Beacons of Hope:
Stories of Transformation and Equity in California Schools

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CALIFORNIA

"This is a student falling out of her school from the sky as she metaphorically graduates. In the fall comes out all the things she has learned in school and elements hoping to reshape the framework of traditional school and inspire future change."
Art and statement by Chelsea Chhem.
Instagram: @chhelseabear

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated deep inequities in our education system. Students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and other marginalized children and youth disproportionately felt the impact when schools closed. It was not just the digital divide in access to technology and internet needed for virtual learning—some students lost access to food, health care, and other resources that they previously received at school. Many students were also impacted by the absence of social connection with friends and teachers and the trauma of people around them losing their livelihoods and, more tragically, their lives to COVID-19.

In the midst of the difficulties and uncertainties, students, educators, and families have adapted—taking on new, bigger roles in their homes and communities, mastering new technology, and expanding how and where they teach and learn. In the coming pages we describe and celebrate their resilience, dedication to community, and commitment to racial justice, and start to reimagine a system where schools like this are the norm. We cannot go back to "normal" as vaccination rates rise and schools return to in-person learning. We have changed, and now it is time to reimagine and rebuild our education system. Picture a network of schools that centers relationships, supports the whole child, invests in its staff, makes learning relevant and rigorous, and constantly seeks to transform itself to be more equitable and racially just. Picture the bright future for our state if every school and every young person across California had that.

To begin to create this education system for all, we can look to examples from schools across California that are already striving for and living this vision. **These beacons of hope provide inspiration and guidance for students, families, educators, and advocates who want to bring this vision to their schools.**

These stories are all examples of school communities that rely on the strengths and assets of their members, who came together to identify a local solution to a specific need or challenge. These stories offer concrete examples of systems and structures that support racial equity; encourage partnerships between students, families, and educators; prioritize mental health and well-being; center trusting relationships; and create the conditions for stronger teaching and learning. We have the opportunity to spread practices like these across the state and transform the system so that every young person gets to thrive in a school and community built for them.

Prioritizing and Protecting Student Mental Health

SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT | SACRAMENTO, CA

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, students and families from low-income communities of color identified an urgent need for mental health support, belonging, and relationships as they struggled with stress, anxiety, isolation, and lack of access to resources. In response to this crisis, schools and districts must prioritize fostering and protecting students' social-emotional health, in addition to academics. Sacramento City Unified School District's approach elevates how every school system can center mental health and wellness as a foundation for learning.

Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) has incorporated mental health supports into its schools to help every student thrive and has pivoted and expanded programs to meet students' needs during the pandemic. From 2014 to 2016, Sacramento County's rate of youth suicide was higher than the state average, and survey results showed that around 20% of 7th-, 9th-, and 11th-grade students at SCUSD had considered suicide in the past 12 months. The district recognized that this mental health crisis was also a social justice issue, because the data showed disparities in school engagement for Black and Brown students, students in foster care, and other student subgroups. In response, SCUSD took this as a call to action to use mental health indicators to identify students in need of support and connect them to services.

SCUSD uses attendance, behavior, and course performance data to identify students who may need mental health supports. There are 29 Student Support Centers (SSCs) at elementary, middle, and high schools across the district that integrate and coordinate all behavioral and mental health and social services. The SSCs use a multi-tiered system of supports to target varying levels of need, starting from universal services provided to all students (e.g., social-emotional learning and peer mentorship), up to intensive supports when needed (e.g., crisis intervention). The team of SSC coordinators, plus a youth and family advocate, an intern, and community partners, ensures the services are approachable and accessible within the context of a school's culture and community. The SSCs recently started focused anti-racism equity training to make sure they are supporting students in ways that are culturally responsive, trauma informed, and focused on healing.

When COVID-19 hit, district staff realized they needed to create new pathways to reach students. They shifted outreach methods and held meetings with students, families, and staff to establish the tiered supports virtually. The district created a virtual calming room as a place for students, families, and school staff to find tools and strategies to manage their emotions and feelings and build resilience. These tools include guided meditations, mindfulness exercises, and support hotlines. SCUSD also has an online support center and created a "wellness warmline" as a central place that students and families could call to speak to a live staff person for help or support in many

> "We really wanted to make sure there was no 'wrong door' — whatever their issue was, whether it was connectivity or physical or mental health, there was one place to go."
>
> —Jacqueline Rodriguez, Student Support & Health Services Coordinator, SCUSD

areas, from physical and mental health to support for foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness. In addition, SCUSD launched a [youth mental wellness app](#), Grace, that provides calming activities, local resources, and a personal wellness advisor bot named Grace that provides interactive, compassionate support. As of April 2021,18,446 students across SCUSD have benefited from 114,833 interventions.

The district also created guidance for its teachers and other school staff on how to recognize when students needed support, understanding that they played a crucial role in helping students navigate the COVID-19 crisis. With funding from Kaiser Permanente and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the district adopted a virtual simulation platform called Kognito to train staff on mental health awareness and to recognize signs of distress. SCUSD has also provided "Signs of Suicide" trainings for middle school and high school students so that students know how to help each other and help themselves.

Ixchel, an SCUSD student and participant in the Signs of Suicide program, described what she has learned: "I have learned that if I see signs of suicide I should tell an adult, because suicide is difficult to deal with. Now, as a peer mediator, I help kids express feelings that they might not trust to tell adults."
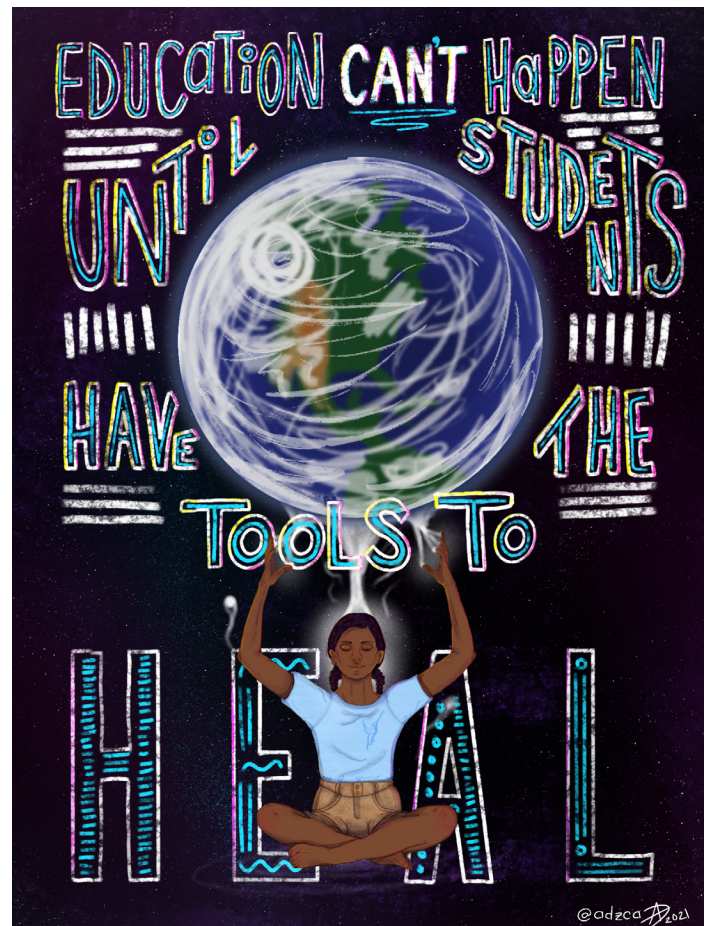
"Students have suffered a collective trauma after already being subjected to an inequitable system. So, allowing healing to happen is the first step." Art and statement by Adrienne Diaz, a community organizer and artist based in Fresno. Instagram: @adzca

KEY IDEAS:

- Collect and analyze data to identify student groups that may need support and access to interventions.
- School-based centers coordinate a variety of supports for students and families, and need funding, staff, and resources to be truly effective.
- A multi-tiered system of supports framework that incorporates an anti-racist and culturally responsive lens ensures that students get the level and type of support they need.
- Offering multiple pathways to reach students and for students and families to reach out ensures that there is "no wrong door" for gaining access to support.

LEARN MORE:

- SCUSD's Student Support Centers
- Student anxiety, depression increasing during school closures, survey finds (EdSource)
- 5 models and a step-by-step guide for education leaders to claim Medicaid funding to increase social and emotional supports for students (California Children's Trust)
- What is a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)? (PBIS Rewards)

Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

Helping New Students Find Community and Connection Through Peer Mentorship

INDEPENDENCE HIGH SCHOOL, EAST SIDE UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT | SAN JOSE, CA

Across California, students have shared how much they have missed connecting with friends and peers during the COVID-19 pandemic—connections that they would typically have had at school. This lack of connection can be especially difficult for students starting at a new school during virtual learning, so it is crucial to create spaces and opportunities for new students to connect with the school community. A program at Independence High School offers an example of how schools can help new students feel welcome and supported.

At Independence High School (IHS), new students are introduced to the school community through an orientation program called Honorary Eagles. The program connects freshmen and transfer students with 11th- or 12th-grade student mentors, who work to build a relationship with their mentees and connect them to the activities, resources, and services the school offers.

Honorary Eagles has existed for years, but the program transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it became especially crucial to help new students feel connected to the school when they could not be on campus in person. Thanks to student leadership at IHS, the program flourished from a single day of orientation into an ongoing program throughout the school year. Mentors met virtually with their mentees, led icebreakers, and shared information about school resources. To continue building and sharing the culture of IHS, even without being on campus, the mentors followed up with weekly check-ins with each mentee via phone, text, or Zoom call.

> "Having a mentor for our new students is a beneficial resource for their transition because it gives them access to an experienced student who can provide valuable insight into campus resources and information. This can help them acclimate not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well."
>
> —Adrian Santiago, IHS student and Lead Coordinator of the Honorary Eagles

This year, Honorary Eagles also formed mentor groups that supported specific student groups, including English learners and students with unique emotional needs, recognizing that these students faced more risk of not connecting with the school community and not receiving the support and services they needed during distance learning. To support English learners, the team looked at the data on incoming students, organized them by language and grade or English proficiency, and then created groups assigned to bi- or trilingual mentors. These mentors talked to their mentees in their preferred language and in English, and were encouraged to use a very personal approach for their mentees and to be a "light in the darkness" for them, according to Activities Director Bill Logan.

The expansion of the Honorary Eagles program was championed by IHS student leaders. Logan and other school staff provided support and guidance, but it was the students' passion, creativity, and drive that made it a success. During summer 2020, for example, IHS students

Bruce, Jonathan, Sean, and Wilson created an entirely virtual version of the school's campus on Roblox, a virtual universe that lets users create and share experiences with friends and classmates. Other students filmed a video tour of the school so new students could get a feel for IHS without being physically on campus. In the Roblox virtual campus, students can enter their schedules and a guide will lead them to their classrooms; they can also gather and engage with each other through a chat feature. Some teachers have encouraged engaging on Roblox, and the school psychologist has an avatar to speak with students who do not want to engage on Zoom or the phone. This tool is helpful for all new students, but especially for English learners, with the visuals offering comfort, ease, and a way to engage without the difficulty of a language barrier. The Honorary Eagles hope to blend the two worlds together when the school goes back to in-person learning and carry forward many of the lessons and successes they had this year.

> "When I was an underclassman, I had to search on my own. It's important to feel included in your school environment—if you don't, you aren't motivated. If you aren't feeling that connection, junior year comes and hits you really hard."
>
> —Julisa, Honorary Eagles mentor

The peer-to-peer model used by the Honorary Eagles is crucial for effective outreach and support for young people. With six different middle schools feeding into IHS and a huge student body of approximately 2,800 students, some students do not have a single class with someone they know. They need support and connection as they navigate the transition into high school, but many will not reach out to adults for help. As Logan explained, "The district and teachers can send as many emails as they want, but new students don't know who any of these people are, so why would they pay attention or listen? But if that message is coming from another student, it changes the game." New students naturally gravitate toward other students for advice until they are comfortable and willing to reach out to adults. And while the mentors do provide information about academics and school resources, some groups just end up playing video games—which is exactly what organizers want this to be: a way for students to find community and connection at IHS.

Photos by Allison Shelley for EDUimages

KEY IDEAS:

- Students have the initiative, creativity, skills, and experience to create successful programs for themselves and their peers.
- Peer-to-peer mentorship provides new students with important connection to the school community.
- English learners and other student subgroups benefit from working with peers.

LEARN MORE:

- Independence High School Honorary Eagles Manual 2020-2021, developed by students
- Find other examples of student-led programming on Independence High School's YouTube channel
- Best Practice for ELLs: Peer-Assisted Learning (Colorín Colorado)
- Building Effective Peer Mentoring Programs in Schools: An Introductory Guide (National Mentoring Resource Center)
- Podcast: SF High School Students Organize Peer Mental Health Support (San Francisco Public Press)

WE ARE THE HONORARY EAGLES.

We are here for You!

The Honorary Eagles are the Orientation Crew for all new students (freshmen and transfers) at Independence. Honorary Eagles exist to provide support and guidance for incoming students, helping them to transition to Indy and promoting the variety of support and services the campus has to offer. We are here to answer any of your questions, assist with your classes, provide language services, and to help you feel welcomed to our inclusive, diverse, and spirited student body.

Honorary Eagles promotional graphic. Source: Independence High School.

Creating Small Learning Communities to Support Students and Improve Equity and Outcomes

OAKLAND HIGH SCHOOL, OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT | OAKLAND, CA

The widespread reliance on "drill and kill" instruction, standardized tests, and other impersonal practices in schools today has created a system in which many students are not seen as individuals. This has reinforced inequities felt by Black and Brown students, who have historically had less access to supportive school environments and personalized and engaging learning experiences. Oakland High School shows that it is possible to break out of the current system and create schools where every student can be known and understood.

Oakland has long been one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the United States, but its public schools have struggled with opportunity and achievement gaps for students of color and students from low-income families. These systemic inequities were the result of years of financial disinvestment, institutional racism, and exclusion of parents and students of color from decision-making. In 2013, two community organizations active in Oakland high schools commissioned a citywide poll that showed widespread voter support for equitable school transformation. This led a partnership of community-based organizations, district leaders, and the teachers union to write and win a ballot measure in 2014 that would generate $120 million over 10 years to support "Linked Learning," or college and career pathways, accessible to all high school students.

At Oakland High School (OHigh), the implementation of college and career pathways broke up the large high school of more than 1,500 students into smaller learning communities. Using a framework called Linked Learning, the Pathways combine

> "When you deal with the same people throughout the year, you build relationships and try to build trust, so they get to know you as a parent and your student. It becomes easier to address challenges when you have that trust."
>
> —Cindy Oludayo, OHigh parent

rigorous academics with work-based learning experiences and structured supports. Each Pathway has a team of teachers who devote time to regularly check in with each other about their collective students. Pathways also have their own leadership teams, consisting of an assistant principal, case manager, and guidance counselor. Together, this team provides leadership and support for all students within the Pathway, from the time they join in 10th grade through graduation.

School leaders at OHigh envisioned the Pathways as a way to promote racial justice and education equity. To avoid uneven tracking of students into segregated and inequitable groups, OHigh follows a complex process to ensure diversity within and across its Pathways. Students rank their preferred Pathways, and then the school assigns students to Pathways so that each Pathway reflects the demographics of the school as a whole in terms of ethnicity, gender, GPA, and attendance. The school has also partnered with Oakland's Office of African American Male Achievement and office of African American Female Excellence to create classes and support groups specifically for

"Schools should be accessible and welcoming to all, and enough resources and support should be available to all kids no matter their race, income, or disability." Art and statement by Jada Wong, a San Jose-based artist and aspiring illustrator. Instagram: @jadawongg

Black students. These practices are helping to close achievement gaps—in 2019–20, OUSD data shows that the graduation rate for African American students at OHigh was 90%, up from 57% in 2013–14. District leaders attribute these outcomes to the school's culture of high expectations and commitment to every student being seen, supported, and taken care of.

The Pathways create a system in which students, educators, and families can build trust and understanding over the years. Educators and other staff use their regular check ins to identify students who may be struggling— academically or otherwise—and connect them to resources. One such resource is Shop 55, OHigh's wellness center, a partnership between the school, the East Bay Asian Youth Center, and other local community agencies. Shop 55 coordinates medical health, mental health, youth development, and academic support for students. Community-based resources like Shop 55 support student-centered spaces and relational culture. These resources and strong relationships with families allow the OHigh community to come together to support each other through challenges.

If a family at OHigh experiences a hardship, a parent leader they trust reaches out and can connect them to aid and assistance available through the school or district. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close, Cindy Oludayo, a longtime volunteer parent leader, picked up dozens of grab-and-go meals offered by the district and drove them to families that could not access the meals themselves. At large schools like OHigh, it would be easy for students and their families to fall through the cracks, but the trust and relationships created by the smaller learning communities ensure every student can be known and supported.

"What we did was make it very clear that we're no longer going to—because of the way a student dresses, walks, talks, or smells—treat any student differently than any other student. We would be lenient, we would be patient, we would be understanding, and we would hold high expectations for all of our students. And all of our students would get served and get taken care of and get seen, because you can't just have high expectations without having the resources and supports to help make it happen."

—Matin Abdel-Qawi, OUSD High School Network Superintendent and former OHigh principal

KEY IDEAS:

- Small learning communities within large schools allow for students to be known and supported as individuals.
- High expectations for student engagement and academics combined with holistic supports lead to improved outcomes.
- Parent leaders can leverage their deep connections in the school community to provide support and resources to students and families.
- Coordination with community-based organizations leverages community assets and resources to support the school community.

LEARN MORE:

- Why Does Oakland Have So Many Small Schools? (KQED)
- 7 years ago, Oaklanders approved a tax to improve schools. Did it work? (The Oaklandside)
- Access & equity in linked learning: A report on pathway access and academic outcomes for traditionally underserved students (SRI International)

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Strengthening School Teams Through Deep Relationships

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SCHOOL, OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT | OAKLAND, CA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools had to make drastic shifts both to provide virtual learning and to support their communities, and many schools struggled with the transition. Schools that were able to pivot most successfully, such as International Community School, were those that already had a strong relational culture in place before the pandemic, with deep connections among members of the school community.

International Community School (ICS) is a dual-language k–5 immersion school that develops students' bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Spanish by integrating language learning with academic content. ICS is committed to building partnerships with families and students so all students can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically, especially in the current context of a global pandemic and deepening racial and socioeconomic inequities. The school was able to support students and families during the pandemic through the powerful combination of integrated student supports and the strong foundation of trusting relationships staff have built with students and families over the years.

In order to be places where students learn and thrive, schools must be built on strong and trusting relationships between all members of the school community. A key relationship-building practice at ICS is the use of relational parent–teacher home visits. Each school year, teachers meet their students' families in their own homes or other places where they are comfortable. During the visits, the teachers get to know the family and learn more about the student's interests, strengths, and hopes and dreams. These are not typical parent–teacher conferences—the focus is less on academics and more on getting to know the students and

> "Informal relationships are what build really strong formal systems."
> —Eleanor Alderman, ICS Principal

their families as people. This establishes trust between the parent and teacher and provides a starting point from which to have conversations about academics or challenges a student may be experiencing. The home visits help to weave a relational fabric between the student, family, and teacher that continues throughout the school year and beyond.

As a parent of two graduates of ICS, Judith Mendez is someone who is both very familiar with and instrumental to the relational culture at the school. After years of volunteering as a parent leader, she explained, "All this involvement helped me grow on a personal level—I began to develop relationships through spending time with teachers and staff, and I got more confident. I became like a parent coordinator at ICS and was also able to get involved at the district level through the family engagement committee to visit other schools to share concerns and ideas with families in other school communities." She became such a key part of the school community that, rather than lose her when her son graduated, school leaders worked through bureaucratic hurdles and red tape to secure her a paid role at the school as a yard supervisor.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the school leaned on the relationships and skills

ICS parent leaders organize a fundraiser for a family in the community. Source: International Community School

of people like Judith to respond to emerging needs of students, families, and educators, many of whom were struggling with reduced income, food and health insecurity, job loss, and distance learning. Because campus-based staff could not do their typical jobs during this time, they pivoted to new roles that relied on the deep trust and understanding they have within the school community. For example, Judith partnered with ICS's full-time social worker, Diosa Diaz, to reach out to Spanish-speaking families as part of a wellness team that formed to check in with the families of students who were not attending classes during distance learning. Because the families knew and trusted Judith, they were honest and vulnerable about their needs, and an ICS team was able to connect families with help. This included food and technology distribution, training and support on platforms for distance learning, and organizing stimulus check donations and redistributing money directly to families in need of financial support.

Throughout the pandemic, ICS kept up other practices to maintain and deepen bonds within the school community. The principal hosted weekly coffee chats with parents,

where they could ask questions, hear about what's happening at school, and share their thoughts and ideas. The school transitioned its weekly assemblies to happen virtually; at these assemblies, the entire school gathered to connect and give shoutouts to each other. Workshops for families continued virtually and have had better turnout than usual, especially among newcomer families and non-English-speaking families, thanks to live interpretation in Arabic and Mam (an indigenous language of Guatemala). During the pandemic and beyond, the people at ICS will continue to support each other through culture, community, and relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

SMALLER ACADEMIES

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

STUDENT AND STAFF ADVISORIES

"California has the funds and resources to respond to the needs of students and should make the investment in what we really need– creating space for trusting relationships and being able to heal from all we've been through." – Isabel, 10th grader

Art and statement by Innosanto Nagara, an author, illustrator, and activist designer based in Oakland.
Website: aisforactivist.org

KEY IDEAS:

- Relational fabric strengthens the entire school community by creating trust and connection between all members.
- Essential relationship-building practices include parent–teacher home visits, one-to-one wellness checks with families by trusted individuals, regular meetings with the principal, family workshops, and community celebrations.
- Schools and districts can reduce bureaucratic barriers to hire staff with deep connections and experience in a school community.

LEARN MORE:

- [Introduction to Home Visits Training](#) (Parent Teacher Home Visits)
- [Relationship-Centered Schools campaign](#) (Californians for Justice)
- Case studies on leveraging deep relationships and on parent Teacher Home Visits in [A Restorative Approach to Equitable Education](#) (Learning Policy Institute)

An ICS student with his family and teachers.
Source: International Community School

# Transforming School Culture by Hiring Parents to Engage Families

SAN BERNARDINO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT | SAN BERNARDINO, CA

When parents are seen and valued as equal partners in education, it creates new opportunities for learning and engagement. Most schools and districts, however, do not have robust policies and programs in place to welcome parents, recognize the expertise and assets they bring to a school community, and invite their active involvement. As a result, parents of color report feeling unwelcome when they step onto campus. Practices within the San Bernardino City Unified School District illustrate what is possible when parents have the information and opportunities to be actively involved in preparing their children to be successful in school and ready for college.

In the late 2000s, many schools in San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD) were getting by with minimum family engagement. With only a handful of families participating and little meaningful engagement or training, school sites did not feel very welcoming for parents who were seeking more information about how to help their children succeed in the k–12 system and beyond.

In response, starting in 2010, parent leaders of Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC), an affiliate of the statewide PICO CA Education for Liberation network, joined together to advocate for making parent engagement a top priority throughout SBCUSD. As parents began researching alternatives to traditional parent engagement, they learned about the Santa Ana Partnership, a coalition including the Santa Ana Unified School District and local higher education institutions that formed in 1983 to address barriers to educational achievement. Research showed that by focusing on family engagement, the partnership was successful at increasing student enrollment at local colleges and universities.

Parents of students at SBCUSD knew they wanted something similar, so they organized
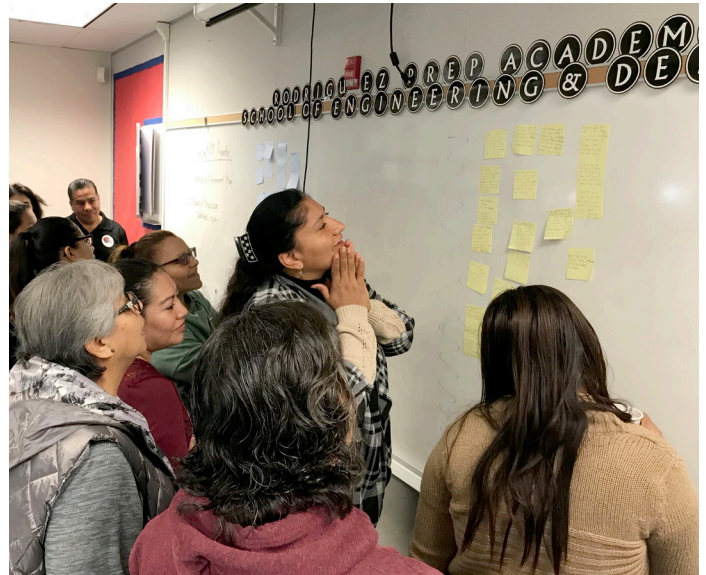
Parents read each other's stories and find common experiences and things they love about their culture as part of a belonging circle at a middle school in San Bernardino. Source: ICUC

a research visit to Santa Ana, inviting board members and district staff to learn about the Santa Ana model. This led to the launch of the "P–16 Partnership" in 2012, a pilot program that included two SBCUSD elementary schools, Juanita Jones and Bradley Elementary; Cal State San Bernardino; San Bernardino Valley College; Riverside Community College; and the University of California, Riverside. Through continuous organizing by parents, the program expanded to include more schools throughout the district. SBCUSD also began contracting

San Bernardino families tour UC Riverside, an activity made possible thanks to parent organizing. Source: ICUC

with ICUC to pay stipends to parent organizers to engage families at school sites, in the community, and in their congregations.

Norma Mejia is a parent of two students in SBCUSD and one of the parent organizers receiving a stipend through ICUC. She shares, "This work is important because parents are keeping up with everything that is happening in the district. Parents often do not know their rights, so ICUC is teaching parents how to talk to principals and the district. I believe that through this program, parents have been helped a lot by receiving information and resources on mental health issues for the family, on how to best support our children academically, and how to help them be prepared for college." In the process, parents like Norma build their skills and leadership to engage in community organizing.

This partnership has engaged thousands of families through training and resources to help

> "Through this program, parents have been helped a lot by receiving information and resources on mental health issues for the family, on how to best support our children academically, and how to help them be prepared for college."
>
> —Norma Mejia, SBCUSD parent organizer

them understand the educational system from k–12 through preparing for college and career. In turn, it is improving outcomes for even more students. For example, families have had the opportunity to tour local universities, like UC Riverside, CSU San Bernardino, University of Redlands, and San Bernardino Valley College.

Thanks to these community organizing efforts, in 2016 the school district opened up six new parent centers at five high schools and one elementary school. Families that have become engaged through this partnership have also had the opportunity to advocate within the district on numerous issues, including increased support for students, parents, and teachers in combination classes, which are formed when students from two consecutive grades are placed in one classroom under the supervision of one teacher; improved social-emotional resources for students across the district; and creating school campuses that welcome parents from the moment they walk through the door.

KEY IDEAS:

- Meaningful parent engagement leads to improved student outcomes and college-going culture.
- Parents, district decision-makers, and staff worked together to research best practice alternatives.
- Paying stipends incentivizes and compensates parents for their time involved in schools.
- Partnerships with community organizations build capacity of parents to participate in advocacy and school decision-making.

LEARN MORE:

- Parents United for Change program (Inland Congregations United for Change)
- Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships
- Case study of the Santa Ana Partnership (W.K. Kellogg Foundation)
- Why Emphasize Active Family and Community Engagement? from Community Schools Playbook (Partnership for the Future of Learning)

ICUC's Parents United for Change hosts a Books and Breakfast event to hand out new books and a meal to more than 140 families.
Source: ICUC

Meeting School Needs Through Shared Decision-Making Among Students, Staff, and Families

FELICITAS & GONZALO MENDEZ HIGH SCHOOL, LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT | LOS ANGELES, CA

For too long, students and parents have not had a say in how learning happens. In order to build an education system for all students, students and families must be part of decision-making—not just the stakeholders that have historically held the power. Decision-making in schools must be a collaborative process that involves the people who are most impacted. The strong, authentic relationships and partnerships at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School show new possibilities for what students, families, educators, and community partners can create and achieve together.

Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) is a community school in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles. As part of its transformational community school vision, Mendez staff, parents, students, and community partners work collaboratively in support of the students. One recent instance of the school's inclusive decision-making process led to scheduling changes for the 2020–21 school year to create more time and space for students dealing with the pandemic and its associated stresses.

> "At Mendez, we see the community and the school as one. What happens in the school impacts the community, and what happens in the community impacts the school."
>
> —Mauro Bautista, Mendez Principal

In the summer of 2020, surveys of students and discussions with staff and families revealed that students and staff felt highly stressed by the distance-learning schedule. "So that was a learning lesson from March," explained Principal Mauro Bautista. "Students were trying to sit in 6 hours of Zoom. Looking at a screen for 6 hours was just too much. And the teachers too; they were trying to teach class and trying to make technology transitions with only 5 minutes."

Rather than waiting for the district to finalize its plans for the coming school year, the Mendez team took a proactive approach, thinking together about a schedule that would best meet the needs of students, staff, and families. An ad hoc scheduling committee began meeting in July as part of a broader planning effort for the 2020–21 school year. The inclusive committee included the school's certificated and classified staff, administrators, representatives from community partner organizations, students, and families. The group ultimately landed on the proposal to switch from a semester to a quarter system and applied to the district for a waiver to make the change.

The proposal, which was approved by the Los Angeles Unified School District, was a game changer for students, dropping their course load from six classes per semester to three courses during each 10-week quarter. With their course load—and their class time—cut in half, students had more time during the day for tutoring or other academic or social-emotional supports provided through the community school.

Teachers, for their part, had more breathing room in between virtual classes to set up technology and more time to spend with

students outside of class. "It was one way that Mendez collaborated … to see what we could do to make it better for students," shared Mendez teacher Deidre Anderson-King.

The shift to the quarter system was just one of the many ways Mendez staff and partners led collaboratively to support students and families during the pandemic. As a community school that centers relationships, soon after the switch to distance learning, staff and partners teamed up to conduct socially distanced home visits to connect with students who were not attending virtual classes. These visits allowed them to identify both connectivity needs (hot spots and computers, for example) and basic needs, like food and toilet paper. "Our community partners … came up big, because they were able to provide some of those items," said Bautista. "And we were able to go back and deliver some of those items to some of the families."

Underlying all of these efforts is a deep-seated commitment to transformational rather than transactional partnerships; to developing authentic leadership of all stakeholders; and to building relationships of trust and support among students, staff, and families. "It didn't take the pandemic for Mendez to show that they care for their families and their community," reflected Zahara Green, a parent at Mendez and the school's parent engagement coordinator. The truly collaborative leadership approach to education that Mendez takes always keeps students and families at the center.

"Positive energy will motivate our youth and leaders to voice their needs and promote positive reform in our school system that benefits each community." Art and statement by Bianca, a first generation college student raised in Los Angeles. Instagram: @Samruvian

KEY IDEAS:

- Conduct surveys and outreach discussions with the school community to assess needs.
- Inclusive decision-making processes led by multi-stakeholder teams of teachers, students, school staff, parents, and community members generate responsive, durable solutions.
- The community schools model coordinates holistic supports, creates expanded and enriched learning opportunities, engages family and community, and features collaborative leadership and practices.

LEARN MORE:

- Community Schools explainer video (Partnership for the Future of Learning)
- Mendez High School virtual tour
- Leveraging Resources Through Community Schools: The Role of Technical Assistance (Learning Policy Institute)
- Collaborative Leadership Practices from Community Schools Playbook (Partnership for the Future of Learning)

With billions of dollars of funding for COVID relief, community schools, mental health, and educator support available to school districts, communities across California have an unprecedented opportunity to make practices like the ones profiled in this report a reality. These resources can be leveraged to build the foundation for racially just schools and transform the lived experiences of students, families, and school staff.

You can find updated information about the funding available for your community via Public Advocates and EdSource. For more information and resources about creating racially just, relationship-centered schools in your community, visit California Partnership for the Future of Learning and Reimagine and Rebuild California Schools.

About the California Partnership for the Future of Learning

The California Partnership for the Future of Learning is a statewide alliance of community organizing and advocacy groups advancing a shared vision of a transformational, racially just education system built for us all. It is led by Advancement Project California, Californians for Justice, PICO California, and Public Advocates, with the support of Community Coalition, InnerCity Struggle, and over a dozen grassroots, research and philanthropic partners.

Learn more at **https://futureforlearning.org/california-partnership/**
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