

Policy Insights:

Analyzing Impactful Shifts in Los Angeles Unified

A review of policy shifts and past research on major change efforts in the district

Executive Summary

As we approach the third anniversary of COVID-19 pandemic school closures, it is an opportune time to review efforts to improve Los Angeles schools over the last two decades. We hope this review inspires existing efforts to expand and build upon, as well as sparks creativity for new approaches and strategies to increase educational opportunities for Los Angeles students of color and those living in poverty. The pandemic provides a unique inflection point for the district to reflect on which reforms have been most impactful and push forward new policies that will prepare the district to weather any future disruptions to student learning.

Over the past year, GPSN has explored the role the Los Angeles Board of Education played in shaping the education policy landscape in Los Angeles—especially looking at the types of policy advanced

by the school board, the level of united or divided policy-making in our school board, and the trends across superintendents in Los Angeles Unified. Our [Resolution Insights report](#) highlighted the work the board has done to push forward important reforms.¹ That report revealed the unique role that the political patchwork of advocacy organizations, educators, civic and grassroots leaders, and philanthropists across the district played in shaping policy decisions.

In an effort to better understand the impact of Los Angeles Unified policy shifts over the last two decades, we've pulled together past research that highlights the impact these policy shifts have had on students, educators, and families across Los Angeles Unified.

Four major themes emerged in the research:

¹ Estrada-Miller, Jeimee, et al. "Resolution Insights: A Review of Los Angeles Unified School Board of Education Resolutions From 2006-07 to 2021-22." GPSN. 2022, <https://gpsnla.org/resolutioninsights2022/>

- 1 Closing opportunity gaps:** Over time, the Board of Education pushed for more equity-oriented policies with the explicit aim of closing opportunity gaps. The most impactful of these efforts is the student equity needs index (SENI), which has successfully redistributed funds to the most underinvested students across the district and improved academic outcomes.²
- 2 Civic engagement:** The Board of Education worked in partnership with advocates and grassroots leaders to shape major policy decisions. Those partnerships led to policy shifts that improved student academic outcomes, access to quality educators, and college readiness.³
- 3 High-quality educators:** The Board of Education has put an intentional focus on the importance of recruiting and retaining high-quality educators and diversifying the ethnoracial make-up of the teacher and administrator workforce. There is evidence to suggest these efforts will likely have a positive impact on students.⁴
- 4 School governance:** The Board of Education's support of advocacy efforts to decentralize school governance created a strong network of high-quality alternative school choice options, like the Partnership for LA Schools. These schools have a positive impact on student outcomes⁵ and consistently outperform similar schools across the state.⁶

² Levin, Jesse, et al. "Evaluation of Los Angeles Unified School District's Student Equity Needs Index." *American Institutes for Research*, Nov. 2021, <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/17238>

³ Fuller, Bruce. "What's Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 30, Mary Lou Fulton Teacher College, Apr. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7013>

⁴ Mittleman, Joel. "What's in a Match? Disentangling the Significance of Teacher Race/Ethnicity." *SSRN*, 15 June 2016, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2796150

⁵ Campos, Christopher. "The Impact of Neighborhood School Choice: Evidence From Los Angeles' Zones of Choice." *SSRN*, 29 Mar. 2022, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3830628

⁶ Kim, Juli, et al. "The Secret to Sustainable School Transformation: Slow and Steady Wins the Race." Chapel Hill, NC: *Public Impact*; and Los Angeles, CA: *Partnership for Los Angeles Schools*, 2018, <https://partnershipla.org/resources/public-impact-report>

These findings reveal the Los Angeles Unified community and Board of Education have been incredible catalysts for change over the last two decades.

It also highlights the significant role those reforms have played in improving academic outcomes and enriching learning environments for students, families, and educators.

The research reveals the four key policy shifts highlighted above had a sustained, positive impact on student outcomes. The data backs this up: fourth- and eighth-grade students in Los Angeles Unified were on a positive trajectory in English/language arts and math outcomes for the two decades prior to the pandemic when these reforms took place.⁷ We hope this brief serves as a tool for advocates and local leaders to reflect on what has worked and where the district should focus efforts to have the greatest impact on students going forward.

Methodology

Our goal included reviewing solutions passed by the Board of Education, as well as the academic and policy studies done on Los Angeles Unified School District. Academic literature was retrieved from a topic search of all research done about Los Angeles Unified since 2013, excluding research done outside of the social sciences. Non-academic research, such as studies published outside of peer-reviewed journals and by organizations known to lead research about Los Angeles Unified, were also included. We also used our database of resolutions from our Resolutions Insights report to identify resolutions. We included any “Adopted” or “Adopted as amended” resolutions.

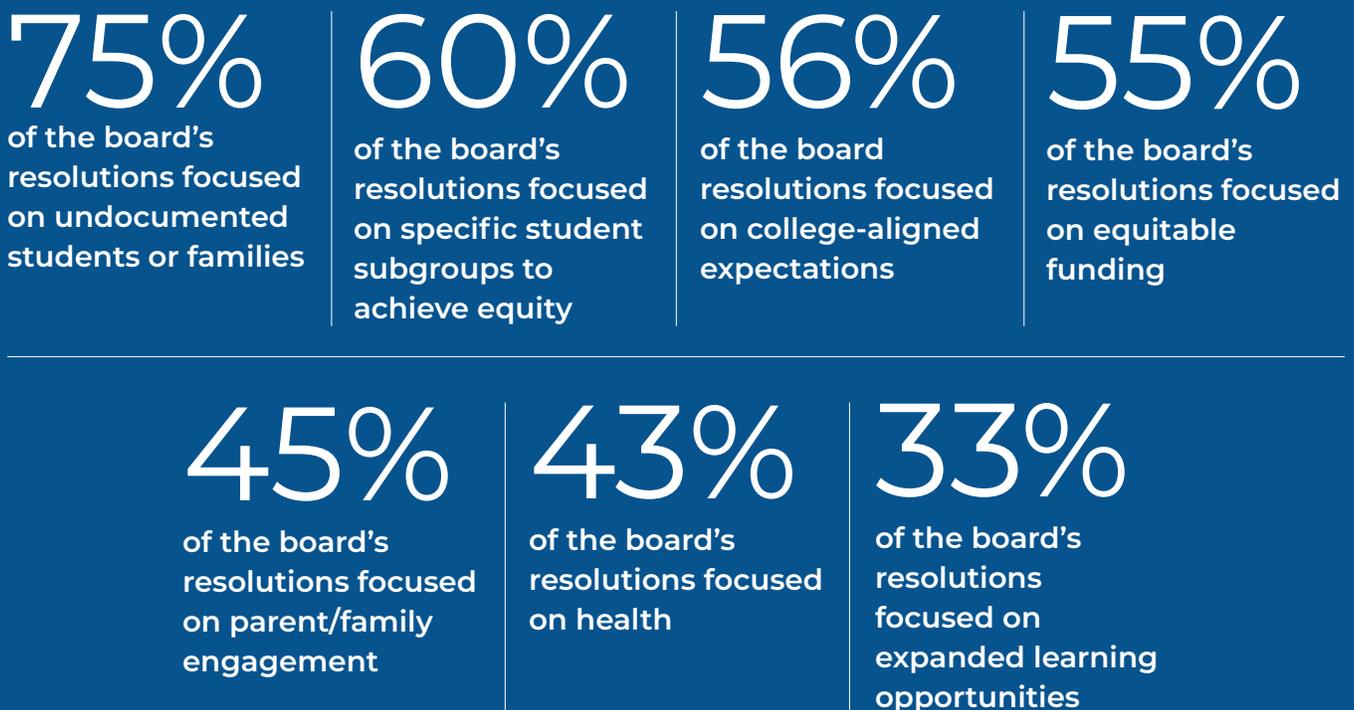
⁷ Fuller, Bruce. “What’s Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains.”

Acknowledging Monica Garcia's contributions to the school board

Monica Garcia was the third Latina to serve on the Board of Education in its 155-year history and served as board president for eight years (2007 to 2013) and during most of the district's significant reform years. She was the longest serving board member during the span of this analysis. Over the course of her time on the board she helped the district navigate a \$2 billion deficit and worked to pass measures that raised \$3.7 billion for modernizing new schools and directing funds in underinvested communities. She helped to design new school models and improve access to high-quality magnet, pilot, charter, and community schools. These efforts supported a period of academic improvement where the district saw an increase in A-G completion rates and growth in English and math outcomes.²⁹

Over the course of her tenure on the board, Garcia authored or co-authored nearly 400 of the over 1,000 resolutions proposed by the board over the last two decades. Many of these resolutions were key elements of the reforms that this report reveals had the greatest impact on student academic outcomes.

Garcia authored/co-authored:



²⁹ Fuller, Bruce. "What's Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains." Education Policy Analysis Archives, vol. 30, Mary Lou Fulton Teacher College, Apr. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7013>

Overview of Policy Shifts in LAUSD

In 2022, the Board of Education unanimously approved a new strategic plan centered on equity and closing opportunity gaps. One of the core tenets of the plan is to improve instructional quality, provide enriching academic experiences, eliminate opportunity gaps, and focus on college and career readiness. If the district is able to meet the new targets it set, its performance levels will be on track with other districts serving a similar population of students as Los Angeles Unified that have a demonstrated record of positive academic outcomes and consistent student growth. This is a direct result of the policy groundwork the Board of Education laid over the last two decades.

The district's focus has shifted over time towards academic achievement initiatives that reconcile the historic inequities in our public school systems, redistribute resources towards the district's most underinvested students, and prepare students to graduate college and career ready. Our review of the research revealed that four key policy areas had the largest influence on student outcomes: changes to school governance; civic engagement; closing opportunity gaps; and high-quality educators.

The following sections dive deeper into each of those policy areas and highlight the most relevant research on the impact of district improvement efforts. We close each section with a "GPSN Recommends" call out to highlight where we feel advocates

and district leaders should direct attention and resources as they plan for future district reforms.

As you read, we encourage you to think about the following questions:

- **What has implementation of these policies looked like in Los Angeles Unified?**
- **What can we learn from the research about whether this policy works for students?**
- **What questions should advocates continue to ask district leaders?**

Changes to school governance

One of the biggest policy shifts in Los Angeles Unified was the push for more decentralized models of school governance with more control at the school level. These efforts to decentralize began in the 1990s when the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructure Now (LEARN) began organizing around William Ouchi's framework about the positive effects of decentralizing decision-making structures. This launched an era of shifts in school governance towards more autonomous

and semi-autonomous school models—including magnet, pilot, small, and charter schools—in some of the most underinvested neighborhoods in Los Angeles Unified. The number of autonomous and semi-autonomous schools (i.e. charter, magnet, and pilot schools) increased significantly. Today, these efforts are still reflected in the work of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a network of schools housed within the district.

The research on early choice efforts, like the Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) initiated in 2010, was mixed.⁹ Under this policy, applicants were allowed to submit proposals to operate the district's lowest performing schools. One of the biggest proposed benefits of the initiative was that it would spur innovations at school sites and translate into improved learning environments for students. In reality, there were only a small handful of school operators who participated in the first iteration of the initiative. This limited uptake of the initiative and the difficulty of authentically engaging families in the school design process were two of the biggest limitations of the model.¹⁰

Another important shift in the governance structure of schools in Los Angeles involves the development of one of the largest non-profit, public charter school sectors in the country. In 2014, research from CREDO at Stanford University found that Los Angeles independent charter schools, in aggregate, had higher performance results than similar district schools. Charter schools in Los Angeles, overall, were found to generate extra weeks and months of learning for the majority of students they serve, particularly for historically disadvantaged student groups.¹¹ While this

Zone of Choice Spotlight:

The district's first neighborhood pilot schools were developed through advocacy efforts to open the Belmont Zone of Choice. This was an effort to create greater school options in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles. It was the result of a unique partnership between Los Angeles Unified Board leadership and a coalition of over 40 local organizations and educators. This agreement between the Los Angeles Unified Board of Education and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) led to the creation of the Belmont Pilot Schools network and paved the way for the larger Zone of Choice movement. Today, there are 16 high school zones of choice across Los Angeles Unified that offer innovative, small school options for ninth through 12th graders. Recent research demonstrates that the Zone of Choice model boosted student outcomes and narrowed achievement and college enrollment gaps for Los Angeles Unified students.⁸

⁸ Campos, Christopher, and Caitlin Kearns. "The Impact of Neighborhood School Choice: Evidence From Los Angeles' Zones of Choice."

⁹ Marsh, Julie A., et al. "Democratic Engagement in District Reform: The Evolving Role of Parents in the Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative." *Educational Policy*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, pp. 51–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814563204>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "Charter School Performance in Los Angeles". CREDO, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2014, https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/los_angeles_report_2014_final_000.pdf

study highlights an important contribution Los Angeles charter schools have made to the education landscape, that landscape has evolved in the decade since the original report was released. No additional research formally comparing Los Angeles charter school and district school outcomes has been completed using more recent student performance data.

Research on school choice initiatives more broadly in Los Angeles Unified has found that introducing zones of choice has the potential to alter school quality, reduce disparities in access to educational opportunities, and improve student outcomes.¹² Specific models like magnet schools create high-quality non-traditional educational venues, improving district enrollment rates and increasing academic performance for students.¹³ Research on pilot school models shows that neighborhood-based public school choice policies can improve student outcomes, reduce achievement gaps, and substantially improve both school and neighborhood quality.¹⁴

One of the most successful models that emerged is the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. They have designed a model that focuses on training strong school leaders, recruiting and retaining high-quality educators, engaging families and community, and working in partnership with the school district. The Partnership's schools consistently outperform other similar schools across the state and demonstrate the positive impact that district partnerships have had on improving outcomes for students across Los Angeles Unified.¹⁵

While this research highlights the unique role that changes to school governance have played in the Los Angeles landscape, it's important to note that school-level academic outcomes, district public school or charter public school, are most influenced by factors like teacher quality, student-to-teacher ratios, per pupil expenditures, and school size.¹⁶

GPSN Recommends

We recommend the district further explore high performing models of school choice and consider expanding models that have a proven track record of success for students. It is also important to proactively keep families up to date on school choice options and provide them with the tools, resources, and transparent data to select school options that best meet the needs and interests of their students.

¹² Campos, Christopher, and Caitlin Kearns. "The Impact of Neighborhood School Choice: Evidence From Los Angeles' Zones of Choice."

¹³ Silver, David, et al. "What Factors Predict High School Graduation in the Los Angeles Unified School District." *California Dropout Research Project Report #14*, 2008, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/71355768.pdf>

¹⁴ Campos, Christopher, and Caitlin Kearns. "The Impact of Neighborhood School Choice: Evidence From Los Angeles' Zones of Choice."

¹⁵ Kim, Juli, et al. "The Secret to Sustainable School Transformation: Slow and Steady Wins the Race." 2018

¹⁶ Greenwald, Rob, et al. "The Effect of School Resources on Student Achievement." *Review of Educational Research*, vol.66, no.3, 1996, pp. 361-396, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543066003361>

Civic engagement

One of the most unique elements of the Los Angeles Unified Board of Education is the role that activists played in shaping the policy landscape. The pushes from LEARN for school decentralization created a strong network of community advocates and coalitions. Advocates have secured wins like the Belmont Zone of Choice, creating more school choice options for parents; pushed the board to improve graduation outcomes and make A-G courses a graduation requirement, guaranteeing all students have access to more rigorous course content; and advocated for the ACLU's Reed case, which protected younger teachers from seniority-based layoffs. Many of these wins were possible because of an inside-outside relationship between the board and community advocates. Advocate-led campaigns, such as Measure Q (the largest local school bond, which invested \$7 billion towards repairing and upgrading schools and building new facilities) and resolutions,

brought about significant change in providing students access to learning support and success, and engaging the community in these efforts.

Although research on the direct impact of civic engagement on student outcomes is limited, there is evidence to suggest that the policy shifts resulting from those wins had a positive impact on students.¹⁷ Research shows Los Angeles Unified's investments in new school facilities—an early win for local advocates—had a positive impact on student learning and academic outcomes.¹⁸ The same is true of college and career readiness advocacy efforts. Although there is no causal link, data indicates that A-G completion, graduation, and college-going rates all increased in the wake of the A-G advocacy efforts.¹⁹ These findings are evidence of the important role that advocates played in shaping outcomes for students across Los Angeles Unified.

GPSN Recommends

We recommend the district explore opportunities to more authentically partner with civic leaders and find ways to make schools community hubs. This could include: creating free community wireless networks, opening campuses for nonprofits to expand their services, and offering play areas for students on the weekends. Additionally, LAUSD can partner with the civic community to advocate at the county, state and federal levels for sustainable and ongoing resources to support initiatives beyond the traditional school day.

¹⁷ Rodriguez, Miguel A. "Making Schools the Centers of Communities: Moving the Los Angeles Unified School District from Policy to Practice," *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 2006, <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/37472/123904586-MIT.pdf?sequence=2>

¹⁸ Lafortune, Julien and David Schönholzer. "Do School Facilities Matter? Measuring the Effects of Capital Expenditures on Student and Neighborhood Outcomes." 2018, https://ojs-content.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/NHI/Old/BaseImages/2019/06/ChrisDoSchoolFacilitiesMatterMeasuringT_preview.pdf

¹⁹ Fuller, Bruce. "What's Working in Los Angeles? Two Decades of Achievement Gains."

Closing opportunity gaps

One key trend over time in Los Angeles Unified was the push for more equity-oriented policies that are explicitly aimed at closing opportunity gaps. Since 2006, the Board of Education passed 68 resolutions focused on reconciling historic inequities in the Los Angeles Unified school system. These efforts took many forms but centered on redistributing funds and resources towards the district's most underinvested student groups. One of the biggest funding reforms was the work to introduce the student equity needs index (SENI). The index built on the statewide Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and introduced a school site ranking mechanism in order to leverage and equitably allocate LCFF funds. Between 2014 and 2021, the district refined the SENI formula to target funds based on multiple academic, disciplinary, and health indicators of school need.

Generally speaking, there is strong evidence that LCFF funding increases have had a positive impact on graduation rates and academic outcomes for low-income students of color.²⁰ Research on SENI has shown that the formula does a good job at more equitably targeting funds towards

the district's most underinvested schools.²¹ Funds are typically used for instruction, staffing, and school administration.

Although there is not a clear strong positive relationship between SENI funds and student academic outcomes, the funds do have a positive impact on some student groups, specifically English learners and students with disabilities from low-income families.²²

As the district narrowed in on a more equitable funding formula, they began to shift focus towards resolutions that specifically targeted racial and ethnic student groups. The board passed resolutions aimed at increasing educational opportunities and outcomes for specific racial and ethnic subgroups. These efforts included expanding access to bilingual and dual language programs for English learners, introducing an ethnic studies curriculum, and creating equitable and more restorative, inclusive learning environments for all students. There is less research on the impact of these specific programs but the efforts are, in part, a result of work to redirect funding to the district's most underinvested students.

²⁰ Johnson, Rucker C., et al. "Money and freedom: The impact of California's school finance reform (research brief)." Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018, https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/2018-09/GDTFIL_Report_Johnson.pdf

²¹ Levin, Jesse, et al. "Evaluation of Los Angeles Unified School District's Student Equity Needs Index."

²² Ibid

GPSN Recommends

We recommend the district explore opportunities to further institutionalize and expand funding allocated to the index. SENI was an important impetus to address the absence of equity in the district's funding of schools and student services. SENI has demonstrated that the district must institute an equity model across all financial decisions and/or practices. We must continue to strengthen implementation and build from SENI to ensure funding equity for all students of color and those living in poverty. If we want to realize the academic achievement and social-emotional goals in the district's strategic plan, it is imperative to align financial decision-making to realize equitable outcomes.

The workforce

Another key policy area we identified in our literature review was the district's intentional focus on recruiting and retaining high-quality educators. Since 2006, Los Angeles Unified has put forth 34 resolutions related to a high-quality and diverse educator and administrator workforce, 18 of which are still active. Persistent staffing shortages were the largest driver of educator workforce policy shifts. Some of the early reform highlights include the Teach LAUSD Campaign, a resolution aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of district job applications, and the Leaders of Leaders Program, which directed the superintendent to create a new, comprehensive principal leadership program. Another turning point was the ACLU win in the Reed case²³, which

protected younger teachers from seniority-based layoffs.

The impact of high-quality educators on student outcomes is one of the more developed areas of research in Los Angeles Unified. It is important to note that these findings are at the individual student level. Researchers found that teacher quality has a weaker impact on student outcomes at the district level, particularly for low-income students of color.²⁴ Still, research has found that students with limited access to qualified teachers are more likely to face learning challenges and that attending a highly-resourced school with qualified teachers has a positive impact on student graduation outcomes.²⁵

²³ This was a class action lawsuit against the State of California and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) seeking to prohibit budget-based layoffs at three Los Angeles middle schools because they denied students their fundamental right under the state constitution to equal educational opportunity.

²⁴ Chambers, Stefanie and Katherine Tate. "Value-Added Measures in Restructuring Urban Schools." *Education and Urban Society*, 47(6), 723–738. 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124513508582>

²⁵ Silver, David, Marisa Saunders, and Estela Zarate. "What factors predict high school graduation in the Los Angeles Unified School District." Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project, 2008.

²⁶ Estrada-Miller, Jeimee and Abby Ridley-Kerr. "Within Reach: Racially Diverse School Leadership and the K–12 Educator Pipeline in Los Angeles County." *Diversity in Leadership*, 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eba507d3b28f637626c923f/t/631629801261db7fc08047e6/1662399070002/WithinReach.pdf>

The district also made progress at diversifying the ethnoracial make up of its teacher and administrator workforce.²⁶ There is strong evidence to suggest that students of all races form stronger connections and learn better when they have teachers of color.²⁷ Students

of color with same-race teachers also earn higher GPAs, spend more time on homework, and have high expectations of going to college.²⁸ This is important in the Los Angeles Unified context, where 89% of students served by the district are students of color.

GPSN Recommends

We recommend the district prioritize supporting its newly recruited teachers, especially those who were intentionally hired to diversify the workforce. We also recommend the district work to intentionally retain its workforce and put supports in place to ensure that high-quality teachers stay in the district. Lastly, we recommend the district work to develop a sustainable teacher pipeline from its existing support staff by creating incentives and opportunities for school staff to stay in the district, advance in their careers, and pursue further credentialing.

²⁷ Cherng, Hua-Yu Sebastian and Peter F. Halpin. "The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers. *Educational Researcher*," vol. 45, no. 7, 2016, pp. 407–420. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16671718>

²⁸ Mittleman, Joel. "What's in a Match? Disentangling the Significance of Teacher Race/Ethnicity."

Conclusion

Los Angeles Unified is a unique microcosm of political advocacy and education reform. As the second largest school district in the country, it is a thought leader for creative policy reforms. Much of that can be attributed to the dedication of the Board of Education and their commitment to working in partnership with superintendents, district staff, advocacy organizations, educators, civic, and grassroots leaders. We see a bright future ahead for Los Angeles Unified as the district embarks on this

new era of student learning under the leadership of Superintendent Carvahlo.

We hope this brief serves as a tool to reflect on what is working well in Los Angeles Unified and provides a launching point for new policy efforts. The research is clear: when advocates, educators, and district leaders come together, we can drive impactful, lasting, positive change for the students of Los Angeles.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Abby Ridley-Kerr, Director of Research and Policy at the Estrada Darley Miller Group (EDMG),

with research support from Julianna Miller and Jeimee Estrada-Miller, Co-Founder of EDMG.