

“In the Shadow of the Happiest Place on Earth”: Schools as Community Institutions in Anaheim

Michael Matsuda,
Dr. Pedro Noguera, and
Dr. Jennifer Goldstein

Jennifer Goldstein: *It has been my great good fortune in this life to work, in different ways and at different times, with two extraordinary educators. I have known **Pedro Noguera**, now Dean of the Rossier School of Education at USC, for upwards of 30 years, since he was my undergraduate professor at UC Berkeley. I have known **Michael Matsuda**, Superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD), since we initiated a robust partnership for leadership preparation between our two institutions in 2018. In Hebrew, a shadchan is a matchmaker. When I read the call for this special issue of VUE, with its focus on schools as community institutions, I thought of them both. My role was mainly that of shadchan: I proposed the conversation to the two of them, and edited the published version into something comprehensible for a reader outside of the California context. Dean Noguera and Superintendent Matsuda had met before; on December 16, 2021, Noguera interviewed Matsuda via Zoom, and the district produced a transcript. That interview, edited for comprehension as well as flow, is provided below.*

Matsuda has served as the superintendent of AUHSD for eight years. It is a large, urban school district located in Orange County, not far from Disneyland. AUHSD is a majority minority school district that covers five cities, including Anaheim. The district enrolls over 29,000 students, and the families it serves speak about 45 different languages. It is a gateway community that serves large numbers of refugee immigrants. Demographically, the district is predominantly Latinx (65%), with another 20% of its students from Asian and Pacific Islander backgrounds. The overwhelming majority of students are from low-income households, with a substantial number (approximately 4,000) who lack stable housing.

Dean Noguera: Michael, can you tell me a little about your district that goes beyond the numbers?

Superintendent Matsuda: We are in the shadow of the happiest place on earth: Disneyland. It's hard for people to wrap their heads around the challenges we face because many people think of Orange County as a wealthy county, which it certainly is. But, in the central parts of the county—Santa Ana, Anaheim, Garden Grove—there is a lot of poverty. We are in Orange County, but we face a lot of similar challenges as you find in other urban areas.

Dean Noguera: Several years ago when I visited your district, you told me a story about taking some kids to visit one of the Japanese internment camps in Manzanar. I think one of your parents had been interned there. Can you share what it was like to take some of your students to the camps?

Superintendent Matsuda: Yes. It was the 75th anniversary of the internment. Thank you for remembering it. Roosevelt signed an executive order for Japanese Americans to be taken to internment camps during WWII. My mom was a freshman at Anaheim High School at that time. We brought a few busloads of kids up there and it was amazing. Most of the kids we brought were first-generation Latinx kids. And there were two boys who were looking at the barracks and the straw beds and taking note. One of the boys says, “Wow, this is really nice.” And I turned around and said, “Excuse me?” And he says, “Mr. Matsuda, at least they had a bed to sleep in. My family sleeps on the floor of a garage.”

I shared that story with our administrators. It was like, how far have we come? Which is not very far, right? If our kids are sleeping in worse conditions than the concentration camp.

Dean Noguera: Given that context, let's talk about family engagement. Many urban districts struggle with engaging families. What strategies and practices has your district been using to foster engagement and collaboration?

Superintendent Matsuda: Well, the partnerships we have created with parents and the community are key to how we do things. This comes naturally to both businesses and nonprofits, who tend to understand the importance of serving your clients well. We are extending this approach to how K-12 education is run. That is, rather than operating in a silo by focusing narrowly on our educational mission, we really reach out to the business community and higher ed to help us in fulfilling our goal of serving our community. That's been key to building trust with families because they rely on us. If we work closely with them and serve their students well, it builds trust and ultimately leads to better jobs for our students.

One of the things that we've done, Pedro, is that we've redefined the achievement gap. We don't focus so much on test scores, even though our test scores are rising. For us, it's really about increasing access to meaningful jobs. This is how we will break the cycle of poverty. It's what every civil rights leader was advocating for. I think somehow, we lost our way over the last several years. We got so accustomed to just looking at test scores as though that was what the achievement gap was all about. For us, it's about so much more. It's about access to purposeful and meaningful jobs for our community. That's how education lifts people out of poverty. We've been able to deliver on that promise and change the narrative in first-generation communities about education leading to higher incomes.

Dean Noguera: Can you talk in a little bit more detail about how you're doing that? You mentioned a moment ago that a lot of your families are recent immigrants. You also said that many of your students are from very disadvantaged homes, and some experience homelessness. How do you engage families who are under so much economic stress? How do you learn about what their aspirations are and their hopes are for their children?

Superintendent Matsuda: Well, it all comes down to trust. I think that we really leveraged the LCAP¹ in terms of this whole focus on community needs. By allowing the parents a voice in the decision-making process, and by prioritizing their budgetary priorities, we are making our commitment to the families we serve real. So we were ahead of other districts in building partnerships with parents. They came to us and told us they wanted, for example, more counselors.

Many of them didn't really know what social workers were at that time, and this was prior to the pandemic. But they did know that a lot of kids were hurting as a result of social and emotional isolation. Many were feeling unsupported. So, we listened to the parents and we were one of the first districts in Orange County to ensure access to social workers through the LCAP funding.

That created a lot more trust. We also started Parent Learning Walks so that parents could see what was happening in the classroom. Thousands of parents across the district participated in the learning walks on a monthly basis. It allowed them to see what was going on in terms of teaching and learning and that really helped us in building trust.

Dean Noguera: So, they were involved in making observations at the schools? In many places, teachers are not in favor of exposing themselves to so much scrutiny. How did you pull that off with teacher support?

Superintendent Matsuda: We spent the first 40 minutes explaining to parents about our learning objectives and instructional priorities. We prioritize critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and compassion or character. We call them the 5Cs. And so we would spend about 40 minutes going over what each of those things mean and what they should be looking for in the classroom.

That's how we built our social compact with parents. If you think about it, our learning priorities are hard to argue with. They are part of the Common Core in California. It's in the state's frameworks, but unfortunately, many districts don't teach these standards because they are not tested.

When we go into classrooms, the visit is usually led by a community liaison who is able to speak the language of the families. In every case, they come away appreciative. It's nonjudgmental. They don't use this as a chance to point fingers at teachers. It's really about just understanding what you're observing.

However, at the same time, the parental observations are putting attention on teaching and learning in our schools. And afterwards they have a debrief and there are two takeaway questions: (1) What did you see in terms of these 5Cs, and (2) What can you do to support the learning you observed at home? Then, there is also a third piece: If it's not happening, what should you do? So, the parents were learning about who to hold accountable, and the process of holding folks accountable.

Dean Noguera: I'm really impressed that you and your teachers had no objection to that kind of parental involvement.

Superintendent Matsuda: Initially, some did, so we piloted the learning walks with teachers who volunteered. This allowed us to create a positive narrative about the process. We worked with the teachers who were confident in their practice. Later, we shared the practice at staff meetings, and worked closely with the teacher's association on this. This allowed the learning walks to grow to a point where it is now institutionalized.

Carl Cohn, the former superintendent of Long Beach and the founding executive director of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), came to the district and observed what we were doing. I think he was really impressed.

All of this was happening before the pandemic. And that's how we built trust in the system at a time when many schools were going the opposite direction in terms of lack of trust in institutions. And that was exposed during COVID.

Dean Noguera: Well, this is impressive because both you and I know in a lot of districts figuring out how to prioritize needs under LCAP has been a source of some tension, and even lawsuits. So, it sounds like really building trust has worked for you.

Here's another question: In what way are the leaders in your district working to manage the controversies that have emerged over how to manage during COVID? In several communities there have been conflicts around masks and vaccines mandates. This has been especially the case in Orange County. Have your district leaders been able to use the trust they built with parents to manage effectively during this period of conflict? I'm particularly interested in hearing how they have worked with communities that have been reluctant to accept the vaccines?

Superintendent Matsuda: Well, we have drawn heavily on the concept of coherence that Michael Fullan [2016] has written about, and systems from Peter Senge [2006], to create a "learning organization." We did this so that we can pivot during periods of uncertainty, like the pandemic. As was true for everyone else, this was thrust upon us. In such a situation you have that trust. This made it possible for us to immediately close schools on March 13th, 2020.

I had a book study with our admins on *Leadership in Turbulent Times* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. As you know, she has studied four presidents. We studied her book together and we examined how these folks managed public opinion, public sentiment, and created a system internally that allowed them to respond to crisis.

That's what we were aiming for. But the pandemic really put us to the test. As we formulated our response, we immediately started holding town halls to keep our community informed. Fortunately, we already had good partnerships with nonprofits and higher ed institutions like UC Irvine, and their medical school. We even drew upon expertise from as far away as Johns Hopkins University. Fortunately, we could get a lot done through Zoom meetings so that we could reach across the country to find experts.



ISTOCK.COM/RUSLAN MAIBORODIN

We also identified medical experts within our own community. We have 30,000 students. Doctors and healthcare workers who can speak the languages of the families we serve were essential. We drew on the concept of *promotora* that's used in the healthcare industry. It's a Spanish word, meaning promoter, and we used it to promote understanding and trust. Trying to reach immigrant communities during a period of crisis is not easy. We had families that wanted to know where to go for pap smears and breast cancer screening. A lot of the women in our community did not know where to obtain this information. There was a lot of stigma about seeking it out. So, the healthcare industry came up with the idea of training lay people, often referred to as *comadres* who were already trusted by their communities as a source of information.

So, what we did, Pedro, when the pandemic happened, was we trained staff and community volunteers with UCI and Latino Health Access, a local nonprofit. These folks helped us in building trust. We used some of our COVID monies to pay them, and that was really effective.

Dean Noguera: How did you get these women, the *comadres*, to work with you? How did you recruit them?

Superintendent Matsuda: We were already working with a lot of folks we identified as community leaders through the learning walks. These are parents that were ready to become parent ambassadors because they are the organizers and leaders.

Other districts may be reluctant to engage students and parents and voices the way we do. But we have found that when parents have a say at the table it makes a difference. Right? Democracy is messy, but if you're going to build trust, you've got to allow different voices and perspectives to be represented.

We do something similar to encourage student voices. I'll give you some concrete examples. We have our own version of Ted Talks. We call them AUHSDtalks and some of them take place in our English classes. It happens in science and other subjects all across the district, from grade 7 through grade 12. For kids who've been participating in these public talks you can really see how strong our student voices become.

All of this work on parent and student engagement has converged into a new framework that we call the Career Preparedness Systems Framework (CPSF). There are three components that are central to CPSF. One component is the development of soft skills. The second driver is the technical

skills. That's the career tech education pathways. We brought in Google and we were the first district in the nation to partner with Google, who has put a billion dollars into a program to create greater cohesion between higher ed and the world of work. The third driver is probably the most important, and that's the development of student voice and purpose.

Dean Noguera: You sent me some data about your academic accomplishments yesterday. Can you tell me about it, the data that you sent?

Superintendent Matsuda: Yeah, we're very excited about the three-year data we have. On several indicators, our Anaheim kids are outperforming kids from wealthier districts. All of the other districts in our county collect data on GPA and college persistence rates, right? Our persistence rates are 10 points above the average and we are blown away by what we have accomplished.

Dean Noguera: I'm really impressed by what your district has done. What's particularly significant is that your kids come from households with much lower incomes.

Superintendent Matsuda: Yes, that's right, Pedro. I want to make this really clear. We do not use the interim assessments for the SPAC to teach the test. We spend our Professional Learning Community time on applied projects, on developing the 5Cs. In terms of academic performance, we are way above California, particularly with respect to our A-G rates.²

This is a mindblower. Our A-G completion rates are now tied or above districts like Newport Mesa and tied with Huntington Beach. Wow! So, UCI is looking at what we're doing to understand how we've managed to make so much progress.

We're not settling for good test scores though. We've developed career pathways, 20 of them across eight high schools. We begin in junior high. We have developed cutting edge pathways in partnership with business and nonprofit, and we have 90 partners now.

For example, we lead Southern California in preparing kids to work in cybersecurity. We brought in a cybersecurity firm, FinTech, and the dean of the business department at Cypress College, because we were building a dual-credit program. Now we have kids who are graduating from high school, getting jobs at Hulu, starting out at \$65,000 a year with a high school diploma, and two dual-credit courses. That's really impressive. Hulu helps subsidize their education and they get salaried over \$100,000 when they get a bachelor's in computer science. We've used that same model to build an artificial intelligence program at Kennedy High School. And we're building a biotechnology program at Anaheim High School.

Dean Noguera: Wow! These are really the jobs of the future. Getting kids into good paying jobs in the high-tech sector will hopefully lead to careers that will allow your kids to support themselves and improve the circumstances of their families.

Superintendent Matsuda: Yeah. And you could imagine we've changed the narrative for the parents. We used to have parents who were putting a lot of pressure on the kids to get a job. And kids would leave school to take a job as a carpenter or whatever. That's fine if that's what you want to do or if that's your calling. But our students can see that there's a lot of great jobs available in an all kinds of fields if you get adequately prepared.

You can imagine a first-generation Latino parent, because initially they didn't want their kid to go into cybersecurity because they didn't know what it is. Now that kid is bringing home enough money to pay for the rent and so, now they're saying, "Hey, tell me more about cybersecurity." The kids are telling their parents about the kinds of jobs they can get now.

Dean Noguera: That's really awesome, Mike. I just want to say how commendable and important what you're doing is. It's so comprehensive with respect to the way you're thinking about serving this community, serving these students, and the results you're getting is so impressive.

To summarize and bring this interview to a close, what you're basically doing is you're working on all the fronts. You're engaging parents in key decision-making roles about funding and how to prioritize those LCAP funds. You're involving parents in learning walks so they can see what's happening in the classroom, and you're really getting kids prepared for college.

And the evidence is showing that your students are doing extremely well, despite, again, the economic disadvantages they face. You're also giving them access to jobs in the high-tech sector which will really expand opportunities to improve their mobility in the future. You're demonstrating that poverty, while still an issue, doesn't have to be insurmountable.

References

- Fullan, M. & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Corwin Press.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Doubleday.

Endnotes

¹ A district's Local Control Accountability Plans, or LCAPs, sit inside of California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation. The intent of the LCFF legislation was to decentralize decisions from the state to local school districts, based on the assumption that districts know their population best and know the resources needed to support the students—especially struggling students. LCFF requires a stakeholder engagement process, such that stakeholders are involved in how to spend money from the state. All districts are required to develop their LCAP, on a three-year cycle, with stakeholder involvement..

² To meet minimum admission requirements for the University of California and the California State University systems, students must complete 15 year-long high school courses with a letter grade of C or better—at least 11 of them prior to the last year of high school. These are known as the A-G requirements.

Michael Matsuda is a nationally recognized 21st century educational leader known for innovation, entrepreneurship, and compassion. Under his leadership, the Anaheim Union High School District has built a new educational model incorporating “reverse engineered” career pathways in partnership with higher education, private, and non-profit sectors, which have extended and transformed educational opportunities for all students. Mr. Matsuda has been superintendent since 2014, during which time he has earned several accolades, including a national “Leaders to Learn From” Award from Education Week Magazine and the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) Administrator of the Year Award.

Pedro Noguera is the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the Rossier School of Education and a Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Southern California. Prior to joining USC, Noguera served as a Distinguished Professor of Education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Before joining the faculty at UCLA, he served as a tenured professor and holder of endowed chairs at New York University, Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of 15 books. In 2022 he was ranked 3rd in the nation for influence and impact in education by Education Week.

Jennifer Goldstein, Ph.D., is Professor of Educational Leadership at California State University Fullerton. She directs Leadership Education for Anaheim Districts, a vibrant university-district partnership for leadership preparation and development and a member of the National Network for Educational Research Practice Partnerships. Prior to coming to CSUF, she taught in the School of Public Affairs at City University of New York, Baruch College.