For Immediate Release

Rancho Elementary Staff Members Team Up and Breakout

March 29, 2019 – Livermore, CA - With a group of teachers huddled around a clue, debating their next move, Kristina Pinto paced anxiously in the periphery of the scrum. Pinto is a member of the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District (LVJUSD) team committed to “utilizing new and innovative technology in education” - the UNITE team. “I want to help them so badly,” she said, quietly, as the teachers began drawing a graph on the whiteboard. “That’s always the hardest part, watching them get really close but not quite catching everything.”

Pinto, along with fellow UNITE team member Michelle Seugling, was facilitating a “breakout box” session – a collaborative puzzle – as part of a staff meeting at Rancho Elementary. The way the activity works is similar to the escape rooms that have gained recent popularity as group activities: teammates are instructed to seek clues hidden around the room that, when solved, will provide information to open a coded lock that secures the box a team needs to crack to claim victory. Clues cover a series of content related to history, science, mathematics, and more; all participants will have an opportunity to play to their strengths, so long as their teammates are listening to the variety of perspectives available to them.

Principal Steve Martin had arranged for the team building exercise, and found that the breakout box might present his staff with some unique challenges – in particular because the UNITE team has used the activity in classrooms with students as a way to enhance collaboration and critical thinking skills. “I think it’s important to be able to offer these team building exercises to our staff,” said Martin. “This is something that has the potential to open new lines of communication as people find out how their colleagues think in a problem-solving scenario.”

The staff was given the same instructions as Pinto gives to students who participate in the activity: “Do the work, figure it out, open the box. Don’t break it if it doesn’t work, and don’t try to guess.”

“It’s interesting to see this activity play out with adults,” commented Seugling, who has facilitated the activity in several classroom settings. “Kids tend to be more open problem solvers, shouting out whatever comes to mind, and experimenting with some out-of-the-box creative solutions.”

The Rancho staff started more quietly, suspiciously checking every object in the room that might contain a clue, wondering to themselves if something was worth bringing to their group. As they started asking more questions and offering ideas, their collaboration began in earnest. To succeed in the breakout exercise, teammates needed to feel comfortable taking risks among their peers – ideas need to be supported, built on, and explored resourcefully.
“Should we all start thinking with you?” asked one teacher, rallying her group together when only a couple members of her team were puzzling over a clue. “Does anyone else have a different idea?” asked another.

Starting with slightly guarded attempts to come up with the right answer, the colleagues – equipped with familiarity and shorthand – soon applied the creativity and peer engagement skills that make them successful educators. As a team, they quickly learned how to utilize the strengths of their peers, and to keep spirits up when some ideas did not bear fruit. These represented the same growth mindset and social-emotional techniques they work to instill in students each day – with all the challenges, frustrations, and incremental successes that come with them.

In the end – with the staff split into two teams in two halves of the room – one side was quicker than the other to break out, but the activity had served its purpose. Working together to solve the clues had fostered conversation about the diverse processes behind the colleagues’ thoughts, and how synergizing their strengths led to solutions that would have been unavailable individually.

While the focus of education is nearly always – and rightfully – geared toward the students, it serves the students to have teachers open to learning and developing professionally. Rancho’s activity was one example of LVJUSD staff utilizing collaboration time to strengthen and support teaching skills. Ongoing professional development is part of LVJUSD’s commitment to lifelong learning for educators, ensuring that they always have the best tools with which to impart knowledge and cultivate innovative thinkers.

Photos courtesy of LVJUSD

Photo 1: A breakout box
Photo 2 & 3: Collaboration solving clues in teams
Photo 4: The Rancho Elementary staff

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**ABOUT LIVERMORE VALLEY JOINT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**
LVJUSD is an award-winning district that serves more than 13,900 students in transitional kindergarten through 12th grade at nine elementary campuses, two K-8 schools, three middle schools, two comprehensive high schools, and two alternative schools. The LVJUSD features International Baccalaureate Programmes and a STEM pathway, TK-12. The mission of the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District is to ensure each student will graduate with the skills needed to contribute and thrive in a changing world. For more information about the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District, please visit [www.livermoreschools.org](http://www.livermoreschools.org)

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