

# **Building an Effective LAUSD**

**Decision-Making Framework for Today's District Realities**

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# The Need to Evolve Decision-Making in LAUSD

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has never operated in a static environment. Right now, its environment is defined by two realities that sit side by side: real academic momentum, with students posting continued gains on state assessments and accelerating progress among historically underserved student groups,<sup>1</sup> and a structural fiscal reckoning that the district can no longer defer. LAUSD's charge now is to build on the first while confronting the second.

The current moment is also shaped by the sustained convergence of other pressures. Sustained enrollment declines are reshaping school operations and funding dynamics, while fiscal pressures have intensified due to rising fixed costs, limited budget flexibility, and shifts in state and federal funding. At the same time, workforce instability and cost-of-living challenges are at their peak, further straining the district's ability to recruit and retain staff. Meanwhile, LAUSD still continues to navigate the long tail of COVID-19 recovery while responding to increasingly frequent emergencies, including the wildfires in early 2025 and federal immigration raids. These challenges are not temporary, and they require the district to make consequential choices that affect students, families, and the district's long-term direction.

In the last several years, LAUSD has had to make repeated high-stakes decisions, from pandemic closures and reopenings,

to navigating enrollment-driven budget shortfalls, to implementing districtwide instructional shifts. The decisions themselves matter, but the *way that they are made* also needs to reflect the times. However, decision-making has not always kept pace with LAUSD's changing realities, reducing the district's ability to respond strategically and effectively.

When decision-making does not evolve as district realities change, the costs can be felt unevenly, as schools and students with the greatest need are least able to absorb disruption, delay, or misalignment. Left unaddressed, legacy decision-making patterns can inadvertently perpetuate inconsistent access to high-quality learning, further widening gaps for the students LAUSD is committed to serving.

This new era brings new leadership and opportunity for refreshed decision-making to LAUSD. Following the June 2026 resignation of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, the Board of Education named Andrés Chait, a longtime district administrator, as permanent superintendent, alongside new senior academic leadership. This transition serves as an opening: a moment for the district to articulate a clear vision for its next chapter, one that preserves and accelerates recent academic progress while confronting the district's fiscal realities through transparent, student-centered leadership. Superintendent Chait has already begun to signal this approach: in his first Opening of Schools address, he framed

the district's task as building on record academic momentum while confronting its challenges directly.<sup>2</sup> How the new leadership team follows through on that framing in its first year will shape whether the opportunity is realized.

This document articulates an approach to decision-making intended to support LAUSD leaders as they navigate complex, high-stakes choices in a consistent, transparent, and student-centered

way. It reflects GPSN's orientation to its work with the district, serving as a tool for partnership and support to help leadership navigate difficult choices. This framework includes principles that anchor our approach and how we surface trade-offs, assess alignment with student need, and bring greater clarity to difficult decisions. Rather than prescribing outcomes, the framework is designed to help leaders ask stronger questions, often as they weigh competing priorities.



# Unchanged Decision-Making in a Changed Context

In the early 2000s, LAUSD decision-making was oriented toward managing significant growth. The district operated as a growing system, including opening more than 100 new schools over the course of about 15 years to relieve overcrowding.<sup>3</sup> In that era, choices focused on scaling capacity for a surging student population in the context of a predictable, expanding budget.

But the LAUSD of today is fundamentally different from the district of 20 years ago, shifting from an era of expansion and relative stability to an era of contraction and volatility. While the district's mission remains the same, the environment in which that mission must be achieved has changed significantly:

- **A shrinking footprint:** At its peak in school year (SY) 2002–03, LAUSD served 724,113 K-12 students; for SY 2026–27, LAUSD projects total TK-12 enrollment of 378,468.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, LAUSD has not meaningfully adjusted its physical infrastructure even though its student population has fallen by more than 40%.<sup>5</sup> Because average daily attendance (ADA), which is directly tied to enrollment, is the primary driver of funding, these shifts directly affect LAUSD's capacity to staff schools, maintain facilities, and provide the academic and student supports needed for success. The core challenge is not simply serving fewer students, but adapting systems and resource

allocation quickly enough to sustain and improve outcomes in the context of a shrinking funding base.

- **From episodic crisis to persistent disruptions:** What were once treated as discrete emergencies have become a defining feature of the operating environment. From the long-term demands of COVID-19 recovery, to the devastating impacts of the 2025 wildfires, to the 2026 Lineage warehouse fire that forced environmental safety testing at several Boyle Heights schools just before the start of the school year, to ongoing federal immigration raids, LAUSD is increasingly required to make consequential decisions regularly under conditions of uncertainty, disruption, and compressed timelines.<sup>6</sup>
- **A shifting fiscal landscape:** The expiration of billions in federal pandemic relief has coincided with growing fiscal uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the state of California is transitioning from a period of expansion to one of tighter and more unpredictable fiscal conditions, with federal proposals signaling potential reductions in education and related funding streams.<sup>8</sup> Although the Governor's 2026–27 budget reflects an unexpected revenue surge driven by AI sector gains, that windfall is volatile, the state is still projecting

structural deficits in coming years, and a significant portion of guaranteed school funding remains in dispute.<sup>9</sup> LAUSD is no longer simply balancing a budget year to year, but rather navigating a structural mismatch between available resources and ongoing obligations. In July 2026, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) notified the district that it meets the statutory criteria for a “Lack of Going Concern” designation, a finding that the district may be unable to meet its financial obligations in fiscal years 2027–28 and 2028–29, driven in part by newly approved labor contracts that add an estimated \$1.13 billion in costs in 2026–27, rising to \$1.44 billion in 2027–28.<sup>10</sup> Addressing the fiscal crisis requires moving beyond short-term fixes toward more deliberate, long-term strategies that protect core classroom supports and student services, particularly for schools with the greatest need.

While the current challenges are significant, there is no single point in LAUSD’s history that offers a simple blueprint for navigating today’s realities. Previous eras of greater financial stability often existed alongside other serious challenges, including uneven access to academic opportunities and outcomes that varied widely across schools and student groups.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, decision-making across LAUSD’s history has never

been a static process; it has been highly personalized and fluid, fluctuating based on the superintendent’s leadership style, the shifting priorities and membership of the board, the involvement of the mayor’s office, and the broader advocacy ecosystem. These ever-changing conditions mean that how input is gathered, how trade-offs are weighed, and who is invited to the table remain largely discretionary, leaving the district’s most critical choices vulnerable to the shifting winds of personality and power rather than being anchored in a stable set of principles.

Taken together, the decisions designed for a 720,000-student district do not all translate for today’s LAUSD, and the assumptions that once guided decision-making — about scale, resources, and stability — no longer fully hold. The conditions facing LAUSD today are different, and so must be the way decisions are made. A return to past practices is not the answer. The district needs a more intentional approach to weighing trade-offs that reflects the specific needs of today’s students and the reality of current constraints. Under this approach, student outcomes are the deliberate goal of every choice, not the hoped-for byproduct of constantly evolving political dynamics. Superintendent Andrés Chait now has the opportunity to anchor decision-making in exactly this way by establishing a consistent, student-centered approach for the district’s next chapter.

# Principles to Guide Decision-Making: What Needs to be True for Students

GPSN's role is not to make decisions for LAUSD or to advocate for predetermined outcomes. Rather, GPSN supports district leaders by helping clarify what is at stake in complex decisions, including who is affected, what trade-offs are being made, and whether choices move the district closer to success for all students.

For LAUSD to serve students effectively in today's context, decision-making must be anchored in a set of core commitments. From GPSN's perspective, the following eight principles represent the essential conditions that must be met to ensure that every choice contributes to a more resilient and student-centered district:

- 1. Prioritize student achievement, especially for students with the greatest need:** Decisions should be grounded in their impact on students' academic experiences and outcomes, not on system convenience or short-term pressures.
- 2. Acknowledge that students may need different inputs to achieve the same positive outcome:** Leading with need depends on being explicit about who benefits, who may be burdened, and why.
- 3. Align resources to need and evidence, not legacy patterns:** Dollars, staffing, and supports should follow what students need to succeed, guided by evidence rather than historical ways of working, and leaders must be willing to take calculated risks when past patterns no longer deliver results.
- 4. Recognize that staff conditions are learning conditions:** Student achievement requires ensuring that all school staff have the time, training, and supports needed to do their work well.
- 5. Treat compliance as the floor, not the goal:** Meeting minimum requirements does not define adequacy; district decisions should be guided by what students need, not just what is required.
- 6. Engage communities meaningfully and respond clearly:** Community involvement strengthens decisions when the experiences, perspectives, and priorities of students, families, educators, and communities are considered.
- 7. Communicate decisions and trade-offs transparently and take ownership:** Clear communication about choices, trade-offs, and accountability is essential to maintaining trust.
- 8. Revisit decisions and course-correct in a timely manner:** Progress depends on monitoring impact and adjusting when outcomes fall short.

# The Principles in Practice

The value of these principles lies in how they shape real decisions. The sections that follow describe how GPSN examines district decisions through this lens, reflect on how the district has centered each principle or fallen short in past decision-making, and offer questions leaders can ask themselves to explore whether choices move LAUSD closer to what needs to be true for its students.

## Principle 1: Prioritize Student Achievement, Especially for Students With the Greatest Need

LAUSD's most consequential decisions should be grounded in how they shape students' daily learning experiences, clearly articulating how students' classroom experiences may change as a result. This means asking instructional questions early, before decisions are finalized, rather than treating academic impact as something to assess after implementation.

This also means recognizing that financial and operational decisions are never academically neutral. Staffing formulas, budget reductions, and program shifts all shape students' access to consistent, high-quality instruction. Even when decisions are framed as operational, their effects impact student achievement, often most acutely in classrooms serving students with the greatest need. Asking who benefits and who bears the burden of a given choice, and whether that burden falls disproportionately on students the district has historically underserved, is an integral part of assessing the decision's real academic impact.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

LAUSD's decision to make **A–G coursework** the default graduation requirement was a landmark example of centering student learning. In response to historical tracking and unequal access to college prep courses, the board adopted its “Create Educational Equity” resolution in 2005, making A–G courses the district's standard course sequence for entering 9th graders after 2008 and expanding access to CSU/UC eligibility across the district.<sup>12</sup> By the time the class of 2016 began high school, LAUSD had phased in A–G as a graduation expectation.<sup>13</sup> In setting college preparatory coursework as the default graduation pathway, particularly in schools that had historically offered fewer options, the district aligned a system-level decision with student learning goals.

In a more recent example, LAUSD has shown that operational follow-through can produce real academic results, even as important work remains. For example, after leadership committed to implementing research-based **Science of Reading** districtwide in SY 2023–24, LAUSD posted consecutive years of gains on the state's Smarter Balanced Assessment — evidence that the district is moving in the right direction.<sup>14</sup> Yet literacy remains a pressing challenge, particularly for the students with the greatest need: in 2024–25, only 46.46% of LAUSD students met or exceeded state standards for English Language Arts, and just 35.8% of Black students and 41.03% of Latino students did so, compared to 68.88% of white students.<sup>15</sup> Significant obstacles were evident at the outset of the Science of Reading rollout, with a February 2024 Families In Schools report finding that just 15% of parents knew what reading curriculum their child's school used, and that many teachers were unfamiliar with the Science of Reading approach and wanted support in implementing it well.<sup>16</sup> As the district builds on its progress, it should keep asking who is benefiting most from current investments, and whether students who have been historically underserved are closing the gap or being left further behind.

### Decision Check

When weighing a major decision, district leaders should be able to answer:

- How will this decision impact the daily experience of student learning, especially for students with the greatest need?
- If we prioritize operational ease here, what specific student opportunity or support are we potentially trading away?

## Principle 2: Acknowledge that Students May Need Different Inputs to Achieve the Same Positive Outcome

Addressing student need requires more than good intentions; it requires clarity about how decisions distribute benefits and burdens across schools and student groups. Decisions that center student need make trade-offs explicit rather than obscuring them in systemwide averages. Without this clarity, well-intentioned policies can reinforce existing gaps by protecting stability for some students while concentrating disruption for others.

In practice, this means recognizing that students may need different supports to succeed, while holding the same high expectations for everyone. Schools serving students with greater needs may require more staffing, funding, or flexibility to achieve comparable outcomes. Need-centered decision-making recognizes that equal treatment does not produce equal results, and that variation in resources is both appropriate and necessary when student needs differ.

It also means naming disproportionate harm directly. Aggregate metrics can mask the ways decisions play out unevenly across campuses, particularly for students in high-need schools. Centering this principle requires asking not only whether a decision improves outcomes on average, but where it creates strain, instability, or loss — and for whom.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

At times, LAUSD has successfully leaned into necessary variation to solve for disparate outcomes. For instance, in the early 2000s, facilities investments addressed **severe overcrowding** and **documented poor conditions** across the district, reflecting an effort to direct resources where conditions most constrained student learning, even when doing so required delaying improvements elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, the **Student Equity Needs Index (SENI)**, first introduced in SY 2014–15 and substantially revised in SY 2017–18, represents a critical shift toward naming and responding to specific student realities.<sup>18</sup> By accounting for factors like poverty, foster status, and English learner status, SENI moves away from treating all schools as interchangeable and toward a model where funding inputs are intentionally varied to meet student need.<sup>19</sup> In SY 2024–25, highest-need schools received \$7,270 more per pupil than lowest-need schools, reflecting a deliberate choice to vary funding based on student need rather than treat all schools equally.<sup>20</sup>

In other instances, a “one-size-fits-all” approach to system rules has created intolerable variation in school stability. Ongoing tensions between **stability at some schools** and **persistent staffing churn** at higher-need campuses illustrate how burdens can become concentrated rather than shared.<sup>21</sup> In LAUSD, some staffing rules are locally set, while others — such as seniority-based layoff order — are required by California law, though the law does allow districts to deviate from strict seniority in narrow circumstances, including to address equal protection concerns.<sup>22</sup> As generally administered, this state-mandated rule interacts with existing workforce patterns in ways that disproportionately affect high-poverty, high-need schools, particularly those serving Black and Latino students.<sup>23</sup> Because these campuses tend to employ larger shares of newer educators, they experience higher rates of layoffs, vacancies, and turnover, resulting in greater reliance on substitutes, less-experienced staff, and ongoing instability.<sup>24</sup>

### Decision Check

- Who benefits, who is burdened, and how does this affect outcomes across schools and student groups?
- Does this decision treat a unique school site challenge with a “one-size-fits-all” solution?
- How must our allocation of inputs intentionally differ in this case to ensure that every student reaches the same high standard of success?

## Principle 3: Align Resources to Need and Evidence, Not Legacy Patterns

When resources are allocated based on historical patterns, political durability, or institutional habit, spending can drift away from what evidence suggests students need most, particularly in periods of fiscal constraint. In practice, centering this principle requires asking how investments are expected to influence student learning, where evidence supports continued spending, and where resources may no longer be producing meaningful academic returns. Because every dollar carries an opportunity cost for students, resource decisions are ultimately academic decisions and should be evaluated by asking who benefits from current spending patterns, who is underserved by them, and whether they still reflect the needs of the district's highest-need students.

However, evidence-informed leadership also recognizes that for the most persistent — or unprecedented — challenges, the proven roadmap may not yet exist. In these moments, the district must be willing to take calculated risks that deliberately shift from an outdated practice.

It also means examining long-term liabilities, not just the annual balance. Decisions that appear fiscally responsible in the short term, such as deferring maintenance, limiting staffing investments, or protecting recurring expenditures without scrutiny, can create future costs that ultimately constrain instructional flexibility. When programs are preserved based on tradition, without clearly articulating their academic impact or opportunity cost, resources may be diverted from higher-need areas. Sustainable

decision-making requires weighing how today's choices shape the district's ability to respond to student needs over time.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

The mid-2000s **Algebra for All** push, in which LAUSD expanded access to Algebra I as part of a statewide shift, illustrates a deliberate move away from entrenched tracking practices. District leaders had no perfect playbook guaranteeing universal success, but they did have mounting evidence that traditional, racially biased math tracks were shutting Black and Latino students out of college preparatory pathways.<sup>25</sup> By making Algebra I a default expectation for far more students, LAUSD and other California districts saw substantial increases in the number of students of color enrolling in algebra coursework that had previously been reserved for a smaller, more advantaged group of students — though access gains alone were not enough to reliably improve achievement.<sup>26</sup> The experience suggests that breaking historical patterns, like traditional access to coursework, is often a necessary first step toward stronger outcomes, even when the implementation is imperfect.

In other instances, decisions have undermined this principle. During periods of fiscal contraction, certain programs or expenditures have remained protected while broader cuts affected instructional staffing and school-level supports. For example, across multiple budget cycles, LAUSD has faced choices about **which established programs to protect**, raising questions about whether all recurring expenditures are being weighed against their opportunity cost.<sup>27</sup>

### Decision Check

- Are resources being allocated based on current student need and evidence of impact, or is this an automatic renewal of a historical pattern?
- What would we need to stop, reduce, or redesign to make this work financially?



## Principle 4: Recognize that Staff Conditions are Learning Conditions

Student outcomes are shaped not only by what decisions are made, but also by the conditions under which adults are expected to carry them out. Even well-designed policies can fall short if school staff lack the time, training, stability, and support needed for effective implementation. Centering this principle requires recognizing that implementation is not automatic and that adult capacity is a prerequisite for student success.

In practice, this means aligning expectations with capacity. New initiatives, program expansions, or shifts in instructional approach place real demands on teachers, principals, counselors, and classified staff. Decisions that assume schools can absorb additional responsibilities without corresponding investments in staffing, professional learning, or operational support risk undermining outcomes.

It also means acknowledging that broader staff working conditions are tied to student learning conditions. Staffing stability, manageable workloads, and access to instructional and operational support all influence the consistency and quality of students' daily experiences. When adult conditions deteriorate, students, particularly those in high-need schools, often feel the effects first and most acutely.

Finally, because staffing and professional learning investments are themselves budget decisions, cutting them to balance a budget is ultimately a decision about which students get the adult support they need. As LAUSD considers possible layoffs

and other cuts to close its budget gap, this principle applies directly: each of those decisions is also a decision about which students keep stable, well-supported adults in their daily lives.



## The Principle in LAUSD's Context

At times, LAUSD has strategically invested in adult capacity and their working conditions. For instance, the **Community Schools Initiative**, initially funded in 2019, has used state California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) grants not just to add programs, but also to build adult capacity to support the implementation of community-connected learning.<sup>28</sup> By treating professional development, coaching, and additional staff as core components of the model rather than add-ons, the district has begun to align expanded expectations with the adult conditions needed to sustain them.

In other instances, decisions have undermined this principle. For example, **reductions in classified staff**, undertaken to preserve classroom teaching positions during fiscal downturns, weakened school site functioning in ways that were not always fully anticipated. Cuts to roles such as campus aides, clerical staff, and custodial workers increased the operational and supervisory burden on teachers and administrators, diverting time and attention away from instruction and altering the adult conditions necessary for schools to function effectively.

## Decision Check

- Do the adults impacted by this decision have the specific time, training, and operational stability required to make this work?
- What existing responsibilities or initiatives are being reduced, paused, or streamlined to create real bandwidth for this work?
- If capacity is constrained, how will remaining staff absorb the workload, and how will those shifts ultimately shape students' daily experience?



## Principle 5: Treat Compliance as the Floor, Not the Goal

Compliance with state and federal requirements is necessary, but it is not sufficient to achieve strong student outcomes. When compliance becomes the primary objective, decision-making can narrow to meeting minimum thresholds rather than pursuing what students actually need to thrive. Centering this principle requires treating mandates as baselines to build from, not ceilings that limit ambition.

In practice, this means distinguishing between what is required and what is discretionary. State mandates often establish minimum expectations while leaving districts significant flexibility in how policies are designed, implemented, and expanded. Student need-centered decision-making requires naming where the district has genuine choice, and using that discretion intentionally in service of student learning and access.

It also means recognizing that how a mandate is implemented matters as much as whether it is met. Decisions that technically satisfy compliance requirements can still produce uneven outcomes depending on how resources, supports, and accountability are structured. Families with the fewest resources are often least able to supplement what the district does not provide, so decisions that meet only minimum requirements tend to fall hardest on the students LAUSD has historically underserved.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

LAUSD's move to make **A–G coursework** the default graduation requirement — which was implemented in SY 2015–16 — is a clear instance of treating the state floor as a starting point.<sup>29</sup> While the state of California has a set of minimum graduation requirements, LAUSD used its local discretion to set a higher bar, signaling that compliance with state graduation rates was less important than ensuring students were actually eligible for college.<sup>30</sup>

Conversely, the district's **pandemic-era remote learning** serves as a sobering example of the distance between legal compliance and student need. In the 2025 settlement of the *Shaw v. LAUSD* class-action lawsuit, filed by parents who alleged that COVID-19 policies violated students' constitutional rights and fell below statewide standards, the district agreed to a multiyear academic recovery plan.<sup>31</sup> The settlement requires LAUSD to provide at least 45 hours per year of high-dose tutoring for more than 100,000 of its most vulnerable students over three years, amounting to more than 10 million tutoring hours.<sup>32</sup> This scale of remedial support illustrates how decisions that hover at the compliance floor can ultimately generate profound moral and substantial operational consequences when systems fail to truly meet students' needs.

### Decision Check

- What parts of this decision are strictly mandated by law, and where do we have local discretion to go further or do things differently?
- What constraints are real versus assumed?
- If we only do the minimum required today, what is the long-term cost to students, and what gaps might we be creating?



## Principle 6: Engage Communities Meaningfully and Respond Clearly

Strong decision-making depends on understanding how policies and system changes are experienced by those closest to schools. Students, families, educators, school staff, and community members bring essential perspectives about needs, impacts, and unintended consequences that may not be visible through data alone. Centering this principle means treating community involvement as a core input into decision-making, not a procedural step at the end of the process.

In practice, this requires recognizing that trust is a critical aspect of the decision-making process. Meaningful engagement does not necessarily guarantee agreement with final decisions, particularly when leaders must navigate competing priorities, constraints, and trade-offs. However, trust is strengthened when communities understand how their input was considered, what factors ultimately

shaped the decision, and why a particular path was chosen.

This principle also requires making the relationship between input and decision explicit. Too often, engagement processes solicit feedback without clearly communicating how it will be used, leading to frustration or disengagement when outcomes differ from expressed preferences. Centering community involvement means being transparent about where input can influence decisions, where constraints limit options, and how differing perspectives are weighed alongside evidence, student need considerations, and system capacity. This is especially true for families and communities that have historically had less access to formal decision-making channels; equitable engagement means proactively reaching those voices rather than waiting for them to arrive.



## The Principle in LAUSD's Context

The **multi-bond, multi-decade school construction program**, totaling more than \$20 billion and ultimately building more than 140 new schools, offers a concrete example of meaningful community involvement.<sup>33</sup> District leaders could not have sustained such a large program in a vacuum; they moved into a highly public posture that relied on broad civic backing that, across different bond campaigns, included businesses, labor groups, civil rights leaders, and community partners, and made the case to voters that new schools would relieve overcrowding and bring students back to neighborhood campuses.<sup>34</sup> By clearly naming the “why” and highlighting tangible benefits, such as eliminating involuntary busing and portable classrooms in specific communities, LAUSD built a durable coalition of voters and advocates willing to renew and extend the bond authority over many years.

More recently, LAUSD's 2026 **Program Landscape Analysis** — a districtwide study of TK-12 programmatic offerings such as magnet schools, career pathways, and advanced learning options — offers a current example of this same principle in practice. The analysis drew on more than 5,700 perspectives from stakeholders across the Los Angeles community, who contributed through community meetings, surveys, and working sessions: 4,300 community members, including families across board districts, who participated in community meetings and/or LAUSD's Thought Exchange platform; 1,100 LAUSD stakeholders, including 745 principals surveyed and teachers and regional staff in focus groups; input from more than 40 labor, civic, foundation, and independent charter partners; and outreach to 290 non-LAUSD families, including ones who had either applied to a LAUSD CHOICES program without enrolling or left the district.<sup>35</sup> Rather than treating this engagement as a formality, the district used it to inform its understanding of current program offerings and shape recommendations to strengthen what communities receive.

Conversely, a persistent challenge in LAUSD has been a cultural habit of treating professional educators and central decision-makers as the primary experts, while **families' lived experience is not always treated as equally** consequential input. Although most LAUSD families say their perspectives as parents and caregivers are represented in major district decisions, 55% report that they feel represented only some, a little, or not at all when it comes to policy decisions.<sup>36</sup> When families are grouped into a broad “community” category rather than recognized as primary partners with distinct moral authority and day-to-day insight into student experience, engagement risks becoming more procedural than substantive, weakening trust and making it harder to sustain major decisions when conditions change.

## Decision Check

- Whose input is essential to understanding the impacts of this decision, and how are we engaging them?
- How will we communicate what we heard and how it informed the final decision?
- If the decision differs from community preferences, how will we clearly explain the rationale, constraints, and trade-offs involved?

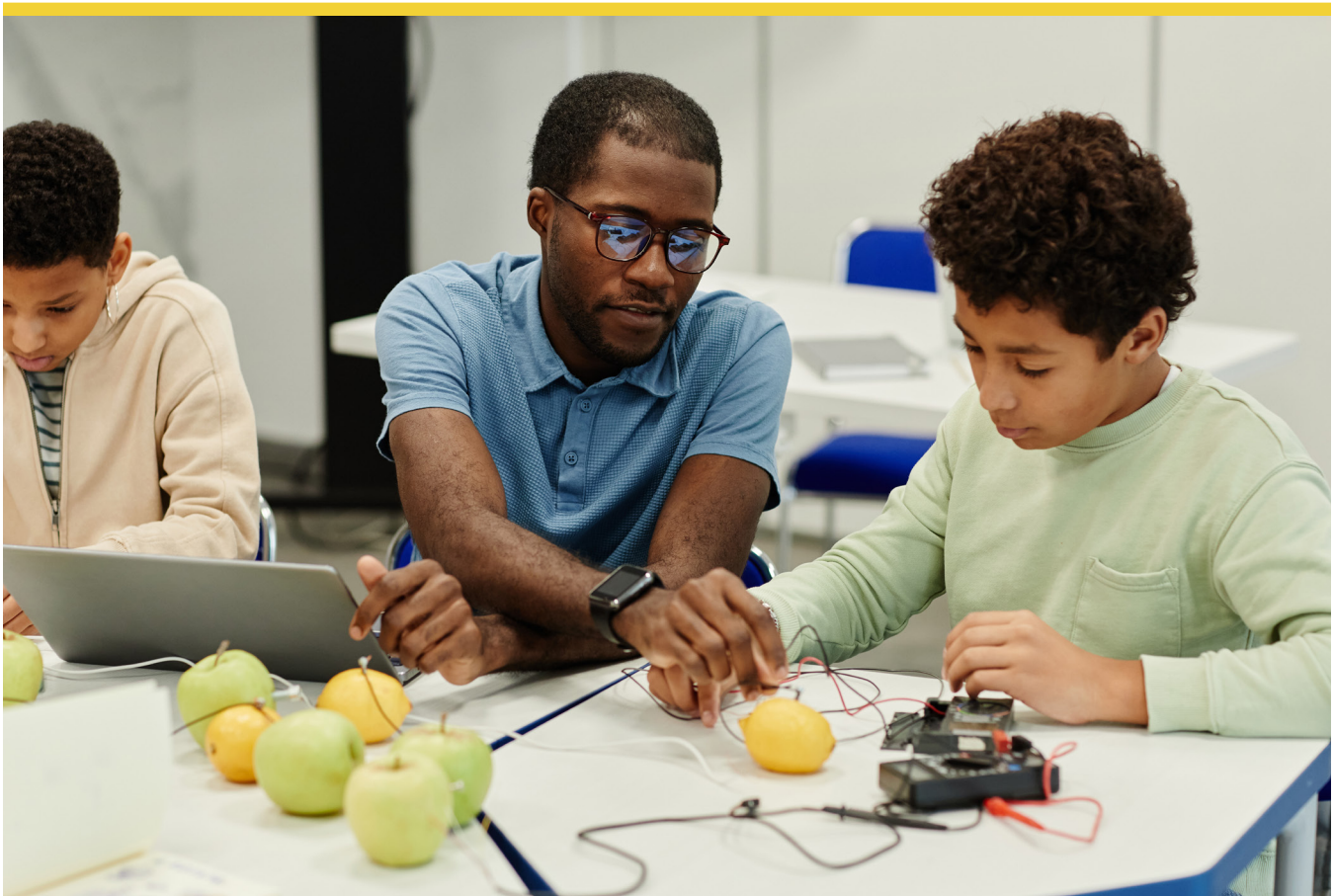
## Principle 7: Communicate Decisions and Trade-Offs Transparently and Take Ownership

Even difficult or unpopular decisions can maintain legitimacy when leaders clearly explain the rationale, the trade-offs involved, and the constraints they are navigating. Centering this principle requires recognizing that transparency means helping stakeholders understand what choices were made, why they were made, and who is accountable for their consequences.

In practice, this means making trade-offs explicit rather than implicit. Every major decision benefits some groups more than others and imposes costs somewhere in the system. When these trade-offs are left unstated, they are often inferred,

sometimes inaccurately, by those most affected. Transparent decision-making names both benefits and burdens directly, rather than allowing impacts to be discovered after the fact. Being explicit about which schools, students, or communities absorb a cost, particularly those historically underserved, is part of this honest communication.

It also requires distinguishing between constraints that are truly fixed and choices that are being made within those constraints. Making those distinctions clear helps stakeholders understand what is unavoidable and what reflects deliberate prioritization.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

LAUSD's creation of the **Black Student Achievement Plan (BSAP)** reflected a relatively clear public acknowledgment about both need and resource trade-offs. In SY 2020–21, the board voted to cut \$25 million from the school police budget and redirect those funds toward academic, climate, and mental health supports for Black students, explicitly linking the shift to longstanding racial disparities and community demands.<sup>37</sup> By naming where the initial BSAP dollars would come from and tying that reallocation to stated goals for Black student success, district leaders created a visible commitment that community advocates could monitor and hold them to over time.

Conversely, LAUSD's 2026 **Fiscal Stabilization Plan** illustrates how large numbers can be announced without the context communities need to understand their impact. To address the structural deficit, the board voted in May 2026 to eliminate 657 central office and centrally funded positions.<sup>38</sup> It also considered a draft plan to close a projected \$3.6 billion three-year gap through cuts, including additional layoffs, mandatory furlough days, and major reductions to SENI allocations beginning in 2027–28, which the board approved in June 2026.<sup>39</sup> However, the district has faced pushback over cuts, with particular concerns from labor leaders and community members about whether they will land harder on some school communities than others.<sup>40</sup> When large dollar or job cut totals are announced without adequately naming where the reductions land or what consideration was given to their impact, communities are left unable to assess, or hold the district accountable for, the trade-offs being made.

### Decision Check

- How are we communicating this decision transparently?
- Can we explain the rationale for this decision in a way that an average parent would understand, even if they disagree with the outcome?
- What trade-offs are we explicitly naming publicly?
- Is it clear to stakeholders who is responsible for the implementation of this decision?

## Principle 8: Revisit Decisions and Course-Correct in a Timely Manner

In complex systems, no single decision is ever final. Decisions are made with imperfect information, evolving conditions, and competing priorities. Centering this principle requires treating decisions as hypotheses to be tested, rather than conclusions to be defended. Strong decision-making depends not only on using data upfront, but on revisiting decisions as new information emerges and adjusting course when intended outcomes are not being realized.

In practice, this means building in clear indicators and checkpoints from the outset. Before major decisions are implemented, leaders should be explicit about what success looks like, how it will be measured, and when progress will be reviewed.

Without these shared expectations, it becomes difficult to distinguish between implementation challenges and flawed assumptions or to know when a decision warrants revision.

It also requires normalizing revision as a sign of learning, not failure. Without regular review and adjustment, even well-intentioned decisions can produce unintended consequences that deepen over time. This applies as much to budget and staffing decisions as to instructional ones: course correction should examine whether those choices are continuing to narrow gaps for the students who bear the greatest burden of historic disparities, or merely maintaining the status quo.



### The Principle in LAUSD's Context

The evolution of the **SENI** is an example of a district revisiting a decision to align with its stated goals. The original index (SENI 1.0) was adopted following the board's 2014 Equity Is Justice Resolution, but it was imperfect.<sup>41</sup> In one analysis, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools found that the index directed less than a quarter of 1% of the district's operating budget according to actual school need, and that schools ranked as lower-need sometimes received more supplemental funding per student than higher-need schools.<sup>42</sup> Rather than defending a flawed system, the district responded to community advocacy by negotiating SENI 2.0 in SY 2017–18 and fully implementing it the following school year.<sup>43</sup> This revised version expanded to over a dozen indicators, including asthma rates, homelessness, and exposure to gun violence, to more accurately capture the reality of student need.<sup>44</sup> By acknowledging the limitations of the first version and scaling the new index to a larger share of the budget, the district demonstrated that course correction can be an important aspect of meeting its goals.

A related dynamic played out with the district's use of one-time COVID relief dollars for **Primary Promise**, its K-3 literacy intervention program launched in 2020. More than a year before the pandemic relief funding underlying the program was set to expire in September 2024, Superintendent Carvalho proposed redesigning it, not because the program had failed, but because its \$134 million annual cost depended entirely on a funding source about to disappear.<sup>45</sup> Acting ahead of that funding cliff, rather than after it hit, gave the district room to redesign the model, including training classroom teachers directly rather than relying solely on dedicated interventionists, and extending support beyond K-3 reading to literacy and math intervention across grade levels.<sup>46</sup> The district's early recognition of the funding cliff created the space to manage the transition and trade-offs in a timely manner, rather than confronting them only once the money was already gone.

These kinds of course corrections are not guaranteed, however. Too often, decisions get made and then simply persist, unvisited and unquestioned, long after the evidence for or against them has changed.

### Decision Check

- How will we know, in the short term and long term, whether this decision is actually working for students?
- If the data shows we are not hitting our milestones, what conditions would trigger changes to this decision?

# Decisions That Will Define the Next Chapter for LAUSD

Several major decisions facing LAUSD in the near term will require leaders to weigh trade-offs across all the principles outlined above: academic impact, student need, resource alignment, adult conditions, compliance, course correction, transparency, and community involvement. Across each of these decisions, who benefits, who bears the burden, and how the decision accounts for the district's historic disparities should be asked continually, not just at the outset. The framework outlined in this paper is meant to support that work: not by simplifying hard choices, but by ensuring that decisions are examined through a lens grounded in what students need to succeed.

## District Realignment Amid Budget Cuts and Declining Enrollment

Declining enrollment and fiscal pressure are forcing LAUSD to consider realignment — bringing the number of schools, staffing, and use of resources into alignment with district enrollment and finances.<sup>47</sup> These decisions are often framed as technical or unavoidable, but their consequences are also deeply instructional. This is not abstract: Board member Tanya Ortiz Franklin has acknowledged that considering school consolidation may be necessary as enrollment continues to decline.<sup>48</sup>

However, realignment can also be approached through a lens of transformation and an opportunity to

rebuild stronger, more resourced schools out of a shrinking system. Seen this way, realignment carries real potential for LAUSD: the chance to concentrate its recent academic momentum into fewer, stronger campuses instead of spreading it thin across underenrolled buildings, to give students fuller course offerings and staffing stability that only come with adequate enrollment, and to model the kind of transparent, student-centered decision-making the district's new leadership has said it wants to define this next chapter.

Realizing that potential also means grappling with hard, specific questions: which school buildings to keep open and which to close or merge, how vacated facilities might be repurposed to serve students and communities rather than sit empty, and what happens to the teachers, counselors, and staff whose positions are affected. The risk of right-sizing is not simply disruption, but uneven disruption across schools. High-need schools, already contending with staffing instability and more strain, are often least able to absorb further disruption from staffing churn or closures. Decisions made to stabilize the system financially can, if not examined carefully, undermine the very learning conditions the district is seeking to protect. At the same time, some small high-need schools may not be viable to preserve in their current form given enrollment and fiscal realities. In those cases, the decision-making process should still explicitly name

the school's high-need status and the specific steps taken to minimize harm to students and staff — through transition planning, staffing continuity, or priority placement — rather than treating the closure as a routine facilities decision.

Decision-making to address budget challenges and declining enrollment is not

just about whether or not to realign, but also how decisions can be guided by a real vision for what comes next for students, understanding where harm concentrates, which academic conditions must be preserved, and which trade-offs are being made explicit rather than silently absorbed by students and schools.

### How Other Districts are Approaching This: Managing Declining Enrollment

Facing a long-term demographic trend of declining enrollment, with over 10,000 fewer students statewide this year, **Denver Public Schools** has moved toward school consolidations and restructuring.<sup>49</sup> Rather than treating facilities as static, the district is attempting to align the floor, consolidating to ensure that remaining schools have the enrollment levels necessary to fund robust experiences for students.<sup>50</sup> Denver Public Schools approached the process through transparent communication with its community, gathering input, explaining decision rationale, and naming trade-offs.<sup>51</sup> While the process has not been without challenges and community pushback, Denver's experience offers one example of how a district can approach consolidation with clearer connections between enrollment realities, program quality, operational sustainability, and community engagement.

**Cleveland Metropolitan School District** offers a recent example of realignment approached as an academic opportunity rather than purely a fiscal necessity. Having lost more than 40% of its enrollment over two decades, the district approved a plan in late 2025 to close or merge 29 schools, framing the restructuring explicitly around what students would gain.<sup>52</sup> The district says that right-sizing could bring the share of high schools offering college credit and career pathways to 100% and significantly expand non-core enrichment course access at the K-8 schools.<sup>53</sup> Like Denver, Cleveland's process involved a year of community engagement before the board voted. The plan followed roughly a year of community engagement — including public meetings, staff sessions, and advisory committee discussions — combined with a data-driven analysis of enrollment trends, building conditions, and school-level factors, which the district used to determine which schools to merge and how to minimize disruption for affected students.<sup>54</sup>

## Workforce Investment and Long-term Stability

At the same time, education workers across LAUSD, from teachers to bus drivers to paraprofessionals, are increasingly being priced out of the communities they serve.<sup>55</sup> This reality has direct implications for students: persistent vacancies and high turnover undermine instructional consistency, disrupt relationships, and place additional strain on the educators and staff who remain.

In spring 2026, LAUSD narrowly averted a three-union strike, reaching agreements with United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), Associated Administrators of Los Angeles (AALA), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99 in a compressed 48-hour window.<sup>56</sup> LAUSD's agreement with UTLA increased salary scales by 11.65% and raised the beginning teacher salary to \$77,000; AALA received an 11.65% salary increase over two years, with a reopener for year three; and SEIU Local 99 secured a 24% wage increase over three years.<sup>57</sup> These outcomes reflect genuine responsiveness to workforce conditions that had become untenable.

However, the district has simultaneously approved a reduction in force and is weighing further cuts under its Fiscal Stabilization Plan, even as the labor agreements reached this spring add to the district's cost pressures, with the district's own multiyear budget projections showing compensation costs on track to exceed operating revenue.<sup>58</sup> These salary increases, necessary to stabilize the

workforce, compound the structural deficit and add pressure to the district's overall fiscal picture. Decisions about workforce investment are therefore not separable from decisions about budget, enrollment, and long-term solvency, and the district will need to navigate that tension in the immediate term.

### How Other Districts are Approaching This: Workforce Stability

#### Minneapolis Public Schools

recently navigated high-stakes negotiations to narrowly avoid a strike, while **Philadelphia** implemented annual salary increases over three years and one-time bonuses for Philadelphia Federation of Teachers members.<sup>59</sup> These moves reflect a growing consensus that the fiscal cost of doing business must include the price of workforce stability, even when the long-term sustainability of those costs remains a significant challenge to solve.

In a more structural approach, **Palo Alto** and neighboring districts are partnering on a 110-unit educator housing development.<sup>60</sup> By capping rents at 30% of income, they are treating housing not as a separate social issue, but as a core workforce investment designed to stop the persistent churn that disrupts student learning.<sup>61</sup>

## Aligning Budget, Staffing, and Operations to Close Achievement Gaps

LAUSD has made real, sustained academic progress. The district's 2026 results reflect a three-year trend of year-over-year growth in English Language Arts, math, and science, with accelerated gains among historically underserved students outpacing overall districtwide growth, evidence that recent investments in instruction and support are paying off systemwide.<sup>62</sup>

The next challenge is to build on that momentum: accelerating the pace of growth and closing the gaps that remain for students who still have the furthest to go. Research consistently shows that closing achievement gaps requires grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep student engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for every student, and too often, students of color, students from families with low income, students with disabilities, and English learners spend the vast majority of their school days without consistent access to these conditions.<sup>63</sup> When decisions across the system fail to protect these conditions, achievement suffers. Seen through this lens, achievement is not a standalone programmatic challenge. It is a barometer of whether budget, staffing, and operational decisions are aligned with academic priorities, particularly for students with the greatest need.

### How Other Districts are Approaching This: Aligning Systems to Close Achievement Gaps

Illinois implemented its **Illinois Tutoring Initiative (ITI)** across 72 districts in 2022; an evaluation of its first year found that nearly 90% of tutored students met or exceeded expected growth in math, nearly 80% did so in reading, and tutored students outperformed peers on end-of-year assessments.<sup>64</sup> The initiative required deliberate coordination across state and district agencies, competitive tutor wages to attract qualified staff, adherence to evidence-based tutoring models, and ongoing monitoring to address implementation challenges.<sup>65</sup> In these ways, Illinois aligned funding, staffing, and oversight around a clear academic goal.

Taken together, these decisions, among others, offer an opportunity for LAUSD to move toward a more coherent approach to decision-making, one that centers student learning, acknowledges constraints honestly, and makes trade-offs visible.

# Toward a More Effective LAUSD

LAUSD does not need to return to a past moment to move forward. The district enters this next chapter carrying real strengths: years of consistent academic gains, and new leadership with an opportunity to set a clear direction. At the same time, the challenges the district faces — a structural fiscal deficit, sustained enrollment decline, and persistent disparities — are real and require confronting rather than deferring. Together, these conditions make clear that the district requires a more intentional, consistent approach to decision-making that reflects the students LAUSD serves and the conditions in which schools operate.

More effective decision-making means aligning dollars, adults, and systems around student learning, especially for students with the greatest need. It means recognizing that financial, operational, and instructional choices are inseparable, that budget decisions are ultimately academic decisions, and that decisions made in one area inevitably shape outcomes in another. It also means continually asking

who benefits, who bears the burden, and how a decision accounts for the district's historic disparities before, during, and after it is made.

The question facing LAUSD is not *whether* trade-offs exist, but *how* they are made. Decisions that are grounded in student need, informed by evidence, examined honestly, and communicated transparently, including clearly explaining how community input shaped a decision and naming the trade-offs when every perspective cannot be accommodated, are more likely to endure, and more likely to move the district closer to success for all students.

Applied consistently, this framework points toward a vision of what LAUSD can become: a district that is academically stronger, fiscally sustainable, more transparent, more equitable, and more trusted by the communities it serves. The decision-making approach outlined in this paper is not an end in itself, but the mechanism through which that vision becomes achievable.



GPSN is a nonprofit intermediary organization exclusively focused on improving Los Angeles public education. GPSN envisions a public school system in Los Angeles that prepares all students to succeed in school and to live thriving adult lives.

Guided by this vision, our mission is to bring together the Los Angeles community to catalyze the transformation of the public education system so that students of color and students living in poverty gain the knowledge, skills, and experiences to lead thriving adult lives.

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