

Community Schools in Los Angeles Unified

Transforming Teaching and Learning



Sarah Klevan, Laura Hernández, Natalie Spitzer, Cassandra Rubinstein, and Walker Swain

Summary

The California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) funds local education agencies to develop and support networks of schools that integrate community school practices, guided by statewide technical assistance. This case study examines how the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Community Schools Initiative (CSI) created a robust support structure that centers inclusive, deeper learning while establishing school-level systems to sustain it. The CSI's supports focus on three priorities: (1) welcoming, inclusive environments enabled by restorative practices; (2) community-connected, project-based learning; and (3) in high schools, the integration of Linked Learning—career-focused pathways bridging high school and real-world experience—with community school strategies. This brief describes the CSI's instructional priorities, their adoption at the school level, and the district-level professional learning strategy that made this vision possible. The brief also reports evidence of substantial positive impacts of CCSPP community schools in LAUSD on achievement and attendance by 2023–24. While all low-income schools in LAUSD are recovering from pandemic-era lows, math and English language arts proficiency rates in community schools are improving faster and exceeding their prepandemic levels.

This brief is based on the forthcoming report with the same title.

Introduction

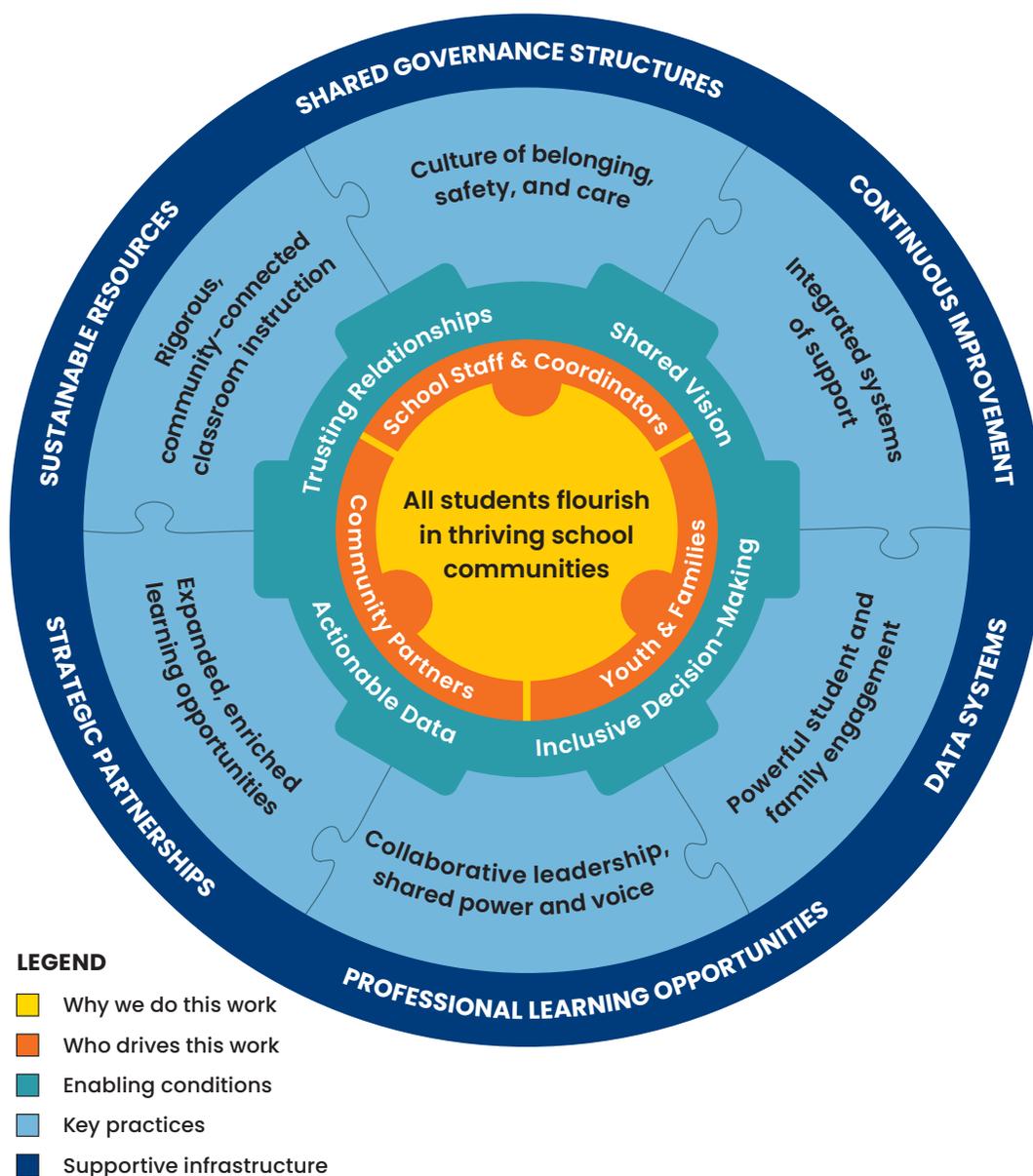
Everything you bring in has to be in service of improving academic outcomes for students. Community schools are about parent engagement, [integrated] services, and shared decision-making, but first and foremost they are about strong Tier 1 instruction.

– Community Schools Initiative Director, Los Angeles Unified School District

Support for community schools is growing nationwide as policymakers, researchers, and educators recognize their ability to improve a range of student outcomes. Community schools bring together educators, families, students, and community partners to create conditions that promote academic success and well-being. They coordinate in- and out-of-school supports and opportunities to foster whole child development—academic, social, and emotional. The effectiveness and sustainability of community schools, however, depend on system-level infrastructure that organizes resources and maintains coherent implementation.

Community schools are much more than service-delivery hubs: They represent a comprehensive approach to school transformation aimed at improving learning conditions and academic achievement. The **Essentials for Community School Transformation Framework** illustrates how community schools integrate whole child educational strategies across every aspect of school life (see [Figure 1](#)). Building on an earlier version of the framework, which had four pillars of community schools transformation (integrated student supports, expanded learning, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership), the updated framework adds two essential features of effective schools—a *culture of belonging, safety, and care* and *rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction*.

Figure 1. Essentials for Community School Transformation



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*.

This brief explores how the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Community Schools Initiative (CSI) centered inclusive, deeper learning opportunities within its community schools, developed the infrastructure to sustain them, and implemented this vision across its network. The brief also draws on evidence from two participating schools—Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary (Roybal-Allard) and the School of Business and Tourism (Business and Tourism)—to show how CSI priorities for inclusive, deeper learning were taken up at the school level. Both schools have seen improvements in attendance and achievement since joining LAUSD’s CSI. The brief also reports evidence of the California Community Schools Partnership Program’s (CCSPP’s) positive impacts on student outcomes in LAUSD community schools. Together, these findings offer insights for educational leaders seeking to strengthen instructional quality across networks of community schools.

LAUSD’s Community Schools Initiative

As the second-largest school district in the United States, LAUSD manages more than 1,300 schools and serves more than 500,000 students. LAUSD’s student population reflects the diverse demography of Southern California. As of the 2024–25 school year, approximately 74% of the student body identifies as Latino/a; 10.1% as White; 7.1% as Black; 5.1% as Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander; and 2% as multiracial. Roughly 20% of students are classified as English learners, with students speaking more than 150 languages other than English within their households. Throughout the district, 82.4% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

In 2017, LAUSD formally launched its CSI with a board resolution signaling a sustained commitment to expanding the community schools approach throughout the district. Local funding for community schools was established through a revised collective bargaining agreement with United Teachers Los Angeles in 2019, making LAUSD’s espoused commitment to community schools a concrete and actionable reform effort. While community schools are one initiative among many underway in LAUSD, they represent an important improvement strategy aiming to promote educational equity; eliminate opportunity gaps; and create racially just, relationship-centered schools.

The California Community Schools Partnership Program

In 2021—after Los Angeles Unified School District established its community schools initiative—California made a historic \$4.1 billion investment in community schools through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP). CCSPP is a competitive grant program that allows local educational agencies (LEAs) to apply for funds to launch, grow, and sustain community school initiatives, prioritizing awardees where at least 80% of their students are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, or youth in foster care, alongside other state priority areas. Because the grant designates LEAs, not individual schools, as the awardees, it encourages local officials to institute supports for a network of community schools—supports that create coherence, collaboration, and efficiency in resource access and professional learning. With this aim, 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 reach approximately 25% of all public schools in the state.

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

The CSI has grown steadily through local investment and state funding. LAUSD allocates annual funding to staff a community school coordinator and community representative at each community school. In 2022, LAUSD’s community school efforts received a substantial infusion of support from the state when the district was awarded a \$44 million grant to support 31 schools in the first cohort of the CCSPP implementation grants. (See [The California Community Schools Partnership Program](#).) To date, LAUSD has secured more than \$83 million in funding from the state through CCSPP and has built on this foundation to expand its initiative to 70 community schools. The district’s longer-standing initiative—coupled with its embrace of high-quality community school practices—allowed researchers to examine the LAUSD CSI’s sustained change process and its implementation of whole child-aligned practices.

LAUSD has built community schools with common roles, processes, and structures. At each school, a community school coordinator leads partnerships and family engagement, and a community representative supports community school implementation and connects families with resources. Led by the community school coordinator, all schools conduct an Assets and Needs Assessment in the first year—and regularly revisited thereafter—to gather input from students, staff, families, and community partners; set priorities; and cocreate action plans through Community School Implementation Teams. Additionally, community schools maintain school-based decision-making bodies (e.g., Local School Leadership Councils) that promote inclusion and shared leadership. While these core features are common, each school adapts practices to its own community’s needs.

This work is enabled by a system-level infrastructure. The CSI Department—housed in the LAUSD Division of Instruction—has grown from a single staff member to include regional community school coordinator coaches and instructional/grade-level specialists who advise site teams. In addition, United Teachers Los Angeles has added a lead coach and two parent organizers to strengthen family engagement. The CSI also provides robust professional learning, including annual institutes; ongoing professional learning communities; targeted coaching for community school coordinators; and districtwide professional development for educators, leaders, and out-of-classroom staff that focus on welcoming, inclusive climates and community-connected, project-based learning (PBL).

Inclusive, Deeper Learning Opportunities in LAUSD Community Schools

LAUSD’s CSI places classroom practice at the heart of its strategy for transforming schools. This brief details how the CSI built staff capacity around three instructional priorities: (1) welcoming, inclusive classrooms; (2) community-connected, project-based learning; and (3) integration of community schools and Linked Learning. As these were implemented, related practices and changes took place at the two study schools.

Welcoming and Inclusive Classrooms

A central focus of LAUSD’s CSI is cultivating welcoming, inclusive classrooms that promote safety, belonging, and positive relationships. To advance this vision, the CSI delivered extensive professional development to community school staff through three main training series—Joyful Disruption, Start With Hello, and The Art of De-Escalation—reaching more than 500 educators and staff across nearly every community school in the district.

Joyful Disruption, a multisession series developed by professors from Claremont Graduate College, engaged hundreds of educators across dozens of community schools in examining and disrupting inequitable structures in education through sessions that explored topics such as educator identity and positionality, physical classroom setup, parent engagement, and culturally responsive curriculum. **Start With Hello**, training provided by the Sandy Hook Promise Partnership, equipped school teams with strategies to strengthen peer connections and reduce social isolation. Complementing these, **The Art of De-Escalation**, delivered by LAUSD’s Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports/Restorative Practices Team, trained classified and out-of-classroom staff to prevent and manage conflict and maintain positive climates in shared spaces such as hallways and schoolyards. Collectively, these offerings aligned adult practice around sustaining welcoming, inclusive environments across classrooms and school settings.

Schools reported tangible shifts after CSI trainings. Spaces were redesigned to support student well-being (e.g., “Calm Corners” at Roybal-Allard and a “Zen Den” at Business and Tourism), and teachers expanded inclusive routines and classroom activities such as adding social and emotional check-ins, community circles, small-group stations, gender-affirming language, and projects tied to students’ lived experiences. Both schools also strengthened restorative practices, replacing punitive responses with connection building and de-escalation, contributing to more inclusive, emotionally responsive school climates. Business and Tourism trained staff and families in connection building and conflict de-escalation, while Roybal-Allard shifted from punitive consequences toward restorative approaches focused on reflection and relationship repair. Collectively, these changes point to more inclusive, restorative, and emotionally responsive school climates that [research](#) links to reduced stress, greater resilience, and stronger engagement in learning.

Community-Connected, Project-Based Learning

Community-connected PBL is a cornerstone of LAUSD’s CSI. CSI leaders describe PBL as a signature classroom practice—one that promotes student voice and engagement through real-world, interdisciplinary projects. To build school-level capacity, the CSI introduced a new PBL Champion role—a teacher-leader position funded by the CSI to coordinate professional learning, coach peers, and advocate for PBL resources. The initiative also expanded collaboration time for teachers by allowing schools to use funds for paid collaboration hours to support teams in developing interdisciplinary, community-connected projects.

Beyond site-level resources, the CSI has offered sustained professional learning through partnerships with Defined Learning and the Center for Powerful Public Schools. These partners provide sessions, coaching, and digital tools that help schools design interdisciplinary projects centered on student experience and local issues. Over 2 years, these trainings engaged roughly 200 educators, administrators, and community school coordinators from more than 20 community schools. The CSI guidance on PBL established a structure and expectation for implementing PBL while allowing schools to adapt it to their specific needs. Roybal-Allard began with a small PBL cohort before expanding schoolwide, whereas Business and Tourism, already experienced in PBL, was able to forgo introductory opportunities.

PBL has long been embedded in Business and Tourism’s Linked Learning pathways, described in the next section. At Roybal-Allard, a cohort of 5th-grade teachers trained through the partnerships began designing community-connected projects engaging students in hands-on learning tied to their school and neighborhood. For example, students revived the school garden—a green space in an otherwise blacktop yard—with murals of native plants and community landmarks; they cultivated raised beds, created hummingbird feeders, and built succulent planters from recycled bottles. Many plants and herbs came

from clippings students brought from home. The school plans for students to design an irrigation system and install a composting area in the garden. Teachers reported increased engagement, collaboration, and confidence in public speaking among students as a result of PBL approaches. The 5th-grade cohort now leads professional learning for their colleagues, gradually expanding PBL schoolwide through a teacher-led, scaffolded approach.

Integration of Linked Learning and Community School Approaches at the Secondary Level

The CSI is taking steps to integrate community school and Linked Learning approaches to strengthen students' academic, social-emotional, and career readiness outcomes. District leaders describe the strategies as “sibling approaches,” aligned in a shared commitment to meaningful, rigorous instruction; community engagement; and holistic student development.

At the district level, collaboration between the CSI and the Linked Learning/Career Technical Education departments has led to practical efforts to integrate the two approaches. For example, the CSI created a secondary specialist role to help schools assess their readiness for Linked Learning pathways, connect with industry partners, and access career exploration opportunities. The specialist also partners with the Linked Learning team and its instructional coaches to deliver overview sessions that introduce the Linked Learning approach and help community schools identify strengths that can anchor a certified pathway. In addition to secondary specialists, work-based learning coordinators, jointly funded by the Linked Learning Department and the CSI, now support industry partnerships and experiential learning opportunities for students in community schools. Additionally, district teams have produced alignment tools that outline pathways for schools to integrate the two approaches—whether they are currently a Linked Learning or a community school site. Streamlined application processes and joint onboarding sessions have made participation in both initiatives more feasible and cohesive.

At the school level, Business and Tourism illustrates how these district supports translate into practice. Informed by the school's Assets and Needs Assessment, the community school coordinator has tailored her role to support the integration of community school strategies with Linked Learning implementation. She supports teachers by organizing field trips and internships and maintaining community partnerships that enhance the school's Hospitality, Recreation, and Tourism pathway. In addition to the direct support she provides to teachers, the coordinator works with other school staff to oversee and coordinate Business and Tourism's Advisory Board, which comprises approximately 10 community members, alumni, and industry professionals who support the school's instructional program. Business and Tourism also receives support from a jointly funded work-based learning coordinator. This coordinator partners with the community school coordinator—who regularly consults teachers to identify desired field trips and partnerships—to embed real-world experiences into pathway instruction.

Impact of the CCSPP in LAUSD

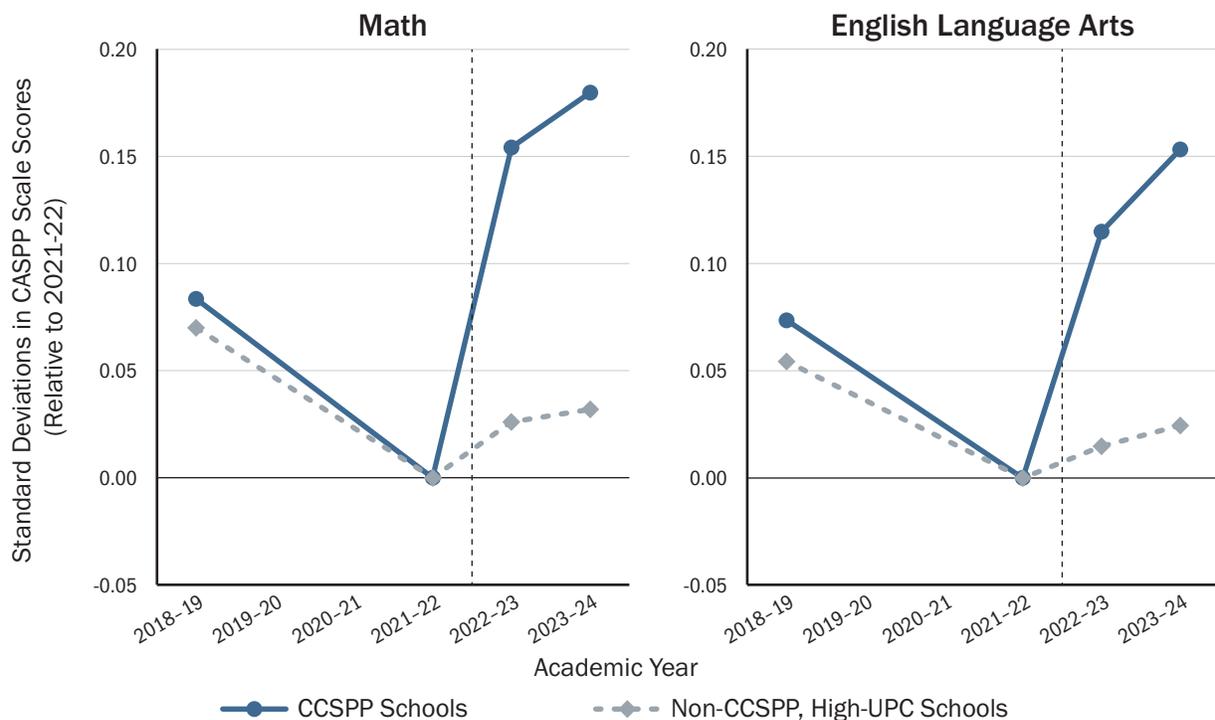
In addition to studying the district's strategies for supporting community schools, we studied the early outcomes of the schools receiving CCSPP investments. To assess the extent to which the CCSPP implementation grants helped support greater learning gains than would be expected in their absence, we compared the trajectories in student outcomes of the first cohort of CCSPP community schools to similar

non-CCSPP schools serving high-need students before and after receipt of the grants. We found that the first CCSPP cohort of community schools in LAUSD (31 schools total, all of which were CSI participants) made greater academic gains than comparable non-CCSPP schools within the district.

Figure 2 shows that the community schools and non-community schools had similar achievement trajectories, declining during the pandemic years before the grants were awarded in 2021–22. After the receipt of the CCSPP funds, achievement trajectories of the two groups of schools diverged in both math and English language arts (ELA). While both CCSPP and comparison schools improved from their pandemic lows, after controlling for a range of school characteristics, data show that students attending the first cohort of CCSPP schools in LAUSD improved at substantially greater rates than similarly low-income non-CCSPP schools following the arrival of state support.

CCSPP community schools also made substantial progress in addressing chronic absence and raising the proportions of students meeting or exceeding state proficiency standards—a different way of looking at student outcome growth. From 2021–22 to 2023–24, cohort 1 CCSPP community schools’ chronic absence rates dropped by 33%, math proficiency rates improved by 29%, and ELA proficiency rates rose 9%.

Figure 2. Student Achievement in CCSPP and Non-CCSPP Comparison Schools Before and After CCSPP Implementation Grants



Notes: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. CASPP = California Assessment of Student Performance. CASPP scale scores are standardized and modeled controlling for school characteristics and include school and year fixed effects. Standardized test scores in this figure reflect levels relative to 2021–22, the baseline year before implementation grants were distributed. The vertical line after 2021–22 indicates distribution of CCSPP funds. Due to limited in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2019–20 and 2020–21 are excluded.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2018–19 to 2023–24 data from the [California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files](#) and the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files](#). (2025).

While these absolute gains in regular attendance and proficiency rates are impressive, we also assessed the extent to which CCSPP recipients exceeded the gains made by similar schools. After controlling for any changes in school enrollments and demographics and trends using a fixed-effects regression model, data show that participating CCSPP schools reduced chronic absence by approximately 9% more ($p = 0.03$) than similar non-CCSPP schools. Community schools improved math proficiency rates by approximately 11% more ($p = 0.02$) than similarly low-income comparison schools in the 2 years following grant implementation. CCSPP schools also exhibited greater improvement in ELA proficiency rates than similar non-CCSPP schools, though ELA impacts were not statistically significant (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Impacts of CCSPP on Chronic Absence and Academic Proficiency Rates

Variables	Chronic absence	Math proficiency	ELA proficiency
CCSPP	-0.087*	0.108*	0.037
Standard error	(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.038)
R-squared	0.541	0.206	0.083
N of schools	803	780	798

Notes: * $p < 0.05$. CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. ELA = English language arts. Outcome variables are log-transformed. For ease of interpretation, coefficients represent approximate differences in percentage changes between the groups. All models include school fixed effects, year fixed effects, and controls for school characteristics. For test scores, grade fixed effects are also included. Analyses exclude schools with prior exposure to community school approaches.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2017–18 to 2023–24 data from the [California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files](#) and the [California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files](#). (2025).

These differential improvements in student outcomes are particularly noteworthy given that all comparison schools served student populations with nearly identical concentrations of students from low-income families (approximately 92%); faced similar pandemic-related challenges; and generally had access to similar state and district supports for mental health, expanded learning, transitional kindergarten, and other supports outside of the community schools program.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the CCSPP grants helped schools improve academically at a faster pace than what would have happened on their own, without CCSPP funding. These findings indicate that not only is the LAUSD CSI investing in teaching and learning practices in meaningful ways but that the district’s CCSPP-backed community schools are driving substantial positive academic improvements. Notably, while all high-need schools in LAUSD have made progress in recovering from pandemic-era achievement lows, CCSPP has led to substantial positive impacts on community schools’ math and ELA proficiency rates, exceeding their pre-pandemic levels by 2023–24.

Key Takeaways

Recognizing that integrating additional services and supports for families is not the end goal but rather an essential component of a broader transformation effort to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for students, the CSI has made inclusive, deeper learning approaches a central focus of its efforts. Its classroom vision focuses on: (1) welcoming, inclusive environments; (2) community-connected, project-based learning; and (3) integration of Linked Learning with community school strategies at the secondary level. Notably, through this wide-scale implementation, community schools in LAUSD have reduced chronic absences and driven even more substantial learning gains than similar non-community schools, exceeding prepandemic levels of student performance in both math and ELA.

To achieve these successes, LAUSD intentionally developed the infrastructure to implement this vision across its network and sustain these learning approaches across schools. Key takeaways about how LAUSD structured its supports across schools include the following:

- **The CSI provides extensive professional development and funding for teacher collaboration to support meaningful changes in classroom practice.** Professional learning opportunities included trainings on creating welcoming and inclusive school environments, drawing strong participation from community school educators across community schools in the district. The CSI also offered comprehensive training in PBL from several providers, created a coaching role in each school, and enabled collaboration time to support shared planning, allowing community school staff to deeply engage in new instructional approaches with robust support.
- **Engaging teachers and other staff from all the district's community schools in shared professional learning creates the potential for a coherent set of positive changes at scale in the CSI.** LAUSD's CSI effectively engaged educators from nearly every community school in the district in professional development opportunities. Additionally, LAUSD's Positive Behavior Interventions and Support/ Restorative Practices Team provided trainings on de-escalation strategies specifically for out-of-classroom staff, aiming to ensure consistent practices across all areas of community schools to support a welcoming, inclusive environment.
- **The unique placement of the CSI within the Division of Instruction enables alignment with other district instructional priorities, such as Linked Learning and Career Technical Education.** It also supports coordination across initiatives and departments, which has enabled the CSI to achieve coherence around core classroom practices and prioritize these practices as central to LAUSD's community schools approach.
- **The CSI created specific district- and site-level roles to offer targeted instructional support and resources aligned to the CSI priorities for PBL.** The CSI's secondary specialists and school-based PBL champions have offered targeted instructional support while strengthening alignment between the CSI's classroom and instructional priorities and school-level practice. The CSI secondary specialist plays a key role in coordinating instructional staff across the district to strengthen practice in secondary community schools. At the school level, PBL champions strengthen PBL efforts by advocating for teacher collaboration time, offering training and guidance, and securing resources to support PBL units and activities.

- **The CSI provides clear guidance and resources around classroom practice while recognizing each school's unique context.** For example, CSI guidance established a structure and expectation for implementing PBL while allowing schools to adapt it to their specific needs. The elementary school in this study began with a small PBL cohort before expanding schoolwide, whereas the secondary school, already experienced in PBL, was able to forgo introductory opportunities. Looking ahead, the CSI plans to offer more advanced PBL opportunities for schools with greater experience to provide continued support for meaningful instructional change while honoring school-level strengths and needs.

Conclusion

Support for community schools is growing nationwide as leaders recognize their potential to improve a wide range of student outcomes, yet the approach is often misunderstood as merely service delivery rather than a holistic strategy for school transformation. The updated [Essentials for Community Schools Framework](#) clarifies this broader vision by expanding the traditional “four pillars” to include a *culture of belonging, safety, and care* along with *rigorous, community-connected instruction*—underscoring that services and supports are not stand-alone goals but vital parts of a broad approach to strengthen learning environments and advance academic success.

This case study examines LAUSD’s CSI, where this vision has become especially evident in the CSI’s focus on inclusive, deeper learning approaches and the implementation of systems and processes to support their adoption across schools. Importantly, early student outcome data show that LAUSD’s first cohort of CCSPP-funded community schools outperformed comparable non-CCSPP schools, highlighting the value of centering inclusive, deeper learning practices within community school implementation. These findings highlight the value of the initiative’s emphasis on classroom practice and position it as an instructive example for other local education agencies seeking to improve instructional quality in community schools.

Acknowledgments

The report on which this brief is based benefited from review by Karen Hunter Quartz, Director of the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, and Stacey Campo, Senior Research Advisor at the National Center for Community Schools.

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

Suggested citation: Klevan, S., Hernández, L., Spitzer, N., Rubinstein, C., & Swain, W. (2026). *Community schools in Los Angeles Unified: Transforming teaching and learning*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-community-schools-los-angeles-unified-brief>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Document last revised March 24, 2026