

District Supports for Community Schools

How Systems Can Enable High-Quality Implementation



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Summary

California's historic investment in community schools enables local educational agencies (LEAs) to establish a network of community schools in their districts or counties. To support community schools at scale, LEAs institute supports that create coherence, collaboration, and efficiency across sites. This brief synthesizes findings from case studies of three LEAs that support urban and rural community school networks, highlighting how they have enabled effective implementation of the community school strategy in their unique settings. Findings show that across these agencies, leaders established multifaceted professional development structures, cultivated strategic partnerships, and instituted continuous improvement processes to scale and support community school implementation. They also hired district-level staff who facilitated these varied supports, allowing for sustained attention to transformation efforts across schools.

For more details, see the reports (forthcoming) on which this brief is based: *Community Schools in Los Angeles Unified: Transforming Teaching and Learning*; *Community Schools in Lynwood Unified: Building Capacity for Districtwide Implementation*; and *Community Schools in Rural California: Leveraging Shared Resources in West Kern County*.

Introduction

Community schools unite the efforts of students, families, educators, and community partners to improve student learning and well-being. Guided by a whole child educational vision, community schools organize in- and out-of-school resources and opportunities to enable student success. These resources include mental health services, meals, health care, tutoring, after-school programming, and other opportunities tailored to the community. They also connect learning to families and the community. To accomplish this, community schools often utilize [key practices](#), which include expanded and enriched learning opportunities; powerful student and family engagement; integrated systems of support; collaborative leadership and shared power and voice; a culture of belonging, safety, and care; and rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction. Community school coordinators are commonly central figures who support the integration of these school features. Moreover, systems-level supports that enable community school development, continuous improvement, and sustainability play an important role, particularly when seeking to support community schools at scale.

Research shows that, when fully implemented, community schools can lead to higher academic achievement and graduation rates, especially for students from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. They also contribute to better attendance, stronger student connections to school, and reductions in exclusionary discipline.¹ As evidence of their impact has grown in recent years, a number of states have made large investments in the community schools approach.

California, in particular, made a historic \$4.1 billion investment in community schools in 2021 through the [California Community Schools Partnership Program \(CCSPP\)](#), a competitive grant that now reaches approximately 25% of all public schools in the state. CCSPP allows local educational agencies (LEAs)—including both districts and county offices—to apply for funds to launch, grow, and sustain community school initiatives, prioritizing awardees for which at least 80% of their students are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, or youth in foster care, alongside other state priority areas. In designating LEAs rather than individual schools as awardees, the grant encourages local officials to institute supports for a network of community schools—supports that create coherence, collaboration, and efficiency in resource access and professional learning.

Increased resources have prompted practitioners, policymakers, and community members to seek guidance on using investments to develop high-quality community schools. However, studies on how resources, coordination, and shared learning enable high-quality community school implementation—particularly at scale—are few. This brief synthesizes findings from three reports stemming from a multisite case study that addressed this research gap. It highlights how LEA leaders of three California initiatives—Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Lynwood Unified School District (Lynwood Unified), and the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools (West Kern)—leveraged CCSPP funding to build systems-level supports that enabled improved student outcomes and high-quality community school implementation across schools. Findings from these cases suggest how agencies can use resources to build supportive infrastructures that develop and sustain impactful community schools.

Case Study Sites

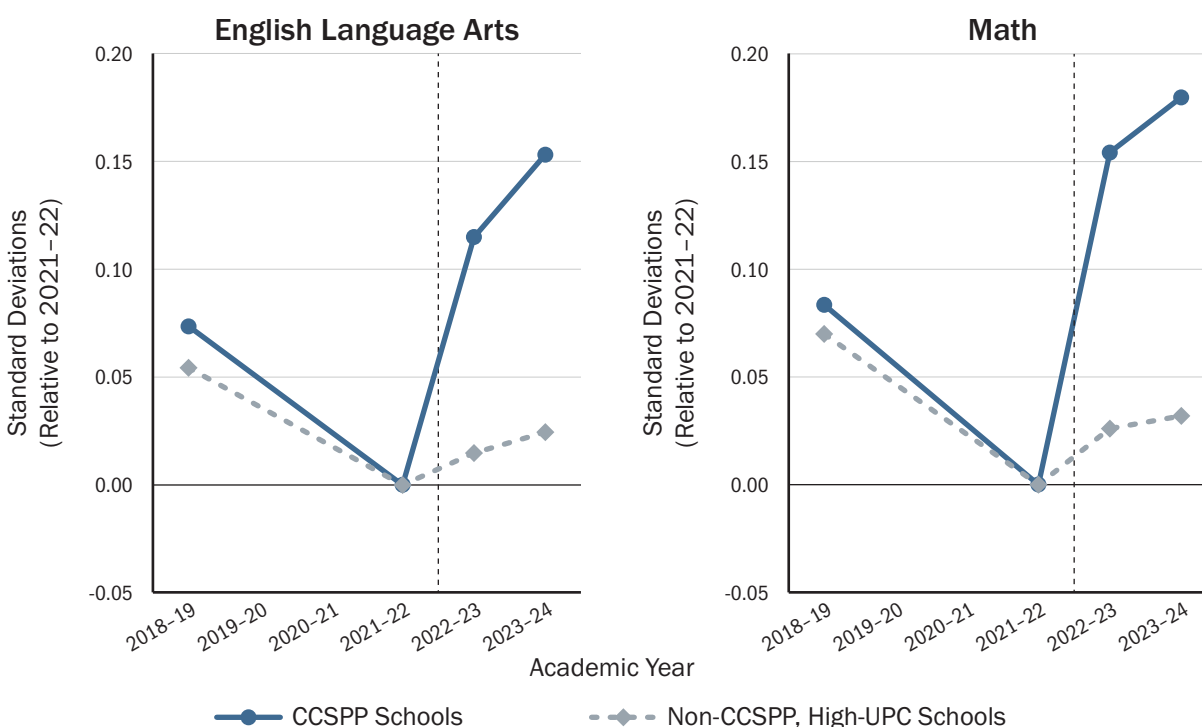
Researchers identified LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern as “information-rich cases”² based on multiple criteria. First, investigators identified LEAs that received CCSPP grants in 2022–23 and 2023–24—the first 2 years of the grant program’s implementation—to understand the change process while providing opportunities to document emerging strategies and impact. Researchers also considered demographic and geographic diversity, student outcomes, and the integration of whole child approaches in community school initiatives to bound the sample.

LAUSD, the second-largest district in the United States, serves more than 500,000 students in more than 1,300 schools across Los Angeles County. Its student population reflects the diversity of Southern California: 74% Hispanic or Latino/a, 7.1% Black, 5.1% Asian/Filipino/Pacific Islander, 10.1% White, and 2% multiracial. Nearly 19% are English learners (ELs), representing more than 150 home languages, including a sizable newcomer population. Overall, 82.4% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. In partnership with United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), LAUSD launched its Community Schools Initiative (CSI) in 2017; funding was secured in 2019 through a collective bargaining agreement following the UTLA strike. The agreement supported the first two cohorts of community schools by funding

community school coordinators and district infrastructure. Subsequent CCSPP funding, totaling over \$83 million, allowed the district to expand capacity building for school personnel and provide discretionary budgets for schools.

Analyses of student outcomes show that the first cohort of schools across California receiving CCSPP funds achieved greater academic gains than non-CCSPP schools serving similar students across the state. This was true to an even greater extent in LAUSD, even though the CCSPP schools began the grant period with steeper declines in performance. Community schools demonstrated stronger improvement in both English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency rates on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), and analyses of standardized scale scores—accounting for school characteristics—confirmed that community schools diverged positively from comparison schools after the grant’s launch. (See Figure 1.) These improvements were supported by the CSI’s emphasis on project-based, community-connected learning—a central vision for classroom practice in community schools—with widespread adoption of professional development in nearly all LAUSD community schools.

Figure 1. Changes in English Language Arts and Math Achievement in Los Angeles USD CCSPP Schools Compared to Similar Non-CCSPP Schools



Notes: USD = Unified School District; CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program; UPC = unduplicated pupil count. California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress scale scores are standardized and modeled controlling for school characteristics and include school and year fixed effects. Standardized test scores in this figure reflect levels relative to 2021–22, the baseline year before implementation grants were distributed. Vertical line after 2022 indicates distribution of CCSPP funds. Because state testing was suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2019–20 and 2020–21 are excluded.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2018–19 to 2023–24 data from the [California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files](#) and the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files](#) for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Lynwood Unified sits within a 4- by 4-mile community in southern Los Angeles County, filled with a mix of newcomer families and those who have lived there for generations. The district serves 10,900 students across 17 schools (3 high schools, 2 middle schools, and 12 elementary schools). Just over 94% of its students identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, 4.5% identify as Black, 93.5% come from low-income households, 25.4% are classified as ELs, and 17.2% are classified as students with disabilities. Many district administrators, principals, teachers, and staff attended Lynwood Unified schools themselves, while others have been in the district for their whole careers. This deep-seated connectedness and sense of community helped solidify the district's commitment to community schools as an equitable school improvement strategy. Community school implementation began in 2019 with Lynwood High School, which was selected to be a Los Angeles County Department of Education pilot community school. In the 2023–24 school year, Lynwood Unified leveraged \$24.5 million in CCSPP funds to expand community schools to the remaining 16 campuses in the district.

Only 2 years into districtwide implementation, Lynwood Unified's efforts have yielded positive results. After peaking at 37.1% the year prior to districtwide community school implementation, rates of chronic absence declined by one third to 24.5% in 2024–25. With a focused effort on reducing suspensions, Lynwood Unified saw a drop from 3.3% in 2023–24 to 2.8% in 2024–25. Academic scores on the annual CAASPP exams are also on an upward trajectory. Between 2022–23 (the year before they became community schools) and 2024–25, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the ELA and math proficiency standards increased in 13 of the 15 schools participating in regular testing. (See [Figure 2.](#)) Schools also reported improvements in school climate and family and community engagement.

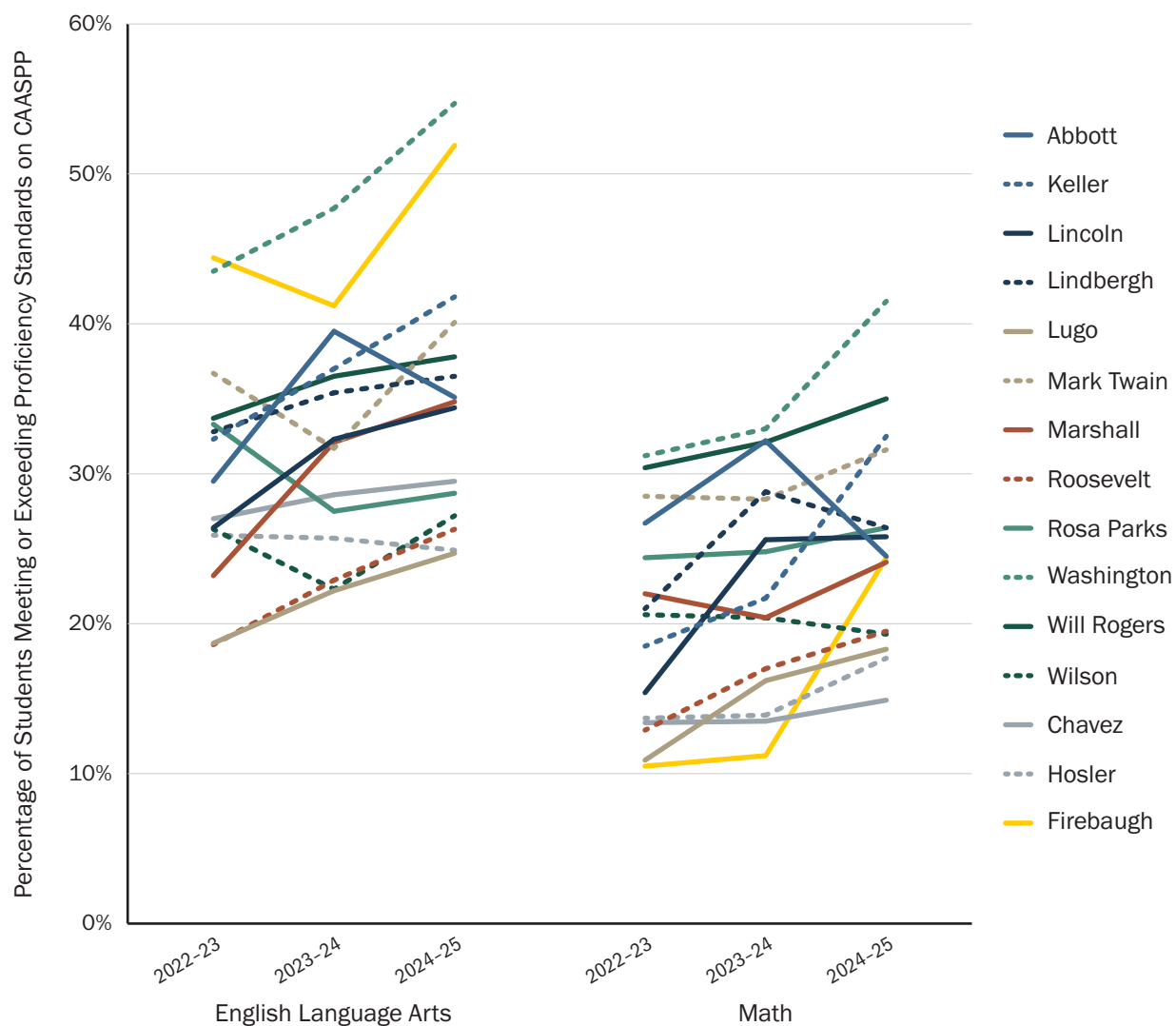
Lynwood Unified's existing initiatives, including their health collaborative of more than 45 health partners and commitment to social and emotional learning, provided a firm foundation that enabled them to scale districtwide in 1 year. Their use of data for planning helped establish clear priorities around mental health, increased access to services, attendance, social-emotional well-being, and tier 3 non-special education students. To support these priorities, Lynwood Unified focused on developing community school case managers—called coordinators in this brief—as the key lever for strong implementation.

West Kern is a collaboration among six rural districts instituting the community schools strategy in California's Central Valley. Together, the consortium reaches more than 3,800 students, 76% of whom are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged. More than 80% of its students identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, and over one fifth are classified as ELs. Community schools implementation began in 2018–19 when the consortium's three founding K–8 districts received the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant. With the support of a \$9.5 million CCSPP grant and additional funding, West Kern has expanded to include an additional K–8 district and two high school districts.

Through a community school model, West Kern districts have made significant reductions in chronic absence. Since peaking at 29% during the 2021–22 school year, chronic absences dropped 9 percentage points in 2 years across all consortium districts. Individual district data paint an even more impressive picture, with one of its K–8 districts reducing its rate to 9.7%—a 68% reduction from the previous year and lower than its 2018–19 prepandemic rate. Students in all but one district have also increased both ELA and math CAASPP proficiency rates beyond their 2021–22 levels, and over half of the districts demonstrated stronger proficiency rates in these content areas than the county average in 2024–25. (See [Figure 3.](#))

West Kern’s approach to community schooling focuses on five priorities: (1) early childhood education, (2) expanded learning, (3) math and literacy education, (4) family and community engagement, and (5) social and mental health services. To advance these aims, West Kern has invested in placing full-time community school coordinators and social workers in each district—individuals who have facilitated improvements in family and community engagement and service provision. The consortium has also invested in instructional coaches and introduced a data-driven improvement strategy to support increases in math and literacy achievement.

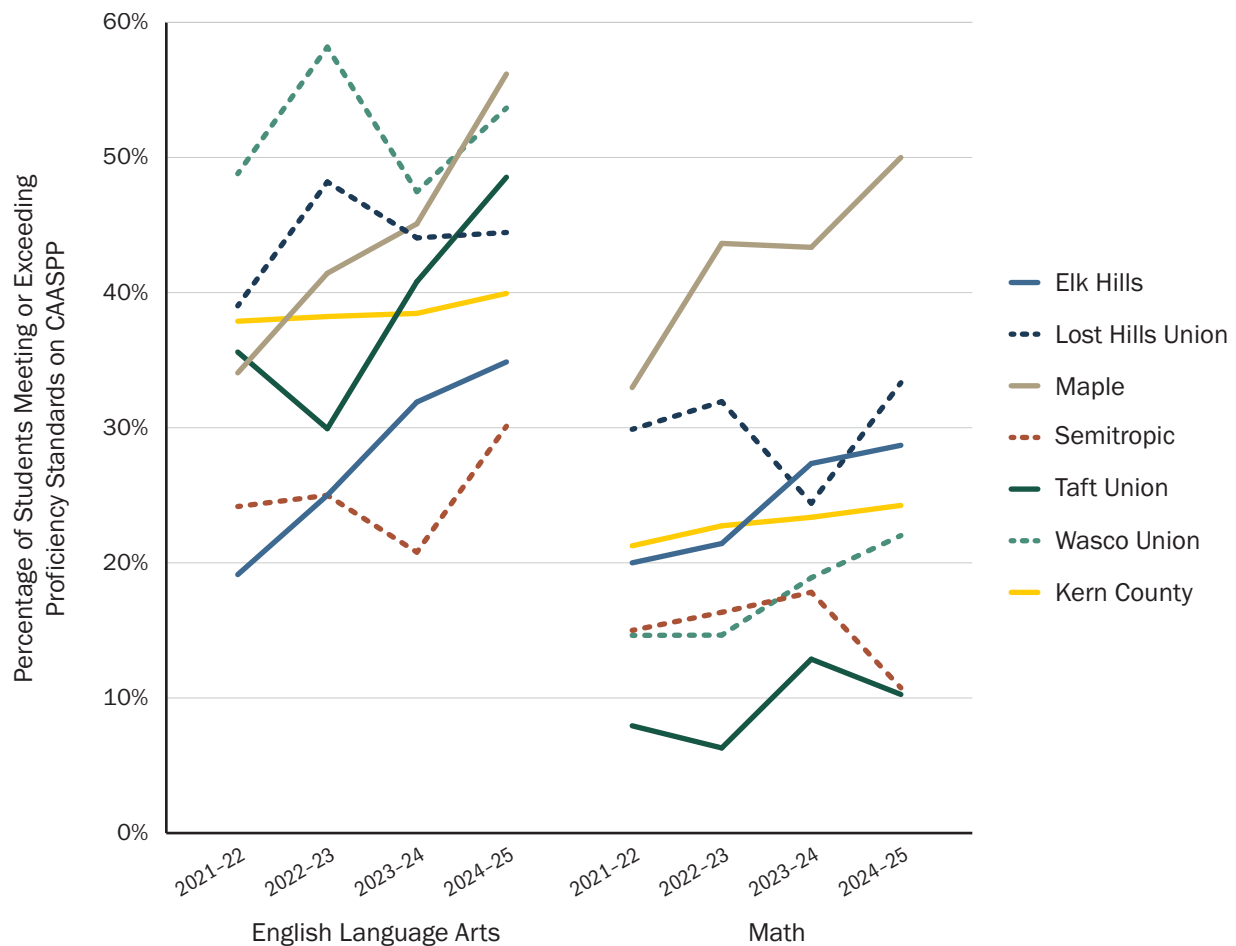
Figure 2. English Language Arts and Math Achievement in Lynwood Unified School District



Notes: CAASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress. Achievement data for Lynwood Unified’s continuation high school, Vista High School, is excluded from this figure due to the low numbers of students testing each year and the focus of the school.

Source: California Department of Education [DataQuest](#) data for the schools in Lynwood Unified School District 2022–23 through 2024–25.

Figure 3. English Language Arts and Math Performance in West Kern Consortium Districts



Notes: CAASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress. CAASPP results for Kern County include charter and noncharter schools.

Source: California Department of Education DataQuest data for 2021–22 through 2024–25 for [Elk Hills Elementary](#), [Lost Hills Union Elementary](#), [Maple Elementary](#), [Semitropic Elementary](#), [Taft Union High](#), [Wasco Union High](#), and [Kern County](#).

Systems-Level Support for High-Quality Community Schooling

Despite differences in size, geography, and initiative maturity, LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern have achieved notable successes in their implementation of the community schools strategy. They have enabled these achievements by leveraging state funds to institute common structures and practices that lend support and guidance to community schools within their jurisdictions. These include systems-level structures that facilitate targeted professional development, partner engagement, and continuous improvement, as well as provide important administrative capacity for initiative management and quality implementation.

Professional Development Opportunities

Leaders in each initiative used CCSPP investments to establish professional development structures that emphasized ongoing, job-embedded learning for community school personnel. These varied opportunities offered differentiated supports to educators and community school coordinators (CSCs) and created communities that allowed personnel to learn with and from their peers. Notably, these professional supports were not single-dose capacity-building experiences; rather, they were ongoing and coherent opportunities that strengthened community school implementation and allowed educators and CSCs to continuously improve their practice.

Across all three initiatives, professional learning communities (PLCs) and direct coaching played a pivotal role in the development of CSCs. In LAUSD, CSC coaches facilitated weekly PLCs for new CSCs, while monthly meetings convened both new and veteran coordinators, allowing the formation of mixed-experience peer networks. Coordinators also received individual coaching from CSC coaches and UTLA parent organizers around planning family workshops, identifying resources, and refining implementation strategies. With Lynwood Unified's more recent implementation of the community schools strategy, it has focused on building the capacity of CSCs through intensive professional development, including weekly PLC meetings that aim to develop key skills and personalized coaching. Similarly, in West Kern, officials facilitated cross-district monthly PLCs for their CSCs and social workers in addition to providing individualized coaching. Overall, these LEA-facilitated PLCs ensured CSCs received appropriate support and afforded CSCs, who frequently are isolated within their building, the opportunity to build community with their counterparts, share best practices, and address common challenges.

As LEA officials facilitated PLCs and coaching, they organized other learning opportunities for community school staff. For example, officials in LAUSD and Lynwood Unified used resources to implement annual summer institutes. In LAUSD, the institute gathers CSCs and principals together to provide them with common resources and opportunities for goal setting, progress assessment, and relationship building. In Lynwood, the summer institute convenes CSCs and focuses on the concepts of data-driven and transformative leadership, preparing CSCs to use data to identify community school priorities and to understand how their collaborative efforts further district goals. Lynwood Unified has also encouraged its CSCs to engage in professional learning opportunities facilitated by the Los Angeles County Office of Education and the State Transformation Assistance Center for Community Schools. Together with PLCs and individualized coaching, these learning opportunities introduced staff to key skills and topics and enabled ongoing professional development to support community school implementation.

In addition to establishing a system of supports for CSCs, leaders of more mature initiatives—LAUSD and West Kern—used resources to support capacity building of community school educators. In LAUSD, officials offered school staff extensive training on the creation of inclusive environments and implementation of deeper learning practices. For example, the district contracted with the organization Defined Learning to provide nearly 200 educators and administrators from 26 community schools with professional development on deeper learning, which helped LAUSD advance its aims of enabling project-based learning. Initiative leaders also engaged LAUSD's own Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports/Restorative Practices team to provide Art of De-Escalation workshops for more than 500 staff from more than 60 community schools, equipping staff to foster inclusive practices in instructional

and noninstructional settings. In West Kern, officials lent resources to increase access to instructional coaches for community school educators—a previously rare resource in its rural districts—and facilitated a data-driven instructional improvement process to improve math and literacy instruction.

Overall, leaders with each initiative invested resources into robust professional development systems that built individual and collective capacity and promoted collaboration and ongoing improvement. In doing so, they provided community school staff with a shared set of tools, processes, and guidance that equipped them to lead efforts in their unique school communities.

Strategic Partnerships

LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern each worked to engage strategic partners to strengthen community school implementation. Rather than having schools secure partnerships individually—a task that can be duplicative as community schools scale, as well as difficult to sustain—leaders built partnerships at the initiative level, which streamlined efforts around resource provision and enhanced the effectiveness and efficiency of community school implementation. These partners, which included community organizations, health agencies, and even other district departments, expanded access to integrated systems of support, building a more robust web of opportunities and services for students and families. In addition, partners extended district capacity, helping initiative leaders better support their community schools.

The partners contributing to Lynwood Unified’s Health Collaborative have played a central role in helping the district connect students and families with key services. Launched with two mental health partners in 2007, the collaborative has grown to include more than 45 organizations that provide a range of services, including mental health care, dental and vision services, and housing assistance. In building the collaborative, Lynwood Unified has gained deep experience in vetting partners, establishing referral procedures, and maintaining communication with external organizations. The collaborative and district meet quarterly and use data to assess and strengthen service provision. CSCs have also worked with collaborative members to increase service access and tap collaborative partners to provide needed supports. These partnerships have helped more than 2,000 students receive direct therapy services. Collaborative partners have also offered workshops and other engagements for nearly every student and hundreds of families to raise awareness about mental health, bullying, and substance abuse.

Strategic partnerships in West Kern have also supported increased access to services. The Children’s Cabinet of West Kern (CCWK), which gathers county-level agencies, medical providers, and nonprofits with representatives from community schools each quarter, is an important forum for facilitating these partnerships. Established as a cross-sector advisory board in 2018 by West Kern leaders, CCWK has allowed external partners and community school personnel to engage in ongoing discussions related to service provision, including access to mental health services. In facilitating consistent engagement among these actors, West Kern leaders have centralized opportunities for communication and connection among county and nonprofit officials, rural district leaders, and school personnel. In doing so, county officials and nonprofit partners have garnered a better understanding of how their organizations can support West Kern districts, and community school personnel have learned where and to whom they can turn to secure needed services, thus helping to bridge resource gaps and to support improved service provision.

LAUSD officials have also engaged strategic partners in implementing their initiative, helping to extend the district's capacity to support implementation and to create coherence among LAUSD instructional priorities. For instance, the initiative itself is a co-led endeavor between the district and the teachers union, who work together to support implementation and strategic planning. Beyond serving as a critical thought partner, UTLA's parent organizers—personnel who support CSCs to engage family members and develop their leadership skills—have expanded the district's capacity to support CSCs on the ground. LAUSD leaders have also partnered with other district departments to align the community schools approach with other strategies. A central example is the CSI's partnership with the Linked Learning Department, which helps schools form career-focused pathways that bridge disciplinary and real-world learning.

Together, these examples illustrate how investments in strategic partnerships helped to improve service provision and expand LEA capacity to support high-quality community school implementation within each initiative. Strategic partners also played an important role in continuous improvement efforts, which are described in the following section.

Continuous Improvement

Each initiative used resources to establish continuous improvement systems that enabled local actors to regularly assess community school implementation and to identify challenges and opportunities to support student learning and well-being. Systematic data collection and analysis were central to continuous improvement efforts, allowing initiative leaders and community school staff to reflect on data in ongoing ways. These data processes also served as professional development opportunities, as leaders and community school staff learned and refined their capacities to use data effectively to inform development alongside their collaborators.

The implementation of assets and needs assessments (ANAs) in Lynwood Unified provides an illustrative example. Like in many community schools, ANAs represent a foundational step in community school design in Lynwood Unified. CSCs facilitated an initial data collection process in which they amassed data sources (i.e., surveys, focus group interviews, demographic and performance data) and worked with their site-based advisory council to develop school goals and strategies. While instrumental in community school design, ANAs also spur ongoing cycles of assessment, planning, and adjustment. CSCs and advisory council members meet regularly to analyze data, assess emerging needs, and refine school priorities. They also gather data in an ongoing fashion to inform their continuous improvement efforts and to ensure that school actors' perspectives are centered. According to officials at one community school—Helen Keller Elementary—these collaborative dialogues resulted in important changes to the school's approach, including more culturally responsive workshop content, better-aligned scheduling, and stronger school-home communication. LAUSD maintains a similarly robust ANA process that informs continuous improvement, as CSCs engage in Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to identify emerging needs and opportunities that can enhance supports for students and families.

Forums that convene strategic partners have also enabled LEAs to engage in continuous improvement. The aforementioned Children's Cabinet of West Kern is one example. In addition to enabling stronger service provision among the rural districts, it has supported West Kern's collective problem-solving. CCWK meetings have been opportunities for cabinet members to engage in data-driven root cause analysis of

consortium-wide challenges and the identification of promising solutions. Notably, cabinet deliberations have supported the rural districts in addressing chronic absence, as members analyzed data patterns and researched innovative solutions (e.g., messaging campaigns, absence-related home visits) to increase attendance. Overall, the facilitation of the Children’s Cabinet of West Kern has played an essential role in supporting continuous improvement in the district. Forums in Lynwood Unified (e.g., Health Collaborative and District Community Schools Advisory Council) and LAUSD (e.g., CSI Steering Committee) have also served this function, as they have supported LEA leaders and community school staff in surfacing implementation challenges and in identifying promising interventions.

Administrative Capacity

LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern recognized that establishing a system of community schools requires administrative capacity to support initiative management and high-quality implementation. In turn, initiative leaders used resources to hire or designate personnel who managed and facilitated systems-level supports for community school transformation. These systems-level personnel dedicated to overseeing community schools played a pivotal role in supporting implementation. In this capacity, they were fundamental in providing professional development and coaching, leading continuous improvement efforts, systematizing partner engagement, and managing the processes and reporting requirements tied to grants.

Establishing administrative capacity was essential in West Kern’s rural cross-district initiative. As a community school collaborative of six independent districts, West Kern did not maintain a central office to oversee its cross-district initiative. In turn, consortium leaders used resources to appoint initiative comanagers—an official in one consortium district that maintained more administrative capacity and an external consultant who held long-standing and impactful working relationships with the rural LEAs. In their appointments, the comanagers provided the administrative capacity often needed in rural settings to support the health of West Kern’s community school initiative, attending to “the nuts and bolts and also the big picture.”³ In their roles, the comanagers streamlined processes related to grant reporting, data gathering, and resource allocation to enable efficiency and organization. They also used strategies that enhanced ongoing communication, collaboration, and adaptability in working with individual district leaders to ensure that community schooling was taking its most impactful form at each site.

LAUSD also allocated resources to hire district personnel who managed and supported community school implementation. While the district’s CSI was initially established with one dedicated staff member—the initiative’s director—it expanded to include nine additional staff members in 2023–34 with the support of state funds. Among new CSI staff are an elementary specialist, a secondary specialist, and four CSC coaches—many of whom previously served as coordinators in LAUSD community schools and broadly support instructional improvement and community school implementation. Likewise, Lynwood Unified used CCSPP funds for a district CSC who manages the supports outlined in this brief and works with colleagues to align existing district initiatives with the Community Schools Initiative. The district also used the CCSPP funds to make strategic hires that could provide comprehensive mental health and social and emotional supports, along with Tier 3 interventions for general education students at each school. This team includes the newly hired CSCs, a social and emotional learning specialist, a licensed clinical social worker, campus community liaisons, and a certified student support analyst.

Overall, LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern used funds to hire district-level personnel dedicated to supporting community school implementation—individuals who served as the backbone of their initiative’s supportive infrastructure and facilitated its mechanisms for enabling high-quality development. Rather than starting from scratch, initiative leaders analyzed their existing strengths and strategically used CCSPP funding to establish new positions or to restructure existing responsibilities for district leaders to fill critical gaps.

Conclusion

[Recent research](#) indicates that even after just 1 year of implementation, California community schools are achieving positive impacts across multiple student outcomes—particularly for students from historically marginalized groups—underscoring the strategy’s potential to promote student success and to drive equitable school transformation. The three cases highlighted in this brief—LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern—are among the grant recipients advancing student outcomes and demonstrating notable progress in implementing the community schools approach.

To enable this success, each initiative leveraged state investments to scale and support community school implementation. They facilitated professional development that engaged CSCs and other school-based educators in ongoing, job-embedded learning to improve their practice. They also cultivated strategic partnerships to strengthen community school implementation and to bring services and opportunities to students and families. By establishing data-driven, continuous improvement processes, they enabled staff to identify successes and address emerging problems regularly. Importantly, LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern hired district-level staff who managed and facilitated these varied supports, allowing for sustained attention to community school development across schools in their purview. Taken together, systems-level supports in the three sites provided staff with important guidance and additional capacity to advance community school aims and interventions. They also created opportunities for continuous improvement, investing in place-based processes that effectively supported community school development and built local capacity.

While LAUSD, Lynwood Unified, and West Kern represent only three examples of systemic supports for community school initiatives, findings in this brief point to the critical role LEAs play in developing and sustaining high-quality community schools. Through their structured supports, the agencies provided the coherence needed to advance the transformation strategy, offering multifaceted implementation supports that aligned with the state’s community schools framework and each initiative’s community schools vision. At the same time, initiative leaders encouraged adaptability, enabling coordinators and other staff to approach implementation in ways that met the needs and assets of their school communities. In doing so, officials acknowledged a fundamental principle in scaling community schools—shared routines, processes, and guidelines allow for aligned growth and tailored implementation.

Overall, this research suggests that LEAs are key actors in community school implementation. When they are strategic and thoughtful in designing multifaceted systems of support, initiative leaders work effectively and efficiently to use state investments to build impactful and sustainable community schools. As LEAs dedicate resources to building a supportive infrastructure, they drive quality implementation and support the spread of high-quality community schools.

Endnotes

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3. Interview with Michael Figueroa, lead consultant and consortium's grant comanager. (2023, November 14).

Acknowledgments

The reports on which this brief is based benefited from review by Catherine Bornhorst, Chief Executive Officer of Borne Ingenuity; Stacey Campo, Senior Research Advisor at the National Center for Community Schools; Kendra Fehrer, Founder and Principal of Heartwise Learning; Karen Hunter Quartz, Director of the UCLA Center for Community Schooling; and Peter Knox, Research Assistant Professor at the University of Vermont.

This research was supported by the Stuart Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Skyline Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

Suggested citation: Hernández, L., Klevan, S., & Germain, E. (2025). *District supports for community schools: How systems can enable high-quality implementation* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-district-supports-community-schools-brief>

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Document last revised November 17, 2025