

Partner Spotlight: Visalia Unified School District (CA)

Kirk Shrum serves as Superintendent of Visalia Unified School District in California. Visalia USD is in its second year participating in UVA's Partnership for Leaders in Education (UVA-PLE). A unique joint venture between the University of Virginia's top-ranked Darden School of Business and the School of Education and Human Development, UVA-PLE is a national education leadership advancement organization that combines world-class executive education for superintendents, principals, and other ed leaders with thought partnership grounded in research to deliver significantly improved student learning outcomes. In its 21st year, most of UVA-PLE's partner schools outgain state averages, almost 50% of our partner schools have experienced double-digit proficiency gains within three years and many partners schools achieve greater gains and are recognized as top growth or blue-ribbon Title 1 schools in their states.

In this Q&A, Superintendent Shrum shares how Visalia educators and students have benefited from the Partnership. For instance, Kirk, after its first year in the partnership, Visalia has seen three participating schools grow ELA proficiency, including Golden Oaks increasing the number of English Learners meeting or exceeding ELA standard by 10%. He also discusses his experience with the Partnership in two prior education leadership roles in the state of Georgia: at Henry County Schools in McDonough and Fulton County Schools in Atlanta.

Q: How did you hear about UVA-PLE?

I've got to go back in time for that question. While at Fulton County about ten years ago, the district had engaged in conversation with UVA-PLE around several of our schools being on the state watch list after several years of low test scores. A member of the district team had heard about UVA-PLE, made the connection, and pretty soon after that, Fulton County made the investment to take its first cohort of schools through the school transformation program. After that first year, we really saw some of the benefits of the leadership focus and the site-based planning.

I was very fortunate to be the principal supervisor for a group of schools that went into the second cohort, and over several years in Fulton County I then took other groups of schools through the program. Of all of the schools in my learning community that were failing; after going through UVA-PLE, each saw significant academic gains to the point where all were removed from the state's failure list, basically in a matter of a couple of years.

Q: You also worked with UVA-PLE when you were in Henry County, Georgia?

I was the chief school leadership officer there and engaged in the Partnership during COVID. We took several cohorts of schools through, and they stayed in the Partnership a few years even after I had left. We took a different approach in Henry in that we selected not necessarily our lowest performing schools, but schools that had leaders who we felt could be transformational. And we had some schools that fell into that "good to great" category.

One thing that was exciting in Henry County – which we also saw in Fulton County – was seeing the return on investment in the leadership of people. For example, several of the principals who participated in the Partnership have since become district leaders. In Henry, the chief academic officer

and I both left to go to different opportunities. There was a lot of movement into leadership from principals and others with experience. Student outcomes are obviously the most important thing, but it's also about someone being a transformational leader who has the understanding and knowledge of systems and how to develop, implement, and monitor them for improvement. It is that skillset that the Partnership really opened people's minds to in ways they likely hadn't thought about before.

Q: How have you engaged UVA-PLE in your current role in Visalia?

We have great people, but previously there had not been investment in them as leaders, which is not uncommon. After about a year here, I knew we needed to get a group together. So for our first cohort, we identified a group of our lower-performing schools with the right leader who had the ability and the capability to learn and implement new things. For the second cohort, we had a couple of principals who were in what would be considered higher-performing schools who were very interested in moving to a lower-performing school to see what they could do to change the outcomes of kids.

In that first group, almost every one of those schools has seen academic improvement in the areas they targeted. Every one of our participating schools has an indicator that we can attribute to that principal's leadership, like the development of professional learning communities. We're building the capability of our people to deliver and execute.

Q: Why has it been important to share the Partnership with the broader community?

It's important that the School Board have a high level of understanding of why this investment is so critical, especially at a time when we're seeing shrinking budgets. If our leaders aren't capable of moving the work, then our teachers are not going to perform well, nor will our students.

We've cascaded impact to the Board and Union presidents, immersing them in shadow opportunities alongside principals and teachers participating in the Partnership. What is powerful is that by doing so, UVA-PLE is now one of the investments the Board wants to protect - a lesson other districts can learn in order to engage in or sustain this work.

Q: What has stood out to you and your colleagues participating in UVA-PLE's in-person executive leadership sessions?

The first takeaway is, wow, professionalism. The caliber of what we just experienced, with presentations, case studies, and exercises, is unlike anything we've experienced before through any other professional development or improvement effort.

Another benefit is the collaboration. You're associating, you're navigating, you're working with other districts, and you're constantly learning. There's a sense that others are engaged in the same work and experiencing the same challenges. We're not alone.

Q: What has been the feedback of principals participating in the Partnership?

A lot of what I've heard from principals is about what it's done for their personal leadership. They're learning how to develop a plan, how to have clear and actionable targets, and how to think about

implementing a plan in a way that may not have been intentional before. And the importance of having the right people on your team and how you bring them along too.

Q: Working with UVA-PLE, what were the “big rocks” that you and your team have hoped to address?

Our team talked through where we were performing as a district and what we’re hearing from teachers, parents, and the broader community. We landed on the culture level around student engagement, and tier one quality instruction and curriculum.

Effective instructional strategies are critical because you can have the right curriculum and the right resources and still not have the right delivery that impacts kids. So, what our district has done is identify the key components of quality, tier one instruction and how that guides our professional learning communities. That’s one of our big rocks.

We also relaunched teacher development through our professional learning communities, which gives teachers the ability to get in and analyze student academic data. This is so critical, it’s now in Board policy as an expectation that we do that, driven by some of the work with UVA-PLE. Based on each participating school’s entry assessment, these district big rocks are then narrowed down and personalized to the needs of individual schools. So, the work is driven from the district lens, but then addresses each school’s unique circumstances.

Q: How do you go from *aspirational to implementation* and making it a reality?

UVA-PLE is very helpful here. You start with a district Purpose Statement, e.g., “Here’s what we would love to see.” Then the school uses that to create their own Purpose Statement. Then comes a 90-day plan where you focus on smaller pieces and go from there. It’s interesting because almost everyone’s 90-day plan is broad at the beginning. Inevitably, teams reevaluate and say, “You know what? We need to take what we started, narrow it, and be more focused.” They learn what makes an effective 90-day plan.

A lot of places are good at making a plan, like a school improvement plan, but they struggle at implementation, monitoring it continuously, improving it, and investigating what went wrong in a root cause analysis. All of these tools you learn and are taught through UVA-PLE.

Q: What are some of the promising practices that have come from the Partnership?

There have been promising practices around tier one quality curriculum and instruction. Now every subject area has what we call balanced instructional models. We have a whole guidance document around ELA and math instruction that’s taken from best practice and research.

The other piece is balanced assessments throughout the district to drive professional learning community conversations. Three years ago, we did not have common assessments across the subject areas, or even within the same school. Teachers now come together and really talk about how they’re doing, what strategies they use to teach this standard, and how their kids did.

Q: How has the Partnership affected educational outcomes?

Some of our schools had previously been the district’s lowest-performing schools until their leadership

participated in the Partnership. For example, in Houston Elementary we moved a high-performing principal from a more affluent school. She participated in UVA-PLE because we recognized that she had the skillset and we've seen transformation there. Houston and other schools are overtaking other schools as far as progress through their professional learning community structures.

Q: What would be your advice to a district leader considering participating in UVA-PLE?

Talk to people who have been through the program. It's great to hear from the folks at UVA-PLE, but it's also valuable to pick up the phone and talk with a superintendent or assistant superintendent who has participated and ask, "Is this worth the investment?" And then ask them about their results, "Did it really transform into what you had anticipated in making your decision to join?" You can also ask to audit part of the program for a weekend to experience it firsthand.

For Visalia Unified, it's definitely been worth the investment of time and money. I've personally seen the leadership transformation in individuals and their ability to build systems that lead to instructional improvements for students. They're able to envision, implement, monitor, and get results out of these systems that they're putting in place. That just doesn't happen by putting on a one-hour PD session in your district. That takes programming. It takes work. UVA-PLE is not only moving a school, it's an all-encompassing approach through system levers to build leadership and the ability to implement the work.

I think back to my professional development journey, from teacher and principal, to the district office, completing a master's and being in a doctorate program for a while. I can say without hesitation that nothing has been more valuable than my UVA-PLE experience.