



# **Social Justice Humanitas Academy**

## **A Community School Approach to Whole Child Education**

**Marisa Saunders, Lorea Martínez, Lisa Flook, and Laura E. Hernández**

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## Executive Summary

Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas)—a public high school located in Southern California’s San Fernando Valley—was designed and founded by teachers as a community school in 2011. Their vision, which they actualized with partners through the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Pilot School initiative, was to create a school that would “not only be a place of learning, but also a resource for the community.” To do so, they designed a school that would bring together community resources, incorporate collaborative structures, and support students on their pathways to postsecondary success and self-actualization.

Over its 10-year history, SJ Humanitas has supported the success of its distinct student population. SJ Humanitas serves 521 students, 96% of whom are Latino/a and 7% of whom are identified as English learners. Ninety-three percent of its students are identified as economically disadvantaged, which represents a larger percentage than the district average. Despite serving a more disadvantaged population, SJ Humanitas outperforms its counterparts in LAUSD on a number of measures. In 2018–19, 97% of SJ Humanitas students graduated from high school, compared to 82% in the district, and 95% of students completed the course sequence required for eligibility to California’s public university system, which nearly doubled the district rate. On the state’s Common Core–aligned state assessment, 72% of SJ Humanitas students met or exceeded standards for English language arts, compared to the district average of 53% of high school students. In addition, survey data suggest that SJ Humanitas students hold a range of important mindsets and habits, such as holding a growth mindset, feeling connected to school, and being socially aware and self-efficacious, at higher rates than their peers in other district schools.

Community schools, like SJ Humanitas, are increasingly elevated as an equity-driven, research-based approach that can address students’ holistic needs. Yet there is a common misperception that community schools primarily focus on the provision of external supports rather than influencing the character of teaching and learning to enable student success. That is, many perceive them as addressing factors that surround learning rather than influencing the very practices that characterize schooling environments and classrooms. This case study addresses this misconception, illustrating how SJ Humanitas implemented a range of whole child education practices to advance outcomes and support student well-being.

The structures and practices implemented at SJ Humanitas honor and nurture whole child development in ways that are supported by the science of learning and development (SoLD). A recent synthesis of that research points to the importance of four sets of principles that leaders and educators can use to promote whole child learning and development, which consist of:

1. **Supportive environments** that promote strong attachments and relationships; a sense of physical and psychological safety and belonging; and connections among educators, school staff, and families.
2. **Social and emotional development** to promote the skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and resilience, along with behavior supports that are educative and restorative.

3. **Productive instructional strategies** that support motivation and engagement, build on children’s prior knowledge and experiences, and develop students’ ability to learn how to learn.
4. **Systems of supports** that enable healthy development, meet student needs, and address learning barriers, including multi-tiered systems of support and expanded learning opportunities.

These four principles characterize the practices observed at SJ Humanitas.

## Fostering a Supportive Environment

SJ Humanitas creates a supportive school environment that lays the foundation for learning and holistic development and works to ensure that the school is a true community space. To achieve these aims, the school holds a deep commitment to relationships and has implemented structures and practices that enable staff to know students, families, and colleagues well. In addition to its small school design that creates opportunities for relationship building, other features of the school environment, including block scheduling, advisories, structured collaboration time, and other everyday routines like the school’s open-door policy, provide multiple opportunities for educators and youth to build the connections that create the conditions for learning.

The school also fosters a supportive environment by cultivating an identity-safe space, creating culturally relevant learning opportunities in which young people can explore and develop their multifaceted identities. Furthermore, SJ Humanitas engages families in meaningful ways by working to ensure their insights inform the school’s approach to supporting student learning and growth. This family engagement is strengthened by the school’s collaborative structures, which allow SJ Humanitas’s practitioners, students, and families to build and share their expertise to inform how the school advances student progress and well-being. Taken together, these practices cultivate a supportive environment where all individuals are valued and known and meaningfully incorporate the expertise of key stakeholders in distributed and democratic ways. In doing so, they set the stage for engaging students in rich learning and emotional development.

## Developing Social and Emotional Capacity

Practitioners at SJ Humanitas understand that social and emotional development is central to learning and well-being and, in turn, have made social and emotional learning (SEL) an area of focus at their community school. Social and emotional skills, mindsets, and habits are developed at SJ Humanitas in several overlapping and reinforcing ways. For example, students receive explicit SEL instruction, which supports them in developing competencies related to emotional awareness, self-efficacy, leadership, and resourcefulness. In addition, educators at SJ Humanitas integrate opportunities to develop students’ social and emotional capacity during content-related instruction, in which teachers reinforce and often model these skills in their teaching—a practice that can positively influence the learning climate and offer examples of how to navigate stress or build healthy relationships, among other skills. Restorative approaches at SJ Humanitas—those enacted with curiosity, care, and recognition of bias—are also helpful in building students’ social and emotional awareness and their ability to cope with challenges and repair harm.

The SEL-related approaches at SJ Humanitas are informed by the use of tools that help educators identify students' social and emotional assets and needs and better tailor their approaches. In addition, they are supported by attention to adult social and emotional capacity. SJ Humanitas understands the importance of helping teachers develop the social and emotional skills they need to teach and infuse SEL, implement restorative practices, and take care of their own needs. Practitioners indicated that their attention to adult wellness was an important aspect of SJ Humanitas's commitment to the self-actualization of all its community members and to establishing a learning environment where adults are active participants.

## **Implementing Student-Centered and Culturally Relevant Instruction**

To drive learning, educators at SJ Humanitas use a student-centered instructional approach and a culturally relevant curriculum that is centered around the school's principles of social justice and self-actualization. The school's shared instructional practices—use of interdisciplinary units, shared inquiry with a critical lens, culturally relevant content for identity exploration, and scaffolding and opportunities for individualized learning and growth—reflect best practices from SoLD and are integrated in a way that reflects the school's commitment to prepare students academically, socially, and emotionally. Furthermore, SJ Humanitas's culturally relevant learning strategies tap into students' funds of knowledge to drive their learning and enable them to learn more about their community and give back.

Teachers learn the school's shared pedagogical practices through a robust agenda for professional development that leverages staff expertise and exemplifies the value the school places on teacher leadership. According to Principal Jeff Austin, he looks to the community for ideas and sees himself as the “collector” of these ideas, with the responsibility of “find[ing] the collection of expertise within the staff.” In turn, professional learning opportunities, ranging from the annual staff retreat to weekly grade-level team meetings, serve as important spaces for teachers to collaborate and develop their interdisciplinary projects and to share their knowledge of students to identify appropriate supports to advance learning.

## **Instituting a System of Supports**

Using community-based practices, collaboration, and its organizational autonomies, SJ Humanitas aligns school and community resources to provide a system of support for its school community. This system aims to boost academic progress and well-being by providing relevant services, opportunities, and interventions that are responsive to the needs of individual learners. Notably, this system includes the school's multi-tiered system of support, which incorporates structures and practices from universal screenings, everyday practices such as restorative circles and small group instruction, and more intensive support such as the school's practices of “adopting” students to ensure they hold a deep one-to-one relationship with an educator and of full-inclusion classrooms for students with special needs. To increase the power of its multi-tiered system of supports, SJ Humanitas also provides expanded and enriched learning opportunities that take place after school or beyond the school campus. Often offered in partnership with community organizations, these learning experiences have been community based; that is, they have provided students with the opportunity to learn from additional adults who support students and enable them to develop trusting relationships that foster learning, development, and student well-being.

A system of integrated services, including services that address academic, social and emotional, health, mental health, and safety needs, is also in place at SJ Humanitas. While school staff noted some challenges in systemizing tracking and access to their integrated services, teachers and administrators indicated that partnerships have played a key role in extending the school's capacity. In fact, partnerships with community organizations have been fundamental to sustaining SJ Humanitas's approach to community schooling. They have not only helped the school provide integrated services and expanded learning opportunities; they have also expanded into the realm of professional learning, where practitioners collaborate with external partners to better understand and implement whole child education practices.

## **Reinforcing Whole Child Education in Community Schools**

As this case study shows, SJ Humanitas is a school that is committed to whole child education. It implements an array of practices and structures that allow this commitment to come to life, which has, in turn, had a measurable impact on students and their outcomes. Yet the school's ability to create a rich and supportive learning environment that enables student success was not only nurtured by its commitment to whole child education principles, but also by its vision and commitment to being a community school. SJ Humanitas incorporated characteristic community school features—or pillars—that attended to students' academic, social, and emotional development in student-centered and culturally relevant ways. Together, these features coalesced to build a learning environment that supports students' development and success and demonstrated the school's commitment to relationship building, collective responsibility, and the democratic principles.

This in-depth investigation into SJ Humanitas demonstrates that the school's community school pillars and SoLD-aligned principles are mutually reinforcing as they work together to build learning environments that support whole child development and academic success. This finding suggests that instead of being centrally focused on the provision of wraparound services, community schools may be institutions that are uniquely able to implement whole child education practices that propel learning and well-being.

## Introduction

“There’s no point in doing great work if you’re not a good person and you’re not treating those around you well and looking out for their welfare.”

—Gilberto Ochoa, SJ Humanitas alumnus

Currently working as a consultant within the public health field, Gilberto Ochoa learned this lesson while attending Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas), a teacher-led community school serving 9th- through 12th-grade students in Los Angeles. He described how this message deeply influenced his work ethic and his professional life: “I’ve taken that into everything that I’ve done as a professional.... That was my motivation.”

Gilberto’s drive to do great work and be a good person led him to study public health while at the University of California at Berkeley. According to Gilberto, the idea of being able to apply his learning and “shape the future health” of his community guided his decision to choose public health as his career path.

For Gilberto, experiences at SJ Humanitas were also instrumental in preparing him to get to and through college. Gilberto remembers his former principal, Mr. Navarro, calling attention to the uneven playing field in a way that helped him navigate college. Navarro described it as “going into a fight with our hands [tied] behind our backs” and noted that Gilberto would likely be sitting in classes where “the person next to you [has parents who] are physicians or professors.” Gilberto began to understand the systemic disadvantages and barriers that he would face and how he would have to diligently work to excel in a college environment. Although it was a tough message, Gilberto recalls that it was delivered with care. Gilberto remembers many ways in which SJ Humanitas staff embodied the stance of caring that is at the core of the school’s ethos.

Gilberto describes lessons at SJ Humanitas as directly contributing to “helping build empathy and connect with people at a deeper level.” Lessons exposed him to an existential perspective that encompassed history and the human experience, including suffering. Gilberto carries with him this recognition of a common, shared humanity. He says, “People are all battling their own things, their own struggles. I’ve taken that [sense of care] everywhere I go, and it’s really helped me be intuitive and be able to connect with people really well.”

Note: The student’s name has been changed.

Over the past several decades, researchers from a variety of fields, including neuroscience, early childhood education, psychology, and the learning sciences, have shown how a multitude of factors shape youth development and learning. These factors include in-school conditions, such as the absence or presence of relationship-centered practices, identity-safe environments, and student-centered learning opportunities. Out-of-school factors, including socioeconomic stability, access to health and social services, and experiences with racial discrimination, also have a significant impact on students’ well-being and learning.<sup>1</sup>

With growing understanding of the conditions that influence students' healthy development, researchers have also elevated the structures and practices that schools can integrate to support student growth and mediate adverse experiences.<sup>2</sup> In turn, many leaders and advocates have aimed to elevate schooling approaches that can address students' holistic needs and nurture their assets.

Community schools, like Gilberto's, are increasingly elevated as an equity-driven, research-based approach that can address students' social, emotional, and academic needs. By definition, community schools represent a place-based school improvement strategy in which "schools partner with community agencies and local government to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement."<sup>3</sup> At their foundation, community schools hold key commitments and values, including a deep commitment to community stakeholders and an acknowledgment of their assets and power to enable and support equitable schooling.

With these commitments, these institutions often have common pillars, or features, that characterize their schooling environments. These features include (1) integrated student supports that help address out-of-school barriers to learning; (2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities; (3) structures and routines for family and community engagement; and (4) collaborative leadership practices.<sup>4</sup> (See Appendix A.) Through their multifaceted approach to supporting student learning, community schools have been shown to generate positive student outcomes, including attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation rates, and to reduce racial and economic opportunity gaps.<sup>5</sup>

While many celebrate the community school approach and its impact, there remains a common perception that community schools primarily focus on the provision of external supports rather than influencing the character of teaching and learning as a means of enabling student success. That is, many perceive community schools as addressing structures and practices that surround learning rather than influencing the very practices that characterize schooling environments and classrooms. This case study sought to understand how one community school—Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas)—implemented a range of whole child education practices that further learning and well-being. SJ Humanitas has all the key features of a community school and has brought the concept of community into its approach to teaching and learning—organizing students and staff into small, supportive learning communities; making learning relevant by connecting it directly to the community; and helping students learn how to become contributing members of their community—in the classroom, the home, and the wider community. These practices, coupled with their focus on relationships and attention to students' social and emotional development, help illustrate how community schools can be vehicles for the development of rich and responsive learning environments that comprehensively support youth development.

## **What Is Whole Child Education?**

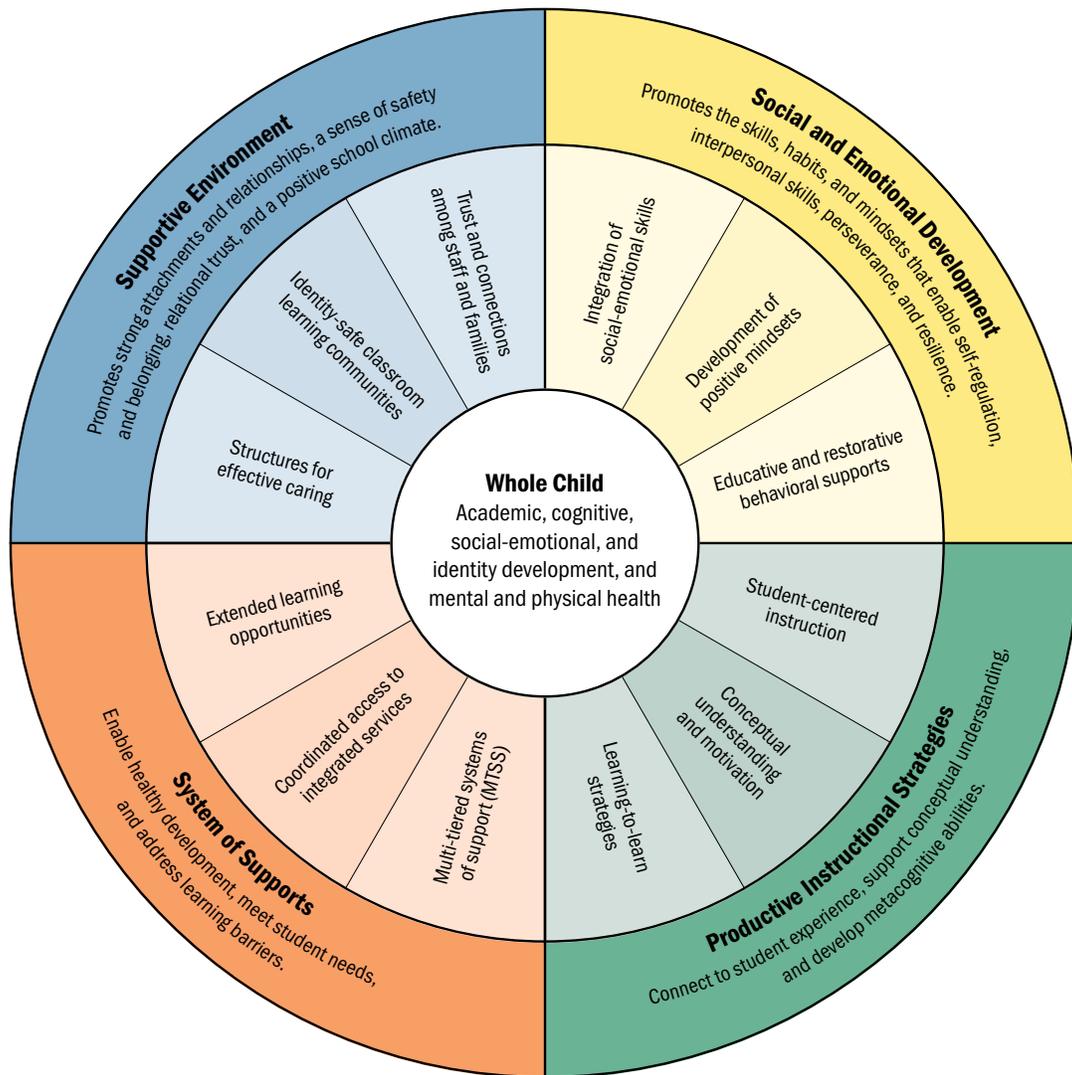
Advocates of whole child education strive to create learning environments that simultaneously attend to students' academic, cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and mental health development. The whole child education approach is grounded in the science of learning and development (SoLD), which has synthesized research from various fields to expand our understanding of how biological and environmental factors interact to drive learning.<sup>6</sup> Its findings underscore the complexity and dynamic nature of the learning process and point to the centrality of human relationships to healthy development; the inextricability of social, emotional, and cognitive development; and the

inherent variability of academic progress among all students.<sup>7</sup> The scientific findings that undergird whole child education advance an equity-oriented approach to schooling—one that addresses disparities and challenges in our education systems to better nurture young people’s potential.

In practice, SoLD promotes a set of four principles that leaders and educators can use to promote whole child learning and development.<sup>8</sup> (See Figure 1.) They consist of:

1. **Supportive environments** that promote strong attachments and relationships; a sense of physical and psychological safety and belonging; and connections among educators, school staff, and families.
2. **Social and emotional development** to promote the skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and resilience, along with behavior supports that are educative and restorative.
3. **Productive instructional strategies** that support motivation and engagement, build on children’s prior knowledge and experiences, and develop students’ ability to learn how to learn.
4. **Systems of supports** that enable healthy development, meet student needs, and address learning barriers, including multi-tiered systems of support and expanded learning opportunities.

**Figure 1**  
**A Framework for Whole Child Education**



Source: Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Learning Policy Institute.

As SoLD has shown how these principles for practice fuel student learning and success,<sup>9</sup> recent case studies have further illustrated their impact and revealed how schools that emphasize and integrate these approaches to whole child education support academic growth and well-being.<sup>10</sup>

While research tells us that schools that incorporate and integrate these principles can further learning, studies have rarely considered how community schools may be uniquely positioned to advance the multiple components of whole child education.<sup>11</sup> Community schools and whole child education are often proposed as educational solutions that can support schools in meeting students’ holistic needs. Though the relationship between the two approaches is reinforcing and congruent, they are often discussed as disparate reforms. This study explores their intersection.

## This Study

This case study investigated if and how community schools can be powerful models that embody whole child education practices to fuel rich and meaningful learning, particularly among marginalized youth and communities. To do this, it examined the practices and structures at SJ Humanitas, a public high school located in Southern California’s San Fernando Valley and part of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), to consider how the school supports student success and well-being.

Through an analysis of qualitative data sources, including documents, interviews, focus groups, and observations of classrooms and professional learning events (see Appendix B for a full description of the study’s methodology), we found that SJ Humanitas created a learning environment that is characterized by SoLD principles. Through its community school model, which emphasizes collaboration and shared leadership among educators, SJ Humanitas:

- built a supportive environment for students, educators, and families that enables them to know each other well, develop strong relationships, and share responsibility and expertise to enable student learning and wellness;
- implemented multiple and reinforcing opportunities for students and adults to develop their social and emotional skills;
- used interdisciplinary, culturally relevant, and student-centered pedagogy to immerse students in academic learning that developed critical thinking, connected to their lived experiences, and shed light on systems of power and inequity; and
- maintained supports that help mitigate the impact of adversity and other external factors, which included a multi-tiered system of support, access to integrated services, opportunities for expanded and enriched learning, and partnerships to support educator capacity.

Taken together, this case study illustrates the clear connections between community schooling and what we know about productive youth development. It demonstrates how community schools can be forums for the implementation and sustainability of whole child education practices that comprehensively attend to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs.

This report begins with a description of SJ Humanitas’s founding, mission, record of success, and teacher-led community school approach. It then explores how this community school implements an array of research-aligned practices that further the whole child education principles. We provide a rich description of the practices that align with each of the whole child education principles and, at times, draw attention to how school-based practices support multiple dimensions of student learning and development. Because of this, some SJ Humanitas structures and practices may appear under multiple sections of the report.

We then turn to a discussion of how SJ Humanitas’s whole child practices support, or are supported by, its community school pillars, paying particular attention to how the school’s distributed leadership approach underlies the staff’s ability to provide a high level of care to students while furthering their own professional learning and development. The report concludes with key lessons learned and information for practitioners and decision makers who hope to integrate and sustain whole child education principles and practices in their own settings.

## SJ Humanitas: Meeting the Needs of Students and Families

In 2009, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) adopted the Public School Choice (PSC) Resolution, which intended to provide new opportunities for families and communities to improve their local public schools. The resolution allowed applicant teams, including in-district teams of teachers and other nonprofit groups, to design innovative and rigorous schools that aimed to increase student achievement at existing sites and newly built schools.<sup>12</sup>

In 2010, a group of teachers from Sylmar High School in the San Fernando Valley came together to plan and propose a small autonomous high school through LAUSD's PSC process. The group of teachers viewed the PSC process as an opportunity to further develop the work they had begun together as a small learning community within Sylmar High School and more effectively direct community resources to their students and their families through a community school model.

Together with the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP),<sup>13</sup> the teachers proposed a school that built on the practices and partnerships they had established within their small learning community—one that would “not only be a place of learning, but also a resource for the community.” This statement in the proposal submitted to the Los Angeles Board of Education captured this aim:

Every learner has a fundamental right to understand what success feels like, and the fulfillment of this promise is dependent upon a high level of personalization and a wide range of tailored learning opportunities that allow all learners to master challenging A-G, standards-based curriculum.... Our students' success and understanding is achieved not by happenstance, but by design.

The Sylmar teachers won their bid, and in the fall of 2011, Social Justice Humanitas Academy, located on the campus of the Cesar E. Chavez Learning Academies, opened its doors.

### A Commitment to a Democratic Approach to Schooling

SJ Humanitas was designed by teachers and envisioned as a teacher-led community school—a student-centered learning environment where teachers serve as key decision makers, leaders, and learners. The school has been guided by its commitment to shared leadership, accountability, and decision-making to ensure those individuals who are closest to students make school and policy decisions.

SJ Humanitas was designed by teachers and envisioned as a teacher-led community school—a student-centered learning environment where teachers serve as key decision makers, leaders, and learners.

At SJ Humanitas, being teacher-led means that administrators do not direct teachers but join with them to develop a curriculum, instructional strategies, and interventions that align with the mission of the school and best meet the needs of all students. According to Principal Jeff Austin,

providing teachers with the autonomy to self-direct and to make decisions informed by their expertise and knowledge is empowering. Austin shared:

[It] is in my best interest to let people find the thing that drives them and support that.... Our teachers have become accustomed to having, if not equal, higher say in what goes on, because they know the power of their connection to our students.... They're the experts.

To support teacher leadership, a number of policies and democratic structures allow staff to develop and share their expertise, collaborate, participate in decision-making, and promote the growth and development of colleagues. SJ Humanitas was organized and approved as a Pilot School—an innovative reform model that advances democracy by emphasizing self-governance and leadership—and its teachers and other stakeholders regularly reflect on the school's vision and mission and use local autonomies to provide an education that best serves students and families. (For more information, see “LAUSD Pilot Schools and Their Features,” below.)

### **LAUSD Pilot Schools and Their Features**

SJ Humanitas is a designated Pilot School within LAUSD. By definition, Pilot Schools are autonomous schools that were established in 2007 when a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was ratified by LAUSD and United Teachers Los Angeles. The MOU approved the creation of 10 small schools within LAUSD's Local District 4 with autonomies over (1) budget; (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (3) governance; (4) school calendar; and (5) staffing.<sup>14</sup> Site-based autonomies across these five distinctive areas were meant to integrate with each other to impact the schools' ability to innovate, provide equitable services for their students and families, personalize learning, and improve student outcomes through a collaborative network of stakeholders.

To govern their autonomous sites, Pilot Schools have a school-based governance structure that allows a group of school stakeholders (which can consist of the principal, teachers, other school personnel, parents, community members, and students) to set and maintain the school's vision and goals, and make decisions about the school's budget, principal selection and evaluation, and programming, while ensuring that the school complies with federal and state legal requirements. This decision-making body, called a Governing School Council, also has the responsibility of establishing bylaws and school policies and approving the annual Elect-to-Work Agreement, which allows Pilot Schools to revisit their mission and vision and the teacher responsibilities required to fulfill shared goals. With greater discretion in site-based decision-making, Pilot Schools can address students' needs through unique school designs. Pilot Schools are also thought to encourage collegiality and foster agreement on school goals and vision among the participants.

As of July 2020, there were 44 Pilot Schools that served k–12 students from every local district in LAUSD. Most Pilot Schools were started from the ground up by teams of teachers. SJ Humanitas serves as an example of one of those schools.

SJ Humanitas's commitment to shared decision-making also means that the voices of students, families, and community members are heard. Within classrooms, teachers work to creatively engage students and to provide opportunities for them to direct their learning through approaches such as project-based learning. Youth forums like the school's Student Steering Committee provide every

student with the opportunity to take part in educational planning and decision-making by sharing their feelings and opinions about their learning and the learning environment on a biannual basis. Further, students, parents, and community members participate in governance structures like the Governing School Council. As members of the council, students, parents, and community representatives assist in shaping school policy and take part in staff hiring and budget decisions.

### Designed as a community hub

Since its opening, SJ Humanitas has also served as a community hub—bringing together the resources and strengths of all stakeholders to serve and support the whole community. Recognizing that both the assets and challenges facing the community penetrate the walls of the school, SJ Humanitas has forged strong partnerships with local agencies and organizations that aim to further strengthen and empower the community. According to one staff member, it is the capacity to both serve as a resource to the community and view the community as a resource that makes SJ Humanitas a community school:

Recognizing that both the assets and challenges facing the community penetrate the walls of the school, SJ Humanitas has forged strong partnerships with local agencies and organizations that aim to further strengthen and empower the community.

I think what makes us a community school is ... acknowledging that the things that happen outside of our doors will also happen inside of our doors.... We have a responsibility to interact with the world outside of the campus. Being not only a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but also looking to them as a resource because we know that the best knowledge and the best practices that will help a community solve its issues are probably also in the community.

In order to serve as a community resource, SJ Humanitas was founded by, and continues to forge strong partnerships with, local agencies and organizations that provide integrated student supports and learning opportunities for the community. The school's enduring partnership with LAEP, for example, was instrumental in nurturing connections between SJ Humanitas and the larger San Fernando Valley community. Even prior to the school's establishment, LAEP brought organizations throughout the region together and directed resources and services toward k–12 schools. Through the Valley Neighborhood Collaborative (see “The Los Angeles Education Partnership: Building a Foundation of Community Partnerships”), LAEP introduced the community school approach to the region and supported SJ Humanitas's proposal to open as a teacher-led community school. For SJ Humanitas, these regional collaborations shed light on the power of partnerships in better understanding community needs and assets and in developing joint strategies to further strengthen and improve the well-being of the community.

In 2018, SJ Humanitas joined the UCLA Consortium of Community Schools to share its experiences as an early adopter of the community schools approach in the Los Angeles region. As a participant in the Consortium, SJ Humanitas documents community school strategies that have been essential to its growth and progress, with a focus on the critical role of teachers in implementing the approach.

## The Los Angeles Education Partnership: Building a Foundation of Community Partnerships

Established in 1984, the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) is a nonprofit that works to foster strong schools in high-poverty communities by maximizing community and school assets, aligning basic-needs resources, coaching teachers and school leaders, and promoting college and career readiness.

In 1996, it led a formal collaborative funded by the state of California and several foundations under the Healthy Start Initiative, which included nonprofit partners and several local elementary schools. Over time, this collaborative expanded to specifically address issues of academic achievement, including low graduation rates across local high schools within the San Fernando Valley, and ultimately gave rise to the Valley Neighborhood Collaborative (VNC) in 2008. Spearheaded by LAEP, the VNC brought community and school providers together to develop strategies for improving student outcomes.

Supported by federal grant funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) Program and grants from a number of foundations, the VNC encouraged coordination of education, developmental, family, health, and other services. Funds were also used to develop a system to coordinate services, establish evaluation processes, and align academic and support services between target schools—San Fernando and Sylmar High Schools—and their feeder schools. A coordinator and administrative assistant at each high school were also paid through these funds.

Services focused on youth development, career preparation, and student engagement opportunities and involved partners such as the Educational Talent Search sponsored by College Summit; EduCare Foundation; Youth Policy Institute; and California State University, Northridge. Partners such as El Nido Family Centers, Friends of the Family, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Narconon, and Total Family Support aimed to meet the needs of families in the community.<sup>15</sup> Many of these organizations joined forces with SJ Humanitas (originally a small learning community at Sylmar High School) when it proposed to become its own autonomous school and to support its community school approach.

Through its collaboration with LAEP and as a member of the VNC, SJ Humanitas established a commitment to partnerships and a community-driven response to meet the needs of students and families. FSCS grant funding expired in 2013.

SJ Humanitas also leverages its partnership with EduCare Foundation to support the delivery of its academic program and a variety of community-based services. Like LAEP, EduCare—a nonprofit established in 1990—has a long history of working in the San Fernando Valley and has been providing a range of academic supports and resources, including tutoring, in-school and after-school programming, summer bridge programs, professional development, and a variety of enrichment opportunities to students across the region for over a decade. EduCare's relationship with SJ Humanitas has deepened over time, and today a full-time EduCare coordinator—supported by SJ Humanitas and by EduCare through external grants—works at the site and assists in organizing the delivery of services, such as health and mental health services and college access support, and oversees an initiative focused on social and emotional development.

SJ Humanitas also works to connect students to community organizations to engender greater community connections, feelings of belonging, and support. Teachers develop partnerships with organizations that enrich their curriculum and encourage students to address issues in their community. For example, SJ Humanitas teachers have partnered with Action Civics LA, a nonprofit youth leadership organization that supports students' involvement with their communities and participation in the democratic process. Students are challenged to create a plan to better their community and are invited to present their projects at City Hall. Past projects have addressed gun violence, homelessness, and immigration policies—issues that impact their community. Through the Mikva Challenge—a national effort to develop empowered, informed, and active citizens by engaging young people in an action civics curriculum—students develop relationships with leaders in the community and participate in civic processes alongside teachers and other adults. A relationship with the Skirball Cultural Center, a cultural institution in Los Angeles devoted to sustaining Jewish heritage and American democratic ideals, also enables students to express themselves through art and to explore the personal experiences and social issues that influence their community.

These partnerships highlight SJ Humanitas's commitment to serve as a social, educational, and enrichment hub by tapping into and building a shared sense of social responsibility across the region to assist the school in meeting the needs of the whole child.

## **Undergirding Philosophy**

Through its community school model, SJ Humanitas's mission is “to achieve social justice through the development of the complete individual. In doing so, we increase our students' social capital and their humanity while creating a school worthy of our own children.”<sup>16</sup> As reflected in its name and mission statement, social justice is deeply embedded in the fabric of the school. Principal Austin describes the dual aims of the school's philosophy of social justice and self-actualization:

We're looking to give our students an education through a social justice lens—as a way to achieve equity—so students learn how to put that perspective on whatever they're doing. The other side of it is the idea about self-actualization—to work on building both your academic self and your emotional self. Our philosophy is to give you a place to increase your mind's capacity and your heart's capacity. Even though those two things do overlap quite a bit, we're not here to push academics at the expense of your well-being.

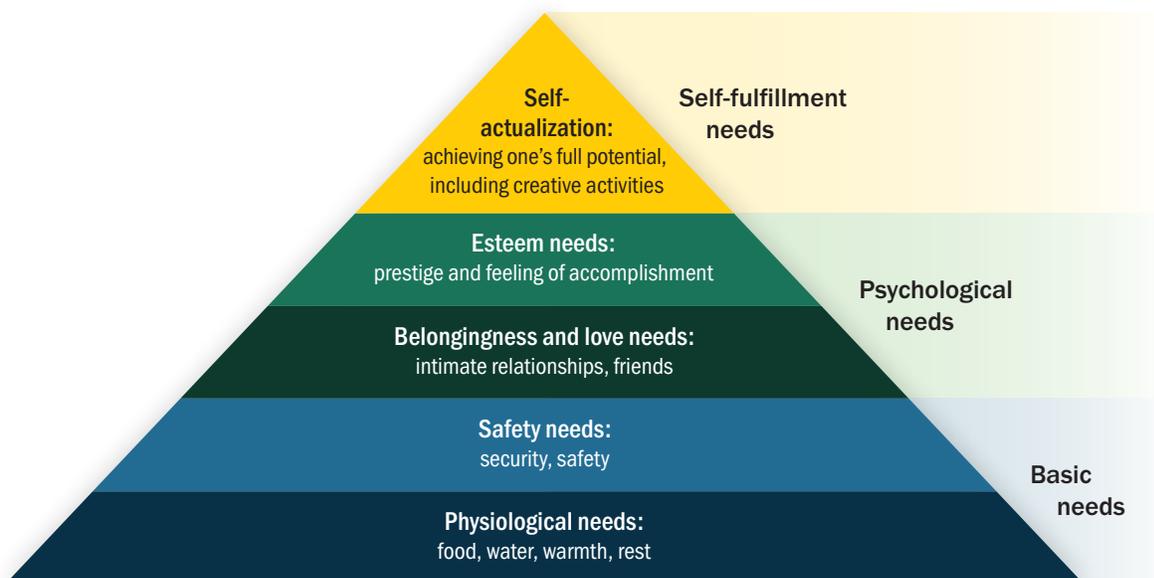
Austin suggests that education at SJ Humanitas can serve as an individual tool for personal growth, as well as a strategy to advance equity at a broader societal level. SJ Humanitas upholds these values by helping students become the best version of themselves and by preparing them for success beyond high school through college preparation.

## **Self-actualization**

At SJ Humanitas, it is not enough to be a good student who succeeds academically—you must also strive to be a good person. SJ Humanitas educators emphasize the idea of self-actualization, or becoming the best version of themselves. This core value is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure 2), which administrators, educators, and students frequently reference. According to math teacher Eugenia Plascencia, “In 9th grade, kids are introduced to the Maslow hierarchy, and it comes back up every year.”

Basic physiological needs are at the bottom of the pyramid, followed by safety, social, and esteem needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs recognizes that when students' physiological, security, belonging, and esteem needs are met, learning is maximized and students are at their full potential for self-actualization.<sup>17</sup> The more levels of needs that are met on the hierarchy, the more equipped and motivated students will be to take on the challenges of learning.

**Figure 2**  
**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**



Source: Adapted from McLeod, S. (2020). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. *Simply Psychology*, 1, 1–8. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

SJ Humanitas educators view student growth holistically, and therefore strive to support students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Students reported that the support they received from teachers empowered them to become who they wanted to be. An 11th-grade student articulated this sentiment: “[SJ Humanitas] made me want to strive because growing up, I really didn’t have a lot and I kind of settled for that. But then I got here, and I was hungry for more.”

### **A path to postsecondary education**

SJ Humanitas educators aspire to initiate students on a lifelong journey to realize their full potential. To do this, the community school established a culture of academic excellence coupled with humanistic compassion, which guides its vision that all students will pursue postsecondary education. Its “college access for all” focus consists of the rigorous coursework needed for successful completion of A-G requirements<sup>18</sup> and the individualized preparation each student needs to get to and through college.

Its approach includes conveying a belief in students' assets while acknowledging the challenges they may encounter as students of color in a low-income community. By leveraging community resources, students and families are supported through services such as tutoring, mentoring,

and enrichment. SJ Humanitas alumni frequently return to campus and share their experiences with current students. For instance, students have opportunities to attend panel presentations where alumni share their college-going stories, the college selection process, and their day-to-day experiences in college. College visits are also offered to give students a glimpse of what is possible. College tours are hosted at each grade level, and a multiday trip is offered for juniors. In some instances, former SJ Humanitas students serve as college campus guides for these tours.

A 10th-grade student shared how she was inspired by visits to campuses and explained how alumni panels reinforced the real possibility of college in her future:

It’s really nice to hear their stories and how they got there, and it just gives me hope that I could do whatever I want to do. I know that if I need support, my friends, teachers, and the staff here [will] all support me.

These experiences reinforce the academic preparation and social support offered at SJ Humanitas. A student affirmed, “They actually are trying to see you graduate. They’re trying to see you walk across the stage, [and] they’re trying to see you push for greater.”

The school’s undergirding philosophies centered on social justice, self-actualization, and college access come together in SJ Humanitas’s school vision: “Our goal for our students is not for them to merely be doctors, teachers, or lawyers but rather doctors, teachers, or lawyers that change the world.”<sup>19</sup>

### Student Success at SJ Humanitas

Data suggests that SJ Humanitas has supported the success of its distinct student population with its community school model. In 2018–19, SJ Humanitas served 521 students, 96% of whom were Latino/a, and 7% of whom were identified as English learners. Ninety-three percent of its students were also socioeconomically disadvantaged, which represented a larger percentage than the district average (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**School Demographics (2018–19)**

	SJ Humanitas	Los Angeles Unified
Students from low-income families	• 93%	• 81%
English learners	• 7%	• 20%
Students with disabilities	• 9%	• 13%
Race/ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 97% Latino/a</li> <li>• 2% African American</li> <li>• 1% White</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% Latino/a</li> <li>• 8% African American</li> <li>• 11% White</li> <li>• 6% Asian, Filipino/a, or Pacific Islander</li> <li>• 1% Other or Not Reported</li> </ul>

Note: Los Angeles Unified enrollment numbers include charter and non-charter schools.

Data source: California Department of Education, DataQuest, 2019.

Despite the fact that it serves a more disadvantaged student population, SJ Humanitas outperforms LAUSD averages on a number of important outcome measures. In 2018–19, 97% of SJ Humanitas students graduated, compared to 82% of students districtwide. Ninety-five percent of SJ Humanitas graduates completed the series of college preparatory courses—the “A-G” course requirements—that students must pass with a grade of C or better to be eligible for admission to California’s public university system. In comparison, 52% of graduates in the district met these qualifications (see Table 2). Based on administration of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), a standardized assessment aligned to the Common Core State Standards, 72% of SJ Humanitas students met or exceeded standards for English language arts, compared to the district average of 53% of high school students. While outperforming LAUSD averages in these metrics, the school still has some areas of growth, particularly in advancing students’ mathematical knowledge and skills. Sixteen percent of students met or exceeded math standards, compared to the high school district average of 25% of students.

**Table 2**  
**School Performance Overview (2018–19)**

	SJ Humanitas	Los Angeles Unified
<b>CAASPP: English language arts performance</b> (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	72%	52%
<b>CAASPP: math performance</b> (% students meeting or exceeding state standards)	16%	25%
<b>Suspension rate</b>	0.2%	0.7%
<b>Graduation rate</b>	97%	82%
<b>Graduates meeting A-G requirements</b>	95%	52%

Note: Los Angeles Unified CAASPP results include charter and non-charter schools. CAASPP results for 11th grade only.  
Data source: California Department of Education, DataQuest, 2019.

Beyond standardized measures, SJ Humanitas students also acquire a range of important skills, mindsets, and habits. Based on the administration of the LAUSD School Experience Survey in 2018–19, SJ Humanitas students indicate they are engaged cognitively, feel connected to their school community, have opportunities to participate and lead, are self-efficacious, acquire self-management skills, are socially aware, and have a positive growth mindset at rates that exceed the district average (see Table 3).<sup>20</sup> Further, SJ Humanitas students characterize their school community as safe and supportive at rates higher than their peers across the district. Based on the range of constructs included in the School Experience Survey, SJ Humanitas students favorably assess their learning opportunities, outcomes, and environment.

Overall, SJ Humanitas has a record of success in supporting students’ academic outcomes and social and emotional development, and in fostering a positive school climate. Over the course of its 10-year history, SJ Humanitas has been able to maintain positive outcomes and support student growth. This case study sheds light on the whole child education practices in this community school that have contributed to these outcomes.

**Table 3**  
**Los Angeles Unified School District School Experience Survey**  
**Results (2018–19)**

	% Agree or Strongly Agree	
	SJ Humanitas	Los Angeles Unified School District
Overall Cognitive Engagement (e.g., in my classes, I use evidence or collect data to come to my own conclusions, work on projects or assignments with other students, put new ideas into my own words, etc.).	80%	73%
Overall Future Orientation (e.g., adults at this school encourage me to work hard so I can be successful in college or at the job I choose).	82%	72%
Overall Bullying (e.g., been made fun of because of your looks or the way you talk).	10%	12%
Overall Connectedness (e.g., I feel like I am part of this school; I feel accepted for who I am at this school).	75%	62%
Overall Safety (e.g., I feel safe in this school; there is an adult on campus whom I trust and can talk to no matter what is bothering me).	73%	62%
Overall Expectations for Behavior (e.g., students know how they are expected to act).	84%	72%
Overall Opportunities for Participation and Leadership (e.g., students have a voice in decision-making at this school).	80%	66%
Overall Self-Efficacy (e.g., I can meet all the learning goals my teachers set).	67%	57%
Overall Self-Management (e.g., I came to class prepared).	74%	71%
Overall Student Social Awareness (e.g., ability to describe my feelings, demonstrate respect for other people’s points of view).	71%	67%
Overall Growth Mindset (e.g., I am capable of learning anything).	80%	71%
Overall Academic Focus (e.g., the school is a supportive and inviting place for students to learn).	86%	71%

Source: Los Angeles Unified School District. (n.d.). LAUSD School Experience Survey results, 2018–19. <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/15606> (accessed 11/01/20).

## I. Fostering a Supportive Environment

Creating positive school environments where youth are well-known and supported is a powerful lever in accelerating learning and providing children with the academic, social, and emotional skills necessary to be successful in school and in life beyond.<sup>21</sup> Often, it is close adult–student relationships that enable students, particularly those placed at risk, to gain the holistic supports they need to succeed.<sup>22</sup> But developing these relationships can be difficult in most U.S. secondary schools, where teachers typically see over 100 students each day, students see multiple teachers daily, and the focus is on competition—just as young people most need to develop a strong sense of belonging and personal identity.<sup>23</sup> Such depersonalized and individualistic contexts can be particularly harmful when students also experience the effects of poverty, trauma, and discrimination without supports that enable them to cope.<sup>24</sup>

Educators and leaders at SJ Humanitas know the importance of fostering a supportive school setting for learning and well-being. In turn, SJ Humanitas uses a variety of approaches to create a safe, caring environment for students, families, and educators—a principle of whole child education. Features of its school environment that will be explored in this section include:

- structures and practices that promote strong relationships;
- identity-safe practices that enable students to explore their multifaceted identities;
- family engagement to meaningfully involve parents in school activities; and
- structures and practices that support formal collaboration and collective decision-making.

In building a supportive environment through these structures and practices, SJ Humanitas lays the foundation for learning and holistic development and works to ensure that the school is a true community space.

### Supporting Strong Relationships

Foundational to SJ Humanitas’s approach is the development of strong relationships between and among students, school staff, and families, which serve as a primary vehicle for meeting students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. Research tells us that the nurturing of positive relationships lies at the foundation of learning and supportive school environments.<sup>25</sup> These relationships help educators reach students, identify their needs, and put structures in place to address them. Staff at SJ Humanitas acknowledge the centrality of relationships as “core to what we do.” In doing so, they emphasize how building connections with students assists learners in realizing their talents and becoming the best possible version of themselves.

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Because of the importance of relationships, SJ Humanitas uses a variety of structures to facilitate the development of connections among teachers and students. For instance, SJ Humanitas is a **small school**, which can enable staff to know their students well and establish a personal connection with them.<sup>26</sup> SJ Humanitas educators also hold weekly **office hours**, before and after school, that provide an opportunity for students to reach teachers and receive additional support. In addition, the school follows a **block schedule** that meets for four periods from Monday to Thursday and six periods on Friday. The block schedule provides extended time for relationship building among peers and between teachers and students. It also allows students to spend more consecutive time within each subject area and thus lends itself to more in-depth group work and project-based learning formats.

**Advisories** are also a key forum for relationship building at SJ Humanitas. Advisory is a class that meets daily and provides students opportunities for completing assignments along with community building and social and emotional learning (SEL). Table 4 provides a window into how SJ Humanitas typically uses time in advisories. Two days are dedicated to networking study hall, where students can help each other and teachers are available to provide assistance. One to 2 days per week are also set aside for community building, team activities, and SEL, and the remaining day focuses on college readiness.

**Table 4**  
**SJ Humanitas Advisory Schedule**

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Character/ Community Building Lesson (Council)	Academic Support and Intervention (Networking) and Mentoring	Career and College Curriculum	Academic Support and Intervention (Networking)	No Advisory

Source: Advisory schedule provided to researchers by principal.

Staff at SJ Humanitas also indicated that **everyday routines** supported the development of strong relationships at their school. Educators described how staff actively reach out to students on a regular basis to check in and connect. For example, Principal Austin and Assistant Principal Marike Aguilar stand in front of the school each morning to greet students as they arrive, and teachers stand at the door of their classrooms to welcome students with high-fives, a smile, or other simple gestures of acknowledgment. These intentional routines provide an opportunity to connect, see how students are doing, and communicate to students that their presence is valued. In addition, administrators and counselors have an **open-door policy** and invite students to visit them when they are struggling with difficult issues.

During student focus groups, students explained that this collection of practices made them feel valued by school staff. They described how much they appreciated that teachers checked in on them and asked, “How are you doing?” They valued knowing that their teachers care about their growth and success in the future. Students also reported that their teachers were responsive to their questions and messages and that they felt comfortable reaching out to their teachers for

support, signaling that strong reciprocal relationships had been built. Teachers, too, described the importance of making students feel seen and heard, and teachers expressed appreciation for the opportunities they had to get to know their students and students' families well.

Building supportive adult relationships was another key component of SJ Humanitas's supportive school environment. For instance, administrators make a concerted effort to humanize staff by recognizing each other as human beings before diving into the work in their professional learning forums, such as the school's staff retreat, professional learning days, and staff meetings.

SJ Humanitas educators also emphasized the importance of their grade-level teams and **structured collaboration time** as supporting the development of professional and supportive relationships. Collaboration time for grade-level teams is built into the schedule to facilitate interdisciplinary lesson planning and to conference regularly regarding academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of specific students, determining how best to address those needs as a team. Yet these spaces also serve as an important source of support for teachers. A first-year teacher expressed the following about her grade-level team and collaboration:

Having emotional support is very reassuring.... Having that level of comradery brings lots of support, and knowing that we're not in this alone ... and being able to offer each other more direct solutions.... I feel like that has been one of the most crucial supports of this entire school year.

During interviews, teachers consistently shared feeling supported by their colleagues and administrators and valuing this focus on adult relationships, which helped them engage in the important work of nurturing student progress and well-being.

## Creating an Identity-Safe Environment

SJ Humanitas creates an atmosphere of identity safety that enables students to feel comfortable and empowered to develop their full selves and see their cultural and linguistic heritages celebrated in the school environment.

Educators create **culturally relevant learning opportunities** for students to explore their background and identity. For example, in 9th grade, the interdisciplinary curriculum asks students to analyze their personal history and how it affects their lived experiences. English teacher Robert Martinez explained how this learning opportunity supports students' growth:

The 9th-graders now have a better idea in terms of how to navigate 10th, 11th, and 12th grade, because they have already looked at their history and their past. They understand how their traumas have affected them—the way they think, see the world, and how they can become better for it.

In this learning process, teachers also encourage students to **explore their intersectional identities**. Ethnic studies teacher Sasha Guzman explained this concept as acknowledging the “various aspects of your identity that equally make up who you are,” including gender, race, sexual orientation, and nationality, among others. In turn, Guzman and many others at SJ Humanitas create an environment where students are invited to be themselves in their full humanity.

**Affinity clubs** are also a way in which staff assist students in developing their voice. For example, in 2018–19, administrators supported students in establishing a Black Student Union (BSU) that could provide the small population of African American students on campus with a safe space. An 11th-grade member described how the BSU members came together to voice their concern that members feel marginalized across the campus. She remarked, “Black students are feeling more respected” since the BSU’s efforts to educate the broader campus about the distinct oppression African Americans feel.

As a result of SJ Humanitas’s culturally relevant practices, current and former students saw SJ Humanitas as an identity-affirming place that informed how they navigated the spaces beyond school walls. One alumnus cited an old Aztec saying that he learned at SJ Humanitas that had stayed with him: “You are my other me. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself.” He asserted that SJ Humanitas “taught us how to be kind to other people, even if we may not agree with their opinions.” This understanding helped him in college, where he encountered greater diversity and differences. And based on pivotal experiences that helped foster a sense of agency and identity safety as a student at SJ Humanitas, he chose to join an activist group on his college campus and helped found a transgender program to create a safe place for other students.

## Building Trust and Connections With Families

Like many community schools, SJ Humanitas incorporates active and authentic family engagement—a partnership in which power and responsibility are shared—as one of its central pillars. Educators at SJ Humanitas understand that family involvement in the school community is a critical aspect of promoting a positive climate and seek to draw on families’ wealth of experience and knowledge to support learning and their community school approach.

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Well aware of the common barriers to school–family partnerships, staff build connections with families in a variety of ways. Math teacher Eugenia Plascencia shared that SJ Humanitas has multiple events each semester geared specifically to parents, including **back-to-school night** and **student-led conferences**. Once a month on Saturdays, Assistant Principal Aguilar also hosts a **parent meeting** to discuss various happenings in the community and school.

**Parent advisory nights**, held once each semester, are another forum for dialogue among families and school personnel. Principal Austin noted that these conversations have focused on challenges facing the whole community. Aguilar shared that discussions covered topics that mirrored SJ Humanitas practice. For instance, at advisory night, the facilitators might

[have] our parents talk about their own self-actualization and their own barriers to self-actualization, or [about] love languages. What’s their love language, and what’s their kid’s love language, and maybe where is the disconnect, and how can [parents and students] help understand each other better?

SJ Humanitas deliberately structures parent advisory nights to provide parents with the opportunity to engage in the same kinds of SEL as their children. An additional example includes introducing families to council—a restorative practice in which a group of people sit together in a circle formation and take turns sharing their stories—which is a central element of implementing SEL at SJ Humanitas that also serves to create a sense of community and inclusion. At the 9th-grade orientation for incoming freshmen, teachers ran councils in both English and Spanish in small groups for parents. In this way, Guzman remarked, students and families are introduced “very early on to this idea of councils and the culture that we build to help our students succeed.” She went on to explain that this collaborative approach helped students and families see how the school works “as a partnership, versus one competing with the other.”

Educators at SJ Humanitas also engage parents as active participants in student learning and academic conferences. Twice a year, SJ Humanitas holds **student-led conferences** in which students lead a discussion with their families and teachers to reflect on how they are doing and what they are learning in each of their classes. This event is attended by 80–90% of the families. According to Guzman, whereas conventional student–parent conferencing consists of 5 or 10 minutes of discussing matters such as a student’s behavior and missed assignments, student-led conferencing at SJ Humanitas asks students to complete a task or assignment with their parent.

The purpose of student-led conferences is to create a safe space for students and parents to come together and have a conversation about student work and growth. The event is structured to support students to feel proud of, reflect upon, and share their work. Student-led conferences have been a staple of the school since it was established. This practice exemplifies how SJ Humanitas actively engages families through organizing events that build trust and strengthen connections within the community. One alumnus remembered the student-led conferences as “super cool, because it was an open space for everybody to display their work.” Overall, student-led conferences not only reinforce supportive environments but also exemplify how family engagement can directly support the learning process.

## **A Look Into Student-Led Conferences and Family Engagement**

Twice a year, families and students line up outside of the gym waiting for the doors to open. Inside the gym, evidence of students’ work is on display and handouts with descriptions of collaborative learning activities are given to families and students. In the middle of the gym, tables and chairs are arranged for families to sit down.

Mr. Garcia, a parent in the Governing School Council—a group of parents, teachers, students, and other school staff that work with the principal to develop and evaluate school improvement plans—and his 10th-grade daughter, Maria, attended the student-led conference. Mr. Garcia has lived in the neighborhood since 1983. He has six children; three of them are in colleges throughout California and are former students of SJ Humanitas. The conference began with Maria and her dad reviewing the learning activities. They started with her history course, with Maria explaining to her dad the concepts of rule of law and limited government that she was learning in class. The handout had questions for the parent as well: “What did you like best about the student’s presentation?” Dad answered, “I was impressed with what you know about democracy, being a 10th-grader. It makes me proud, and I want to show you off.” He smiled at his daughter.

When it came to chemistry, a question on the handout asked, “Has the student done everything possible to improve in this class?” Maria answered, “I have done a good amount, but not the best.” The student evaluated her performance in the class based on her understanding of the assignment, not the overall grade that she was given.

Maria and her father engaged in an exercise for art, math, and English as well. Each activity allowed Maria to reflect on her progress and provided Mr. Garcia with an opportunity to engage, with Maria, in the learning process.

SJ Humanitas also engages parents to further their knowledge, particularly around students’ postsecondary pathways. For example, the school organizes **panels** at which parents of students in their senior year talk to parents of juniors and sophomores in order to help them know what to expect for their children as they pursue college attendance. In 2018–19, SJ Humanitas staff also planned a **parent college trip**. Assistant Principal Aguilar explained that they wanted parents to have an opportunity to gain firsthand experience, similar to the offering for students, so staff organized campus visits during which SJ Humanitas alumni took parents on a tour. Overall, these practices demonstrate how SJ Humanitas supports parents so that they can continue to play an integral role in enabling students to realize their full potential.

Through its various structures for family engagement, SJ Humanitas has fostered an inclusive school environment that brings educators, students, and families together as partners. An alumnus explained the sense of closeness that resulted from parent involvement, saying,

Since it’s a small school, it was really easy for teachers to meet your parents.... My mom was one of the people that a lot of teachers knew, for good reasons. She had really good connections with the teachers, and I think it showed that we were more than just students at the school.

In authentically engaging and partnering with parents through these practices—and those involving formal school governance that are described below—SJ Humanitas has worked to make families feel valued and use their assets as central to student learning and growth.

## Fostering Formal Collaboration

In addition to the many forums and practices that SJ Humanitas uses to build connection between and among its stakeholders, the school has formal collaborative structures that further indicate its commitment to creating an inclusive and empowering school environment. It does so by creating opportunities for educators, students, and families to build and share their expertise to inform how their community school advances student progress and well-being.

A feature of Pilot Schools, the **Governing School Council** at SJ Humanitas is one formal structure through which collaboration is built and exercised. The council holds decision-making power over all aspects of school administration, including staffing, principal evaluation, curriculum, community relationships, assessment, calendar, and budget. Members of the council include the principal, teachers from each grade level (who are elected by their peers), parents from each grade level, three students, a community partner representative, and two at-large positions. As English teacher Robert Martinez put it, including a wide range of stakeholders on the council allows a collection of voices and perspectives to “have a direct say in what happens at our school.” Educators and leaders also

expressed that governing through a diverse coalition communicates an appreciation for multiple perspectives and leverages members' unique funds of knowledge, which further contributes to the positive climate and sense of the school as a community. The Governing School Council meets on a monthly basis.

SJ Humanitas also maintains several structures that specifically support teacher leadership—a necessary component of its teacher-led community school model. For example, the school has an **Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)**, which plays an advisory role in guiding the school's approach so that it addresses the needs of students and families. Each grade level and core department (e.g., math, science, English language arts, history) elects a teacher to serve on the ILT. The ILT agenda is created collectively, and all teachers can submit an agenda item on topics ranging from operational to instructional issues. The ILT taps into the expertise of teachers and fosters continuous improvement by creating a space where teachers can raise challenges and possible solutions. The team meets two times a month. Decisions within ILT are reached by consensus. The ILT also develops the schedule for professional learning sessions based on issues staff have identified. Teachers indicated that they are welcome to attend ILT meetings even if they do not serve on the team. A teacher shared,

SJ Humanitas also maintains several structures that specifically support teacher leadership—a necessary component of its teacher-led community school model.

I can express how I feel, I can express what I think, and community members and parents are also welcomed and voice their concerns. Members are going to make decisions, but naturally they are going to be listening to the community as a whole.

The school also has designated teacher leads for advisories. **Advisory leads** design the advisory curriculum and collaborate with other leads from each grade level to manage and improve the content in advisory. Specifically, they support the implementation of the social and emotional program at SJ Humanitas as well as family engagement efforts, including parent nights and student-led conferencing. As one advisory lead shared, the leads identify topics that will strengthen the school community and student learning—from SEL to networking opportunities to college and career preparation to discussion of important cultural events. These practices exemplify how teachers can share their knowledge about students in planning curriculum to meet student needs and can create continuity in practices and norms that can support students emotionally and cognitively.

Overall, these formal collaborative structures at SJ Humanitas allow families, educators, and students to have their insights valued, expressed, and incorporated into the vision and direction for the school. These practices contribute to a learning environment and culture in which all stakeholders continuously develop skills and knowledge and share their expertise through collaboration and shared decision-making processes that are distributed and democratic.

SJ Humanitas is committed to creating a supportive school environment that values stakeholders' perspectives and nurtures the whole person. With this aim, the school's structures and practices were designed intentionally to enable staff to know students, families, and colleagues well and to

develop strong relationships. Its approach also sought to affirm individual identities and cultural backgrounds; engage families in deep and meaningful ways; and provide ongoing opportunities for leadership, learning, and collaboration. The supportive environment created through these practices provides a foundation for challenging students academically, nurturing their social and emotional development, and fostering the professional growth and well-being of adults.

## II. Developing Social and Emotional Capacity

Research tells us that students' academic and social and emotional learning (SEL) go hand in hand. Development of productive mindsets, skills, and habits gives students the capacity to persist through difficult work and life challenges, collaborate with others, take risks while learning, think critically, and communicate effectively. Social, emotional, and cognitive engagement also influences how safe the students feel, how relevant they perceive content and learning to be, and how focused their attention and decision-making are.<sup>27</sup>

Educators and leaders at SJ Humanitas understand that social and emotional development is central to student learning and well-being, and, in turn, they have made SEL an area of focus at their community school. Social and emotional skills, mindsets, and habits are developed at SJ Humanitas through four key strategies:

1. Explicit instruction of social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets, such as emotional awareness and regulation, self-efficacy, close relationships, and resourcefulness.
2. Ongoing opportunities to practice these social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets inside and outside the classroom with other students and adults.
3. Educative and restorative approaches to behavior management and discipline, so that students have tools to manage their behavior responsibly and repair harm when needed.
4. Attention to the social and emotional capacity of the adults supporting students, so that teachers have the tools to teach SEL while nurturing their own resilience and well-being.

Through these practices, which are provided in and out of the classroom by teachers, counselors, and community partners, adults are able to support the development of social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets that students will need to graduate from high school and succeed in college and beyond. These skills and mindsets also support students as they cope with traumatic experiences resulting from living in an environment where they are often exposed to poverty, violence, deportation, and food scarcity. Collectively, these approaches also attend to students' psychological needs—the need for belonging, love, and a sense of accomplishment—which comprises the core of SJ Humanitas's social and emotional supports.

### Teaching Social and Emotional Skills, Habits, and Mindsets

In order to address students' social and emotional needs, SJ Humanitas provides a range of opportunities for students to develop their social and emotional capacity. Students receive explicit instruction on social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets during their advisory classes and council meetings, and through the school's mentor program. In addition, teachers use a variety of tools to identify students' social and emotional assets and needs, so they can better target their SEL and classroom instruction to the specific needs of students.

## Identifying students' social and emotional assets and needs

Assistant Principal Aguilar acknowledged the intense needs that students at SJ Humanitas have, saying, “You could spend a day at our school and realize these kids have a lot of really heavy life issues and traumas that they’re dealing with.” In order to support them, teachers use a variety of tools to better understand students’ preferences, needs, and competencies so they can provide more personalized supports.

The **Developmental Assets Profile** from the Search Institute is one such tool used by SJ Humanitas educators to assess students’ internal (e.g., positive identity) and external (e.g., boundaries and expectations) strengths and needs. Every student takes this survey at the beginning of the year, and staff analyze the data to determine areas in which students excel or may need additional supports. Notably, SJ Humanitas educators indicated that the tool helps them identify the social and emotional supports that students need and receive on campus.

Teachers also use a survey based on the book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman (1992) to tailor students’ and adults’ expressions of care and appreciation to what makes each individual feel valued. At the beginning of the year, students and teachers answer a survey to determine their top two preferred love languages (i.e., words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, or physical touch), and then students share their answers with their classmates and advisory teacher. Teachers create a list of students’ preferred love languages, and they use it in their interactions with them. Students are also encouraged to share this information with their parents or guardians, and work with them to determine their own preferences. The school uses these data as a tool to develop students’ self-awareness of their unique preferences as individuals, better communicate with each other, and develop trusting relationships. This information is kept in students’ school records and is regularly accessed by educators and counselors.

While teachers accommodate students’ learning assets and needs, students are also encouraged to advocate for themselves and ask for help when they are having difficulties in their classes.

## Dedicating time and space for social and emotional development

With their knowledge of students’ assets and needs, educators at SJ Humanitas dedicate space and time to cultivating students’ social and emotional skills and habits. Much of this work occurs in **advisories**. In addition to being a forum for relationship building, according to the SJ Humanitas Advisory Teacher Guide, advisories are intended to be “a period in the day during which our students are able to process, and reflect on what they are learning, and use that information to shape and inform their character, ethics, and sense of justice.”<sup>28</sup>

During advisory, teachers are expected to teach lessons that support the development of social and emotional skills and mindsets, such as healthy relationships, empathy, or community building. These lessons are created by the advisory leads and given to advisors prior to the day they are teaching the lesson. Teachers are expected to teach the lessons with fidelity and reach out to their advisory lead if they have any questions or need support. These SEL lessons help students identify their strengths, use conflict resolution skills, and apply emotion management tools, among other SEL-related skills and habits.

A 9th-grade advisory lesson on developing self-awareness and identifying strengths provides an illustration of this in practice. During advisory with teacher Sasha Guzman, students explore a set of questions that are generally included in college applications for the University of California system. The first question is about talents and skills; students have to brainstorm their own top three talents and then identify talents or skills possessed by three people in the room. While students can easily identify their classmates' talents, it is harder for them to see their own unique skills. Being able to identify their own skills and talents is an important aspect of developing self-awareness. One of the students shares with Guzman: "I don't have any talents. I just like art." The teacher responds, "Can you imagine a world without art? I love art. Look around the room. Some people [have the talent to] express themselves through colors, drawing, or music." Guzman shares with her students the power of identifying and appreciating one's own strengths and talents.

SJ Humanitas educators are also expected to facilitate **council** during advisory, which aims to create a structured and safe place where students can put the many social and emotional tools that are taught into practice. Council is a practice of many ancient and Indigenous cultures all over the world.<sup>29</sup> Participants sit in a circle, where everyone's voice and humanity is recognized. It is an egalitarian and democratic way to build community, connect with each other, and practice attentive listening.

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The school defines council as "the practice of listening and speaking from the heart." During council, students and teachers take turns sharing about the positive and difficult things happening in their lives. At SJ Humanitas, council has three main parts:

1. Council participants review intentions: Speak and listen from the heart, speak spontaneously, speak leanly.
2. Council participants volunteer to offer a "dedication" for the day. Would anyone like to dedicate today's council to a person or group? Explain why.
3. Teacher sharing: A time I did not feel heard was [add fill-in line]. Students, when did you not feel heard? (The prompt may vary depending on the group.)

Council engages participants in practicing many social and emotional skills: their ability to connect with their emotions, develop their active listening, apply empathy, and show respect toward others. Councils also build community by creating a space where participants can be honest and vulnerable while receiving support from the group. Sharing stories helps to create connections and enables participants to develop a deeper appreciation for the common struggles. One of SJ Humanitas's 9th-grade students described the practice of council:

Most of our councils are when they check up on us. They ask us how we're feeling or what's something we feel we accomplished, or something we're trying to achieve. [When] they see a student feeling down or something, or not their usual self, they will check up on them.

Although council is a powerful tool for connecting with students and building community, it is not an easy activity for many to embrace. Guzman, a teacher of 16 years, stressed the importance of opportunities for students to develop self-efficacy, voice, and agency but recognized that it is difficult for many students, especially those she teaches in 9th grade. She explained, “Many of our students who are extremely intelligent hate speaking for themselves or volunteering. So we create a structured, safe space [for them] to voice their story and their opinion.”

Educators also faced challenges in implementing council, particularly when teachers felt insecure in their ability to hold that space. Assistant Principal Aguilar explained:

The whole thing crumbles if our spaces are emotionally unsafe, or if the kids feel that teachers don’t actually buy in to some of the things that we do. I want to make sure, if we do nothing else, that every teacher feels comfortable facilitating council, or that they understand what it is, and then feel comfortable asking me, or [Principal Austin], or somebody else to come in and facilitate until they do feel comfortable. Sitting in circle, and everyone sharing, and that egalitarian nature of that teaching practice is foundational.

Administrators Aguilar and Austin are available to facilitate these circles for those teachers who do not feel ready to do them on their own yet. Advisory leads, who are responsible for the advisory curriculum at SJ Humanitas, are also a source of support for teachers during staff retreat, team meetings, and teacher-driven professional opportunities. Providing these supports for teachers signals not only how important council is for the school’s culture, but also how intentional the school is about developing students’ social and emotional skills.

## Integrating Social and Emotional Skills

In addition to explicitly teaching social and emotional skills, educators at SJ Humanitas integrate opportunities to develop students’ social and emotional capacity across the curriculum. Teaching practices reinforce these skills and connect the academic content in history, geography, or language arts to topics that are important to students, and to the skills that will help them achieve self-actualization. Integration of social and emotional skills in teaching and learning also supports the mission and vision of the school.

For example, English teacher Marcella DeBoer uses **check-ins**—a common practice among SJ Humanitas educators—in her class to explore students’ social and emotional state before delving into academic learning. Specifically, she described that after returning from spring break, she does a round-robin check-in with students to see how students’ break was. DeBoer noted that students may have experienced an array of emotions during the break, some pleasant and others not, which influences their ability to focus and be ready for learning. During these check-ins, she and her students come together to connect and reflect on how things are going. It is also an opportunity for students to develop their emotional literacy by taking time to notice, accurately name, and interpret their emotions in a safe and supportive environment.<sup>30</sup>

DeBoer also uses check-ins as a time to have students set up an intention for the remainder of the year. During one observation of these check-ins, one student expressed a powerful realization: “My need to help others is actually holding me back. I have to know when to step up, when to step back. I need to prioritize myself.” Several students shared the sentiment and the need to prioritize

their schoolwork over other obligations. In response, DeBoer acknowledged, “This does not happen just to students.... We’ve got to deal with things when they come.” This type of opening activity, like routine check-ins, creates opportunities for teachers to reinforce the executive functioning skills that are being taught explicitly during advisory and encourage students to apply them in the context of academic learning.

Opportunities for SEL are also **integrated into academic instruction** itself. Teacher Jael Reboh provided a strong illustration of this in his English classroom. Reboh engaged his sophomores in a high-level analysis of the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. In the book, Wiesel describes his experience as a teenager, living with his father in two Nazi concentration camps. Using *Night* as a testimony of human suffering and resilience, the teacher created the opportunity for students to reflect on their own strategies to cope with challenges and have meaningful conversations about hate, compassion, and survival.

During interviews, SJ Humanitas teachers also talked about the importance of **modeling social and emotional skills** in their teaching—a practice that can effectively and positively influence the learning climate in the classroom and offer positive examples of how to navigate stress and frustration or build healthy relationships.<sup>31</sup> One of the teachers said he begins class by telling students his own story. He grew up in the same community, raised by a single parent, and grappled with drug addiction in his family. Although this type of story may not be easy for many teachers to share, educators indicated that it has a positive impact on students and their sense of trust toward teachers. As the teacher commented, “The fact that I’m honest and open with them [makes] a lot of them feel connected very early and open with me. It makes it easy for them to connect and just come and talk to me.” By intentionally modeling social and emotional skills like these in their interactions with students, teachers are contributing to the social and emotional growth of their students and creating an environment conducive to positive outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

The **ACE (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) Initiative**, developed by EduCare—one of the school’s long-standing partners—provides another opportunity to integrate SEL into students’ daily learning. The initiative is designed to empower high school students to achieve excellence in personal, social, and academic pursuits through character development, personal responsibility, and emotional intelligence. At SJ Humanitas, a 3-day ACE training is held for incoming 9th-graders, and students meet for an ACE day each year after that for a refresher in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade. The focus is on community building through experiential activities and on creating a sense of family. During the academic year, ACE has supported the launch of a women’s group, a college prep bootcamp for mentors, and a 9th Grade Leadership Academy, and it helps eligible seniors apply to 4-year universities.

In addition, the EduCare coordinator works with teachers to bring more SEL and mindfulness into their classrooms to equip students with the tools, knowledge, and skills to use their assets in addressing the challenges and trauma in their lives.

Overall, SJ Humanitas includes consistent opportunities for social and emotional development across the school day and the curriculum.

## Supporting student leadership

Learning how to make one's voice heard to resolve disputes and contribute to the improvement of the community is considered a key aspect of SEL and a desired outcome at the school. For this reason, SJ Humanitas creates opportunities for students to “find their inner leader.” Programs like the school's mentor program and Student Steering Committee provide students with the opportunity to develop skills through practice.

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SJ Humanitas has developed a strong **mentor program**. Students from 10th, 11th, and 12th grade are selected to mentor other students, and every student on campus has a mentor. Ninth-graders have a 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade mentor; 10th-graders are mentored by 11th-graders and seniors; 11th-graders and seniors are mentored by other seniors. Selected student mentors receive a full day of training before school starts and regularly meet with their faculty advisor, Roberto Vega, for ongoing leadership development. For instance, at an observed mentor training Vega asked seniors to reflect on their individual preferences for group work and discuss in small groups the pros and cons of their preferred group work behavior.

Teachers and students explained that a lot of thought goes into matching mentors with students, including using data from the surveys (i.e., Developmental Assets Profile, Love Languages) to inform the pairing process. Mentors are nominated into the program based on their leadership and character skills and their work ethic. Teacher Martinez explained,

We try to be very strategic on how we pair the mentors with the mentees. We have a mentor that has a similar learning style as well as the same kind of home life. That way they can open up with each other, and that makes that connection more powerful.

One of SJ Humanitas's alumni described how being a mentor better equipped her to help others and help herself:

I was a mentor at Humanitas, so I know how to talk to people better, even when they are going through something. I had my mentees; I was expected to be there for them. I think it has been easier for me to help others deal with their problems, as well as for me dealing with [my own].

Another opportunity for students to develop and practice their leadership skills is the **Student Steering Committee** (SCC), which provides a space for students to voice their opinions regarding their school and to take an active part in shaping the quality of their education. The SCC is composed of student facilitators who meet with students in advisory to gather feedback, using a protocol that is aligned with the school's vision. The SCC meets with grade-level teams each semester to share feedback. This committee provides authenticity to SJ Humanitas's philosophy of ensuring that students' voices are heard.

Students are asked to provide feedback in six areas—interdisciplinary units, advisory classes and councils, teaching strategies, motivation and coping with pressure, building community, and self-actualization—and assess how these learning opportunities help them achieve their goals and become the best version of themselves. At times, students have provided suggestions about topics they would like to see in class or about tools and strategies they would like teachers to start or stop using. For example, students shared that they did not like having graphic organizers to complete their history homework. The teacher responded to the feedback and came up with an alternative way to help students engage in their studies. Students have also provided input on the teaching approaches that were most and least engaging for them. To illustrate, 11th-grade students at an observed SSC meeting shared that they valued working in groups, seeing documentaries, and doing hands-on projects, but that practices like rushed lessons, a lack of resubmission opportunities, and insufficient time to seek out support between assignment due dates made learning difficult. After the meeting, teachers regrouped and made decisions to incorporate the feedback, which were shared with students to close the feedback loop.

This system of feedback reflects an orientation toward continuous improvement and growth by encouraging students' agency in shaping their own learning, while providing teachers with constructive feedback to improve their practice. Principal Austin explained the importance of including students in this process: "We have really given students the ability to see that they can speak [and] be heard and that the things they say are important and have impact." During student focus groups, students expressed valuing this opportunity to provide feedback about their classes so teachers can plan and execute lessons that will help them learn better. One student shared, "Our teachers see that as a way to grow instead of as an insult, or a way that we are attacking them. They actually take it [the feedback]; they listen to us and they modify their lessons to benefit us."

In all these student leadership opportunities, students develop their voice, regulate their responses to adult input, and work to build consensus—important social and emotional skills students need in order to be successful in college and beyond. At SJ Humanitas, they can practice these skills in a safe environment while being part of important decision-making processes. These mechanisms, according to administrators, have contributed to the generation of ideas that have been critical in improving the school community.

## **Implementing Restorative Approaches to Discipline**

Using restorative approaches to support positive student behavior is another way SJ Humanitas supports students' social and emotional growth and their journey to self-actualization. The aim of restorative practices is to teach students skills that enable positive behaviors, encourage them to take responsibility, and help them make amends to restore relationships when needed.<sup>33</sup> The school's behavior management plan is rooted in the following principles:<sup>34</sup>

- building and sustaining community;
- restoring the harm, not punishing the person;
- upholding students' and teachers' humanity; and
- building character and resourcefulness.

The school sees behavior as a symptom of greater conditions—teachers try to identify and address the root causes of students’ behaviors and modify the school environment to remedy them. During the staff retreat and staff meetings, teachers reflect on the environments that students may inhabit and how those environments can impact students’ ability to learn. The teachers’ goal is to identify ways to help students learn positive skills and behaviors that students can use in school and other environments. Martinez described it this way:

You give kids a second chance, but how do you also hold kids accountable? It’s a balance.... We understand kids make mistakes. We understand the stories that they come with. That’s always at the forefront of our mind. We want to give these kids a second chance.

### Engaging with curiosity and care

Many teachers said that taking a restorative approach was one way they modeled their beliefs about valuing and caring about students as unique individuals. In practice, this changed the way teachers interact with students when they are late to class, miss an assignment, or are not engaged in class. Teachers **intentionally ask students the reasons behind their behaviors** instead of applying consequences without knowing the causes. For example, ethnic studies teacher Guzman spoke to a student about all of his recent tardies; after the conversation she realized that she hadn’t asked him why he was late to her class:

I just reflected for 30 seconds, and something in my head said, “You didn’t ask him why.” So I called him back and said, “Hey, why have you been late so much?” And his eyes immediately filled with tears, and I was like OK, whoa, I obviously triggered something. I said, “Step outside,” took him some tissue, and I said, “What’s going on?” And he said, “Miss, I [am struggling with mental health issues].”

Guzman realized how 30 seconds to ask one question shifted the entire narrative. Now, when she sees this particular student in class, she tells him, “I’m glad you made it to school. I’m glad you’re here.” When students trust their teachers with their challenges, and teachers respond to them with care and support, new pathways can be created for healing and new opportunities for learning.

Several teachers spoke about **restorative circles** they had conducted with students who had broken school rules; during the circles, the teachers shared how the students’ behavior had affected them. For instance, 2 years ago, Martinez led a senior college trip during which four students were caught with vaping pens. Martinez explained, “I took this really to heart.... I was really hurt by it.” When they came back, the staff struggled to figure out what to do. They worried: “If we kick them out, they will lose all of their college, their hopes and dreams. So what do we do? We wanted to help them.” And at the same time, teachers knew that the students broke the rules. Martinez explained:

We did a restorative justice circle with the students, other mentors, and the teachers who were affected by that issue. The kids owned up to their mistakes; they explained why [they brought vaping pens]. I knew why, but I just let my emotions get to me first. I was angry.... It really hurt me. The students owned up to it.

Humanizing practices like these are routinized at SJ Humanitas. Martinez does a final activity with the seniors every year: One by one the **students and the teacher acknowledge each other** by giving a hug, a handshake, or a simple acknowledgment. When the kids involved in the incident

came to Martinez, they started crying. He remembered that each one of them said, “I’m so sorry for what I did. I know I screwed up.” Martinez told them, “Yeah, you messed up.... I’m still here. I still love you. I still care about you.”

Martinez further described the value of this restorative approach: “The accountability part is hard to handle, but at the same time, you cannot argue with these results and relationships. We work with them as much as we can. When they come back, they are grateful, they acknowledge it, they appreciate it.”

Students, too, echoed this sentiment. During a focus group, a 10th-grade student explained, “If we ever have a problem, as long as the staff is aware of what’s happening, they try everything in their power to fix or come to a solution to the problem.” Even when students have conflicts with teachers, they are able to discuss them and solve them, which students shared did not happen at their former schools: “We can have a mature conversation with the teachers and talk about the problems that we’re having, and the teacher will do whatever to help the situation in any way.”

### **Building awareness of bias**

SJ Humanitas’s restorative approach is also grounded in building awareness of students’ and teachers’ own biases. In surfacing and acknowledging biases that are held, educators and students at this community school can see how their perceptions influence their interactions and conflicts, which, in turn, helps them engage in restorative approaches that help them build or repair strong relationships.

Students can explore and work through their biases in advisory, in council, and through culturally relevant learning opportunities that are integrated into the curriculum across subject areas. For example, some Latino/a students shared how they struggled with having White teachers at the beginning of the school year. According to one senior,

We have a couple of White teachers, and there are always some people out there that think White people are here to hurt us. For example, some people, when they first meet [White teacher], they try fighting her because they think she’s a racist. But once they meet her on another level, they say, “This is one of the best English teachers that I have had in my life.” ... You can’t just judge people for how they look. You have to meet them at another level.

Through their opportunities to reflect on their bias, these students were able to open up to what teachers had to offer, regardless of their race and ethnicity.

Just as students have an opportunity to investigate their own biases during advisory and apply their newly developed skills in their academic classes and school-based leadership opportunities, teachers are also supported in this process. Professional learning opportunities, grade-level and subject-area team meetings, and staff retreats enable staff members to examine their own biases and develop the skills to guide students through these explorations.

Overall, SJ Humanitas’s embrace of restorative practices has helped cultivate a culture of open dialogue among educators and students—particularly in the face of personal and interpersonal conflicts and the resulting harm that can emerge. Through these practices, students and staff are able to develop their social and emotional capacity to engage in productive conflict resolution, emotion regulation, and stress management.

## Nurturing Adult Social and Emotional Competencies

At SJ Humanitas, social and emotional skill development and well-being is not restricted to students. SJ Humanitas understands the importance of helping teachers develop the social and emotional skills they need to teach and infuse SEL, implement restorative practices in their classrooms, and take care of their own needs. Practitioners indicated that their attention to adult social and emotional wellness was an important aspect of SJ Humanitas’s commitment to the self-actualization of all its community members and to establishing a learning environment where adults are active participants.

SJ Humanitas understands the importance of helping teachers develop the social and emotional skills they need to teach and infuse SEL, implement restorative practices in their classrooms, and take care of their own needs.

While serving as learning spaces, professional development opportunities like staff retreats and staff meetings also provide a time for faculty to come together as a group and take the pulse of how everybody is doing. These **check-ins**, where staff may offer a high and low point of the week or share appreciations, form a critical component of these professional development gatherings. One teacher shared how critical it is to take a moment to connect as people and “make sure we’re OK.”

**Targeted professional learning opportunities** also focus on teaching and supporting social and emotional development and on providing teachers with the tools to engage in and lead this work. According to Assistant Principal Aguilar, “We can’t assume people understand how to do any of these things.... You’re not trained to do this work. [We] have to be very clear for ourselves, so that we can be really clear for new people.”

To date, learning sessions have included discussions on restorative approaches and council (with outside experts facilitating learning sessions), and advisory leads provide ongoing support to strengthen advisory curriculum. Teacher Eugenia Plascencia indicated how important it is to develop and practice these skills in order to build an environment in which students and teachers feel respected and safe. She shared,

Yes, we’re the teachers, but we’re also human. We’re not robots. We’re also tired sometimes. Sometimes we snap and we say things that we shouldn’t, and how you apologize, and how you go through that process and grow from there [is important].

As Principal Austin reminds newly hired teachers, they are all going to do “brilliant things” and they are all going to make some “mistakes.” The important thing, according to Austin, is to let teachers know that SJ Humanitas is an environment where they can share their mistakes and struggles and receive the supports needed to keep improving. The hope,

according to Austin, is to create a learning environment that enables adults, like students, to take risks, make mistakes, acknowledge areas for improvement, and try again. As Austin shared,

I think [we are] creating that culture of, “We’re not competing with each other, we’re competing against something else. We’re competing against inequity and poverty.” ... I think [we are] creating that kind of system where [teachers] feel like, “I can go to my peers for help, and not worry about being judged.” I think that’s really been our first line of defense.... It really is a longer process of building relationships where they see that [there is no judgment].

While teachers indicated high levels of satisfaction,<sup>35</sup> many acknowledged that the demand to meet the individualized needs of students and families could be overwhelming. By providing supports and engaging educators in the continuous development of social and emotional skills, SJ Humanitas creates a safe learning environment where everyone is aiming to be and do their best. The **staff retreat**, described in “SJ Humanitas Annual Staff Retreat” below, is the perfect place to build the social and emotional foundation for a productive school year.

## **SJ Humanitas Annual Staff Retreat**

SJ Humanitas’s annual retreat takes place over the course of 3 days at the beginning of each summer and serves as an opportunity to welcome new staff, build relationships, and develop and practice many of the activities educators will do with students during the year. The gathering gives staff, including community partners, time and space to revisit the school’s vision, recommit to school practices, and build community.

In 2019, the staff retreat focused on the practice of council. Participants engaged in councils multiple times throughout the 3-day retreat, during which staff shared their own educational experiences as students and teachers. In doing so, staff demonstrated trust as they shared their personal stories with each other while familiarizing themselves with, or deepening their knowledge of, council practices.

In addition, the school’s full-time EduCare coordinator engaged faculty in the same activities the community partner implements with SJ Humanitas students to support their social and emotional development. For example, the EduCare coordinator instructed grade-level teams through trust-building activities, games, and competitions. Teachers were able to experience these exercises firsthand and remember what it is like to be in a learner role. One teacher reflected on his experience at the staff retreat:

We started off with a circle, just talking about how we are, emotionally, physically, and mentally.... I never thought I would do it in a professional setting with colleagues and coworkers.... Seeing that, I [thought], “Wow, this is a different place. This is not a regular school.” Also, the retreat really focused on relationship building. We played games that really focused on revealing strengths of our own and weaknesses, and helping us focus on those aspects of our lives.

In collaboration with their colleagues and partners, SJ Humanitas staff members learned from each other and deepened their relationships at the staff retreat. The professional learning setting also provided staff with the opportunity to experience the cognitive, social, and emotional impact and weight of many of the community- and culture-building practices that are at the heart of their approach.

SJ Humanitas focuses on supporting students' social and emotional capacity through explicit instruction of social and emotional competencies and its integration inside and outside the classroom. The school has also established a restorative approach that supports students in choosing positive behaviors, while offering opportunities to amend relationships when needed. In addition, students are able to develop their social and emotional skills through leadership opportunities, which reflects the school's commitment to collaboration and attentiveness to multiple perspectives. Finally, attention to the social and emotional well-being and competencies of the adults working with students shows the school's commitment to its teachers as both leaders and learners.

### III. Implementing Student-Centered and Culturally Relevant Instruction

Learning is a function of teaching—what is taught and how it is taught—and of student perceptions about themselves as learners.<sup>36</sup> Researchers have identified four key mindsets that support students in succeeding academically and persevering in the face of challenges: (1) belief that they belong at school; (2) self-confidence in their ability to succeed; (3) belief that their effort will lead to success; and (4) belief in the value of the work.<sup>37</sup> Through its attention to creating an inclusive and collaborative school environment and to integrating opportunities for SEL, SJ Humanitas has taken strides to support youth in developing these mindsets that advance academic growth.

Pedagogical approaches at SJ Humanitas also aim to cultivate these productive mindsets, as educators engage students in culturally relevant learning opportunities that allow them to deepen their knowledge and skills as well as learn about their identities, critically assess the world around them, and reflect on their development. Specifically, educators at SJ Humanitas use a student-driven approach that includes:

- interdisciplinary projects that engage students’ social, emotional, and academic skills;
- shared inquiry with a critical lens;
- relevant content for students’ cultural and identity exploration; and
- scaffolding of student learning in individualized ways.

The science of learning and development tells us that instructional strategies like these fuel student learning. The research explains that skillfully implemented instruction that incorporates student-centered and culturally affirming instruction, conceptual understanding and motivation, and strategies to learn how to learn are powerful practices to support academic and cognitive growth.<sup>38</sup> The combination of communicating high expectations for students, providing engaging and relevant instruction, and delivering adequate supports for learning further enables students to succeed.

SJ Humanitas has implemented these instructional approaches as a means of supporting students in reaching their fullest potential. Notably, it has done so by aligning the school’s curriculum and pedagogy to its mission of social justice and by providing opportunities for student-centered and culturally relevant learning, so students can gain the knowledge and skills to achieve self-actualization and become the best version of themselves.

#### Using Interdisciplinary Projects to Drive Learning

Following the school’s vision of self-actualization and social justice, learning at SJ Humanitas is furthered and enhanced by the use of interdisciplinary units of study and assessments that allow students to make connections across content areas, particularly as they explore issues related to equity, justice, and their local communities. Interdisciplinary projects are an important pedagogical practice at the school, where teachers work in their grade-level teams to create a project that integrates knowledge, skills, and habits addressed in the different content areas they teach. These units also support students in applying the knowledge and skills gained in different classes to plan, design, and execute inquiry-based projects. Furthermore, these learning activities are collaborative in nature, thus providing additional opportunities for students to practice many of the social and emotional skills that are taught in advisory and reinforced throughout the day.

To illustrate, toward the end of the school year, 10th-graders **create a museum** on a selected topic—a performance assessment that measures student learning in a hands-on manner, across a range of subjects.<sup>39</sup> In teacher Jeanette Ramirez’s advisory class, students choose a theme based on topics they studied in their other classes, such as art, history, or English. Past topics include activism, industrialization, imperialism, NAFTA, immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, and police brutality, among others. To create the museum, the advisory group discusses the different jobs that are needed to execute the exhibit: curators to select and label artifacts and objects, educators to walk the audience through the museum, and exhibit designers to create and design the different displays and the floor plan. Other students would need to write a vision for the museum, explaining what visitors will see and experience at the exhibit. Each role demands a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Once these museums are created, students visit other groups’ exhibits and the exhibits are evaluated with a rubric. According to teachers, this project is very engaging for the students and enables students to connect their learning across subjects. They explained that the museum project also offers students an opportunity to develop their capacity to work in groups, build consensus in making decisions, deal with the inevitable conflicts that arise, and follow through to completion. These are social and emotional skills that students will need in other contexts—outside of school, in college, and in the workplace.

A 10th-grade project focused on social movements is another example of interdisciplinary learning at SJ Humanitas. During the first semester, students learn about various movements—the farm workers movement, LGBTQ+ rights, and the #MeToo movement, among others. In groups, students **write an essay and create a play** based on one of their chosen topics. Plascencia explained, “This project is mostly humanities and art. We try and balance the essay with something fun and more creative, so that was the play.” Similar to the museum project, students have to use concepts and skills that they have learned in different classes, while using their creativity, ability to perform, and ability to work effectively in groups with their peers. In addition, these projects allow students to show what they know through a meaningful and culturally relevant learning opportunity that helps them build an understanding of their communities and the ongoing fights for social justice.

While the school has supported students in interdisciplinary learning and connections in history, art, ethnic studies, and English classes, it has found it harder to infuse science and mathematics into this practice. Plascencia acknowledged the challenge, saying, “It is definitely an area of growth, and something we are actively working on.” However, teachers have found ways to include mathematical analysis in integrated projects. For example, in one 10th-grade project, students explored the relationships between the economic policies that were implemented after World War I and World War II; they analyzed graphs and tables with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and other data points. Students read the Treaty of Versailles, the Marshall Plan, and the Truman Doctrine. They then developed an argument that described the effect of postwar policies on the economy of different countries, using the primary documents and connecting back to trends they observed in the data. The project culminated in a four-paragraph essay created in small groups, with students working together to identify their arguments, support with evidence, and cite their sources. Plascencia reflected on the project:

It was very heavy on the mathematical analysis, which is great. It was the most interdisciplinary project that we did this year, and we worked really hard on it. We are proud of it.

SJ Humanitas interdisciplinary projects exemplify an effective way to incorporate a variety of whole child instructional practices—collaborative and interest-driven learning, motivating tasks connected to students’ life experiences, and performance assessments—while providing an enriched learning opportunity for students in a community school. Many of these projects also aim to connect students to their lived experiences and their community. These community-based learning strategies tap into students’ experiences and funds of knowledge to drive their learning, and also enable them to learn more about their community and give back.

SJ Humanitas interdisciplinary projects exemplify an effective way to incorporate a variety of whole child instructional practices while providing an enriched learning opportunity for students in a community school.

### Establishing Shared Inquiry With a Critical Lens

In addition to engaging students in interdisciplinary learning practices, educators at SJ Humanitas immerse students in shared inquiry—which emphasizes inferential reasoning, questioning, and student-to-student talk—about complex topics with a critical lens.<sup>40</sup> This common instructional practice engages students in rich learning experiences and provides an additional opportunity for students to explore social justice issues in meaningful and collaborative ways.

Student learning in history and humanities classes exemplifies how educators at SJ Humanitas engage students in shared inquiry around critical issues. Teachers at the school expressed that they see history as a constructed narrative that is told and taught in a particular way, impacting how students see the world and their role in society. Their hope is to help students develop their own interpretations by asking them to **research relevant evidence that represents a wide variety of perspectives**. Students work in small groups to analyze rhetoric, historical events, or media literacy from multiple perspectives in many of their humanities classes. Teachers **use document-based questions**, which are included in the Advanced Placement (AP) history exams, to guide many of the lessons they teach. For example, ethnic studies teacher Guzman and colleagues use some of these questions to guide critical conversations in the classroom:

To analyze rhetoric—*What is the power of words?*

To utilize historical thinking skills and apply them to real-world issues—*Do things happen for a reason or is there a reason why things happen?*

To think creatively about problems and solutions—*If social problems are man-made, how can they be undone?*

To analyze media literacy—*How do I know my thoughts are my own?*

In addition, teachers use **experiential activities** such as mock trials, debates, Socratic seminars, or role-playing to actively engage students and help them develop their historical thinking skills and their capacity to analyze events with a critical lens.

Students at SJ Humanitas also frequently engage in shared critical inquiry in their English classes as they explore topics and literature to build their literary analysis skills. For example, in Martinez’s English class, 9th-graders worked on an interdisciplinary environmental justice unit, in which they read different articles and watched short documentaries to answer six essential questions. The teacher encouraged students to work in pairs or small groups to answer the critical questions and to help them prepare for the **Socratic seminar discussion** they would have the following session. During the small group discussion, a student shared how an episode of one of the documentary series they watched, *Tales by Light*, which shows children working in the Bangladesh slums, opened his eyes. He explained that he saw children younger than him happily running around on a landfill: “These children live in poverty and are exposed to aluminum dust from the environment. They live near the train tracks and factories that pollute.” The student reflected on how this documentary made him think differently about his life and the things that make him happy.

In another example, 10th-grade students read *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, a classic narrative about Africa’s cataclysmic encounter with Europe as it established a colonial presence on the continent. SJ Humanitas teachers support students in unpacking the story beyond the colonization lens. Teacher Sam Siegeler illustrated how they do it: “It’s about highlighting counternarratives and analyzing power dynamics and our rules within them.” Students work individually and with their classmates to understand how resistance works, how people organize to resist a common narrative, who controls the narrative, and who validates it. By collectively exploring these questions, students develop their capacity to connect these topics to their own experiences and critically think about historical events and their consequences to form their own arguments. Siegeler explained, “Being at a social justice school, we explore power dynamics, internalized issues and how those manifest, and what could be done to undo some of that harm.”

The examples above show how educators at SJ Humanitas collectively engage their classes in structured and critical examinations of literature and historical events. Yet SJ Humanitas teachers also use **daily practices** that allow students to build their critical thinking skills in collaboration with their peers. For instance, having discussions with a partner and doing small group work are common strategies used at SJ Humanitas to support students’ understanding of the concepts taught in class, making their learning visible and engaging them in deeper conversations.

These examples illustrate how teachers at SJ Humanitas develop students’ critical thinking skills by engaging them in shared inquiry about complex topics affecting their lives and communities. Teachers provide an expanded and enriched curriculum to students—one of the core pillars in community schools—by actively engaging them to consider, question, and make inferences about real-world issues.

## Using Culturally Relevant Content to Support Identity Development

Educators at SJ Humanitas use culturally relevant teaching practices to provide students with the opportunity to develop their sense of confidence as individuals and increase their engagement in their learning. Culturally relevant teaching enables students who have been marginalized in schools and society to build their skills and capacity to engage in rigorous work.<sup>41</sup> Plascencia explained that the use of this approach at their community school aimed to further students’ belief that they will succeed and achieve the best versions of themselves because of who they are and the experiences they have had, not despite them.

SJ Humanitas’s teachers acknowledge the power of culturally relevant teaching and incorporate identity-affirming practices in their teaching in concrete ways. One way they do this is by utilizing **media and literature pieces that are relevant to students’ lives and experiences** to allow for personal connections. Guzman explained,

When you see yourself in the curriculum, you automatically are more engaged.  
When you see someone who looks like you or who is young like you, or who is poor like you or who is gay like you [you become more engaged].

In her class, Guzman helps students learn about the different aspects that form their identities and how these elements (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) influence how students interpret and engage with the world. The class also explores how these different groups are portrayed in the media and how those portrayals may impact the way they see themselves.

In another example, students in 9th-grade English recently read the memoir *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez, in which the author tells his story of being a young Chicano gang member surviving the streets of East Los Angeles. The English teacher, Martinez, explained that he selects novels that reflect issues that many students may have encountered in their lives. In this assignment, students were asked to write an essay reflecting on how qualities such as perseverance and the need for self-actualization helped the author overcome adversity and setbacks.

According to SJ Humanitas educators, novels like *Always Running* can help students develop their consequential thinking skills—a core social and emotional competency—as they analyze the pros and cons of the author’s decisions and its consequences. In addition, teachers believe that students can gain a deeper understanding about the influence of trauma in people’s behaviors and thoughts and develop empathy toward other people who might be in a similar situation but in a different context.

Educators at SJ Humanitas also explore **culturally relevant topics across content areas** as a way to integrate identity-affirming practices in all aspects of student learning. For example, in an AP English class, the teacher started one class with the guiding question “What does it mean to be African American in America?” An African American student shared how she thought this would be an easy question to answer, since she was African American; however, when they started reading and learning about the history, she realized there were many things she did not know about her ancestors. The class read passages from Frederick Douglass and explored the story of Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine. The student appreciated how all these readings helped her have a deeper understanding of the legacy of African Americans in the United States. She shared,

I’ve learned that I shouldn’t take this [class] as a careless opportunity. I should really be thankful for and take advantage of it because somewhere else I might not get this opportunity. I really loved learning about my history.

SJ Humanitas also explores culture and identity through **art and its connection to social justice**. World history and art teacher Ramirez explained that she sees art as a social commentary and uses it to help students explore social issues. In her class, she taught students an over-500-year-old art technique that has been used to create enlarged portraits. With that skill in hand, students were tasked over the spring break to watch an assigned movie about a character who experienced childhood growing up in war and who created an idealized fantasy world in order to survive the harsh reality. Students were asked to extrapolate from the film and apply the art technique to

re-create a picture of themselves that represented their best self. The self-awareness built through these artistic expressions enables students to see themselves more clearly and notice the inequities impacting their communities. Students have painted murals throughout the campus using this technique to re-create realistic portraits of people who fought for social justice.

In using culturally relevant practices like these, educators at SJ Humanitas explained that they wanted students to develop their voice and confidence—one of the main goals of culturally relevant teaching—and to “unlearn” many of the negative beliefs they carry about themselves and their communities, learned over the years. Plascencia, who grew up in the community, described how she tended to only remember the negative aspects of her community. She explained that a goal at SJ Humanitas is to change that perspective and approach instruction from the assets that students bring and the belief that they can succeed.

[I remember] thinking about how “ghetto,” or ugly, or dirty my community was, and just thinking about all of the negative aspects of my community. What we’re trying to do is ... flip that, and we’re trying to come from an assets-based understanding of our community, and what our kids bring to school, what our parents bring, and instead of focusing on all the negative things, we want to focus on the positives and how can we use those to help propel us forward.

By developing an “asset-driven mentality” to social justice and culturally relevant teaching, SJ Humanitas’s teachers hope to support students to become confident and engaged learners.

## Scaffolding Student Learning in Individualized Ways

SoLD indicates that there are multiple pathways to learning and academic success; that is, students learn, know, and communicate in different ways and at different paces, which requires teachers to design scaffolds that incorporate students’ unique prior knowledge and learning needs.<sup>42</sup> At SJ Humanitas, teachers use tools and strategies to ensure that lessons are engaging and challenging and that all students can access the content taught in class.

At SJ Humanitas, teachers use tools and strategies to ensure that lessons are engaging and challenging and that all students can access the content taught in class.

Teachers at SJ Humanitas draw on a range of **assessment strategies and tools** to support student learning—quizzes, student conferences, classroom observations, interdisciplinary project rubrics, performance assessments, and student self-assessments. These tools help teachers gain insights to better personalize instruction and support students’ growth. Sometimes these insights drive teachers to challenge students to do more than they think they are capable of doing. One of the students explained how one teacher encouraged her to take AP classes, which she had never considered and thought she could not do:

She pushed me. She was like, “I’m going to challenge you now to join AP English literature next year.” I was like, “I can’t do an AP. It’s not possible.” And now, although it’s really hard, I do like the fact that I did join this AP, because it has taught me a lot.

In addition to assessment tools that help individualize learning, educators at SJ Humanitas use a range of practices during lessons to support students in individualized ways. **Opening activities** that “wake up” students’ brains and emotionally hook them to the content being taught is a common practice among teachers that is intended to support student learning. An observed lesson in an 11th-grade philosophy class illustrated this point in action and demonstrated how these community school educators incorporate what students feel and know from their own lives to open the door for learning.

English and philosophy teacher Reboh started the lesson by asking students about their mood. He threw a stuffed animal, which functions in his class as a talking stick, to a student and asked him to share his mood. The stuffed animal was passed around the room, and students shared feelings such as heated, tired, excited, calm, anxious, left out, and bored. Then Reboh connected this question to the lesson in the class—he explained there is a wide range of moods in the class and it is interesting to understand how these moods shape students’ relationship to the world, to others, and to their potential future selves. He asked students to consider the impact different moods have on one’s relationship with these various “existentials” that philosopher Martin Heidegger proposed, which students had been studying in class. After this activity, the class engaged in a warmup exercise in which they were asked to respond to a prompt shown on the screen: “How does mood shape your relationship with the world?” Students had 7 minutes to write a response to the prompt.

In addition to opening activities that connect students to lesson content, educators at SJ Humanitas use other practices during lessons to **support students in differentiated ways**. A look into the practices used in the remainder of the 11th-grade philosophy class illustrate this point. Reboh asked students to show “thumbs up, thumbs down, or sideways thumb if you can explain why Heidegger’s theory of others is subjective.” Seeing a mix of up, down, and sideways thumbs, Reboh proceeded with a quick review of these concepts before introducing a new text. With a handout of this new text in hand, students followed along as Reboh read certain sections aloud. He guided students in writing helpful notes next to the text on their handout and scaffolded the text when students asked for clarification. Once they were done reading the text, students were asked to do a quick check-in with a partner and discuss “What is the big takeaway from the text?” As students discussed the text, Reboh answered a few individual questions.

Reboh supported students’ understanding and acquisition of complex topics and skills by using a combination of **individual work, stimulating group discussion, and pair sharing**. This helped to ensure that all students participated and had opportunities to verbalize their thinking and apply the skills they learn in class. It also allowed him to regularly check on students’ understanding and provide additional clarification and scaffolding as needed. The practices seen in Reboh’s class were similar to those that other educators implemented to support students on their personalized learning journeys.

Teachers at SJ Humanitas also balance individualized attention to students with letting **students work at their own pace**. Teachers explained that they hoped to support students’ growth to achieve the learning goals and nurture students’ ability to work independently. One student shared appreciating this autonomy: “Times where we really need it, she [the teacher] will help us and teach us, and if we don’t really need the help and we really understand the topic, she’ll let us work with our partners or individually.”

At SJ Humanitas, teachers also recognize and value mistakes as part of the learning process. They understand that students may not acquire a skill or understand a concept the first time around. For this reason, students have **several opportunities to make up missing assignments or failed assessments** in class or during office hours, which supports improvement and growth through formative feedback. Physics teacher Sean Dickson acknowledged that there are many reasons why a student could have struggled with an assessment and described how this approach works in his class:

I give them the option of retaking a quiz if they need to, because for me it's important that they have that opportunity. Maybe they had an off day, maybe they weren't able to focus, [or] maybe they missed that material. I usually give them the opportunity to retake assessments to demonstrate that they do know the material.

In another class, math teacher Plascencia engaged students in quiz corrections, which is a common practice on the math team. She explained that after she gives the class an assessment, she regularly engages the whole class in **error analysis**, asking, "What was the mistake? How could [you] avoid this in the future?" This helps students develop their ability to identify their mistakes and learn from them, which normalizes errors as a part of the learning process. Then, students have an opportunity to take a different version of the quiz for a "redo." When assessments are used as part of the learning process, they support students in understanding their skill level and teachers in providing more effective supports. Research has also shown that opportunities for regular feedback, like the ones created in Plascencia's class, help students develop a sense of confidence and competence as they see improvements in their work.<sup>43</sup>

While providing opportunities for retakes is a shared practice at SJ Humanitas, teachers acknowledged the need and challenge to balance second chances with accountability. Martinez explained, "Second chances are important, but you can't abuse them. That's the hard part that we are learning as well. How do we give them the second chance but not let it be a crutch? The accountability plus the support is something that we are also trying to balance."

Teachers at this teacher-led community school also receive formative feedback from students, through the Student Steering Committee, about how to improve the learning experiences that teachers create in the classroom. As they collect and analyze this feedback and modify their teaching practices to better serve these students, they model a growth mindset and a spirit of continuous improvement. It is a collaborative effort that helps teachers be more effective and ultimately benefits students' learning experience and growth at the school.

## Leveraging Teacher-Driven Professional Development

Teachers learn the school's shared pedagogical practices through a robust agenda for professional development that leverages staff expertise. Principal Austin said he looks to the community for ideas and sees himself as the "collector" or "filter" of these ideas, with the responsibility of "find[ing] the collection of expertise within the staff." Professional learning opportunities, ranging from the annual staff retreat to weekly grade-level team meetings, serve as important spaces for teachers to bring their ideas together to develop and map out interdisciplinary projects that might be adopted and differentiated across grade levels and content areas.

For example, art teacher Ramirez collaborated with community partners and other staff to implement an interdisciplinary art and history project across multiple grades. Students studied the art of exhibit, presentation, and storytelling, originally implemented in Ramirez’s 11th-grade Museum Studies class, by visiting a nearby cultural center to bring attention to a particular topic in history. The project has since been incorporated into all 10th-grade history classes, and discussions were underway about how to incorporate it into the 9th-grade curriculum. School administrators acknowledged that everything that happens at the school is dependent on the individuals within the school space. Assistant Principal Aguilar said, “I think we can really anchor ourselves in some of the values, but in terms of what we’re doing, it’s so dependent on the strengths and interests of the team.”

Indeed, all staff members are encouraged to bring ideas to the table to strengthen practices and to improve student outcomes based on their extensive knowledge of their students. Of the 36 professional learning opportunities offered during the academic year, 26 of them were set and led by teachers, who used multiple forms of data and their experiences in the classroom to identify areas for teaching growth and improvement, and/or who have extensive expertise in a particular practice that could accelerate student learning.

For instance, teachers learn to use a critical lens to refine and improve their teaching through analysis and reflection. Teacher Siegeler acknowledged how difficult developing a critical lens can be for teachers, since many of them were not taught to identify counternarratives or recognize their own areas of growth, and students will call teachers out when they say something problematic. She explained:

You have to humble yourself. You have to realize that there’s a lot you don’t know, being vulnerable enough to say, “I haven’t thought about that power dynamic. Thank you for saying that.” It’s a lot to learn to navigate this space. A lot of learning needs to be done.

Teachers use staff meetings and these professional learning opportunities to develop these skills and get support from other teachers to improve their teaching.

Importantly, professional learning opportunities at SJ Humanitas can fall outside the usual realm of instructional practice and focus on topics such as leadership skills, “Norms of Collaboration,”<sup>44</sup> how to better build community in the classroom, or how to support students’ social and emotional needs. Professional learning opportunities provide a space for teachers to share their ideas, best practices, and student work, and they also represent an important space for teachers to practice and fine-tune their leadership skills by leading conversations and seeking feedback.

SJ Humanitas’s teachers use a student-driven instructional approach to create a supportive learning environment and an enriched curriculum for students that is centered on the school’s principles of social justice and self-actualization. The school’s productive instructional practices—use of interdisciplinary units, shared inquiry with a critical lens, culturally relevant content for identity exploration, and scaffolding and opportunities for individualized learning and growth—reflect best practices from the whole child education literature and are integrated in a way that reflect the school’s commitment to prepare students academically, socially, and emotionally for college, career, and beyond. In addition, teacher-driven professional development exemplifies the school’s commitment to meeting students’ needs and the value placed on teachers’ leadership skills and instructional expertise.

## IV. Instituting a System of Supports

All students have unique assets and interests to build upon and strengthen in their learning journeys. They also have needs and challenges that need to be addressed without stigma or shame to propel their learning and well-being. As schools seek to support student learning and well-being, they must be prepared to address individual barriers to learning and development, which can result from academic challenges or adverse childhood experiences, including discrimination, physical or mental illness, abuse, food or housing insecurity, exposure to violence, or other difficulties.<sup>45</sup>

SoLD principles suggest that effective learning environments take a systematic approach to supporting students' personalized, holistic needs. As shown in its instructional and culture-building approaches, SJ Humanitas seeks to address the needs and nurture the assets of each student and school community member. In addition, the school bolsters student achievement and well-being with a strong support system that is informed by personalization and responsiveness to the needs and capacities of individual learners. Using community-based practices, collaboration, and its organizational autonomies, SJ Humanitas aligns school and community resources to provide a system of support that includes:

- a multi-tiered system of support for all students based on a shared framework of relationship building;
- a range of fully integrated services that address the needs of the whole child and encourage healthy development; and
- expanded learning opportunities that enrich students' learning experiences and nurture positive relationships.

In addition, the school intentionally leverages community resources and partnerships to support professional development so that SJ Humanitas educators can effectively maintain whole child education practices. In this section, we detail how school staff, teachers, families, and community partners have come together to build and maintain a system of support that seeks to propel student learning and well-being while addressing existing educational inequities.

### Developing a Multi-Tiered System of Support for All Students

Teachers and administrators at SJ Humanitas consistently explained the importance of school structures and practices (i.e., advisory, council, mentoring) in which relationship building is primary. According to the staff, these spaces and practices enable students to feel known by their peers and adults and allow them to see themselves as vital contributors to others' learning and well-being.

With the centrality of relationships at this community school, SJ Humanitas sees relationships as the key strategy for identifying the need for academic, social, and emotional supports. Notably, SJ Humanitas has incorporated its relationship-building structures and practices into the school's multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). MTSS is a comprehensive framework and approach that aligns resources, initiatives, and interventions to support students' academic, behavioral, and social needs. The approach synthesizes team- and data-driven interventions and practices aimed to improve the outcomes of every student through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices.

At SJ Humanitas, MTSS includes a wide range of supports—from universal screenings conducted through everyday practices like restorative circles, to small group interventions like office hours, to more intensive and individualized support such as the school’s practice of “adopting” students to ensure they hold a deep one-to-one relationship with an educator and full inclusion for students with special needs in order to enable all students to access the curriculum and social environment. These practices—which demonstrate the care and responsibility each community member has for each other—are foundational to SJ Humanitas as a community school.

### Universal supports

At SJ Humanitas, a range of universal supports are critical in deepening student and teacher relationships and often work to identify when something might be “off” with a student. These include **routine, everyday practices** that SJ Humanitas educators implement, such as greeting students at the classroom door each period and spending passing periods in the hallways. Teachers use information gathered through these practices to monitor students’ well-being and determine if additional and/or more intensive interventions are required. It is important to note that all adults, ranging from office staff to counselors, engage in these sorts of practices. As one student shared,

It’s not only the teachers. We also have people inside the office [who] help out, too. If they notice I’m struggling, they’ll have a one-on-one talk outside. We have three counselors.... Let’s say there’s a kid crying outside their class. Nobody’s just going to walk past them.... Somebody’s going to go up to them and help resolve the situation and make it better.

SJ Humanitas also uses **regular data reviews** as a way to assess how students are performing academically, socially, and emotionally. These data reviews, which occur each 5-week grading period, assist teams in ensuring that every student is receiving the supports needed to be successful and in assessing the effectiveness of interventions that might already be in place. Multiple forms of data, including attendance and grades, are reviewed during professional learning days and/or within grade-level teams. If teachers identify a change in a student’s performance or engagement, teachers will discuss what they can do to support the student in the class(es) in which the student is experiencing difficulties.

All students who receive a D or F grade at the 5-week data review are required to attend **office hours**. Office hours are a routine practice at SJ Humanitas that are intended to provide universal support for students and to enable their success. Through office hours, each teacher provides after-school support, generally offered 1 hour per week. Students who are required to attend office hours must attend two sessions per week, preferably in the class(es) in which they are experiencing difficulties. Office hours are not restricted to just those students in need of additional support. Many students attend to finish homework, ask clarifying questions, and check their grade with the teacher. Current and former students expressed valuing this time to finish assignments, receive additional help from their teachers, and spend

Office hours are a routine practice at SJ Humanitas that are intended to provide universal support for students and to enable their success. Through office hours, each teacher provides after-school support, generally offered 1 hour per week.

time with teachers outside of classroom hours. Students appreciated teachers' accessibility, and our observations of office hours revealed that office hours were well attended, with approximately 10 students attending sessions for a range of reasons. One student shared that office hours signaled to him that teachers cared about the progress and futures of students: "It's really amazing, because they're really trying to get you to be engaged with your work so they could help you in the future, because that's all they're really trying to do."

Data reviews can also lead to a **Very Important Person (VIP) meeting**, where an advisor, counselor, administrator, and/or teacher meets with identified students and parents to determine if interventions are needed. Coordinator Roberto Vega explained how SJ Humanitas practitioners approach the VIP meeting. He noted that teachers understand that each individual student who is struggling presents a unique story and situation, and they attempt to figure out what is happening inside or outside of the school that might be contributing to students' achievement. He also noted that VIP meetings include conversations to determine who (students or staff) holds a relationship with the student and how that person can serve as a source of support.

**Student planners** also serve as an important form of data and are an integral part of SJ Humanitas's intervention system. All students are required to maintain a planner, which is provided by the school, in which students detail and organize their homework and activities. Planners also contain color-coded stamps that teachers give to students to help them monitor assignment submissions, grades, and tardies. Students receive a red stamp if they have a 2.0 GPA or below after a 5-week grading period, and for each tardy. Staff members indicated that stamps provide a quick way for advisors and other staff members to get a glimpse of students' progress and begin a conversation about any issues that may be causing low grades and/or tardies. The planner provides data that enables staff to determine if a VIP meeting is necessary and to communicate with parents, teachers, and other staff members on how students are doing and what supports or services could be of assistance. Advisors track students' stamps each week as part of their advisory grade.

The SJ Humanitas **advisory class** also provides an opportunity for all students to deepen relationships with teachers and peers, and it allows for enrichment and intervention. Because advisories are dedicated spaces for relationship building, teachers indicated that their interactions with students during these classes helped them understand what a student might be going through, in and out of school. They noted that it enabled them to respond more quickly when a student was absent and be more understanding when a student appeared to be tired, in need of alone time, or in need of conversation. Advisors' knowledge and understanding of students contribute to regular 5-week data reviews and needs assessments.

All students at SJ Humanitas benefit from the care and support provided by the school's academic **counseling** staff. In 2018–19, there were three dedicated academic counselors for the campus of 521 students. "Usually a school of our size will have one counselor. Each counselor [at SJ Humanitas] is in charge of 100 kids to 150 kids to 200 kids. That way the kids can have access to [counselors] as much as possible," explained Martinez. Indeed, in 2018–19, the average high school counselor caseload in Los Angeles Unified School District was 433 students.<sup>46</sup> SJ Humanitas's budget autonomy enables the school to invest in academic counselors and establish a counselor caseload that fosters relationship building and ongoing support for students' holistic needs. Budget decisions are made collectively by the Governing School Council, with the principal, teachers, parents, students, and community partners determine allocations. Recognizing the necessary trade-offs, SJ Humanitas invests in counselors to demonstrate the school's shared commitment to supporting the

social and emotional needs of students and creating an environment where students feel known and cared for by adults. One student shared that she felt seen and understood by her counselors at SJ Humanitas:

Let's say I don't have a smile on my face or I'm not happy. [My counselor will] come up to me and ask, "Are you all right?" And he knows. He might know at least to say that something might be wrong or something's up or something's bothering me. So the adults here, they care.

For students who feel they need additional advice or guidance, or want a caring adult to speak with, the school's **open-door policy** fulfills this need. Students shared that the policy enables them to seek an extra level of "love" from administrators and counselors, especially during times of crisis. One student recalled how her counselor reminded her "that there are people who love you and want to help you" while going through a particularly challenging time.

These universal supports foster relationships that enable each student to feel known, and they help staff discover their unique strengths and needs. Assistant Principal Aguilar shared:

I think with all the different supports that we have in place, and the advisory curriculum, and doing councils, there comes a point where if it's [in] advisory, [or with] teachers, or counselors, ... when the kids do open up, you've built the trust, they've lowered the affective filter, and they're open, and it all comes pouring out, and you're [able to understand their needs].

Universal supports also serve to advance the school's vision and mission to achieve social justice by serving and developing the complete individual.

### **Supplemental supports**

The universal supports described above drive decisions regarding the need for supplemental supports. When it is determined that a student requires additional supports to excel and thrive, educators can use a range of strategies, including more intensive and frequent use of universal practices. Yet educators and leaders also pointed to one practice that was commonly used at SJ Humanitas to meet students' holistic needs—the process that the school calls **adoption**.

SJ Humanitas's adoption process provides an opportunity for students who need additional support to establish a deep one-on-one relationship with a teacher. Each teacher assumes a caseload of three to four students to provide them with continuous encouragement to work toward their goals. The identification of students for adoption is based on a combination of data reviews and the information teachers gather through advisory and everyday routines and practices. Teachers work with their adoptees on a range of emotional, social, and academic issues. According to Martinez, adoptions enable students to build trust and help them in breaking down barriers that often prevent them from requesting assistance on issues that might be impeding their academic progress:

We work with them on ... anything that they're going through. We pull them out [of class], depending on the teacher, once a week or once a month. And we have a conversation, sometimes not even about school, just, "Hey what's going on with life? How are things at home? I know you mentioned your brother moved away, or mom was dealing with some issues before, what's going on with that? How can we

help?” ... The biggest hurdle for us is to break down that barrier, but once we do, it gives [us] the full opportunity to address and help the kids out with anything that they need.

**Restorative practices**, like restorative circles, are also a key lever in the school’s system of supports. Restorative circles at SJ Humanitas build on established relationships among teachers and students and encourage students to take responsibility for their actions and restore relationships as necessary. SJ Humanitas’s embrace of restorative circles has helped nurture a culture of open dialogue among educators and students, enable students to practice self-expression, and proactively build the skills they need when conflicts arise.

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### Targeted supports and interventions

When it is determined that a student requires additional assistance to excel in their learning and to ensure their well-being, SJ Humanitas provides a number of services and interventions. Students have access to a school-based **psychiatric social worker** (PSW) who provides services to the students across the four schools on the Cesar Chavez campus. The PSW devotes one day a week to providing services to SJ Humanitas students, with all four schools on the campus sharing the expense. The PSW provides a range of preventive, early intervention, and acute mental health assessments and treatments in individual or group settings. Students are referred to the school-based PSW by teachers, counselors, or administrators.

For those students with individualized education plans (IEPs) or 504 plans, SJ Humanitas maintains a full **inclusion model**. Resource specialist program (RSP) teachers and paraeducators work with teachers in classrooms to provide students with support to implement their individualized plans. In 2018–19, SJ Humanitas had two full-time RSP teachers and two full-time paraeducators.

In 2019, SJ Humanitas partnered with school-level representatives from across the Cesar Chavez campus and with community partners, including EduCare, to address the needs of the growing population of students who had recently immigrated to the United States—“newcomer” students. Practitioners and partners met monthly to design and establish supports and interventions that could improve the learning experience for students and assist them in gaining the skills and knowledge needed for secondary and postsecondary success. As Aguilar shared, “We want these students to be able to tell their story, know it is valuable, feel comfortable, feel a sense of pride, and understand their power.” As a result of the group’s collaborative work, they identified weekly speakers and community partners who presented to students in their English language development course on a range of pertinent issues, including mental health services and challenges, postsecondary programs, and the career trajectories of Spanish-speaking professionals. Councils are a routine practice in these spaces. Students are “cohorted” to nurture supportive relationships and to make sure they do not feel isolated in core classes. A teaching assistant travels with the cohort

of students from class to class to provide support, and teachers commit to translating PowerPoints and other materials. EduCare provides an after-school space for students to participate in a range of enrichment activities, including exercise classes and tutoring.

In addition to on-site services and interventions, students are also connected to a range of outside agencies, such as mental health providers, when needed. Indeed, SJ Humanitas strengthens its multi-tiered system of support by providing integrated academic, social and emotional, and health services to maximize students' progress and achievement. Partnerships with local agencies make this possible.

## Partnering to Strengthen Integrated Student Supports

To bolster its multi-tiered system of supports, SJ Humanitas has cultivated a system of integrated services, which works to ensure that students receive supports that address their academic, social and emotional, health, mental health, and safety needs. Teachers and administrators indicated that building relationships with community organizations has assisted in providing a range of on- and off-site services for students and families.

Relationships with community partners also serve to strengthen the school's culture of care and trusting relationships. Long-term relationships with a few community partners have enabled a more personalized approach to integrated student supports through which teachers and other adults can build on students' prior knowledge and experiences to create and provide needed supports. While all staff members work collaboratively to connect students to needed services, counselors, administrators, and the EduCare coordinator play a critical role in coordinating these supports and services.

As described, SJ Humanitas has maintained a partnership with **EduCare** since its days as an academy at Sylmar High School. The partnership was originally developed to create a support network for the school's summer bridge and after-school program but has evolved and deepened over time. EduCare has a **full-time site coordinator**, Jennie Rosenbaum, who works on the SJ Humanitas campus (see "EduCare's Full-Time Site Coordinator" for more information on the role of EduCare's coordinator). Rosenbaum works to develop connections across the community based on the needs of students, teachers, and families. Rosenbaum also works with students, teachers, families, and community members to integrate EduCare's social-emotional learning initiative—ACE—to strengthen students' learning experiences. As one staff member shared, "Jennie [connects] people to people. [There is a need] and next thing you know, 10 boxes of food for families at Thanksgiving."

### EduCare's Full-Time Site Coordinator

SJ Humanitas's partnership with EduCare is an integral part of the school's everyday work. Jennie Rosenbaum, EduCare's coordinator, is at the center of this work. Rosenbaum, formerly employed by the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), has worked with SJ Humanitas since its inception. As a representative of LAEP, Rosenbaum played a role in the founding of SJ Humanitas and, as she states, "earned her street creds" by dedicating weekends and late nights to writing SJ Humanitas's school proposal with a team of teachers. Once school doors opened, Rosenbaum served as SJ Humanitas's community school coordinator—a position supported by LAEP. In 2017, Rosenbaum

joined the EduCare staff, continuing her relationship with SJ Humanitas. A memorandum of understanding between EduCare and SJ Humanitas guides the partnership. Rosenbaum's position is funded by EduCare (through grant funding) and by SJ Humanitas.

Rosenbaum's long history with the school has strengthened the relationship between EduCare and SJ Humanitas—a relationship built on trust and a shared commitment to the school's vision. As well, her longevity and deep commitment to the school's mission and vision has supported strong community ties and partnerships. Rosenbaum attends staff retreats and professional learning opportunities, and she has long-standing and deep relationships with staff, students, and families. Her main role is to support the school in addressing students' social and emotional needs. Rosenbaum accomplishes this through her direct work with students as well as through the provision of professional learning to teachers. She also connects the school with additional partners and serves as a thought partner as an active member of the school's leadership team. On any given day, Rosenbaum can be found in a classroom providing support to a teacher, providing one-on-one guidance to a senior applying to college, planning an after-school event, tracking down a needed service for a student and/or family, or attending a staff meeting.

Alumni interviewed for this study often referred to their ongoing relationship with Rosenbaum as a source of support, motivation, and inspiration. As one alumna commented, "If I ever need anything, I can always contact [Ms. Rosenbaum]."

Through the support of its EduCare coordinator and the individual work of leaders and teachers, SJ Humanitas also maintains several partnerships with other community organizations that provide **on-site services** to students and families. For example, the school maintains a partnership with **Mission City Community Network**, a mobile health clinic that is available to students and families on campus on a weekly basis. Mission City offers a range of health services (e.g., physicals, vision and auditory screenings, sexual health) and mental health services. Student registration packets include an application to receive services through Mission City, expediting the process that determines if families qualify for services and when they can be seen.<sup>47</sup>

**Hathaway-Sycamores Child and Family Services (Hathaway-Sycamores)** also provides on-site mental health services to students and families, such as crisis intervention and individual, group, and family therapy. Hathaway-Sycamores also provides linkage services to other agencies, in-home family support, and access to medication support. Services are available to students attending all four schools on the Cesar Chavez campus. Relationships with Mission City and Hathaway-Sycamores, both nonprofits, are managed by a Cesar Chavez administrator. According to one estimate, one fifth of the student body receives on-site services through these outside providers or through the school psychiatric social worker.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to services provided on campus, SJ Humanitas relies heavily on **external services**. SJ Humanitas has developed an inventory of community resources, coordinated by counselors, administrators, and EduCare's coordinator, for the purpose of referrals. Relationships with external providers and community-based organizations are vital in ensuring that access to services is a seamless and manageable process. Identifying external services to meet the needs of students and families is a shared responsibility, and staff are resourceful in finding ways to meet families' needs.

School counselors, teachers, and administrators work closely with the EduCare coordinator, who is continuously working with outside partners to provide additional services that students and families might need.

Principal Austin commented that the EduCare coordinator's connections with the community have been critical in providing intensive support to families, including procuring temporary shelter, food and other supplies, and legal assistance. In one case, Austin recounted, the school was able to provide both hotel and food vouchers for a family until they were connected to an appropriate shelter. The coordinator, through her relationships with the community, is able to accommodate the specific and varying needs of students and families. Principal Austin commented:

[Families] start to see that I can't solve their problems for them but that the school is a good center of information. We have connections in the community to say, "Go look here." Whether it's for food services, mental health, or even something like donating a refrigerator.

SJ Humanitas aims to convey to parents that school is more than just a place where kids take classes but is a resource, according to Principal Austin, "where you can find out where to get help on everything else." Assistant Principal Aguilar summarized the school's inclusive mentality with regard to meeting the needs of students and families: "What community resources do we have that can help us meet those needs [of students]? That expands to parents and families, and ways we can help meet their needs too, because they're the support system of our kids."

Efforts to secure and provide a range of integrated services at SJ Humanitas are intended to support students in feeling empowered as individuals with unique needs and to normalize the need for academic and mental health supports. Alumni from SJ Humanitas indicated just that—they felt safe to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually and to ask for help when they were facing challenges. One student shared how integrated student supports have made a lifelong difference for him:

I lived in really bad poverty and never saw myself even going to high school or college.... That wasn't in the plan for me. Orientation [at SJ Humanitas] really got my attention and it made me believe in myself. The teachers and mentors were working with me one-on-one. I became very good at reading, [got] high test scores, and began doing [well] in school, but they were not only focusing on my academics but what I was going through. I was going through very emotional hard stuff. The counselor[s] took their time talking to me and making sure I was OK.... It really stuck with me, knowing that I can seek out help and that I'm not going to be shamed.

While SJ Humanitas is able to provide or connect families with a range of services, the process by which this is done and secured can have its challenges. First, some challenges emerged around the responsibility for securing partnerships and referring students and families to services, which was shared among administrators, counselors, and the EduCare coordinator. That is, as teachers identified the need for supports for students and families, the individuals who worked to connect stakeholders to services varied and, in some instances, overlapped.

A school counselor described the organic, yet at times complicated, process by which students and families were connected with services. The counselor explained that the need for a referral was typically made by a teacher or counselor. Yet they noted that students have also reached out to a staff person to request a referral, and other times the request has come from a family member. Though administrators and counselors tended to serve as the point person in coordinating services, the counselor reported it was not unusual for multiple individuals at SJ Humanitas to be working simultaneously to secure services. Overall, while this distributed model assisted in sharing responsibility and allowed those most familiar with services and students to spearhead a given process, it created opportunities for staff to engage in redundant and inefficient actions.

In addition to these processes, staff at SJ Humanitas noted some data challenges related to the referral and service provision. While individuals at SJ Humanitas indicated that counselors and administrators held primary responsibility for tracking service provision with external partners, a range of privacy concerns, reporting policies, and caseloads often prevented school staff, including counselors, from following up or monitoring the impact of services. Reporting policies and caseloads also restricted the sharing of information between school staff members. As one teacher shared,

If social services has come to the home recently, it's mostly the counselor that will know about that, unless a student has told a teacher about it. And I think the counselor's the point of contact for [who] would be a good candidate for counseling.

SJ Humanitas has developed a locally designed in-house whole child data system that assists in keeping track of students' assets, grade point average, attendance, and mentors, as well as referrals to services, when known. The school's adoption process and VIP meetings also help grade-level teams keep track of referrals and services. Welligent—a districtwide web-based software system used for online IEPs and tracking of related services—assists in monitoring specified services. Despite these tracking efforts, there is not a comprehensive data system that ensures equitable and efficient distribution of services.

A final challenge relates to funding and its impact on available services. According to English teacher Martinez, the provision of services changes yearly based on available funding (philanthropic, state, or federal funds support these organizations): “[Services provided] change every year just because of funding with different programs. That's always a hard thing.... If their grant runs out, then they can't be on the campus anymore, so it's always in flux.” Martinez noted that while the school leverages its structures and established relationships with students, families, and community to identify gaps and possible resources, the constant need to monitor and revisit service availability created some difficulty and anxiety for staff.

SJ Humanitas is working to improve the provision and integration of supports and services to ensure that the academic, social and emotional, health, mental health, and safety needs of all students are met. In addition to its efforts to develop and sustain relationships with local agencies and community organizations that are key in providing a range of on- and off-site services for students and families, SJ Humanitas aims to improve referral and tracking mechanisms that will enable the school to ensure that the needs of all students and their families are met.

## Supporting Learning and Well-Being With Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities

A well-designed system of supports also includes opportunities for students to feel safe and sheltered from excessive stress, build their sense of strength and agency, and achieve success. Expanded learning time and opportunities—a community school pillar—can contribute to building this system. Expanded learning time can support instruction and skill building; provide mentorship; tend to students’ physical and mental health; build on students’ interests; tap into student, family, and community assets; nurture positive developmental relationships; and provide authentic learning opportunities.<sup>49</sup> SJ Humanitas provides a range of enriching learning opportunities that take place after school or beyond the school campus, often offered in partnership with community organizations.

A well-designed system of supports also includes opportunities for students to feel safe and sheltered from excessive stress, build their sense of strength and agency, and achieve success.

These expanded learning settings at SJ Humanitas are community-based; that is, they provide students with the opportunity to learn from additional adults who support and mentor students and enable students to develop trusting relationships that foster students’ learning, development, and well-being. These community-based expanded learning opportunities include:

- **After-school programming:** EduCare offers a range of “interest clubs” that are meant to enrich students’ learning and provide students with access to new and varied experiences. Interest clubs include fitness, sign language, guitar, film/storyboard, and the “take action” campaign club.
- **ACE Initiative:** Provided in collaboration with EduCare, the Achievement and Commitment to Excellence (ACE) Initiative is designed to create a healthy and positive school culture that promotes student achievement and prepares students to succeed in college, career, and life. Provided in the summer and throughout the school year, ACE works with students and parents, and trains educators to create a school environment that meets the social and emotional developmental needs of students—including feelings of belonging, safety, and community.
- **Teacher-sponsored clubs:** SJ Humanitas provides Academic Decathlon, Student Leadership, Teens United, Adventure Seekers, Imagine Green, Pride Club, Art Club, and Math Club to elevate student voices and connect expanded learning time opportunities to students’ in-school learning. These after-school clubs provide a way for teachers to connect students’ academic learning to students’ interests, backgrounds, and experiences.
- **Off-site learning:** School staff, in collaboration with community partners, develop an array of off-site learning opportunities that take place during the school year and summer that highlight the assets in the community and develop the skills and knowledge that will enable students to contribute to their community. Partnerships with Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural and Bookstore and the Skirball Cultural Center, for example, aim to lift student voices

and raise awareness of issues that impact students' lives and learning. Off-site learning opportunities often provide students with the chance to share their learning, including presentations of final projects, to audiences of community members.

- **UniCamp:** SJ Humanitas students participate in overnight enrichment activities such as UCLA's UniCamp—a summer camp for students to explore the outdoors and learn alongside UCLA student volunteers. Students learn leadership skills, play, and experience the rich assets in their community and surrounding areas.

Deep relationships with community partners, such as SJ Humanitas's established partnership with EduCare, allows for the tailoring of expanding learning programs to better meet the needs and interests of students and to ensure opportunities align with the school's mission. For example, because EduCare's coordinator is viewed as a member of the SJ Humanitas staff, attends SJ Humanitas professional learning opportunities and retreats, and works directly with students, joint decisions can be made about what programs to offer. This integrative strategy allows SJ Humanitas to draw on the rich cultural and social resources and assets in the community and to respond to issues facing the larger community.

Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities—such as those described above—are an important component of a system of supports that assists students in feeling safe, encourages agency, taps into students' strengths and interests, and promotes academic success.

## Partnering to Strengthen Teachers' Capacity to Deliver Supports

To support student learning and well-being, teachers at SJ Humanitas feel that they need the tools and knowledge that can best prepare them to establish an effective learning environment that tends to students' holistic needs. As such, partnerships at SJ Humanitas not only focus on the provision of integrated supports and services and expanded learning opportunities, but also extend into the realm of professional learning, in which practitioners collaborate with external partners to better understand and implement whole child education practices.

Partnerships at SJ Humanitas not only focus on the provision of integrated supports and services and expanded learning opportunities, but also extend into the realm of professional learning, in which practitioners collaborate with external partners to better understand and implement whole child education practices.

For example, partnerships with UCLA's Center X and Cal State Dominguez Hills enable staff at SJ Humanitas to connect with a network of teachers, professors, and experts who address relevant topics such as trauma, special education, social and emotional skills, and adolescent brain development, and model leadership and communication skill development. In addition to formal learning opportunities, teachers and administrators have developed and maintained relationships with Center X faculty that enable informal learning opportunities (a large number of SJ Humanitas teachers and administrators are graduates of UCLA's Teacher Education Program, Principal Leadership Institute, or Education Leadership Program).

Through a 5-year partnership with Cal State Dominguez Hills's School Leadership Program, SJ Humanitas has engaged in regular professional learning on the topic of leadership and the "Norms of Collaboration,"<sup>50</sup> which often takes the form of daylong off-site sessions. As staff members recognized, developing the skills to engage in shared decision-making, to connect with others, to communicate the needs of students and colleagues, and to collaborate are essential to teacher leadership and community schooling. One teacher affirms, "It's good to have those connections ... and have a team that does that [learning], and [then] we implement. Having those partnerships really helps." Other teachers echoed this appreciation to call on community partners to address professional learning needs in the school community.

Summer retreats provide an opportunity to invite external partners to deepen staff's knowledge about a particular topic and/or practice, facilitate discussions, and increase preparation. For example, SJ Humanitas routinely invites Circle Ways—a nonprofit providing training on councils—to its summer retreats to strengthen and reaffirm its commitment to restorative practices and improve teachers' facilitation skills. EduCare regularly plays a key role at the staff retreat in facilitating opportunities for the entire staff to learn about and engage in community-building activities. And UCLA faculty members are often invited to attend retreats to present and/or facilitate conversations on exigent issues.

At SJ Humanitas, the needs of the whole child are tended to by using a strong support system that is informed by personalization and responsiveness to the needs and capacities of individual learners. To develop and sustain a system of supports, SJ Humanitas staff, teachers, families, and community partners come together to address existing disparities through the provision of a multi-tiered system of support, a range of fully integrated services, and expanded and enriched learning opportunities that nurture positive relationships and students' readiness for learning. They also leverage community resources and partnerships to support professional development so that SJ Humanitas educators can effectively maintain whole child education practices.

## V. Reinforcing Whole Child Education in Community Schools

SJ Humanitas is a teacher-led community school that advances student learning and development in the service of fulfilling its mission and vision to support students in their journey toward self-actualization and social justice. This case study demonstrates that through established structures, systems, and practices, SJ Humanitas supports student learning and growth through SoLD principles. (See Appendix C for the list of the school’s whole child-aligned practices and structures that build on SoLD.)

At the heart of SJ Humanitas’s whole child approach is the creation of a **supportive environment**. First and foremost, the school maintains a culture—firmly grounded in strong, trusting, caring relationships—that is woven into every aspect of the school’s day-to-day functioning and fuels students to persist and overcome adversity. Educators at SJ Humanitas recognize that students are nourished by strong relationships that enable them to recognize their potential and see a vision of themselves that is based on pride in their heritage and that motivates them to become the best version of themselves. For students, the path to college and well-being is supported by the dedication of staff, including administrators, teachers, counselors, and community partners, who ensure that all students are known in their full humanity and that their academic, social, and emotional needs are addressed.

In holding relationships at the center of its approach to community schooling, SJ Humanitas is able to embody, implement, and integrate the full range of whole child education practices. The school creates an inclusive and culturally relevant environment by promoting strong relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, and relational trust, fostered through advisory class, regular check-ins, and a peer mentor program, and by engaging parents and staff in school activities and governance. Based on the strong relationships staff members build with each other and their students, they are able to identify targeted supports and interventions for individual and family needs as they arise. This relationship-driven culture creates a safe and inclusive environment for students to build connections with adults and peers and explore their identities within the safety net of the school community, which feels like a family for many students.

The school is also equally focused on supporting students’ **social and emotional development** through the explicit instruction of social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-awareness, interpersonal skills, agency, perseverance, and resilience. SJ Humanitas also takes strides to integrate SEL inside and outside the classroom, with plenty of opportunities for student collaboration and leadership. Exemplifying its commitment to relationships and self-actualization, SJ Humanitas takes a restorative approach to behavior and discipline, which supports students in making positive decisions and conflict resolution that promotes healing and care. Finally, the school’s commitment to social and emotional well-being extends to adults working with students, offering teachers opportunities for connection, learning, and support.

With a supportive school environment and culture that attends to students’ whole selves and values relationship building in place, educators implement **productive instructional strategies** that incorporate a student-driven, interdisciplinary, and culturally relevant learning approach that elevates the school’s principles of self-actualization and social justice. Students are challenged academically to become critical thinkers and analyze text to understand the significance of historical, societal, and personal factors that are involved in systems of oppression and justice. They

engage in shared inquiry and in interdisciplinary, hands-on projects, which provide opportunities to practice academic, social, and emotional skills. Educators also use a range of scaffolds to support student learning in individualized ways to ensure that students are engaged and their individual learning assets and needs acknowledged.

The efforts of SJ Humanitas as a community school are further bolstered by an **integrated system of supports** that aims to ensure that all students can be academically successful and physically, emotionally, and socially well. A system of supports—one that includes a multi-tiered system that identifies barriers to students’ learning; integrated services that address the needs of the whole child and encourage healthy development; and expanded learning time and opportunities that provide enrichment, nurture positive relationships, and foster students’ readiness for learning—is built on strong teacher–student relationships, routine data collection and sharing, and family and community partnerships. SJ Humanitas provides supports that meet the individualized needs of learners and families through a flexible system that taps into teachers’ understanding and knowledge of students. Everyday practices and structures assist in the identification of supports. Partnerships support in-school and out-of-school services that provide health, mental health, and social assistance and grow teacher capacity. Because SJ Humanitas is a teacher-led school, all staff members play a pivotal role in connecting with students and identifying the need for supports.

As this case study shows, SJ Humanitas is a school that is committed to whole child education. It implements an array of practices and structures that allow this commitment to come to life, with the aim of developing and empowering students, staff, and the local community.

Educators and administrators at SJ Humanitas point to the school’s identity as a community school as a key reason why they have been able to implement and sustain this approach. At SJ Humanitas, whole child practices support or are supported by its community school approach and underlie the school’s ability to provide a high level of care to students and ensure their growth and development. This concluding section highlights how being a community school supports the school’s commitment to its students, its families, and the larger community. In what follows, we highlight how community school practices and structures—designed and led by teachers—enable the school to fulfill its commitments and support the whole child.

## **The Deep Connections Between Community Schooling and Whole Child Education at SJ Humanitas**

Community schools represent a place-based school improvement strategy in which “schools partner with community agencies and local government to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.”<sup>51</sup> At their foundation, community schools tend to hold key commitments and values to enable and support equitable schooling. Foremost among these are a deep commitment to community-based teaching and learning and a belief in the power and assets of local stakeholders to inform and drive equitable change. In addition, community schools seek to elevate the voices and perspectives of their community members, particularly educators, as they implement practices and structures that attend to students’ holistic needs. It is through the implementation of these key values and components that community schools can reinforce whole child education—integrative practices that can support the holistic growth and well-being of students.

Though some practitioners, districts, and organizations clearly identify community schools as a framework for whole child education, for others there remains a common perception that community schools primarily focus on the provision of external supports and services rather than influencing the character of teaching and learning as a means of enabling student success. This concluding section aims to address this misperception by illustrating the deep connections between community schooling and whole child education practices.

Below we describe the key features of community schools and elevate the community-based practices and structures at SJ Humanitas as a means of showing how community schooling can influence the learning that transpires within each classroom, cultivate an inclusive and supportive school environment, and provide critical supports that surround and undergird student learning. In doing so, we suggest that community schools like SJ Humanitas may be institutions that are aptly able to implement and sustain a range of whole child education practices that help students learn and thrive.

### **Features of community schools and how they support whole child education**

Community schools are intentionally context-sensitive as they adopt and implement structures and programs that nurture the assets and address the needs of their local communities. Yet research shows that four features—or pillars—are consistently present across community schools.<sup>52</sup> (See Appendix A for a description of the four community school pillars.)

**Integrated student supports** are a prominent feature of community schools. They aim to address out-of-school barriers to learning through partnerships with social and health service agencies and providers, ideally coordinated by a dedicated professional staff member. To illustrate, some community schools implement SEL, conflict resolution training, access to wellness clinics, trauma-informed care, and restorative practices as part of their system of supports and services.

As described, partnerships with in-school and out-of-school providers, such as Mission City Community Network and Hathaway-Sycamores at SJ Humanitas, serve as an example of this pillar. Similarly, the school’s enduring partnership with EduCare and implementation of ACE serve to support students’ academic, social, and emotional learning. In addition to partnerships, SJ Humanitas ensures students receive needed supports and services by building strong teacher–student relationships and utilizing routine data collection and sharing practices that enable the staff to understand and get to know the individual needs and strengths of each learner.

Integrated student supports reinforce whole child education in many ways. First, this community school pillar shares a common aim with the whole child education principle focused on developing systems of support: to establish a safety net for students and families to promote their holistic well-being and stability. In addition, access to integrated supports promotes other components of whole child education. It can support healthy social and emotional development and enable students to remain resilient in the face of challenge and adversity. Integrated student supports can also enable rich learning. When supports are integrated and personalized like they are at SJ Humanitas, learning can be reinforced, academic needs can be met, and learner assets can be further nurtured.

Another pillar of community schools is **expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities**, including in-school, after-school, weekend, and summer programs, which provide additional academic instruction, individualized academic support, enrichment, and learning opportunities

that emphasize real-world projects and community problem-solving. These additional forums for student learning are particularly powerful when they adopt, emphasize, and integrate with learning goals and approaches established within students' primary learning settings.

At SJ Humanitas, an array of expanded and enriched learning opportunities is offered to students, during and after school, on campus and off. These opportunities are often delivered in partnership with community organizations to build on students' interests, provide a safe and caring environment, and deepen and nurture positive relationships with caring adults. In addition to teacher-sponsored clubs, after-school programming, and summer programs, a number of teachers have incorporated off-site learning opportunities into classroom learning through partnerships with community organizations to provide students an opportunity to learn about critical issues impacting their community and to identify strategies for making change. The school's ACE Initiative, offered in the summer and throughout the school year, in partnership with EduCare, aims to foster a caring school culture and build students' social and emotional skills. The initiative offers a series of workshops and events and provides ongoing support and training to school staff to better meet the social and emotional developmental needs of students.

Indeed, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, like those at SJ Humanitas, can work in conjunction with classroom instruction to engage students in productive instructional strategies that allow for more student-centered and culturally relevant learning opportunities. They can also propel whole child education by providing additional opportunities for identity development and social and emotional growth, further showing how community schooling reinforces whole child education principles.

**Active family and community engagement** is another common feature of community schools that advances whole child education. This community school pillar seeks to involve parents and other community members in the school as partners in shared decision-making around children's education. In addition, community schools often become neighborhood hubs by providing adults with educational opportunities and other supports.

SJ Humanitas was designed to serve as a resource for the community and has erected democratic structures that enable all stakeholders to reflect on the vision and mission of the school to provide an education that best serves students and families. Students, families, and community members are actively involved through Student Steering Committee (SSC), student-led conferences, and a range of community partnerships that enrich the learning experiences of students and provide opportunities for students to contribute to the life and well-being of their community. As described by an SJ Humanitas staff member, "not only [are we] a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but [we are] also looking to them as a resource."

Meaningful family and community engagement recognizes trusting relationships as foundational to ongoing learning and development and to building a culture of shared responsibility among teachers, families, and students. The strong web of relationships fostered through family and community engagement in community schools provides opportunities through which all members of the community can thrive. This relationship web helps a school to be a supportive environment—a key principle of whole child education. Engagement can create a community in which members have a strong sense of connection and belonging and are committed collectively to students' holistic well-being and success. The feeling of belonging is particularly important

if students are to develop an academic mindset through which they feel that they are capable enough to succeed at challenging work, that they fit into intellectually demanding classes and environments, and that challenging undertakings have personal value to them.<sup>53</sup>

A final common feature of community schools is **collaborative leadership and practices**, which seek to build a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility using such strategies as site-based leadership and governance teams and teacher learning communities.

These practices are central to the work at SJ Humanitas. Formal collaborative structures such as its Governing School Council, which includes students, families, and community partners; an Instructional Leadership Team; grade-level teams; and the SSC demonstrate the school's commitment to create an inclusive and empowering school environment. Through these structures and practices, educators, students, and families can build and share their knowledge and expertise to inform how their community school advances student progress and well-being. Several structures specifically support teacher leadership to ensure that those individuals who work most closely with students guide the school's vision and design the community-based practices that can best meet the needs of students and families. The collaborative leadership and practices that community schools like SJ Humanitas embody contribute to the advancement of whole child education by helping to develop a supportive school environment that values stakeholders' perspectives and knowledge and that nurtures the whole person. These practices are also vital to building a culture of professional learning and shared responsibility. Stakeholders understand that they are valued and that their insights are important to enabling students to grow and develop as individuals and learners.

### **Integrating community school pillars to support whole child learning**

As you can see, each community school pillar supports student learning and reinforces the central principles of whole child education, demonstrating the deep connections between the two approaches. Yet community school pillars hold the most potential to further whole child education practices when they are integrated in deliberate and context-sensitive ways to meet the holistic needs of students and communities.

The following examples illustrate how these pillars are interwoven to support the growth, progress, and well-being of all students across academic, social, and emotional dimensions at SJ Humanitas.

In 2019, staff noticed a significant increase in the population of newcomer students at their school and recognized their distinct and varied learning needs. In response, multiple stakeholders—teachers, administrators, and community partners—came together to collaboratively develop an action plan to support their learning and development. Jointly, they developed and adopted a curriculum that would be delivered through students' English language development (ELD) class and via after-school programming. Students were also placed in cohorts, moving from class to class together. This allowed for a teaching assistant to travel with each cohort to identify and provide a range of learning supports. In addition, cohort-based learning supported students' emotional and social well-being, as it provided more opportunities to students to develop positive relationships with their peers.

Community partners at SJ Humanitas also mobilized. The school's primary community partner, EduCare, offered expanded learning time opportunities after school that included enriching experiences like exercise classes as well as academic tutoring. Other partners also acted to provide a system of support to students by developing and participating in a weekly speaker series in which relevant and meaningful topics were explored—health and mental health resources and issues, postsecondary learning opportunities, career exploration, etc.

In another example, the school has strived to incorporate students' perspectives and feedback into collaborative decision-making processes. Through structures like the SSC—a committee in which all students participate—students reflect on their learning, including community-based projects and assignments. They also reflect on the learning environment and share their perspectives on the effectiveness of the schedule; everyday school practices; expanded learning time opportunities; and the provision of a range of student supports, including office hours and the school's open-door policy. Information gathered through the SSC influences curriculum and practices and strengthens supports and enrichment offerings. The SSC also works to bolster relationships and deepen trust between students and adults by reaffirming a shared commitment to the vision and mission of the school. Through these efforts, SJ Humanitas has demonstrated how it created and leveraged collaborative decision-making and engagement with students to inform the character and scope of the learning activities in which they are immersed and the supports they can access. In doing so, the school has created forums and practices that can enhance student voice and agency and develop students' interpersonal skills and self-awareness.

As seen through these examples at SJ Humanitas, community school pillars can be interwoven to reinforce and bolster whole child education. Together, community school pillars coalesce to build learning environments that support students' healthy development and academic success. Together, the pillars form a system of supports for students and families that promote healthy social and emotional development. They engage students in productive instructional strategies that allow for student-centered and culturally relevant learning opportunities, meaningfully engage the community, and foster supportive school environments that recognize trusting relationships as foundational to ongoing learning and development.

## **The Promise of Community Schooling for Whole Child Education**

Whole child education prioritizes the full array of a student's developmental needs as a way to advance educational equity and ensure that every student attains their fullest potential. It recognizes that students' learning opportunities, both in and out of school, as well as their school environment and relationships, influence educational and life outcomes. Adopting whole child education requires designing learning environments to support holistic learning and development; developing curriculum and instruction for meaningful and culturally relevant learning; preparing educators for whole child practice; and developing policy, partnerships, and structures that support the whole child. As a school, SJ Humanitas has designed its environment with these features and aims at its foundation and, in doing so, has had a measurable impact on supporting the success of its students.

Yet the school's ability to create a rich and supportive learning environment that enables student success was nurtured not only by its commitment to whole child education principles, but also by its vision and commitment to being a community school. As the evidence demonstrates, SJ Humanitas implemented characteristic community school features that coalesced to create

a school environment that attended to students' academic, social, and emotional development in student-centered and culturally relevant ways. It also embodied key values of community schooling that were infused in practices and structures that fostered positive relationships, a sense of collective responsibility, and an acknowledgment of the importance of varied experience and expertise in supporting a vision of equitable schooling.

This in-depth investigation into SJ Humanitas demonstrates that the school's community school pillars and SoLD-aligned principles are mutually reinforcing as they work together to build learning environments that support whole child development and academic success. This finding suggests that instead of being centrally focused on the provision of wraparound services, community schools may be institutions that are uniquely able to instantiate an array of whole child education practices that propel learning and well-being.



This in-depth investigation into SJ Humanitas demonstrates that the school's community school pillars and SoLD-aligned principles are mutually reinforcing as they work together to build learning environments that support whole child development and academic success.

## Lessons and Takeaways

Across the country, we see a growing awareness of the need for schools to be nurturing environments that further not only students' academic prowess but also their social and emotional well-being and development. The difficult events of 2020 have laid this need bare. The compounding effects of ongoing displays of racial violence, increasing social and economic insecurity, and the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have put a spotlight on the long-standing need for dramatic changes in our schools. To support student development and well-being—particularly in times of extreme hardship—schools must incorporate structures and practices that can better nurture young people's resilience, agency, and full identities while mitigating the impact of adversity. In doing so, schools can create learning settings that enable students to grow as learners, individuals, and citizens.

SJ Humanitas demonstrates how a community school may be a vehicle for whole child education—a school design and vision that can advance an array of student outcomes and enhance the equitable character of schooling that has long underserved the most vulnerable U.S. populations. While SJ Humanitas is just one school among many engaged in this important work, this study provides lessons and insights for those committed to bringing about equitable and whole child school transformation in their settings. Here, we share some of these key themes and their implications for policy and practice.

Perhaps most centrally, SJ Humanitas is a school grounded in a **clear vision** that comes from and is sensitive to the community. The school's vision was born from community, as its founding educators worked closely with local partners to design a school that would be responsive to the needs of local stakeholders and would create a path for postsecondary opportunity. They collectively identified the goal of self-actualization as a guiding principle for their school that informed the pedagogical approaches and additional practices the school implements to enable its students to grow and thrive along their individual trajectories. While seeking to help learners grow as individuals, the school also sought to further collective aims. By holding a commitment to social justice and democratic principles in its vision, the school has also adopted practices and structures that further these aims, which are embedded and actualized in their daily interactions with students, families, and partners.

With its vision, the school holds **relationships as central** to learning and development. SJ Humanitas has created ample opportunities for stakeholders to develop positive relationships that support learning and well-being. From the structures and practices that allow educators and students to build long-standing positive relationships to those that aim to foster collegial connections, the school centers the idea of care as a foundational value in building school community. Moreover, it is through the development and sustainability of these caring relationships that educators at SJ Humanitas often identify and provide key academic, social, and emotional supports that enable their students to grow and persist.

SJ Humanitas is also grounded in and organized around the idea of agency—**agency among students, educators, and community**. At SJ Humanitas, nurturing student agency and voice is evident in an array of school practices, ranging from student representation on school committees to student leadership opportunities that allow young people to lend guidance and support to their peers and other school stakeholders. The school also seeks to empower students through its interdisciplinary, culturally relevant curriculum and uses student-centered and inquiry-based learning strategies that help students strive toward self-actualization as they build positive identities and critical thinking skills.

As SJ Humanitas supports students in recognizing their many strengths and assets, it recognizes that this work requires building adult agency in the learning space. As such, **teacher collaboration, leadership, and professionalism** are foundational to SJ Humanitas’s vision. The school’s organizational structure and built-in autonomies assist in providing teachers with the flexibility and freedom to introduce new pedagogical approaches, implement new projects, and design the curriculum in ways that meet students’ needs and interests. It also creates ample opportunities for educators to guide professional learning and encourages teachers to reflect on their own practice and identities, engage in shared inquiry, work across disciplines, and learn from their own mistakes—strategies that align with the school’s student-centered approach to empower them as professionals and individuals.

To capture and elevate the agency of communities and families, the school uses a range of strategies to engage and draw on the knowledge of **families and community assets** to further the mission and vision of the school. This includes creating consistent formal and informal avenues by which stakeholders inform and guide school decision-making. It also includes transforming the school into a community hub through which students and families are connected to resources to support their well-being. Long-standing and key partnerships with community organizations offer resources to help meet students’ needs and overcome barriers to learning. This approach reflects a belief and confidence in the knowledge and resources of the community to solve issues to support and advance equitable change.

With its commitment to empowering the voices and perspectives of its stakeholders, SJ Humanitas has installed structures that **enable collaboration and collective problem-solving**. As an organization, the school is self-reflective and creates opportunities to question and improve what it does in a collaborative way. Assistant Principal Aguilar reminds us that “[SJ Humanitas] is a living organism—it’s adaptive.... We implement social justice changes as we get new ideas, or as the data changes.” In creating consistent spaces for collective deliberation, the school works to develop a sense of shared responsibility for student success and well-being. Moreover, it lifts stakeholder expertise—particularly educators who work most closely with students—to sustain a community- and justice-based educational program that can meet the varied and shifting needs of students, families, and the community. While this organic and distributed approach to action and problem-solving has served SJ Humanitas well, increased systemization could provide additional supports to practitioners as they balance both in-class and out-of-class responsibilities.

Finally, to create and sustain its unique community school approach, the school has leveraged its autonomy as a Pilot School to **secure and organize its resources** to support the creation of its whole child school design. Educators and school staff have worked relentlessly to maintain the school’s vision and to adapt processes to meet emerging challenges that could alter their operations and programming. SJ Humanitas’s success is a testament to the deep commitment of its educators, administrators, and community, yet its progress and sustainability has not been without challenges. Staff noted the instability they face with the ongoing presence of insecure funding streams for services. They also described the difficult realities of securing, coordinating, and tracking service and referral provision in their semiautonomous, teacher-led community school. While staff at SJ Humanitas have been able to maintain their community schooling approach amid these obstacles, their experiences suggest that more secure funding sources and infrastructure to support community schools and whole child education practices could improve their functionality and ability to meet students’ varied needs.

## Appendix A: Community Schools and Their Four Pillars



Source: Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute.

## Appendix B: Methodology

This case study investigated how a community school created and sustained a school environment grounded in whole child education practices. It considered how practitioners created an inclusive culture in which high school students felt connected to their school; engaged in deeper learning through meaningful pedagogy and instruction; developed social and emotional skills, including through restorative practices; and had access to holistic supports, which allowed them to academically succeed and to live well-rounded lives. Findings were intended to help practitioners and policymakers understand how community schools can be vehicles for advancing a whole child education practice that promotes equitable learning and helps students overcome barriers to learning.

With these aims, this investigation sought to answer the following five questions:

1. How are supportive environments that promote strong relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, and relational trust fostered in community schools?
2. How are productive instructional strategies that connect to student experience, support conceptual understanding, and develop metacognitive abilities instantiated and supported in community schools?
3. How do community schools promote the social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets that enable self-regulation, interpersonal skills, perseverance, and resilience?
4. How do community schools create systems of support that enable healthy development, meet student and family needs, and address learning barriers?
5. What policy and administrative structures enable community schools to create and sustain their whole child education approaches?

Because the study sought to surface best practices aligned with whole child education and community schooling, researchers used purposeful sampling to identify schools that could be “information-rich cases.”<sup>54</sup> The research team sought to learn from a community school that had a demonstrated record of success in advancing student outcomes and creating a rich and supportive learning environment, particularly among students who face adverse circumstances. Identifying the structures, practices, and cultural features that have facilitated success provides insights into factors that can enable these type of supportive, whole child cultures to take hold.

Social Justice Humanitas Academy is an example of an information-rich case and was, in turn, selected as the focal unit for this investigation. The research team identified the school site through chain sampling.<sup>55</sup> The team conducted informational interviews with researchers and field experts to identify community schools with strong whole child education models that had a demonstrated record of supporting student outcomes and community responsiveness. Researchers then triangulated insights garnered from experts and conducted additional background research on identified schools to understand their impact and schooling approaches. Through this process, the research team identified SJ Humanitas because of its record of success (see the section titled “SJ Humanitas: Meeting the Needs of Students and Families” for the school’s data) and evidence of its strong implementation of a community school model that furthered students’ academic, social, and emotional growth.

To answer the study’s research questions, a three-person research team engaged in an in-depth case study approach. Case studies allow researchers to investigate real-life phenomena in context, thus generating understandings of a phenomenon and its interplay with its environment.<sup>56</sup> This design is also best suited to studying phenomena that require an analysis of multiple sources of data and when the researcher has little or no control over what is studied.<sup>57</sup> With its sensitivity to context and its ability to capture a multitude of processes, a case study approach was an appropriate and ideal method to elucidate the dynamic and complex ways that schools support whole child development.

## Data Collection

Data were collected from October 2018 to December 2019. Primary data sources for this study include interviews, observations, documents, and databases.

### Interviews

The research team conducted a total of 43 interviews with key stakeholders, including the principal, administrators, teachers, students, alumni, and counselors at SJ Humanitas (see Table A1). Interviews with current students were conducted across 2 consecutive days in April, and interviews with staff took place in spring and fall 2019. The school’s leadership organized focus group sessions with students across grade levels who could speak to the school’s climate and instructional practices as well as share reflections about their experiences at the school. School leadership also worked with the research team to identify teachers to invite for individual interviews. This strategy used the knowledge and experience of the school’s leadership to identify respondents who could best speak to systems, practices, and structures that the school has used to support its community school model and its whole child education components.

**Table A1**  
**Study Interviewees**

Role	Number
Principal and Administrators	3
Teachers and Teacher Leaders	7
Community Partners	3
Counselors	1
Students	20
Alumni	20

Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and lasted 30–60 minutes. Interview prompts asked participants to describe the school’s key pedagogical and discipline practices; its staff onboarding and professional learning processes; its approach to supporting students socially, emotionally, and academically; and its restorative justice practices. Interviewees were also asked to discuss challenges that have emerged in the development and implementation of the identified pedagogical practices and their community schooling approach. At times, the

researchers tailored the protocol based on the role of the interviewee, tenure with the school, and classroom observations made. This differentiation ensured that particular questions could be explored in more depth with the respondents who were most likely to hold relevant knowledge on the topic. Interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and submitted for transcription services.

## Observations

Observations comprised the second primary data source. The research team attended student-led conferences; Student Steering Committee sessions that provided feedback to teachers; the annual staff retreat; and professional learning activities, including an ACE training facilitated by EduCare. Attendance at these events provided insight into the school’s collaborative approach to instruction and ongoing professional learning around whole child education practices and also allowed researchers to triangulate data retrieved from interviews and documents on the school’s professional learning supports and intentional culture-building efforts.

The three-person team also conducted site visits to the school to observe practices and to interview school leaders, teachers, and students in situ. (See Table A2 for observations and site visit information.) Visiting the school and different classes during the school day allowed researchers to garner a range of perspectives and insights from individuals who varied in their affiliation with the school and/or familiarity with its inclusive culture and community schooling approach.

**Table A2**  
**Observation and Site Visit Information**

Date of Visit	Observations Made
October 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student-led conferences—Students from grades 9–12 meet with their family and teacher to discuss academic goals and progress</li> <li>• Professional learning—Focused on theme of relationships and the brain</li> <li>• Student Steering Committee*—Student representatives present feedback to teachers</li> </ul>
April 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom observations*—Advisory, English, ethnic studies, Integrated Math 2, philosophy</li> <li>• Classroom observations—American lit, developmental math, English, Integrated Math 3, physics, world history/art</li> <li>• Office hours, senior mentoring sessions</li> </ul>
June 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff retreat—Annual retreat for staff to build community and revisit the shared mission and vision of school</li> </ul>
August 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional learning—ACE training facilitated by EduCare</li> </ul>

\*Classroom observations spanned grades 9–12.

## Documents and databases

The final data source for this study consisted of organizational documents and databases. The research teams collected and reviewed documents, including:

- **Administrative documents:** school policy, mission, and vision statements; written and electronic communications sent to students and parents; documents and readings provided to teachers for professional learning; schedules; and webpages
- **Curriculum and assessments:** professional learning materials, curriculum overviews, classroom visuals, and rubrics for teacher feedback and performance assessment
- **District documents:** district data about the school's performance and district data about the school's demographics
- **Press:** news reporting about the school's history and performance, news about the district's discipline policies, news and documents about state education policies, and documents on neighborhood demographics

Researchers reviewed these documents to understand the school's history, its mission and impact, contextual factors, and its programmatic approach to teacher and student learning. Curriculum and assessment materials also helped researchers triangulate data with regard to the continued implementation of the school's project-based approach to learning, its integration of social and emotional skills development into academic learning, its system of professional learning supports, and its efforts to fulfill its mission to achieve social justice through the development of the complete individual by increasing students' social capital and their humanity while creating a school worthy of all children.

## Analysis

To analyze the data, the researchers engaged in a multistep process. First, they created a preliminary code list based on the ideas present in the study's framework, which focused on the principles of whole child education and the community school pillars. They then refined the codebook after site visits and preliminary interview transcript review to include themes, structures, and practices that emerged from the data. In this process, researchers clarified, added, or deleted codes from the initial list to improve code definitions, minimize redundancy, and capture district dynamics.

Once the codes were refined, researchers applied them to interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. To increase interrater reliability, researchers met periodically to refine their analyses and the consistency of their findings. Once coding was completed, researchers triangulated findings across multiple data sources, seeking confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence, and collected additional data related to points that were emerging from the evidence but needed further clarification.

## Appendix C: Whole Child Education at SJ Humanitas

SoLD Principle	School Structures and Practices That Support It
<b>Supportive Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship-building structures (e.g., advisory, office hours, frequent check-ins)</li> <li>• Structured stakeholder collaboration and decision-making (i.e., staff planning time, Governing School Council, Instructional Leadership Team)</li> <li>• Culturally relevant and identity-safe practices</li> <li>• Consistent family engagement (e.g., student-led conferences, parent advisory nights, parent panels)</li> </ul>
<b>Social and Emotional Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification and assessment of students' social and emotional assets and needs</li> <li>• Dedicated time and space for social and emotional development (e.g., advisories, council)</li> <li>• Ongoing and integrated opportunities to practice social and emotional skills, habits, and mindsets</li> <li>• Support of student leadership and agency</li> <li>• Restorative approaches to management and discipline</li> <li>• Bias awareness development</li> <li>• Attention to social and emotional capacity building for adults</li> </ul>
<b>Productive Instructional Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of interdisciplinary and culturally relevant teaching and learning</li> <li>• Shared inquiry with a critical lens</li> <li>• Culturally relevant learning to support identity development</li> <li>• Individualized learning scaffolds</li> <li>• Teacher-driven professional development to support teacher capacity</li> </ul>
<b>Integrated Systems of Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-tiered system of support for all students based on a shared framework of relationship building</li> <li>• Integrated services that address the needs of the whole child and encourage healthy development</li> <li>• Expanded learning opportunities that enrich students' learning experiences and nurture positive relationships</li> <li>• Partnerships to strengthen teacher capacity</li> </ul>

## Endnotes

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14. The Pilot School initiative in LAUSD had a specific focus on creating new, innovative schools to relieve overcrowding at Belmont High School. Over the course of the next 2 years, the cap of 10 Pilot Schools was reached, and teachers lobbied United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the local teachers union, to expand the number of Pilot Schools within the district. In 2009 a second MOU was ratified by LAUSD and UTLA for an additional 20 Pilot Schools districtwide. By the fall of 2011, the total number of Pilots districtwide was 32. The most recent agreement between LAUSD and UTLA, ratified in 2011, lifted the cap on Pilot Schools altogether and allows any school in the district to adopt this model through a proposal process. For more information on LAUSD’s Pilot Schools, see <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/2841>.
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