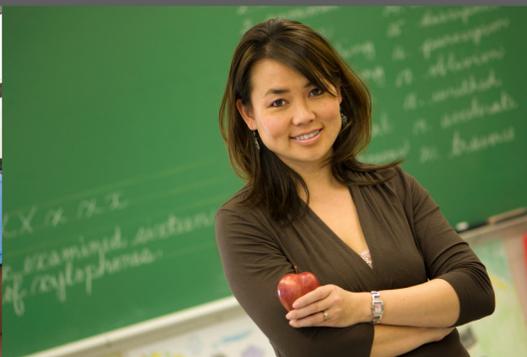


# ON TARGET

A QUARTERLY REPORT BY TARGETED LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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## Introduction

Dear Colleagues,

The Fall edition of our On Target Report highlights the hard work and leadership of five schools in the Chula Vista Elementary School District operating as an Accountability Community. These schools have gone from being in the bottom 5% of student achievement to top performers in a just a few years. The report looks at the attributes of an Accountable Community and delves into how these five schools have found success in holding one another accountable – from the five principals to their wider school communities.

Following the report is a tool your school or district may find useful in looking at how you might form, or refine, your own Accountable Community. You will find four groups of questions to help focus your discussion.

Jeff Nelsen

## Living as an Accountable Community: Five Principals Committed to Student Success

by: Jeff Nelsen, Ph.D.

*The academic honors continue to accumulate for Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School, Otay Elementary, and Silver Wing Elementary. These three schools in the Chula Vista Elementary School District were announced as 2009-10 Title I Academic Achievement Award winners, the most recent in a string of honors for each of the schools. In addition, Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School, Silver Wing, and Harborside have been recognized as 2010 California Distinguished Schools. Otay Elementary qualified to apply for recognition as a National Blue Ribbon School and should be notified soon.*

—Press Release, Chula Vista Elementary School District, May 2010

So what are the conditions that support this cadre of schools in their growth and success? How did these schools go from being in the bottom 5% of student achievement to top performers in just a few years? What types of leadership continue to foster success for both students and staff?

## The Context

Meeting the annual targets set by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is a challenge for most schools. This is especially true for those schools serving large numbers of students that are second language learners and/or students of poverty. For some, those factors alone can cause a school staff to discount achievement targets as too high for their students to reach. For others, there is a belief that given the right conditions, all students can achieve high standards. In the Chula Vista Elementary School District, located in San Diego, California, a group of principals is determined to prove that their students can and will meet the standards set by

NCLB. These principals choose to work as a team, five schools banding together to create conditions that ensure success for all their students. These principals operate as an Accountable Community.

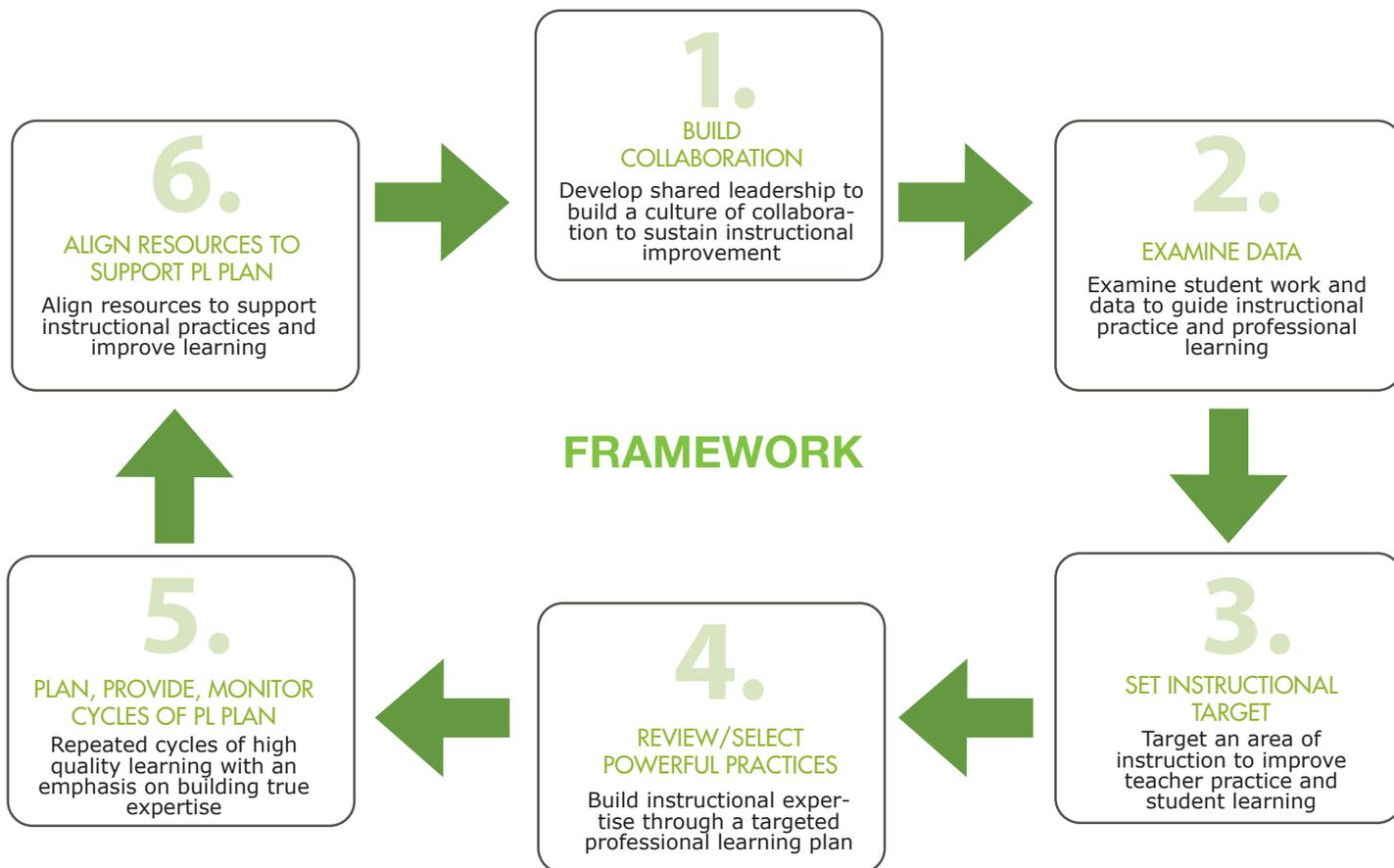
## Attributes of an Accountable Community

People on teams that operate as an Accountable Community (Platt, et al, 2008) exhibit behaviors that place student needs above the needs of adults. Members of accountable communities expect to be challenged when their behavior is not beneficial for students or to the mission of the group, and are

willing to confront others whose behavior is not aligned with the school's commitment to student success. Members of accountable communities use protocols and processes to address controversial issues. Members of accountable communities build a great amount of trust by sharing openly, honestly, and with a shared belief in their outcome.

## Organizing the Work at the School Level

Each of the schools in this Cohort of 5 organizes their work around a framework:



The five schools in the cohort meet four times a year for a day-long training that targets elements of this framework. These training sessions are led by a Targeted Leadership Consultant who shares tools and strategies to assist schools with implementing the framework. Each school has identified a targeted area of instruction. That targeted area provides the lens through which decisions are made regarding resources, professional development, and instructional practice in the classroom.

Cohort principals do not do this work in isolation. The transition from a focus on one person as the leader to the distribution of leadership is what allows schools to continue growing. Each principal in this Cohort of 5 works with a site-based Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) to support the school's instructional initiatives. Each school's ILT meets on a regular basis to discuss school-wide needs around the targeted instructional area. In addition, the ILT facilitates grade level conversations during collaboration time around data analysis and instructional practice. The ILT is charged with the task of having clear communication with their colleagues around the goals and mission of the school towards student success.

The ILTs were introduced to the concept of mutual accountability and accountable communities early in the process. During training around shared leadership and how to build a culture of collaboration, ILTs discussed the definition of a team. One definition in particular unified the group's sense of community:

*A team is a small group of people with complementary schools, committed to a common purpose, and a set of specific short and long term performance goals. Its members are committed to working with each other to achieve the team's purpose and hold each other fully and mutually accountable for the team's results.*

**"The Wisdom of Teams"  
Katzenbach and Smith, 1993**

Implementation of the framework and setting goals based on data provided a common purpose for the ILTs. Members struggled with what it meant to be "fully and mutually accountable for the team's success." To gain more clarity around this concept, the ILTs studied Platt's "Continuum of Community Function." (Platt, 2008)

In Platt's "Continuum of Community of Function," there are five identified types of community: toxic, laissez-faire, congenial, collaborative and accountable. The first three: toxic, laissez-faire and congenial, are grouped under the heading "Communities that Undermine Learning." The actions associated with these communities tend to be adult-oriented and often stall or cause backward movement for the implementation of initiatives.

The other two, collaborative and accountable, are considered "Communities that Sustain Adult and Student Learning." The actions associated with these two communities are student-oriented and result in forward movement of initiative implementation.

After the introduction of Platt's continuum, ILT members shared their understandings with colleagues, established norms for working towards being an Accountable Community and worked on building skills to support their colleagues. While each school ILT worked towards becoming more mutually accountable, the cohort principals also came together as a peer group and challenged themselves to operate as their own accountable community and to support each other as their schools moved forward in support of students.

## Functioning as an Accountable Community

The five principals challenged themselves to consistently practice the attributes of an Accountable Community. Examples of these characteristics and progressive actions taken by the principals follow:

### 1. Student learning and achievement is put above adult needs

In addition to the four annual institutes, the principals meet formally at each others' schools at least three times a year. At each of these meetings, principals share their school's quantitative data, including school-wide, grade level, classroom results; and qualitative data, including walkthrough observations and feedback on classroom practice.

After a brief overview of the most current data, principals take a Targeted Learning Walk (TLW) through the building to check for progress on goals and practice. The TLW might be school-

wide, a specific grade level that is under-performing, or classrooms where the principal needs support addressing concerns of practice.

Following the TLW, goals are established and a commitment is made to follow through on suggestions given by his peers.

*I think a good example of how we hold each other accountable is the level of discussion that we engage in during our walkthroughs. We are consistently growing as site leaders and also as instructional leaders. We are not afraid to ask the obvious questions because of the trust we have built with each other, and to also ask the tough questions, not in a demeaning manner, but as a way to challenge the status quo.*

**-Alex Cortes, principal, Silver Wing Elementary**

While each school in the Cohort of 5 has formal dates for principal peer visits, there are also "surprise-unannounced" visits when members of the peer group "drop in" to follow up on an earlier visit. They look for evidence around the goals established at the "scheduled" visit and give feedback to the visited school principal.

## 2 Point out when behavior is not beneficial for students

The "surprise-unannounced" visits, as well as the formal follow up visits, provide the structure for monitoring the commitment made by the visited principal. Where change is lacking or slow to come about, the peer group is candid and honest, holding their colleague accountable for the work. They constantly monitor each other's data as well as their own.

## 3 Point out when behavior is not beneficial for group

When the principals in the Cohort of 5 initially began their peer work around achieving the ideals of an accountable community, there was some inconsistency in attendance at school site meetings. Sometimes just four would be at the school on time, sometimes three, sometimes everyone. At the end of the first round of school visits, one of the principals called out his colleagues on this inconsistency and asked about everyone's commitment to the group's success. All five principals recommitted to upholding the ideals, and except for a rare, unavoidable conflict, everyone regularly attends the school visits.

## 4 Share a sense of urgency tied to rigor and challenge

Part of a planned TLW always includes a discussion around rigor. As part of the training at several of this year's institutes, the Cohort of 5 studied Willard Daggett's work around Rigor and Relevance. This provided the principals and teachers a common definition of what they meant by rigor. As part of the principal walkthroughs, they carry with them a copy of the California State Standards for English-Language Arts. There is a concentration on these standards because the target area for each school is around literacy, especially the support given to English language learners.

One of the elements principals look for in each other's schools is how time is used in the classroom. How quick are transitions? What is the teacher doing when students are doing independent work?

How quickly are students engaged in an instructional activity when entering the classroom? The principals look for this element consistently as they visit one another's schools and hold the leader responsible if time is not being maximized.

A key attribute of this accountable community is that principals monitor one other and check for how they are each holding high expectations in classrooms by examining classroom work and the instructional decisions that are reflected in the work of their teachers.

The constant monitoring of data by school, grade level, classroom and targeted students, combined with the examination of both oral and written student work, give ample evidence to each principal around a sense of urgency tied to rigor.

## 5 Use structures to sustain adult and student learning

One of the components of the TLC framework is the use of repeated Professional Learning Cycles to support professional development. This structure is designed to support the implementation of a few select powerful practices tied to the school's targeted area. Goals are set for student learning as well as implementation of goals focused on adult practice. Each of the Cohort of 5 schools has established a Professional Learning Cycle around practices that fit their school's unique needs.

At each of the Institutes, school teams report to each other on progress towards achieving goals set in their Cycle plan. Principals also

challenge each other on how they are implementing the Cycles. On Targeted Learning Walks, visiting principals look for evidence of implementation by examining student work, talking to students about what they are learning (as opposed to just a focus on what they are doing), and observing how students are engaged and interacting during lessons. This data is shared with the school's principal, who in turn shares it with the ILT as part of the monitoring system around the implementation of the Professional Learning Cycle.

(For more on Cycles of Professional Learning, see the article "Lasting Impressions" published by the Journal of Staff Development, December 2009 and posted on our website [www.targetedleadership.net](http://www.targetedleadership.net))

## Outcomes of Functioning as an Accountable Community

When asked to reflect on the impact working as an accountable community has had on their practice, the principals of the Cohort of 5 shared these thoughts.

*Being a part of an accountable community means having the responsibility and courage to face the reality and facts about what is happening or not happening at your school site and taking the necessary steps to ensure all students are successful. It means stepping out of your*

*comfort zone, in some cases being pushed, but always knowing that you have the support, trust and same value system regarding student achievement. It means an on-going commitment to student needs always being put above adult needs.*

**-ALEX CORTES, Silver Wing School**

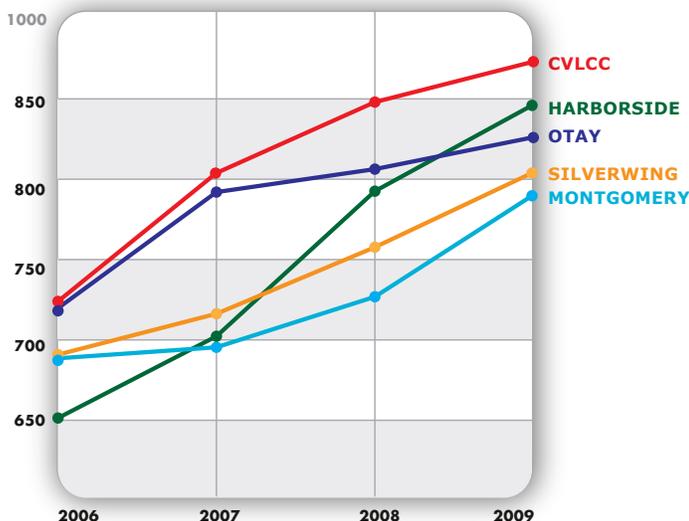
*Being in an accountable community means doing whatever it takes to ensure a world-class education for children. Challenging each other, asking tough questions, and supporting each other's work is what ultimately pushes the rigor of classroom instruction and learning within our schools.*

**-MATTHEW TESSIER, Harborside School**

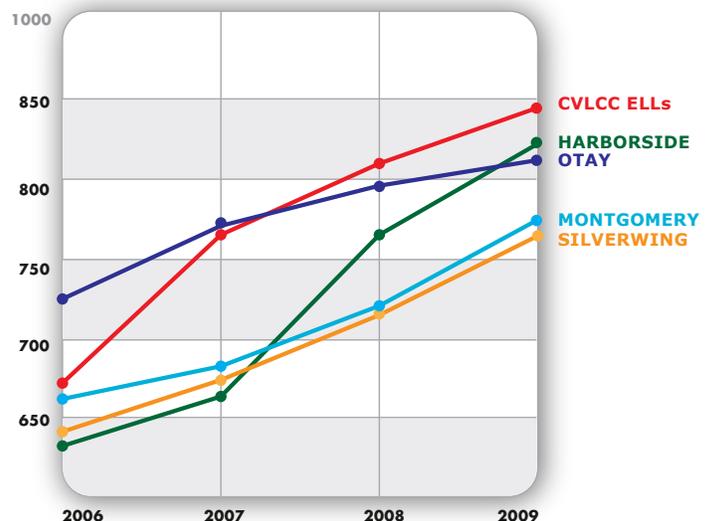
## Chula Vista Elementary School District, API Chart

API = Academic Performance Index (California)

### School Wide Data



### ELLs



*For me, it (being an accountable community) has meant becoming the best I can. I choose not to rest on my (limited) knowledge, but commit myself to personal improvement and stepping out of my comfort zone. As a group, we have been able to push each other; and, in some cases ourselves, into the unknown and try new things.... regardless of our fears.*

**-FRANCISCO VELASCO, Montgomery School**

*Being accountable starts with believing that our students can and do achieve with good teaching, that is why we entered into the cohort. As we walk through each other's schools, we look for student engagement through an understanding of purpose of lessons. When this is not observed we ask tough questions of each other, expect goals to be created, and follow through on those goals at consequent walk-throughs. We believe in each other's work and therefore strive to make each other stronger by following through on expectations.*

**-ROSARIO VILLAREAL, Otay School**

*A leader needs to be reflective in thought and action. Having colleagues to support and value the thinking process is beneficial. Leadership in isolation no longer exists.*

**-DR. JORGE RAMIREZ, Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School**

Accountable communities exist where environments have been created that promote, sustain and distribute growth (Platt, 2008). For any accountable community, the impact on student achievement is the ultimate measure of effectiveness. Each of these schools has seen significant growth across a multi-year time span, and for the principals in the Cohort of 5, there is a drive to continue to improve their own practice so that the conditions are set for all students to succeed.

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The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning

By: Alexander D. Platt, Caroline E. Tripp, Robert G. Fraser, James R. Warnock, and Rachel E. Curtis, Ready-About Press, 2008

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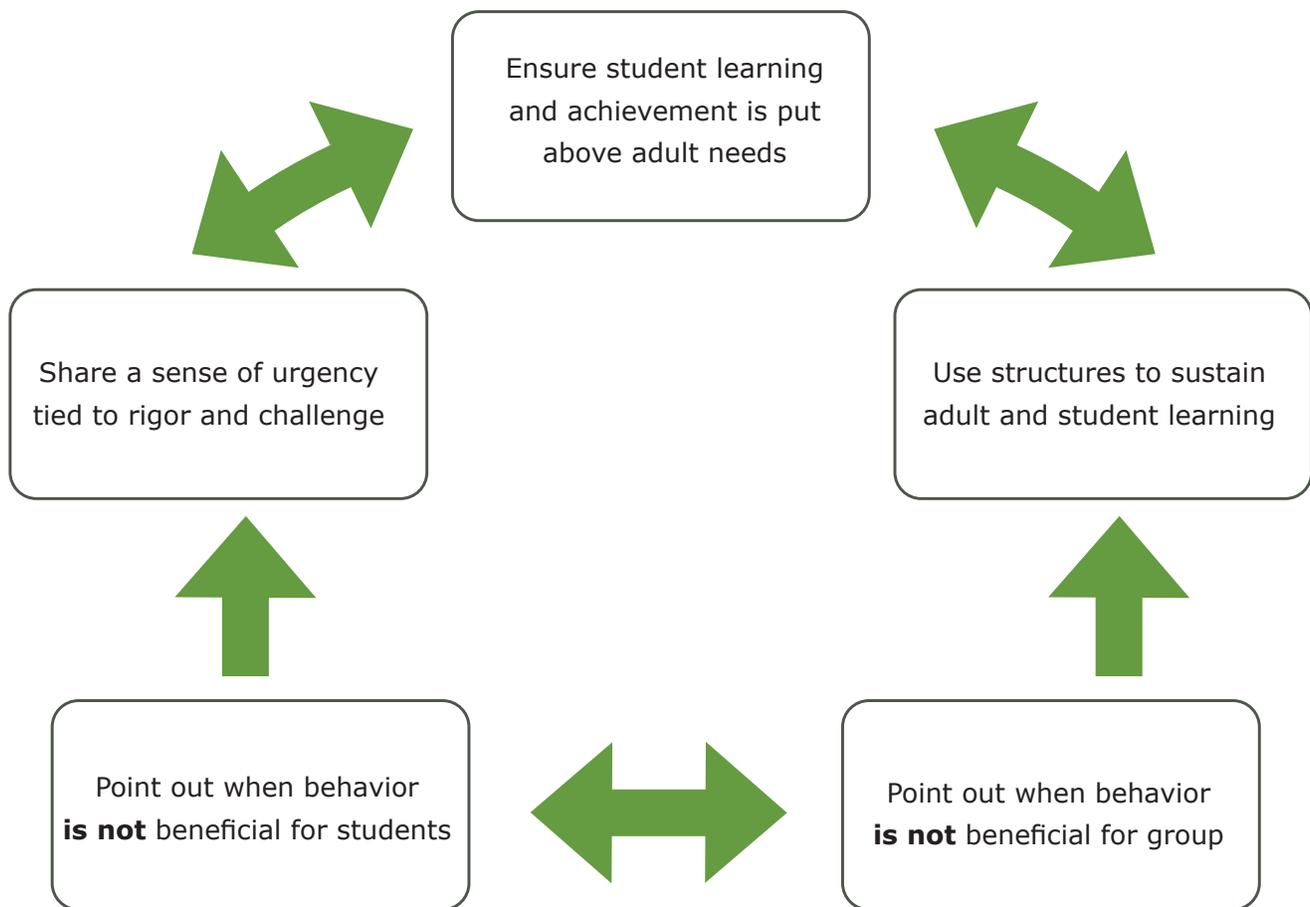
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## Developing an Accountable Community

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## GUIDING QUESTIONS TO USE WHILE DEVELOPING AN ACCOUNTABILITY COMMUNITY

### Clarifying roles and goals

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- What is the goal/focus of the Targeted Learning Walks at each site? (i.e., developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, identifying best practices and/or consistent and/or inconsistent practices)
- What roles will each participant involved in the Targeted Learning Walks hold? (i.e., will there be different and/or specific roles for each principal during the walkthrough, or will everyone have the same role?)
- How will the members of the community hold each other accountable? (i.e., debrief of information, follow-up plan, sharing out with staff, plan of action)

### Building the momentum

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- How will site visits be arranged so that staff continue to be aware of their purpose? What factors will spark a sense of urgency across the school community?
- What process will be used for sharing information with staff?
- How will each principal utilize the thoughts and reflections of other cohort members to gather a different perspective on their own school?

### Using the information gathered to foster growth on site

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- How will each principal determine what key information will be shared with staff?
- Based on observations of strengths and areas to improve, how will relevant information be identified? (i.e., looking for issues that are ripe, connected to current work or may be leverage points)
- How will information gleaned from observations be used to connect to professional development plans or to on-going learning at the site?

### Continuing to build a level of success

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- What will the timeline be for continued visits?
- How will you determine a strategy to further engage staff in the process?
- Identify next steps. Do goals need to be reevaluated? How and when will principals follow up with one another?