

# VERNONIA SCHOOL DISTRICT SIA APPLICATION

## Part One: General Information

### Applicant

Vernonia School District  
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## Part Two: Narrative

### Plan Summary

Vernonia School District serves approximately 570 kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. Each school takes an active role in providing educational programs designed to bolster students' self-esteem and foster a positive school environment.

In the Vernonia School District:

42% of students are economically disadvantaged.  
18% are identified in need of Special Education Services  
2% are Homeless  
<1% are students learning English as a Second Language  
<1% are in Foster Care

White – 86%  
Black – 1%  
Hispanic – 7%  
Asian – 1%  
Hawaiiin/Pacific Islander - 1%  
Alaskan/Native American –n 1%  
Bi-Racial – 3%

The district's strengths are resiliency, caring attitudes, diligence and an attitude of can-do, problem-solving. We have caring and committed staff who connect with their students through kindness and respect. We have students who are willing to work hard, and are always learning. We have a community that supports its youth, and wants to provide as many opportunities as possible for them to grow and develop their dreams and futures.

Our challenges over the last decade have been to address lagging student achievement and widening achievement gaps between student focus groups, in the face of recovering from two natural disasters. The new K-12 Vernonia Schools building was built in response to two major flooding events that devastated the old school campus in 1996 and 2007. Even in 2020 the VSD continues to address financial, academic and personnel setbacks from these events. Tightening budgets enabled the district to survive, but the need to overcome severe staff cuts, a dramatically shortened school year, and a necessary focus on financial and facility recovery in the district have been true barriers for the educational system in Vernonia.

Based on input from the community, disaggregated student achievement data, and other district data, Vernonia School district has identified the greatest needs for additional resources to be supporting students' needs in terms of mental and behavioral health, improving students' academic achievement, especially that of underrepresented students, and providing students a more well-rounded education.

One major challenge we are facing is adequately providing mental health supports to students. Increasing mental health providers and staff who are expert in social emotional learning will be important to improving students' behavior and sense of wellbeing, which will result in better attendance and academic performance, including 9<sup>th</sup> grade on track and graduation rates.

Another area of improvement for the district is to provide a more well-rounded educational experience for students. Being a small, rural district, it is challenging to provide all the elective courses and educational experiences that students and their families desire. Expanding elective offerings and increasing instructional time with high interest, hands on learning experiences will help students perform better in class, attend school, and eventually improve graduation rates.

## **Part Three: Community Engagement and Input**

### **Overview of Community Engagement**

We began our SIA community engagement process in November 2019. Over four months and through a variety of activities, we engaged: elementary students, secondary students, students with disabilities and their parents, students navigating poverty and their parents, homeless students, board members, parents, all district staff (certified, classified, administrators) and various other community members.

Information was collected via surveys (online and paper), empathy interviews and three community engagement sessions. The staff survey included questions regarding barriers to students' learning, impacts on student success, and strengths of their school/district. Student surveys included questions regarding what helps them be successful at school, what keeps them from being successful at school, what engages them at school, and suggestions for school improvement. Community engagement sessions asks for feedback in terms of their children's success and struggles at school,

their children's sense of safety at school, and ideas for improving the district. Empathy interviews included questions regarding barriers to learning, student/staff relationships and school improvement ideas.

Vernonia SD worked with several partners as it engaged the community, collected and analyzed data from that engagement and as it compiled this application. The NWRES D was a critical partner in this process providing up to date information on the process, guidance, and technical support in every aspect of developing this plan. In addition to the NWRES D, the Vernonia Head Start, Blue Heron Hollow Apartments and the Vernonia Voice newspaper also provided support in distributing information, and providing publicity and space for our community engagement activities.

In the future, Vernonia will cultivate additional community partnerships to enhance the community engagement process, and further address the needs of our students and community. Working to include the NWRES D's Early Childhood Special Education practitioners and participants, as well as the two other local private preschools in town, should help us get the perspective of future patrons of the school district.

### **Self-Assessment of Community Engagement**

Overall, the SSA Community Engagement process went well for the Vernonia School District. Several methods were implemented to obtain input from our community, such as paper and on-line surveys, phone and personal interviews, and community engagement meeting sessions. Support from the NW Regional Education Service District (NWRES D) was invaluable to being able to conduct this community engagement process effectively.

Several portions of this engagement process went very smoothly and were effective at enlisting responses from our constituents. Things that went well included:

- Collaborative efforts to develop effective survey questions that were differentiated for students, staff and community.
- Setting an appropriate number of engagement sessions that provided a wide variety of times and places for participation.
- Holding meaningful discussions with patrons who attended the engagement sessions.
- Responses were consistent from all constituent groups in terms of projected district need.
- The District Community Engagement Team consisted of parents, Board members, teachers, administrators and classified employees who cooperated to develop an effective proposal for utilizing Student Investment Account (SIA) funding.
- Consensus on which areas to spend this funding was reached easily and quickly, fitting into prescribed need for the district as well as allowable expenditures as defined by the SIA.

There were also parts of the engagement process that did not go as planned, and were barriers to completing this work. They included:

- Small number of participants at Community Engagement meetings.
- Relatively small number of community surveys returned compared to students and staff.
- A snow day that forced the postponement of one community engagement session.

There was a large amount of information to gather, compile and analyze in a very short period of time. In a small district it is very difficult to take care of an employee's regular duties, while conducting such a large project as the SIA Community Engagement process.

In the future, Vernonia will cultivate additional community partnerships to enhance the community engagement process, and further address the needs of our students and community. Working to include the NWRESD's Early Childhood Special Education practitioners and participants, as well as the two other local private preschools in town, should help us get the perspective of future patrons of the school district.

One resource that helps us meaningfully engage with stakeholders is money to support the process. We appreciate receiving these new SIA funds, and anticipate using a small portion of them next year to continue to engage with our community. Another resource that would be helpful is to have regional support from Northwest Regional ESD. This could be in the form of sample surveys and other engagement tools, data computing and analysis services, and facilitators. Another area that would be helpful is to provide resources that help build strong relationships with higher education teacher preparation programs. We need more engagement with higher ed programs in order to help us recruit and retain teachers.

### **Who was Engaged?**

- Students of color
- Students with disabilities
- Students who are emerging bilinguals
- Students navigating poverty
- Families of students with disabilities
- Families of students navigating poverty, homelessness, and foster care
- Licensed staff
- Classified staff
- School volunteers
- Business community
- Community leaders

## How did you engage your community?

- Surveys
- In-person forum
- Focus groups
- Roundtable discussions
- Community group meetings
- Website
- Email messages
- Social media
- Partnering with unions

## Evidence of Engagement

### Five Artifacts

- Agenda – SSA Community Engagement Team 1-7-2020
  - This artifact was chosen because it demonstrates the broad range of participants we had on our Engagement Team. Participants were ESD partners, administration, teachers, classified employees, parents and Board members. It also demonstrates the breadth and thoroughness of our planned discussion.
- Vernonia Community Engagement Meeting Sign-In Sheet 1-16-2020
  - This artifact was chosen because it represents the largest number of participants in our 4 Community Engagement sessions. We have difficulty getting our community to participate, and this is a barrier to our work. Of the nine people present, seven had direct connection to the school as employees or Board members.
- Vernonia Community Engagement Meetings Agenda January 2020
  - This artifact was chosen because it demonstrates the breadth and thoroughness of our discussion with parents and the community. We addressed all topics required by Student Success Act guidance, and had necessary discussion on how to best meet our students' needs.
- Vernonia Community Engagement Meetings Schedule January 2020
  - This artifact was chosen because it demonstrates that there were several opportunities for direct community input. These were in addition to our surveys.
- VHS Student Community Engagement Survey Questions January 2020
  - This artifact was chosen because it demonstrates that we value the input of our students. Our choices impact their futures, and we need to understand what helps, and hinders, from their perspective.

## **Strategies and Activities for Engaging Focal Student Populations and Their Families**

### Strategies:

As a district, we value the relationships that exist between our schools and community. Being a small, rural district it was important that we gathered meaningful, genuine feedback from our entire community. We did not want to go through the motions just to “check the box” for this application, but wanted our community to have a voice in how the SIA funds will be invested.

One strategy that we used to engage students was to create feedback avenues that were both general and specific. On the one hand, we needed to hear from as many students as possible in order to understand what overall themes emerged from their responses. A survey was created for this purpose that was given to all students. On the other hand, it was important to hear from an individual perspective from some of our students from focal groups. In order to collect this feedback, a small number of focal group students were interviewed individually in order to gain their perspective.

A strategy that we used to connect with parents was to hold a series of community meetings in various settings, in different communities. Students who attend Vernonia come from the town of Vernonia and the outlying communities of Mist, Birkenfeld, and Fishhawk Lake. We realize that to invite people to come to meetings that are held on campus might work for people who live close to the school, and for people who are comfortable with a school setting. But people from other communities may be less likely to attend an on campus meeting because of travel time, or from feelings of not belonging. With that in mind, we held two meetings on Vernonia’s campus, one in an apartment complex in Vernonia and one in Mist, a nearby town whose children attend our schools.

### Activities:

The district administered four surveys in the course of our recent stakeholder engagement process. One survey was designed for K-5 students, one for 6-12 students, one for district staff, and one for community members. The surveys could be accessed online, and were available in paper. Although specific questions varied slightly from survey to survey, depending on audience, each survey were designed to assess priorities in the four key areas of instructional time, student health and safety, class size and a well rounded education. Responses to the student survey yielded overall themes from the general student body (over 350 responses).

A second activity the district employed to gain more specific information was to conduct interviews of individual students and parents. The interviews included questions regarding student success at school, possible barriers to students’ learning, student/teacher relationships, school improvement ideas, and potential new learning experiences that would benefit students. These empathy interviews targeted students

from focal groups and their parents. They were conducted in order to gain insight into individuals' thinking, especially from those who may feel marginalized.

A third engagement activity implemented by the district was to hold a series of community engagement meetings. The meetings were hosted by district staff, and were held in different settings; two at schools and one in a community setting. Additionally, the meetings occurred at facilities in two different towns (Vernonia and Mist) from which students attend schools in Vernonia. These meetings were a combination of guided discussion and open forum where attendees had the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding our school system. Although not attended as well as we had hoped, the people who showed up participated freely and provided valuable feedback.

### **Strategies and Activities for Engaging Staff**

#### Strategies:

One strategy we used to collect staff feedback was to provide opportunity during contract time for staff to express their input. We understand that working in schools is demanding, and that most staff members feel as though there aren't enough hours in the day to do everything required to do a good job. To post a survey online and then expect staff to take it during their off hours is to ensure a low response rate, and probably one that is not representative of the larger population. In order to gain higher levels of response and fair representation, we offered staff the opportunity to complete the survey during staff meetings or team meetings.

A second strategy that we employed was to include different types of engagement activities, both anonymous and personal. The survey given to all staff, and responded to by most, gave staff members the opportunity to express their feelings anonymously, and hopefully honestly. In a small district like ours, where "everybody knows everybody", it is important to provide an avenue through which staff can express their feelings and ideas without being identified. At the same time, hearing individual staff voices is critical, especially from those teachers who work with students from our focal groups. By interviewing staff who work with our highest needs students in terms of behavior and social interactions, we gained insight into an area in our district that needs improvement.

#### Activities:

One activity that we used to collect input from staff members was to have them fill out a survey. The survey was posted online and handed out in paper form when needed. As stated above, the survey offered staff the opportunity to provide input anonymously, and gave the district insights into general themes felt by the larger population of district employees. Survey questions focused on positive impacts on student learning, barriers to student learning, staff/student relationships, ideas for improving the district, and school/community relationships.

A second staff engagement activity we employed was to interview several social emotional learning staff members. The interview was prompted by questions regarding what additional resources might be needed to create a positive student learning environment, and ideas for improving systems that provide support for students' mental and behavioral health needs. These interviews gave us feedback from staff who often feel underappreciated, and who understand the specific needs of the district's behavior and mental health support system.

### **Collecting and Using Input**

Not surprisingly, input from the community engagement process reflected several areas the community appreciates about our district, and several areas where that they feel need improvement. People appreciate the small school atmosphere in Vernonia, where staff know students as individuals, and parents feel they can approach teachers and administrators easily. It is clear from the engagement process that improving students' mental and behavioral health is important to all sectors of our community. These themes emerged from every group who provided feedback. Other themes emerged as well. Students consistently mentioned hands on learning experiences as positive and engaging. At the same time, a common message from staff and community members was that the district offer students more electives, and a more well-rounded educational experience. Ideas included STEM classes at the secondary level, and art and music at the elementary level.

The themes that emerged from the community engagement process were parallel to the results of the needs assessment and district leadership conversations leading up to the formation of the most recent district CIP. We clearly see the need to increase supports for students' mental and behavioral needs. Providing more academic supports and offerings to all students is a high priority as well. Another priority is to increase help for students in two focal groups – students navigating poverty and students with disabilities. Students in those groups regularly underperform in relation to all students. The plan to invest our SIA funds target support for students in those two focal groups, and at the same time increase help for all students' behavioral, mental, and academic needs.

### **Part Four: Data Analysis**

The district reviewed data sources such as SBAC results, chronic absenteeism, and other data from the district's state report card. In addition, the District used local data such as discipline referrals and grade failures. Another major source of data came from our extensive community engagement process that included students, staff, parents and other members of the community. All these data points were reviewed in summary, but were also disaggregated to highlight disparities between groups. From examining this data and applying our equity lens, areas of improvement for the district became apparent. The needs that arose from our community engagement process largely mirrored the needs that emerged from reviewing data related to student achievement, behavior, and mental health. That alignment created clarity in how to invest our SIA funds for the next three years.

## **Part Five: SIA Plan**

### **Outcomes**

Based on disaggregated data, community engagement feedback, QEM recommendations, Vernonia School District CIP, the Equity Lens, and evidence based educational practices, the following **Outcomes** emerged:

**Students will graduate high school on time and adequately prepared for next steps after high school.**

**Students will be able to participate in a variety of elective subjects/courses that ensures a well-rounded education for each student.**

**The Vernonia school calendar matches the state average in terms of student contact and teacher contract days.**

**Students and staff will experience an equitable increase in feeling safe, connected, supported, and valued.**

### **Strategies**

**Offer students expanded learning opportunities that include high interest, hands-on, applied learning educational experiences.**

This Activity directly supports Outcome #2 by creating additional learning opportunities for students. It will help students feel more engaged and connected to school (Outcome #4), which will help them graduate on time (Outcome #1).

**Improve student:staff ratios in general, and increase instructional time for students.**

The district recognizes the importance of students building positive relationships with staff members. This Activity helps make sure there are enough adults (teachers, EA's, counselors, etc.) in the system so that each student gets the support they need to succeed. This is especially important for students with disabilities and students navigating poverty. Adding staff allows us to offer students more elective courses (Outcome #2), better preparing them for life after high school (Outcome #1). Increasing instructional time connects with Outcome #3. Additionally, this Activity will help both students' and staff members' sense of feeling supported and valued (Outcome #4).

**Provide secondary students with enough core and elective courses so that each student receives a well-rounded education.**

A consistent message from students, parents and the community was that the district find ways to offer a more well-rounded educational experience. This Strategy directly advances Outcomes #2. Additionally, it supports Outcome #4 by helping students

engage more fully with school, and by increasing their sense of being valued, both of which will cause more students to graduate on time (Outcome #1).

**Improve academic and career/college readiness supports for students with disabilities and for students navigating poverty.**

As stated above, data show that the district needs to implement strategies that help narrow the academic performance gap of focal group students compared to the aggregate. In Vernonia those two focal groups are students with disabilities and those navigating poverty. This Strategy will help focal group students feel more valued and supported (Outcome #4), and will help them graduate on time and well prepared for next steps (Outcome #1). Additionally, this Strategy connects with Outcome #2 as focal group students participate in more elective, hands on courses.

**Create a culture of safety and respect that supports the social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of students and adults that is critical to academic and professional success.** This Strategy has far-reaching effects on every person in the district, and in the community, and directly or indirectly supports all four Outcomes. It directly advances Outcome #4. As students feel safe and more connected to school, they perform better in class (Outcomes #1). And offering students a well-rounded education, along with a full school year, helps both students and staff gain a sense of being respected and valued (Outcomes #2, #3).

**Activities**

**Extend contract with CCMH by two days; aligns with Strategies #2, #4, #5.**

The district currently contracts for mental health support from its partner Columbia County Mental Health. This would extend that contract by two days. The superintendent is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Maintain SEL Coordinator at 0.33 FTE; aligns with Strategies #2, #4, #5.**

We currently share the SEL Coordinator with Ranier and Clatskanie school districts. We will use SIA funds to maintain that same arrangement. The superintendent is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Hire a 1.0 FTE HS Math teacher; aligns with Strategies #1, #2, #3, #4, #5.**

Hiring an additional Math teacher will increase the middle and high school math offerings to students, and will create space in the schedule for more elective courses. The secondary principal is responsible for hiring this teacher. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Expand elementary Art/Music; aligns with Strategies #1, #2, #4, #5.**

Like many districts our size, we lost our elementary Music and Art teachers to budget cuts years ago, and have never had the resources to add them back. By offering Art

and Music to elementary students it will provide more elective course choices, and create space in the schedule for classroom teachers to have more prep and grade-level team time. The elementary principal is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Increase school calendar by three days; aligns with Strategies #2, #4, #5.**

The district currently has a school year calendar that is short of the state average. This Activity will increase the calendar by three days; two student contact days and one staff professional development day. The superintendent is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Purchase instructional resources; aligns with Strategies #1, #3, #4, #5.**

This Activity provides resources for staff to upgrade outdated instructional materials. The elementary and secondary principals are responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: High

**Offer summer school; aligns with Strategies #1, #2, #3, #4, #5.**

This Activity creates summer educational experiences, including credit recovery and hands on, high interest learning experiences. The elementary and secondary principals are responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: Mid

**Create after school learning experiences; aligns with Strategies #1, #2, #3, #4, #5.**

This Activity focuses on providing high interest, engaging learning experiences for elementary and secondary students. The elementary and secondary principals are responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: Mid

**Hire two 1.0 FTE IA's; aligns with Strategies #2, #4, #5.**

These two additional IA's will provide much needed support to focal group students, and offer help to all students when available. The elementary principal is responsible for hiring these staff. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: Mid

**Increase support for AVID; aligns with Strategies #1, #4, #5.**

This Activity expands support for the district's AVID program. The secondary principal is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23. Priority level: Mid

**Community Engagement resources; aligns with Strategy #5.**

This investment is to help support the district's annual community engagement process. The superintendent is responsible for implementing this Activity. This investment is for school years 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23. Priority level: Low

## **Priorities**

Plan A: The following are our highest priorities for Year 1:

- Extend our contract with CCMH by two days
- Maintain SEL Coordinator at 0.33 FTE
- Hire 1.0 FTE HS Math teacher
- Expand elementary Art/Music
- Increase school calendar by three days
- Purchase instructional resources

Plan B: Should the district not be able to hire qualified staff into the positions listed above, some investments may include the following:

- Offer summer school
- Create after school learning experiences
- Hire two 1.0 FTE IA's
- Increase support for AVID

Plan C: Should the district not be able to implement all the Activities listed above, some investments may include the following:

- Community Engagement resources

## **SIA Integrated Planning Tool**

Submitted to ODE as an attachment.

## **Budget**

Submitted to ODE as an attachment.

## **Equity Lens**

Submitted to ODE as an attachment.

## **Longitudinal Growth Goals**

Submitted to ODE as an attachment.

## **Part Six: Use of Funds**

### **Allowable Uses**

- Increasing instructional time
- Addressing students' health and safety needs
- Evidenced-based strategies for reducing class size and caseload
- Expanding availability of and students participation in well-rounded learning experiences

### **Meeting Students' Mental and Behavioral Health Needs**

- Increasing instructional time
- Addressing students' health and safety needs
- Evidenced-based strategies for reducing class size and caseload
- Expanding availability of and students participation in well-rounded learning experiences

### **Describe how you will use SIA funds**

The district plans to use SIA funds to add personnel who work directly with students, and to create additional learning experiences for students. To provide for students' mental and behavioral health we are planning on using funds to expand our contract with the district's mental health partner, maintain our SEL Coordinator, and hire two additional IA's.

To support students academically we are planning on hiring a HS Math teacher, expand elementary Art and Music programs, develop a summer school program, and create after school learning experiences for students. Additional SIA funds will be used to update instructional resources and support the district's AVID program.

### **Addressing the Needs and Impact on Focal Student Groups**

Many aspects of our SIA Plan have the potential to positively impact focal group students, and at the same time benefit all students. Expanding mental health services and maintaining our SEL Coordinator directly provides mental and behavioral health support for students with disabilities and those navigating poverty. And adding two full-time IA's will help provide academic support to focal group students. But all those staff will provide similar support to all students in our system as well. Similarly, increasing elective course offerings will be good for focal group students, but also gives all students the chance to enroll in high interest, engaging classes that help them stay connected to school, succeed in school, and eventually graduate with a well-rounded education.

The same can be said for the additional learning experiences that SIA funds will help create in summertime and after school. All students, focal group students included, will have more opportunity to engage in high interest activities, build strong relationships with adults, and increase their sense of being valued.

### **Barriers, Risk, Choices**

One barrier we foresee that could impact our SIA Plan is the availability of qualified staff. Our Plan includes hiring a high school Math teacher, difficult at any time, but especially considering that most districts across the state are planning on using their SIA funds to add staff as well. Other staff to hire through SIA funding such as Instructional Assistants, Art Teachers and Counseling support will also be difficult to obtain. As we consider these barriers to finding qualified applicants for our open positions through the SIA it is necessary to consider "second choice" options for expenditure if our initial plans don't materialize.

If necessary other options for further expenditure within our selected activities and initiatives exist and include:

- adding another day or two of instruction to bring our academic calendar up to standard
- increasing the amount of time and money spent on after school programming and summer school
- providing further funding for instructional materials if the adoption costs are greater than \$50,000.