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CASE STUDY

Models For K-12 Public School Success Against The Odds & The Promise Of Community Schools In California

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Abstract

California's education system is in a unique position. As Covid-19 restrictions are being lifted across the country, schools and childcare facilities are losing the pandemic emergency funding that kept them barely hanging on as attendance waned and students fell through the cracks. However, in California, Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed off on a \$307.9 billion state budget that features a record \$128 billion toward reviving TK-12 public schools and community colleges. Understanding what to do with this significant budget allocation in order to serve California's children best will be vital for educators and politicians in the coming years. This piece addresses how the state may use the influx in funding to address inequity. This is particularly pertinent in California, a highly diverse state with vast differences in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, identity, and need in the children served from district to district. Focusing on the Los Angeles Unified School District as a case study, the article delves into how the community school model has transformed suffering schools, and child outcomes, with pupils who faced high rates of dropout now regularly attending secondary education. Looking beyond the urban public school landscape, the article then presents how a rural school district has managed to defy the odds, focusing on the importance of teacher retention and programming. This article argues for an enormous need for change in the state— California has consistently performed poorly in public education quality rankings, and, unfortunately, the effects of this are distributed unequally, depending upon child socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and postcode.

During a period of extreme turbulence across the nation, in the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, K-12 schools across the United States took an enormous toll. Public school enrollment dramatically decreased, particularly for the earliest grades and youngest children (D'Souza 2023). California saw the highest number of unaccounted-for, or 'missing' students, those who left schools during the pandemic and have not yet returned, with 152,000 students lost, 56 percent of the nation's population of unaccounted-for pupils. Many families opted to enroll their children in private or alternative schools, as many chose to resume in-person learning much earlier than public schools. Even as restrictions were lifted and public schools returned to face-to-face learning, the gap in enrollment remains evident, and public schools are suffering. This is a major concern for education experts, particularly because this dramatic drop in enrollment can potentially exacerbate societal and regional inequities already faced by children across California. Young and already underserved children are expected to face the brunt of the negative effects on enrollment and resources—already struggling students whose needs were not being met prior to the disruptive effects of the pandemic fell through the cracks as the public education system experienced tremendous difficulty. Now, as we transition into a 'post-pandemic' society, where emergency funding to keep struggling childcare and early education programs alive will subside, California is pouring additional money into education to address the trend of worsening educational and resource inequity for children across the state.

Though Governor Newsom and the California Board of Education are taking financial action to address this growing problem, California K-12 schools will have to implement clear action plans in order to best serve all students as education bounces back, and this prospect is a vast and intimidating endeavor for many administrators and educators. California is in a particularly unique situation, being a highly diverse state, with vast differences in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, identity, and need in the children served from district to district.

In the past few decades, California has consistently performed poorly in public education quality rankings. Its public perception is growing worse, as the families served have lost faith—in Los Angeles, a district that serves the second highest population of students in the nation, one in three voters gave their schools a 'D' or 'F' failing grade (Blume 2022). Even with an influx of money, strategically using the incoming funding to restore schools to pre-pandemic standards, to really transform the system for the better, will be a challenge.

In the coming years, California is looking to the community school model to re-think current failing practices in its public education system. By reframing long-standing perceptions of what a school can look like, we can hopefully serve the state's diverse student population more effectively. Horace Mann Middle School is a fixture in South Los Angeles. In an area historically plagued by poverty, addiction, crime, and violence, Horace Mann was established in 1926 and served as the heart of the neighborhood and a safe haven for children" (Amelio & Quartz 2022). The school served a substantial population for a long time, with 2,000 students at its

height. However, over the past two decades, the school has suffered a steep decline in enrollment, reaching a low of only 350 students.

Today, Horace Mann, now a UCLA Community School, serves a student body of just over 500, with a 98.6 percent minority student population— 49 percent black and 48 percent Latino (U.S. News 2023). Half the students are foster youth, and 30 percent require special education services (Favot 2017). When UCLA began its partnership with the school, just 10 percent of students met or exceeded English standards, and 12 percent met math standards. The school culture was also suffering, no longer a safe community space for many students— 52 percent reported feeling unsafe at school.

These concerning statistics reflect decades of families fleeing for private schools in other neighborhoods, a problem only exacerbated by the pandemic. It began in the 1970s when reforms integrated schools and addressed inequity in educational opportunity. The solutions included busing and transportation programs that brought students to magnet, pilot, and charter school programs— schools that attract students from neighborhoods outside the district due to their innovative or quality curriculums— outside of their zoned neighborhoods. Many families zoned to Horace Mann and similar schools chose to send their children outside of the community to what they perceived to be better and safer schools. This resulted in 21,000 children participating in transfers to schools outside of inner-city Los Angeles by 1983 (UCLA 2018). These programs reinforced inequity because the families who did not have the background knowledge and resources to navigate the system were left in schools drained of students and, as a result, left devoid of resources and quality education. School closures reinforce racial segregation— though black students make up about 31 percent of the population in open urban schools, they make up 61 percent of the population in closed urban schools (Gallagher & Gold 2017).

After two years of planning, UCLA began its full partnership with Horace Mann, intending to turn a school on the decline into a community school partnership that would bring innovative strategies for advancement and inclusivity from the university's research and resources to a long-standing and important community space, allowing underserved children to attend a quality school in their own neighborhood amongst peers. The community school model emphasizes the importance of building better public schools in the communities they serve instead of just transporting students to wealthier schools in higher-income neighborhoods.

Research shows that good schools build strong communities and vice versa (Gallagher & Gold 2017). Particularly in urban neighborhoods, such as Horace Mann's South Los Angeles, school closures often contribute to a cycle of disenfranchisement and disinvestment. Areas with frequent school closures are consistently associated with lower earnings, higher poverty rates, lower college completion rates, and lower home values. The community school seeks to invest in not only endeavors to improve education but also to invest in the whole community— because schools tend to reflect the health and culture of the

surrounding neighborhoods, investing in their strength may have the power to turn a whole community around for the better, resulting in long-lasting generational change for children and families.

UCLA's first pilot community school, a K-12 in Koreatown, was built from scratch in an area of Los Angeles where the vast majority of students speak a second language at home, and many come from immigrant families. The school was formed to keep bilingual education at the forefront and to meet the needs of this particular population of students beyond five days a week from 8 to 3 (Quartz 2021). Immigrant rights organizations contributed to the school's design, and students' lived experience is at the forefront of learning. Their goal is to create an environment where student agency is prioritized— elementary schoolers express their identity through artwork and play-based learning, and high schoolers perform independent research projects and participate in internships with social justice-oriented organizations across the city. Teachers create an environment of mutual learning, where students feel heard and like they also have something to share and teach about their own lives.

The community school traces to as early as the 1930s and envisions the school as the center for wraparound social services in a neighborhood— medical and mental health care, food assistance, jobs programs, or legal aid (Stokes 2022). Community schools are democratic institutions where teachers, parents, and community members contribute to local decision-making. Historically, community schools have risen in popularity as a strategy to address failing social institutions during periods of socio-political upheaval when trust in administration and schooling is low (Quinn & Blank, 2023).

In a post pandemic education landscape, California is clearly a prime candidate for integrating this model in a post-pandemic education landscape, though there is a long road ahead for most schools across the state. In the coming years, the California education system will be working to implement more community schools with an influx of funding, and schools will work to establish the four pillars of the community school, all of which have been implemented at UCLA's campus in Koreatown. The first pillar emphasizes the concept of community, recognizing the social and cultural position of the school in a wider context and applying the expertise of family and community members in the school's design. For UCLA, this meant fully integrating Spanish and Korean in the classroom, reflecting the 95 percent non-English first language student body. The second pillar asks schools to provide services that address students' physical, social-emotional, and mental health needs (Stokes, 2022). As many as two-thirds of Koreatown's residents were not born in the United States, which for the community school meant that fully serving students beyond the classroom would mean collaborating with an Immigrant Family Law Clinic to provide on-campus services for undocumented students. Under attorneys' supervision, UCLA Law School students offer consultations to all families who require it. Additionally, social, mental health, and wellness services are integrated into the fabric of the school— while it's not uncommon for a school to employ social workers, psychologists, and counselors, at the UCLA Community School, service

providers work closely with teachers, students, and parents, taking the burden off of teachers to deal with behavioral concerns.

The third pillar of a community school is the availability of extended learning time and opportunities beyond the classroom and outside of school hours. UCLA Community School offers various after-school activities, including during the summer, some of which integrate families, such as a Community Arts program that invites students and parents to make art together (VAPAE 2023). The school's UCLA affiliation also provides students an opportunity to participate in university-sponsored enrichment programs and internships with associated social justice organizations, contributing to a culture of social responsibility as well as expectations of college attendance (where students can see what their options are through the relationships they build with UCLA students and staff). The fourth pillar addresses school organization and administration—many decisions are made by consensus instead of solely the principal or a high-up administrator. This practice promotes quality teacher recruitment and retention, as teachers are given a greater say over the school's daily operations than at a traditional school. Additionally, parents and students are invited to participate in a governance council for major, more consequential school-wide decisions.

At Horace Mann, UCLA is taking on a partnership with a long-standing school with significant history and an established reputation in the community that has soured over the past couple of decades. UCLA hopes to replicate the Koreatown Community School's success in making an underserved, low-income student population 99 percent college ready at graduation. Improvements at Horace Mann will center around integrating UCLA graduate students into the existing teaching force, adding enrichment programs in and out of the classroom, and developing a college-going culture of high expectations.

The new curriculum will follow a "learn, see, do" model with field trips and internships highlighting career options, the completion of a personal capstone project, and unique themed grade levels, partnering with schools at UCLA (for example, the seventh grade could have a computer science theme, partnering with the School of Engineering). UCLA graduate students will teach and tutor undergraduate students in urban education. Pre-law will work with the middle schoolers on dispute resolution, giving Horace Mann students a chance to interact with people who have taken a higher education path. UCLA has also brought in a college center that never existed at Horace Mann, filled with college merch from across the country. Additionally, through conversations with families, school leaders determined that integrating more extracurricular activities would be crucial. A two-month-long summer school program has been introduced through UCLA where students can enroll in Mandarin, coding, martial arts, and science classes as well as field trips.

Importantly, UCLA's role is that of a partner, not a disruptive force coming in to do a school takeover. In the past, other universities have struggled with forming partnerships like this because of community tension. In Westchester, Loyola Marymount's partnership with the

district to open a new middle school triggered a battle between surrounding neighborhoods, as wealthy families who had long been sending their children to wealthier schools in other districts or private schools were assured priority in the new middle school housing lottery (Phillips & Kohli 2016). Wealthier neighborhood Playa Vista residents' children could transition from their similarly high-achieving elementary school to the Loyola partnership school, while lower-income surrounding neighborhoods could enroll if enough space was left at the end. This controversy further outlines the importance of a community focus in school development, building schools in ways that would best serve the children who live locally.

The innovations and improvements at Horace Mann are attracting teachers, as well— schools that serve under-resourced children constantly struggle with teacher retention and attracting teachers with proper credentials. Struggling public schools often face frequent educator turnover, resulting in classes cycling through multiple teachers throughout the year, sometimes substitutes without credentials or experience (Fensterwald 2019). This can be traumatic for children, particularly those facing a difficult home life, as the teacher can often take on the role as the safe adult mentor. Horace Mann had long struggled with maintaining a full teaching staff, but educators are now interviewing for positions at record numbers. In addition to an exciting proposed curriculum and the promise of improved school culture, Horace Mann will have two professional development days a week, led by faculty from UCLA's Center X, for professional teacher development, inspiring an atmosphere of continuous growth.

Another important consideration for school improvement in California will be hiring diverse, inspiring educators. Research shows that when students of color have teachers of color, they learn more, are more likely to graduate, and are also more likely to attend college (Rancano 2019). Currently, three-quarters of California students identify as people of color, while only one-third of teachers do. There is also great gender disparity— fewer than 10 percent of California's teachers are men of color, and only one percent are black men. This is particularly concerning because of the evidence that being taught by at least one black teacher in early elementary school years cut the high school dropout rate in half for black boys (Gershenson et al. 2017). There is a significant financial barrier for college graduates of color, who are disproportionately burdened by debt, so the prospect of entering teaching, a low-income profession, can seem unattainable for many. Research suggests that subsidizing the cost of teacher education by increasing scholarships for prospective educators of color has the potential to remove barriers to joining the profession for underrepresented groups and improve outcomes for students as a result (Carver-Thomas 2018).

Nevertheless, some schools across California have succeeded in implementing programs to attract and keep teachers, increasing both students' quality of learning and feelings of security and support at school. Gridley Unified School District has been identified as a 'positive outlier' school system, which has succeeded in supporting students and raising academic achievement despite certain barriers (Burns & Shields 2019). Far from densely populated inner-city Los Angeles, Gridley serves students in a small rural town in the upper Sacramento Valley, where farming and agriculture are central to the economy and integrated into education, with half of

high school students enrolled in agriculture technical education classes. Establishing a stable teacher workforce is essential for small, rural districts such as Gridley because high levels of teacher turnover could have a particularly significant impact on the performance and wellness of students.

Often this is achieved through a strong sense of community and mutual confidence. Unlike the majority of school districts across California, Gridley has not faced teacher shortages, and many teachers stay in the district for their whole careers. This can be attributed to a higher-than-average teacher salary, availability of teacher preparation programs, and a culture of support for teachers, who are given considerable autonomy, regular support, resources, and few additional commitments outside of the classroom. Gridley teachers reported feeling supported by and confident in the district— while the district intervenes in ensuring they receive proper material support, campuses are generally left to make decisions regarding leadership and hiring at the school site level, giving teachers a significant voice. Additionally, teachers reported little top-down pressure from administrators and high levels of autonomy in making teaching decisions. This degree of autonomy is also reflected in the UCLA community school model, providing more compelling evidence for the power of implementing consensus decision-making to improve our schools in the coming years.

After-school programs also reduce some of the burden for teachers to ensure all students are performing at a desired level. The presence of a local after-school program for the Gridley school district, called Mi C.A.S.A., has shown significant promise in improving student scores and outcomes. This program is located in Gridley's Farm Labor Housing Development, a county-run camp for migrant workers and their families. It is staffed by retired teachers, volunteers, and high school juniors and seniors. Mi C.A.S.A. has improved educational attainment for populations in the district with historically poor performance, and is also credited with reducing gang activity in the area because it provides students with an alternative activity in an engaging after-school program. When students are provided after-school opportunities, they are more likely to engage in healthy decision-making, and families are greatly supported, as this additional childcare is often crucial for working parents.

In a period of uncertainty coming out of the devastating impacts of the pandemic on our K-12 public education system, it is inspiring to look at these schools as models for change of how we can best serve the children of California. In the following few years, it will be crucial for educators and administrators to come together in consensus to determine the best path forward for making improvements to California's schools with a significant influx of pandemic support and subsequent post-emergency funding provided by Governor Newsom. Turning to the promise of the community school model, integrating enriching and accessible after-school programs, and introducing incentives to teacher recruitment and retention, such as consensus decision-making and pay raises, will be the next step in dismantling segregation and inequality in educational opportunity for children across the state.

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