

## Case Study

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# ***A New Approach to Academic Support Brings Equity to a Diverse School District***




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— **Keith Irish**, Assistant Superintendent, Education Services, South San Francisco USD

# About South San Francisco USD

“South San Francisco, The Industrial City,” reads the giant, historic sign cemented into a towering hillside overlooking downtown since the 1920s. Beginning more than a hundred years ago, thriving cement plants, shipbuilders, meat packers, steel manufacturers and other industries attracted a diverse set of working families to the area colloquially known as South City—all seeking to make a better life for themselves.

### South San Francisco Unified School District at a glance

	Enrollment	English Learners	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged
	8,438	22.8%	40.8%

Today, the South San Francisco Unified School District, which serves South San Francisco as well as portions of neighboring San Bruno and Daly City, remains both ethnically and economically diverse, including about ¼ of students who are English language learners and about 41% of students coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged households.

“We have an equity statement in South City and it basically states ‘providing each student what he or she needs when they need it,’” says Keith Irish, the district’s Assistant Superintendent, Educational Services.

# The Dilemma

## Students fall through the cracks of a traditional extra help model

As part of its equity mission, every school within South San Francisco USD is committed to providing academic support to students. In the recent past, this was primarily done using a homework center model where any student could come in—usually after school from 3:30 to 5:30—to get extra help from a teacher.

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But according to Irish, the homework center model for academic support presented a number of challenges. Students would tell parents they were headed to extra help, and parents would in turn ask the school if their child actually showed up. “We didn’t know who came,” or what they worked on during their sessions. “We tried to track it, but we could never effectively communicate with parents what actually happened. That’s what we spent our time with,” says Irish.

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### Academic support unavailable when students need it most

Additionally, students and families would report that the hours immediately after school conflicted with their schedules. “Kids are busy, and they have other responsibilities. Many of our kids in South City are working to help their families,” says Irish. “We don’t like it, but we all know [students are studying and doing their homework] early morning and late at night. So when they need help—well we can’t ask our teachers to be awake and respond to students 24/7. It’s just not possible.”

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Education Services

# ***The Dilemma***

## **Covid grinds extra help to a halt**

When the Covid pandemic hit, the district moved to remote learning. Teacher-hours became an even more scarce a resource, making the homework center model unsupportable. "We [now] have no after school tutorial or anything like that because our staff is burnt. I'll just put it like that. They just cannot do anything more for us. Their whole focus is providing a high quality instruction during synchronous time," says Irish.

At the same time, according to Irish, "Students were coming to me saying 'Mr. Irish, I need help and my teachers are doing everything they can, but I need some other support' and the supports weren't in place."

## **The need for a solution becomes urgent**

With the need for academic support greater than ever, and the challenges of remote learning taking a toll on the entire school community including teachers, students, parents and administrators, the district's leadership felt a heightened sense of urgency to deliver solutions.

"The Superintendent got a directive from the board: 'what supports can you put in place for our students this year?'" says Irish. "They gave me a month."



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# The Solution

## Modeling the successes of a neighboring school district

“I already had [Paper] in mind because [they] partner with a neighboring district,” says Irish.

Just 20 miles south of South City lies Sequoia Union High School District. With a similar enrollment and socioeconomic profile to South San Francisco USD, Sequoia UHSD was successfully using Paper to overcome its academic support challenges.



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“You know, us assistant sups, we all share information. So I talked to Ms. [Bonnie] Hansen and I was just picking her brain. What did you do? What was the entry point for you? Why did you pick [Paper]?” says Irish.

Paper provides learners with unlimited 24/7 homework help, writing feedback and study support at a predictable fixed cost. Specialized tutors deliver on-demand, 1:1 academic support in English, Spanish, Mandarin and French across more than 200 academic subject areas—so students can access expert extra help whenever and however they need it.

### Leveraging existing technology investments

After further discussions with Ms. Hansen and directly with Paper, Irish and his team were intrigued by what Paper offered, and hopeful it could be a fit to help solve the challenges South City was facing.

What’s more, South San Francisco USD had just purchased some 6,000 tech devices and hotspots for every student and staff member who needed it. That investment was a perfect foundation for Paper’s on-demand model, and for furthering the district’s equity directive to support every student and every family in the community.

# The Solution

## Deploying methodically

One area of focus for South City's evaluation of Paper was the rollout and implementation plan. Irish and his ed services team appreciated the structured approach Paper brought to the deployment. "I like how [Paper] approaches the rollout. We had implementation meetings, we set deadlines," says Irish.

They also appreciated how easy it was to onboard teachers to the platform. "To be able to introduce the teachers [to Paper] in 30 minutes! You're going to walk out, you're going to know what it is. You're going to log in. Boom! If you need more, here's some links."

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## Simplifying budgeting and sourcing funding

In coordinating funding for the project, the ed services team found the budgeting process refreshing versus the district's existing model, which was a variable of hours per week times each particular teachers' salary rate. With Paper, "I know exactly [how much it will cost] because it's based on how many students we want to serve. So it's a lot easier to plan. That's huge," says Irish. Irish tapped a number of funding sources. These included local continuity funds as well as state and federal (CARES Act) learning loss mitigation funds of which South City received a substantial amount.

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With funding, a solid rollout plan, and stakeholder buy-in all in place, the project breezed through board approval. In fewer than three months, the district had gone from identifying the problem to launching the solution that would help overcome it.

# Results

## A community gets the help it needed

Around the time Paper was launched, the district was doing extensive communications with the community around the decision to reopen school. Rather than attempt a full-blown launch of the district's new academic support solution at the same time, South San Francisco USD Superintendent Dr. Shawnterra Moore recommended soft-launching the program.

"Without even pushing hard, we got usage. We were surprised. Kids go into our portal and they just started clicking...we started getting emails from [students] 'hey I've been getting on with Paper,'" says Irish. "The kids are giving us feedback. We never got it before. That's a big thing."

Soon, usage of the Paper platform began to grow organically. And when the district and its teachers began to promote Paper to students and families, usage ramped up significantly.

### Detailed and frequent writing coaching

Essay review has proven an area of support where Paper's tutors are playing a critical role in supporting students, families and teachers. With Paper's writing feedback service, expert tutors review student writing and provide detailed, timely feedback on grammar, structure, content and style.

**We all know how long it takes to grade 170 essays. Taking some of that [workload off teachers] is huge.**

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Working with Paper, students are doing first and second revisions of their writing work before it's ever handed in to teachers. Not only does more frequent feedback make for better writers, but "we all know how long it takes to grade 170 essays," says Irish. "Taking some of that [workload off teachers] is huge."

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# Results

## Insights that help improve instruction—and boost math scores

The data captured and reported through the platform has also been invaluable to Irish and his team. “We’re starting to see patterns on what the kids are asking questions on, which informs ed services, which means we can readjust our scope and sequence. We can talk about instructional practices,” says Irish. “We just have more information than we ever had before...on what we need to fix and rectify.”

“In particular, math has been...an area of growth where lots of our students struggle based on national and state assessments,” according to Irish. “Our math coaches are looking at those patterns to help align services. [Paper’s] given more resources for us so we can adapt quicker.”



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## Opportunities for every student to benefit

Paper isn’t just proving effective for students who’ve fallen behind. It’s also for learners—like AP students—seeking to get ahead. “Advanced placement kids flooded our board meetings in the fall and it was all about support for AP,” says Irish. He and his team have been pleased with their ability to meet these academic support needs as well. “[AP students] have been excited about Paper. They’re happy.”



**Teachers say ‘thank you for setting this up. This is really easy, it’s pretty intuitive. The platform looks like what the kids are used to.’**

— Keith Irish

## Gratitude from teachers and families alike

“I don’t get ‘thank yous’ from teachers very often. I got emails from teachers saying ‘Mr. Irish, this is great.’ Teachers say ‘thank you for setting this up. This is really easy, it’s pretty intuitive. The platform looks like what the kids are used to.’”

“The parents have been excited because...we’ve taken a burden off them where they were trying to figure it out or paying [for tutoring] themselves. So that’s been huge across the board,” says Irish.



# Results

## Cementing a better future

The success of Paper thus far has South City rethinking its entire approach to academic support. “The board of South city is in agreement...even if we returned to in-person [instruction], we would love to continue this partnership and dissolve the homework center model, because we think we can serve more students this way in a more equitable manner.”

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“My next step is to fund this and put it in our LCAP so it’s a fixture,” says Irish, with the intent of making Paper a permanent support for all learners and families in the South City community.

“I get lots of emails from neighboring districts,” says Irish. “If anyone asks what we’re doing to help provide support for all students, I talk about Paper first.”

“In fact,” says Irish, referring to the district’s equity statement of providing every student what they need when they need it, “When I think of that statement, it makes me think of Paper.”

# PAPER

*Paper partners with K-12 schools throughout the U.S. and Canada to give every student an equal opportunity to excel academically. Our educational support system (ESS) provides learners with unlimited 24/7 homework help, writing feedback, and study support at a predictable fixed cost. Paper's specialized tutors deliver on-demand, 1:1 academic support in four languages across more than 200 academic subject areas—so students always have access to expert extra help exactly when, where, and how they need it.*

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