Community Schools in Rural California

Leveraging Shared Resources in West Kern County

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Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Executive Summary

Rural schools and the distinct obstacles their leaders face in spurring school improvement have received increasing public and policy attention. While rural schools are diverse, studies indicate that many share common challenges, including lower student achievement in comparison to their nonrural counterparts and the presence of achievement gaps as students progress into secondary settings. Other studies highlight that many students and families in rural settings face socioeconomic difficulties, often noting how job insecurity and discrimination shape rural living and student outcomes. Additional research demonstrates that structural factors, including teacher recruitment and retention, limited administrative capacity, and inconsistent access to services, can hinder operations in rural schools and impede student progress.

Enabled by state and federal investments, many leaders in rural districts are turning to community schooling to address the realities their students and families face. Community schools represent an evidence-based school improvement strategy in which educators, community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning. To do this, community schools organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities to enable student success and well-being, typically instituting a range of whole child educational approaches that support academic, social, and emotional development. 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.

Practitioners, policymakers, and community members are seeking guidance on how to use investments to implement and sustain high-quality community schools. However, studies on the structures and practices that enable quality community school implementation are few. Even fewer focus on the strategy's enactment in rural settings, despite the distinct challenges and opportunities in rural communities. This case study addresses these research gaps and examines how a cross-district collaborative—the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools (West Kern Consortium)—leveraged shared resources to enable student success and well-being through its implementation of the community schools strategy in its rural context.

West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools

Nestled amid the agricultural and oil-rich fields outside of Bakersfield, CA, are the six rural districts that comprise the West Kern Consortium. Four of the six consortium districts support students in grades K–8 and maintain student populations ranging from 140 to 291 students. The remaining two are high school districts composed of one comprehensive high school and one alternative learning setting and serve between 1,159 and 1,782 students. As a collective, the consortium reaches more than 3,800 students in rural West Kern County.

The West Kern Consortium was formally established in 2018 when three elementary districts established a cross-district community schools initiative after receiving a federal Full-Service Community Schools grant. In 2019, the community schools collective grew to include an additional small elementary district, and by 2022, with the support of a California Community Schools Partnership Program implementation grant, the consortium had expanded to include the high school districts.

The West Kern Consortium maintains a vision for its community schools initiative that is grounded in advancing five priorities: (1) early childhood education, (2) expanded learning, (3) mathematics and literacy education, (4) family and community engagement, and (5) social and mental health services. Data suggest that the consortium's multifaceted initiative is having an impact, as its districts have supported growth in math and literacy achievement and impressive reductions in chronic absence, among other positive outcome measures.

Findings

West Kern Consortium leaders used investments to institute structures and practices that enabled high-quality community school implementation and student success. These included the following:

- **Allocating Resources to Enable Achievement and Instructional Improvement.** From its inception, the West Kern Consortium centered math and literacy achievement as key priorities in its community schools initiative. In turn, consortium leaders allocated resources to spur continuous improvement in teaching and learning, illustrating how to prioritize and integrate academic learning as a pillar of community school transformation. Resources were used to invest in instructional coaches who provided virtual or on-site guidance, depending on educator preference, as well as the introduction of a data-driven instructional improvement process that engaged educators in a coherent suite of professional development activities throughout the school year. These instructional supports were not single-dose professional development experiences; rather, they represented ongoing and coherent professional supports that allowed educators to continuously improve their pedagogical practices over time.
- **Hiring Dedicated Community School Personnel.** Consortium leaders invested in community school coordinators (CSCs) and social workers—full-time personnel placed in each district who lent dedicated capacity to initiative priorities. CSCs played a central role in enabling family and community engagement, while social workers' primary charge was to better connect students and families to social and mental health resources. As CSCs and social workers maintained distinct primary responsibilities, they collaborated to ensure that critical supports were in place for students and families, particularly in the face of acute challenges. The most notable example of their collaboration to tackle challenges can be seen in their coordinated efforts to combat chronic absence—an area in which the consortium has made impressive gains. Overall, hiring community school personnel expanded the often-strained staff capacity in small, rural districts and allowed the districts to advance their goals while addressing emerging challenges.
- **Creating Capacity-Building Opportunities for Community School Personnel.** To enable CSCs and social workers to do their work in powerful ways, West Kern Consortium leaders created a system of professional development opportunities. These included communities of practice, which convened virtually each month and enabled CSCs and social workers to engage in ongoing learning opportunities with their counterparts in other districts. In addition, CSCs and social workers received individual coaching from initiative leaders and engaged in site visits to connect with community school personnel in other districts or regions. In instituting these ongoing professional development opportunities, West Kern Consortium leaders recognized the importance of targeted support for these actors and facilitated learning exchanges that made it possible for CSCs and social workers

to collaborate with those in similar roles to share best practices and engage in collaborative problem-solving. Taken collectively, these capacity-building opportunities coalesced to create a coherent professional development system, which is a critical systems-level support for high-quality community school implementation.

- **Creating a Supportive Infrastructure to Sustain Implementation.** West Kern Consortium leaders allocated time and resources to create a supportive, systems-level infrastructure to sustain implementation. This included identifying initiative comanagers—a district administrator of one consortium district and an external consultant—who lent necessary administrative capacity and visionary leadership. Comanagers, in turn, embraced adaptive and collaborative leadership strategies as they managed the initiative, enabling shared governance, continuous improvement, and attentiveness to districts' distinct needs. Collaborative leadership and continuous improvement were also supported by the initiative's rural Children's Cabinet, a cross-sector board that advised comanagers and consortium districts in addressing key challenges and in supporting strategic thinking. As leaders built a cross-district system of community schools, they maintained a keen eye on the initiative's sustainability, taking care to institute structures and practices that could enable ongoing quality and financial solvency.

Lessons

Findings from the efforts in the West Kern Consortium point to how investments in community schools can be used to build effective and supportive learning environments in varied geographic regions. At the same time, this study provides specific lessons about systemic efforts to enable high-quality community schooling in small, rural settings. These lessons include the following:

- **Working Stronger Together.** By bringing together small, rural districts, the consortium amassed and leveraged resources that individual districts likely would not have attained by working independently. These previously unavailable resources provided critical capacity and helped to alleviate challenges in connecting students and families with resources—two common issues in rural schools.

- **Creating Systems for Efficient and Collaborative Management.** Shared resources are better accessed when there is an intentional system for initiative management and collaboration. In the West Kern Consortium, this took the form of allocating resources to secure dedicated capacity from the initiative's comanagers. Comanagers provided much-needed administrative capacity while establishing a system of shared governance that conveyed and embodied a sense of collective responsibility.

- **Enabling Adaptability.** Processes that allow for adaptability in community school implementation acknowledge and address the diverse dynamics and needs in rural communities. Approaches used in the West Kern Consortium embodied this orientation, as consortium leaders provided districts flexibility in using shared resources and implemented capacity-building approaches that supported individualized professional learning. Instituting approaches like these fostered adaptability and responsiveness, thus honoring an inherent principle in community schooling—that community schools be designed and supported in ways that meet the distinct needs in their settings.

- **Facilitating Connections Between Partners and Districts.** Facilitating opportunities for communication and connection among county and nonprofit officials, rural district leaders, and school personnel supports high-quality community school implementation. In the consortium, leaders facilitated these connections through its Children's Cabinet, enabling external partners and community school personnel to understand what services were needed and to ultimately enable improved service provision. Through engagement like this, leaders can help to bridge resource gaps.
- **Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement.** Structures that engage local actors in continuous improvement build a culture that drives high-quality community school implementation and sustainability in small, rural settings. The West Kern Consortium instituted a range of localized structures that cultivated this culture, including its professional development structures and its rural Children's Cabinet, which enabled local actors to identify emerging problems and institute effective solutions. Structures like those in the consortium not only help spur improvement, but they also contribute to community school sustainability as they build local capacity.
- **Responding to the Conditions for Living and Working in Rural Settings.** Mitigating challenges associated with living and working in rural communities is an important consideration in rural community school implementation. Consortium leaders understood these obstacles and instituted structures that facilitated access to key resources, services, and supports. These included structures that allowed staff, students, and families to receive supports in ways that eased travel burdens and/or aligned with their preferences. Instituting accommodations like these can ensure that teachers, students, and families receive the supports they need in the ways they need.
- **Attending to Sustainability in Small, Rural Districts.** The financial sustainability of community school initiatives in small, rural districts requires nimbleness and sensitivity to the fiscal realities these districts face. Consortium leaders were consistently mindful of limited state funding and worked with consortium districts to identify and establish sustainable funding strategies. They also strategically instituted structures—like those that support professional development and continuous improvement—that were economical and adaptable to local needs. Leaders of rural community school initiatives in small, rural settings can maintain similar sensibilities as they chart a stable financial path forward.

Introduction

> If you look at the schools and the districts that are in this grant with us, we're all small. We all have similar issues. We all have similar demographics. It almost is like we could be one big district, and we're just sharing ideas. … With this [similarity], it allows us to work together and to share things, and to share resources. … I have 150 kids at my district, but they could just as easily go to Lost Hills, and they'd be their students. So, they're all of our students, and it's just about the students in Kern County, really, and keeping that in the forefront.
>
> – Bethany Ferguson, Superintendent and Principal at Semitropic Elementary School District

Rural communities are diverse settings with multifaceted histories, geographies, economies, and local cultures.[1] Rural schools, which served more than 1 in 5 students across the United States in 2023,[2] reflect this diversity, varying in district and school size, demographic profile, and surrounding geographic and socioeconomic landscape. Despite the prevalence of rural schools in the United States, research has tended to retain an urban-centric bias.[3] However, rural schools are receiving increased public and policy attention, spurring a growing number of examinations into the ways that such schools engage in school improvement to support students and families.

Even though rural schools are not monolithic—varying in size, demographics, and remoteness, among other characteristics—they often face similar key challenges. Researchers have compared achievement levels between rural and nonrural schools. One study found that while modest outcome differences in 3rd-grade achievement generally existed between rural and nonrural students, these differences were more pronounced among specific socioeconomic and racial and ethnic groups who tended to perform lower than their nonrural counterparts.[4] Another study emphasizes the presence of growing achievement gaps—driven by greater summer learning losses—as students progress into secondary settings.[5] Other studies highlight the significant socioeconomic difficulties facing many students and families in rural settings, often noting that job scarcity, low wages, and racial discrimination shape rural living and impede student outcomes.[6]

Additional research has demonstrated the structural factors that can hinder the day-to-day operations of rural schools and affect student progress. Notable issues include the recruitment and retention of well-prepared practitioners;[7] limited administrative capacity;[8] and inconsistent access to supplemental supports that can enable students' academic, social, and emotional development.[9] These factors—individually and collectively—play an important role in nurturing and sustaining a rich learning environment that supports academic success and healthy development.[10]

Many small and rural districts are turning to the community schools strategy as a way to strengthen learning conditions for students, harness more resources, and engage with families.[11] Their ability to implement community schools, however, can often be hindered by their size and inability to leverage economies of scale, pushing rural districts to innovate and form cross-district partnerships.[12] The formation of cross-district consortiums remains underutilized

Many small and rural districts are turning to the community schools strategy as a way to strengthen learning conditions for students, harness more resources, and engage with families.

and understudied. This report offers a case study of a set of small, rural districts that joined forces to pool resources and collectively implement a community schools approach to improve outcomes for their greater community. The findings highlight how this consortium of rural school districts leveraged shared resources and developed a supportive infrastructure to advance school improvement through the community schools strategy.

What Are Community Schools?

Community schools are an evidence-based school transformation strategy that unites the efforts of students, families, educators, and community partners to improve student learning and well-being.[13] Embodying a whole child educational approach, community schools organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities to enable student success. These resources and supports include mental health services, meals, health care, tutoring, after-school and enrichment programming, and other services and opportunities tailored to specific community needs. To do this, community schools often implement specific key practices, such as 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. They also embrace a shared whole child vision; cultivate a relationship-centered school culture; and emphasize meaningful collaboration and leadership among educators, families, local community members, and students as a means of enabling the conditions to drive change.[14]

Community schools are constantly adapting and setting priorities grounded in local needs and goals. This refinement and adaptation occurs as the community works together to track progress in an ongoing cycle of shared reflection, analysis, revision, and inclusive decision-making. This continuous improvement process both builds capacity and draws on the support of the entire school community to develop and maintain a responsive, high-quality community school where students thrive.

Systems-level supports that enable community school development and sustainability play an important role, particularly when seeking to support community schools at scale. This includes, but is not limited to, adequate resources, shared governance structures, data systems to support continuous improvement, professional learning opportunities, and strategic partnerships. These efforts are further strengthened by supportive local, state, and federal policies; ongoing, coordinated technical assistance; and private and public investments.

Researchers, policymakers, and community members increasingly recognize community schools as an evidence-based strategy for improving a range of student outcomes. Studies indicate that, when fully implemented, community schools enable increased academic achievement and graduation rates, particularly for students from marginalized communities and/or disadvantaged backgrounds.[15] Research also shows that high-quality community schools improve student attendance and feelings of connectedness while reducing exclusionary discipline practices.[16] COVID-19 also brought the value of the community schools strategy to the fore, as these schools maintained structures, processes, and home–school connections that enabled them to respond to students' and families' holistic needs.[17]

With growing evidence of their impact and promise, historic investments in the community schools approach at the federal and state levels have followed.[18] These investments have spurred the growth of community schools in geographically diverse communities across the country, including states in different U.S. regions (e.g., Kentucky, New Mexico, New York, and Tennessee) and a range of urban, suburban, and rural communities. In these disparate locations, community schools strive to use the improvement strategy to create environments in which students can thrive. However, practitioners implementing the approach are often doing so with different tools and resources available to them.

This Study

With increased resources for community schools, practitioners, policymakers, and community members alike seek guidance on how to use investments to develop high-quality community schools that are responsive to community needs and assets. However, studies on the structures, processes, and practices that enable systemwide quality implementation of the community schools strategy are few.[19] Even fewer studies focus on the strategy's enactment in rural settings, despite the variable and distinct realities practitioners in rural communities navigate.[20] This case study addresses these research gaps and examines how a cross-district local education agency secured and leveraged shared resources to effectively implement the community schools strategy in its rural settings.

Specifically, this case study examined the efforts of the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools (West Kern Consortium)—a consortium of six rural school districts that is collaborating to institute the community schools strategy in California's Central Valley. It investigated how the consortium used pooled resources to build structures and practices that enabled student academic success and well-being through its rural community schools initiative. To draw its conclusions, this case study relied on qualitative data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents, which elicited insights into the systemic approaches used to support community school transformation across the consortium as well as site-level implementation in three of its member districts. (See Appendix A for the study's methodology.) Findings suggest that the consortium developed a cross-district system of high-quality community schools by:

- allocating resources to enable student achievement and instructional improvement;
- hiring dedicated community school personnel who lent critical capacity to advancing community school priorities;
- creating capacity-building opportunities for community school personnel who enabled it to monitor and improve work with students and families; and
- creating a supportive infrastructure to sustain implementation that enabled efficient management, collaboration, adaptability, and cross-sector engagement to support community school implementation and continuous improvement.

This report begins with an introduction to the West Kern Consortium and the outcomes it has advanced through its community schools initiative. It then describes how the consortium used investments to institute cross-district practices and systems to enable change and sustainability. The report concludes with a discussion of takeaways and lessons for those seeking to implement the community schools strategy, particularly in rural settings.

The West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools

Nestled amid the agricultural and oil-rich fields outside of Bakersfield, CA, are the six rural districts that comprise the West Kern Consortium. Four of the six districts—Elk Hills Elementary School District (Elk Hills), Lost Hills Union Elementary School District (Lost Hills Union), Maple Elementary School District (Maple), and Semitropic Elementary School District (Semitropic)—support students in grades K–8 and maintain student populations ranging from 140 to 291 students. All but one elementary district—Lost Hills Union—are composed of just one K–8 school, while Lost Hills Union maintains an elementary school and a middle school within its district. The two consortium high school districts—Taft Union High School District (Taft Union High) and Wasco Union High School District (Wasco Union High)—are each composed of one comprehensive high school and one alternative learning setting and serve between 1,159 and 1,782 students.

As a collective, the consortium reaches more than 3,800 students in rural West Kern County. More than 80% of its students identify as Latino/a, while White students (16.6%) represent the second-largest student group. Seventy-six percent of its students are categorized as socioeconomically disadvantaged, about 10% of its population are students with disabilities, and more than one fifth of consortium students are classified as English learners. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Student Demographics in the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools, 2024–25

Demographic	Elk Hills Elementary School District	Lost Hills Union Elementary School District	Maple Elementary School District	Semitropic Elementary School District	Taft Union High School District	Wasco Union High School District	West Kern Consortium	Kern County
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	73%	98.6%	60.3%	61.4%	82.8%	88.0%	76.0%	75.9%
English learners	6.9%	47.4%	5.6%	53.6%	19.6%	19.2%	21.2%	16.5%
Students with disabilities	10.6%	7.6%	8.0%	8.6%	13.1%	9.1%	10.2%	12.0%
Asian, Filipino, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	–	1.4%	1.2%	–	1.4%	0.6%	0.9%	4.3%
Black or African American	3.1%	–	–	2.1%	0.4%	1.8%	1.2%	4.9%
Hispanic or Latino/a	20.6%	98.2%	78.8%	97.1%	61.7%	94.5%	80.7%	68.9%
White	72.5%	0.3%	20.2%	0.7%	35.1%	3.0%	16.6%	18.1%
Other race/race not reported	3.8%	–	–	–	1.5%	0.1%	0.7%	3.8%

Sources: California Department of Education DataQuest data for 2024–25 for Kern County free or reduced-price meals, enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS), special education enrollment by program setting, and enrollment by ethnicity.

While the consortium collectively serves this student population, disaggregated profiles of the consortium districts shed light on their demographic diversity, revealing how individual districts serve distinct student populations in some instances. For example, while all consortium districts primarily serve socioeconomically disadvantaged students, Lost Hills Union, Taft Union High, and Wasco Union High serve a higher proportion of students from low-income backgrounds than the Kern County average. All but two consortium districts serve higher rates of English learners than the county average, and English learners make up almost half of the student population in two districts—Lost Hills Union and Semitropic. (See Table 1.) In addition, while Latino/a students are the largest demographic group in five of the six consortiums, Elk Hills primarily serves White students (72.5%), and Taft Union High has a White student population (35.1%) that exceeds the Kern County average.

History and Initiative Priority Areas

The West Kern Consortium was formally established in 2018 when its founding districts—Lost Hills Union, Maple, and Semitropic—joined forces to establish a cross-district community schools initiative after receiving a 5-year, $2.5 million federal Full-Service Community Schools grant. Prior to the grant application, the founding districts had informally collaborated as a group that was colloquially called the "West Side Smalls," referring to their geographic location in Kern County and their district size. Michael Figueroa, the lead consultant and comanager of the initiative, explained the nature of these early collaborations:

> They [the districts] came together, and they talked about how we can partner. Usually it was surface-level partnership, in my opinion, of, "Let's put together a beginning-of-the-year PD [professional development] for everybody and bring in a great guest speaker." That kind of thing. It wasn't about, "What are you doing in the classroom every day, and how can we support that with each other?"

According to Figueroa, the formal establishment of the consortium created a "deeper version of the West Side Smalls collaboration," allowing the districts to work together in more substantive ways.

In 2019, the community schools collective expanded to include Elk Hills—another small elementary district that engaged in discussions as part of the West Side Smalls collaborative—after the consortium successfully garnered a federal School Climate Transformation Grant of almost $650,000. By 2022, the consortium had expanded to include Taft Union High and Wasco Union High, which were feeder high schools for the consortium's elementary districts, with the support of a $9.5 million California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) implementation grant, which they were awarded in 2021–22. (See The California Community Schools Partnership Program.)

The California Community Schools Partnership Program

In 2021–22, California allocated a $4.1 billion state investment in the growth and spread of community schools across the state. This legislation established a competitive grant program, called the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), which allots funding to cohorts of community schools annually through the 2031–32 fiscal year. CCSPP offers planning grants, implementation grants, and extension grants, depending on the maturity of the community schools initiative. It also allots more than $200 million for technical assistance, including statewide and regional centers that provide ongoing support to grantees within their jurisdiction.

The grant program prioritizes funding for community school initiatives in which 80% or more of the students are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, are English learners, or are living in foster care and considers these demographic characteristics alongside other state priority areas when determining grant awardees. CCSPP grants can be used for staffing, service coordination and provision, family and community engagement, data systems and continuous improvement structures, and professional development.

To date, CCSPP grants are reaching 2,484 school sites—approximately 25% of California public schools—and more than one third of high-need schools in the state (37%) are or will soon be in community schools supported by the grant program. The West Kern Consortium was among the 15.3% of Cohort 1 CCSPP grantees to obtain state funding to engage in community school development in rural settings.

Source: Swain, W., Leung-Gagné, M., Maier, A., & Rubinstein, C. (2025). *Community schools impact on student outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute.

While the West Kern Consortium is composed of individual districts serving disparate student populations and age ranges, its vision for community schools is founded on advancing five priorities: (1) early childhood education, (2) expanded learning, (3) mathematics and literacy education, (4) family and community engagement, and (5) social and mental health services. These priorities were initially identified as the consortium applied for the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant. Leaders of the consortium's three founding districts came together to examine administrative data on key outcomes, as well as more qualitative data on climate and community needs, as a means of surfacing common areas of challenge. Bethany Ferguson, Semitropic's Superintendent and Principal, recalled these interactions:

> We all looked at our [challenge] areas. We were all struggling in math. We were all struggling with having the capacity or having the personnel to be able to fulfill needs. … So when we did come up with what our areas of focus were, it was basically us going, "Yeah, we're all struggling here. We all see a need for this and this."

As areas of common challenge were identified, these data-driven deliberations also surfaced individualized areas of need. For instance, leaders at Lost Hills Union identified a distinct need in their community to establish an Early Learning Center. Leaders at Maple advocated for attention to expanded learning in the community schools initiative, noting the importance of establishing before-school, after-school, and summer care, because the majority of the school's parents and guardians were making the 20- to 25-mile commute to Bakersfield on a frequent basis. Ultimately, consortium leaders agreed to

incorporate these additional goals into their initiative with an understanding that "not every school has programs that target or that hit each of the priorities," stated Fidelina Saso, Assistant Superintendent of Lost Hills Union and initiative comanager.[21]

While empowering each district to pursue context-specific goals has remained a priority, the priorities themselves have been slightly amended over time in response to the needs of newer consortium members. Specifically, the West Kern Consortium's focus on "mathematics and literacy education" was initially bound only to mathematics, given the acute need for improvement in this content area across the districts. When Elk Hills joined the consortium, its district leaders advocated for literacy to be included, given the school's significant attention to literacy skill development in its district.

Initiative Management

As a community schools collaborative of six independent rural districts, the West Kern Consortium did not inherently maintain a central office or bureaucratic structure to oversee and manage a community schools initiative. In turn, consortium leaders developed a structure that enabled efficient administration of the grant and related implementation supports after it received its federal Full-Service Community Schools grant in 2018.

First, consortium leaders identified Lost Hills Union—one of the founding consortium districts—as the designated local education agency through which grant management and administration would be facilitated. Lost Hills Union assumed this important charge because it maintained an assistant superintendent while the other two founding consortium districts had just one district administrator at the time of receiving the federal grant.

In addition to identifying the consortium's grant administrating body, leaders established the initiative's comanagement structure, in which Assistant Superintendent Saso and Figueroa were tapped to manage and support grant activities and related community school implementation efforts. Saso was identified for this role because of her leadership and affiliation with Lost Hills Union, while Figueroa was tapped as a comanager based on his noteworthy school improvement work across Kern County and his long-standing relationship with the founding consortium districts, which predated the community schools initiative.

Student Success in West Kern Consortium

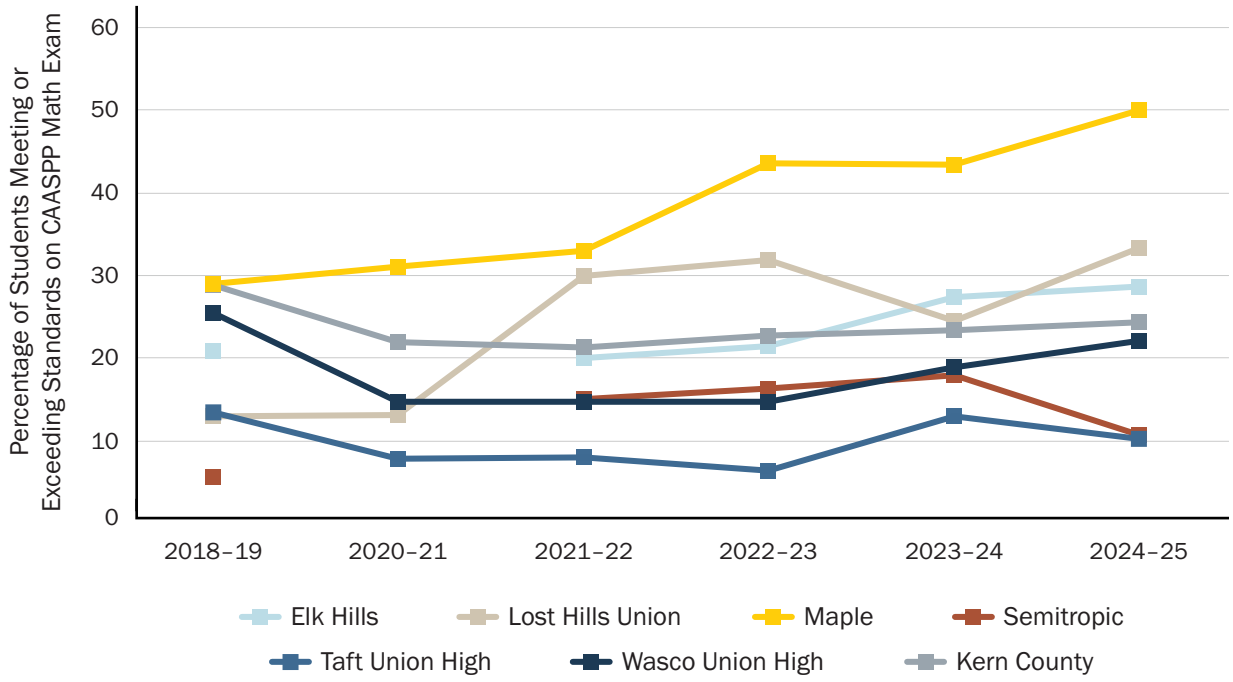
Data suggest that the West Kern Consortium has supported the success and growth of its distinct student population through its community schools initiative. Gains often can be seen in both aggregated and disaggregated outcomes and at times exceed those reflected in county averages.

Math Performance

Based on administration of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), a standardized assessment aligned to the Common Core State Standards, students in West Kern Consortium districts have generally demonstrated steady growth in math since 2018–19—a priority area of the community schools initiative. While the number of students meeting or exceeding math proficiency standards in Kern County has remained relatively steady since 2021–22, when CAASPP testing schedules were regularly reinstated postpandemic, five of the six consortium districts have seen proficiency rates

exceed their 2021–22 levels, and three schools—Elk Hills (28.7%), Lost Hills Union (33.3%), and Maple (50%)—maintained math proficiency rates that exceeded the county average (24.3%) in 2024–25. The two newest members of the consortium—Taft Union High and Wasco Union High—have also demonstrated growth in math performance since 2021–22, with Wasco Union High district increasing its math proficiency by about 7.4 percentage points during the 3-year period. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Math Performance in West Kern Consortium Districts



Notes: CAASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress. CAASPP tests were not administered in 2019–20, and the tests were optional in 2020–21. Thus, Elk Hills and Semitropic have no reported test data for both years. CAASPP results for Kern County include charter and non-charter schools.

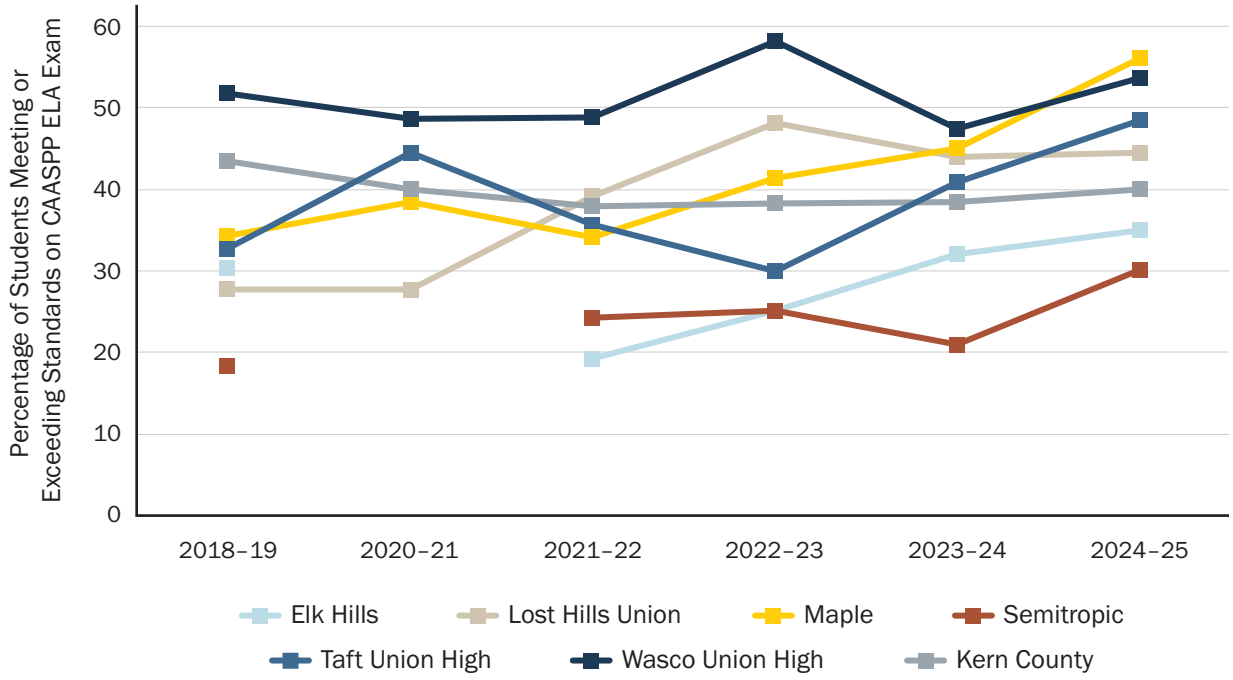
Sources: California Department of Education DataQuest data for 2018–19 through 2024–25 for the following districts or geographic regions: Elk Hills Elementary School District, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District, Maple Elementary School District, Semitropic Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, Wasco Union High School District, and Kern County.

An independent analysis of math achievement conducted by WestEd, the consortium's external evaluator, further demonstrates the impact of the community schools initiative, particularly within its three founding districts. Specifically, WestEd evaluators compared the math proficiency rates at Lost Hills Union, Maple, and Semitropic shown in Figure 1 with those in demographically similar schools in Kern and Tulare counties over the period of the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant (2018–2023). They found that Lost Hills Union demonstrated the highest growth in math performance out of all similar districts in Kern County, increasing scores by 187% (20.8 percentage points). Maple was the second-highest-performing district in the comparison group, increasing scores by nearly 72% (15.3 percentage points).[22] Semitropic had lower overall proficiency rates than Lost Hills and Maple; however, it was the only district in its comparison group to demonstrate growth in math proficiency, increasing its scores by 120% (8.9 percentage points).[23]

English Language Arts Performance

While the initiative's focus on literacy education was integrated into its priority areas in 2019–20, individual consortium districts were making early strides in demonstrating growth in English language arts (ELA). While ELA test performance has generally remained steady in broader Kern County since regular CAASPP testing schedules were reinstated in 2021–22, each consortium district has improved its ELA proficiency rates, with Elk Hills (+15.7 percentage points) and Maple (+22.1 percentage points) making the greatest increases from 2021–22 to 2024–25 (see Figure 2). In addition, four consortium districts (Lost Hills Union, Maple, Taft Union High, and Wasco Union High) demonstrated ELA proficiency rates that exceeded the county average (39.9%) in 2024–25.

Figure 2. English Language Arts Performance in West Kern Consortium Districts



Notes: CAASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress; ELA = English language arts. CAASPP tests were not administered in 2019–20, and the tests were optional in 2020–21. Thus, Elk Hills and Semitropic have no reported test date for both years. CAASPP results for Kern County include charter and non-charter schools.

Sources: California Department of Education DataQuest data for 2018–19 through 2024–25 for the following districts or geographic regions: Elk Hills Elementary School District, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District, Maple Elementary School District, Semitropic Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, Wasco Union High School District, and Kern County.

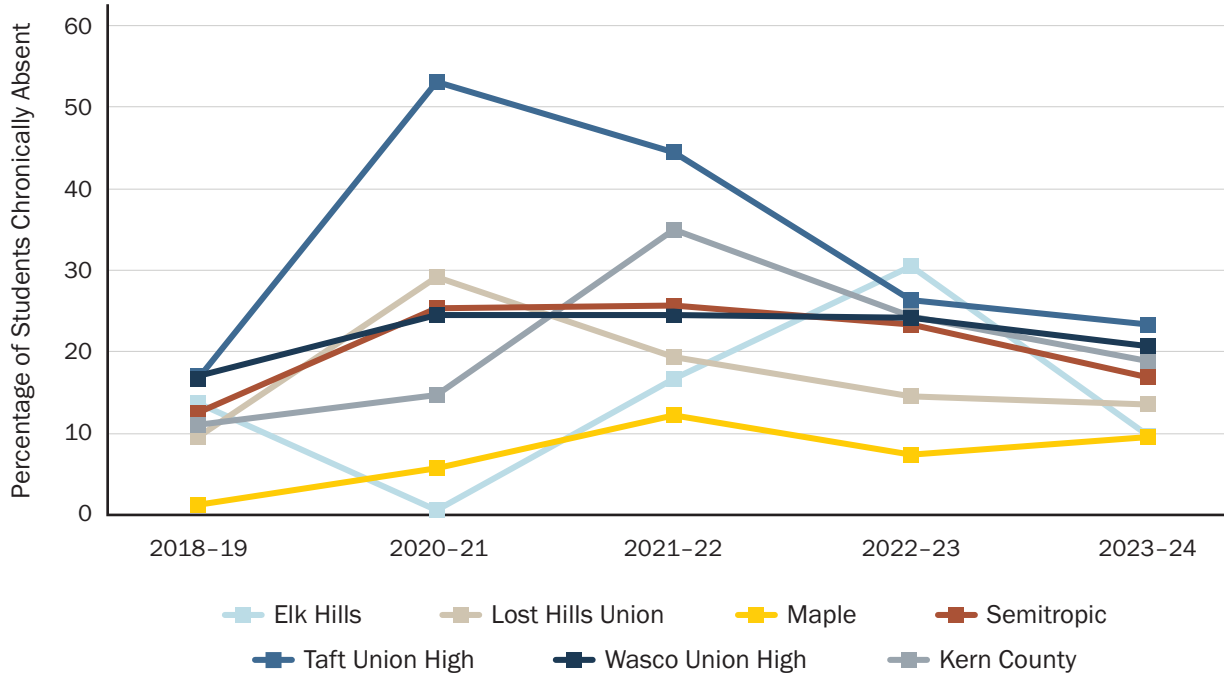
WestEd's 2023 comparative analyses of the consortium's founding districts with similar schools in the region that did not receive community school grants also demonstrated the progress made on literacy development under the community schools model. According to WestEd, Semitropic, which demonstrated a modest 1.4 percentage point increase in ELA proficiency from 2017–18 to 2022–23, actually had the highest growth in ELA proficiency out of all similar districts in Kern County.[24] In addition, Lost Hills

Union had the highest and Maple the second-highest growth in ELA performance in their respective comparison groups. Lost Hills Union increased ELA proficiency rates by 92% (23 percentage points), and Maple increased its proficiency rate by 35% (11 percentage points). In 2022–23, Lost Hills had the highest overall ELA proficiency rate in comparison to similar districts, with 48.2% of students meeting or exceeding the standards.[25]

Chronic Absence

Consortium districts have also made impressive gains in reducing chronic absences—a significant challenge faced by schools in California and across the country in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[26] Aggregated data show that since peaking at 29% during the 2021–22 school year, chronic absences dropped 9 percentage points in 2 years across all schools in the consortium.

Figure 3. Chronic Absence in West Kern Consortium Districts



Sources: Ed-Data for 2018–19 through 2023–24 for the following districts or geographic regions: Elk Hills Elementary School District, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District, Maple Elementary School District, Semitropic Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, Wasco Union High School District, and Kern County.

Disaggregated data for individual consortium districts paint an even more impressive picture. (See Figure 3.) For instance, Elk Hills, which saw a significant uptick in its chronic absence rate in 2022–23, when it exceeded the county average, has reduced its rate to 9.7%—a 68% reduction from the previous year and lower than its 2018–19 prepandemic rate. Taft Union High has also reduced its chronic absence rates since formally joining the consortium in 2022, going from 44.5% in 2021–22 to 23.4% just 2 years later, a decrease of just over 47%. The consortium's founding districts—Lost Hills Union, Maple, and Semitropic—have also demonstrated lower chronic absence rates compared to the county average. Since

the 2021–22 school year, these three districts have maintained, on average, chronic absence rates that are between 38% and 45% lower than the county. Of note, in 2022–23, Maple boasted the lowest rate among all Kern County schools, at 7.4%.

Additional Outcomes

In addition to these measures, West Kern Consortium districts enabled other positive outcomes that suggest they are supporting student success and well-being. For instance, despite being the consortium's newest members, Taft Union High graduated 88.9% of students, and Wasco Union High graduated 92.2%, compared to 86.1% of students countywide. That same year, each district maintained a lower suspension rate than the Kern County average of 4.2% in 2023–24, ranging from 0% in three of the districts to 3.1% in one of the high school districts. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Outcome Data for West Kern Consortium Districts, 2023–24

Demographic	Elk Hills Elementary School District	Lost Hills Union Elementary School District	Maple Elementary School District	Semitropic Elementary School District	Taft Union High School District	Wasco Union High School District	Kern County
K–12 suspension rate	0%	1.3%	2%	0%	3.1%	0%	4.2%
Graduation rate	–	–	–	–	88.9%	92.2%	86.1%

Sources: Ed-Data data for 2023–24 for the following districts and geographic regions: Elk Hills Elementary School District, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District, Maple Elementary School District, Semitropic Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, Wasco Union High School District, and Kern County.

Researchers at WestEd—the consortium's formal evaluation partner—also reported positive school climate outcomes, finding that students at Elk Hills, Lost Hills Union, and Semitropic reported feeling connected and supported by a trusting adult. In survey questions about the mentorship program instituted across the schools—monthly cross-grade groups of students who gather with an adult in the building—students were overwhelmingly positive. Between 87% and 94% of students enjoyed meeting with their mentor across the campuses, while 74% to 89% reported being supported by and receiving help from their mentor. The addition of a social worker to each campus was also perceived positively by students. Between 70% and 93% of students across campuses agreed that the social worker provides supports to students and reported feeling really comfortable "opening up to social workers" and using them as a resource when they were having a tough day emotionally.[27]

In implementing its cross-district community schools initiative, the West Kern Consortium has supported its diverse, rural districts in enabling positive outcomes and growth trajectories across a range of measures. How has this collective of rural districts enabled these gains for students in West Kern County through its community schools model? The following sections of this report shed light on this question, as they describe how the consortium has used community school investments to implement structures and practices to enable its districts to implement the community schools approach in high-quality,

community-responsive, and effective ways. Findings provide insights into the consortium-wide processes that enable community school development and continuous improvement while elevating their particular uptake in three consortium districts—Elk Hills, Lost Hills Union, and Taft Union High.

The first section illustrates how consortium leaders have allocated resources to spur instructional improvement as part of their community schools initiative, leveraging investments to connect educators with math coaches and to institute a data-driven improvement process. The report then demonstrates how the consortium invested in and professionally developed community school coordinators and social workers, who lent dedicated and critical capacity to advance the community school priorities and work closely with students and families. The final finding describes how effective shared governance approaches created and facilitated by consortium comanagers and leaders have enabled quality implementation, continuous improvement, and sustainability of the community schools in this cross-district, rural collaborative.

Allocating Resources to Enable Achievement and Instructional Improvement

High-quality community schools implement instructional approaches that expose students to rigorous content while immersing them in meaningful learning experiences that pique their curiosities and interests.[28] Recent case studies have showcased this pedagogy, highlighting how community school staff cultivate community-connected classrooms that propel student learning and engagement.[29]

However, research on community schools instruction is an emerging field. Early initiatives less commonly featured instructional improvement as a central priority, making research and guidance scarce for community school leaders. When instruction in community schools has been highlighted, it has tended to elevate practices in urban schools and, in turn, underexamined how instructional improvement can be spurred in community schools in diverse geographic settings. Efforts by officials in the West Kern Consortium shed light on these open research questions, as they offer an example of how to successfully prioritize and weave academics into community school transformation.

From its inception, the West Kern Consortium centered on a commitment to improving instruction, making academic learning a foundational pillar in its community schools initiative. Fidelina Saso, the Assistant Superintendent at Lost Hills Union and comanager of the initiative, recalled the decision to place academic learning at the center of the consortium's community schools vision:

The West Kern Consortium centered on a commitment to improving instruction, making academic learning a foundational pillar in its community schools initiative.

> We wanted the academic piece to be a big part of community schools. … We said, if we're going to do this work—because we knew it was going to be a lot of work—we want to make sure that we're seeing results in academics and student learning.

With a commitment to spurring stronger student achievement, the consortium sought ways to use its community school investments to spur continuous improvement in teaching and learning. This section describes the measures the West Kern Consortium has taken, elevating its investments in external coaching to support educators' instructional improvement in math and its facilitation of a data-driven improvement strategy to address challenges in math and literacy. Through this, we demonstrate how consortium officials used resources to enable job-embedded professional development and collaborative data inquiry to drive instructional improvement and academic learning.

Increased Access to Coaching

With math achievement as a central priority in the West Kern Consortium's initiative in its early years, consortium leaders invested in math coaches as a primary means of spurring academic improvement through their community schools model. According to initiative leaders, none of the consortium districts had access to math coaches prior to receiving community school grants. Thus, increasing teacher access to professional coaching was seen as an evidence-based lever that could fuel instructional improvement.

Initially, the consortium allocated resources to gain access to Harvard University's Mathematical Quality of Instruction (MQI) coaching—a program that engages math educators in virtual and video-based coaching cycles. MQI coaching asks a participating teacher to film a math lesson, which is, in turn, shared with their designated coach, who reviews it and provides individualized feedback. An MQI coach may also refer their advisee to resources in the MQI video library to elevate relevant instructional practices. Overall, securing MQI coaching was a way to maximize access to and the frequency of math coaching in consortium districts—access that was previously unavailable and unaffordable to these individual districts, as well as difficult to consistently obtain in remote, rural communities.

Access to MQI coaching was first implemented in the elementary districts, with the goal of having educators engage in 10–12 coaching cycles per year. Some participating math educators lauded its impact and called attention to its support as a reflective tool. For example, a middle school math teacher in Lost Hill Union explained:

> Once I see my videos, I'm able to see where I could have asked follow-up questions. That's one of the things that my coaches have been helping me [with] these 3 years. … So it makes me reflect on what I'm doing, so I think it's helped me grow a lot.

One of his colleagues at Lost Hills Union expressed similar sentiments around MQI and its impact on her math instruction in the school's elementary grades. She stated, "It [MQI] is honestly the only time I've probably been able to actually stop and reflect, besides looking at data. … I feel like that's contributed a lot to our math growth."

While some educators embraced MQI coaching as a professional development resource, others had reservations about its virtual format and required tasks. After hearing the differing assessments of MQI and mixed buy-in from teachers, in January 2022, West Kern Consortium leaders opted to invest in an additional resource to supplement the virtual coaching: a shared math coach who provided on-site professional development support to educators who preferred in-person coaching. As a shared resource across the consortium's elementary districts, the coach, a Maple employee, spent time at Elk Hills, Lost Hills Union, Maple, and Semitropic, where she conducted classroom observations, provided individualized support, and modeled or cotaught lessons, depending on the school's or teacher's need. In this way, the consortium leadership acted upon feedback across the districts and adjusted the offerings to provide different access points to improving instruction.

With increased demand for on-site coaches and to meet teacher preferences for support, consortium leaders later expanded the coaching portfolio and hired coaches from the Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS). With this new coaching format, educators could maintain virtual coaching with some in-person support from KCSOS staff. A teacher at Elk Hills who benefited from the hybrid coaching model explained the varied ways she worked with her math coach during the coach's visits to the school:

> [We] meet twice a month. One time is to work with us and to help us create lessons—to add things into our math lessons that are targeting the specific needs of the students and where we want to go and the goals that we want to set for our classroom within math. Then we create lessons together, and then she'll come back in, and she'll either observe or coteach.

With access to both MQI coaching and a KCSOS coach through the community schools initiative, educators in consortium districts now select their preferred coaching approach. Tiffany Touchstone, Superintendent and Principal at Elk Hills, explained how her K–8 district made the transition from a mandated to a flexible approach to math coaching: "At one time, we mandated MQI. Then, we mandated county [coaching]. And then we said, 'You know, everyone's different. We will allow them to choose what best fits their way of learning.'"

This flexibility in identifying how best to spur math achievement extends to the consortium's high school districts. Although Taft Union High and Wasco Union High have access to MQI coaching as members of the consortium, interviewees from those districts indicated that the virtual coaching program did not suit their needs. Jason Hodgson, Taft Union High's Superintendent, described some of these difficulties:

> We had partnered with [MQI], a group of math coaches who would meet with our teachers and talk through their lessons … but our need was a little more thorough than that. We really had to break down essential standards, just an understanding of developing learning targets, some real basic things. … Instructional strategy was still a need, but districtwide, that's actually one of our main focus areas. They were just inundated, so it was really overkill for them, and they were drowning in too much PD [professional development].

Noticing the instructional needs of its educators, Taft Union High opted to embrace other professional development strategies to provide more direct, job-embedded feedback to its teachers. According to a Taft Union High district official, this included allocating time for "trust-based observations," which enabled administrators to conduct 20-minute nonevaluation observations in classrooms followed by "reflective conversations with the teachers on what was working, what formative assessments were used, and asking the students, 'What are you learning about today?'"

Overall, the West Kern Consortium has allocated resources so that its educators can receive job-embedded and ongoing math coaching opportunities to spur instructional improvement. Notably, consortium leaders remained attentive to teacher and district feedback on MQI coaching and ultimately incorporated alternative coaching or professional development approaches that ensured educators engaged in capacity-building experiences in ways that met their needs. The adjustments and adaptability displayed point to the commitment to continuous improvement in the West Kern Consortium and align with the ethos of community schools: gathering and acting upon stakeholder feedback. Further, due to the varied needs of teachers across districts, the array of coaching options offered required negotiation and cooperation across districts, embodying collaborative leadership practices.

The West Kern Consortium has allocated resources so that its educators can receive job-embedded and ongoing math coaching opportunities to spur instructional improvement.

While access to math coaching has remained a consistent focus within the West Kern Consortium, there is growing interest in hiring literacy coaches to support targeted improvements in literacy instruction. For instance, Semitropic obtained a grant for its district through the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative, which

allowed the district to secure coaching for early literacy for 2nd- and 3rd-grade teachers. Elk Hills, on the other hand, used funds from the California Community Schools Partnership Program to employ a full-time literacy specialist who supports students in developing their literacy skills. The literacy specialist explained that she spends most of her time using data:

> [We] make decisions about who will be receiving interventions and coordinating what intervention tool they receive. We make groups for kindergarten all the way through 8th grade and every grade level gets a 30-minute block … and then every 3 weeks we reassess that and we repeat the process, and we make new groups, and we use different tools depending on what skills the students need.

Thus far, the consortium has not invested in literacy coaches at the systems level, but it has supported districts in allocating their individual resources or securing independent grant funding to obtain literacy coaching at their sites.

Data-Driven Instructional Improvement Process

West Kern Consortium leaders did not only seek external supports to spur instructional improvement in their community schooling approach, but they also facilitated a data-driven improvement approach that consortium districts could use to improve teaching and learning in math and literacy. Michael Figueroa, the West Kern Consortium's lead consultant and comanager of the initiative, introduced consortium leaders and practitioners to the Data Wise Improvement Process (Data Wise)—a multistep model that guides teams of educators as they work together to improve teaching and learning through the collaborative use of data[30]—and played a central role in facilitating its ongoing implementation in consortium districts.

Data Wise begins with the identification of a problem of practice in a given content area, in which teams of educators collaborate in analyzing data and student artifacts to surface key areas for improvement across classrooms. With a focus on math and literacy education in its community schools model, West Kern Consortium districts were supported in engaging in the Data Wise process in these content areas. A description provided by a Lost Hills Union teacher provides a vivid example of how she and her colleagues worked collaboratively to identify a problem of practice related to student writing:

> We brought writing samples in during our PLC [professional learning community]. We did Notices and Wonders, and that's how we figured it out. And then even further, we noticed that when students engage in writing tasks, we are rarely as educators giving formative verbal feedback. … So that's why this year we were like, "OK, we are teaching them, but how do we give feedback? Do they know what they're doing? Do they know how they can improve?"

Conversations held in PLCs were mirrored at the full-staff meeting levels in elementary districts, as educators and staff sought to identify schoolwide problems of practice that could be the focus of their collective instructional improvement efforts.

Once a problem of practice is identified in the Data Wise process, educators and school leaders nominate instructional strategies to address the teaching and learning challenge and collaboratively determine which nominated approach will be the yearlong focus for instructional improvement and site-based

professional development. According to Figueroa, educators at consortium schools determined their focal strategies by assessing teacher-nominated approaches with an "Impact–Effort Matrix." The matrix allowed practitioners to place nominated strategies on a sliding grid to capture whether they were low- to high-effort and low- to high-impact, with the aim of identifying strategies with the potential highest impact with the smallest amount of effort.

Once instructional strategies for addressing problems of practice were identified, elementary districts engaged in ongoing professional development that focused on the implementation of these strategies and the progress made in addressing the focal problem of practice, per the Data Wise process. Dedicated professional development on the strategies occurred during full-staff meetings throughout the year, while opportunities for teacher collaboration—often in the form of PLCs that gathered teachers within grade spans (e.g., K–3, 3–5, 6–8), given the size of the rural consortium districts—allowed practitioners to analyze data and reflect on instruction.

Observations of classroom instruction are also central in the Data Wise process, and West Kern Consortium leaders have created opportunities for educators to receive individualized feedback on their teaching. For instance, consortium districts have instituted "check-ins," which allow teachers to opt in to having their instruction observed for short periods by consortium leaders and a rotating set of teachers. Teachers participating in check-ins indicate which of the school's focal strategies they are seeking feedback on in advance of the observation and share their preferences for receiving feedback.

Learning walks—in which consortium leaders, principals, and select educators observe classrooms to broadly gauge the implementation of a school's focal strategies across classrooms—are also important observations in the Data Wise approach. These learning walks, which occur 4–8 times per year, depending on the district, focus on observing math and literacy strategies and enable targeted discussions about the state of instructional improvement and possible next steps for capacity building.

While Data Wise is driven by ongoing collaboration among educators and leaders at district sites, Figueroa plays an important role in supporting districts and practitioners in engaging in this instructional improvement process. He facilitates reflective and collaborative deliberations associated with the Data Wise process in consortium schools and provides coaching to school leaders, facilitating the Data Wise process at their site. Lost Hills Union Principal Veronica Gregory explained:

> We consult with Figueroa Consulting. … He's one of the people that leads the charge on it. He helps us with our agenda and helps us get organized. He brings us back to like, "Are we meeting our problem of practice? Are we working on that?"—so, really looking at our mission and our vision, collaborating with other schools.

In addition, Figueroa actively participates in check-ins and learning walk observations at consortium schools, providing direct feedback to educators and leaders on instructional quality.

The West Kern Consortium introduced and helped facilitate the Data Wise approach, which enabled consortium districts to engage in a coherent suite of activities to improve math and literacy instruction—a central focus of its community schools initiative. In doing so, it introduced interactions and routines that not only drove professional development but also strengthened educators' ability to engage with

actionable data to improve their practice. Through this process, the consortium provided its districts with an important structure for spurring instructional improvement, with consortium leaders, particularly Figueroa, providing expertise and guidance in implementing the multifaceted approach.

This approach, coupled with investments in coaching opportunities, is a critical support that the consortium invested in to foster academic growth in its community schools. Importantly, these instructional supports were not single-dose professional development experiences; rather, they represented ongoing and coherent professional supports that allowed educators to continuously improve their pedagogical practices over time. The focus on instructional improvement across the consortium provides an important example of how community school resources can be deployed to amplify a range of priorities, including academic achievement.

These instructional supports were not single-dose professional development experiences; rather, they represented ongoing and coherent professional supports that allowed educators to continuously improve their pedagogical practices over time.

Hiring Dedicated Community School Personnel

While research highlights the assets and diversity of rural schools, it elevates a persistent obstacle that rural schools and districts face—staff capacity. With their small school size and, often, limited budgets, rural schools are constrained in the number of staff they can hire to support the multifaceted, day-to-day work in schools. Because of this, rural administrators and staff have often had to wear multiple hats in supporting school operations, leading to administrative burden and making it difficult to manage all their responsibilities.[31] Staff shortages and turnover in rural schools compound these challenges,[32] as officials work to recruit and retain staff and reestablish trust and relationships among new staff, students, and families.

Community school investments have enabled officials in the West Kern Consortium to expand their staff capacity, thus mitigating often-seen capacity-related challenges in rural settings. Specifically, consortium leaders have used resources to hire full-time community school coordinators and social workers, who play a central role in improving family and community engagement and access to social and mental health services—two of the initiative's key priorities. This section describes the roles and responsibilities of these critical actors and illustrates how their dedicated capacity has allowed community schools to build and maintain school–family relationships and improve service provision in rural settings.

Community School Coordinators

Community school coordinators (CSCs) are essential figures in community schools. Research demonstrates that CSCs provide dedicated capacity and leadership in advancing a community school's vision and goals. Central to this work is building bridges between schools, families, and community partners in order to cultivate and align resources to support student learning and well-being.[33] In fact, one study found that for every dollar invested in a CSC, it brings $7 to the school community.[34] CSCs in the West Kern Consortium carry these responsibilities, serving as key actors in deepening relationships with families and building a school responsive to their needs.

Each consortium district has a CSC on its campus—a position each district established when it joined the community schools collective. Lost Hills Union has two full-time coordinators. Taft Union High also maintains a unique approach to the CSC position, as coordinator duties are shared among a special programs clerk, a district official, and a teacher on special assignment who holds the formal CSC title and maintains both CSC and instructional responsibilities.

As community schools expanded and the federal grant sunsetted, consortium and district leaders have sustained these positions across the consortium by blending and braiding funding sources. Specifically, they have leveraged California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) grants and funds allocated to each district through the state's equity-based funding formula, which provides additional funding to local education agencies that serve high concentrations of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English learners, and youth living in foster care.

According to interviewees, consortium CSCs spearhead efforts to increase and improve family and community engagement—a stated priority of the West Kern Consortium community schools initiative. Niki Espinoza, the CSC at Maple, summarized this primary charge, explaining, "We serve our community and bridge that gap from community to school, parents to teachers, and parents to administrators. We

bridge that gap so that there's that steady form of communication and transparency." Angie Benavides, the CSC at Wasco Union High, characterized her role as a coordinator similarly, describing her priorities as "parent engagement, community engagement … being able to provide and connect them [families] with all the resources they need, saying, 'Here you go. [These are] the people you need to talk to' or 'This is the next step.'"

With this charge, CSCs engage in a range of formal and informal activities that enable them to build familiarity and connection with students and families. For instance, CSCs help build a "bridge of positivity"[35] on campus by maintaining a visible and welcoming presence during school arrival and dismissal and engaging with students and campus visitors while in the yard or common areas. Espinoza explained the importance of seizing these informal opportunities to build connections and rapport:

> I'm at the gate. I'm a smiling face. … Every school event, I'm there. I'll stand at a door, and I will greet every parent on campus by their first name. … Those parents know that I know every kid's name. I know the grade they're in. I know the sport they play, and I know what's happening. This is gospel. This is what I do. The relationship piece is the authentic realness, and that's the bridge.

Building authentic relationships like those described by Espinoza allows CSCs to remain attuned and responsive to family needs. For instance, in learning of acute housing challenges faced by families in their school communities, CSCs in Elk Hills and Taft Union High engaged officials from the county housing authority to explore long-term solutions to the area's affordable housing crisis. In these efforts, CSCs, along with the consortium's lead consultant, identified potential plots of land for residential development—a significant challenge given the prevalence of oil and privately owned land parcels in the region.

Other CSCs described their efforts to connect families with resources in response to more immediate issues, such as access to food or clothing. One Lost Hills Union CSC provided an illustrative example:

> I had a parent [whose child was] struggling with attendance. She would say, "Hey, my kid doesn't even want to get up for school. It's too cold."
>
> "OK, great. We got jackets. What else?"
>
> "Oh no, well, they don't want to get out of the car because they start crying."
>
> "Not a problem. Here's my number, call me. I'm here an hour before I need to clock in."
>
> Then we have other families that, as far as food commodities, we try to help them with that.

As CSCs engage in daily efforts to engage parents and connect them with needed supports, they also take the lead on coordinating formal community events in which students, families, teachers, and community members gather for activities. In consortium elementary schools, these events include bingo nights, color runs, picnics, and seasonal celebrations. CSCs in consortium high school districts also coordinate engagements, including parent learning opportunities and social events like paint nights. For these events, CSCs lead event planning, manage logistics, recruit volunteers, and, when possible, secure community sponsors and partnerships. They also spearhead publicity efforts, often leveraging social media and online apps (e.g., Thrillshare) to promote events.

Interviewees noted that these school events, which were typically held monthly or quarterly, depending on the school level, were leading to palpable changes in school culture and climate. Interviewees from both elementary and secondary consortium districts noted significant increases in attendance at CSC-crafted events. In speaking about Taft Union High's quarterly parent university workshops—a learning series coordinated by the school's CSCs and in partnership with Fresno State University—District Superintendent Jason Hodgson noted "a threefold increase in our parents attending the parent university." He pointed out that they "went from 1 or 2 [parents] each quarter to 18 to 20." Tiffany Touchstone, Elk Hills Superintendent and Principal, also pointed to significant increases in attendance at community events, elevating the school's winter program, which drew almost 500 people—a number she indicated was "double the size of the town that the school is in."

Beyond growing attendance at family and community events, interviewees described positive improvements in family relationships and engagement. For instance, Irma Mealy, a CSC at Lost Hills Union, noted that events were supporting greater family involvement. She said, "I feel like it helps them be more involved with their students and want to participate, want to be engaged in what the school and their child [are] doing. I've seen a change in that for the better." Others elevated how these engagements built relationships and trust with families. An Elk Hills teacher who frequently attended these events shared this assessment:

> It's creating a strong relationship between the parents and the school, them trusting the school and where their kids spend their whole day. … I feel like the communication is open, and then the parents are like, "OK, they're doing all this stuff for us and the kids."

Some went further and described how these events helped to build a sense of connection and identity that was not merely bound to the school building but encompassed their broader rural community. For instance, in reflecting on community participation and presence at school events, an Elk Hills parent shared, "I like the fact that it is more community-oriented because they have things for the community. … They make sure that our kids are a part of more than just a school."

CSCs in consortium districts play a central role in advancing the community school collaborative's aim of enhancing family and community engagement. Their efforts—both formal and informal—have enabled stronger and authentic relationship building with families, helping community schools to connect families and students with key resources and to cultivate a welcoming and responsive school culture. Their full-time presence on community school campuses has also enhanced school capacity in these rural districts and allowed for ongoing, critical work on family outreach and communication.

CSCs in consortium districts play a central role in advancing the community school collaborative's aim of enhancing family and community engagement.

Social Workers

West Kern Consortium leaders have also made significant investments in social workers to advance their community school priorities. The consortium began placing social workers in each of its districts in 2019, when the community schools collective received the federal School Climate Transformation Grant. As the initial 4-year grant sunsetted, these positions were sustained by blending and braiding funds

secured through the consortium's CCSPP grant and individual districts' state funding allocations. With these sustained investments, five of the six consortium districts have at least one full-time social worker on campus. Consortium high schools—Taft Union High and Wasco Union High—have two or three social workers each, reflecting the size of their districts, and Lost Hills Union hosts one full-time social worker and the initiative's lead social worker, who supports and supervises other consortium social workers while managing a small caseload.

A primary charge of consortium social workers is to better connect students and families to social and mental health resources—a stated priority of the West Kern Consortium's community schools initiative, which aims to overcome the challenges in resource access and service provision often experienced in rural communities. These services include greater access to basic resources as well as health and mental health services, among others.

Social workers themselves play a role in providing these services, as they lend individualized social and emotional support in the form of therapy to students within their caseload. Interviewees also described how social workers provided additional social and emotional interventions in more informal ways. An Elk Hills teacher explained:

> If I have a student that isn't necessarily in [the social worker's] caseload, but I see that that student is struggling for whatever reason, I can go to her and say, "Hey, this student is dealing with this." Or "I've noticed these things in this student. Any advice, or what would you recommend?" She's always so helpful, and very honest and open. And she'll even say, "If I have free time today, send them over."

Interviewed social workers similarly described impromptu opportunities to support students experiencing social, emotional, or behavioral challenges and went further to describe how they worked with teachers to develop incentive or behavior tracking in their classrooms as another form of support and intervention.[36]

While directly providing services, consortium social workers also manage the partnership with the consortium's only external community health agency—Clarvida—which offers additional support to students and families in each district as needed. A Taft Union High social worker explained the importance of this partnership:

> We collaborate closely with Clarvida. … That, to me, is a really important relationship to maintain because we can't provide ongoing mental health services to every student or even through the summer, so it's important to get students that need [those services] linked to that organization.

Because this partnership extends consortium district capacity to connect students and families to mental health services, maintaining communication with Clarvida personnel is a key responsibility for consortium social workers. Managing the referral process to Clarvida is also an important process that falls under their purview, ensuring that students and families receive the mental health support they need.

In addition to providing or connecting students and families with services, consortium social workers played a proactive role in enabling social and emotional development at their schools. Specifically, social workers at Elk Hills and Lost Hills Union both reported pushing into classrooms to lead or observe lessons

during dedicated social and emotional learning time, which allowed them to model instruction and to provide guidance to teachers implementing lessons. At the high school level, social workers reported establishing clubs dedicated to mental health wellness as a means to, as one social worker said, "provide students with information about mental health, remove the stigma, and also give students an opportunity to learn about different professions in the mental health arena."[37]

Like their community school coordinator colleagues, social workers in the West Kern Consortium engage in their own outreach to families to build positive connections with parents and guardians. To do this, social workers are often present at family and community events organized by CSCs, creating informal opportunities to engage with parents and guardians. However, they also implement discrete strategies to make themselves and their work visible to district families.

For instance, social workers design and lead informational parent workshops on health topics, including vaping, suicide prevention, and processing grief, to build family awareness of health and mental health issues. They also organize events to support family enrollment in Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program that promotes access to affordable and comprehensive health care among individuals from low-income backgrounds, and host open houses to introduce themselves to families and share information about the services available to them.

Consortium social workers also elevated the practice of home visits as a strategy for building personalized relationships with families. While social workers noted that home visits are conducted on a case-by-case basis depending on family circumstances, time constraints, and distance, they emphasized that these visits are important for building rapport and trust. One Taft Union High social worker explained the impact of home visits:

> [Home visits have] been really important for us, making the time to get in the car and go. … It sometimes takes a while, but then you build that rapport and you have that connection. Then when a parent needs something, they call you and you can be there with them.

Interviewees also noted how relationship building between social workers and families worked to mitigate negative perceptions of social work held by many families. A Taft Union High district official explained:

> It takes a lot to work with the parents and to spend that time where you have to build that relationship with the parents. Because when you say social workers, sometimes it has a negative feel to it. They feel like they're going to be in trouble or something, so we have to build that bridge so that we can actually help the students.

As the district official suggests, efforts to build positive connections between social workers and families were not only important for destigmatizing social work but also aided in ensuring that students and families were able to receive the supports and interventions they needed.

Collaboration Among Community School Personnel

CSCs and social workers maintained distinct primary responsibilities in advancing community school aims, yet this does not mean they worked in isolation. (See Other Community School Personnel for information on additional staff support.) In fact, most interviewees pointed to the ways that key community school personnel worked together in both informal and formal ways to support students and families in discussing their work and impact.

Other Community School Personnel

While investments in community school coordinators and social workers have played a central role in the West Kern Consortium's strong implementation of its community schools approach, consortium districts have also allocated resources to hire additional personnel who lend capacity in supporting student learning and well-being.

For instance, as part of a partnership with Kern County, all but one consortium district has a full-time AmeriCorps mentor at their site. AmeriCorps mentors provide academic tutoring, behavioral support, and other interventions as needed, helping consortium districts to make strides in their goals of improving math and literacy achievement and supporting students' holistic well-being.

Community school funds have also enabled the consortium's elementary districts to gain more consistent access to school psychologists, speech pathologists, and school nurses. These specialists—who are shared resources across elementary districts and who visit each campus a few days a month—provide students with increased access to social, emotional, and health services.

At the high school level, leaders at Taft Union High School District have used community school funds to invest in two full-time behavior interventionists, who lend capacity in providing targeted supports and interventions for students. District officials noted that interventionists play a particularly important role in combating chronic absence, as they facilitate daily outreach to absent students and conduct attendance-related home visits.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews. (2024).

Ongoing and Informal Collaboration

In many instances, collaboration among CSCs and social workers in consortium districts occurred in an organic and ongoing fashion. Lead social worker Leticia Limon, who also provides services at Lost Hills Union, described how she works with her CSC colleagues:

> I think we all kind of help each other. When they [coordinators] do their events, we help them set up, help supervise and man the event—whatever they need us to do, we'll help them. It's the same thing when we do food commodities [distribution]. They come, and they help because we're very small, so … we have all hands on deck.

The small size of schools in the rural consortium districts mentioned by Limon also helps to facilitate ongoing communication among coordinators, social workers, and even other community school personnel. To illustrate, Elk Hills CSC Cassandra McGowan described how daily interactions allowed social workers

and other school staff to become aware of student challenges that may require attention. She explained, "If a parent has talked to me about something, I let them [social workers] know. … Or if a teacher notices a student acting a certain way, I can let the school social worker or even the AmeriCorps mentor know." Espinoza, Maple's CSC, similarly described exchanges in which she informed the school psychologist—a staff member in her district with responsibilities similar to those of social workers in other consortium districts—of potential issues she observed during morning arrival:

> I'm at the gate, and I see a kid come in, and they're usually high level, "Hey, Ms. Espinoza. Like your hair today," or "Cool shoes." … The next day the same student gets out of the car, shuts the door, walks in, and there's no eye contact. I immediately, once we close the gate, I'll find [the psychologist], and I'll say, "Hey, I think you need to check in with so-and-so."

Formal collaboration structures in consortium schools, like the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) teams discussed in the next section, provided opportunities for social workers and CSCs to engage in ongoing discussions of observed challenges and to ensure necessary outreach and interventions were in place.

As interviewees from elementary consortium districts expressed positive assessments of collaboration among CSCs and social workers, their counterparts in larger high school districts described effective collaboration and communication as an area for improvement. For instance, a social worker at Taft Union High explained that sharing CSC roles and responsibilities among three individuals on the campus could, at times, pose challenges:

> Having the job split between three people provides an opportunity for miscommunication or maybe lack of communication and, at times, passing the buck. Like, "I don't have time for that at this time. Can you do this?" … I do feel like we've stepped into that role at certain times, and that really has been a bit of a challenge where we don't want to step on toes. We don't want to take responsibility from someone else.

While noting these dynamics, the Taft Union High social worker later attributed these challenges to the district's more recent adoption of the community schools model and expressed confidence in Taft Union High's ongoing commitment to refining its implementation: "I do feel like we're trying to figure it out and trying to go down that path of what does this look like."

Formal Collaboration

As ongoing and informal communication often enabled community school personnel to identify potential issues faced by students and families, CSCs and social workers in elementary and high school districts also formally collaborated with each other and with building leadership teams to support community school priorities. For instance, in elementary districts, CSCs and social workers were contributing members on varied site-based committees, including MTSS teams that supported improvements to students' learning conditions and the provision of responsive services and interventions. (See Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in Elementary Districts.)

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in Elementary Districts

The West Kern Consortium used investments it received through a 2019 federal School Climate Transformation Grant to develop and refine multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in consortium elementary districts. Seeking to improve behavioral outcomes and students' learning conditions under the terms of the 5-year grant, the consortium focused its efforts on enhancing behavioral and social and emotional learning (SEL) supports to provide universal (Tier I), supplemental (Tier II), and intensive (Tier III) interventions to support prosocial behavior and supportive behavior management.

Elementary districts first used investments to enhance the implementation of positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) and SEL as universal interventions, often leaning on incentive-based systems to proactively motivate positive behavior and student engagement among all students. District leaders later introduced and/or refined Tier II and Tier III supports, including small-group SEL instruction and access to key services (e.g., therapy, special education services, paraprofessional support) for students needing additional guidance and interventions.

Community school coordinators, social workers, and other community school personnel (e.g., school psychologists) have played a central role in the development and effective implementation of MTSS in elementary districts. For instance, through their active participation on MTSS teams and other related school committees (e.g., PBIS teams), community school personnel have monitored behavioral and school climate data to both assess the impact of Tier I supports and identify individual students who may require improved or additional interventions. When a student or group of students is identified as potentially needing additional support, community school personnel also relay critical updates to relevant school staff and connect with students and families to ensure necessary supports and interventions are identified and put in place.

Community school personnel in consortium elementary districts continue to leverage MTSS structures and processes to ensure effective and timely interventions are supporting students and families. MTSS remains the lens and structure through which they identify and effectively tackle emerging challenges, particularly the consortium's successful efforts to mitigate chronic absence.

Sources: Cartznes, S., & Tejwani, J. (2022). *West Kern Consortium: Annual evaluation report, 2021–2022*. WestEd; Germain, E., Hernández, L. E., Klevan, S., Levine, R., & Maier, A. (2024). *Reducing chronic absenteeism: Lessons from community schools*. Learning Policy Institute; Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews. (2024).

Social workers and CSCs also engaged in coordinated efforts to ensure that critical supports were in place for students and families, particularly in the face of acute challenges. The most notable example of their collaboration to tackle emerging challenges can be seen in their efforts to combat chronic absence—an area in which the consortium has made impressive gains. Specifically, CSCs and social workers—and in the case of Taft Union High, behavior interventionists—collaborated to lend essential capacity to the day-to-day efforts to support increased attendance.

Coordinators and interventionists at Taft Union High served as first responders to attendance challenges in consortium community schools. They monitored attendance daily, made phone calls, sent letters home, and, in some instances, conducted home visits to understand why students were missing school and to share helpful resources to families and students. While initial attendance-related outreach included

state-mandated communications, staff presented them in a personalized and supportive manner, often leaning on the positive rapport built between families and community school staff. Cassandra McGowan, Elk Hills Community School Coordinator, described how building positive connections with parents supported her efforts to address chronic absence: "The relationships I've built with parents who were really unavailable—who didn't call in the absences, didn't come to campus, didn't come to events—now they're here, and they're calling in. They're emailing or texting me." By being a consistent and supportive presence for families, McGowan suggested, she built familiarity and trust, allowing schools and families to work together to help students be in school.

At both elementary and secondary levels, social workers were enlisted to intervene in complex cases that required referrals for additional services, such as counseling, relief funds, or transportation. Information gathered from these efforts was shared with school principals and site-based support teams, including MTSS committees, so that progress could be effectively monitored and to determine if additional interventions needed to be in place.[38]

This example of intentional collaboration and communication among key community school personnel demonstrates how these rural community schools have been able to institute supportive strategies to combat chronic absence. These strategies work in conjunction with consortium district efforts to improve school climate through refined MTSS structures (see Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in Elementary Districts) and efforts to engage cross-sector partners in generating effective solutions. (See Creating a Supportive Infrastructure to Sustain Implementation.)

This intentional collaboration also serves as an example of the impact of consortium investments on enhancing student learning opportunities and well-being. In allocating resources to hire coordinators and social workers, consortium districts maintained dedicated capacity that allowed them to connect students to key supports—supports that enabled students to be present and engaged in classrooms. Prioritizing relationship building and engagement in their work also enhanced the ability of coordinators and social workers to respond effectively to rising challenges. Principal Veronica Sanchez-Gregory at Lost Hills Union expressed this sentiment when reflecting on the role of coordinators, social workers, and other community school personnel at her site:

> Because we're so small and our social worker, coordinators, and counselors are so engaged in our everyday work, I feel like it's such a benefit. If a student or parent has something that's going on or something that happened, they're able to open up so much quicker than if they're receiving outside services. … Here, now, it's instant. I could go over there and say, "OK, we have a problem. What do we need to do to address it?"

Her reflections suggest that the West Kern Consortium's investments in specialized community school personnel not only enabled schools to more quickly respond to emerging needs, but they also allowed for coordinators and social workers to become trusted members of the school community. These positive relationships paved the way for stronger service provision, as community school personnel served as trusted brokers who connected students and families to key services. In addition, this trust helped ease potential skepticism about external or nonlocal agents, who can be viewed as outsiders in close-knit rural communities.

Creating Capacity-Building Opportunities for Community School Personnel

Evidence demonstrates that employing community school coordinators (CSCs) and social workers has allowed for more dedicated capacity in supporting students and families in the West Kern Consortium rural districts. Yet consortium leaders recognized that merely having additional personnel in place was an insufficient strategy for ensuring that districts were able to maintain strong family and community engagement and increased service and resource access. Instead, consortium leaders established ongoing professional development opportunities that enabled CSCs and social workers to monitor and improve their practice.

In designing capacity-building structures for CSCs and social workers, consortium leaders sought to develop job-embedded opportunities that allow these staff members to grapple with opportunities and challenges in their daily work. Michael Figueroa, the initiative's lead consultant and comanager, explained the consortium's philosophy:

> The best development happens in the form of meeting about the work and doing the work. … At every level of the system, it's almost always a learn-by-doing approach. … It's all about internal team strategizing. Staff meetings are about reflection and about the work that we're doing and us training ourselves, as opposed to us depending on someone else coming in.

Consortium leaders turned this vision into action by instituting communities of practice for CSCs and social workers that enabled them to collectively address challenges and share best practices. In addition, they provided CSCs and social workers with individualized coaching and facilitated site visits that allowed them to learn from their counterparts in other settings. In doing so, the consortium established a system of professional learning opportunities—an essential feature of the supportive infrastructure needed to enable high-quality community school implementation[39]—that enabled ongoing, cross-district learning that would have likely been difficult for coordinators and social workers to pursue individually.

Cross-District Communities of Practice

For CSCs and social workers, the consortium's guiding vision for professional development most notably took the form of cross-district communities of practice, which convened virtually each month and enabled CSCs and social workers to engage in ongoing learning opportunities with their counterparts in other districts.

The coordinator community of practice, also known as the community school coordinator professional learning community (PLC), is facilitated by Lost Hills Union Assistant Superintendent Fidelina Saso—a key leader and grant manager of the community schools initiative. Saso described the intended purpose of this professional learning opportunity, explaining, "Our PLC is really to get them [coordinators] to see and to reflect on what they're doing [in their roles] and to use the data to drive what it is that they're doing." She also emphasized that the PLC is focused on using shared learning to help each individual improve

and build capacity as a coordinator. Saso further explained how the community of practice played an important role in onboarding those newer to the CSC role, noting that participation in the coordinator PLC helped them answer common questions like:

> How can I come in and play this role and be a key player in school attendance? How do I hold that work? How do I work with the principal? What is it that we are doing, and why are we doing all this work?

With these aims, agendas for the coordinator community of practice typically included time for coordinators to share progress on their work to advance community school priorities, to refine data collection and analyses approaches, and to seek input and guidance on emerging challenges. (See Community School Coordinators' Community of Practice in Action.)

Community School Coordinators' Community of Practice in Action

In January 2024, community school coordinators (CSCs) in the West Kern Consortium gathered via Zoom for the monthly meeting of their community of practice—a virtual forum aimed at supporting their professional development. The meeting began with an informal icebreaker, asking CSCs to share an emoji that captured how their day was going thus far, before turning to more substantive topics to guide learning and reflection.

One of these substantive agenda items was "Improving our community schools strategy"—a recurring topic for discussion that asks CSCs to engage with specific issues that pertain to family and community engagement and resource access. Today's topic centered on engaging families and communities in developing a district Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)—a California-mandated process that asks district leaders to engage local actors in identifying district priorities and allocating appropriate resources to support their advancement. The initiative's comanagers, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District (Lost Hills Union) Assistant Supervisor Fidelina Saso and lead consultant Michael Figueroa, who were both in attendance, shared a resource that included a range of practices for engaging community members and families in the LCAP process. After reviewing the engagement strategies, CSCs were charged with considering strategy implementation in their context as well as finding opportunities to use the LCAP process to continue informing local actors of community school priorities.

The remainder of the meeting was deemed "collaboration time with other coordinators," allowing CSCs the opportunity to pose questions or talk about successes and challenges they were facing. Semitropic Elementary School District's CSC posed the following question to the group, which became the center of discussion: "What types of conversation are coordinators having, if any, with the people who run the social media pages for the school?"

Some CSCs, in turn, shared the strategies emerging from discussions among attendance subcommittee members at the Children's Cabinet of West Kern meetings—convenings of an advisory board facilitated by the West Kern Consortium that gathered consortium districts and county and community partners to advise on community school implementation. Coordinators explained

how social media could serve as a forum to celebrate school and attendance achievements, to advertise school events, and to support information campaigns related to the importance of school attendance and mental health.

In addition to these suggestions, Maple Elementary School District CSC Niki Espinoza offered to share a flyer she had posted on social media that sought to support school attendance. Espinoza's colleagues posed subsequent questions as to how she effectively communicated the messages in the flyer to parents during one-on-one exchanges. Irma Mealy, one of Lost Hills Union's CSCs, recalled this exchange during an interview and explained its impact:

> We asked her questions on how she would approach parents that may not fully understand the importance of their students coming to school. … What questions did she ask? How did she go about talking to the parent and making them understand how important it is for their student to attend school? She gave us some great tips, and we ran with them.

Source: Virtual observation of a community school coordinator community of practice, January 17, 2024.

The social workers' community of practice is facilitated by the initiative's lead social worker and affords similar opportunities for dialogue and exchange related to social workers' daily work. Leticia Limon, the lead social worker who manages this community of practice, summarized its main aims: "We keep an eye on what's going on [and] what patterns are coming up, and work through problem-solving, strategy, getting strategies from each other."

According to interviewed social workers, their community of practice includes discussions of administrative tasks, such as learning to track health data on digital platforms and ensuring proper documentation to meet billing requirements, as well as progress made toward meeting the goals and milestones of the community schools initiative. Social workers also noted how the community of practice provided opportunities to speak through emerging challenges, including ethical concerns related to maintaining confidentiality and navigating resistance to efforts to increase Medi-Cal enrollment among district families.

Interviewed CSCs and social workers described how communities of practice sparked productive professional relationships and strategy exchanges. For instance, Cassandra McGowan, the CSC at Elk Hills, described how she and her counterpart at Semitropic remained in frequent communication outside of the monthly PLC convening, "bouncing ideas off of each other" when an opportunity or challenge emerged. Consortium social workers and CSCs newer to the initiative or in their role also described the impact of these communities of practice on their professional growth. A social worker at Taft Union High—the newest member district of the West Kern Consortium—explained how she has benefited from these professional exchanges:

> I do feel like that [community of practice] is beneficial because we get to communicate all the things that we're doing and share what's going on. We also share our struggles and any challenges and share information. That's really where we've gathered a lot of our information about the consortium and what other schools and community school coordinators look like.

Irma Mealy, Lost Hills Union CSC who was newer in her role, expressed a similar sentiment. Mealy noted how the coordinator PLC allowed her to learn from her seasoned counterparts, helping her to "get ideas of how we [Lost Hills Union] can better ourselves and how we can better anything that comes with our community." These sentiments not only highlight the value communities of practice offer but also point to a major benefit of the consortium model, which creates the structure for PLCs and pulls these otherwise isolated peers together across districts.

West Kern Consortium leaders have established and facilitated communities of practice that allow social workers and community school coordinators to collaborate in implementing and improving the execution of their roles and responsibilities. The cross-district composition of these learning forums is of particular importance since in small, rural settings, the social worker and community school coordinator would be isolated with little to no opportunity to build a community of practice. With cross-district learning opportunities, coordinators and social workers are able to collaborate with those in similar roles with comparable responsibilities to share best practices and to engage in collaborative problem-solving.

Individualized Coaching and Site Visits

While communities of practice are important capacity-building forums that support CSCs and social workers, these practitioners receive additional professional support in progressing and improving their day-to-day work. Among these supports are opportunities for individualized coaching, in which coordinators and social workers work with the initiative leaders to address their specific needs and questions. According to consortium leaders, individualized coaching is available when needed or requested and can be initiated by practitioners or consortium leaders.

Griselda Soto, the social worker at Elk Hills, described how she enlisted support from the consortium's lead consultant to develop strategies to increase attendance at family workshops on health-related topics. With insights from Figueroa, Soto generated the following range of ideas to bolster attendance and the spread of information about important health issues:

> I'm working on surveys right now to see what topics they [families] want, and we're looking into incentive[s]. … Then another option that we had thought about was me recording myself in the presentation, and then just putting it on our social media, and then creating a link of, "OK, name something that you learned, and then you're going to be thrown into a drawing." So that's an alternative that we also looked into.

McGowan, Soto's colleague at Elk Hills, also described how Figueroa was providing her with individualized support around addressing the housing crisis in the Elk Hills community. McGowan explained that she and Figueroa "were working with the housing authority of Kern County to try to get affordable housing built in Taft," often searching for available land parcels or other strategies that might provide longer-term solutions. In both these instances, community school personnel received individualized support to address discrete challenges in their settings.

In addition to individualized coaching, West Kern Consortium leaders facilitate site visits that allow community school personnel to engage in observation and dialogue with community school personnel in other communities or regions. Figueroa described the particular relevance of intra-consortium district site visits for community school coordinators new to the position:

> [We] send them to a school to be there and job shadow for a week, see the kinds of things that they do. Then they come back to their school and try and implement or learn from and continue that communication with that person that they built a relationship with that they job shadowed. Then, they just kind of take off in terms of their own communication with one another.

As Figueroa notes, localized site visits serve an important onboarding function for new coordinators, providing them with insights into the position's day-to-day responsibilities while supporting relationship building between counterparts.

While less frequent, site visits and exchanges with community school practitioners and leaders in other rural contexts supported professional development and innovative thinking among the consortium's community school coordinators. Specifically, consortium leaders and select community school personnel participated in a learning exchange with a consortium of rural community schools in Wayne County, NY. This learning exchange, which was born of the happenstance of having leaders from both rural initiatives on a conference panel, began with Wayne County officials visiting West Kern Consortium districts in December 2022. In October 2023, consortium leaders and community school coordinators made their own multiday site visit to Wayne County, which afforded them opportunities to observe classrooms and speak with their counterparts about their initiative and its implementation efforts.

Interviewed coordinators noted their takeaways from engaging with their counterparts in Wayne County. For instance, Angie Benavides, the CSC at Wasco Union High, shared how her learnings around Wayne County's community engagement efforts to bring farm-to-table food resources to community schools sparked her thinking: "We [Wasco Union High] have Future Farmers of America. We have a big school district that does a lot of this stuff, so I'm thinking about how to bring local farmers to the table." Elk Hills's McGowan, who also participated in the site visit, pointed to the food pantries maintained in Wayne County community schools as instructive for her development. She noted that conversations with Wayne County personnel about food pantry operations and sustainability were especially helpful in shaping her own efforts to launch a pantry in her district that would encourage students and families "to get whatever they need when they need it."

While distinct learnings and questions emerged from the Wayne County site visit, consortium leaders noted that ongoing communication between the rural consortiums continues to propel their thinking about school improvement in rural community schools. Saso described how ongoing conversations with Wayne County surfaced a focus on professional learning between the two consortiums in their ongoing collaboration:

> We're going to continue the discussion about how we prioritize academics and how we do that within the community schools model, so that's something that they want to learn more from us. We want to continue to learn from them how to engage the community partners effectively. Those are our next steps.

The West Kern Consortium instituted a range of professional learning experiences for its CSCs and social workers—personnel who were put in place with the initiative's financial resources and who played a critical role in advancing the consortium's community school aims. These capacity-building opportunities enabled individualized professional development as well as role-alike exchanges that allowed individuals to learn from and alongside their counterparts in other consortium districts or rural settings. Moreover, communities of practice and coaching provided job-embedded supports that were tied to coordinators' and social workers' daily work, allowing them to attend to real-time challenges and opportunities and to spur continuous improvement. Through these efforts, the West Kern Consortium supported CSCs and social workers in bolstering family and community engagement and resource provision, helping them to identify effective strategies and address emerging challenges in their settings.

Creating a Supportive Infrastructure to Sustain Implementation

As demonstrated, the West Kern Consortium has effectively allocated key resources and facilitated professional learning to advance its community school priorities. These efforts have had tangible impacts in individual consortium districts as instructional improvement processes and dedicated community school personnel have enabled districts to better support student learning and well-being.

Consortium leaders have also taken important steps to establish a systems-level infrastructure that provides its six rural districts with ongoing support for the implementation and sustainability of the community schools initiative. Its unique consortium configuration has required the West Kern Consortium to innovate beyond traditional administrative structures to support community schools and to institute structures and processes that acknowledge the unique realities of rural schools while empowering its varied districts and leaders to be drivers of change.

This section describes features of West Kern Consortium's supportive infrastructure, which have facilitated cross-district governance and attention to the initiative's ongoing improvement. It describes how the consortium developed a comanaged structure, bolstered by adaptive and collaborative leadership strategies, that has enabled efficient administration, ongoing collaboration, adaptability, and attention to sustainability. It also discusses how collaborative leadership and continuous improvement are further cultivated through the consortium's creation of a cross-sector advisory board that enables continuous improvement and collective problem-solving to ensure that community school aims are being advanced. It ends with a discussion of the consortium's sustainability efforts and the ways its leaders are seeking to maintain fiscal and initiative solvency in the years ahead.

Initiative Management and District Collaboration

Working with a collective of small, independent districts, consortium leaders recognized the need to build administrative capacity—a resource that is often strained in rural districts—to enable successful, high-quality implementation. To this end, the consortium established management structures that provided dedicated capacity to facilitate and support community school transformation across its diverse districts.

The initiative comanagement approach—in which Lost Hills Union Assistant Superintendent Fidelina Saso and the consortium's lead consultant, Michael Figueroa, spearheaded grant management and related initiative activities—was a primary structure for enabling effective administration and community school implementation. Reflecting on the creation of these roles following the receipt of the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant, Figueroa explained their importance: "When we got the grant, we discovered a lot of things related to capacity, and that small districts have a hard time facilitating these larger projects. … You have people wearing multiple hats, and essentially that's really difficult."

To address these commonly experienced administrative constraints, Saso and Figueroa provided dedicated support for the consortium, attending to both "the nuts and bolts and also the big picture," according to Figueroa. The comanagers played a significant role in supporting professional development

and in facilitating cross-sector engagement via the Children's Cabinet of West Kern. They also managed critical administrative tasks and worked to streamline processes related to grant reporting, data gathering, and resource allocation to enable efficiency, organization, and pragmatism.

While Saso and Figueroa provided critical leadership and management in the West Kern Consortium, they cultivated an approach to governance that was adaptive in nature and characterized by ongoing communication and collaboration with leaders in individual districts to ensure that community schooling was taking its most effective and responsive form at each site.

Standing meetings that convened the initiative's comanagers and all consortium districts' leaders were rare, limiting opportunities to discuss the initiative and areas for continuous improvement. Instead, Saso and Figueroa encouraged individualized outreach to district leaders that allowed for discussions of implementation successes and growth areas. This outreach often took the form of informal exchanges (e.g., texts, emails) between consortium district leaders and the consortium's comanagers, through which quick updates and requests were shared. More formal individualized district outreach occurred at least twice per year, eliciting insights into implementation and budgetary needs. Saso explained:

> We have conversations with the superintendents and with the leaders as to what they need, and some of the schools have a higher need in certain areas. Then, we [Figueroa and Saso] come back together, and we say, Taft really needs additional funding because they want to fund two interventionists. Then we come back in the budget, and we say, hey, where can we reallocate? Oh, we noticed that Semitropic used allocation for such and such thing. We'll talk to Semitropic [and say], hey, would you be OK if we move these funds over to help Taft? And we go from there.

Saso's comments suggest that these more formal check-ins with consortium districts facilitated reassessments of a district's specific priorities. Furthermore, they spurred efforts to reconsider budgetary reallocations across the consortium to ensure sites were getting what they needed. (See Variations in Community School Funding Allocations.)

Variations in Community School Funding Allocations

While the West Kern Consortium has received investments to advance five priorities through its community schools initiative, its leaders indicated that these funds can be allocated in variable ways to align with individual district priorities and needs. Lost Hills Union Elementary School District Assistant Superintendent Fidelina Saso, the initiative's grant comanager, explained how similar and differing funding allocations are determined for community school resources:

> Let's say we're going to allocate funding for community school coordinators. How many community school coordinators do we have to fund? Then, we divide it that way. If there's $80,000 for math support, then we take the $80,000, and we divide it among the school districts. For high school, it's a little bit trickier. … High schools don't always get the same amount that we [elementary districts] get, and sometimes they get higher amounts in certain

areas. One example is the social workers. Because of the need and because of the nature of their populations, we decided that they [high schools] needed more social workers for each district.

Alongside the differing allocations for social workers Saso described, consortium leaders pointed to preschool and expanding learning investments as additional examples. Specifically, Lost Hills Union—the sole consortium district with the stated aim of establishing an on-site preschool—was the only district in the consortium to receive dedicated community schools funding to establish its Early Learning Center. Similarly, Maple Elementary School District and Semitropic Elementary School District, which both hoped to enhance expanded learning opportunities as part of their community schools approach, received dedicated funding to establish after-school and summer programming with the support of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Kern County.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews. (2024).

Saso's comments also reflect a willingness on the part of consortium districts to engage in resource sharing—a familiar practice in small, rural districts, according to Figueroa. He explained:

> These districts that have had hard-to-fill positions … what they'll do is they'll share those positions, like a speech pathologist or school psychologist—positions that they need to have in their system, essentially, but they're not able to afford them on their own. So, they have a history of sharing already.

Consortium district leaders indeed had a history of collaboration and resource sharing—a history that predated the establishment of the consortium for its elementary district leaders, who informally collaborated as part of the "West Side Smalls." By virtue of their participation in the West Kern Consortium, the districts continued to engage in resource sharing as they shared funding and, at times, personnel (e.g., math coaches) to support student learning and well-being across their sites.

The districts continued to engage in resource sharing as they shared funding and, at times, personnel (e.g., math coaches) to support student learning and well-being across their sites.

While finite resources can evoke competitive tendencies, leaders in the West Kern Consortium described how their collaboration was driven by a shared sense of responsibility among consortium districts. Figueroa described how this orientation was particularly tangible among the consortium's founding three elementary districts: "Among them there's no ego. … They're just like, 'Hey, yeah, let's figure it out and work together. … I care just as much about your staff and students as I do my own.'" Julie Boesch, the former Superintendent of Maple, shared a similar sentiment when reflecting on her collaboration with the consortium's elementary leaders. She shared, "We were all people who were truly devoted to serving our students. And so there was no competitiveness, no comparison. … It was very much like, let's figure out how we can do more." While the consortium's expansion has required ongoing attention to building relationships—particularly among consortium leaders and high school districts—this sense of collective responsibility and common vision undergirds shared governance in the West Kern Consortium.

Leaders in the West Kern Consortium have instituted a range of shared governance processes that have facilitated effective and adaptive initiative management, ongoing communication, and resource sharing to enable their cross-district system of rural community schools to support student success and well-being. Consortium comanagers and district officials ground their collaboration in a shared vision and relational trust and collectively work to ensure the responsiveness of the community schools model. Rather than import technical solutions (e.g., more meetings) or prescribe one-size-fits-all approaches to enable community school implementation, consortium leaders empower and honor the perspectives of their colleagues and alter the strategies needed to meet the differentiated needs in their six districts to drive change. In doing so, consortium leaders have embraced adaptive leadership, an evidence-based orientation to leadership that embraces change and supports resilience and continuous improvement as school and district actors collaboratively solve problems and navigate complexity.[40]

Garnering Cross-Sector Input to Drive Continuous Improvement

As the consortium leaders used adaptative leadership strategies to support cross-district collaboration and initiative management, they also endeavored to use these approaches to engage cross-sector partners who could advise on the ongoing health and quality of the initiative. In 2018, consortium leaders established a shared governance forum—a children's cabinet—with that intention, creating a space that allowed consortium leaders and community school personnel to engage in collective problem-solving and strategic thinking with community partners.

The Children's Cabinet of West Kern (CCWK), started by the initiative's lead consultant and comanager Figueroa, brings together a variety of county-level departments, organizations, medical providers, and nonprofits with community school personnel and families, and, more recently, two youth leaders. Among the organizational partners represented on the cabinet are Community Action Partnership of Kern, Housing Authority of the County of Kern, Kern Community Foundation, Kern County Superintendent of Schools, Omni Family Health, and the United Way of Kern County.

The CCWK is modeled after Paul Reville's work with Harvard University's EdRedesign Lab and existing children's cabinets, most commonly found in urban areas. In cities, children's cabinets typically include the mayor, who helps lead the work and brings together cross-sector entities that share a common goal around youth well-being and success. Figueroa had a vision for developing this type of partnership in a rural context:

> We don't always have mayors, because most of our area is unincorporated in our rural area. … So, I went to the county supervisor while we were writing the grant and I said, "Hey, county supervisor. … We're trying to crosswalk this idea of a cabinet into a rural area and it's going to look different, and you're not a mayor necessarily but you can help pull things together." He agreed to get things going, and he called in department leaders from public health, human services, and behavioral health, and with those partners alongside some of the others that I was calling in, that's what started the cabinet.

To actualize this vision of creating a strong cross-sector network in rural West Kern County, consortium leaders created structures that supported regular communication and participation ease for CCWK participants. For instance, the CCWK holds quarterly hybrid meetings. Offering both in-person and virtual attendance has been a central part of why this cabinet has worked in rural West Kern County. Many of

the county representatives and community partners attending do not have time to drive the long distance to an in-person meeting and noted that their participation is only possible because they can join the meetings virtually.

Figueroa prepares a shared agenda in advance and assigns roles like notetaker and timekeeper to ensure the time is used well and all the goals for the session are met. CCWK agendas typically create opportunities for participants to share information, connect resources to needs in schools and communities, collectively problem-solve, and build relationships. The structure of the meetings supports continuous improvement, as meetings are typically organized around data-informed trends related to student and family well-being.

As a shared governance forum unbound by parliamentary rules or formal decision-making authority, the CCWK has served as a cross-sector "advisory board," according to West Kern Consortium leaders, helping the consortium to tackle key challenges that all consortium districts face. In fact, as the CCWK has matured, it has incorporated a subcommittee structure, which has allowed a subset of cabinet members and community school personnel to engage in collective problem-solving and root cause analysis around key challenges to identify promising solutions. As subcommittees generate insights into root causes and potential interventions, they share their findings with the full committee so that schools are better able to find resources and plan interventions that are appropriate for their communities.

One of the first challenges the cabinet spent considerable time on was how to increase access to, and frequency of, mental health services. Figueroa noted that it was evident early on that "nothing was streamlined or clear in terms of communication with the partner agencies, the way the county's mental health services support the schools, or whether or not we could even have people [providers in schools]." As a result, a behavioral health subcommittee was established and charged with developing a "robust Interconnected Systems Framework infrastructure in a rural context"[41] to improve service coordination and delivery.

The need for mental health services exceeded the capacity of the social workers placed at each consortium district campus. To address this gap, the behavioral health subcommittee initiated a pilot project that placed staff from Clarvida—a CCWK member and nonprofit that contracts with Kern County to provide children's mental health support—at schools between 1 and 3 days per week. The goal of the pilot was to increase capacity and encourage more families to respond to referrals and receive services. The pilot also intended to facilitate stronger communication and collaboration among community school personnel and partners at consortium sites. (See Partner Management in West Kern Consortium Districts.)

Partner Management in West Kern Consortium Districts

Many larger districts with community school initiatives have local education agency personnel who directly support community schools in facilitating and maintaining strategic partnerships. In the West Kern Consortium, partner management is approached quite differently, as it empowers those closest to the school community (e.g., social workers, community school coordinators, principals) to lead the charge in making more localized partnerships.

Because the schools are small and rural, many district partnerships are informal in nature, in terms of both how they are formed (e.g., through existing connections or word of mouth) and how they are managed (e.g., for most partnerships, there is no memorandum of understanding, or MOU, in place). The site-based, day-to-day partner management in each district tends to be either strategic or relationship-based. For example, social workers tend to manage the partnership with the mental health provider Clarvida, with whom they work closely, while community school coordinators or principals may manage partnerships they initially established or those with which they have the most regular contact.

While neither consortium leaders nor cabinet members hold the reins in securing and managing partnerships for its community schools, the Children's Cabinet of West Kern does provide a key venue to make partnerships happen more quickly. As coordinators and principals interact with and build relationships with various county offices and other nonprofit organizations, they are able to call on them when a need arises. Partners, too, are able to step up as they hear about issues schools and their families may be struggling with. One cabinet member representing the Community Action Partnership of Kern shared:

> I might be having a meeting with the Department of Public Health and say, "Hey, I was at a [Children's Cabinet of West Kern] meeting the other day about Lost Hills Union, and they're needing Medi-Cal enrollment support services. Is there any way you guys can go out there and help?"

As the consortium's cabinet structures have enabled collective problem-solving, they have, at times, provided opportunities to strengthen the organizational networks of these rural school communities and the connections they could call upon to secure key resources and services.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews. (2024).

As part of the pilot, Clarvida staff were encouraged to build relationships on campus, attend meetings, and better coordinate with the school social worker to ensure that referrals were not dropped and assessments remained on track. A social worker at Taft Union High shared the impact of this coordination and collaboration:

> I think they're [Clarvida] doing better in making sure that they follow up with clients, making sure that they're getting appointments made. And our communication definitely supports that, because we're holding them accountable and then checking up to make sure that our clients are there or our students get seen. Or, if they're not seen, then we can talk to the parents and see what the challenge is, what's going on, why they weren't able to make their appointment. If it's transportation, we can help with that. Or if it's scheduling times or just having a free moment to make that call.

These efforts were tracked through data collection, and the data were then analyzed to determine if the pilot to enhance connections between consortium districts and Clarvida had improved access to and use of mental health resources. According to Figueroa, the consortium saw improvement as "more students [were] getting more services and [fewer] things fell between the cracks." The West Kern Consortium continues to iterate on building coherent systems to support how mental health referrals are processed and ensuring that strategic partnerships result in students' socioemotional and mental health needs

being addressed. At the same time, the promising impact of the pilot—and the increased, on-site presence of mental health providers—remains a laudable feat that has been enabled by the initiative's consortium structure and its ability to advocate for stronger connections among the small, rural districts and the area's primary mental health provider.

In addition to its focus on increasing access to behavioral and mental health services, the CCWK has turned its attention to improving attendance. Rising absences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic elevated the need to tackle this issue from multiple angles, given the varied factors that contribute to a student missing school. Attendance is also a leading indicator for the longer-term outcomes these schools aim to improve on.[42] Figueroa realized that attendance was an issue that allowed the diverse set of partners to visualize how their role connected to the work:

> I think people saw themselves more in the work and could connect. Even if a conversation didn't directly pertain to their organization, they could provide feedback, thoughts, ideas, and that sort of thing. And we organized the meetings in such a way where they are able to do that—to talk about problems potentially that are not even related to what they do, which is interesting. It gives us different insights and different ways of thinking.

Centering the work on attendance proved to engage partners, as evidenced by one partner and sitting cabinet member's succinct summary of CCWK's goals and purpose:

> My understanding of the priorities, and what I've heard, is the priority is the student, number one, and to help eliminate the reduction of kids missing school. That could be a multitude of different subjects. It could be the lack of food, the lack of many health care services. So that was the main purpose: How do we reduce the number of kids missing school year-round? As we go through this project and we identify different needs, how do we tackle these challenges that many families are facing?

While the full CCWK allowed schools and partners to collaborate and make connections around specific student and family needs, the cabinet established a school attendance improvement subcommittee to enable more deliberate work around strategies to reduce chronic absence. In addition to combing through school data to assess patterns and needs, the subcommittee solicited parental and student perspectives in its collective problem-solving efforts. Parent representatives on the cabinet shared insights on attendance barriers and improvement opportunities. Students from Wasco Union High discussed barriers to attendance in a facilitated panel. The students shared stories about the stress of looking after sick caregivers, walking long distances to school, and not getting enough sleep—experiences that helped cabinet members brainstorm support. The cabinet has since appointed two high school students to the advisory board, thus expanding its approach to collaborative leadership by incorporating students and their important perspectives.

Once the subcommittee had a more nuanced understanding of the root causes of chronic absence, the members researched innovative solutions to increase attendance and improve ways to track attendance progress. Learnings and solutions were brought in front of the full cabinet, where the group discussed next steps, planned action items, and provided places for partners to step in, when necessary. Several tangible resources and strategies resulted from the subcommittee's work, including protocols to guide absence-related home visits, messaging campaigns to promote healthy sleep routines, development of

high-quality attendance teams, and practice in parsing data trends. These resources and strategies were, in turn, used by community school coordinators, social workers, and other school personnel to support site-based efforts to increase consistent student attendance.

The Children's Cabinet of West Kern is an innovative forum that has allowed consortium leaders to collectively solve pressing problems with the leadership and support of diverse experts. Despite it not being a formal decision-making body, it represents an important shared governance forum that embodies the principles of collaborative and adaptive leadership to enable effective rural community school implementation. In a geographical area where resources are spread out and it can be difficult to form relationships with different partners, the CCWK has also centralized access to key service providers and enabled the consortium's rural districts to hone their practices, interventions, and supports to improve implementation and outcomes. The concerted use of data and continuous improvement as a means for conducting the work of the cabinet also strengthens the capacity of community schools across the consortium. With this, it represents yet another critical feature of the consortium's systems-level infrastructure for supporting community school development and improvement.

The Children's Cabinet of West Kern is an innovative forum that has allowed consortium leaders to collectively solve pressing problems with the leadership and support of diverse experts.

Attending to Community Schools Sustainability

As the West Kern Consortium has built a system of high-quality and effective community schools, its leaders have maintained a close eye on the initiative's sustainability. In many ways, the structures and processes that the consortium has put in place to enable community schooling are primed to support long-term implementation in its rural setting. For instance, its facilitation of job-embedded professional development structures (e.g., Data Wise, communities of practice) creates ongoing opportunities to develop and maintain skillful practitioners and community school personnel. The consortium's processes for enabling cross-district and cross-sector collaboration (e.g., site visits, CCWK) also support long-term sustainability, as they establish systems for collective problem-solving and strategic thinking that can enable local actors to seize opportunities and to meet emerging challenges faced by consortium students and families. The localized character of these structures also ensures that those closest to consortium community schools—individuals who maintain a deep understanding of the realities that their rural communities face—are drivers in refining and sustaining the community schools strategy.

While positioned to support sustainability in these ways, consortium leaders have remained mindful of the fiscal resources required to maintain their community schools approach—particularly their investments in personnel who have lent essential capacity and made an impact in consortium districts. With this, they have made strategic decisions to support fiscal sustainability along the way. For example, consortium leaders pointed to their decision to designate the CSC position as classified and nonmanagerial. Figueroa explained:

> Traditionally a community school coordinator is more like a vice principal kind of level, and these districts don't have money to afford that. In fact, it would flip their [administrative] ratio. … It felt more realistic to fund that kind of role in a small school district setting than to fund a vice principal kind of level.

Figueroa explained that designating CSCs as classified personnel was not only a financially prudent choice that supported long-term sustainability but also a bureaucratic necessity since small, rural districts like those in the consortium are legally allowed to employ only a limited number of certificated administrators.

Like many officials leading other community school initiatives, West Kern Consortium leaders have leaned on the practice of braiding funding sources to build their initiative. This enables leaders to use two or more funding sources together to support initiatives and their respective programs and services,[43] which is critical to the initiative's sustainability.

To date, the West Kern Consortium and its districts have procured a range of funding sources to advance and maintain community school investments, totaling more than $21 million. Some funding sources, such as the 2018 federal Full-Service Community Schools grant and the 2021 CCSPP implementation grant, were awarded to Lost Hills Union—the designated grant administrative agency—which, in turn, allocated resources to individual districts for specialized community school personnel and programming. At the same time, individual consortium districts have obtained grants that support community school priorities. For instance, Lost Hills Union was awarded a California Preschool Development Grant to support its Early Learning Center, and both Elk Hills and Maple received a California Expanded Learning Opportunities Program grant to support after-school programming. The state grants secured by individual districts have not only helped to supplement and extend the consortium's fiscal resources, but they also represent an important sustainability strategy as individual districts seek and receive independent resources to maintain their community schools programming.

Consortium districts are also increasingly revising their Local Control and Accountability Plan—a locally and collaboratively developed plan that describes how districts will use state funding to advance their goals and priorities—to allocate state funds for community school investments as a sustainability strategy. According to consortium leaders, all districts except for Wasco Union High have initiated the process of codifying community school coordinators, social workers, or other specialized personnel into their Local Control and Accountability Plans—with Maple paying for all of its community school expenses with district funds. (See Maple's CCSPP Grant Eligibility Challenges for more information on why the district has increasingly assumed all community school–related expenses.)

Maple's CCSPP Grant Eligibility Challenges

Although the consortium as a whole has used shared and individual resources to implement its community schools initiative, eligibility requirements for the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) grant have inhibited Maple Elementary School District (Maple)—a founding consortium district—from leveraging CCSPP funds to sustain its model.

The CCSPP grant prioritizes funding for applicant schools that serve a student population in which 80% or more of the pupils are from low-income households, are English learners, or are living in foster care, along with several other competitive priorities. Although the West Kern Consortium collectively meets this threshold, Maple does not, with approximately 55% of its students falling into those categories in the data assessed for grant eligibility. While the state has since expanded its

CCSPP competitive priorities to include applicants in small and rural schools, funds from the CCSPP Cohort 1 implementation grant awarded to the consortium remain unavailable to Maple, making the financial sustainability of its community schools model a significant challenge.

However, district leaders in Maple recognized their district's thoughtful use of funding to build a high-quality community school despite the precarious circumstances, noting how they effectively leveraged resources from the expiring federal Full-Service Community Schools grant, general LCAP allocations, and California's Expanded Learning Opportunity Program. Former Maple Superintendent Julie Boesch also acknowledged how the West Kern Consortium and its comanagers remained committed to working with Maple despite its exclusion from the CCSPP grant funds. She explained that consortium leaders "have voluntarily agreed to continue to support the efforts with Maple as a partner." She shared, "We hope that the funding will come and then we can use other funding sources to continue the work as well."

Note: Student demographic data from 2018–19 was assessed to determine school eligibility for CCSPP funds for Cohort 1 implementation grants.
Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews. (2024).

Semitropic has also made significant strides in transitioning support for community school priorities from the consortium's soft grant money to its more stable state funding. Bethany Ferguson, Semitropic's Superintendent and Principal, explained these changes:

> We took over funding our community school coordinator and … added a full-time social worker into our LCAP [Local Control Accountability Plan] because we knew that it was something that was good. … Same with our math coaching. … The staff, as well as the parents, see all of the extra help that they're getting and know the value in that. So, adding some extra coaching from the county office through our LCAP has also justified that, "Hey, we need to continue doing this work. We can't just end it when the grant is gone."

As Ferguson describes how state allocations are supporting key community school personnel, she also suggests that her district community's desire to sustain the model and its impact was the key motivation.

While having individual districts assume more responsibilities in funding community school investments is seen as an important sustainability strategy, some consortium leaders expressed concerns about this approach as a universal solution. For instance, Saso noted that individual grant seeking by consortium districts could pose capacity issues, as rural districts maintain limited capacity to keep up with budgeting and reporting requirements. In addition, some officials held less favorable assessments of the viability of using state funding to support community school personnel and programming than their counterparts in other consortium districts. A district official at Taft Union High, the newest member of the consortium, explained that with relatively stable enrollment, "We are getting pretty much the same amount of money year after year. … So as all the costs increase, we're having to provide the same amount of services with the same amount of money."

The Taft Union High official also said that allocating funds for community school personnel through the LCAP would require taking money from another area—a point echoed by the consortium's lead consultant. Figueroa explained:

> One of the things that I've run up against with these very small districts is that we often hear the language of, "Well, then just have your LCAP sustain it." Or something that they continuously get or funding that is almost guaranteed. It's almost like a joke for the small district superintendents, because it's like, "What money? We couldn't even repurpose money if we wanted to because there's just not enough to go around to do the additional things that we need."

Taken collectively, these comments suggest that while the use of annual state funding is broadly seen as an important resource for community school sustainability, consortium and district leaders acknowledge the potential difficulties and limitations in relying on it as a sole funding source.

In acknowledging fiscal limitations and administrative constraints in individual grant seeking, consortium and district leaders noted that community school sustainability also required the consortium to remain a cross-district collective—not only for the benefits it afforded to students and families in its community schools, but also for its potential impact on the fiscal sustainability of the model. For instance, Lost Hills Union Assistant Superintendent Fidelina Saso described how the cross-district consortium structure enhanced rural districts' ability to pursue grant opportunities:

> Some grants depend on the number of students and people that we can serve. The more school districts, the bigger the population, the higher the opportunity you have to get some of those or be awarded some of those grants. … A small school district of 300 students is probably not going to get a federal community schools grant. So, coming together now is, it's not 300 students. Now it's over 800 students. So, we have more of an opportunity of actually being granted some of the grants that before, by ourselves, we wouldn't have that opportunity.

Jason Hodgson, Taft Union High's Superintendent, also described how the consortium structure enhanced grant competitiveness while noting additional ways that it extended individual district capacity. He noted, "Because it's a consortium model, there's more strength in an application and more opportunity. Also, if there are other federal and state grants available, the consortium has helped us stay abreast of opportunities for additional funding." Here, Hodgson notes how the consortium's small but dedicated administrative capacity has helped Taft Union High remain attuned to additional funding opportunities they can pursue to sustain their community schools approach.

Maintaining the consortium's dedicated administrative capacity was also raised as a critical sustainability matter. In the current configuration of the consortium, Figueroa and Saso are central to its ongoing viability. They are acutely aware, however, that codifying their work, bringing others on board, and building out a succession plan are essential for long-term sustainability. When asked, Figueroa stated, "I think if Fidelina and I both left, it'd be really challenging to continue." This has prompted them to begin the work of sustainability planning and documenting what the consortium has built. For example, Figueroa noted that one key task is outlining each of their roles and identifying the disposition and skills needed to do the work well. They also plan to capture the ways they support and develop coordinators and how the

subcommittees on the Children's Cabinet operate. The process of instantiating the infrastructure, policies, practices, and values of the West Kern Consortium is an ongoing one, but when complete, it will help ensure that the commitment to community schools continues far into the future.

West Kern Consortium leaders' focus on fiscal solvency and sustainability has led them to braid consortium-wide and district-level funding streams to maintain the initiative's financial health. As the initiative matures, consortium leaders are continuing this approach by helping rural districts allocate more stable funding for community school programs and staff, while also pursuing cross-district opportunities to supplement the limited resources available in rural communities.

West Kern Consortium leaders' focus on fiscal solvency and sustainability has led them to braid consortium-wide and district-level funding streams to maintain the initiative's financial health.

Lessons on Enabling High-Quality Community Schooling

Community schools represent a promising school improvement strategy in any community. With their undergirding whole child vision, high-quality community schools organize resources, personnel, and supports to mitigate in- and out-of-school barriers and seize opportunities to enable youth thriving. Moreover, they are inherently responsive to local settings as they institute practices and structures to meet the needs and nurture the assets of their unique communities.

Community schooling's sensitivity and adaptability to local contexts have made it a growing phenomenon in many rural communities. Enabled by federal and state community school investments, community schooling has allowed a growing number of rural districts to design school improvement efforts in ways that address the distinct and varying realities that youth and families face in their settings. This case report highlights one such reform effort, illustrating how the West Kern Consortium leveraged and pooled resources to create a cross-district system of high-quality community schools that are helping its students to succeed and thrive.

Findings

Findings from the study include the following:

- **Allocating Resources to Enable Achievement and Instructional Improvement.** West Kern Consortium leaders allocated resources to enable achievement and instructional improvement. Its investments to support stronger instruction—such as increased access to math coaches and the facilitation of a data-driven improvement process—were not single-dose professional development experiences; rather, they were ongoing and job-embedded supports that enabled educators to receive personalized feedback to refine their pedagogical practices over months, if not years. These investments also created coherent systems of professional development, which contributed to focused professional learning and substantive progress toward the consortium's priority of improving math and literacy achievement. In making high-quality instruction a central focus of their initiative, efforts by consortium leaders and districts illustrate how to effectively prioritize and integrate academic learning as a pillar of community school transformation.
- **Hiring Dedicated Community School Personnel.** West Kern Consortium leaders also hired dedicated community school personnel who worked to improve family and community engagement and access to social and mental health services. Placing full-time community school coordinators and social workers in consortium districts expanded the often-strained staff capacity of practitioners in small, rural districts and allowed the districts to advance the initiative's central aims while effectively addressing emerging challenges.
- **Creating Capacity-Building Opportunities for Community School Personnel.** Leaders not only placed full-time community school coordinators and social workers in consortium districts, but they also created capacity-building opportunities for community school personnel to support them in executing their distinct roles and responsibilities. Communities of practice and site visits provided coordinators and social workers an opportunity to collaborate with their counterparts at other sites—rare role-alike

exchanges in consortium districts that allowed these community school actors to learn from and with one another. Opportunities to receive individualized coaching from consortium leaders also enhanced coordinators' and social workers' capacity to implement effective strategies and to address emerging challenges. Taken collectively, these capacity-building opportunities coalesced into a coherent professional development system, providing critical systems-level support for high-quality community school implementation.

- **Creating a Supportive Infrastructure to Sustain Implementation.** In addition to its professional learning systems, consortium leaders created a supportive infrastructure to sustain implementation across their cross-district community schools system. They established a comanagement structure that provided dedicated leadership and efficient administration. Consortium officials also embraced adaptive and collaborative leadership strategies as they engaged with district leaders, helping to enable shared governance, continuous improvement, and attentiveness to districts' distinct needs. Collaborative leadership and continuous improvement were also furthered by the Children's Cabinet of West Kern, as cabinet convenings provided opportunities to engage cross-sector partners in collective problem-solving and strategic thinking. Each of these systems-level structures and processes was grounded in a shared vision and enabled by a sense of collective responsibility and relational trust to strive for student success and well-being.

Lessons

While West Kern is just one initiative advancing rural community schooling, these findings point to how community school investments can be used to build powerful learning environments in varied geographic regions. At the same time, this study provides specific lessons about systemic efforts to enable high-quality community schooling in rural settings. These lessons include the following:

- **Working Stronger Together.** When small, rural districts come together, they can amass and leverage resources that individual districts would likely not have attained if working independently. In the case of the West Kern Consortium, the cross-district collaborative was successful in increasing its competitiveness in grant competitions and procuring key resources—resources that they then pooled and shared to spur stronger family and community engagement, service provision, and instructional improvement. These previously unavailable resources provided critical capacity and helped to alleviate challenges in connecting students and families with resources—two common issues in rural schools.

- **Creating Systems for Efficient and Collaborative Management.** Shared resources are better accessed and utilized when there is an intentional system for initiative management and collaboration. In the consortium, this took the form of allocating resources to establish dedicated capacity for initiative comanagement. Comanagers provided much-needed administrative capacity in the absence of a preexisting centralized local education agency, thus providing the capacity often needed in rural settings. In addition, the comanagers facilitated a system of shared governance that foregrounded collaboration, communication, and a commitment to supporting students and families in each district. In doing so, they established a system of shared governance that exemplified the sense of collective responsibility held by consortium leaders.

- **Enabling Adaptability.** Processes that allow for adaptability in community school implementation acknowledge and address the diverse dynamics and needs in rural communities. Approaches used in West Kern embodied this orientation, as consortium leaders provided districts flexibility in using shared resources and, when needed, reallocated resources to support new or alternate interventions. The consortium's capacity-building approaches for educators and community school personnel also embraced individualization by creating opportunities for staff to have their unique professional needs met. Instituting structures and processes like these fostered responsiveness and adaptability, thus honoring an inherent principle in community schooling—that community schools be designed and supported in ways that meet the distinct needs in their settings.

- **Facilitating Connections Between Partners and Districts.** Facilitating opportunities for communication and connection among county and nonprofit officials, rural district leaders, and school personnel supports high-quality community school implementation. In West Kern, leaders facilitated these connections through its Children's Cabinet, enabling external partners and community school personnel to understand what services were needed and to ultimately enable improved service provision. Through engagement like this, county officials and nonprofit partners garner a better understanding of how their organizations can support rural districts, and community school personnel learn where and to whom they could turn to procure needed services, thus helping to bridge resource gaps.

- **Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement.** Structures that engage local actors in continuous improvement build a culture that drives high-quality community school implementation and sustainability in small, rural settings. West Kern instituted a range of localized structures that cultivated this culture. Its varied professional development structures were grounded in a commitment to continuous improvement, as they enabled staff to identify and address emerging problems of practice in an ongoing fashion. Its Children's Cabinet also empowered school personnel and varied community members to examine pressing issues and ultimately to identify innovative solutions. Structures like those in West Kern not only help spur improvement, but they also contribute to community school sustainability, as they build locally driven capacity.

- **Responding to the Conditions for Living and Working in Rural Settings.** Mitigating the day-to-day challenges associated with living and working in rural communities is an important consideration in rural community school implementation. Leaders in West Kern understood these obstacles and instituted structures that facilitated access to key resources, services, and supports. For school staff, leaders facilitated professional development that did not require participants to travel long distances, which may have inhibited consistent participation, and/or afforded educators the option of virtual or on-site coaching to meet their professional and personal preferences. Students and families, too, had travel and resource access burdens eased as full-time community school coordinators and social workers connected them with and, at times, directly delivered services. Instituting accommodations like these can ensure that teachers, students, and families receive the support they need in the way they need it.

- **Attending to Fiscal Sustainability in Small, Rural Districts.** The financial sustainability of community school initiatives in small, rural districts requires nimbleness and sensitivity to the fiscal realities these districts face. Leaders in the West Kern Consortium were consistently mindful of the limited

state funding that the consortium's small, rural districts were allocated and worked with its districts to identify and establish sustainable funding strategies. It also strategically instituted structures, like those that support professional development and continuous improvement, that were economical and adaptable to local needs. Leaders of community school initiatives in small, rural settings can maintain similar sensibilities as they aim to chart a stable financial path forward.

Appendix: Methodology

This single-case study was conducted as part of a multisite investigation of how local education agencies (LEAs) that received a California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP) grant leveraged resources to enable community school transformation in their settings. The purpose of the research was to examine how state investments enabled LEAs to implement systems and approaches that allowed for the development and sustainability of high-quality community schools. To this end, this overarching study sought to answer the following questions:

- What structures and processes are implemented and/or are redesigned by LEAs that received CCSPP grants to support community school implementation and sustainability?
  - What infrastructure (e.g., policy, personnel, partnerships, professional development), if any, do LEAs put in place to enable community school development?
  - How are funding streams deployed, blended, and/or braided to support community schools and their features?
- How are LEAs' community school transformation efforts enabling the development of high-quality community schools?
  - How have LEAs' efforts supported schools in implementing community school key practices (e.g., culture of belonging, safety, and care; powerful family and community engagement; rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction; integrated systems of support)?
- What, if any, emerging impact have community school transformation efforts had on students, families, and communities?
- What lessons can be garnered from community school transformation efforts? How can we apply these lessons to future efforts?

Researchers used purposive sampling to identify "information-rich cases"[44] that could generate insights into these research questions. Purposive sampling was driven by specific bounding criteria. The study focused on LEAs that received a CCSPP implementation grant, reflecting its interest in understanding how grant recipients used funds to systematically develop and sustain community schools. Investigators specifically identified LEAs that received grants in 2021–22 and 2022–23—the first 2 years of the grant program's implementation—to enable researchers to gather evidence of the sustained change process while also providing opportunities to document emerging systematic changes and impact.

To further bound the sample, researchers considered geography, as they sought to garner insights from LEAs developing and sustaining community schools in diverse geographic regions. Investigators also considered if LEAs were implementing community school initiatives that advanced the system and school-level practices aligned to the Essentials for Community Schools Transformation framework—a framework providing guidance on these features and functions of high-quality community schools.[45] This site selection criterion was included because it helped researchers identify LEAs that aimed to integrate a range of whole child practices in community schools rather than solely focus on the provision of services. Finally, given that community school transformation represents a critical equity strategy, the demographic composition and outcome data of LEAs were also taken under consideration so that researchers could investigate how students, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds, were supported under community school change efforts.

In considering these criteria, the West Kern Consortium emerged as an information-rich case and was thus selected as one of three initiatives for this investigation. The consortium received an early-round CCSPP grant, which it used to refine and improve the community schools initiative it established in 2017. Its long-standing initiative—coupled with its embrace of high-quality community school practices—allowed researchers to examine the LEA's sustained change process, its implementation of whole child–aligned practices, and the ways it enabled the impressive gains demonstrated by students in consortium districts. Furthermore, given how community school efforts in rural contexts are less understood by researchers and policymakers, investigating efforts by leaders and practitioners in the West Kern Consortium allowed researchers to elevate the systems and approaches advanced by this community schools collective in its rural setting.

Research Design

To answer the study's research questions, investigators conducted a nested case study, allowing them to generate a holistic and comparative understanding of consortium practices and their interplay with the local context.[46] This case study methodology also enabled researchers to analyze a variety of data sources, which allowed them to examine the LEA as it operated, rather than exerting control over the research sites.[47] Given that a case study allows researchers to remain sensitive to context and enables investigators to capture multiple processes and data sources, it is an appropriate research design to surface the complex ways that community school transformation efforts transpire in local settings.

This study's research design also supports holistic and nested case analyses, which can surface insights about the phenomenon and its distinct manifestations in varied contexts. Nested case analyses enable researchers to examine a broader phenomenon and its embedded subunits, which supports systematic comparisons of patterns within and across the study's sample to corroborate evidence and illuminate embedded case dynamics.[48] In this study, researchers consider the LEA the overarching case of a transformation effort, while community schools operating within its jurisdiction can be understood as its nested subunits.

With this design, this report illustrates how community school transformation has uniquely unfolded within the West Kern Consortium and draws its conclusions from the commonalities that emerged across the nested cases to identify lessons and takeaways for researchers, practitioners, and educational decision-makers.

Data Collection

Data for the West Kern Consortium case study were collected from November 2023 to June 2024. Primary data sources for this study include interviews, observations, and documents.

Interviews

The research team conducted 41 interviews with 33 stakeholders affiliated with the West Kern Consortium, including initiative leaders, district officials, principals, community school coordinators, licensed social workers, teachers, and parents. (See Table A1 for a complete list of the study's participants.) Interviews were conducted in multiple rounds. For the initial wave of interviews, investigators used purposive sampling to identify initiative and consortium district leaders who were asked to speak to the consortium's history, its evolving approaches, and the challenges and successes it has faced in developing and sustaining community schools. Interview prompts also asked participants to describe initiative priorities and the systems and structures used to facilitate cross-district collaboration and strong site-based implementation.

After these systems-level interviews (n = 7), researchers interviewed community school coordinators in all but one consortium district, seeking to understand their experiences and pivotal role in implementing the approach and their strategies to advance community school priorities. Interview prompts asked community school coordinators to describe their site's community schools model and their primary roles and responsibilities in its implementation. Coordinators also reflected on the ways they collaborated with families, school leaders, and educators and how consortium structures supported them in engaging in their daily work.

Upon completing interviews with community school coordinators, researchers used both purposive and snowball sampling to identify site-based personnel at three consortium districts—Elk Hills Elementary School District (Elk Hills), Lost Hills Union Elementary School District (Lost Hills Union), and Taft Union High School District (Taft Union High)—who were asked to describe community school implementation at their site and to reflect on the successes, challenges, and impact the model has had on the school community. When relevant, these interviewees, comprising principals, teachers, licensed social workers, and parents, among others, were also asked to reflect on how the LEA and its cross-district initiative had enabled them to engage in community school transformation work. Researchers identified these three districts for deeper study after considering their performance outcomes in conjunction with data gathered from systems-level interviews about robust site-based implementation at the elementary and secondary levels.

Interviews were semistructured and lasted 60–120 minutes. In most instances, study participants were interviewed once, but district and initiative leaders and several community school coordinators were interviewed multiple times to solicit additional information given their leadership in community school efforts. In two instances, two study participants were interviewed at the same time, per a request for convenience. Interviews were primarily conducted virtually via Zoom, but researchers did conduct nine in-person interviews with select participants during site visits (See Table A1). Each interview was audiorecorded, with permission from participants, and later transcribed to support data analysis.

Table A1. Study Interviewees

Role	Number interviewed	Districts represented
District and initiative leaders	5	Lost Hills Union (1), Maple (1), Taft Union High (2), lead consultant comanaging the initiative (1)
Superintendents/Principals	2	Elk Hills (1), Semitropic (1)
Principals	1	Lost Hills Union (1)
Community school coordinators	6	Elk Hills (1), Lost Hills Union (2), Maple (1), Taft Union High (1), Wasco Union High (1)
Social workers	4	Elk Hills (1), Lost Hills Union (1), Taft Union High (2)
Teachers	5	Elk Hills (3), Lost Hills Union (2)
Parents	5	Elk Hills (3), Lost Hills Union (2)
Community partner representatives	2	
Other site-based personnel	3	Elk Hills literacy specialist, dean of students, instructional aid
Total	33	

Note: While 33 individuals were interviewed in the West Kern case study, researchers conducted a total of 41 interviews.

Source: Learning Policy Institute interviews with individuals from Elk Hills Elementary School District, Lost Hills Union Elementary School District, Maple Elementary School District, Semitropic Elementary School District, Taft Union High School District, and Wasco Union High School District.

Observations

Researchers also conducted observations to support case study research. Observations included a 2.5-day site visit to the region in March 2024, which enabled researchers to observe day-to-day operations of community schools in the three focus districts in the West Kern Consortium: Elk Hills, Lost Hills Union, and Taft Union High.

Two-day site visits to Elk Hills and Lost Hills Union were the primary focus of these observations. In these elementary districts, researchers observed classroom instruction and on-site professional development opportunities, including "check-ins" instituted as part of the Data Wise improvement cycle at Lost Hills Union and a localized site visit of Maple Elementary School District practitioners to the Elk Hills campus to promote interdistrict learning. During site visits, investigators also shadowed community school coordinators to gain insights into their daily activities and the ways coordinators engaged with school actors to promote community schooling in everyday exchanges. At the secondary level, the research team

made a half-day site visit to Taft Union High, where they observed an after-school community engagement event that invited prospective students and families, school groups, and community partners to campus to showcase the school's offerings.

In addition to site visits, the research team observed approximately 13.5 hours of consortium-facilitated meetings and professional learning opportunities. These included virtual attendance at four Children's Cabinet of West Kern meetings during the 2023–24 school year and five convenings of the community of practice for community school coordinators.

Taken collectively, these observations provided insight into the implementation of community school approaches and the professional development and governance structures that enabled implementation and advanced community school aims. The observations allowed researchers to triangulate data obtained from interviews and relevant documentation. Raw field notes were taken during observations and converted into narrative field notes.

Documents

The research team collected and reviewed 75 organizational documents related to community school implementation in the West Kern Consortium, including:

- consortium and district documents, such as programming or school descriptions, memorandums of understanding, webpages, service inventories, and press reports;
- detailed meeting notes from previous convenings of the community school coordinators community of practice and Children's Cabinet of West Kern and its subcommittees; and
- evaluation reports produced by WestEd, the consortium's formal evaluation partner under the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant.

In addition to these documents, the research team accessed publicly available data on student demographics as well as student outcome measures. Investigators reviewed these data sources to better understand the consortium's history, its mission, and its evidence of success. Detailed meeting notes from governance and professional development opportunities also helped researchers triangulate data with regard to the implementation of structures to support high-quality community school implementation.

Analysis

Investigators used a multistep process to engage in qualitative analysis of the data collected in the West Kern Consortium case study. They began by creating a preliminary list of descriptive and deductive codes based on the ideas present in the semistructured interview protocols. Researchers then refined the code list after a review of select interview transcripts to include themes, structures, and practices reflected in the data. Through this process, researchers clarified, added, and deleted codes from the initial list to ensure key concepts were reflected in the codebook and to minimize perceived redundancies. They also revised code definitions to more clearly capture the dynamics, processes, and structures supporting community school implementation.

After refining the codebook, investigators engaged in activities to ensure interrater reliability in code application. Each member of the research team applied the codes to select interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. Once select data were individually analyzed, the research team convened to compare their code applications in order to refine the consistency of their analyses and findings. Once a strong measure of interrater reliability was achieved, the research team coded the study's data sources using Dedoose qualitative analysis software, a web-based application for qualitative analysis.

Once qualitative coding was completed, researchers analyzed code frequency and identified patterns within and across the case and its embedded units. Researchers identified something as a finding if the conclusion was triangulated and convergent. At the same time, researchers examined divergent findings to understand the complexity, nuances, and variations in community school implementation where relevant.

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