

Cultivating World-class Thinkers

Technology, partnerships, enhanced instruction, and 21st century skills are part of this school district's effort to prepare students for a global worldview, explains Dr. James Lee.



Arizona's Paradise Valley Unified School District (PV Schools) won't be satisfied with just a little improvement. The district's stated goal is "to cultivate, lead, and inspire world-class, innovative thinkers and expert communicators." Through targeted investments and ambitious goal setting, Dr. James Lee, superintendent, believes the district is positioned to do just that.

"By creating a thorough long-range plan, we set a path for students and teachers so they know exactly what needs to be learned as it pertains to the standards and assessment tools to monitor individual student growth on a regular basis," he said.

The seventh-largest school district in Arizona with 45 schools and 33,500 K-12 students, its goal is to foster expertise in 21st century skills in all students. Educational programs include international baccalaureate, core knowledge, science, technology, engineering, math, global geography, fine arts, career and technical education, as well as state-of-the-art media centers, a digital learning center for gifted students, before- and after-school programs, sports, and extracurricular activities.

Pointing the way

PV Schools is now implementing a long-range planning program called *Compass 2015*. *Compass 2015*, which stands for Centered on Measures Positioning all Students for Success, is the framework for a plan that is setting goals, identifying success indicators, and establishing implementation strategies in all instructional programs at all schools and business operations.

Created by a district design team and planning committee, all stakeholders had a hand in crafting the initiative. The school district's cabinet and the presidents of the Paradise Valley Education Association, Paradise Valley Support Employee Association, Paradise Valley Principals, Central Office Administrators, and United Parent Council were part of the design team. The planning committee was co-chaired by the district's assistant superintendents and consisted of teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and community members. Unlike most planning



documents, *Compass 2015* is presented as an interactive digital plan that includes streaming video components to highlight school strategies.

The plan targets three key areas: instruction, human resources, and operations. Regarding instruction, the goal is to improve instruction and learning in ways that enhance student success, reduce failure, and prepare students for the future. The human resources goal hinges on improving and adapting instructional practices and learning environments, while the operations goal is to focus the use of district operational resources on ways that maximize opportunities for student success.

The goals are simply stated and broad, but *Compass 2015* lays out pathways to turn those goals into reality. During the next five years, the district's targets include employing a balanced assessment system for the design and alignment of curriculum, altering instruction and improving its ability to evaluate

and increase student progress, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of hiring and retention processes, and expanding coordination of operational efforts to upgrade fiscal oversight.

At its core, the plan emphasizes student success through improved classroom instruction and new approaches to teaching. By 2015, Lee thinks the PV Schools will achieve a standard of excellence that will establish it as a national leader for setting a high bar for student achievement, preparing students for a productive and successful professional life, and creating a sense of civic pride and global responsibility.

“Having defined our vision and mission, we can work on changing the way we do things to better prepare our students for their college and career pursuits,” Lee said. “We will engage students in their education through technology, but we must also ensure the effectiveness of teachers because teacher effectiveness and relationships with students are critical when it comes to improving achievement.”

Focus on 21st century skills

In all instruction, the district incorporates the skills students will need as the century progresses, such as the ability to persuade, explain, and convey particular interpretations of data; digital literacy; global mindedness; the ability to work well with others; and empathy, conflict resolution, and integrity.

“Just memorizing facts will not be enough,” Lee said. “We must challenge students to engage using 21st century skills and content.”

To support development of those skills, PV Schools invested heavily in programs and technology. The digital learning center for the highly gifted opened at Sunrise Middle School. A new science specialty school, the Center for Research in Engineering, Science, and Technology, opened in 2010 on the Paradise Valley High School campus. The district’s pvONLINE virtual campus offers courses in all levels of math, geometry, algebra, biology, English, American history, and American government. The online offerings will continually expand to offer courses in all grade levels.

The importance of technology is vital to learning. The district’s TelePresence system allows for collaboration with scientists and researchers throughout the nation and world. Powered by Cisco and broadcast over the National LambdaRail network, TelePresence connects district students and teachers with world class institutions.



As the first K-12 system to join the LambdaRail, the district hosted the first-ever international TelePresence conference that included the participation of universities like Duke and Harvard. At Shadow Mountain High School, 300 district students are helping the Federation of American Scientists beta test 3D educational

simulation software. At Pinnacle Peak Elementary, students explore new ideas on district-owned iPads in the iMaginarium, a work-play suite created by a team of administrators, teachers, and parents.

PV Schools continues to expand already-solid community and business partnerships. In addition to Cisco and TelePresence, current partnerships include Cox Communications, the Musical Instrument Museum of Scottsdale, and a \$3.2 million city of Phoenix investment in the Center for Research, Engineering, Science, and Technology. The district is a key member of the Minority Student Achievement Network. The district’s Hispanic students represent one-fourth of total enrollment.

District efforts are already bearing fruit with 22 schools performing at high standards. The district has no underperforming schools. National and local media have taken notice. *Newsweek* ranks Pinnacle, North Canyon, and Horizon high schools among the top nine public high schools in Arizona. Horizon earned a silver medal from *US News & World Report* for college readiness. *Phoenix* magazine named Explorer Middle School as best school for technology and Grayhawk Elementary School as a top academically performing school.

Most impressive is the district’s ability to realize achievements amid significant state budget cuts and to win voter-approved overrides and bond issues in a challenging economic environment. In November 2009, voters approved a \$4.9 million maintenance and operations override, and PV Schools has been careful with discretionary funds. Challenges remain, but Lee believes ongoing initiatives, coupled with *Compass 2015*, will allow the district to realize its goals.

“We are competitive by nature, and I believe we have the best educational product out there. Our biggest challenge is what I call the river of educational nostalgia. In many ways, we are swimming against a current that is determined to provide education the same way it has been done for years,” said Lee. “But courage, innovation, and persistence will allow us to make significant changes in the way we deliver instruction because it is what our students need to be successful.” ♦

—Eric Slack