into middle school. I feel that when they miss that many days they fall behind academically and it becomes more and more difficult for them to come to school.

- Teacher

Office staff, administrators and educators need to realize the importance of taking action immediately when students are absent, educating parents to the importance of an education, easier method of implementing help for students that are struggling at all schools.

- Teacher

There is no accountability if teachers do not take attendance.

- Social Worker

The office has to be trained on the importance of having students at school along with teachers following up quickly when a student is absent.

- Teacher

Not all students can read and write by 3rd grade. Learning how to be a successful student begins with early childhood education, a solid academic foundation, and consistent school attendance.

5. Teachers and school staff must ensure that every student knows how to read and write at grade level by the end of 3rd grade.

- 5.1. Continue the full implementation of the recommendations of the Early Learning and English Learners task force reports.
- 5.2. Provide necessary resources to implement a district-wide literacy strategy to ensure that every student is proficient in reading and writing.
- 5.3. Communicate the importance of consistent attendance for children from birth through high school.
- 5.4. Develop procedures for efficient recruitment, registration, enrollment, and attendance of early learners.
- 5.5. Implement a standards-based curriculum in pre-school that provides a seamless transition to K-3 standards.
- 5.6. Partner with the Fresno County Office of Education, Early and Head Start, First 5 Fresno County, and other stakeholders to expand early learning opportunities for all families in Fresno.

What is so important is that during the first five years of life, 90% of the brain growth occurs. Its critical, if we're really going to come up with a sustainable long term solution to the graduation issue, we need to look at the supports that they need to be successful. As a community, the most impactful thing we can do is to put the needs of our children first.

- Task Force Member

I believe that drop-out and truancy prevention programs should be implemented very early in a child's life. A whole-family approach should be used to provide resources to overcome barriers to education.

- Social Worker

Early intervention with families is the key to keeping kids in school. It may be a stretch to say that we need to start working with the family before the baby even leaves the hospital. Working with agencies to encourage attachment parenting might seem crazy, but in our current reality, this really should be explored. Put some money into parent education, make schools a community center for teaching the parents about parenting (nutrition), giving them job skills (English and typing classes), and life skills (balancing check book). Empower the parents-empower the kids.

- Teacher

Not all schools identify and intervene to keep students who are at-risk of dropping out, in school. We must intervene at the first sign of trouble for every student and provide the academic and behavioral supports to keep them in school on target to graduate.

6. School staff must identify students who are at-risk of dropping out and do everything possible to keep them in school on target to graduate.

- 6.1. Build an early warning data system for all grade levels to alert teachers, staff, and families about students who are at-risk of dropping out of school.
- 6.2. Provide comprehensive counseling services to ensure that every student understands the graduation requirements and career options available to them.
- 6.3. Adopt and implement a case management system to ensure that every student's academic, personal, and wellness needs are coordinated and met.
- 6.4. Create a safety net for at-risk youth and their families with coordinated district and community resources.
- 6.5. Develop effective community partnerships to ensure that students' needs are met.
- 6.6. Apply effective and timely interventions to ensure that students improve their academic skills and avoid falling behind or failing classes.
- 6.7. Develop and implement effective interventions for elementary, middle, and high school students who are reading below grade level including interventions that address linguistic barriers and parent engagement.
- 6.8. Closely monitor the attrition of all students on a monthly basis and commit necessary resources to find and return them to school.

Children can't study or learn when they're coping with trauma, drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic abuse, unemployment, homelessness, etc.

- Parent

There must be a systematic process of counseling/guidance that keeps every student on track to graduate, it must be implemented by every teacher and staff, it needs to be our #1 priority.

- Principal

The problem is, our students lack the tools necessary, and no one has the time or know-how to help them. Schools need to have their own task force made up of administration, counselors, and caring and willing teachers to work with these students. They need to be provided with instructional assistance, counseling, as well as to be taught coping skills. These children are angry and scared. Their lives are out of control and they don't know how to handle it, so they respond in destructive and disruptive ways at school. Eventually, without the right help in place, when they realize they can just quit, they do.

- Teacher

Not all schools ensure that every student is engaged in the arts, music, athletics, or Career Technical

Education (CTE). Student engagement is not a privilege. Every student should have multiple opportunities to participate in school activities, regardless of their academic performance or behavior.

7. School staff must ensure that every student is engaged in school by connecting them to activities like the arts, music, athletics, and Career Technical Education programs so that every student is motivated to come to school and stay on target to graduate.

- 7.1. Work with community organizations to provide engagement activities in arts, music, athletics, and CTE.
- 7.2. Provide real-world options and work opportunities linked to graduation requirements.
- 7.3. Expand mentoring programs to provide support for all students who need mentoring.
- 7.4. Hold teachers accountable for creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning to keep students in school on target to graduate.
- 7.5. Implement career awareness programs from kindergarten through high school including college visits, PSAT preparation, workplace skills and competencies, and college access requirements.
- 7.6. Provide paid work opportunities linked to graduation requirements and credits to incentivize students who need jobs to stay in school.
- 7.7. Ensure that all middle school students understand the graduation requirements and the academic, extra-curricular, and co-curricular opportunities available at FUSD high schools.
- 7.8. Continue the full implementation of the recommendations of the Workforce Readiness and Career Technical Education Commission.

Students drop out when they feel like they don't belong and have no place in the community. More money needs to be put into art and music, industrial education and vocational education.
- Teacher

Students with low GPA scores are restricted from sports and social activities and made to feel more disconnected from their school. There is no motivation for these kids to stay in school. My suggestion is that you allow these students to participate in sports and social activities on a temporary basis while they try to raise their scores. Students need to WANT to go to school.
- Parent

Teachers must get to know the students - their environments, experiences, likes and dislikes, motivations, sports, goals and much more. Administrators and teachers must work together in order to connect as much as possible.
- Teacher

The current discipline system does not restore healthy interactions or help people learn from their mistakes. Students need to be taught appropriate behavior and be held accountable for their misbehaviors. The goal of

every intervention should be to return students to their class with their teachers as quickly as possible.

8. The district's discipline system must restore healthy interactions, help participants learn from their mistakes, and connect students and adults with the supports they need to keep all students in school on target to graduate.

- 8.1. Provide the resources to schools to implement a discipline system that restores healthy interactions and helps participants learn from their mistakes.
- 8.2. Work with community organizations to support a discipline system that restores healthy interactions and helps participants learn from their mistakes.
- 8.3. Repurpose and restructure current behavior systems such as out-of-school suspensions and transition programs to ensure that students stay in school on target to graduate.
- 8.4. Develop new opportunities for adults working with students to listen to students' sides of the story during any discipline intervention.
- 8.5. Monitor student behavior throughout the district and implement effective responses to reduce misbehaviors.

Give kids second chances but don't let them be disrespectful.

- Student

I skipped almost 90 days of one class because of a guy that was harassing me. I told the principal and he did nothing.

- Student

There really needs to be a consistent disciplinary procedure in the classroom within each classroom. We have to try to improve ourselves and view things from the perspectives of the students every once in a while.

- Teacher

Policies that result in off-campus suspension and expulsion are draconian in nature, do not improve behavior, and don't help our kids succeed. In addition to those policies, please consider implementing a model that restores discipline, helps kids learn from their mistakes, and is designed to connect kids with the supports they need.

- Community Member

The district's grading systems and graduation requirements may impede some students from graduating. Some students report earning grades that did not reflect their knowledge and performance on class assessments.

9. The district must redesign policies to ensure that every student is given every opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and to earn credits to stay in school on target to graduate.

- 9.1. Establish a workgroup of teachers, leaders, and other stakeholders to make grading policies and practices consistent to help all students stay in school on target to graduate.
- 9.2. Identify the best grading practices within and outside the Fresno Unified School District that should be implemented consistently throughout the district.
- 9.3. Align supervision and evaluation processes from the boardroom to the classroom to include measures of students' academic growth and demonstrated knowledge and performance.
- 9.4. Revise the FUSD graduation requirements to keep more students in school on target to graduate.
- 9.5. Students should be graded based on what they know and are able to do.

Grades are subjective; establish criteria and consistency for grading procedures in core academic areas; provide grade incentives for students who achieve on ACS and CST tests.

- Vice Principal

Fresno has more math and science required than most districts and what the Education Code requires. The district did this several years ago saying it was "raising the bar." But what it did was change the courses at high school so the elective programs are very limited.

- Teacher

Students who are truly trying to raise their grades or trying to catch up find it almost impossible with current grading scales in which an F is worth 50 points and all other grades cover a 10 point range.

- Teacher

Research current grading practices and best practices for such. Too many times grades are inconsistent

- Vice Principal

The district needs to provide real-world options and work opportunities linked to graduation requirements.

- Community Member

The district's transfer procedures do not always keep all students in school on target to graduate. We need to support students in transition between schools to get them enrolled and attending their new school as quickly as possible to increase stability and decrease obstacles to success.

10. The district must ensure that transfer processes keep students in school on target to graduate.

- 10.1. Create a clear and transparent transfer process that includes intake procedures between sending and receiving schools that are responsive to each student's academic, social, and emotional needs.
- 10.2. Establish an identification, placement, and transfer process for all alternative schools.
- 10.3. Establish consistent rigorous graduation requirements at all high schools.
- 10.4. Staff should encourage every student to remain enrolled at their home school regardless of their academic or behavioral needs.

The district needs to create clear and transparent transfer processes between other schools to meet the needs of each student.

- District Leader

I recently referred a student who was well behind in credits and he was unable to even take a placement test for 2.5 weeks so he could not begin attending his new school. That is a lot of time for us to lose kids in.

- Principal

When a student is expelled out of the district, the transition to community day school or a charters school is often difficult, and the student and family would greatly benefit from support ensuring that the student attends orientation, enrolls, and remains encouraged at the new school site.

- District Leader

Some students struggle to adjust to new schools and the district can do more to support these transitions. Many students struggle as they adjust to a new school. We need to ensure that students do not miss school and that their needs and interests are identified and met at their new school.

11. The district must ensure that every student who enrolls at a new school has his/her needs and interests identified and addressed.

- 11.1. Implement an elementary-to-middle and middle-to-high school transition program to ensure that students effectively transition to new schools.
- 11.2. Train all elementary and middle school teachers about FUSD graduation requirements including the need to pass classes and earn credits to stay in school on target to graduate.
- 11.3. Ensure that families of elementary and middle school student understand FUSD graduation requirements.
- 11.4. Create a resource center to assess the academic, social, and emotional needs as well as the career interests of students to provide a “soft-landing” upon reenrollment.
- 11.5. Coordinate the academic, social, and emotional needs as well as the career interests of students among all stakeholders to meet the needs of “re-enrolled” students.
- 11.6. Provide additional supports to students re-entering comprehensive high schools from non-traditional or alternative high schools.
- 11.7. Coordinate with the Fresno “Learn 2 Earn” initiative to ensure that students are redirected and reenrolled effectively.

If I were a teacher or principal, I would introduce new students, and have another student welcome them and show them around.

- Student

Students need mentors to help them through transitions.

- Student

Staff needs training on all educational options in the district and the process and procedure for accessing the most appropriate program option to meet each student’s academic and behavioral needs, including programs at the neighborhood school.

- Teacher

As much as we try our best to engage every incoming ninth grader and new student, we need to do more and provide the necessary resources to create a stronger transition from middle school and to our newly arriving students.

- Teacher

The district has not done enough to help all families to successfully support their children in school. Students need the full support of their families to succeed in school. The district should help parents and families to do this important work.

12. The district must help parents and families maintain high expectations for their children, hold their children accountable to perform and behave appropriately, and keep their children in school on target to graduate.

- 12.1. Expand Parent University training for all families in our community and ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and available at times when families can participate.
- 12.2. Develop new Parent University courses focused on the particular needs of English Learners, Special Education, and other at-risk students.
- 12.3. Use data to connect students and families to organizations in the community that can provide needed assistance.
- 12.4. Implement an alert system for parents and staff for student attendance, behavior, and achievement.
- 12.5. Redesign the parent-teacher conference and back-to-school nights to be a more interactive process focused on academic goal setting for each student.
- 12.6. Establish new expectations for teachers and school staff on how to work with parents and families to support their children's learning.

I wholeheartedly believe that academic success involves a team approach: teacher and parent working together. Great things happen, when a teacher has the support of her students' parents.

- Teacher

My mom depended on me. I had to come home and take care of my disabled sister. I didn't have a dad and I had responsibilities at home with my family.

- Student

Families should be connected to resources and supports to help them meet their challenges. Additionally, attendance patterns are commonly repeated by the younger siblings of a student, and attendance is frequently an issue for the entire family.

- Teacher

The district's alternative education programs do not provide effective paths to graduation. Alternative education should continue to serve students who require smaller learning environments and alternative methods for earning credits, but these programs should also ensure that students are earning credits and making adequate progress toward graduation.

13. The district must repurpose and restructure alternative education programs to provide effective paths to graduation.

- 13.1. Develop new opportunities for students to earn credit toward graduation.
- 13.2. Create course and school placement policies that are understandable and meaningful for all students, parents, and stakeholders.
- 13.3. Identify and increase academic support through remedial courses, additional instructional time, tutoring, extended learning programs, study skills, and small-group instruction.
- 13.4. Adapt and innovate instructional strategies such as blended learning, enhanced technology, project-based learning, and hands-on learning options to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, especially at-risk students.
- 13.5. Offer students enrolled at alternative schools opportunities to engage in activities such as arts, music, athletics, and CTE.

Continue to provide a greater variety of alternative educational environments that serve to meet the goal of engaging students and keeping them in school and on track to graduate.

- Parent

Centralize the assignment of students to alternative educational programs, including current programs such as JE Young, Cambridge and DeWolf, in order to standardize the process and the increase transparency.

- District leader

The district needs to add more elective, hands-on, industrial arts, programming, project based, shop type classes to most schools curriculum. Students need that one thing to "grab on to" at school, whether its sports, academics, relationships, or clubs.

- Teacher

Not everyone in our community is committed to keeping all students in school on target to graduate. The dropout problem affects our entire community, and we are all responsible for solving the problem. Support from the entire community is the only way to significantly increase attendance and graduate rates.

14. The Fresno community must be committed and engaged in the goal of keeping all students in school on target to graduate.

- 14.1. Engage the community in creating an effective public awareness campaign using traditional and non-traditional communication tools in multiple languages to highlight the importance of attendance and graduation.
- 14.2. Community Based Organizations (CBO) and schools staff should attend Parent University courses.
- 14.3. Implement a data sharing system with stakeholders to improve student attendance and to keep all students in school on target to graduate.
- 14.4. The Graduation Task Force should meet quarterly to receive an update on the status of these recommendations, to adjust the implementation plan, and to provide the necessary supports to ensure full implementation of the recommendations.
- 14.5. Establish a joint mayor's office/school superintendent's inter-agency task force to prevent and combat absenteeism.

We have to focus differently on the youth of our city, and it will only happen if we look at our students as individuals, all of whom have a clear expectation that they want something from life. Our school system has to be a leg up, and not a hurdle. Kids everywhere are seeking a path and we have to find ways to nudge them along, and guide them. We have tremendous amounts of community work to do, but every bit of it will be in service of our future generations. This is our city, it's city building.

- Superintendent Michael E. Hanson

Community organizations, businesses, and government agencies are not always aligned to support our schools. This is a community problem that we must solve together. We must align policies, programs, and practices across agencies and organizations on behalf of our students in ways that support their future career success because our schools cannot address all of the needs of students and their families by themselves.

15. All stakeholders – community, faith-based, civic, business, and government organizations – must work collaboratively with the district to keep all students in school on target to graduate.

- 15.1. Establish clear procedures for stakeholders who partner with FUSD.
- 15.2. Create a system to match students with stakeholders for real-world learning opportunities.
- 15.3. Implement a system for stakeholders to identify absent students so they return to school.
- 15.4. Create an adopt-a-school program for all stakeholders.
- 15.5. Build partnerships to design and build technologically-advanced school facilities to prepare students to be career ready graduates.
- 15.6. Collaborate with community leaders to revitalize Fresno neighborhoods.
- 15.7. Develop partnerships to provide reliable transportation for students to and from school.
- 15.8. Increase programs such as Neighborhood Watch and youth development outreach that prevent at-risk behaviors such as drug usage and teen pregnancy.
- 15.9. Establish safety zones around all schools that create clean, safe, drug-free, and alcohol-free neighborhoods.

We need coordination and collaboration among Community Based Organizations to enhance and complement each other, then they can coordinate with the District to help students stay in school to graduate.

-Community Member

Be careful to look at each child individually, and give them the space to interact with you so they can tell you what's going on. It's about individual children. It's about the willingness and the enthusiasm of the adults at each individual school to work on this problem together. There's no big fix, no grand program, there's interactions between adults and children, and the earlier the better.

- District Attorney Egan

Not all parents hold their children accountable to attend school, behave well, or perform academically. Students need the full support of their families to succeed in school. Families need to be caring and respectful of their children and also maintain high expectations for their academic success.

16. Parents and families must have high expectations for their children to stay in school on target to graduate by attending school consistently, behaving appropriately, and achieving academically.

- 16.1. Families should participate in Parent University programs to learn how to support their children's academic success.
- 16.2. Families should monitor attendance, academic performance, and behaviors every day and hold their children accountable.
- 16.3. Families need to get their children to school on-time, every day.
- 16.4. Families need to notify school when their child is going to miss school and also make sure that any missed work is completed.
- 16.5. Families should check their children's homework to make sure it is complete each day.
- 16.6. Families need to work with teachers to make sure that their children are enrolled in and attend all needed interventions.
- 16.7. Families should attend parent conferences and back-to-school nights.
- 16.8. Families need to ensure that their children follow the Student Code of Honor.
- 16.9. Families need to follow school and district policies, rules, and expectations.

Parents and grandparents can help keep their students motivated to graduate by making sure homework gets done, supporting them by going to sporting events and any other extracurricular activity, checking up on grades and attendance. Students need to feel that someone cares.

- Teacher

There are students who I see on a daily basis that have no role models in the home to support their education. They learn to become street-smart, but ignore the knowledge of the other half of the real world. Some students do not have parents who simply remind them to do their homework, wake up, or even provide snacks for them. I have students who come to school late because nobody reminded them to wake up, then they miss the breakfast at school because the cafeteria staff has already cleaned up and the students are left with a grumbling stomach in first period!

- Teacher

Conclusion

Fresno's reality is that it ranks near the bottom by most measures of health, income, and education – factors that contribute to the high number of students who drop out of school in the Fresno Unified School District. For too long, these hindrances have been used as excuses and not enough has been done to overcome these challenges. To be contributing members of the community, all students must have the solid academic foundation that begins with a high school diploma.

In the past year, it has become clear that the community has the vision and determination to join Fresno Unified in creating a new future for students, one that ensures each and every student graduates with options for college and career. The path ahead is not an easy one, but if this city is to become the community its residents desire and deserve, then students, educators, community members, community leaders, and families must work together to decrease the number of students who dropout and increase the number of students who graduate.

While it's the job of parents to teach students how to be responsible, to have a strong work ethic, and to graduate with skills for career or college, teachers and staff cannot give up on students when they forget to do their homework, show up late, miss class, or misbehave. Although the majority of the district's students come from poverty, the district must have high expectations for all students and provide all the support and encouragement it possibly can so students view school as the pathway to a bright future -- and not something to be endured each day. Said differently, a high school diploma is one of the first stepping stones toward lifelong success because it keeps more doors of opportunity open.

The Fresno community must bring forward every possible resource in support of students and their families and find new ways to partner with Fresno Unified to support efforts that keep students in school, on target to graduate. As a starting point, the district and the community must ensure that systems **already** in place are working as they should. The graduation rate for students would jump significantly if:

- All parents got their children to school each day
- All students followed the rules at school
- All teachers took attendance each day
- All teachers ensured their students understood what they were learning
- All adults on campus treated students with respect, empathy, and high expectations
- Community groups and government agencies accelerated efforts to provide support to families

The task ahead is challenging, but working together, the district and community can improve each student's future and the future of Fresno.

Task Force Members, Sponsors, and Staff

Task Force Members

Member	Position	Organization
Albert Rocha	Teacher	Kings Canyon Middle School
Alma El Issa	Chief Marketing Officer	Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE)
Brian Angus	Chief Executive Officer	Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission
Carmen Romero	Senior Defense Attorney	Fresno County Public Defenders Office
Catherine A. Huerta	Retired Director and Consultant	Fresno County Department of Social Services
Cathy Caples	Executive Director	Hands On Central California
Rosendo Pena	Judge	The Superior Court of California, County of Fresno, Juvenile Delinquency Court
Dr. Luz Gonzalez	Dean	CSUF College of Social Sciences
Dr. Matilda T. Soria	Research and Development Director	Reading and Beyond
Elaine Robles	Manager	City of Fresno Community Revitalization
Elizabeth Egan	District Attorney	Fresno County
Howard K. Himes	Director	Fresno County Department of Social Services
Hugo Morales	Executive Director	Radio Bilingüe, Inc.
Javier Guzman	Executive Director	Chicano Youth Center
Jefferson Vang	Student	Edison High School: Men's Alliance
Jim Aldredge PhD	Professor Emeritus	CSUF Business
Juan Arambula	Retired Legislator & Trustee	
Kathy Mytton	Lead Teacher	Kings Canyon Middle School
Kay Bertken	Education Committee Chair	League of Women Voters
Kendra Rogers	Executive Director	First Five Fresno County
Dr. Laura Tanner-McBrien	Manager	FUSD Department of Prevention and Intervention
Laura Sanford	Regional Vice President	AT&T
Lilia Becerril	Parent	Roosevelt High School
Linda Ramirez	Principal	Easterby Elementary School
Lue Yang	Executive Director	Fresno Center for New Americans
Mai Der Vang	Director	The kNow Youth Media
MaiKa Yang	Executive Director	Stone Soup Fresno
María L. Gutiérrez	Retired, Senior Vice President and Regional Director of Local Media	Univision
Mary Jane Skjellerup	Senior Director of Programs of Central Valley	Youth Leadership Institute
Miriam Hernandez	Student	Roosevelt High School: Californians For Justice, Building Healthy Communities, Students United to Create a Climate of

		Engagement Support and Safety
Oliver Baines	Councilmember	Fresno City Council, District 3
Ollie Dimery Ratliff	Director Juvenile Justice Campus-Detention Facility	Fresno County Probation
Rene W. Logan	Parent	Martin Luther King Elementary and Baird Middle Schools
Tate Hill	President/CEO	Fresno Metro Black Chamber
Tony Monreal	Assistant Superintendent	Porterville Unified School District Human Resources Department
Valerie Davis	Board Member	FUSD

Task Force Sponsors

Sponsor	Position	Organization
Dan DeSantis	Executive Director	Fresno Regional Foundation
Paul Koehler	Director	WestEd Policy Center
R. Michael Alexander	President/CEO	United Way of Fresno County
Sarah Reyes	Program Manager	The California Endowment Central Valley

District Staff to the Task Force

Staff	Position	Organization
Darrin Person Sr.	Manager	Mentoring
Dave Calhoun	Executive Director	Research Evaluation and Assessment
Ed Gonzalez	Associate Superintendent	Department of Prevention and Intervention
Dr. Joel Rabin	Administrative Analyst	Superintendent's Office
Dr. Jorge Aguilar	Associate Superintendent	Equity and Access
Jose Guzman	Manager	Campus Culture
Kristen Boroski	Manager	Career Technical Education