



CA
LMI

SPOTLIGHT

California Labor Management Initiative



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

Labor-Management Cooperation in Times of Crisis: The St. Helena Unified School District

Julia E. Koppich, Ph.D., J. Koppich & Associates

Julia Koppich is a leading education policy researcher and has served as a consultant for numerous state and federal organizations.

ST. HELENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

- County: **Napa**
- Locale Type: **Rural**
- Union Representation: **CTA, CSEA**
- **177** Employees:
 - 106** Certificated
 - 62** Classified
 - 9** Administrators



Introduction

“A catastrophe a year.” That’s how teacher union president Brandon Farrell described life in the St. Helena Unified School District beginning in fall 2017. In the two years between October 2017 and October 2019, this small Napa Valley district experienced several major wildfires—the Atlas and Tubbs fires in October 2017, the Camp Fire (which destroyed the town of Paradise) in November 2018, and the Kincade Fire in October 2019. Though flames did not directly threaten district buildings, heavy drifting smoke and intermittent PG&E blackouts forced schools to close for days at a time. Then on March 13, 2020, Covid shuttered schools for nearly eight months. As fall 2020 approached and the district began to consider reopening schools, the LNU Lightning Complex and Glass fires struck, putting those plans on hold.

This CA LMI *Spotlight* examines St. Helena’s experiences with these serial crises. How did the district prepare for them? What role did labor-management relationships play in crisis management?

Image: A fire-retardant drop during the Camp Fire, November 2018.

What prepared St. Helena for years of nearly nonstop crises?

Two pivotal decisions, initially unrelated, proved critical: 1) a 2014 targeted district focus on emergency preparedness, and, 2) participation a year later in CA LMI's inaugural convening.

Preparing for Emergencies

When Marylou Wilson¹ came to St. Helena Unified as superintendent in 2014, she brought with her a wealth of experience around preparing for crises. Dr. Wilson had developed deep understanding about both the need for and practical aspects of planning for a range of unanticipated eventualities. Her knowledge stemmed from her own experiences as a principal in San Diego during the first incidents of school gun violence and the first fires that closed California schools. Dr. Wilson found St. Helena unprepared to handle situations such as these and set to work, in concert with the governing board, developing comprehensive district and school safety plans that could be activated in the event of emergencies. The district stocked schools and classrooms with emergency supplies, trained staff and conducted drills for emergencies such as intruder alerts, earthquakes, and fires, and developed security procedures and student evacuation plans.

As Superintendent Wilson noted, "It's not that what you plan and practice actually occurs. But if you don't [plan], the muscles aren't ready to react at all."

As a consequence of St. Helena's emergency preparedness work at the beginning of Dr. Wilson's tenure, the superintendent and governing board developed a deep level of mutual trust. The board came to rely on the superintendent. "[We] trust [her] to make decisions with her leadership team," said Board President Lisa Pelosi. The superintendent, in turn, felt supported by the board. This trusting relationship, combined with the district's concrete emergency preparedness plans, would prove critical as the district experienced a rash of crises that required quick and agile decisions.

Data for this Spotlight were gathered primarily through in-person interviews conducted May 24-25, 2022 in St. Helena with key district and union officials: the superintendent, chief academic/human resources officer, chief business official, two members of the governing board, and two officers each from the teachers' union and the union representing classified employees. Interview data were supplemented with information gathered from other sources such as the district website, LCAP, and Covid-era memoranda of understanding.

1. Dr. Marylou Williams was superintendent at the time of the interviews. She retired June 30, 2022 and was succeeded July 1 by Ruben Aurelio, former chief academic officer of the Berkeley Unified School District.

ST. HELENA USD AT-A-GLANCE



1,200

Students
(K-12)

90-94%



Graduation Rate

45%

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged

19.5%

English Language Learners

About St. Helena Unified

St. Helena Unified is a small district in the heart of the Napa Valley. The district serves slightly under 1,200 students, more than half of whom (53%) are Hispanic and 44% of whom are Caucasian. One-fifth (19.5%) of St. Helena's students are English Learners; nearly half (45%) are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Teachers and other certificated employees are represented by the St. Helena Teachers Association (SHTA), classified employees (paraeducators, clerical staff, custodians, and food service workers) by Chapter 287 of the California School Employees Association (CSEA).

Like many California districts, St. Helena is experiencing declining enrollment, due largely to the rising cost of living and shrinking availability of affordable housing in the area. St. Helena also is one of about 80 basic aid (community-funded) districts in California. Local property tax revenues exceed what the district would receive from the state (the revenue limit); the district is allowed to retain these additional dollars.



Former SHUSD Superintendent Marylou Wilson.

Honing Labor-Management Collaboration

St. Helena participated in CA LMI's inaugural 2015 labor-management convening in San Diego. Superintendent Wilson had learned of the opportunity from a California Department of Education announcement and applied on the district's behalf. St. Helena was accepted and the superintendent, board president, and leaders of the district's two unions attended. The district's experience with CA LMI both affirmed much of what already was in place and broadened team members' understanding of the possibilities of deeper labor-management collaboration. As the superintendent noted, "[Our team] looked around the room and saw ... what labor-management could be. [We] truly felt validation and wanted to do even more and better."



HR Director Chris Heller in meeting with CSEA executive board members.

District and union interviewees report that participation in CA LMI has resulted in increased communication between the unions and the administration. The human resources director and union presidents meet weekly and communicate frequently between formal meetings. “They have my cell phone number and text me,” says Human Resources Director Chris Heller. Heller also meets monthly with the unions’ executive boards. Key to these district-union interactions is resolving problems at the lowest organizational level, the school, for example, rather than the district, if possible.

**Says CSEA’s Christina Avina,
“We meet to solve problems
before they get out of hand.”**

CA LMI and follow-up labor-management work also have contributed to SHTA and CSEA taking more active and visible roles in district activities and functions. Each union has a designated slot on governing board meeting agendas and both unions participate in school year opening ceremonies. In addition, the district organizes quarterly “mini-CA LMI” of the superintendent, union leaders, and board president to refresh the

commitment to labor-management collaboration and explore issues of interest to all. For example, the district has put in place a Wellness Initiative focused on employees’ physical and mental well-being. One board member summed up the impact of St. Helena’s participation in CA LMI as helping the district and unions to develop habits of mind that have enabled them to “talk about organizational challenges and celebrate successes.”

Labor-management relationships in St. Helena are, “incredibly trusting, very collaborative,” says Superintendent Wilson. They are “built on a foundation of trust,” notes human resources chief Chris Heller. The district and its unions have developed an appreciation for the jobs of colleagues and counterparts. “We understand each other’s roles,” says teacher union president Brandon Farrell. This “walk in the other’s shoes” perspective, the ability to understand an issue from another’s point of view, has produced a collaborative willingness on the part of the district and unions to identify problems and work toward mutually beneficial solutions.

First the Fires, Then the Pandemic and More Fires

The crises that began with the October 2017 wildfire tested St. Helena’s emergency preparedness and the strength of its labor-management collaboration.

**“We should be on Survivor.
We’re winners of Survivor,”
says CSEA’s Lisa Montelli
about the last few years.**

From the time the first wildfire struck, a “We’re all in this together” attitude prevailed in St. Helena. Notes Chris Heller, “We knew we [all] had to unite to find solutions to the problems that confronted us.”

The Emergency Team: Putting Preparedness into Practice

The Emergency Team served as St. Helena's primary decision-making and coordinating body during the wildfire and Covid crises. Organized by the Superintendent, the Team—composed of the superintendent and her cabinet, the school board president, district directors (e.g., facilities, technology), school principals, leaders of both unions, as-needed district expertise (nurse, social worker), and a representative of the local Boys and Girls Club²—was designed to be sufficiently flexible to serve the needs of multiple kinds of emergencies.

The Emergency Team met in-person during the fires, then virtually during the pandemic, and served as a kind of standing action committee for the district, coming together to confront a crisis then suspending operation as that crisis abated until the next one caused it to reconvene.

The Superintendent activated the Emergency Team (*see sidebar*), St. Helena's collaborative approach to crisis decision-making and problem-solving. The Emergency Team served a number of critical purposes—a conduit for receiving and processing information, a forum for planning actions and responses, and a venue to ensure key district and union decision-makers were in constant conversation. Team meetings also provided a necessary avenue to reconcile divergent views among Team members and create buy-in for decisions the Team took. Says SHTA's Jennifer Marinace, "Everybody had a say." Adds CSEA's Christina Avina, "We all got to decide together."

The Emergency Team also was able to anticipate criticisms that were likely to come from the larger community. As teacher union president Brandon Farrell explained, "Decisions were going to be questioned and going to be criticized and challenged. The Emergency Team [got] people on the same page." The Team helped to ensure that members were communicating the same message, critical because, as Board President Pelosi notes, absent a consistent message from the Emergency Team, "people fill in their own narrative," interpreting events and actions individually rather than collectively. Importantly, in the midst of the often unknown and unpredictable, says CSEA's Lisa Montelli, "The Emergency Team calmed the waters."

The Pandemic Brings New Challenges

When St. Helena schools closed for Covid on March 13, 2020, the district became a community hub—distributing food, providing locales for Covid testing, and, eventually, offering Covid vaccine clinics. With Covid came a new set of challenges. Says school board member Jeannie Kerr:

"As tough as the fires had been, the pandemic was a different challenge...we had some knowledge about what a fire was and how to deal with it. None about the pandemic. We were living in an unknown space."

2. St. Helena Unified has a longstanding partnership with the local Boys and Girls Club whose programs operate on district campuses.

The Emergency Team was pressed into service again, shifting focus to the pandemic as the district grappled with the vagaries of virtual schooling and the challenges of keeping students, families, and staff safe. The district also faced a number of issues outside the purview of the Emergency Team, for example, uncertainty about the availability of funds. As a community-funded district, St. Helena revenues were particularly sensitive to potential swings in local revenue resulting from the crises. With the wildfires, residential growth, and thus property tax revenue, was lower; with the pandemic, business revenue fell. “Both [kinds of crises] required us to think on our feet and make decisions without knowing what additional revenue might be coming from the state or federal government,” says Andi Stubbs, the district’s Chief Business Official.

Covid also upended work situations for most employees. The district, SHTA, and CSEA negotiated memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to reconcile these new circumstances. Both unions and the district were keen to ensure health and safety matters were a priority (for example, before returning to school, building cleaning protocols, appropriate distancing in classrooms, and availability of adequate personal protective equipment). For teachers, MOUs additionally focused on what virtual school looked like, teachers’ responsibilities under this scenario, and the conditions that would need to be in place to return to in-person teaching. CSEA faced tension around classified employees temporarily taking on new or different roles (working out of classification) to prevent layoffs or reduced hours while ensuring that Covid-created work, such as distributing food to students and families, was handled.

The district and unions worked collaboratively through Covid issues. Neither side was interested in jeopardizing their relationship or putting employees at risk. In the midst of the pandemic, the district also was able to use a pot of money from the state to give all employees bonuses. “I think that tightened the desire to work together,” said Superintendent Wilson.



St. Helena labor-management team meeting at their district office for a CA LMI training session (August 15, 2019)

Reopening Schools

As fall 2020 approached, St. Helena looked toward reopening schools. The district, unions, and school board held a shared vision that the best way to serve students was to get them back to school in person as quickly as it was safe to do so.

To develop a plan for school reopening, the superintendent expanded the Emergency Team, adding parent representatives from each school, and renaming it the Transition Team. Members were assigned to topical sub-teams, such as cleaning and safety protocols, technology needs, transportation, and communication. Members of sub-teams reviewed information relevant to their areas and developed plans and approaches.

**Says Superintendent Wilson,
“The commitment on the part
of everyone was non-stop.
They did whatever it took” to
make plans work.**

The decision about when to reopen schools was not free of challenge. As in most school districts, St. Helena community members' views of Covid ran the gamut from, "It's a hoax" to "This is a real danger to our community." These differing points of view, reflective of the more general politicization of Covid, had practical implications for issues such as wearing masks and social distancing in schools and classrooms. In St. Helena, the politics were fairly muted and the impact mild. The superintendent found herself under some modest pressure to reopen schools quickly. Teachers took some bashing as well, for example, criticisms on Facebook about continuing to receive their salaries when they "were not really working."

SHTA described something of a balancing act as it considered the circumstances that needed to be in place for teachers to return to in-person instruction. Their members' beliefs about Covid, echoing the wider community's, encompassed the range of views.

Says SHTA president Brandon Farrell, "We ... had to be considerate of the people that were most scared and ... manage the people [whol] thought [Covid] was nothing."

See-sawing Toward Reopening

St. Helena initially hoped to reopen schools in August 2020. But that month the district found itself in the purple tier, prohibited by the state from reopening for in-person instruction.³ Plans were put on hold. No sooner did planning resume than the Glass Fire forced



St. Helena High School, built in 1912, is recognized in the National Register of Historic Places in Napa County

the evacuation of 80 percent of the town of St. Helena. Schools' reopening plans were halted again. By this time, St. Helena had moved out of the purple tier into red, meaning Covid would not prevent reopening. October 26, 2020 was set as the date, only to have smoke from yet another wildfire force schools to remain closed for an additional week.

St. Helena schools finally reopened on November 2, 2020. Students returned on a modified, half-day schedule, released each day at 1:45p.m. Teachers were simultaneously teaching students in-person and virtually, with cameras in their classrooms. The partial day schedule remained in effect for the rest of the 2020-2021 school year, though one major aspect of the teaching-learning arrangement would change in January.

In December 2020, Superintendent Wilson hosted a series of in-person feedback meetings with district staff to assess how back-to-school was going. Dr. Wilson found that most teachers, even those who had been skeptical of returning to in-person instruction, were pleased that school reopening was proceeding smoothly, with one

3. In August 2020, Governor Newsom unveiled California's Blueprint for a Safer Economy that divided counties into four tiers based on their rate of Covid infection. Tier 1 (purple) indicated the virus was widespread; Tier 2 (red) meant substantial spread; Tier 3 (orange) indicated moderate spread; and, Tier 4 (yellow) meant minimal spread. Districts in counties in the purple tier were prohibited from reopening for in-person instruction.

notable exception. Simultaneous virtual and in-person instruction, teachers told the superintendent, was just not working, not meeting students' needs. Students who attended school in-person were engaged with instruction. Those who attended only virtually far less so.⁴

In January 2021, the superintendent changed the in-person-virtual duality. Students who were medically fragile, left homeless by the fires, or temporarily quarantined by Covid had the option of remaining in virtual instruction with their district teachers. Other students who chose to remain virtual could do so only through an arrangement with an outside contractor and had no formal contact with the district. Said Marylou Wilson, "I created the space where it was easier to come back than to be in virtual."

When St. Helena schools reopened, 75 percent of the district's students returned immediately. Four months later, on March 1, 2021, 98 percent had come back. St. Helena schools saw no Covid outbreaks subsequent to the November 2020 reopening and were not forced by the pandemic to close again.

Conclusion

St. Helena Unified weathered a long string of crises in a relatively short period of time—wildfires, the pandemic, more wildfires. The district's story is one of resilience. Two take-aways stand out.

First, the Emergency Team was able to take advantage of the district's prescient crisis preparedness efforts, serving as a steadying and consensus-building force when questions were abundant and answers not always obvious. Everyone came to the table to make decisions, leading to the second key take-away. The crises served to strengthen labor-management relationships. Said SHTA's Brandon Farrell,

"[They] reaffirmed our ability to creatively solve problems together."

Superintendent Marylou Wilson seconded this point.

Rather than pulling the parties apart, she said, "The crises increased [our] desire to work together."

Crises are not a thing of the past for St. Helena. The threat of wildfires remains ever-present. Just on the night before the interviews for this Spotlight, a small fire erupted in the hills above the school district. ■

4. Interestingly, teachers also reported that students who attended school in-person, then were exposed to Covid and attended school virtually for the period of quarantine, displayed more engagement than students who attended school only virtually.

FOR ADDITIONAL SPOTLIGHT ISSUES, VISIT [CDEFUNDATION.ORG](https://www.cdefoundation.org)

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.

For additional information contact:

Gustavo Morales, Director:
gustavo@cdefoundation.org

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.





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