



Each **Spotlight** will feature a researched story of transforming labor-management practices in one of the 150+ districts that have participated with CA LMI.

Dinuba's Journey: From Conflict to Cooperation

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DINUBA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



- County: **Tulare**
- Locale Type: **Rural**
- Union Representation: **CTA, CSEA**
- **601** Employees:
 - 329** Certificated
 - 242** Classified
 - 30** Administrators

Introduction

Dinuba Unified is a small rural school district in Tulare County. Its nearly 7,000 students (6,659) are primarily Hispanic (93.3%) and disproportionately socio-economically disadvantaged (83.6%). Nearly a third (33.8%) are English learners. Dinuba boasts a better than 90 percent graduation rate (92.3%), a tangible reflection of the district's guiding philosophy, "to end generational poverty through education."¹

Labor-management relations in Dinuba historically have been rocky, even toxic. This Spotlight chronicles Dinuba's labor-management transformation, its journey from conflict to cooperation. Data were collected through interviews with Superintendent Joe Hernandez and Dinuba Teachers Association President Gregory Garrison (March 11, 2020) and with CSEA chapter President Ana Hernandez (May 26, 2020). The Dinuba team's presentation at CA LMI virtual Summit (June 24, 2020) provided additional information.²

Image: The Dinuba labor-management team presenting at CA LMI Sacramento / El Dorado Regional network convening, February 2020.



Labor relations were tense for many years in Dinuba Unified before labor and management engaged with CA LMI in 2015.

Dinuba's Labor-Management Story

Between 2000 and 2014, labor-management relations in Dinuba were adversarial and angry. The district and its unions seemed unable to solve problems or quell disputes without significant, and often public, displays of contention and frustration. Says Superintendent Joe Hernandez,

“We were broken.”

Dinuba's labor-management crisis came to a head in 2014 when DTA president Greg Garrison tried to force Superintendent Hernandez and Assistant

Superintendent Marti Kochevar³ to resign. The school board instead ordered the parties to work out their differences.⁴

Moving Toward Change

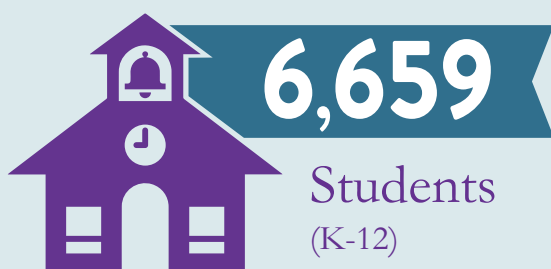
Dinuba knew of CA LMI and thought the training session might be a good fit for the district. In its 2015 CA LMI letter of application, Dinuba wrote:

For years we [Dinuba Unified] have been caught up in some very traditional [adversarial] labor negotiations. This has created miscommunication, distrust, and barriers to the accomplishment of our district vision. We must find an effective way to collaborate as a district.

Dinuba was accepted to CA LMI and assembled a labor-management team—Superintendent Hernandez, Assistant Superintendent Kochevar, DTA President Garrison, CSEA chapter President Hernandez, and one member of the school board—to attend the May 2015 conference in San Diego, the first convening CA LMI offered. This turned out to be the turning point for Dinuba's labor-management relations, but not quite in the way the district or its unions anticipated.

Dinuba lauds CA LMI, especially the presentation by the ABC Unified School District, a longtime leader in labor-management partnerships. “ABC,” says Ana

DINUBA USD AT-A-GLANCE



92.3%  Graduation Rate

83.6% Socio-Economically Disadvantaged

33.6% English Language Learners

Hernandez, “really opened up everyone’s minds.” Participation in CA LMI gave Dinuba the opportunity to interact with and learn from a community of like-minded teams in various stages of revamping their labor-management relations.

Dinuba reserves its highest praise, however, for the six-hour team van ride from the district to San Diego. These uninterrupted away-from-work hours gave team members an opportunity to get to know one another outside of their roles as district and union officials. Says Joe Hernandez, “We discovered we liked each other and had a lot in common.”

Collaborative Relationships Develop

The trip to CA LMI started Dinuba’s collaboration ball rolling. The Dinuba Leadership Alliance, a labor-management forum through which the district and its unions collaboratively focus on existing and emerging issues, was born. As Joe Hernandez and Greg Garrison note, “We began talking about kids rather than fighting each other.”

One of the ways Hernandez and Garrison have continued to foster their own collaborative relationship is with mini re-creations of the CA LMI van ride—informal get-togethers that promote conversation and collegiality. Says Greg Garrison, “We show up some place, we eat, and we just start talking.”

“We began talking about kids instead of fighting with each other.”

—Greg Garrison, President,
Dinuba Teachers Association



Three Examples of Labor-Management Collaboration in Action

Three examples illustrate the reach of Dinuba’s collaborative labor-management relations: school level problem solving, classified meet and confer sessions, and teacher contract negotiations.

› School Level Problem Solving

Before collaboration was a labor-management norm in Dinuba, principals would bring school level problems to the district to resolve. As both the district and DTA acknowledge, district-developed resolutions often satisfied neither principals nor teachers. Hernandez and Garrison believed a better approach would be to encourage schools to solve their own problems. This would require, they knew, that principals and teachers work together collaboratively. Hernandez and Garrison spent dedicated time visiting schools, talking with principals and teachers in formal and informal settings, and offering advice about options for resolving school level disputes. As an added incentive, the district provided each principal with \$200 to meet informally with the school’s DTA representative, mirroring the Hernandez-Garrison “meet and eat” approach, to develop more collaborative working relationships.

Many issues in Dinuba now are resolved at schools. Fewer need district level attention or become formal grievances.⁵ The District Committee for Problem Resolution (DCPR), another joint labor-management group, steps in to handle problems schools are unable to resolve on their own.

› Classified Meet and Confer Sessions

CSEA chapter president Ana Hernandez describes the situation in Dinuba for classified employees before labor-management collaboration: “It used to be that the district made decisions *about* classified employees,” she says. As a result of collaboration, “Now we make decisions together.” Dinuba and its CSEA chapter have developed a collaborative problem solving process to nip issues in the bud. Dubbed “meet and confer” after a legal procedure that requires that parties to a dispute meet to try to reach agreement before taking additional steps, Assistant Superintendent Kochevar and CSEA’s Ana Hernandez get together regularly to discuss issues as they arise. Their goal is to catch problems at the outset, not allowing them to fester or become formal

grievances. Ana Hernandez speaks of what she views as a significant accomplishment of this process: “We [the district and the union] treat each other as equals.”

“It used to be that the district made decisions about classified employees. Now we make decisions together.”

—Ana Hernandez, President,
Dinuba CSEA chapter

› Teacher Contract Negotiations

Dinuba has developed a collegial process to replace previously adversarial contract negotiations. Once DTA and the district have determined the issues or topical areas that are to be part of negotiations, they appoint committees of teachers and administrators. These committees study the topic, generate options, and bring their findings back to the full bargaining team for consideration. The bargaining team can decide to accept or modify committee suggestions. Decisions about how to proceed on an issue now are based on information and data to which both the district and union have been privy. As a result of this process, a wider range of educators is involved in bargaining and, thus, more Dinuba employees who will be affected by the agreement are part of developing it. The Dinuba approach, say Hernandez and Garrison, fosters transparency and collaboration and paves a path to agreement. Interestingly, neither the superintendent nor DTA president sits at the bargaining table. “We trust our people to do the work,” they say.



From left to right: Greg Garrison, DTA President; Ana Hernandez CSEA Chapter 152 President; Marti Kochevar, Assistant Superintendent; Dr. Joe Hernandez, Superintendent; Katrina Sheaffer, DTA; Annie Ogata, DTA, Robert Gaytan, CSEA; Ramon Rivera, Director of Information Technology

Dinuba district and union leaders significantly report that labor-management collaboration has contributed to tangible gains for the district's students. English Language Arts and mathematics test scores have been on a steady upward trajectory in Dinuba since 2016. This outcome, says Superintendent Hernandez, demonstrates that,

“the stronger the collaboration between teachers and administrators, the better student achievement will be.”

Dinuba's Response to COVID-19

As COVID-19 has upended education, Dinuba used labor-management collaboration as a tool to make its way through the crisis. When schools closed on March 13, the district assembled a labor-management school closure group to plan the district's COVID response.

Additionally, the district and DTA issued a series of joint letters to provide initial guidance to teachers. The district-DTA collaborative relationship allowed Dinuba to use the joint letter approach rather than returning to the bargaining table to renegotiate contract provisions to meet changing circumstances.

The district and CSEA quickly developed agreements to meet the moment. These focused primarily on issues such as how many and which classified employees might be deployed to schools, for example, to distribute food to students, and what the process would be for making these determinations.



Superintendent Joe Hernandez with a student.

One situation in particular displays the strength of Dinuba's collaborative labor-management relationships. DTA had negotiated a two percent raise for teachers for the 2020-21 school year. As the COVID crisis intensified, Dinuba faced uncertain budget circumstances. DTA leadership offered to delay or modify the teacher salary increase if, says DTA President Greg Garrison, “the district felt that budget cuts would lead to layoffs for anyone in the district.” In other words, the teacher union expressed concern for all Dinuba school district employees, not just its own members, and was confident enough in its relationship with the district to make this offer. Dinuba assured DTA that district budget reserves would carry the district through for the school year with no layoffs necessary.

As it became apparent the COVID crisis would stretch on through the spring and summer, the district and its unions turned to a process for making collective decisions. The original joint labor-management school closure group morphed into the school reopening committee, charged with developing multiple school reopening scenarios. Says Superintendent Joe Hernandez, “...Right

now I can't imagine being in a district that's not working together and being collaborative."

What Can We Learn from Dinuba's Experiences?

Dinuba has made significant strides toward transforming its labor-management relations from adversarial to collaborative. District and union leaders have formed a partnership to solve problems and tackle issues as they arise. None of this was by chance.

As Assistant Superintendent Marti Kochevar noted at CA LMI's June summit, "Trust ... happen[s] by design. You need to build structures and make a commitment." Dinuba built new labor-management structures around problem solving, contract negotiations, and tackling the COVID crisis. Embedded within these structures was a firm commitment to trust and cooperation.

Building a new labor-management culture in Dinuba has not been without its challenges. Greg Garrison notes that some of his members initially were concerned about the union's collaborative relationship with the district. Some teachers, he says, were used to, and comfortable with, the adversarial approach and thus suspicious of change. Superintendent Hernandez notes that some district and school administrators also were gun shy, concerned about forging new and different relationships with teachers and classified staff.

Acceptance of collaboration has come with time. "You can't win everyone at the same time," says Superintendent Hernandez.

"You need to let go of the past to move forward. You need a short memory and a lot of forgiveness."

—Joe Hernandez, Superintendent

Dinuba leaders speak of taking "baby steps" as collaboration took hold and they brought colleagues along. They advise others who are interested in going on this journey to be willing to show vulnerability and display humility, to acknowledge that there will be bumps on the road. They also readily admit they still have some work to do, in particular to ensure the collaborative labor-management model is not dependent on the current set of leaders but is instantiated as "the way we do business in Dinuba." ■

Additional district labor-management stories can be found at the [CA LMI website](#)

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- 1 Data were obtained from the 2019 California Dashboard, caschooldashboard.org.
 - 2 The Dinuba Teachers Association (DTA) represents the district's non-administrative certificated employees (teachers, counselors, etc.). Dinuba CSEA is a "wall-to-wall" unit that represents all classified employees.
 - 3 Kochevar was director of Human Relations in Dinuba and, thus, directly involved in many labor-management matters.
 - 4 [Video excerpt](#) of Board Member Mary Villarreal speaking about the changes in Dinuba, February 2020
 - 5 According to Superintendent Hernandez, 6 grievances reached the district level in 2018 and only 1 in 2020.

Who We Are

Over 165 districts and county offices have participated since 2015.



Our approach:

CONVENE labor-management teams from across CA to promote inquiry into the processes for effective system-wide collaboration.

CATALYZE collaboration in districts through ongoing support and by connecting teams in regional and statewide peer networks.

COMMUNICATE to build awareness and access to key resources across districts, state associations, and educational stakeholder groups.

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The California Labor Management Initiative,

a project of the [CDE Foundation](#), brings together union and management leaders to co-develop structures and practices that lift staff voices and build systems for continuous improvement to create better outcomes for students and staff, parents and communities. CA LMI convenings provide a safe space for labor and management to work together on issues from communications to collaborative processes that strengthen partnerships.

CA LMI Overview of Support Opportunities

If you are interested in learning more about CA LMI and would like to participate, see the [CA LMI website](#) for upcoming events, materials and our [CA LMI Resource Library](#). The California Labor Management Initiative provides districts and county offices with three tiers of support to advance labor-management collaboration.

» **Universal Convenings**, provide labor-management teams across the state opportunities to learn about labor-management partnership, understand key collaborative frameworks and are designed as a shared learning and team building experience for school districts and county offices. Universal convenings are provided in various regions of the state as well as online virtual offerings. These convenings provide a place for unions and management to learn together and build trust and relationships.

» **Regional Networks** connect multiple districts within a geographic region and support localized networks which build capacity and peer learning opportunities over time. Regional Networks support sustained peer-to-peer learning, and they provide a structure for teams to share resources, celebrate successes and navigate challenges. We have worked to connect our Regional Networks to County Offices of Education as a hub for convening districts and develop labor-management regional planning committees to further our networks.

» **Individualized Supports** provide an opportunity for districts or county offices to work with CA LMI staff or consulting partners to further support their labor-management teams. The support is tailored to the individualized context of the district or county office. Teams can contract with CA LMI staff or our consulting partners directly to develop a customized scope of work to advance their labor-management partnership efforts via in-district coaching.

