

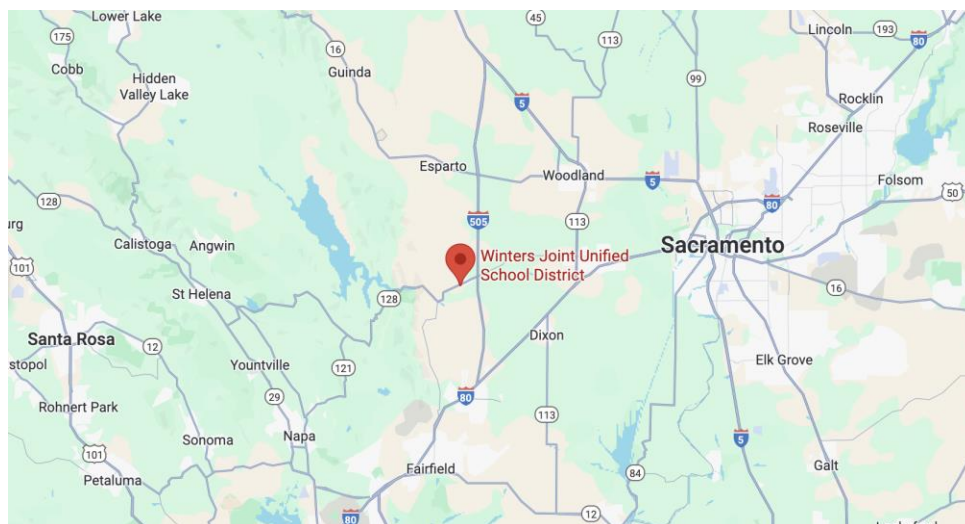


Rethinking Student Success in Winters Joint Unified School District

In Winters Joint Unified School District (WJUSD), a quiet but powerful transformation is taking place. This year, all staff, from teachers to administrators, from the district office to classroom aides, are working together to reimagine what it means to prepare students for the future.

For too long, school success has been defined primarily by test scores and numbers that reflect only part of a much larger story. In Winters, the community has come together to ask a deeper question: *What do our students truly need to flourish in college, career, and life?*

“Winters Joint Unified has about 1,670 students, and we are increasing enrollment. There is growth and development in the area, so that's a good thing. I think we have roughly 250 total staff, classified, certificated across the board right now. If you look on a map, it's right between Sacramento and San Francisco. About 15 minutes west of Davis,” shared Superintendent Rody Boonchouy, Ed.D.



From Reflection to Redefinition

WJUSD’s rethinking of success began with a simple realization: traditional indicators of progress were not telling the whole story. Despite two decades of reform, investment, and effort, achievement data across California, and locally in Winters, have remained largely flat.

“We pulled data from the past 20 years, and we really haven't budged at all in ELA and math. Then the opportunity gap has continued very steadily, a 30-point gap between our Hispanic, Latino, and our white students, over the past 10 years or so, on our ELA scores,” Boonchouy said.



The pandemic further underscored what many educators already knew: students needed more than content mastery. They needed to feel connected, engaged, and prepared for a future filled with uncertainty and change.

“Following the pandemic, we had so many programs that we’ve been implementing, good programs, but a lot of them: TK, ELOP, community schools, ethnic studies, it goes on and on. Good stuff, but it’s been spreading us thin.”

Recognizing that complexity, Winters JUSD made a collective decision to narrow its focus and anchor its work around what matters most: the skills and mindsets that define lifelong learners and community contributors.

The Graduate Profile: A Vision Rooted in Community

Two years ago, through a process that engaged every part of the Winters community, students, parents, educators, business owners, civic leaders, and elected officials, the district developed a Graduate Profile, a shared vision of what all Winters graduates should know and be able to do.

“We created the graduate profile two years ago, but now we’re doing the hard work, and that is bringing the poster to practice,” Boonchouy said. “As a community, with very extensive engagement and outreach we started asking ourselves, staff, students, families, the business community, elected officials, everybody, what are the key skills and competencies our students need to leave our schools with to be successful in college, career, life, and beyond.”

That work produced six core competencies: critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, cultural awareness, and civic engagement.

“It made for a really nice poster” Boonchouy said. “But we are at a point where we have the interest of the board and the community to work as a staff to bring it to life. What does it look like to align the structures, assessments, and programs with the skills and competencies we value? We have been valuing what we measure, and now we want to flip the script and measure what we value, as a school district.”

Listening to Students, Learning as a System

To bring the Graduate Profile to life, Winters JUSD began this school year with an ambitious goal: to listen deeply to staff, students, and families, and reimagine instruction, assessment, and school culture through their eyes.

“This year is a series of listening tours with students, with staff, ideation, identifying where we are already excelling in practices and structures aligned to the graduate profile, and what it would mean to reimagine our school district to be more aligned with that,” Boonchouy said.

From transitional kindergarten to high school seniors, student voices have guided the district’s conversations. “Whether it’s around engagement or a lack of alignment between what they’re seeing in school and what they need to know and be able to do in today’s world...they’re looking for meaning,” he said.

For younger students, that has meant embracing play-based learning and outdoor exploration. “When we start grinding into the academics super early, it may not be fully aligned with the developmental needs of our students. So how do we teach collaboration, problem solving, and conflict resolution? We hear a lot about being outside more, and this resonates with teachers, too.”

At the secondary level, the message is clear: students want more hands-on, project-based learning and opportunities that connect classroom knowledge to real-world application. “They want to see more inquiry, more project-based learning experiences, more hands-on, more flexibility with time,” Boonchouy shared.

Building Momentum Through Shared Leadership

This initiative is not top-down. It is built from the ground up. “This is not a directive, top-down, here’s what we’re going to do. It’s more of, we need to co-develop, as a staff, what it is that we’re going to do moving forward.”

That collaborative spirit extends to the school board, which has embraced the process of discovery and experimentation. “It’s challenging because for those that need concrete steps, it feels too ambiguous, while others are embracing the ambiguity and sitting in it, so that when we visit other school districts and do our research, we can develop something unique to us,” Boonchouy explained.

The district plans to synthesize its findings this fall and bring recommendations to the board in the spring. Those recommendations will likely include revisions to the master schedule, expansion of senior capstone projects, and continued alignment of classroom practices with Graduate Profile competencies.

Innovation in Career and Technical Education

While Winters is a small rural district, it holds some of the most robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) offerings in the region. “Our claim to fame is our agriculture CTE program.



We're a rural ag community. Ag mechanics, floriculture, and then our other two sectors are culinary and robotics. So for a small school district, we have three powerhouse CTE pathways, and a lot of the lessons learned about what engaging instruction and real-world application looks like comes from those pathways," Boonchouy said.

These programs serve as proof points for how learning can be hands-on, relevant, and deeply connected to community life. Students in CTE pathways often demonstrate the very skills outlined in the Graduate Profile: collaboration, problem-solving, and communication, showing that these attributes can be taught and measured in authentic ways.

A Challenge to the Status Quo

Part of Winters' journey is acknowledging the limits of the current educational model itself. "All of us as educators have been doing the same thing, the same paradigm of public education, our whole careers. And that model, the model of public education, has been around since the Industrial Revolution. We're really trying to think outside the box and identify how we start evolving our district to support our kids better," Boonchouy said.

Across the nation, test scores have remained stagnant, despite countless reforms. "No matter what we do, no matter how hard we work, no matter how much money we have, in the macro, it really hasn't moved," he said. "What if we developed a test that was worth teaching to, where you demonstrate all these competencies?"

Boonchouy points out that current assessments often reflect socioeconomic factors more than true potential. "The number one predictor of test scores is zip code. So what we need to do is be more dynamic and teach and assess those key competencies and skills, where all students come in with assets, regardless of socioeconomic status. That way, we can lift up all students and have education be a great equalizer."

Part of a Larger Movement

Winters JUSD is not alone in this work. Across California, roughly 100 school districts have adopted Graduate Profiles, and many are beginning to take similar next steps, aligning their instructional systems to reflect their values. "There are probably about 100 districts in the state of California that have a graduate profile, and a good chunk of them are moving aggressively forward, like us," Boonchouy said.

Winters JUSD is also engaging in policy advocacy, working with the State Board of Education and monitoring efforts led by Linda Darling-Hammond to create a statewide Graduate Profile. The district has applied for the Secondary School Redesign Grant recently introduced by the



Governor's Office, which would provide funding to support school innovation and design efforts.

As Winters moves forward, Boonchouy acknowledges one critical challenge: balancing innovation with staff well-being. "The driving sentiment of staff is that they are on board with the vision. They love this idea, but they don't know what it looks like, and the fear is that they want to do this well without burning out. So this can't just be piling on more stuff; it has to be a reimagining of what we already do."

As Winters continues its listening tours and districtwide collaboration, the following steps are clear: to synthesize what has been learned, visit other innovative schools, and bring forward actionable ideas that keep students at the center.

"We want to see our students graduate with clarity and a plan for what they want to do, that they have the supports and skills to accomplish those goals, whether it's college, career, or anything else, and feel like they have the agency, confidence, and capacity to navigate a rapidly changing world," Boonchouy said.

In Winters, success is no longer defined by how well students perform on a test, but by how deeply they think, how creatively they solve problems, and how meaningfully they contribute to their community.

Through shared vision, honest reflection, and the courage to innovate, Winters Joint Unified is building a model of education that truly prepares students for life, not just for the test.