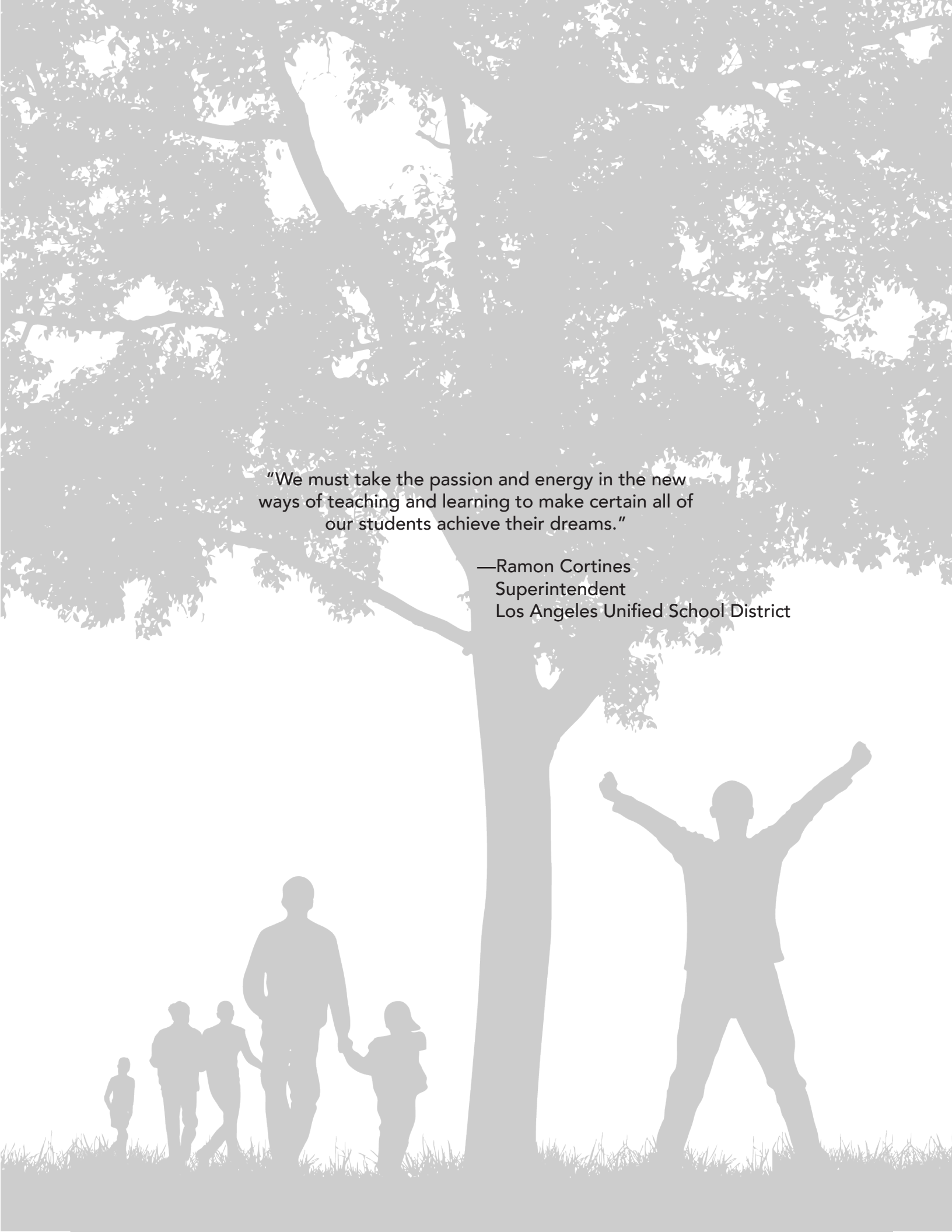




AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT'S  
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS PLAN  
2015–2018

Daniel Armstrong  
President  
Find A Tree

A large, leafy tree dominates the upper half of the image. In the foreground, silhouettes of a family (a man, a woman, and two children) are walking from left to right. To the right of the tree, a silhouette of a person stands with their arms raised in a celebratory gesture. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

**"We must take the passion and energy in the new ways of teaching and learning to make certain all of our students achieve their dreams."**

**—Ramon Cortines  
Superintendent  
Los Angeles Unified School District**

# HOPE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Los Angeles Unified School District's "A Plan for Navigating the Future: College and Career Readiness" appears to offer a logical strategy for improving student academic achievement by focusing on academic content. However, the plan will not achieve the intended goals because it is based on false underlying assumptions and does not present strategies that will address the emotional and psychological realities of students in the District.

To the uninitiated, a plan that focuses on content delivery (A-G requirements, Common Core State Standards, NGSS standards, ELD standards) and on preparing teachers to teach the content to students who are academically behind grade level makes logical sense. **But in order to prepare students who are college and career ready, the District must properly diagnose what is preventing student achievement and then create a plan of action based on that diagnoses that factors in the environmental, social, emotional, and psychological realities of students.** This may sound like a hurdle too high to clear, but with the appropriate, innovative approach as suggested in this report, the vast majority of students can become college and career ready. (Note: this report's recommendations have been tested on some of the District's lowest-performing students and have successfully transformed their attitudes, school attendance, GPAs, and graduation rates.) The failure to incorporate such innovations into the District's plan will result in continued low achievement and high drop-out rates.

The reality is that the majority of students who are not achieving have little interest in learning, low motivation, and no hope or dreams for their future. The students already possess the tangible resources necessary to succeed: books, computers, capable teachers, and classrooms. What they lack are the intangibles: hope, motivation, and a dream (a purpose for learning). Without these intangibles, students will not achieve and will continue to drop out.

The implementation of more credit recovery programs, tutoring programs, technology, teacher training, and data will not solve the crisis. The District's report states that across the U.S. "over 8,000" students drop out each day. The same solutions--adding more tutoring, credit recovery and a focus on academics--are being applied at schools across the nation, but students continue to drop out at an alarming rate. A new analysis of the problem and a new approach must be found in order to improve education in America.

For the District's plan to work, it must first address the root cause of the crisis—the lack of hope, motivation, and dreams (purpose for learning)—and only then can the educational programs outlined in the plan effectively provide students the academic tools needed to succeed and become college and career ready.

# MOTIVATION

## FALSE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The primary false underlying assumption presented in the current plan is that students want to learn and that they simply need classes (A-G, Common Core, AP), along with teachers who are updated with ongoing professional development training in their content areas, and access to the latest technology. The plan assumes that once these components are in place, monitored by data collection and managed responsibly, then students will succeed and become college and career ready. This is a false assumption that makes the plan unworkable. This same strategy is failing in school districts across the country.

## A PLAN ROOTED IN REALITY

A successful plan has to recognize this reality: many students have given up.

The reality is that students are hurting emotionally. They have no dreams that they connect with their academic classes, going to school, and attending college. Students have lost hope. Some do not even foresee themselves living past the age of twenty-five. Students are not motivated to learn; they have no desire to struggle and put forth the requisite effort to graduate. And lacking dreams, there is no reason for many to consider college. While this remains the reality of many students, a plan that is content- focused will not work. In order to succeed, the District's plan must be student-centered and focused on meeting them where they are, not only academically, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

## CONTENT-CENTERED VERSUS STUDENT-CENTERED

The current District plan is content-centered, not student-centered, and therefore will not work. Low-achieving students are not buying what schools are selling: academic achievement. To succeed, the plan must make a connection between academic achievement and their dreams.

Imagine a car dealership where the sales staff knows their car inventory very well. They know every detail of their product line. They have been drilled and rehearsed. A prospective buyer walks into the dealership's showroom and the salesperson tells the prospect which car to buy without ever asking about the prospective buyer's needs and wants. After describing all the car's features, the sales representative proceeds to write up a sales contract. Naturally, the prospect has no interest in signing the contract for a car that she feels does not meet her needs and she walks out. The salesperson wonders what happened. The salesperson studied the company's car manuals and explained every detail about the car to the buyer. The sales rep even used an iPad and the latest technology with interactive features to sell the car. This is a product-centered approach to selling.

# DREAMS

A student- or customer-centered approach would begin by asking about what the customer or student wants. After listening to the student/customer, the sales rep/teacher would show the student/customer how what they are offering could address their desires. Once this connection is made between what the customer/student wants and what the sales rep/teacher is selling, then a sale can be made. Currently, schools dictate to students what they should buy (academic achievement, graduation, and college attendance) and students are not buying. They have no interest in the product and they too are walking out refusing to buy. Many attend school for social reasons, athletics, or because their mothers make them go. Low-performing students are not attending school because they are eager to learn and achieve academically.

Assuming that students “get it” and that they are motivated to learn is a fatal mistake that perpetuates the problems of a high dropout rate and low academic achievement.

Student engagement is mentioned in the report as an “interdependent component”; however, no clear strategy is outlined for how the District intends to engage students in their own learning. In order to engage students, the plan must be student-centered.

## A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

The first questions that have to be answered in a student-centered educational program are: What does a student want? And what is a student’s dream? Most students do not know what they want and haven’t identified their dreams. A student-centered educational approach would facilitate students uncovering their talents and interests in order to determine a dream. Once a teacher knows a student’s dream, the instructor can show the student how mastering an academic subject will help that student achieve his or her dream. This connection between students’ dreams and their academic subjects will motivate and engage students to want to learn, achieve academically, and graduate. Superintendent Cortines’ vision of helping students achieve their dreams cannot be realized unless they first have a dream. It sounds simple, but nowhere in the plan does it mention practical steps for helping students determine their dreams. Dreams and aspirations are what motivate people; therefore, a student-centered approach would focus on connecting academics to students’ individual dreams. This would be the innovative, transformative approach that is missing in the current plan. Students with a dream who are taught to understand the connection between achieving their dream and mastering their academics suddenly want to learn. A plan that is focused on students’ dreams can successfully raise student achievement and reduce the dropout rate. Once motivated, then students will embrace the content-based strategies recommended in the District’s plan.

Here is how this could be implemented: On the first day of school, all students write down twenty of their talents and interests. Based on that list, teachers would coach students on how to determine their dreams. Next, teachers will explain that the reason students are in school is to make that dream a reality. In English classes, for example, students would read and write about topics related to the dream that they chose. Because the research is what students personally chose, there will be inherent motivation. The teacher’s job is simply to

# PURPOSE

make sure research papers are grammatically correct and coherent. Students should have to research how mastering math, for example, will help them achieve their dreams. Not all classes will have a clear connection to each student's dream, but there must be connections made between their dreams and what a teacher is "selling"—the mastery of an academic subject.

What careers are related to students' dreams and how will college help them to achieve that dream? These topics would be internalized for each student in a student-centered plan of action.

Schools must help students determine their dreams (giving them a reason for attending school) and then make academics relevant to the students' dreams in order to motivate and engage them in learning and mastering their academic subjects.

## FIVE KEY STRATEGIES

The current plan offered by the District list “Five Key Strategies.” These are fine goals, but lack insight into how to implement them in a practical way. Again, in an ideal world-- wherein students were motivated, had hope, were engaged, possessed a sense of purpose, and took ownership of their education--these strategies would work. However, in today’s environment, these strategies are idealized goals that will not produce the intended results. The five strategies offered by the District’s plan are as follows:

### 1 Transform teaching and learning and the use of technology

The plan does not describe what that transformative teaching and learning will be and how it will be different from the teaching and learning used in the previous plan offered by the District (“All Youth Achieving – Strategic Plan – 2012-2015”) Again, the assumption is that if the District provides the services—tutoring, extra study periods, credit recovery programs, etc.--students will take the required steps to achieve. Despite these offerings, the problem of low achievement and a high dropout rate continues.

Nothing new is being offered in the District’s plan which will transform teaching and learning.

Focusing on students’ dreams (what they want) and showing them how to use their academics to help make their dreams a reality would be transformative and new.

### 2 Implement a multi-tiered behavior and academic support system

Traumatic life experiences are inhibiting student achievement. There are many experiences that students never talk about, but which consume them. To ignore this reality is like an invading army thinking they will not face resistance. A wise general factors unseen factors into his battle plan. Students do not need a trained psychologist. They simply need a safe environment where they will not be mocked or laughed at, and an opportunity to share their stories—whatever they may be--facilitated by an adult and students who listen. This process of healing is a critical first step in unlocking students’ potential and allowing them to heal. Many behavior issues and low-achievement issues can be overcome by recognizing the realities of students’ lives and allowing them the opportunity to heal. Failure to do so will result in a failed plan.

Allowing students to heal is a critical piece missing in the District plan. Without healing, students will never achieve their potential.

### 3 Deliver effective literacy instruction

Of course effective teaching is needed and in an ideal world, would be sufficient for the improvement of literacy. Unfortunately, simply providing effective instruction will not solve the issue. For the District’s plan to work, the plan has to ignite the mental light in students’ mind. If a student has no desire to read, even the greatest teacher cannot overcome that lack of desire. A great teacher

motivates as well as instructs. Motivating strategies must be incorporated into any literacy plan.

For many African American boys, their only dream is to play professional sports. Consequently, many do not see the need for mastering their academics or learning to read since, as they see it, they are going to become professional athletes. Challenging African American boys, in particular, to have a dream off the court or field and show them the necessity of knowledge gained by reading and academic achievement would help close the achievement gap.

If students were instructed to read about their dreams, then they would become motivated to read to find out more about something they are interested in or passionate about. Imagine if students worked in study groups with others who shared a common dream. Then, they'd complete a writing assignment in which they had to write to a professional who works in the area of their dream, inviting the professional to campus to meet with them to discuss how that individual achieved his or her dream. This would create the connection that students need to engage and motivate them to read, as they learn to perceive school as something that helps them pursue their dreams.

## 4

**Develop a culture that promotes positive beliefs about the academic ability of every student, and engage parents and community as partners**

A new culture will be created when students want to learn. When they want to learn, they will exceed expectations. As long as they are emotionally hurting, angry, and lack hope, motivation, and dreams, the culture will remain the same. All students want to succeed, but they need a step-by-step pathway to their dreams. After determining a dream based on their talents and interests, and conducting research on their dreams to create a connection to their academic classes, imagine if they were required to do an age- and ability-appropriate service learning project that embodied their dreams. For example, future doctors could educate classmates on an appropriate health matter; future veterinarians could educate classmates on animal care; and future police could inform their fellow students about strategies for keeping their homes and neighborhoods safe. Students get excited about engaging in dream-related activities now, not in the distant future. Students could invite community professionals who work in the area of their dream to provide insights on how they achieved their dreams. A culture shift will take place once students are motivated and excited about attending school and learning. This will take place when they are able to make the connection between learning and achieving their dreams.

Without a new approach, the cultural shift outlined in the District plan will remain a fantasy and will not become a reality.

## 5

**Use data to drive instruction**

Yes, data is important. However, the challenge is creating a plan that will produce data that shows positive results.



## CONCLUSION

In order to succeed at making all students college and career ready and reach the District's zero dropout goal, students must have hope, motivation, and a dream—a reason for attending school and a desire to learn. This foundation must first be laid, on top of which a sound content-based academic program can be built.

This innovative approach has already been developed and applied successfully at LAUSD schools. It's called the Find A Tree program. At Roosevelt High School, one hundred and twenty-five of the lowest-performing students were enrolled in the Find A Tree program. After sixteen weeks, these students experienced a 44% increase in their overall GPAs and a 35% decrease in failing grades.

The challenges are great, but a solution exists. Incorporating the Find A Tree program into the District's plan will result in that plan's success. The District could then present a successful model for the nation with an innovative way to reduce the dropout rate, close the achievement gap, and raise student achievement at all levels.

For more information on the Find A Tree program, read *Unlock Students' Potential: The Blueprint for Motivating Students to Achieve* and visit [FindATree.com](http://FindATree.com).

## DANIEL ARMSTRONG

Daniel Armstrong is a dream coach, author and motivational speaker. He's widely recognized for his work within the American education system—providing empowerment programs to educators, administrators and students through his Find A Tree program.

Daniel's mission is to inspire and mentor, both youth and adults, to pursue and actualize their dreams. Daniel Armstrong earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Columbia University in New York City. At Columbia, Armstrong was the founding chairman of the Coalition for a Free South Africa, an organization whose four-year campaign resulted in Columbia divesting from corporations operating in apartheid South Africa. Armstrong earned his Master's degree in Business Administration and Juris Doctorate both from UCLA. He is also a Ford Foundation Fellow, having studied youth development in Zimbabwe, where he organized a national tour by the Harlem Magicians, an American basketball team. The tour's opening night game was the largest multi-racial gathering, at that point, in Zimbabwe's then brief history, following twenty years of civil war.

For more information on Daniel Armstrong and his Find A Tree program, visit [FindATree.com](http://FindATree.com).

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