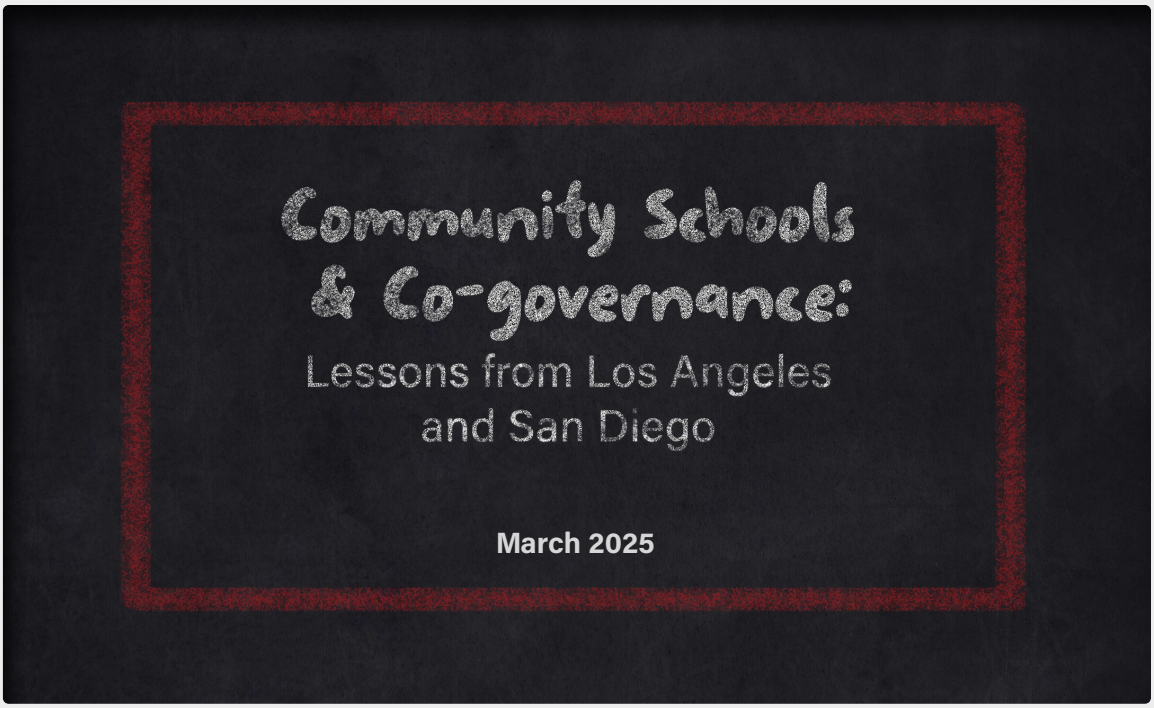

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INTRODUCTION

When we imagine a multiracial democracy where everyone's needs are met, a central part of that vision includes public schools that support and educate our children with vigor and love. We envision schools that provide an outstanding education, staffed with dedicated educators and administrators, with engaged students who embrace learning, and who receive the supports they need and deserve. To achieve that vision, a school system would allow all of its stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, families and students, the power to shape their school communities.

For more than three decades, under both political parties, on the federal and local level, our public school system has undergone a neoliberal transformation, privatizing public schools and limiting democratic governing structures in favor of corporate control. Los Angeles and many other urban school districts have long been the site of pitched battles over control of public education, as billionaires like Eli Broad, Betsy DeVos and Jeff Yass have tried to dismantle the public school system and replace it with schools that are run like top-down, for-profit corporations. In the process, schools have been shut, students were pulled out of their communities, and democratic governance of schools was stripped from districts where the student body was made up of a majority of students of color.

Despite — or because of — years of "educational reform," too many of our public schools are not working as they should. After years of incentivizing schools to "teach to the test" and punishing those that refuse to, too many students still struggle to meet grade-level academic standards. Teachers remain underpaid and overworked. School infrastructure is falling apart. And the schools themselves are too often segregated along racial and economic lines, with children in wealthy, whiter neighborhoods attending well resourced schools with outstanding educational opportunities, while the rest are left to make do with not enough — not enough teachers, support systems, infrastructure, decent food or extracurricular activities.

For those who believe that education should stay a public good — provided by the government and equitably available to everyone but also agree that changes are needed, the question becomes, how can we effectively improve and operate our public schools?

Community schools are public schools with deep roots in the larger community that work to build a reciprocal relationship where the school strengthens the community and the community strengthens the school. They are focused on offering a rigorous education while also supporting the whole child by partnering with community to meet the student's social and educational needs. Community schools have grown over decades of iterative development, and represent an established, delineated and

successful framework to building schools that reflect what public schools should be. Students receive a meaningful education with extended hours during the day and summer, with a curriculum that reflects their lives and the community's needs.

Essential to this model is a respect for the school's community stakeholders and their perspectives on how to make improvements and solve problems. Many of the most successful examples have created concrete structures that explicitly share decision-making power between the district, local school administrators, educators and stakeholders in the community. As such, they have become powerful examples of **co-governance.**

> **Co-governance** is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities work together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

In this report we look at how community schools are structured to bring students, teachers, parents, guardians and administrators together to co-govern schools to support students and families. This report examines in particular the inspiring community school models launched in the Los Angeles Unified and San Diego Unified school districts in recent years.

LA Steering Committee meeting.

Community and Schools Working Together

Building schools that provide all children the opportunity to thrive takes dedicated teachers, but teachers are not magic, and they cannot do it alone. It also takes a community — families, administrators, staff, nurses, counselors, outside supports and so much more — each of whom have important on-the-ground knowledge that can strengthen schools if they are given a voice in the decision-making process. Because of this, community schools can be flexible and responsive to their communities in ways that too often traditional top-down public schools are unable to be.

As it currently stands, our school system is expected to rectify extraordinary disparities in our society — the result of decades of systematic harm inflicted on marginalized groups due to their race, class, gender, sexuality and ability — while they continue to mirror those very disparities. Many public schools suffer from a lack of funding, despite evidence that more money drives better outcomes. State and local school districts have failed to adopt equitable funding systems while maintaining policies that keep schools segregated, force schools to compete for resources and treat families as consumers. Creating a community school entails extra funding — mainly for hiring an extra full-time staff member — but the real shift comes from reorienting the decision-making process and including the community to better reflect their hopes and needs for their childrens' education, as well as enlisting the support of local community-based organizations that are able to help with relevant community resources.

High-Stakes Testing and Charter Schools

Through the neoliberal era of governance that began in the 1990s, billionaire-funded think tanks and foundations and elected officials in both political parties pushed a number of education reform efforts designed to make K-12 schools work more like for-profit businesses. Chief among these were the pushes for metrics and testing and the campaign to turn public schools into charter schools.

Metrics and Testing

The past decades have seen a series of policies implemented on the federal, state and local level that focused on metrics and testing as the main strategy to improve educational outcomes, but failed to address the racial and economic segregation that remains widespread throughout the system. No Child Left Behind, federal legislation passed in 2001 under President George W. Bush, was

then replaced with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 under President Obama. Both focused on testing as the primary metric for "success" but did little to address the root causes of inequality. This led to widespread "teaching to the test," with both children and teachers straining under the pressure of passing high pressure tests, but left schools without the appropriate policies or funding to contend with huge racial and economic inequities that drive disparities, often between schools within the same district.

Charter Schools and School Vouchers
Federal and state-level policies opened the door to public funding of charter schools and school vouchers, both of which send students to schools that have little to no accountability or oversight from the government or community. Charter schools, often backed by billionaires, like Michael Bloomberg, Eli Broad, and Betsy DeVos, want schools to perform like for-profit businesses, and see the hollowing out of the public school system as a feature, not a bug. In their view, privatization of the public school system can nullify the power of teachers' unions, and force schools to compete like any other business on the market. They promote the values of testing, competition, accountability and school choice, but ignore studies that show testing does not correlate to learning, that charter schools cherry pick high-performing students while pushing out those who need more support, and that charter schools, religious schools, private schools, and homeschooling all have far less oversight and accountability than public schools. School vouchers allow families to use government money to pay for private school tuition, with more and more states embracing the policy, only to find that the programs are significantly more expensive than predicted, and result in taxpayers' money going to schools with little to no transparency or accountability to their school district.

Community schools offer a path towards equity: schools that are committed to both providing an excellent education, with extended hours and summer options, that also embrace the whole child, and use the strengths and insights of the community to achieve those goals. Because they recognize that children's health, well-being, and ability to learn are affected by their immediate family and broader community, community schools build a hub that supports and reflects the whole community, including by providing infrastructure that helps meet families' broader social and economic needs. As such, they are a key component in building a multiracial democracy, one in which everyone's needs are met.

The Six Key Practices of Community Schools

Community schools have a history that goes back over 100 years, but the modern wave of community schools gained traction in the 1990s, with initiatives in New York City, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Kentucky, Oakland, Baltimore, Chicago and Indianapolis, among others. Each model developed strong partnerships between the school and its community, so that they could better respond to the needs of their students and their families. Throughout the years, various models of community schools have evolved, often centering on what was referred to as the "Four Pillars."[1] There is now a strong consensus around a core approach centering **six key practices**.

The Six Key Practices of community schools:[2]

1. Integrated student supports;
2. Expanded learning time and opportunities;
3. Family and community engagement;
4. Rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction;
5. Culture of belonging, culture and care; and
6. Collaborative leadership and practice.

Including only one or two of the practices does not make a community school — all six practices need to be embraced because each is important and because each reinforces the other. Providing a food pantry in a school, or expanding the school day, are individual positives, but the real strength of the community schools approach is only achieved when all six practices are implemented.

> *"WHEN YOU TALK TO PEOPLE WHO DON'T NECESSARILY UNDERSTAND WHAT A COMMUNITY SCHOOL IS, EVERYONE THINKS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL IS A FOOD PANTRY."*
>
> **Aronn Peterson**
> *Former San Diego District Lead for Community Schools*

1 For more in-depth analysis of the Four Pillars, refer to the Community School Playbook.
2 For more on the Six Practices, refer to Key Practices of Community Schools.

Because community schools are unique to each community, the range and type of services provided respond to the needs of the community. This is where the intertwining of the key practices and the need for co-governance become apparent. While the first five practices focus on the "what" of community schools, the sixth is about the "how": building collaborative leadership and practice.

Without real, authentic family and community engagement, it would be difficult if not impossible for a community school to identify how best to support students and their families academically and socially. For example, school leadership in a community with a large Latine[3] population might assume that ESL classes for parents would be a priority, but after deep engagement through surveys and meetings might learn that the priority for parents and caregivers was that their children have more Spanish instruction. A successful community school engages, listens, understands and responds to its community's unique needs and insights.

Transforming Schools into Community Schools: Structures and Committees that Lead to Success

The strongest community school models embrace collaborative leadership and practice by codifying and building structures, often in the form of **Memorandum of Understanding** (MOUs) and committees, that give a voice and share power between the major stakeholders in the community.

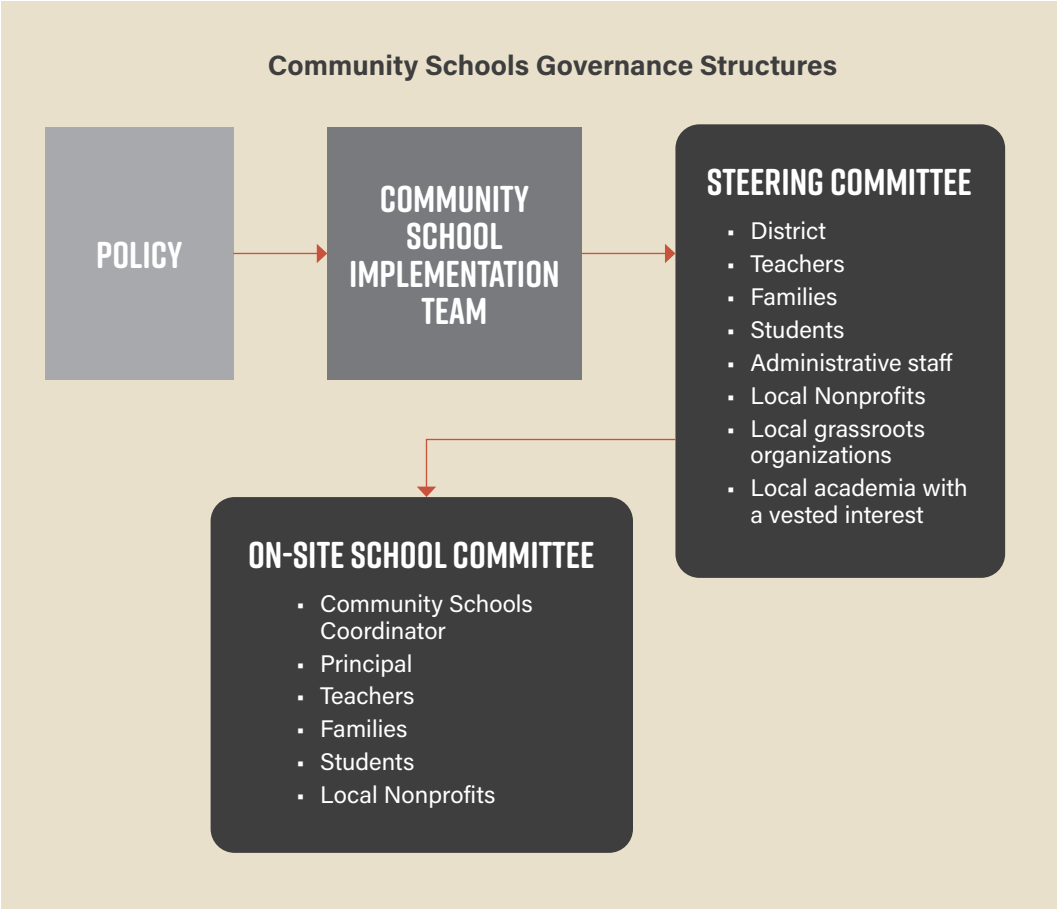
In the case of community schools, **MOUs** are often agreements between the district and the teachers' union that can establish:

- How many community schools will be founded and how quickly
- Where the funding will come from and how much
- The structures and committees that will be created to share decision-making power

Before an MOU is established, the district and the teachers' union need to agree to community schools in the first place. Every community school initiative has a different creation story, but it often begins with schools struggling under the weight of divestment and top-down reforms forced on schools and families. This cycle has led to stagnant or plummeting learning progress, high staff turnover, and mounting threats from charter schools or school voucher programs to siphon resources, with parents pulling their kids from the system. Change is hard and school districts rarely cede administrative power voluntarily.

3 For more on the use of the term Latine, read A Brief Explainer on Latine and Latinx.

Once the understanding is in place, the design, governance, and implementation structures can be built. Often this means creating a **Community Schools Implementation Team** (CSIT), that will eventually transition into a **Steering Committee**, as well as the creation of **on-site committees** at each individual community school. One key to a strong structure is that each committee includes community stakeholders and gives each stakeholder a voice and a vote. The best practices give stakeholders real, meaningful power: enough power to influence which policy choices are made and how these policies and budgets are implemented. This is not the symbolic and at times tokenistic nods towards family input in which parents, for example, are invited to to give feedback.[4] Not every community school initiative is designed this way, but strong steering and on-site committees are a concrete approach to sharing governance across multiple stakeholders.



When a community school initiative is designed for collaborative decision-making, as it is in LA and San Diego, the hard work of co-governance begins with the Implementation Team and then with the Steering Committee. These are where all the stakeholders come together and work collaboratively to move the initiative forward.

4 The Spectrum of Family and Community Engagement for Educational Equity goes into further depth on what authentic family engagement can look like.

The Implementation Team is where the collaborative decision-making begins. Committee members decide how exactly the initiative will move forward. How many community schools will be created, at what pace and over how many years of expansion? How will schools be identified and prioritized? Will they require individual schools to apply or will they assign them? What funding is available and how will it be spent? Each school needs time and attention to establish its sea legs, authentically involve their unique communities, figure out how to provide services and establish collaborative leadership at the school. A rush to build up and out can lead to weak community schools, ones that rely on only one or two key practices, such as expanded services, that can result in a charity model rather than authentic co-governance. An application process that is not overly burdensome can help weed out schools that are only interested in the extra funding that can come with being designated a community school but may not be committed to community school principles such as collaborative leadership and decision-making.

After the initial round of decision-making, about three to six months, the Implementation Team generally morphs into the Steering Committee, which is the major site of decision-making and collaboration moving forward.

The district and the teachers' union generally have five votes each, with one each serving as co-chairs of the committee. Ideally, the district sends representatives who are enthusiastic about community schools and understand the importance of collaborative decision-making. This is not always the case, and it can be helpful to have representatives on these committees from more neutral community based organizations or nonprofit institutions. These neutral representatives can hold the committee together, negotiate differences in good faith, and, if necessary, nudge and push various stakeholders towards a broader acceptance of the goals of community schools. For a district representative, it can be an at-times painful shift to understand that they need to listen to and negotiate in good faith with a parent on the committee who has equal voting power. Similarly, some districts have difficult histories with their teachers' unions, full of conflict and painful negotiations. That history does not disappear when the district and the union sit together on a committee. Having a trusted intermediary, often in the shape of a nonprofit organization, can be helpful and necessary.

The Steering Committee maintains a bird's-eye view of the entire initiative, but the individual school site committees are also integral to the work. These school site committees include the major stakeholders of each school: the principal, teachers, administrative staff, students, family, representatives from local nonprofits and academia that are involved with the school and the Community Schools Coordinator.[5]

The **Community Schools Coordinator** is often the biggest budget item for a community school, integral to implementing the changes necessary to turn a school

into a community school and to ensure the initiative keeps its momentum, in the face of typical day-to-day setbacks. An effective Community Schools Coordinator s constantly pushes the mission forward while they act as mediator, facilitator, and taskmaster coordinating across stakeholders. Principals might like the idea of community schools, but the reality of sharing power with staff, teachers, families and students can be a bitter pill to swallow for some. For students and families, after years of disenfranchisement and tokenistic efforts to get "feedback," it can be difficult to convince them that if they put in the time and effort this time, they will actually get real decision-making power. Particularly with families who are already overburdened and have very little bandwidth, coordinators often have to work doubly hard to earn trust and buy-in.

Proponents of more top-down approaches may believe that "let's create a committee" is the first step towards killing a dream. While including more people in the decision-making process can slow things down, the results are often more successful because of the different perspectives and points of view that have been considered. Quicker is easier, but not always better. In community schools, committees are the heart and soul of the initiative and making committees effective sites of collaborative decision-making is what makes them work so well. Proponents of community schools believe strongly in structures and committees that allow for truly collaborative work. While a dental clinic in a school is a nice resource, a well-constructed, humming committee is the engine that makes the initiative soar.

Implementing Community Schools

Once a school has been approved, the coordinator hired and the on-site committee established, the next step is a deep **assessment** of the community's assets and what it wants and needs.

Assessments often begin with a community-wide survey. The survey needs to be followed up with granular outreach to make sure every stakeholder group has been thoroughly sounded out, with a minimum goal of 75% of students, staff members and families giving feedback so that decisions can be made with a thorough understanding of the community. What should expanded days and summer learning look like? What special needs and extra supports are lacking? What services would best help the community? Who can we partner with to provide all of these things? How do we identify students and parents to be on the on-site committees? Community Schools do not replace traditional school-based parent committees such as a parent teacher association, but build additional capacity to actively cultivate relationships with more parents, guardians and caretakers, beyond the handful of parents who are already involved and active.

5 For more information on effective community school structures, read the NEA's System Level Structures for Effective Community School Implementation and Support.

The community schools model addresses some of the problems traditional public schools have struggled with, but it also brings new challenges. Many of the issues that arise stem from shifting power dynamics. People who traditionally hold power in school districts and schools — school boards, superintendents and administrators — need to be willing to share it. People who have less power (depending on the school and the community, this can include students, families, administrative staff and teachers) need to believe that things have changed, and need to then be willing to accept the responsibility — in time, energy, and effort — to put in the work necessary to wield it. Too often, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities, families are treated as a problem to be solved, a mentality that is rooted in racial and class biases. Community schools recognize that families are experts on their children and their community who can be problem solvers. Building trust is hard and takes time, and depends on a commitment to relationship-building.

The history of public education is filled with extraordinary teachers, administrators, staff, students and advocates who have worked tirelessly to help raise up all of our children. But its history is also one of great harm that reverberates through families over generations. Corporal punishment is still legal in some school districts. The school-to-prison pipeline continues. Young people and children need understanding, patience and respect, and they don't always get it.

Despite the challenges that students, families, teachers and administrators all face in segregated, under-resourced school districts, community schools are exhibiting tremendous potential to support students' education and whole communities' well-being. Because the best way to understand a model is often to look at how it has worked in practice, we will share two case studies on community schools in Los Angeles and San Diego. While the origin of each initiative is unique to the history and context of each city, both have forged highly successful initiatives by embracing collaborative leadership and decision-making. There is no silver bullet to building a great school, but the seeds of possibility can be seen in community schools where the knowledge and wisdom of every member of the community can be heard and acted upon.

CASE STUDY: LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

After years of organizing and coalition-building, culminating in a six-day strike, the teachers' union in Los Angeles won the right to begin a community schools initiative that embraced collaborative decision-making power between the district, the teachers, families and their community. The results are a model for how to use the expertise and on-the-ground experience of multiple stakeholders in order to build successful schools.

Planting the Seeds of Community Schools in Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest school district in the country, with over a thousand schools. Like many large districts, it struggles with schools that are deeply segregated along racial and economic lines, compounded by a history of punitive and harsh discipline practices, like fining families for lateness and arresting children for minor infractions. Since property taxes are a major source of school funding in LA, students in wealthier neighborhoods attend schools with many more resources, while poorer Angelenos are left to go to schools with limited supports and worse facilities, leading to poorer educational outcomes.

As of 2025, sixty-three schools in the district are designated community schools, each with a strong commitment to collaborative leadership and practice. Community schools in LA were built around a collaboration between the teachers' union and local grassroots organizations that came together through the Reclaim Our Schools LA (ROSLA) coalition. LA's community schools have since become a model for how to share decision-making power between multiple stakeholders, despite a painful history of conflict and the resultant distrust between the district and the teachers' union and families who had too often been treated as a nuisance to be managed. As such, the LA community schools have shown how a co-governance strategy in schools – where government and community work together to design and implement programs – can strengthen schools and improve outcomes for both the students and their communities.

There were three main drivers that led to the creation of community schools in LA: decades of community work that laid the groundwork, the teacher's union that demanded them and billions of dollars from the state that helped fund them. Behind all the work was a foundational shift in mindset: the growing understanding that the traditional approach to public school education was failing LA's kids — that educating children meant more than history and math classes, it meant using the whole community and engaging every stakeholder to raise children up so they could receive the quality education they needed and deserved. In addition, the growing charter

school movement in LA, backed by wealthy donors, was creating a competitive market for public education that was vacuuming up students and public money, helping nudge those with reservations about community schools to recognize the need for change.

The first cohort of community schools in LA began in the fall of 2019, but the seeds were planted all the way back in 2007, amidst the fiscal crisis and ensuing layoffs. At that time, there was an influx of new, younger teachers of color who had grown up in the neighborhoods that they were now teaching in, and who were committed to social justice and democratic participation. At the same time, many teachers were increasingly frustrated with the district and their union, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). Their union wasn't fighting for them, or their schools, and they realized the change they wanted needed to begin inside the union, starting with a long-term vision: what would change look like for their union, what would that mean for their schools, and how could they achieve it?

While in 2007, people in LA didn't have the "community schools" language yet, that was essentially what they were envisioning: schools that involved the entire community and every stakeholder, provided appropriate wraparound services and support for students, practiced collaborative leadership, extended the school day into robust afterschool and summer programs and provided a dynamic and academically excellent learning experience for their students. They were inspired by the Freedom Schools in the South[6], by the UCLA professors that had taught them and eventually by the National Education Association (NEA), the national teachers union that UTLA was an affiliate of, which provided essential guidance and leadership around community schools. The UCLA School of Education had taught many of the teachers coming into UTLA at that time, and had also opened the UCLA Community School in Koreatown in 2009, providing a model for the movement. Since then, UCLA has established the Center for Community Schooling which has supported a citywide effort and provided technical assistance statewide.

Reclaiming the Teachers' Union and Reclaiming Schools

By 2014, the LA teachers' union was stuck. Its leadership was stagnant, its members were burnt out and there was no vision at the top. Charter schools were steadily eating away at their membership, and internal rifts in 2007 and 2008 had weakened the union further. The teachers who wanted change realized they needed to elect new leadership before they could reach out to the community and build a movement together.

6 For more on Freedom Schools, refer to Exploring the History of Freedom Schools

> *"OUR UNION WAS NOT IN A POSITION OF FIGHTING FOR US AND FOR THE SCHOOLS, SO THAT COMPELLED A LOT OF US TO THINK ABOUT CHALLENGING WHAT WAS HAPPENING AT THE SCHOOLS AND THE ROLE OUR UNION WAS PLAYING IN THOSE FIGHTS."*
>
> **Rosa Jimenez**
> *former teacher at UCLA Community School and UTLA member*

Alex Caputo-Pearl has been teaching in Compton and South Los Angeles for 22 years, while also working as a community organizer. He, along with a slate of change-minded teachers, ran to change the leadership of the union from traditional business unionism to social justice unionism. Their campaign was unapologetic and radical, promising to use collective power as a foundation for change. They won.

The next step was to figure out how they could re-energize the union and use it as a force to change LA's schools. They worked to identify new leaders at school sites. Internally, they started the Build the Future, Fund the Fight campaign to build the consciousness and leadership of members and to talk to their fellow teachers about why it was important to increase their dues to invest in the union. Faced with the threat from the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation to move half of LAUSD students into charter schools within 8 years, the membership overwhelmingly approved a 30% dues increase in 2016. With that victory, they were able to hire one more organizer, as well as a research staff member. The subsequent research, power mapping and strategizing they did was essential and fruitful. Organizers also worked with rank-and-file teachers to help them organize parents and teachers around broader education and community challenges and goals.

Building coalitions that are effective and powerful is difficult and necessary work. Part of that difficulty is building trust between organizations, especially when their history is complicated. Such was the case in LA; union members realized they needed to reach out to other groups in order to achieve their goals, one of which was community schools, but many of those groups did not trust the union. In the past, the union had been exclusively focused on pay and benefits for their teachers, and had treated negotiations as a zero-sum game: more money for nurses meant less money for teachers. Part of building that trust meant breaking out of this austerity mindset and acknowledging that what was best for schools was best for teachers and vice versa. Union members needed to understand that a school that gave their students the necessary and appropriate support was also better for its teachers. Union members joined the Public Education Roundtable led by professor John Rogers at UCLA to do a deep dive into the future of education.

> *"IT WAS NOT EASY . . . UTLA HAS HAD A VERY FRAGILE RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS FOR A LONG TIME AND IN FACT, IN THOSE EARLY CONVERSATIONS, MANY COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS WERE VERY DISTRUSTFUL OF THE UNION BECAUSE OF THEIR HISTORY OF NOT ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY, AS I IMAGINE THEY ARE IN A LOT OF PLACES."*
>
> **Rosa Jimenez**
> *former teacher at UCLA Community School and UTLA member*

Out of that work, the union decided to build a coalition, Reclaim Our Schools LA, that was a collaboration between the union and the community. The coalition included UTLA, the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE, a base-building organization committed to racial and economic justice), the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE, a labor-community strategy and organizing center) and Students Deserve (a youth-led organization committed to ending the school-to-prison pipeline). Building this coalition and the trust needed to sustain it was time-consuming and difficult, but marked a key turning point in the development of community schools.

The coalition helped the members educate themselves and then build a cadre of parents and students who were their ambassadors in schools. They called this "building consciousness, leadership and structure" — a framework that teacher and organizer Esperanza Martinez learned while working with the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union. The community organizations brought in the perspectives of parents and students outside of the school, which complemented what the teachers saw within the school. Without that deeper understanding, UTLA would not have been able to later put together the list of their demands that would eventually lead to their strike and subsequent wins.

In December 2016, the coalition came out with their platform, "A Vision to Support Every Student." An important part of that platform was community schools, an idea that Kyle Serrette from the NEA helped foster. Community schools had acquired new importance now that the union was willing and able to think about changes they wanted to make beyond salary and benefits for their rank and file. Members of the teachers' union participated in a Community Schools Institute that Serette and the NEA ran in Milwaukee, then came back in 2017 ready to work with school board members to co-author a resolution. In 2017, LAUSD passed a board resolution, Embracing Community Schools Strategies (ECSS), that established a Community Schools Implementation Team (CSIT) comprised of business, education, community

and civic partners. The team gathered extensive community input and learnings and developed a roadmap and list of benchmarks to guide the community schools implementation process within the district through 2018.

By 2018 it became clear that a teachers' strike was looming. UTLA had introduced Bargaining for the Common Good, a framework that expanded their collective bargaining demands to include the needs of the whole community. Working with Reclaim Our Schools LA, the organizers built a base of students and teachers in each of the eight parts of the district. They ran town halls and talked about using the bargaining table to fight for everyone, including parents and students. Out of those town halls, union member surveys and their own research, they shaped their platform, which included:

- Smaller class sizes
- Increased support staff
- Improvements in special education
- A salary hike
- An end to random searches of students
- Less standardized testing
- More funding for schools
- Community schools funding

In September 2018 the union had their first bargaining session with the district, and they included students and parents on their bargaining team. Having students and parents in the room shifted the dynamic and empowered the teachers.

> *"THAT WAS LIFE CHANGING TO SAY THE LEAST. TO BE ABLE TO SEE THE PRIDE IN PARENTS AND STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS BE AT THE TABLE WITH THE DISTRICT AND ON THE UNION'S SIDE WAS PRETTY INCREDIBLE."*
>
> **Esperanza Martinez**
> *Former UTLA Community Schools Lead Coach*

By January 2019 negotiations broke down and the UTLA had their first strike in decades. It lasted six days, during which the teachers organized from 5:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, supported by parents and students, despite constant, driving rain. The NEA brought in state and national organizers to help them. Through it all the teachers refused to settle and insisted on holding out for all of their demands. After six days of passionate demonstrations and shows of unity the union won just about everything they asked for — including community schools.[7]

7 For more on Freedom Schools, refer to Exploring the History of Freedom Schools

Building a Culture and Institutions of Collaboration

The strike propelled community schools into reality with a bargaining agreement that included piloting the first community schools in the district with $12 million in funding for development. The first cohort launched in 2019 with seventeen schools. By the 2025-26 school year, there will be seventy community schools.

Within their new contract the teachers' union won a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the district that included funding, a steering committee and a structured partnership between the union and the district. The union's insistence that the district work with them as a collaborator in the initiative was essential to its success. Out of that collaboration they won the necessary staffing capacity and funding and co-developed a steering committee that represented the community.

> *"2019 WAS ONLY THE FIRST HALF OF THE BATTLE. THE NEXT PART WAS GOING TO BE "HOW DO YOU IMPLEMENT THESE TYPES OF VICTORIES THAT THE DISTRICT HAS NEVER HAD TO CONTEND WITH?" THAT WAS THE ONGOING BUILDING STRUCTURES, BUILDING COMMITTEES, BUILDING TASK FORCES THAT WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR HOLDING THAT WORK."*
>
> **Esperanza Martinez**
> *Former UTLA Community Schools Lead Coach*

The steering committee was founded in 2019 and includes eight representatives from LAUSD and eight representatives from UTLA. It is co-convened by a nonprofit organization, UNITE-LA. For more than 25 years UNITE-LA has established itself as a trusted education and business intermediary, dedicated to supporting the development of an effective local public education system through the intersection of programming, policy, and systemic change efforts. Because of UNITE-LA's collaborative partnership history with LAUSD and UTLA through a prior effort, the L.A. Compact, the organization was brought in as a trusted, neutral party to convene, facilitate and project manage the steering community.

UTLA wanted strong representation on the steering committee, but given how big the district is, it also wanted strong district representation to integrate community schools with the rest of the district's work. The district's representatives include leadership from Student Health and Human Services, the Division of Instruction and the Office of Student, Family and Community Engagement. The steering committee also includes

regional and community-based organizations that understand community schools, namely ACCE, LAANE and another grassroots organization focused on economic and racial justice named SCOPE. LAANE and ACCE identify a parent to sit on the committee, while Students Deserve identify a student leader to provide a student voice. All together, there are about 20 people on the committee, but a few, including UNITE-LA, don't have voting power.

> *"WE ASSUME THAT WE PUT PEOPLE IN A ROOM – OR ON A COMMITTEE – AND THEY JUST ARE GOING TO FIGURE THINGS OUT. WE NEED MORE PRACTICE IN DECISION-MAKING, IN WORKING THROUGH PROBLEMS AND IN MOVING NEW IDEAS [FORWARD]. I THINK THAT IS THE REALLY HARD PART."*
>
> **Rosa Jimenez**
> *former teacher at UCLA Community School and UTLA member*

Too often, we think of committees as places where good ideas go to die, one reason being because institutions will sometimes create committees with the implicit desire to placate or create a vehicle of tokenized input. However, when designed carefully, committees can be powerful vehicles for collaborative decision-making. With community schools, the steering committee is the brain and the heart of the operation, providing leadership, structure and a sounding board to effectively support the scaling, advocacy, continuous improvement and sustainability of the community schools initiative. Each individual school can then move forward with a concrete understanding of what it is they need to do and how to do it, including making the leap and opening up the decision-making process to the broader school community.

The collaboration between the district and the union is ongoing and is centered around the steering committee. The committee is the space in which stakeholders can collaborate around resourcing, the application process, grant writing, ongoing learning and improvement, advocacy and decision-making. Governance by committee does not come

LAUDSD meeting with Community Schools Coordinators.

without difficulties, but it has been fundamentally successful. One key has been having the structure and membership codified within the MOU. In the past, similar attempts at collaboration withered on the vine through summer breaks, staff turnover and ongoing conflicts. With this steering committee, if conflicts arise, committee members and stakeholders can consult the contract and the bylaws, officially created in 2023, on the rights and roles of the different members in order to figure out a resolution.

> *"THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL GOES BEYOND PROVIDING WRAPAROUND SERVICES. IT REALLY IS ABOUT A STRONG DECISION-MAKING BODY AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP. . . IT IS A GOVERNING STRUCTURE THAT IS UNIQUE. THE IDEA OF HAVING LAUSD, UTLA, ACTUAL COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS AND A NEUTRAL PARTY LIKE UNITE-LA PARTICIPATE IN THINKING THROUGH HOW TO ENHANCE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP – I APPRECIATE IT, BUT I CAN SAY IT'S AN ONGOING CHALLENGE BECAUSE THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES AT ALL TIMES."*
>
> **Jenny Vu**
> *UNITE-LA*

While the steering committee is the governing body of the community schools initiative within the district, each community school must establish their own shared decision-making body. The MOU initially named the pre-existing **Local School Leadership Council** (LSLC) at each school as the official governing body. This was different from the traditional model in which a school administrator hand picks their team.

LSLCs tend to have 7 to 15 people, including the principal, the community schools coordinator, teachers, staff, parents and students. The contract requires them to meet 2 hours per month. The strongest ones are comprised of a slate of people who are deeply committed to community schools, with parents and teachers electing their own representatives on the committee. There are teams under the LSLC that focus on instruction, district policy and other priorities.

However, some schools found that arrangement is not ideal — the members were sometimes unresponsive and too busy — so each community school was asked to create a **Community School Implementation Team** (CSIT). Ultimately, the requirement is that each school has some form of shared leadership body. The various stakeholders, led by the Community Schools Coordinator, decide what kind of body they want to form and the details of how they operate.

Slow but Steady Expansion

The MOU outlined a plan for 30 community schools within the first two years, with a community school coordinator at each site and funding for each school to hire the coordinator as well as to organize outreach to the parents. LAUSD was aided in expanding community schools by California's Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), a 2022 state bill that provided $4.1 billion in funding to school districts for community schools. Under the guidance of the Community School Implementation Team, the district started with the first cohort of 17 schools, and then the next year added 13 more schools. With the fifth cohort in the 2024-25 school year, there are 63 schools, with a goal of 70 schools by the following school year.

Because the school district had historically been so top-down, the steering committee agreed to start community schools on a smaller scale, and initiate a bottom-up organizing approach to build leadership in each school. The first year, each community school received $150,000, which essentially funded the community schools coordinator. Later, each school received $250,000 through new school board resolutions in 2020 and 2021, which could pay for the coordinator, plus training and planning time for the teachers.

The Community Schools Coordinator is a vital nexus to the whole operation, tasked with spearheading outreach to the broader community, and working with the school principal, teachers and staff to ensure the school is implementing all six key practices, including collaborative decision-making.

Community School Coordinators at the Miguel Contreras Learning Complex in Los Angeles.

The steering committee agreed to require schools to apply to be designated community schools to ensure that the schools, and their leadership, were genuinely enthusiastic about the initiative. Some of the applicants were mainly interested in the extra funding, and were weeded out. Another issue was that the MOU protected community school sites

from hosting charter schools (that would end up poaching students from the public school). It became clear that this was also a motivator for some schools to apply. It was important that there was a base of teachers, parents and students that were interested at each school site, not just one or two individuals plus the principal. The steering committee would take a close look at each applying school and do a thorough assessment of the school's climate, readiness, and willingness to implement the community school's framework. They made the application relatively easy, but not too easy, because building a community school is significant work and if the school couldn't manage an application, it couldn't manage a community school.

One of the biggest hurdles to building a community school is a school principal who isn't deeply invested in the model. Being a principal of a public school is always difficult and demanding. On top of handling budgets, testing, parent meetings, discipline, data and staffing, community school principals also have to learn how to work with the community schools coordinator and share decision-making power. Sometimes there can be tension between the community schools coordinator and the principal, or other members of the staff and community, who are still wrestling with some aspects of the model. Ideally in a community school, all staff, leaders, families and community are aligned in vision and strategy, and share equal responsibility, leadership and decision-making. When everyone is aligned, schools experience greater student outcomes and success. But in reality, there are often growing pains and setbacks as schools work to build foundational leadership, alignment and shared decision-making processes.

While the principals, teachers and parents technically came together in the Local School Leadership Councils, which were sites of organizing and leadership, the reality was that too often the councils weren't getting the attention they needed. The steering committee has re-committed to empowering and using them as a vehicle to move the principals toward understanding that they are not simply giving up power, but gaining a well of on-the-ground knowledge and people-power that they can tap into to make better decisions and improve their school. UNITE-LA will also step in to mediate as a neutral party and process-observer when necessary.

The Local School Leadership Council is also a primary place to invite additional parents, students and classified staff (teaching assistants, office workers, maintenance workers, cafeteria workers, etc.) to participate. LAUSD's classified workers are unionized with seven different unions, and the council offers a rare opportunity for all the disparate stakeholders in the school to come together and collaborate.

Lessons Moving Forward

In the 2024-25 school year, four years in, community schools are in a moment of expansion, both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of politics and ideology. Soon there will be 70 community schools, and while that represents less than 10% of the entire LAUSD school district, those 70 schools serve as a model for how all stakeholders and the entire school community can educate and support children, and for how supporting children also means supporting their communities. At least six key lessons have emerged from LA's experience.

1. Community schools offer flexibility during unforeseen disruptions.

This became particularly evident when Covid spread in March 2020, and the community schools that were already in place could more easily pivot using their Community Schools Coordinators as their resource providers. Since the Coordinators had existing relationships with the parents, they could mobilize support and services for families, whereas other schools had to scramble in real time.

2. Outstanding educational instruction will always be at the heart of great schools.

At the beginning of LAUSD's community schools implementation, the focus hadn't been on improving instruction and learning, but more on wraparound services to support kids and families. Dr. Sylvia Rousseau, an important mentor and guiding light for the initiative, always insisted that if you're not impacting teaching and learning, you've missed the mark. With that in mind, Reclaim Our Schools pushed to move the initiative from SHHS (Student Health and Human Services) to the Division of Instruction. Now the steering committee and the Division of Instruction work together, advocating for more structure and staffing at the district, with a focus on supporting deeper thinking around teaching and learning and how teaching is different in a community school. Part of that work included getting a new MOU to hire four citywide community schools coaches. In addition, the original MOU became an article in UTLA's collective bargaining agreement, giving it permanence across changes in school board leadership. Five years in, the steering committee is fully committed to focusing on teaching and learning.

3. Strong structures and systems help sustain gains.

There is always the threat that gains will be rolled back; new leadership, lack of funds, general exhaustion and burnout can all lead to a loss of momentum. Only two of the original seventeen Cohort One schools still have their original administrator who applied for community schools. This turnover has made it hard to ensure that the new administrators continue to implement the community schools' vision and collaborate with all the stakeholders. As always, the key is to have the structures and systems in place that can maintain the integrity of the work so it is not dependent on a single leader.

4. Building a successful community school is an iterative process.

Ongoing evaluations and adjustments continue. Thirty-three coordinators and ten principals recently participated in empathy interviews to document what coordinators and principals see as both strengths and challenges, which UNITE-LA has compiled in a summary report. Both coordinators and principals said they feel stretched to capacity, and that others don't fully understand their role. The CSSC is refining key recommendations from these interviews as they continue to support the strengthening of the community schools initiative.

5. Collaboration is exhausting work and will engender resistance.

Getting everyone to fully understand and buy into the model is an ongoing battle. Some district representatives are not completely committed and miss steering committee meetings. There is a sense that the district sees community schools as a small project, rather than the goal for all schools in the district moving forward. Some people, including teachers, like the idea, but then balk when they realize they have to take on extra work. There is a constant fight to avoid watering down the model to just a wrap-around social service delivery system.

6. State funding continues to be an essential lubricant.

Hanging over everything is the need to maintain funding. LA is getting a significant amount of state funding, which has taken the pressure off of the steering committee to fundraise. Because of the strike, the district has committed to the expanded funding for the first 70 community schools in perpetuity. Governor Newsom has committed to funding community schools through 2025, despite a yawning $56 billion deficit in the California budget, and has signaled that he will extend state funding for another five years. Beyond state funding, organizers hope that the success of the community schools will convince all the stakeholders to maintain the work, with or without the extra funding.

Where do LA's community schools go from here? As Kyle Serrette of the NEA has said, in 2019 they were "storming." Then they were "norming." Now they are "transforming." If there were one single lesson to draw from the LA Community Schools Initiative, it is that community schools have not only transformed individual schools throughout the district, but have offered a model for what true collaborative leadership can look like. This begins with the Steering Committee, which has shown how to share decision-making in ways that empowers diverse stakeholders. In the process, community schools have created communities in which people can be their best selves: involved, caring and committed to an outstanding education for every child.

CASE STUDY: SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Community schools in San Diego came about through savvy organizing and coalition building led by the teachers' union. With support and guidance from the National Education Association and the community schools leadership in Los Angeles, the San Diego initiative built out their own structures and committees that allow for flexibility within individual schools, and strong collaborative decision-making between multiple stakeholders.

Launching Community Schools in San Diego

By 2020, the San Diego Unified School District, the teachers' union and the community were in agreement that their schools were not working like they should. The schools were not supporting their highest-needs kids, the district was moving too slowly to make necessary changes and charter schools were beginning to swallow up the district, with 20% of students attending a charter school. Community schools in San Diego addressed a host of challenges that the school district was facing.

To some degree, all the major stakeholders, including the teachers, families and even the district, understood that what was needed was a way for individual schools and the district as a whole to give each stakeholder a voice in the decision-making process so that the schools could better respond to the needs of their students while offering an excellent education. In other words, they needed a framework for co-governance in their schools, where government and community work together to design and implement programs. The answer was community schools. Community schools are public schools committed to integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement and collaborative leadership and practice.

The teacher's union, San Diego Education Association (SDEA), wanted to build an aspirational approach to their schools that was empowering and sustainable. They saw the way that charter schools could make changes without interference from the district, and they wanted the same ability for their schools, but they wanted to innovate by empowering their teachers to involve their whole community, including students, families and administrators. The union wanted to build structures that allowed all the stakeholders to use their on-the-ground experience and knowledge to help build better schools by giving stakeholders a voice in the decision-making process.

Unlike in Los Angeles, the teacher's union, the district, and the community were not riven to the same degree by decades of bitter fights and distrust. While there were divisions and disagreements, by 2018 the district had begun to warm up to the idea of community schools. This had not always been the case — back in 2010 there had been a failed attempt that the school board quashed. Learning from that experience, the teachers' union and their labor allies successfully worked together on a strategy to fill the school board with members that were more amenable to community schools. With five members on the board in total, by the time they started advocating again for community schools in 2018, they already had two school board members from the highest-needs neighborhoods fully on board, and they were working to educate new school board members as they arrived so they could build allyship. Part of their strategy was to make clear that the union would only endorse school board candidates who supported community schools.

Along with strong union support for community schools, there was crucial support and training from the National Education Association (NEA) — which SDEA was an affiliate of — and a local non-profit research and action institute dedicated to advancing economic equity, the Center on Policy Initiatives (CPI). The NEA got the ball rolling with a convening on community schools in 2018, which included representatives from the SDEA, CPI and Alliance San Diego, a local grassroots organization focused on building power and inclusive democracy. CPI played a crucial coordinating role, pulling together all the different strands to support and uplift the effort.

After the convening, the teachers' union decided to pursue community schools by building a **coalition of stakeholder organizations** called the Campaign for Community Schools in San Diego.

Broad **stakeholder coalitions** can be crucial towards launching community schools initiatives. The Campaign for Community Schools in San Diego included:

- Alliance San Diego
- Association of Raza Educators
- Center on Policy Initiatives
- Global Action Research Center
- San Diego Education Association
- SDSU Department of Dual Language and English Learner Education
- SAY San Diego
- Urban League of San Diego County
- Youth Will

CPI was a significant partner in that coalition, and the lead organizer for the coalition was a staff member at CPI. CPI helped to convene the Campaign for Community Schools in San Diego, conduct research and add a community and equity lens to the coalition's analysis. Some coalition members were enthusiastic about community schools from the beginning, but others needed more background information and education, so CPI was often the one to guide those conversations. Throughout the process, Kyle Serrette at the NEA served as an important guide on how to navigate the district, often working with Andrea Gaspar and Sarah Farouq at CPI, who would then pass on the information to other members. Representatives from CPI also had conversations with representatives of the district, working with them to understand why community schools should be a priority.

While the membership in the coalition occasionally fluctuated over the years, coalition members were clear that they needed to hear and work with the community. They conducted listening sessions and surveys to get a better understanding of what the community wanted and needed. From the beginning, the coalition was grappling with how to design systems that included all the stakeholders and this necessitated using an expansive vision of how schools could be organized and what they could provide. The coalition would also be central later on in sharpening both the district's community schools resolution's language and SDEA's community schools contract language so that they incorporated a whole-child perspective going beyond education to general well-being.

By 2020, with prodding from the coalition, the district — now far more pro-union and pro-public-schools than it had been due to the teachers' union's strategic planning — recognized that too many schools lacked resources and practices necessary to respond to the broad spectrum of needs of their students, and that the district as a whole was too slow in how it made changes. Administrators looking at the entire district could not have the knowledge or responsiveness that individual schools needed. Community schools would allow individual schools to make the changes that suited their needs, and do so far more quickly than if they had to wait for the entire district to make changes.

The school board unanimously adopted a resolution to create community schools in July of 2020. San Diego was unusual in that the union, the superintendent and the Board of Education were all on board with community schools. State funding for community schools helped cover the cost of establishing the first ones.

The resolution recognized the importance and positive impact of community schools, acknowledged that the district needed to address the "health and climate" of the entire community in order to better support their children, created a Community Schools Advisory Committee (CSAC) and a Community Schools Implementation Team (CSIT). It also determined that both committees would include representatives from every major stakeholder, including the district, teachers, the teachers' union, students and the community, provided sustained funding for at least one Community

Schools Coordinator and any other necessary staff per community school and established that the first cohort would begin in the fall of 2021.

In two short years, the community and district had come together to achieve a codified, legal agreement to implement a co-governance strategy. In it, every major stakeholder had not only a say, but also a vote, on how community schools would be implemented and run, initially through the Implementation Team, and eventually through a districtwide Steering Committee and the individual schools' Site Governance Teams.

Implementation: Building a Culture and Institutions of Collaboration

The Advisory Committee and the Implementation Team had essentially a year, from summer 2020 to summer 2021, to make community schools in San Diego happen. LA community schools served as an important model. Aronn Peterson, the District Leader for Community Schools in San Diego at the time, said they learned a lot from LA, including borrowing from LA to develop their benchmarks, implementation strategy for the first two years, application process and contract language. An organizer from CPI visited LA to observe and conduct interviews. In 2023, members of the LA Coordinator Committee and the San Diego Coordinators did a site exchange. Peterson kept in regular contact with Cora Watkins and Esperanza Martinez from the LA Steering Committee. In just a few short years, California has gone from the LA teachers' union dragging their school district, kicking and screaming, into implementing community schools, to the San Diego district openly embracing the LA example and using it as a model for many of its major decisions.

There were some important differences between LA and San Diego. While the years-long fight to radicalize the LA teachers' union and build its willingness to fight for the whole community was long and arduous, culminating in a massive six day teachers' strike, it meant that both the teachers and the community in LA were better organized and better understood what community schools were and why they were important. In San Diego, while the Campaign for Community Schools included a broad group of stakeholders, the union hadn't needed to do deep organizing and educating of its member teachers in order to win buy-in from the district for community schools. This meant that the implementation phase needed to include more educating about community schools to get all the stakeholders

on board, including the teachers. The implementation team had to build the buy-in: from teachers, parents, students and administrators, and then they needed to build the committee at each community school. Especially during the first year, the district wasn't championing community schools, so CPI in particular made a big push to get the word out, particularly to parents who had never heard of community schools.

While the implementation team was working on educating the community, they were also busy setting up and codifying the various structures necessary to making community schools a reality. The school board updated the original community schools resolution with a resolution to enshrine the **Steering Committee**. The steering committee has the authority to oversee the school selection process, evaluate implementation and to facilitate, support and refine the process moving forward. It has thirteen voting members, plus additional non-voting participants that include representatives from school staff, parents, students, SDEA and community stakeholders.

Unusually for a school district, every school in San Diego already had a Site Governance Team (SGT) in place as part of the SDEA's contract, a result of a teachers' strike in the 1990s. The on-site team already required the inclusion of both teachers and parents. When a school became a community school, it was able to build off the existing structure and realign the Site Governance Team around the community schools model. The Site Governance Team is composed of about 10-12 elected stakeholders, including staff, teachers, parents, students and the Community Schools Coordinator. Meetings are open to the public. Some schools already had strong on-site teams with established norms and protocols, others needed more time and attention to get them up to speed, and to make sure they truly represented all the stakeholders. Each new community school also needed to decide if their Site Governance Team was going to become the on-site community schools team, or if they wanted to create a subcommittee to guide the work. The toughest part has often been getting people who will commit to show up and then disseminate information from the meetings to the broader constituencies to get input on what they think of proposals and ideas.

In addition, each community school has a Community Schools Coordinator, a full time position and a vital resource for the school. The coordinator implements the work of community schools on the ground, bringing stakeholders and working groups together, and developing parent engagement strategies. They coordinate student and family support services and make sure every student is thriving and has their needs met. If there is a crisis — over food insecurity, housing, or health, for example — the coordinator works with the student and their family to make sure they connect to the resources that are available. Many of those resources already existed, but often in a disjointed and somewhat haphazard manner. The coordinator makes sure students and families know how to access them and that students and families are supported in a coordinated fashion.

Ultimately, the aim of these structures is to create a real collaboration in which all voices are heard, not just the loudest.

> *"WE'RE STILL EARLY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN SAN DIEGO AND REAL COLLABORATION IS CRUCIAL, BUT NOT EASY. IT'S GOING TO TAKE HARD WORK AND COMMITMENT FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS TO FEEL LIKE THEIR PARTICIPATION AND VOICE MATTERS."*
>
> **Dr. Kyra Greene**
> *Center on Policy Initiatives*

Advocating for Community Schools to the District

Once the implementation process was underway, it became clear to the union leadership that their next area of focused advocacy needed to be with the district administrators — the area superintendents and the principals. Initially, they had focused on the school board because they needed the board to pass the resolution. Then they focused on making sure the larger community, including their own teachers, the students and the families, were grounded in the model and understood why it was important. But this meant the administrators were often left to figure out community schools for themselves, or, worse, to come to their own conclusions — that community schools would result in the lessening of their power and control.

Realizing this, the union has worked to strengthen relationships with administrators, set up regular meetings and reframe the conversation around power. It is constant work, and the leadership understands that they need to be intentional around difficult issues and stay rooted in their shared vision. Sometimes the union has needed to advocate for the district leaders they want, because having the right administrators who are supportive and who hold the trust of principals is important. It helps that the School Board is fully behind the initiative and word of the success of the first community schools has spread, creating positive momentum.

> *"THERE HAS BEEN A STRENGTHENING IN THE UNION AND BOARD RELATIONSHIP AROUND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS. OUR BOARD MEMBERS HAVE SAID IN MULTIPLE MEETINGS THAT EVERY SCHOOL SHOULD BE A COMMUNITY SCHOOL – THAT THIS IS THE RESPONSE TO IMPROVING OUR STUDENT OUTCOMES [AND] IMPROVING OUR GRADUATION RATES. THIS MODEL IS THE MODEL WE NEED TO HAVE, AND IT WAS BROUGHT BY THE UNION . . . THE MOMENTUM AND THE SUPPORT FROM THE BOARD IS PRETTY STRONG."*
>
> **Aronn Peterson**
> *Former San Diego District Lead on Community Schools*

So far, LA, Sacramento and San Diego are the only schools that require a school to apply to be a community school. This forces the school and all of its stakeholders to demonstrate that they are committed to community schools and not just angling for extra funding. The school application process comes from the schools' Site Governance Teams, and each team needs to sign off on the application. The first cohort had five schools, and ten new schools joined in both year two and year three. The steering committee has been careful not to grow the initiative too fast and risk losing sight of its goals, but instead has aimed to keep at a pace where each school gets the support it needs. Each school needs time and attention to build up its leadership effectively.

Partly because of self-selection produced by the application process, the principals of the first five community schools have been strong advocates for community schools. As the process has continued, there has been push back and skepticism from some principals, particularly around having to give up power. At times, principals have complained to the district. Peterson, representing the district, has reminded them that they are sharing power and bringing people in to carry out the work together. Early wins that meet parents and students' needs also helped build trust and buy-in.

Lessons Moving Forward

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is fully in the implementation stage of its community schools initiative. This means that all the major stakeholders are now taking stock of what is working and where they can make improvements. At least six key lessons have emerged from San Diego's experience.

1. Bargaining for the Common Good can strengthen unions.

The SDEA and the Coalition are now engaging in a Bargaining for the Common Good campaign, reflecting both their growing strength, and an acknowledgement that it is in everyone's best interests, including the teachers', to make sure schools meet their students' academic, social and mental needs. The campaign also acknowledges that the union wants to fight for every stakeholder, not just for better wages and benefits for its members.

2. Expanding and strengthening parents' power and input in decision-making is important.

It can take time and attention to build trust and buy-in from parents such that they are willing to spend their limited bandwidth on attending meetings or other work that might initially seem pointless and unnecessary. To deepen their trust in the system, parents and students need to be connected and prioritized in the discussions and actions schools take in response to their input. To this end, the SDEA has won a new article in their contract with the district giving parents greater parental voice around afterschool programming.

3. Successful community schools become models and their participants become evangelists.

As the initiative keeps growing and every year there are more community schools, success feeds on itself, building more interest and enthusiasm. Members of the first cohort of community schools have become advocates who talk to other schools about their experiences and successes. The SDEA has also won the addition of community school district coaches in its contract — three in 2024-25, and five the next year — to help support schools in collaborative leadership and decision-making processes. There are also now fifteen site coaches at San Diego's community schools who help develop leaders within these schools who understand why collaborative leadership is important, and how having parents and students involved in decisions strengthens their schools. The mindset in the broader school community is shifting, and members are gaining organizing and leadership skills in how to resolve conflicts, build consensus and advocate for issues. These new leaders are building an organizing culture within each community school.

4. Successful implementation at each school site takes years.

Each new community school is a part of a year-long journey to identify the needs as well as the assets of each community. In the beginning of the first year, the Community Schools Coordinator and Community Schools Site Coach engage in Site & Community Mapping, where they work to identify pre-existing resources, partnerships, groups, and leaders on site and within the community. From there, they build up a collaborative team to guide the work and make decisions about Community Schools implementation. Each group consists of classified and certificated staff, admin, students, parents, and community partners. Once the Community Schools Teams are established, they construct and implement data-collection plans (utilizing surveys, focus groups, and interviews) to collect data from at least 75% of each educational partner group (students, staff, parents, and community partners). Each team then codes the data, evaluates it, and identifies the top areas of growth. Going into the second year, working groups are established to engage in root cause analysis and Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to identify and implement solutions aimed at sustainable, transformative change.

5. Community schools provide holistic family services, not just education.

In San Diego, there were already schools such as Hoover High School that provided services, including a mental health center. Hoover High is a school in which 100% of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. Elizabeth Lonnecker, an English teacher at Hoover, recognized that food insecurity was a major issue with her students year after year; as a result, she created a class project aimed around bringing in a community partner, Feeding San Diego, to help co-construct a food pantry run and operated by her students to meet student, family and community needs. That same year Hoover became a community school, and the implementation team was able to augment the pantry with extra funding and then linked the pantry to multiple departments in the school. The chef in the culinary department does educational cooking demonstrations for parents and students. The English department offers units on nutrition, sustainability and food security. The services that are provided are in direct response to what the community needed, and are provided in a more coordinated fashion.

6. Implementation is flexible across districts and schools.

One of the many advantages of the community schools model is its flexibility. San Diego looked to LA's model and adapted it to fit their own communities. They saw a model that drew strength from its collaborative power-sharing, primarily through the Steering Committee, and tilted it slightly to suit San Diego by shifting the focus towards their Site Governance Teams, a structure that was already in place and that school communities were familiar with. For San Diego, their Steering Committee is an important point of collaboration, where the union and the school board can strengthen their relationship through their shared commitment to community schools, but everyone is equally committed to letting each individual school build the school

that best meets the needs of their community. Increasingly, all of the stakeholders understand that meeting the needs of their community means giving everyone — students, parents, teachers, staff, the district and the wider community — real decision-making power.

The successes of the San Diego model show that winning and implementing community schools in a district does not have to be a brutal, years-long fight. Some districts and school boards recognize that the status quo is not working and are genuinely eager for solutions. But just as in Los Angeles, the teachers' union and the community needed to analyze where the roadblocks were and work around them. Once SDUSD won approval for their community schools plan the real work began: engaging the whole community and all of its stakeholders, including people and institutions who were resistant, to make the initiative blossom.

CONCLUSION

Co-governance is hard. Collaborating with people, organizations and institutions for the first time is risky work. It takes patience and a leap of faith to sit at a table, both literally and figuratively, with a representative from an institution that you have been fighting against for years, maybe even decades, to try to figure out some kind of consensus. The tensions are real: time, money and power are all at play. Some people at the table are not sure they have a right to be there; others don't want to share the power they have grown accustomed to.

However, when implemented effectively, community schools benefit from co-governance strategies, which allow schools to provide an outstanding education and address the whole child, while responding to the needs and desires of their communities. If we are truly committed to transforming our educational system, we need to be equally committed to fully understanding it. This requires understanding our schools through the experience and insights of all school stakeholders: students, families, teachers, administrators and staff. In the process, districts learn to be more nimble in how they treat individual schools, teachers see they have concrete avenues through which to address conflicts with the district, and students and their families become genuinely engaged with their schools.

When we talk about community schools that have embraced collaborative decision-making, we are talking about initiatives that have created enabling environments for that joint process. That means: strong structures and committees, decision-making processes that are codified to include multiple stakeholders, funding, neutral and trusted third-parties who can troubleshoot when problems appear, and stakeholders that have embraced all six key practices of community schools.

Community schools in Los Angeles and San Diego have been models for this approach. Working within different histories and power dynamics, they have created enabling environments for shared decision-making. Below are few of the lessons learned from both models:

1. All six key community school practices count.

There are many schools across the country that label themselves "community schools," but there are only a small percentage of those that embrace all six key practices. A food pantry in a school is a nice resource for students and families, but services alone do not make a community school. In particular, the practice of "collaborative decision-making" can be the hardest to implement and sustain, but without it, a community schools initiative can too easily devolve into a charity model where services of various types are offered, and students and families are expected to passively take what's given. This is also why it is important to grow the model slowly, so that people can build effective systems, processes, and relationships — and have

time to figure out improvements and work through the kinds of opposition that are only natural when making systemic changes.

2. Sometimes, the change you need starts with your own leadership.

In Los Angeles, young, active teachers came into the union and realized their leadership was ineffective and failing them. They organized and elected new leaders, kicking off a different, aggressive approach to organizing within the union, before they reached out to their community. In San Diego, the teacher's union learned from past stumbles that it needed to change the school board in order to make any headway, and so devised a strategy to get board members who supported community schools.

3. Coalitions are effective.

The movement to start community schools in both Los Angeles and San Diego began with their teachers' unions, but gained traction when they reached out to their respective communities and built strong coalitions that represented multiple stakeholders, including grassroots organizations, families and students. They then worked together to iron out differences, address past harms and come to a consensus around what they wanted: community schools. In LA in particular, building a shared vision, and embracing Bargaining for the Common Good made the teachers' union stronger, especially when it was time to bargain with the district.

4. Learning and supportive infrastructure across districts is key.

Leaders and organizations with deep knowledge and bandwidth can play critical roles. The NEA was invaluable in offering guidance and mentorship, especially in the early days, and in LA, the UCLA Center for Community Schooling also provided key support. UNITE-LA and CPI in San Diego were nonprofits that played vital roles in keeping both initiatives on track. The leadership in San Diego also learned a lot from LA's experience, and used the LA steering committee as a sounding board when questions and issues arose.

5. Strong, codified structures and systems keep community schools on track.

"Collaborative decision-making" can quickly devolve into a community survey and a couple of feedback sessions if structures and policies are not in place and are not codified. MOUs with concrete structures that are outlined in detail are essential to maintaining the integrity of the work. Who is represented on the Steering Committee? Who gets a vote, and how is it carried out? How often does the committee meet? How is it funded? Include multiple stakeholders in decision-making and get that in writing. A well-designed committee can be an excellent vehicle for community power-building, because it gets the district to sit down with teachers, families, students and the community to reach decisions and vote together.

6. Culture matters.

Get everyone on board — from the district to the parents to the teachers — and especially the principals. This helps inoculate against roadblocks, flagging enthusiasm and funding dips. Education is exhausting work and burnout is real, but if everyone understands the goal and supports each other, it can make a big difference.

7. Money helps too.

State grants eased a lot of potential opposition from districts and principals. When California committed $4 billion dollars towards community schools, it both legitimized the initiative to some skeptics, and provided a powerful incentive for districts and individual schools to embrace community schools. Districts could qualify for millions of dollars and schools that became community schools could expect more than $100,000 annually added to their budgets.

8. Community schools can be an effective bulwark against charter schools and school vouchers.

We can say no to privatization of public education more effectively when we offer a vision for what we want instead. The success in LA, where the district agreed to pivot away from charter schools to community schools, shows that the spread of charter schools is not inevitable.

It is incumbent upon government to provide an outstanding education to every child. None of this is simple, or easy. We need to transform a system designed to be separate and unequal, and that is resistant to adopting equitable reforms. The headwinds are fierce with the 47th presidential administration's attempt to eliminate the Department of Education and starve local school districts of much-needed funds, creating a situation in which privatization becomes the only possible outcome. A Race to The Top ended in 2015, but we are still mired in federal and state education policies that create winners and losers. For community schools to take root, we need to abandon market-driven approaches to transforming public education.

A school reflects the values, needs and ambition of its community. A great school can anchor a community and become a hub of connection, activity and learning. Sometimes a particularly outstanding school comes to be naturally — through having the right leadership, helpful families and often because the community itself has the means and the wealth to support the school with few limits. But too many schools are struggling with limited resources and communities that are stretched thin.

The community schools approach is an effective road map to building better schools because it pulls together all the elements of great schools: it emphasizes the academics and necessary supports that students need, but also addresses the needs of the broader community, and recognizes the importance of including multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process. None of this is easy. But we have models for how to do it.

Communities know best what they want and need. The key is to figure out how to make sure communities can share decision-making power in all the different ways that affect their health and well-being. Community schools offer a powerful model for how to include multiple stakeholders in an essential institution of community life.

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Edited by Colin Palmquist
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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