



Designing System Coherence

Leadership, and Learning in Paradise Valley
Unified School District, Arizona





Executive Summary

Paradise Valley Unified School District (PVSchools), located in Phoenix, Arizona, offers a compelling example of **dynamic systemness**—intentionally designed to be focused and flexible, strategic and relational, structured and responsive. This is not a district simply managing schools and programs, but one where alignment, trust, and continuous learning are core operating principles.

School systems that invest in relational infrastructure, strong leadership, and collaborative practices are better positioned to navigate complexity, improve outcomes and adapt in real time. PVSchools exemplifies this systems-based approach, demonstrating how coherence can be sustained—not just planned—through deliberate design, shared purpose, and everyday practice.

Serving approximately 27,000 students across 45 schools, PVSchools shifted from a site-based governance model to a more unified, whole-of-system identity. Historically, the district emphasized decentralized decision-making and school-level autonomy. But about five years ago, district leaders initiated a strategic transition—anchoring local flexibility within a shared district vision and clear set of priorities. This shift was driven by growing recognition that variation across schools was leading to inequities in student experience and limiting opportunities for system-wide improvement. In response, PVSchools moved beyond a support-and-compliance role toward a model rooted in strategic direction, relational leadership, and ongoing capacity-building.

Using interviews, surveys, and a participatory system mapping process, this study explored three key questions:

- How does PVSchools maintain coherence across district priorities while enabling site-level flexibility and innovation?
- What structures and practices support leadership development as a system function?
- How do relationships, feedback loops, and collaborative routines enable continuous system learning and responsiveness?

Throughout our research, a consistent, deeply human story emerged. Across roles and levels, people in PVSchools express a strong sense of shared investment in the system. Leaders, educators, and staff uniformly describe feeling part of something larger than their individual schools—connected to a broader mission and committed to the success of all students, in every school.

Dynamic Systemness and Four Key Drivers

PVSchools sustains coherence across a large, diverse district through four interdependent drivers that shape the capacity to learn, adapt, and improve over time:

- 1 Relational infrastructure grounded in trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility
- 2 Leadership development as an integrated district function
- 3 Collaborative practices that reinforce continuous feedback and cross-role coordination
- 4 Innovation enabled by flexible policies and a culture of learning

PVSchools's strength lies not in eliminating tensions, but in surfacing them, learning from them, and adapting in real time. Its coherence is not a fixed state, but a constantly negotiated process—sustained through the everyday practices of people who feel responsible not just for their role, but for the system as a whole. By reinforcing relationships over rigid hierarchy, alignment over fragmentation, and continuous learning over compliance-driven implementation, PVSchools has cultivated the responsiveness and resilience needed to navigate complexity. As districts nationwide confront growing uncertainty, PVSchools offers a hopeful model—showing that public education systems can evolve and improve by investing in the people, structures, and cultures that sustain them.

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What's Inside

1 Introduction: Understanding PVSchools Through a Systems Lens

The System Under Study: PVSchools

Theoretical Framework

Why This Study Matters

Methodology

5 Key Findings

Dynamic Systemness in PVSchools

Driver #1: Relationships as the Infrastructure of Coherence

Driver #2: Leadership as a Lever for System Coherence

Driver #3: Collaborative Structures Supporting a Responsive System

Driver #4: Innovation as a System Design Feature in PVSchools

23 Conclusion: A Case of Dynamic Systemness

24 Future Direction

25 References

26 Appendix

Results on Arizona State Data

Stanford Education Opportunity Project Data

Classroom Teacher Retention Data



Introduction: Understanding PVSchools Through a Systems Lens

Systems literature suggests that the fundamental unit of analysis in education is not the individual part, but the relationships between parts. Schools do not function in isolation, and neither do the policies, teams, or people within them. Instead, school systems are composed of nested and interdependent components: central offices, school leadership teams, professional development networks, teacher collaboration groups, and community input mechanisms. Each part shapes—and is shaped by—the others. The complexity of such systems demands more than technical solutions; it requires relational trust, adaptive leadership, and responsive structures that enable the system to continuously learn, adapt, and evolve.

Paradise Valley Unified School District (PVSchools) offers a compelling example of systemness in action. PVSchools has moved beyond managing isolated initiatives to intentionally cultivating a coherent learning system—one capable of navigating complexity and leading systemic improvement over time. Its approach demonstrates that coherence¹ can be built not by enforcing uniformity, but through deliberate system design and investment in the relationships, leadership capacity, and learning structures that sustain continuous improvement. PVSchools's systemness lies in its ability to balance coherence and flexibility, structure and autonomy, strategy and relationships—continuously evolving to meet the needs of all learners.

The System Under Study: PVSchools

Located in the northeastern corridor of Phoenix, Arizona, PVSchools serves approximately 27,000 students across 45 schools that span suburban neighborhoods, urban density, and rapidly growing residential areas. The district reflects significant socioeconomic diversity: some schools serve communities with fewer than ten percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, while others exceed ninety-eight percent.²

Within this complex landscape, PVSchools's governance model has evolved significantly. Historically, the district emphasized site-based decision-making and school-level autonomy. However, about five to six years ago, PVSchools began a deliberate shift toward a more unified,

1. Coherence is framed as a dynamic process that emphasizes the integrated and interconnected relationships across components in a way that mutually reinforces shared understanding and progress toward goals. This concept is related to, but not the same as, alignment, which refers to the consistency and fit between various components.

2. [Free and Reduced-Price Percentage Report](#)

system-wide identity—anchoring local flexibility within a shared strategic vision. This change was driven by a growing recognition that wide variation across schools was producing inequities in student experience and missed opportunities for system learning. District leaders saw the need to move beyond a support-and-compliance role and toward a model of strategic leadership and coherence-building.

This mirrors a growing body of research that positions districts not merely as operational units, but as key drivers of coherence, equity, and continuous improvement (Honig 2022; O'Day and Smith 2019). In PVSchools, this shift has not meant abandoning local autonomy, but rather embedding it within a coherent system that ensures every school is working toward common goals while adapting to local needs.

A look at recent data offers insight into how the district is navigating this complexity. As of 2024, 21 district schools are rated A, 14 are rated B, and 3 are rated C by Arizona's accountability framework. English Language Arts outcomes have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, and mathematics performance has slightly surpassed 2019 benchmarks. Beyond academic metrics, PVSchools demonstrates strong system health through educator retention, with new teacher retention at 90.3% in 2023–24 and projected to reach 95% in 2024–25 (see appendix A). These trends are supported by intentional leadership development pipelines, embedded professional learning, and a culture of relational trust. The district has also expanded partnerships with local industries and higher education institutions, increasing opportunities for real-world learning and workforce readiness.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the foundational work of scholars such as Honig (2022) and O'Day and Smith (2019), who conceptualize coherence not as a static, predetermined state but as an evolving and negotiated process that is focused on shared goals. In their view, coherence is crafted dynamically through adaptive leadership, structured feedback loops, and collective sense-making within shared learning routines. Highlighting the central role of leadership in enabling coherence, Leithwood's (2019) extensive research underscores how strong working conditions and distributed leadership contribute to system-wide effectiveness and improved student learning.

We also draw on the insights of Daly and Finnigan (2011, 2014), whose research highlights how relational networks within school systems function as essential conduits for the flow of information, knowledge sharing, and professional support. These social ties facilitate continuous improvement and innovation, enabling adaptive responses to complex educational challenges.

Additionally, we are informed by the works of Gates (2017, 2021) and Schwandt (2014), who apply complexity theory and systems thinking to the evaluation of educational systems. Finally, the NCEE Blueprint: Designing Systems That Work (2024) shapes our perspective by emphasizing that high-performing systems maintain a relentless focus on coherence—aligning key functions to move in the same direction, reinforcing one another to build shared understanding and drive systemic progress toward the system goals.

In PVSchools, coherence reflects these perspectives—emerging not from mandates, but from the recursive alignment of people, priorities, and practices through continuous dialogue and adaptive learning.

Why This Study Matters

This work sits at the intersection of educational leadership, policy implementation, and systems research. It investigates how a district like PVSchools prioritizes coherence within a complex context, supports professional growth as a system function, and adapts to meet the needs of its diverse learners.

Specifically, it asks:

- How does PVSchools maintain dynamic coherence across its strategic initiatives while allowing for local flexibility and fostering innovation throughout the system?
- What mechanisms and structures support leadership development at all levels, enabling leaders and educators to contribute to—and grow with—the broader system?
- How do relational networks, trust-based relationships, and feedback loops facilitate continuous system learning, adaptation, and innovation across the district?

This study highlights PVSchools’s systems stance—one that privileges interrelationships over isolated components, coherence over compliance, and learning over linear implementation. PVSchools is a rich case for understanding how public education systems can function as agile, coherent learning environments—where systemness is not just designed but lived.



Methodology

This study applies a systems evaluation lens, using a mixed-methods approach to deeply understand the system dynamics of PVSchools. Methods included qualitative interviews, a structured survey, and a participatory system mapping exercise—capturing multiple perspectives and enabling triangulation of findings.

Qualitative Interviews

- 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes.
- Participants included central office administrators and school principals.
- Interview questions focused on perceptions on system coherence, alignment between district policies and school practices, relational dynamics, leadership development practices, and the role of feedback in system learning.
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis across four domains: system interdependence, leadership capacity, change dynamics, and learning systems.

Quantitative Survey

- Administered electronically to all school-level leadership staff including principals, assistant principals, and Teachers on Assignment (TOAs), achieving a 75% response rate.
- Survey items assessed the quality and impact of interactions between central office and school staff, alignment of professional development with strategic initiatives, perceptions of leadership support, and effectiveness of feedback mechanisms.
- Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns and validate qualitative themes.

System Mapping Exercise³

- Conducted a three-hour participatory system mapping session with district leadership and representative principals.
- Visualized connections, tensions, and leverage points between district-level strategy and school-level realities.
- Identified key feedback loops, leverage points, and areas for strategic improvement.

Triangulation and Validation

Findings from qualitative interviews, survey data, and system mapping were cross-analyzed to confirm and enrich themes. Consistency across data sources reinforced the credibility of findings and surfaced critical areas for strategic action.

3. This in-person experience was facilitated by colleagues from the Center for the Future of Arizona, NCEE's partner in the state.



Key Findings

The interviews, surveys, and a participatory system mapping process revealed how PVSchools functions as a coherent learning system—intentionally designed to be flexible, responsive and adaptable. This overarching dynamic systemness is sustained not by top-down mandates, but through four interdependent drivers that shape the district’s capacity to adapt and improve over time:

- relationships as the infrastructure of coherence, enabling trust, alignment, and shared ownership across roles and levels;
- leadership as a system function, cultivated through purposeful pipelines, transformative learning, and distributed practice;
- collaborative structures that embed feedback, reflection, and cross-role coordination into the fabric of the district; and
- innovation as a design feature, supported by flexible policies, professional trust, and a culture of continuous learning.

The following sections go through the key findings in more detail.

Dynamic Systemness in PVSchools

PVSchools demonstrates many characteristics of a dynamic learning system—intentionally designed, relationally grounded, and continuously evolving. Its systemness is not defined by rigid uniformity, but by a shared sense of purpose, strong cross-level relationships, and adaptive practices that respond to the diverse needs of its students and schools.

At the core of PVSchools’s approach is a deep commitment to coherence. Coherence is treated not as uniformity but as purposeful connectedness—a shared language, direction, and learning culture that links efforts across the system. Strategic initiatives serve as anchors, but they are implemented with flexibility at the school level. Coherence is continuously negotiated between central direction and site-level discretion, sustained through relationships and reflection focused on common goals.

The district’s four strategic initiatives—MTSS, PBIS, PLC+, and STEAM⁴—are “the cornerstone of our efforts to ensure that all students have the resources and supports they need to succeed,”

4. MTSS-Multi-Tiered System of Supports; PBIS-Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; PLC+-Professional Learning Communities (with a focus on building educator expertise) and STEAM-Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math interdisciplinary approach.



according to the district website. Crucially, this framing is not merely rhetorical. Interviews and survey data consistently reinforce that these initiatives are interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and integral to the larger vision for student success. Collectively, they create unified priorities across grade levels and roles, which are intentionally embedded in strategic plans, school-level goals, professional learning systems, and instructional frameworks—forming the backbone of PVSchools’s system design.

One district director explained,

| *“Now there’s a strategic plan and the four priorities and they all fit together.”*

Another emphasized,

| *“Everything our PD team plans connects to the four initiatives—it’s what the schools and the district are all focused on.”*

Consistent with findings from O’Day and Smith (2019), these perspectives illustrate a deliberate district-wide effort to ensure that all parts of the system fit together and are moving in the same direction. As a high school leader put it,

| *“My site-level success plan maps directly to these initiatives and our quarterly progress checks are grounded in them... it has brought such focus and alignment.”*

As described in its tight-loose-tight model, PVSchools’s coherence balances clear expectations around the four initiatives with school-level flexibility to tailor implementation strategies to their unique contexts. As one district leader described,

| *“Here are the four things you’re gonna do... How you do them is up to you.”*

This emphasis on site-based ownership is echoed by school leaders, as one high school principal explained:

| *“Even within our three high schools, we’ve each adapted them slightly differently because our populations are so different.”*

Another framed it as “top-down clarity with local flexibility.” This perspective was reinforced in survey results as seen below.

“The district’s policies and practices are flexible enough to support diverse approaches to achieving common goals.”

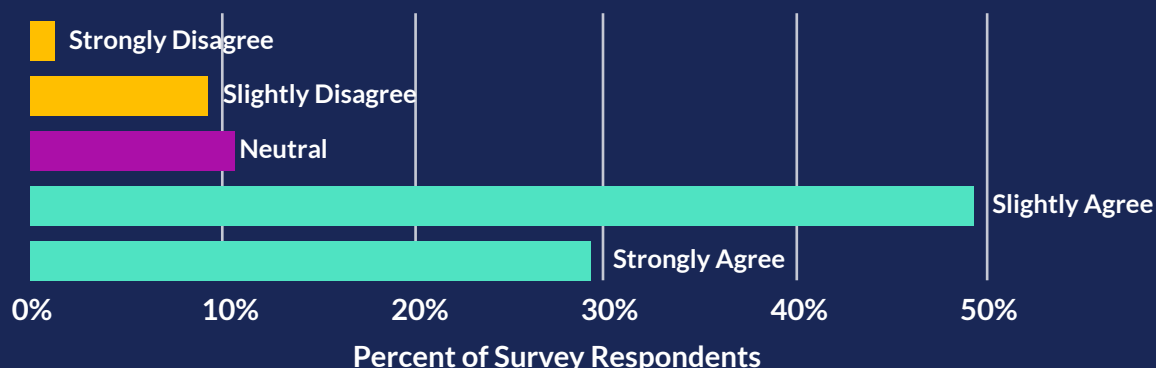


Figure 1. Survey results from school-level leadership staff including principals, assistant principals, and Teachers on Assignment (TOAs).

Importantly, this autonomy is paired with meaningful support. Schools are not left to navigate complexity alone. A robust network of curriculum specialists, PD facilitators, and instructional mentors works directly with school teams to interpret initiatives, tailor strategies, and build implementation capacity. These roles serve as bridges between district vision and local enactment, reinforcing coherence while honoring local needs.

Relational trust is the foundation that enables alignment and adaptation to happen without centralized micromanagement. In PVSchools, trust is built through accessibility, consistency, and genuine partnership, and is described as a cultural norm rather than an initiative. Leaders across the system feel psychologically safe to ask for help, take risks, and voice concerns. A strong sense of shared responsibility and system identity—reinforced by leadership pipelines, alumni presence, and collaborative norms—fosters continuity over time.

Adaptive leadership is the dynamic force that keeps the system responsive to complexity. Leaders are not compliance officers—they are sense-makers, bridge-builders, and learning facilitators. Assistant superintendents are described as coaches and thought partners, helping school leaders navigate ambiguity, sustain momentum, and continuously align their work with the district’s broader vision.

PVSchools’s coherence does not rely on goodwill alone—it is supported by intentional structures that hold the work together. Regular principal meetings, leadership feedback loops, and cross-functional committees reinforce shared understanding and continuous sense-making. Curriculum and professional development structures are tightly aligned to district goals while remaining responsive to site-specific needs. Even innovation efforts are structured through flexible evaluation processes, co-designed technology integration, and formal avenues for student input.

Together, these embedded structures ensure that system learning and improvement are not episodic events, but part of the everyday functioning of the district. PVSchools exemplifies a system that learns as it leads—continuously interpreting, adapting, and refining its practices in response to real-time needs, sustaining coherence through relationships, reflection, and responsive action.

Evolving Through System Challenges

While PVSchools's systemness is intentional and supported by strong relational and structural foundations, it remains a work in progress. Leaders acknowledge that coherence is not a fixed achievement but a continuous negotiation between central direction and school-level discretion, stability, and adaptation.

- **Initiative Overload and Sequencing Pressures**

A common concern among school leaders is the challenge of simultaneously implementing multiple strategic initiatives—MTSS, PBIS, PLC+, and STEAM. While these initiatives are seen as aligned and mutually reinforcing, their concurrent rollout has raised some concerns about pacing and capacity. One principal remarked, “I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wish I got them one at a time.” Other principals praised the initiatives but noted that rollout pacing could be overwhelming. This tension surfaced in both interviews and survey responses, particularly related to professional learning. Some principals reported being tasked with leading implementation efforts before they themselves had received adequate preparation. Even with strong supports, leaders called for more deliberate sequencing and pacing to preserve depth and sustainable engagement.

- **Common Curriculum and Teacher Autonomy**

The district’s decision to implement a common, guaranteed, and viable curriculum has been generally well-received, providing greater clarity and support for teachers, as well as enabling more consistent cross-system data analysis and interpretation. However, ongoing tensions persist between some teachers’ preference for customizing instructional materials and the district’s emphasis on consistency—particularly to better support students who transfer between schools. PVSchools is working toward promoting curriculum fidelity alongside pedagogical autonomy, though fostering teacher buy-in for this balance remains an ongoing discussion in some schools.

- **Equity in Resource Allocation**

Another recurring tension concerns how resources are allocated across schools with varying needs. While PVSchools strives for fairness, some leaders expressed concern that staffing and support decisions do not fully account for the unique challenges of schools serving higher-needs populations. Survey respondents emphasized the need for a more differentiated resource strategy grounded in school-level data, demographic complexity, and targeted student needs.



- **Workforce Sustainability and Enrollment Decline**

Like many districts nationwide, PVSchools faces staffing challenges including teacher turnover, certification gaps, and burnout. While the district has launched creative solutions—such as the Aspire⁵ teacher preparation pipeline—these innovations also signal underlying strain. Externally, Arizona’s expanding school choice landscape has contributed to a significant decline in PVSchools’s enrollment—from approximately 33,000 to 27,000 students in recent years. This shift introduces both fiscal pressure and planning complexity, making it more difficult to maintain consistent supports and coherent programming across a shrinking and increasingly diverse system.

- **Leadership Continuity and Cultural Stability**

Recent superintendent turnover has introduced some uncertainty. While some interviewees expressed concern about potential disruption, others remained optimistic about new leadership. Notably, participants in the system mapping sessions emphasized that despite this turnover, neither the core policies nor the overarching vision and strategy have substantially changed.

Despite these pressures, PVSchools’s underlying system design remains resilient—structured to respond, not just react. A key takeaway from the system mapping session was that district policy is intentionally crafted to avoid being restrictive or rigid, enabling fluid responses to emerging needs. Structures like collaborative planning sessions, shared digital tools, and real-time data reviews help ensure that strategic goals remain responsive to school-level realities. MTSS, PBIS, and PLC+, for example, serve not only as technical frameworks but also as critical mechanisms for identifying and supporting students’ needs and development across multiple dimensions, particularly among underserved groups. As one school leader emphasized,

If ‘all means all,’ then what are we doing to support that child—either through their behavior or academics—through PBIS, MTSS?

An elementary principal shared how the integrated positioning of these initiatives helped transform MTSS at her site from a fragmented, inconsistent model into a coordinated, school-wide effort where her team now reviews a broad array of data on the “whole child,” making real-time connections to instruction and classroom supports through PLC discussions and evidence from PBIS.

Ultimately, PVSchools’s systemness lies in its ability to balance structure with autonomy, and strategy with flexibility. It nurtures the relationships, routines, and supports that enable ongoing learning and shared ownership. The result is a district not merely implementing reforms but cultivating an adaptive, interconnected learning system—one capable of evolving in service of all students.

5. PVSchools ASPIRE is a 2-year “in-house” program designed to give interested candidates the training and tools they need to advance their careers by earning an Arizona Teacher Certification in the area of Mild/Moderate Special Education.

Driver #1

Relationships as the Infrastructure of Coherence

One of the most powerful throughlines emerging from PVSchools is the centrality of relationships—not just between individuals, but across departments, roles, and system levels. In PVSchools, relational infrastructure is not peripheral—it is foundational. Relationships form the connective tissue that enables coherence, supports adaptive leadership, and sustains a shared commitment to student success. This section explores the district’s use of relational trust and collaboration as powerful levers for coherence.

Trust as a Foundation for Leadership and Learning

Trust runs through every layer of PVSchools—within schools, across schools, and between schools and the central office. Leaders across the system consistently describe an environment of psychological safety, where they feel supported in taking risks, navigating uncertainty, and seeking help without fear of judgment. This trust is not abstract; it is built through sustained presence, consistency, and shared purpose.

At the school level, principals highlight the strength of their relationships with staff—often individuals they personally hired—anchoring a strong sense of collective identity and commitment to students. One high school principal shared.

“I’ve hired just about everybody that works here. We look for specific characteristics—people who love kids and know this is a hard job.”

Just as crucial is the trust between school and district leadership. Principals describe assistant superintendents and cabinet members as accessible, responsive, and invested in their success. Said a high school principal,

“I trust [district leaders] implicitly. They are always looking to help me ... [The Assistant Superintendent] will physically come to the site more than anyone else ever has, just to sit down and talk about progress.”

This kind of presence builds confidence and opens space for collaborative problem-solving.

The strength of these relationships becomes especially apparent in moments of challenge. One principal reflected,

“They do a really good job of keeping me from losing it on occasion. When something bubbles up that’s hard to deal with ... having their support is crucial.”

Another added,

“It’s not usually pushback like ‘you can’t do this.’ It’s, ‘walk me through why you think this.’ Very annoying, but very, very productive.”

These reflections and the survey results below point to a district culture in which relational trust fosters not only emotional safety but intellectual partnership.

“Trust between district and school leaders supports innovative problem-solving.”

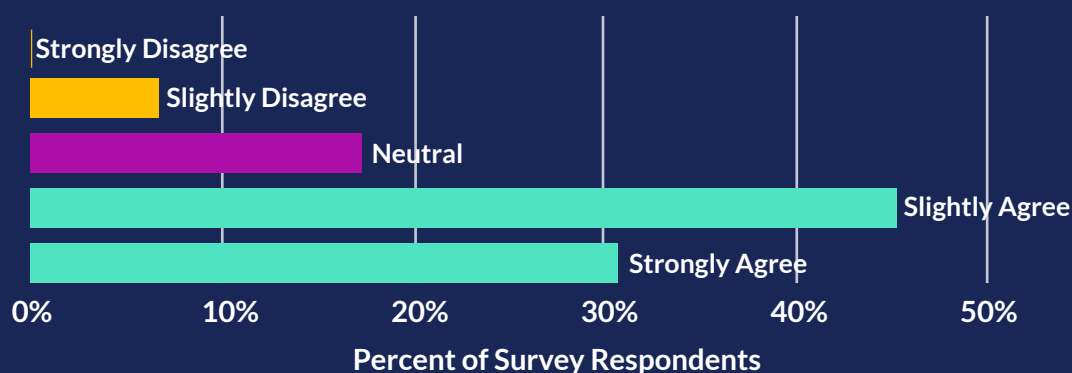


Figure 2. Survey results from school-level leadership staff including principals, assistant principals, and Teachers on Assignment (TOAs).

Collaboration as a Cultural Norm

Relational trust is accompanied by a deep culture of collaboration. Across interviews, district and school leaders describe PVSchools as a system where working together is the norm—not just within schools, but across schools and departments. Collaboration is not episodic or siloed; it is structural and cultural. One district leader reflected,

“Paradise Valley functions as a team. We work together. We don’t leave anybody behind. That’s the PV way—from the superintendent to the playground aide.”

This ethos is embedded in daily operations. Cross-departmental planning is routine, and district leaders emphasize inclusion and coordination. Noted one leader,

“I don’t even have to ask my directors to include others. I just ask, ‘What do they think about it?’ because I know they’ve already looped people in.”

The district’s culture is further strengthened by deep community ties. Many PVSchools educators and leaders attended district schools themselves, fostering lasting connections and a strong sense of belonging. Said a high school principal,

“We have close to 30 alumni working here. It’s like a club. That sense of pride and community runs deep.”

PVSchools’s coherence stems in large part from this investment in relationships. Trust and collaboration enable alignment through feedback, shared inquiry, and joint reflection—rather than through mandates or compliance. Research by Daly and Finnigan (2014) emphasizes the role of social networks in enabling system learning, and PVSchools exemplifies this insight. PVSchools educators describe robust peer networks, direct access to central office staff, and collaborative routines that reinforce a shared instructional focus.

Leadership in PVSchools is not confined to positional authority—it is exercised through relationships that support collective sense-making. One principal explained,

“We’re researching problems of practice together. It’s not just for compliance—it’s so we can get better.”

Rather than receiving top-down directives, school leaders experience district leadership as a partnership rooted in curiosity, dialogue, and mutual learning.

In short, PVSchools operates not as a collection of disconnected units, but as a learning-oriented system in which relationships are both the medium and the mechanism of coherence. Trust and collaboration form the infrastructure that sustains alignment, enables innovation, and cultivates a system that is agile, responsive, and focused on continuous improvement—for both students and adults.



Driver #2

Leadership as a Lever for System Coherence

While relational infrastructure creates trusting networks, PVSchools's strategic investment in leadership ensures that people at all levels are equipped to guide improvement across contexts. Leadership development is not treated as a standalone initiative—it is a system function embedded within the district's structures, culture, and strategic vision. PVSchools's approach reflects a deep commitment to growing people as builders of the system, with leadership pathways that are intentional, learning opportunities that are robust, and support mechanisms embedded at every organizational level.

PVSchools invests deliberately in people—through leadership pipelines, transformative learning experiences, and distributed leadership. This approach ensures that leadership is not exercised solely by individuals, but embedded in the fabric of the organization.

Purposeful Pipelines: Growing Leaders from Within

At the center of PVSchools's leadership strategy is the AIM Program,⁶ a district-developed pipeline dedicated to identifying and cultivating aspiring leaders from within the system. Facilitated by assistant superintendents, AIM offers a year-long, immersive experience that exposes participants to the complexities of school leadership and the district's broader operational infrastructure. Participants gain practical knowledge through job-embedded experiences, book studies, guest speaker insights, and structured internships, all designed to build both system-level understanding and leadership readiness. As one district leader explained,

"The AIM program is really where we develop our leadership. It's learning about systems within Paradise Valley. ... many of our administrators, over 75%, came up grassroots through the AIM program."

This intentional cultivation of talent reflects the district's belief that effective leadership is rooted not just in role or title, but in deep contextual understanding and relationships built over time. By investing in leadership pipelines, PVSchools strengthens continuity, builds collective capacity, and reinforces system coherence.

Transformative Learning Experiences

Leadership development in PVSchools extends beyond formal preparation to include high-impact professional learning opportunities that shift mindsets and transform practice. One of the most widely praised offerings is BTO/ NISL,⁷ an NCEE offering that supports principals in adopting systems thinking and strategic leadership approaches. A middle school principal reflected:

"NISL was perhaps the best professional development I've received in my career ... It really allowed me to stop putting Band-Aids on things and look at systematic approaches."

6. The AIM Program is a district leadership initiative designed to prepare educators for administration roles.

7. NISL in Arizona is sponsored by the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA). It is known as BTO/NISL or Beat the Odds School Leadership Academy.

The impact of such learning is visible. One high school principal shared:

"We went from a C school to an A school because of some of the things I learned and implemented from NISL."

These experiences are more than skill-building—they support leaders in rethinking how to lead for improvement across complex systems. In addition, PVSchools invests in facilitative leadership training focused on shared decision-making and consensus building. A middle school principal reflected on the course and its impact:

"They provide new principals with this course that is focused on how we lead in a way that brings other people along and honors their feedback. You can go into an organization and make some changes quickly and have results that won't last because you are not bringing people along, you are not listening to the people."

These learning opportunities prepare school leaders to operate not only within their own sites but as contributors to the system as a whole, reinforcing broader district coherence.

This commitment to transformative learning experiences extends beyond traditional leadership roles. Through internal and external partnerships, the district provides open-access professional learning opportunities to staff across departments—including IT professionals, classified staff, and emerging leaders. A district leader shared:

"We have a partnership with Coursera... open to anybody in the district ... I completed project management, which helped me with big initiatives. We offer pathways and certifications ... like becoming Google Admins."

This democratized approach to development reflects a system-wide learning culture—one that values continuous improvement and distributed expertise at every level.

Leadership growth in PVSchools is embedded in daily routines, relational practices, and supervisory structures. Assistant superintendents play an active role in supporting principals and aspiring leaders through coaching-style supervision, data dialogue, and structured problem-solving. One interviewee shared:

"Our Assistant Supt. ... does problems of practice with his principal group ... I can accelerate that process and ensure the assistant principals are just as in the know as anybody else."

The district's approach blends structure and flexibility. While principal forums and district PD calendars provide shared learning opportunities, principals are also encouraged to pursue professional development aligned to their individual goals and school context. An elementary principal noted:

"If there's a PD I feel I need to go to, I can reach out ... and they're super supportive of providing that."

This responsiveness is reinforced by the district's broader leadership culture—one rooted in trust, accessibility, and partnership. Leaders describe district supervisors not as enforcers, but as coaches and collaborators. The "call anytime" ethos, coupled with consistent check-ins, creates the psychological safety necessary for learning and innovation.

Distributed Leadership as a Driver of System Coherence and Improvement

In PVSchools, these embedded supports not only strengthen individual leadership, but also enable leadership to be distributed across the system. Across interviews and in survey responses, distributed leadership emerged as a key feature of the district's organizational culture. Rather than concentrating decision-making authority narrowly at the top, leadership in PVSchools is intentionally shared among principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and staff. As a high-school principal noted, building strong site-based leadership teams is not just encouraged but expected:

"It's important to build a team of diverse people ... you want some fresh ideas, some new perspectives, someone with other skills. That helps you build a more balanced team and make better decisions."

An elementary principal emphasized that leadership is exercised through empowered collaboration at the school level, describing regular leadership team meetings where teachers and staff actively shape planning and goal-setting efforts. Similarly, a district leader observed that district leadership practices reflect an understanding that "leadership isn't just positional," but rather "distributed across the system," enabling more voices to shape decisions and ensuring that schools are not simply implementers of top-down mandates, but co-creators of district success. These perspectives highlight how PVSchools's approach to distributed leadership reinforces both system coherence and responsiveness, creating an environment where strategic direction and local innovation are mutually reinforcing, not in tension.



Driver #3

Collaborative Structures Supporting a Responsive System

Structures that Institutionalize Feedback

In PVSchools, feedback is not treated as a compliance mechanism—it is a core system function. Leaders across schools and the central office describe a culture where two-way communication, reflective practice, and shared problem-solving are structurally embedded into daily work.

Feedback is not only expected and valued—it is designed into policies, routines, and relationships that guide the district’s continuous improvement. One leader captured this ethos succinctly:

“If you have something to say or share, there are opportunities for everyone to have a voice and help shape decisions.”

This openness is reinforced by a “just pick up the phone” mentality, described not as a slogan but as a lived reality. As a high school principal shared:

“I feel very comfortable and supported ... I can just call one of them and be like, ‘I need help with this.’ They always come back with an answer.”

An elementary principal echoed,

“There is always someone I can call ... even on their personal time. And everybody’s willing to help.”

This accessibility creates psychological safety, ensuring that feedback flows naturally across roles and levels—not just through formal structures, but through trusting relationships.

Formal Structures for Collaboration

PVSchools has developed formal structures that make collaboration and shared learning a predictable, consistent part of professional life. At the horizontal level, monthly principal meetings organized by grade span (elementary, middle, and high school) create regular opportunities for reflection, learning, and collaborative problem-solving. These gatherings go beyond logistical updates; they provide space for authentic dialogue among schools facing similar challenges. Vertically, all-administrator meetings bring together leaders across K–12 to strengthen coherence across the system. These meetings help align strategies and expectations across grade spans, particularly within feeder patterns, ensuring continuity in student experience.

This layered meeting structure reflects PVSchools’s commitment to coherence—balancing strategic alignment with local adaptability. Crucially, this collaborative ethos extends into the instructional core. Teachers engage in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), cross-school partnerships, and peer observation cycles to reflect on student needs, analyze data, and adjust instruction accordingly. Informal networks and committee work further reinforce a professional culture rooted in mutual learning and continuous improvement.

Embedded Expertise to Bridge Strategy and Practice

A critical enabler of PVSchools's collaborative culture is its investment in embedded expertise. Curriculum specialists, professional development (PD) facilitators, and instructional mentors are not peripheral support staff—they are integral to the district's learning infrastructure. These individuals provide job-embedded, just-in-time support that translates district strategy into daily practice.

- **Curriculum specialists** ensure coherence across pacing guides, instructional materials, and frameworks, while also adapting resources to local school needs.
- **PD facilitators** co-design and deliver adult learning experiences with principals and teacher leaders, tailoring professional development to each context while reinforcing strategic priorities.
- **Mentors** onboard new teachers and new principals, support continuous reflective practice, and reinforce a culture of ongoing improvement across the district.

By embedding expertise at the school level, PVSchools accelerates learning, reinforces alignment, and strengthens the bridge between system-level vision and classroom-level action.

Stakeholder Input and Participatory Design

Participatory decision-making is another distinguishing feature of PVSchools's system. Teachers, principals, and community members regularly participate in stakeholder input committees that shape district policies and guide strategic decisions.



“There is open communication between school leaders and district administrators regarding new ideas and feedback.”

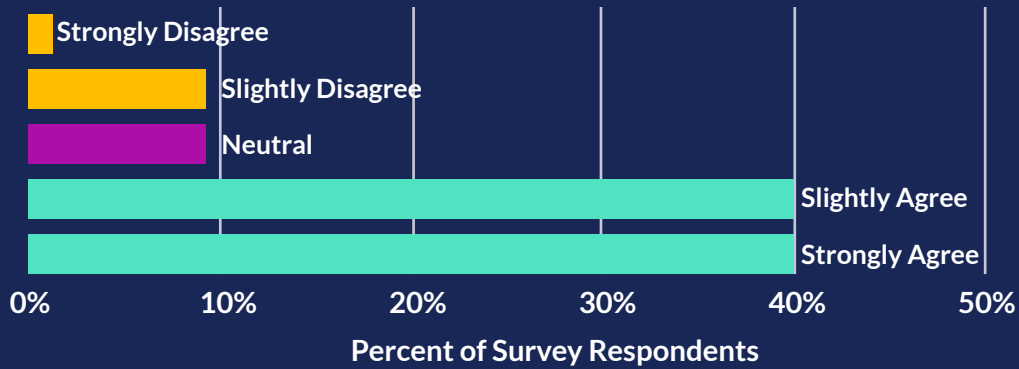


Figure 3. Survey results from school-level leadership staff including principals, assistant principals, and Teachers on Assignment (TOAs).

As one district leader explained,

“Every decision that’s made has stakeholder input committees.”

These committees connect perspectives across classrooms, departments, and leadership levels as well as different school communities, ensuring that policy is grounded in practitioner and community experience. Importantly, stakeholder voice is integrated into policy design, not just post-decision feedback. One leader illustrated this mindset:

“The Cabinet didn’t say, ‘No phones K–8 is a mandate.’ They said, ‘Have you talked to your Site Council?’ It’s embedded in the culture that we include people in shaping change.”

This commitment to shared ownership strengthens relational trust and ensures that decision-making reflects the needs and aspirations of those closest to the work. A middle school principal shared another example where educators from all over the district were invited to join committees that created rubrics tied to the district’s four initiatives.

Through layered structures for horizontal and vertical collaboration and feedback, embedded expertise, and participatory decision-making processes, the district cultivates a learning system that is continuously attuned to both strategic goals and school-level realities. By deliberately building structures that facilitate openness, reflection, and collective problem-solving, PVSchools strengthens system coherence while remaining responsive to complexity. Collaboration is not left to chance—it is woven into the fabric of how the system learns, adapts, and improves in service of all students.

Driver #4

Innovation as a System Design Feature in PVSchools

In PVSchools, innovation is not viewed as a fringe activity or the domain of a few risk-takers. It is embedded in the system's design and sustained by policy, professional trust, and a culture of continuous learning. Leaders across the district describe an environment where creative thinking is encouraged, experimentation is supported, and successful ideas are refined and scaled through collaboration.

Empowering Leaders and Teachers to Innovate

Innovation in PVSchools is supported by a district-wide culture of permission and encouragement. School leaders report feeling empowered to try new approaches and are intentional about passing that mindset on to their staff. One high school principal conveyed this perspective concisely:

"I feel like I have permission from my boss to be innovative and try new things. And so I pass that permission on to my teachers ... Try it. See how it works. Look at the data. How can you improve upon it?"

This culture of permission translates into tangible, student-centered innovations. At one high school, openness to new ideas led to the creation of integrated PE, art, and music classes where students with and without disabilities learn together. The principal shared that due to a significant shift in student demographics,

"We decided to start an integrated PE class, where we had each special needs student paired with a typical student. The best part was, we opened it up one day for registration, and we had to close it the next day, because we had so many typical students wanting to get into the class ... It was so successful that we expanded to art and music ... I find that my typical kids are better off because of it, too—they learn and show empathy ... they're just nice."

This initiative exemplifies inclusive innovation—where the benefits extend across student groups and strengthen school culture. It also illustrates PVSchools's belief that innovation is most powerful when it emerges from authentic needs and is refined through collective experience.

Another illustrative example comes from one of the district high schools, where the principal worked with district leadership to acquire a flight simulator for students pursuing aviation-related coursework. The idea began as a conversation about how to expand elective options that would excite students and align with workforce needs. District leaders were receptive and worked alongside the principal to secure resources and navigate logistics. The result was a hands-on, high-engagement learning opportunity that gave students real-world experience and certifications



Trust in educators and leaders empowered one PVSchools high school to redesign PE, art, and music as inclusive spaces where students with and without disabilities learn side by side.

and sparked increased interest in STEM pathways. This kind of innovation—grounded in student interest, made possible by district partnership, and aligned to broader learning goals—is emblematic of PVSchools’s approach to responsive system design.

New Ways to Organize Cross-Departmental Collaboration: IT + Curriculum

At the system level, PVSchools has made structural changes to foster innovation across departments. A notable example is the integration of the information technology team within the curriculum department—an organizational redesign that has improved coherence and strengthened the instructional impact of technology. As a Department Director explained:

“We don’t want technology seen as separate; we want to clearly demonstrate how it supports Tier 1 teaching. Professional development is tightly aligned with our core curriculum and the four strategic initiatives.”

Technology Integration Facilitators (TIFs) are strategically partnered with curriculum staff, reinforcing the idea that technology tools are not just “cool gadgets” but intentionally embedded supports designed to enhance teaching and learning. This integration has streamlined processes and fostered shared ownership of instructional resources. For instance, curriculum and IT teams now collaboratively vet digital resources through a shared dashboard. The director further elaborated,

“Previously, selecting technology resources was a free-for-all. Now, we have a unified vetting process between curriculum and IT, and teachers know they can use a single dashboard to access approved resources and understand why they were selected.”



Professional development is now collaboratively designed across departments, integrating digital tools into curriculum and instructional training rather than presenting them separately. This coordinated approach ensures that instructional technology innovation remains rooted in pedagogical intent, enhances instructional consistency, and aligns with district-wide learning goals.

Flexibility in Evaluation and Improvement

PVSchools’s approach to evaluation reflects its broader commitment to adaptability and system learning. The district retains control over its teacher and leader evaluation systems but revises them annually through a stakeholder-driven process. Within this framework, school principals have flexibility in selecting the specific tools they use. A range of options is available, allowing leaders to choose tools that align with their leadership style and their understanding of what will be most effective for the educators they are evaluating. A district leader commented:

"We make tweaks every year ... We want it to be flexible, not one-size-fits-all. Principals can use different tools depending on the teacher's experience or needs."

This flexibility allows the system to evolve in response to emerging needs and insights, reinforcing PVSchools's broader posture toward iterative improvement.

Academies and Pathways


PVSchools's commitment to student-centered innovation is evident in its move toward academy and pathway models—system-level structures that integrate student interests, real-world relevance, and future readiness into the high school experience. At several high schools, leaders described efforts to create "small learning communities" organized around themes such as business, engineering, health sciences, and the arts. These academies are designed to increase relevance, deepen engagement, and ensure students see a clear connection between their coursework and real-world applications. As one principal explained,

"We're really focusing on providing students with authentic experiences and exposure to careers—they're not just choosing electives; they're choosing a direction."

The approach is both student-centered and system-aligned: academies are supported by cross-departmental planning, community partnerships, and advisory structures that provide flexibility while maintaining coherence with district goals. By building structures that foster choice, purpose, and belonging, PVSchools is designing for long-term student success—not just in high school, but beyond graduation.

The district also actively engages external partners in its design processes. For example, a high school principal described how community input directly shapes curriculum decisions:

"We bring in 30 to 40 industry partners to review what we're teaching each year in our bioscience, engineering, and computer science strands. We've even changed software based on their feedback."



PVSchools intentionally involves community partners in shaping learning. One high school invites 30–40 industry experts to help review and refine the curriculum for bioscience, engineering, and computer science courses each year.

Fostering Innovative Peer Learning Among Teachers

A low-cost, high-impact innovation in PVSchools is the intentional support of peer learning among teachers. Principals facilitate informal observation opportunities, encouraging veteran teachers and early-career educators alike to learn from one another. An elementary leader said:

"Giving them suggestions about someone else in their department—like, 'Oh hey! So-and-so has a lot of great ideas ... let me know a day that you want to pop in and see what they're doing, and I'll come cover your class for you.'"

This approach supports culture-building, professional growth, and mutual respect across experience levels. It also reinforces PVSchools's belief that innovation often emerges through everyday collaboration—not just from formal programs, but from informal networks and shared curiosity.

Building on this foundation of peer-based learning, the district has also developed a more formal structure to support instructional reflection through live-streamed teaching sessions. PVSchools has equipped twelve classrooms across the district with high-resolution cameras, enabling real-time observation of master teachers in action. These master teachers—selected based on expertise, curricular fluency, and a willingness to share practice—model high-quality instruction aligned with district priorities. New and veteran teachers alike are invited to gather in the district’s Center for Teacher Development (CTD) lab, where they observe live lessons, analyze instructional moves with a facilitator, and engage in real-time debriefs with the observed teacher. This model supports deeper understanding of curriculum implementation and classroom strategy in a local, context-specific way. It reflects PVSchools’s belief that powerful professional learning is grounded not in abstract theory, but in authentic practice and shared reflection. As one district leader put it,

“We want teachers to see what good instruction looks like right here—in our classrooms, with our students, using our materials.”

In PVSchools, innovation is not an add-on. It is integrated into how the system works—through structures that promote collaboration, policies that allow for site-based flexibility, and relationships that build trust and support. Whether through integrated classrooms, cross-departmental partnerships or teacher-driven experimentation, innovation is sustained by the district’s capacity to align strategy with practice and vision with values. By making innovation part of the system’s daily function—not just its aspiration—the district ensures that innovation is not episodic, but enduring.

Twelve PVSchools classrooms now double as learning labs, live-streaming expert teaching to support professional growth districtwide.



A close-up photograph of a young man with dark hair, looking down with a thoughtful expression. He is wearing a brown sweater over a white collared shirt. The background is blurred, showing red and blue elements, possibly a classroom or school setting.

Conclusion: A Case of Dynamic Systemness

PVSchools offers a compelling example of dynamic systemness—an education system intentionally designed to operate as a coherent, adaptive, and learning-oriented organization. Across interviews, surveys, and mapping artifacts, a consistent picture emerges: this is not a district simply managing schools and programs, but one where alignment, adaptability, and relational trust function as core operating principles.

PVSchools's coherence stems from deliberate system design. Strategic initiatives—MTSS, PBIS, PLC+, and STEAM—are positioned as interconnected drivers of improvement, not isolated mandates. Professional learning, curriculum alignment, leadership development, and student supports are orchestrated through structures and feedback loops that reinforce shared priorities while enabling contextual flexibility. The district's relational infrastructure—described by leaders as rooted in trust, access, and collaboration—serves as the connective tissue that makes coherence possible.

Importantly, coherence in PVSchools is not a fixed endpoint. It is a continuous process of negotiation between direction and discretion, structure and responsiveness. As previously described, leaders across the district operate within a governance model that balances clear vision with site-level flexibility and structured reflection—a tight-loose-tight approach that sustains coherence without stifling agency. This model allows for autonomy without fragmentation and coherence without conformity.

At the heart of PVSchools's success is its investment in people—as learners, as leaders, and as contributors to the system. Leadership development is embedded in the culture; multi-directional feedback is treated as a learning tool; and innovation is supported through professional trust and cross-functional collaboration. These efforts reflect a system designed to learn its way forward.

PVSchools's case reflects many of the system leadership principles described in the *NCEE Blueprint: Designing Systems That Work*—demonstrating how coherence can be cultivated dynamically through relationships, strategic design, and adaptive leadership. Rather than relying on rigid governance frameworks, PVSchools shows how leadership agency, shared ownership, and embedded system learning can sustain coherence and drive continuous improvement in complex environments.

At the same time, PVSchools's coherence remains a work in progress. While the district has made substantial progress in cultivating coherence, leaders acknowledge that this is an ongoing endeavor. Several tensions emerged across the study, highlighting areas where the system continues to evolve. These included challenges with initiative sequencing, curriculum

consistency, equity in resource allocation, workforce sustainability pressures, and turnover at the Superintendent level. These challenges do not undercut the district's successes; rather, they reveal the real-world complexity of building and sustaining coherence in dynamic environments. PVSchools's strength lies not in having eliminated these tensions, but in its willingness to surface them, reflect on them, and use them as levers for system learning and redesign.

One notable aspect of PVSchools's system is the role of policy. Throughout this study, the absence of frequent reference to rigid policies is itself revealing. The infrastructure for coherence in PVSchools is built primarily through practice, relationships, and leadership—not through rigid governance. A flexible policy context provides the space for innovation and coherence to be cultivated by district leaders and practitioners, rather than imposed externally. This dynamic reinforces the power of relational trust, adaptive leadership, and collective professionalism as the primary engines of systemic coherence and growth.

The district's culture of trust, openness, and shared responsibility—supported by enabling conditions at the policy level—allows it to engage complexity not with defensiveness, but with a spirit of collaboration and inquiry. This willingness to examine practice, adapt in real time, and sustain progress amid uncertainty is one of PVSchools's defining strengths—and a hallmark of dynamic systemness in action.

As districts across the country face heightened demands, political pressures, and shifting expectations, PVSchools offers a hopeful model. It demonstrates that with intentional design, relational trust, adaptive leadership, and embedded learning structures, systems can navigate complexity with purpose. Insights from PVSchools suggest an important lesson: system transformation becomes possible when coherence is cultivated not through mandates, but through relationships, trust, strategic design, and a shared commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

Future Direction

This case contributes to the field of systems-based inquiry in education. Future research could explore how systems like PVSchools adapt, evolve, and sustain momentum over time. In particular, examining the conditions that enable leadership continuity, community trust, and innovation at scale will be essential to understanding how dynamic systems thrive amidst increasing complexity.



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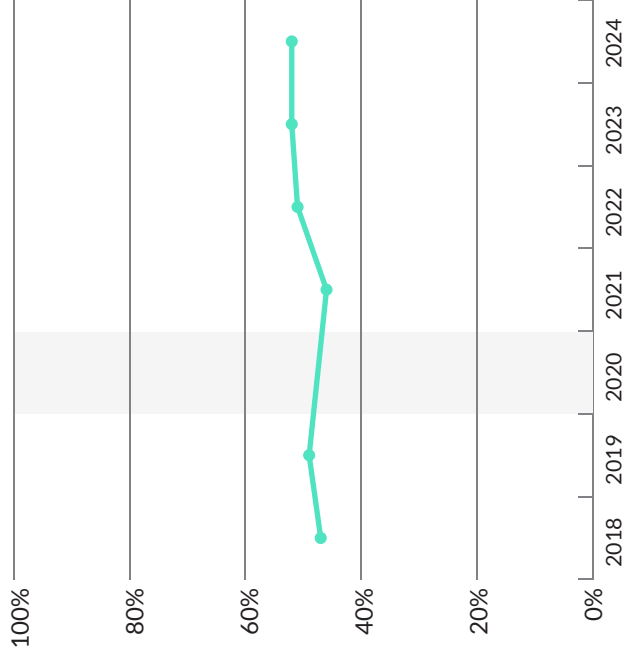
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Appendix

Results on Arizona State Data

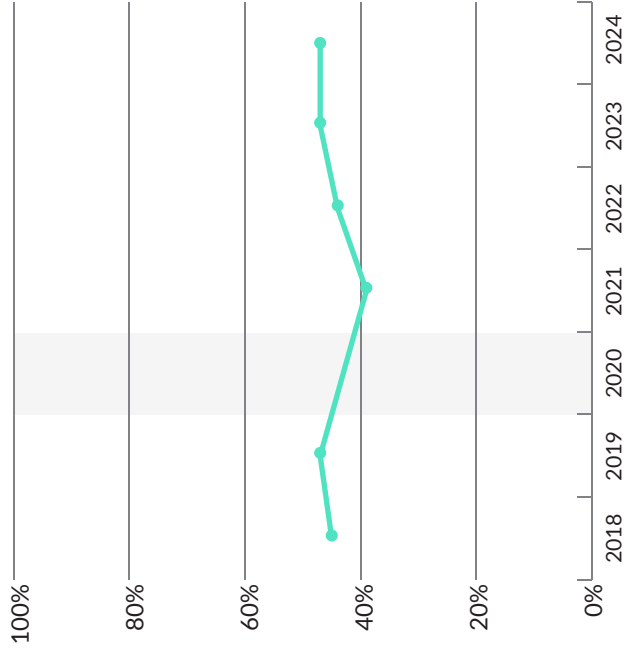
ELA

The following chart illustrates the district trend on state English Language Arts assessments from 2018 to 2024, with a notable data gap in 2020 due to statewide assessment cancellations during the COVID-19 pandemic.



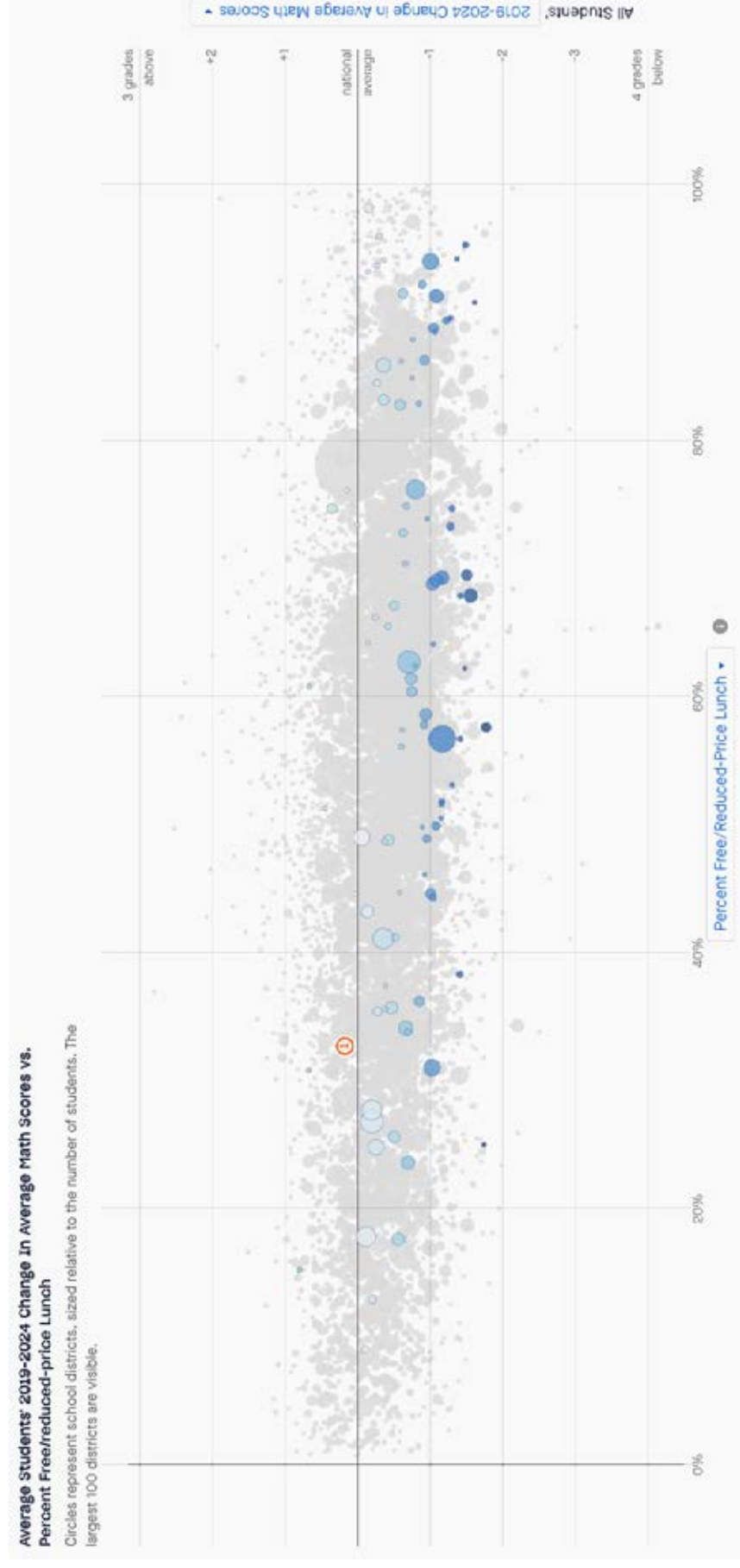
Math

The following chart illustrates the district trend on Math assessments from 2018 to 2024, with a notable data gap in 2020 due to statewide assessment cancellations during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Stanford Education Opportunity Project Data

The following chart, sourced from Stanford University's Educational Recovery dashboard,⁸ displays the relationship between the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and the change in average math scores from 2019 to 2024, with Paradise Valley Unified School District outperforming the national average. The blue dots are districts in AZ. PVSchools is marked as #1 in red.

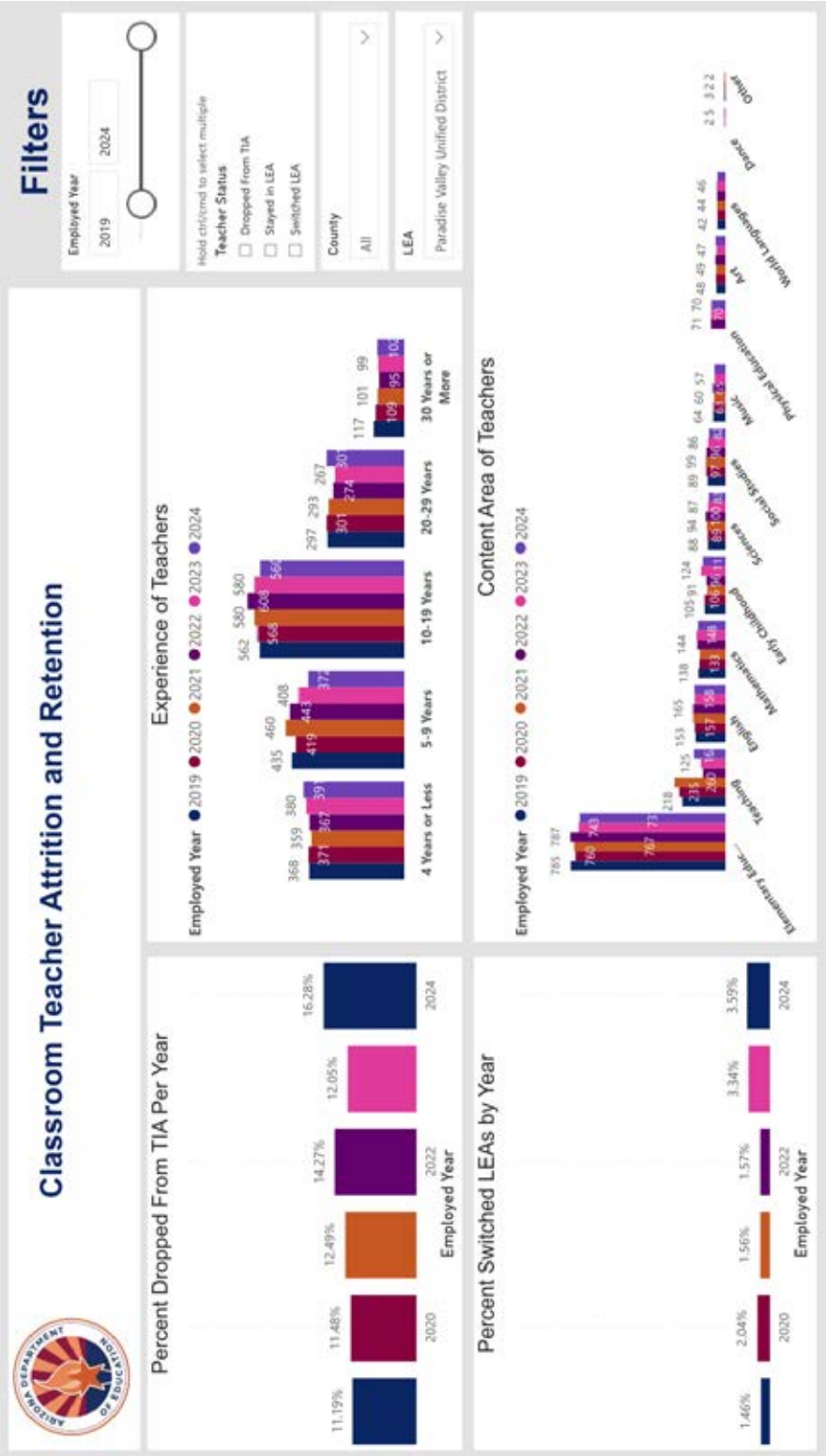


8. The dashboard can be accessed here: <https://edopportunity.org/recovery/explorer/>

Classroom Teacher Attrition and Retention Data

The following data is sourced from the Arizona Classroom Teacher Attrition and Retention Dashboard, which presents data available from 2019 to 2024.⁹

During that period, PVSchools's average teacher attrition rate was 13%, which was lower than the statewide average of 15.7%.¹⁰



9. The Teacher Input Application (TIA) is a data management system developed by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to collect and maintain comprehensive information about educators across all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in the state, including both public school districts and charter schools. It also serves as a central location to retain staff credentials, certifications, relevant experience information, and assignments, alongside summative educator evaluation data.

10. This average was calculated from the dashboard's "Percent Dropped From TIA Per Year."