

Summary of Findings & Recommendations | Laguna Beach Unified School District

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Learner-Centered
COLLABORATIVE



Introduction

Learner-Centered Collaborative (LCC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to partnering with schools and districts to advance learner-centered education and equitable opportunities for all students. Our team of experienced educators works closely with schools and districts nationwide to facilitate transformative change and create powerful learning experiences that meet the unique needs of each learner.

In an effort to better understand the opportunities and challenges faced by high achieving students in Laguna Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), LCC developed a learner experience survey, examined relevant findings, and conducted empathy interviews with current 11th and 12th grade students, alumni, and LBUSD staff. This initiative gathered valuable insights from students, alumni, staff, and families with the aim of informing evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation that will equitably support all learners. Throughout this process, LCC and LBUSD operated with an awareness that “high achieving student” can be defined in numerous ways; therefore, the data collected in this project allows for the analysis of traditional as well as more personalized and learner-centered definitions of high achieving students .

In this report, we summarize the process by which we gathered and analyzed community members' perspectives and share high-level findings based on common themes and trends that emerged. The insights gained from this research will provide valuable guidance for LBUSD as it continues to work towards creating a more equitable and learner-centered education system.

Our Process

LCC conducted empathy interviews and surveys with current students, alumni, and staff to gather insights on the experiences of high achieving learners in LBUUSD. Key findings were synthesized from the interview and survey data.

Timeline

- Design Phase: September–October 2023
- Data Collection: October – December 2023
- Survey Deployment: November – December 2023
- Data Analysis: January – February 2023
- Synthesis and Staff Reporting: March 2024
- Summary of Findings Board Update: May 2024
- Presentation and Discussion with Laguna Beach Governing Board: September 2024



Our Findings: **Current Students**

Celebrating Unique Talents:

- Students and alumni report that their individual talents feel celebrated most in electives like arts, CTE, AER projects, clubs, and sports
- Their unique talents are recognized less in general requirement courses and in AP courses with “bell to bell” instruction

Adult Support:

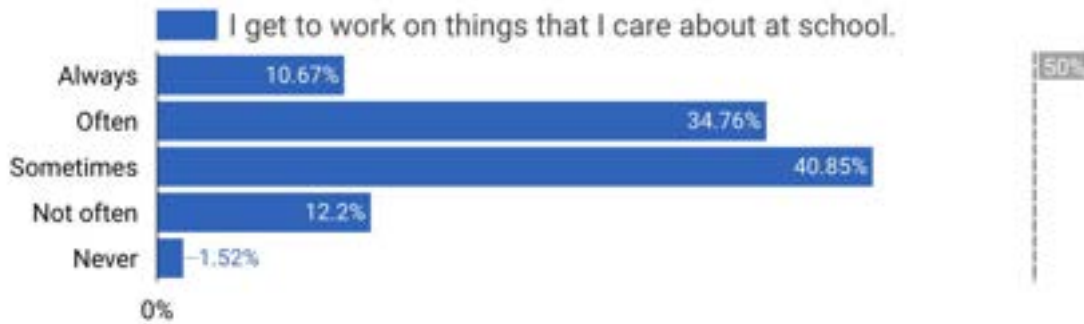
- **Reduced workload:** Many students felt overwhelmed by the amount of homework and overall workload from their classes.
- **Pacing:** Students requested that teachers assign less work, coordinate on timing of assignments and tests, and provide more time to work in class.
- **Balance and wellbeing:** Students said teachers needed to understand academic pressure in light of other activities, jobs, illness, and life events. They wanted adults to recognize signs of student stress and overload.
- **Work relevance:** Some students questioned the purpose of certain assignments, calling them busywork. They wanted work to feel meaningful and applicable to real world skills.

“Adults could help me out by understanding the stress and mental strain of school as it is not the only aspect of our lives. As well, teachers recognizing that the homework they assign us is on top of other homework from other classes, not just theirs, would be very helpful.”

Our Findings: Current Students

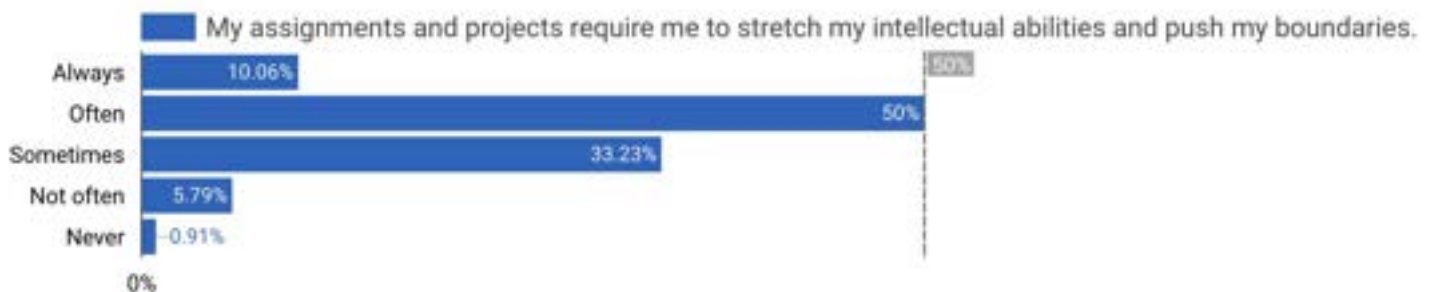
What's Working Well:

- **Teachers and staff:** Students overwhelmingly praised the quality of teachers, saying they are caring, passionate, understanding, helpful, and that they make learning engaging. Students feel comfortable approaching teachers.
- **Social connections:** Many students said their social life and connections with friends are working well. Some cited the general sense of community at the school.
- **Classes and curriculum:** On the whole, students reported that they are enjoying their classes, especially electives related to their interests.



Suggestions for Improvement:

- Reduce test stacking, homework not aligned to learning goals, and uncoordinated projects
- Offer more class options between AP and general requirements
- Provide time management, study skills instruction, and planning time skill building
- Personalize class assignments based on student interests when possible



Bright Spots: Students

- Supportive community
- Relationships with adults
- Small class sizes
- College & career center
- Flexibility and creativity in some classes, especially electives and real-world experiences
- Tutorial choice

“One thing that is helping my school experience is to be more included in school activities. There are more activities happening in the quad that help me connect more with my peers.”

Our Findings: Current Students

Summary

The current students at Laguna Beach High School reported varied experiences with workload manageability, ranging from heavy and overwhelming to manageable, busy, or light, depending on factors such as the number of AP classes taken, extracurricular commitments, personal priorities, and time management skills. Students expressed that the weighted GPA system creates pressure to take AP classes, which can make the workload feel too heavy, with no middle ground options. They also feel that their unique talents are most celebrated in electives and in real-world experience, but not in general requirements and AP classes.

When comparing outcomes between GATE-identified and non-GATE-identified students, there was no significant difference in responses, except when it related to balance between students' academic workload and personal lives. In this area, 38.47% of GATE-identified students reported feeling this balance "never" or "not often" while just 20.29% of the non-GATE-identified students answered "never" or "not often" for the same question.

In regards to the level of rigor in the LBHS student experience, the high percentage of respondents who reported experiencing assignments and projects that require them to stretch their intellectual abilities and push their boundaries (93.29% responded "sometimes," "often," "always") aligns with the results of the '23-'24 LBUSD Annual Stakeholder Survey, in which middle and high school students agreed that they regularly participate in challenging learning opportunities (76% agree with 13% neutral) and relevant learning opportunities (80% agree with 11% neutral). When considering rigor, student requests for more "meaningful and applicable" learning experiences can also be seen as an opportunity to provide the accountability and rigor that is built into relevant, real-world learning experiences with authentic audiences.

Our Findings: **Current Students**

Summary Continued

Overall, students called for adults to take on a more supportive role in helping them balance wellbeing with academic success - being responsive when students show signs of being overloaded, offering flexibility when possible, and assigning work that contributes to real skill development.

Despite some challenges, students acknowledged many aspects of their experience that are working well, such as tutorial choices, a supportive community, small class sizes, and the college/career center. To improve their experience, students suggest reducing test stacking, ensuring homework is aligned with learning goals, offering more coordinated projects, providing more class options, teaching time management and study skills, and personalizing class assignments based on student interests when possible.

Our Findings: Alumni

Alumni Dashboard

Workload/Stress Levels:

- LBUSD graduates felt the workload ranged between Rigorous and Manageable, depending on the number of AP classes taken, extracurriculars, jobs, and lack of time management skills. On the whole, alums viewed their high school workload as more manageable than current LBUSD students do



Importance of Relaxing/Not Comparing:

- Graduates wish they knew how important it was to relax and not constantly compare grades/achievement to others. The competitive culture made this difficult.

“Reflecting more on self-achievement rather than comparing myself to others has been the most important skill I’ve gained since graduation.”

Our Findings: Alumni

Valuable Skills That Have Been Applied Since Graduation:

- Writing skills, evidence-based analysis, science skills, time management, self-reflection/achievement tracking have been the most valuable after high school.



Differences in Experiences:

- Experiences varied greatly based on factors like number of extracurriculars, course load, motivation levels of individual students etc. Not all students felt overwhelmed or highly engaged.



Bright Spots: Alumni

- Upon reflection, alumni identified writing skills, evidence-based analysis, science skills, time management, and self-reflection as integral skills developed at LBHS that are used today
- Alumni reported the ability to set and steadily work toward a goal as a positive outcome of managing the academic and social schedule of high school
- Social connections, school sponsored activities, and a supportive environment were highlights of alumni reflections

“Being able to immerse myself in clubs and activities on campus is still my favorite aspect of LBHS. We had so many opportunities to engage with each other and with staff, and I think that was the best part of my experience at the high school.”

Our Findings: Alumni

Summary:

Alumni from LBUSD discussed both positive and stressful aspects of their high school experience. A number of respondents felt that the workload was overwhelming and a cause of stress, with factors such as the number of AP classes, extracurricular activities, jobs, and lack of time management skills contributing to this stress. In retrospect, graduates wish they had known how important it was to relax and not constantly compare their grades and achievements to others, as the competitive culture made this difficult.

When reflecting on the most valuable skills gained from their high school experience, alumni identified writing skills, evidence-based analysis, science skills, time management, and self-reflection/achievement tracking as the most useful in their post-graduation lives. However, graduates also noted that their experiences at LBUSD varied greatly based on factors such as the number of extracurricular activities, course load, and individual motivation levels, with not all students feeling overwhelmed or highly engaged.

Many graduates expressed that they wished they had focused more on self-growth rather than comparisons during their time at LBUSD. Despite some challenges, alumni gained valuable skills and perspective on striking a life balance moving forward.

Our Findings: Staff

Workload and stress for students:

- Staff concur with the findings that student workload can be heavy, overwhelming, manageable, busy, or light depending on factors such as number of AP/honors classes, extracurriculars, personal learning style and emotional state.
- Staff acknowledge that a lack of coordination around tests and assignments leads to stress when everything piles up at once and understand why students want more coordination.
- Staff expressed concern that some students over-extend with too many advanced classes due to expectations and pressure.
- Staff note that projects that take place after AP exams often feel like busy work rather than meaningful engagement.

Staff Self-Identified Priorities: Personalized & Authentic Learning

- Make learning relevant by connecting schoolwork to students' lives and interests. Ask what matters to them.
- Have students and teachers from different disciplines collaborate more - "dream sessions."
- Offer more choices including start times, test scheduling, project options, electives. Amplify student voice, choice, and agency.
- Assess learning in more authentic ways, not just tests.

"More and more teachers are actually asking what matters to their students and expecting them to formulate their own questions - they're important partners."

Bright Spots: Staff

- Positive student-teacher relationships
- Strong college and career support
- Integrated course options
- Extra help through tutorials and academic support.
- Performing arts, electives and CTE classes allow students' unique talents to shine. Students want more flexibility earlier to take these specialty classes.
- Some teachers incorporate student voice, choice, and relevance within core academic classes through topics of interest, student questions, etc. But this is inconsistent.

"Prioritizing those personal connections and making sure every learner has an adult that knows them in some way"

Our Findings: Staff

Summary

Staff at Laguna Beach High School reported that students' workload and stress levels vary depending on factors such as the number of AP/honors classes, extracurricular activities, personal learning styles, and emotional states. They expressed concern about the lack of coordination around tests and assignments, which can lead to increased stress, and noted that some students may overextend themselves by taking too many advanced classes.

Staff identified opportunities for personalized learning, such as allowing students to explore their unique talents through electives and incorporating student voice and choice within core classes, but noted that these practices are inconsistent. They also mentioned that standardized testing lacks relevance and demotivates students.

Despite these challenges, staff recognized the school's strengths, including strong college and career support, positive student-teacher relationships, and extra help through tutorials. To improve, staff suggested making learning more relevant, fostering collaboration between students and teachers from different disciplines, offering more choices in scheduling and coursework, and assessing learning in more authentic ways.

Recommended Next Steps

Learner Identified:

- Offer more relevant, real-world projects and learning experiences
- Reducing test stacking – coordinate tests and major assignments
- Ensure homework is clearly aligned with learning goals and that this alignment is transparently communicated with students (share the why behind the work)
- Ensure that gen ed courses offer the rigor and relevance that will make them as appealing as AP courses
- Offer instruction in time management and study skills to all students
- Personalize class assignments based on student interests
- Eliminate GPA ranking system

Staff Identified:

- Make learning relevant by connecting schoolwork to students' lives and interests.
- Offer interdisciplinary learning experiences – "dream sessions."
- Offer more student voice and choice, including start times, test scheduling, project options, electives.
- Assess learning in more authentic ways, not just tests.