

Meeting 45 Summary
Centering Equity and Ensuring Whole-Child Well-Being:
Pandemic Recovery in Garden Grove

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***Note:** This meeting summary was developed as a resource for members of the California Collaborative on District Reform. We are making this document publicly available in an effort to share the work of the Collaborative more broadly to inform the dialogue and decisions of educators throughout the state. This summary does not, however, contain the background and contextual information that might otherwise accompany a product created for the general public. For more information about the meeting and other Collaborative activities, please visit www.cacollaborative.org.*

In November 2021, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened virtually for the fifth time since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the disruption of in-person learning in districts across the state. Meeting participants convened to discuss the challenges that district leaders, school administrators, and teachers face in ensuring that students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs are being addressed alongside academic needs in truly transformative ways. Members and guests met over two days to sharpen the focus on three issues that have emerged repeatedly in meetings throughout the pandemic. The first is the importance of relationships and attention to social, emotional, and mental health alongside attention to academic needs. The second is the necessity of grounding discussion and solutions in the voices and experiences of students. The third is a persistent focus on equity, recognizing that students and communities who already were underserved were the hardest hit by the pandemic and require the greatest attention during recovery efforts.

Session I. Understanding the Learning Conditions of Students During the Pandemic

This was the fifth meeting since the pandemic began and the first such meeting in which we returned to the Collaborative’s typical practice of nesting the group’s deliberations in the context of a host district. Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) serves close to 40,000 students across 67 schools in five cities. Eighty percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and a substantial portion of those are from immigrant families. In short, many of the students in the Garden Grove district come from populations that have been particularly hard hit during the pandemic. In order to ground the discussions in the needs and experiences of these students, the district invited 11 students

from its high schools to talk with meeting participants in small groups. The students' comments highlighted the many reasons why learning was a challenge for them, both during distance learning and in the return to in-person schooling. The small group explorations also underscored ways in which these challenges varied from student to student.

The Pandemic Took an Economic Toll on Students and Their Families

Multiple students described ways in which the financial struggles and the economic toll of the pandemic on their families affected their focus, motivation, and ability to learn. One student said, "It is important to understand that for every little house, there's a different story. Every student comes from a different background, and in my community, there is a lot of financial struggles." Some students got jobs when their parents lost jobs or when their parents got sick with COVID-19, decreasing the amount of time students had to devote to their schoolwork: "I wish my teachers could have understood that my family wasn't as financially stable during COVID, so I had to work. My priorities were elsewhere. I couldn't just focus on schoolwork and learning."

Another reason students gave for not being able to focus on schoolwork and learning was that their living conditions were not conducive to distance learning. Due to their parents' financial situations, many students found themselves living with multiple families under one roof. In cases where multiple families shared the same living space, students not only encountered elevated risks of infection from the airborne coronavirus, but they also experienced more distractions from schoolwork. One student shared, "My parents got COVID, but what surprised me is that I didn't get it [even though] we all lived in the same room." When students in the same household all shared one room, attending class and doing schoolwork became more challenging. As another student stated: "I remember just sitting in the room, my brother in one corner, my sister on her bed and me on my bed. And I would just dread it because I wasn't only hearing my class, I was seeing theirs as well."

The Pandemic Took a Mental Toll on Students and Their Families

Multiple students also talked about the mental toll on them and their families, making it difficult to focus on learning and school despite their best efforts. Some emphasized how the lack of face-to-face interactions and relationships during distance learning contributed to their feeling disconnected, affecting their mental health: "Without in-person connections with my teacher or fellow classmates, I didn't feel human," one student said. "I just felt like part of the system that just had to get the work done."

Others mentioned how being home all day, every day, during distance learning was not a healthy environment conducive to learning: "Being in the same room every day is not a relaxing, healthy environment to learn in," a student said. "There was no balance, but I don't think my teachers understood that."

Still others spoke about how the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the feeling of being out of control affected their ability to prioritize learning. Some students talked about their family members getting sick and dying from COVID-19. Many worried about the possibility that either they themselves or other loved ones would get sick and die from

COVID-19. All described feeling sad, worried, frustrated, out of control, and unable to focus on school because they had so many other things to worry about.

Return to In-Person Learning Has Highlighted Persistent Student Needs

The students shared their excitement to be back learning in person given the many challenges of distance learning. However, they emphasized the fact that because students continue to live in high-stress environments—especially given that the pandemic is ongoing—they could benefit from additional supports for wellness and mental health.

Students described their struggles with adapting to a typical school experience that does not take into account the ways in which the pandemic has reshaped their lives. One student shared, “I can see it in my peers that some of them still aren’t completely here and they’re still checked out a bit. It’s going to be a while for things to be the same.” However, the pace of school is relentless, according to one student, who said it’s like being thrown into the deep end of the pool “going to high school 5 days a week for 6 hours a day, practicing sports for 2 hours a day after school, coming home from school tired and burnt out and stressed because there is still homework to do and tests to study for.”

As a result, students expressed a desire for more support and understanding from teachers who often did not acknowledge the change in students’ realities and instead proceeded with business as usual. Although some teachers understood that students occasionally need a mental health day because some have lost family members and were struggling financially, other teachers believed students should just get past these challenges, not recognizing that they aren’t the same as they were before the pandemic and needed time to adjust.

Additionally, students said that although formal structures and supports are available to them—such as wellness centers and time built in during the school day for students to seek out extra help from teachers, school psychologists, and social workers—there are ways that the schools can improve these supports. First, students suggested that schools increase awareness that these supports are available. For example, the students referenced a “blue slip” program at the district’s high schools that allows a student to ask teachers for a blue slip if they need to take a mental health break to see the school psychologist. However, multiple students said many of their peers do not know about the program and that it needs to be better publicized. In addition, students suggested that efforts need to be made to decrease the stigma associated with available supports. In reference to the “blue slips,” one student stated, “We still have to go ask the teacher for the slip. But it’s tough to have the courage to get up and ask for help if you are already struggling in the first place and you don’t want to look vulnerable.” Another student pointed out that although the district provides support from social workers, there is a negative stigma in the community associated with social workers because they often are associated with Child Protective Services. Historically, families and students in the community don’t trust social workers out of concern that what students share with social workers can result in students being removed from their homes. As a result, the district and schools need to make efforts to

eliminate that misconception so students will feel comfortable accessing available supports.

Session II. Exploring a Tiered Approach to Building Social-Emotional Learning Competencies

Previous Collaborative meetings have explored the integral connection between students' social and emotional well-being and their academic learning. This connection has become ever more evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as articulated in the students' comments during the morning session. The continuing strain and uncertainty of the pandemic, especially when coupled with other ongoing stresses like food and housing insecurity, have created traumatic conditions for many students across California and across the country. These challenges are compounded for students with undocumented parents as they face the additional anxiety of wondering whether their parents will be there when they come home from school each day.

One way schools have addressed the connection between social and emotional well-being and academic learning has been to incorporate curriculum and instructional strategies to develop students' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills so that they can navigate difficult situations more effectively. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been a leader in this area for almost three decades, particularly through popularizing its five-dimensional framework for social and emotional competence. CASEL's framework comprises five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Decades of research have demonstrated the individual benefits resulting from attention to developing students' social and emotional understanding and skills, including improved academic performance and declines in anxiety, behavioral problems, and substance abuse.

Some educators and other stakeholders, however, raised concerns that the original CASEL framework was not sufficiently reflective and inclusive of the students' diverse cultural backgrounds and paid too little attention to the disparate contexts and conditions that also shape students' well-being and ability to thrive educationally and otherwise. Based on this and related feedback from the field, CASEL recently has revised its definition of SEL to emphasize the connection to equity, social justice and civic engagement, personal and collective identities, and overall system transformation. To highlight this change, CASEL now uses the term "Transformative SEL" (TSEL).

Transformative SEL: How SEL Supports Educational Equity and Excellence

Transformative SEL is a process in which young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting, relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity, and to develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being. This form of SEL is aimed at redistributing power to more fully engage young people and adults in working toward just and equitable schools and communities. It emphasizes the development of identity, agency, belonging, curiosity, and collaborative

problem-solving within the CASEL framework; in doing so, TSEL has the potential for being transformative for both individuals and for educational systems.

The core features of Transformative SEL implementation are (a) authentic partnering among students and adults with a deep focus on sharing power and decision-making between young people, educators, families, and communities; (b) academic content that integrates issues of race, class and culture; (c) instruction that honors and makes connections to students' lived experiences and identities, and scaffolds learning to build an understanding of others' lived experiences; (d) enhancing and foregrounding social and emotional competencies needed for civic engagement and social change, such as reflecting on personal and social identities, examining prejudices and biases, interrogating social norms, disrupting and resisting inequities, and co-constructing equitable and just solutions; (e) prioritizing students' individual and collective agency to take action for more just schools and communities; and (f) focus on creating belonging and engagement for all individuals.

Collaborative members and guests discussed how this TSEL approach might help address some of the challenges that the GGUSD students shared about their experiences during the pandemic and how it affected their ability to learn. Some of the points raised were as follows:

First, the TSEL framework addresses the community aspect of social and emotional well-being, thus addressing the need students mentioned about feeling connected to their peers and to adults in the system. Second, the TSEL standards recognize that each community and each individual has unique circumstances, but that within each community and each individual lie assets and capacities that can help students develop a sense of identity and the confidence to speak up and let their voices be heard. (This is particularly important for students from communities that are marginalized.) Third, the TSEL standards emphasize the importance of embedding an explicit SEL curriculum into academic classroom instruction to best support student learning. This kind of integration is relevant to the issue that students raised about some teachers not acknowledging the social-emotional needs of students upon returning to the classroom.

One District's Approach to Structuring SEL Supports to Pursue Equity and Excellence

Given the importance of attending to social-emotional learning to support whole-child well-being, districts must design formal structures and supports to meet students' needs by incorporating the assets students bring. GGUSD offers one example of what this can look like in a specific context.

GGUSD is committed to preparing all students to be successful and responsible citizens who contribute to and thrive in a diverse society. The district works toward this end through a multifaceted approach organized around three central goals. Goal 1 is to help students achieve academic skills, including content, language, and scholarly habits. Goal 2 is to help students achieve personal goals; it encompasses motivation, socioemotional well-

being, and school climate and culture. Goals 1 and 2 contribute to Goal 3, which is lifelong success, including college and career readiness and success.

The district works toward Goals 1 and 2 through an integrated three-tiered framework that outlines strategies and supports available to address students' diverse academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs. As we have seen in other districts, the base (Tier 1) of this multitiered system of supports (MTSS) is effective instruction for all students in every classroom. In Garden Grove, Tier 1 comprises, among other strategies, universal design for learning and common curricula along with a variety of culturally responsive SEL-related practices and routines to foster social and emotional development and well-being for all students. Tier 2 strategies are designed for students who need additional support beyond the core program. Among these strategies are small-group instruction and mentoring on the academic side (Goal 1) and small-group mental health counseling and restorative circles on the personal skills side (Goal 2). Finally, those students requiring more targeted or intensive intervention also can receive Tier 3 supports, such as special education services, individualized instruction, or individual counseling.

Because this Collaborative meeting focused on student well-being, district staff also delineated a broad range of mental health and SEL supports appropriate for each (or multiple) tiers of their MTSS framework. To provide these supports, the district is in the fifth year of an 8-year plan to build a comprehensive team of mental health specialists, certified social workers, and interns who would be available to all schools in the district as part of their "ASPIRE¹ System of Care."

Although the district identifies academic skills and SEL skills as distinct goals, the MTSS helps staff to align and integrate these goals and related approaches. Additional strategies to support integration include proactively teaching students what it looks like to engage in appropriate behaviors and building positive relationships with peers and adults both inside and outside the classroom through the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) work; training teachers to allow space for mindfulness in the classroom; and focusing on mental health awareness for students, staff, and family members inside and outside the classroom. Integration of SEL and academic instruction remains challenging, however, especially during an extended pandemic when teachers, administrators, and support staff are all exhausted. One challenge is creating the mental, emotional, and temporal space for teachers to shift mindsets so that the work to achieve Goals 1 and 2 becomes deeply connected rather than siloed. Other challenges include ensuring fidelity of implementation and measuring the results to determine if the work is making a difference and how it might be improved.

Discussion among meeting participants acknowledged the difficulty of shifting fully to a whole-child approach in which social and emotional development and well-being are addressed jointly with academic learning. This is a struggle for all districts, not just Garden Grove. A first step, participants suggested, might be messaging the work such that it is clear to teachers and other personnel that social and emotional development and well-being are

¹ ASPIRE stands for Advancing Social-emotional Prevention, Intervention, and Resiliency in Education.

not just one more thing to pile on an already full plate, but rather an essential element of setting the conditions for learning in the classroom. Making the classroom a supportive and safe space and giving students tools to productively navigate their emotions and relationships open the way for learning to take place, both individually and collectively. Given the magnitude and complexity of the work, however, especially under current conditions, participants also suggested that districts consider making the scope more manageable by focusing on one challenge at a time instead of trying to tackle them all at once. And a final suggestion was to underscore the importance of SEL and its connection to academics by incorporating SEL into teacher evaluations.

Of course, in taking on this work, it is important to remember that context matters. GGUSD is a highly centralized district whose approach may not be transferable to districts organized in other ways. A leader from a different district noted that they were struggling with how to develop a framework that supports the whole child from an asset base and embeds supports as part of the curriculum but in a more decentralized setting.

Session III. Additional Challenges that Complicate the Work of Supporting Student Well-Being in Three Districts

In the third session of the meeting, several districts² shared challenges with which they were struggling in their efforts to promote their students' well-being. Although these challenges were specific to the presenting district, the issues resonated with district leaders across a wide variety of contexts. Meeting participants used a consultancy protocol to provide feedback to each of the presenting districts about the work they are doing.

Increase Awareness About the Mental Health Supports Available to Students

One challenge many districts face is increasing awareness about the mental health supports available to students. Leaders from one participating district shared that over the last 5 years, five current or former students have committed suicide; in light of that, the district has been making efforts to grow the mental health supports in their high schools. The district is partnering with a local community nonprofit organization to create a web of mental health resources available to students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They also are building capacity at the two comprehensive high school sites by adding school psychologists, intervention specialists, and counselors. In addition, the district has created student care centers and have adjusted the school day to build in time for check-ins and academic and social-emotional supports.

Over the last five years, the district has conducted mental health and wellness surveys with students and have found that since 2017, 40% of students are reporting high levels of stress and anxiety. Yet, although 65% of students say they have knowledge of school-provided mental health and social-emotional supports, only 13% of those students report they are likely to seek them out. The survey asked students about the top barriers to accessing mental health and social-emotional supports. Of these, 23% of students reported

² Four districts shared challenges for the district consultancies during the third session of the meeting; however, only three districts' challenges are discussed in this section of the summary, as GGUSD was one of the districts sharing a problem of practice as a continuation of the work shared during the second session.

a lack of willingness to receive help, 21% reported a lack of communication between students and staff, and 20% reported a lack of knowledge about who to ask for help, echoing what GGUSD students shared during the first session of the meeting.

Given the findings from the survey, the district is hoping to expand outreach efforts to increase students' awareness and use of mental health resources in a way that resonates with teenagers. Meeting participants suggested several approaches for doing so. Targeting messaging to smaller groups of students rather than at large whole-school assemblies could enable a degree of personalization that resonates more than easy-to-ignore generic calls to the full student body. Creating a video campaign using students talking about how they used a specific resource when they were struggling can help other students see a particular support's relevance to the challenges they are experiencing. Another meeting participant suggested using messages from young celebrities about mental health struggles, anxiety, and depression to make the dialogue around seeking out supports more acceptable and part of the culture.

Meeting participants also made several suggestions that could go beyond spreading awareness of services by focusing on the root causes of students' anxiety. One participant noted that this would require digging into the data to find out why such a large percentage of students are feeling stress and anxiety; the district then could attack the root of the problem. Is it the amount of homework students have? Is it the grading practices? Another participant suggested changing the language in the survey from "seeking out mental health supports" to using language that has a less negative connotation, such as "being stressed out." A final participant commended the district for working to build its capacity to meet students' social-emotional needs by adding school psychologists, counselors, and intervention specialists to school sites; however, the participant reminded the group that teachers also can make an incredible difference by checking in with students. Thus, training teachers to embed strategies addressing mental health in their classes is another approach the district can take so that even if students are not actively seeking out mental health services, they have access to supports daily through classroom teachers.

Bring Student Voices to the Table and Elevate Them

Another challenge highlighted by the pandemic is the extent to which the voices of underserved students—that is, those with the greatest need—often are marginalized instead of being at the center of discussions about policies and practices affecting their educational experience. In an effort to bring student voices to the table and elevate student perspectives that have been historically ignored, one district is starting a student leadership round table initiative with three primary goals: (a) connect students who have the greatest needs with people who have the power to advocate for them; (b) provide students with a mentor to model with them how they can advocate for themselves; and (c) provide them with the skills to advocate for other students.

The students participating in this effort have been nominated by adults in the system, but the district is looking for additional ways to select students to ensure that the most vulnerable students come to the table and stay there. In this session, the district sought

feedback from meeting participants on how to engage these students to take advantage of this opportunity. One possible hook is to organize their work with the student leaders around a concrete problem; this could both engage students initially and encourage their continued involvement by demonstrating ways in which their work is having an impact on the system. One meeting participant pointed out that this is a great opportunity for Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles, because there are many opportunities to try things on to see what is and is not a good fit for this initiative.

Overall, the small-group discussion affirmed that this student leadership roundtable could be a great short-term solution to shift power from adults to students and elevate student voice. At the same time, the group suggested that districts should pursue a range of longer term solutions to ensure that the voices of the most underserved and vulnerable students are centered in district discussions, policies, and practices.

Address Misconceptions About What SEL Looks Like and Sounds Like

Another obstacle to adequately supporting whole-child well-being is misunderstanding among community members about what SEL is and entails. One district said it has been on its SEL journey for almost a decade and has come far with respect to having a clear vision and definition for SEL work. It has developed core competencies, signature practices, and a common SEL curriculum for elementary schools. However, as the work continues to develop and evolve, the district has found that it needs to address three common misconceptions about SEL.

One misconception is that SEL is for students with behavioral problems and that it is a tool to treat and fix bad behavior; many stakeholders see SEL as a set of interventions for a subset of “problematic” students rather than a set of competencies for *all* students to develop. A second misconception among teachers is that SEL is for kids, not adults. District leaders see SEL as a set of skills that all members of the district community need to thrive in their roles, yet teachers often view it through the narrow lens of support for students. Third, parents and other district partners misunderstand SEL work as separate from academics rather than inextricably linked as part of the youth development process. Compounding these challenges is a long history of leadership turnover in the district, which has made it difficult to develop and maintain consistent messaging over the years.

This particular district has taken several approaches to address these misconceptions. Its goal has been to convey that SEL is an assets-based tool that can be integrated with academic instruction to encourage human development for all students and support adults in their own professional and personal growth. First, the district has worked to build capacity in school sites around the science of learning and human development through professional development. Second, like GGUSD, this district uses the MTSS framework and universal design for learning for both the academic and culture work to target their supports based on students’ academic and SEL needs. Third, the district employs antiracism and implicit bias training at all levels and has been modeling how the work around SEL and antiracism can be braided with the professional development around academics so adults in the system can see how these can be addressed together.

The district sought feedback from meeting participants about how to address these misconceptions and encourage stakeholders to embrace the value of addressing social-emotional learning alongside academic learning. The first suggestion: Have the district look at the implementation of two initiatives that have had great success in the district—Linked Learning and community schools. Meeting participants suggested that the district invite those implementing Linked Learning to integrate the SEL with the academics as a pilot to show the impact of braiding the two. The second suggestion was to go back to stakeholders' basic expectations of the education system and show how integrating SEL work for all students can help students and adults meet those expectations.

Other districts with a history of embracing SEL may need to combat similar misconceptions within their local contexts. For systems that are just beginning their journeys, however, one district leader offered advice: "One big do-over would have been for the initial team to wrestle with the meaning-making of what SEL is before bringing it into the ecosystem and making clear the interconnection between some of the other work that was already going on to help people understand the intersectionality of the work."

Session IV. Employing a Community Schools Approach to Meet Student Needs

The first three sessions of the meeting combined to underscore the multifaceted, interwoven needs of students and adults in our educational systems. Much of the discussion throughout the 2 days focused on ways to ensure both systematic attention to identifying students' needs (and assets) and a coherent approach to meeting them. During Session IV, participants explored ways in which a community schools approach might be well suited to the task of meeting whole child needs and promoting student well-being. The session drew on insights from Hayin Kimner, project director of the California Community Schools Learning Exchange, as well as from Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the latter of which has anchored its work in a community schools model for many years. An important and timely backdrop for this discussion has been the recent statewide increase in funding for community schools, which has elevated awareness about the potential for a community schools approach to supporting students' mental health and wellness.

Orientation to Community Schools

A community school is a whole-child, whole-family approach to teaching and learning where schools align resources and integrate academic, health, and social services; youth and community development; and community engagement. Early iterations of community schools focused on outside partners that came into school settings to wrap around the core academic work of the school. However, the current vision of community schools has evolved to become a strategy for system transformation in which schools, relationships with community members, and resources align to improve student outcomes. For this iteration of community schools to succeed, the work must grow from an understanding of and commitment to providing what students need to succeed in school.

Kimner outlined four core practices of implementing comprehensive community school strategies: center racial equity and justice by repairing and earning trust; provide support and capacity; offer opportunities to learn, lead, explore, and thrive; and ensure rigorous accountability for multiple preconditions and dimensions of student success. To be effective, Kimner argued, community schools fundamentally revolve around teaching and learning. They require partnership with students, families, educators, community agencies, and local government to cocreate an integrated focus on students and success. To ensure this alignment, quality community schools prioritize explicit coordination to identify and resolve fragmentation and duplication of efforts. Finally, effective implementation prioritizes relationships—among adults, between adults and young people, and between schools and their communities.

Kimner concluded her opening remarks by identifying two key contributors to transformative and sustainable community schools work. First, although it is important to have a sustained flow of funding for a community school, having strong leaders who have a clear vision and can communicate that vision is even more essential to have a sustained impact. Second, the work is a long-term commitment that requires practice and continuous refinement.

Community Schools in Oakland Unified School District

Community schools have been the centerpiece of OUSD’s strategy for 9 years to achieve the district’s mission.³ When district and school leaders talk about attending to the needs of the whole child, they really are talking about the conditions of learning for all students to accelerate and meet their human potential so they are ready to be successful in college, in the workforce, and as productive democratic citizens.

When OUSD embarked on its community schools journey, the district took the time to establish a clear vision. The process began with the following fundamental question:

What are the skills, mindsets, and dispositions the district is trying to teach?

Through reflection on this question, district leaders realized that its work must be collaborative and cross-sector because the skills students need to thrive are not just academic, but also require social, emotional, and mental health. The district therefore set out to transform how multiple systems work together, all while holding students and families at the center. District leaders thus describe the community schools work not as a program, but as a strategy for system transformation.

³ An April 2013 Collaborative meeting explored the Oakland approach to community schools during the early stages of its development. For resources from this meeting, including a summary of key themes from the 2-day discussion, see <https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting21>.

Having established a clear purpose for its community schools work, the district has engaged in a long-term commitment to continuous improvement to deepen and enrich its efforts. Policies that establish social and emotional learning standards, restorative student discipline, student and family engagement, and other manifestations of district priorities sustain and serve as a reminder of the guiding principles for community schools in Oakland. Practices like the district's principal leadership framework, or Linked Learning pathways that connect students with relevant life experiences, also advance key aspects of its community schools commitment. Partnerships, which the district calls the cornerstone of the community schools strategy, emphasize the cradle-to-career needs of the Oakland community and underscore the district's goals not just to improve the quality of teaching and learning, but to create a thriving and healthy city.

Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell shared some of the changes in student outcomes that the district has seen since it started the community school journey. These include a drop in suspensions for students overall, with a decrease in the disproportionately high suspension rates for African American students. Prior to COVID-19, the district also had experienced a decrease in chronic absenteeism, although conditions of distance learning have interrupted this trend. OUSD also has seen an increase in graduation rates from 59% in 2011 to 74% today, with improvement across all subgroups. The commitment to community partnership also achieves impact beyond traditional measures of student outcomes. For example, educators and other community members recently examined practices of having police in schools. Although the issue brought with it substantial tension, schools and community organizations found a way to codevelop an approach to ensure that schools are safe spaces for all students.

The district also has wrestled with the challenges of sustainability. Financial resources are a key piece of this puzzle, and district leaders have sought to leverage both internal and external funds to maintain their community schools commitment. Equally important, however, is finding and supporting the personnel who are instrumental to executing the vision of community schools. Data sharing agreements also are instrumental in building both sustainability and scalability. Partnerships with the Oakland Housing Authority and the Alameda County Department of Health are key pieces of the infrastructure that enables the district to better understand and address student needs. Nevertheless, data sharing remains the most complex part of the work. Because the players in the game are changing constantly, the district must continue to develop and refine partnerships to better access and use data.

Concluding her remarks about the OUSD journey, Johnson-Trammell shared some advice for those considering a community schools approach: "It's not just something that can be done at the periphery, or just another initiative to wedge in there with all the other initiatives. This has to be at the center of the work being done. It is the invisible engine, and if it's working well, it should show up in the learning and engagement."

The Potential for Community Schools to Address Whole-Child Well-Being

In small group discussions that followed the initial presentation in Session IV, participants affirmed the potential value of community schools in addressing the student concerns voiced earlier in the meeting. The approach acknowledges that learning happens everywhere, not just in formal school settings. Moreover, student needs extend beyond the school system. As one participant observed, “You realize we cannot do it alone”; community schools seek to unite a whole range of partners in service of student and family success.

Participants also reflected on how a community schools approach can leverage existing assets in a district. Many districts and schools already have moved in a community schools direction, whether they use the label or not. On-site health services, such as COVID-19 tests and vaccinations, meals, and wellness centers, bring partners together to meet community needs. Increased use of tutoring and family engagement in student learning have expanded opportunities for learning in the community. In fact, many existing district initiatives—like Safe and Welcoming Schools in Garden Grove—already are consistent with a community schools approach. Other leverage points may exist as well; for example, facilities in districts with declining enrollment can be spaces to house services for students and families and used to generate income that sustains community schools work.

Overall, comments from participants underscored the potential of a community schools approach to facilitate systemwide transformation. Too often, educators and school systems approach improvement through short-lived and fragmented programs that track to external funding streams or pet initiatives of new leaders rather than a sustained vision for student success. Indeed, that tendency may be amplified in the short term as districts navigate the massive infusion of new money from federal and state recovery funds, but do so with limited bandwidth to act in coherent and strategic ways. Viewing community schools as a way of reimagining systems, and not as a program to layer on to a school’s existing body of work, offers the possibility of long-term improvement.

Areas Where Districts Need Support

For all the promise that community schools offer, many districts are not yet equipped to move down that path, especially given the overwhelming pressures that educators are experiencing to navigate the myriad needs of students, teachers, and the broader community. As California finalizes the details of the Community School Partnership Program—both the parameters for grantmaking and the structures for technical assistance—participants identified some of the areas in which districts could benefit from support.

Staffing is one key area of need. Community schools represent a personnel-intensive approach at a time when districts have limited staff. Many school systems are struggling to assemble sufficient numbers of full-time and substitute teachers. Identifying, hiring, funding, and supporting a community liaison or community school coordinator may be critical to a successful community school. The recruitment, training, and retention of these positions is one area where districts are likely to need assistance.

Closely related to staffing are capacity needs at the school, district, and regional levels. District leaders emphasized that they already have been pushed far outside the areas of their professional expertise to navigate the many dynamics of COVID-19. As one participant explained, “Whatever that funding is has to come with experts in that area...because we’re trying to be doctors and testers of the COVID vaccine, and vaccinators, and all these things at once, when we’re really educators.” The community school coordinator position, new to most schools and districts, requires capacity building and ongoing support for people in the role to perform well—yet districts may not have the expertise to prepare, empower, and assist them. Given limited district experience with community schools, the state also needs to consider its capacity to provide technical assistance (TA). Legislation for the community schools grants calls for at least five regional TA centers, but questions exist about how many people and organizations actually have experience in providing this kind of support to schools.

Given the capacity needs in districts, participants suggested that one key source of support is connecting districts to resource and expertise. This could mean experts in community schools work who can provide advice. It could mean connections to providers of specific services that help community schools work to thrive but are outside the scope of current district partnerships and practices. These connections could offer sources of staffing for key community schools roles. Participants also suggested that it would be helpful to see models of effective community schools that dig into the details of how to operationalize relationships within and across organizations. Connecting districts to others is also vital for district leaders to explore and broker new relationships. The details of building relationships and partners, achieving role clarity, and fostering a shared vision across organizations with different priorities and incentive structures are areas in which expertise and support could be vital.

Across these observations, a clear theme emerged. State efforts to promote community schools should not focus on *doing* or *requiring* certain things. Rather, support might be most effective when it removes barriers that stand in the way of progress and coherence.

Unintended Consequences of State Policy

Small group participants also identified some of the unintended consequences that often result from well-meaning improvement efforts like those supporting community schools.

First and foremost, traditional approaches to state policy—already visible in the emerging approach to community schools grantmaking—can undermine the coherence that is essential for a community schools approach to thrive. Mandates for specific programmatic pieces can undermine coherence as leaders scramble to fit their response to the requirements of a grant rather than to the vision of teaching and learning for the district. Separate funding streams can reinforce the fragmented nature of improvement efforts. As one participant explained, “We are investing billions, millions of dollars right now into the education system, and each investment is coming in with a different type of initiative: SEL, behavioral health, wellness centers...There’s a level of fragmentation with these big-time initiatives, and it’s creating barriers.” Some participants said these new waves of funding echo the old systems of categorical programs that plagued California’s approach to finance and governance for years.

Second, the speed at which funding opportunities force districts to respond could prevent the thoughtful coordination and planning needed to foster a coherent and sustainable approach. Applications will be due at a time when districts are still overwhelmed by the demands of pandemic recovery. For districts and schools that do apply, the expectations tied to community schools grants and the parameters tied to other sources of one-time funding could prompt a rush to spend money in a way that overlooks strategic planning, shared understanding, and relationship development. Although the state's plans to offer planning grants help in this regard, they may be insufficient to cultivate the alignment and buy-in necessary to establish deep roots for the work.

Participants also raised concerns about the degree to which the details of the community schools grants align with the current needs of districts. California's education system is experiencing an unprecedented but narrow window of financial abundance. The greatest challenges for districts are not finding resources, but personnel—a particular concern for a personnel-intensive approach like community schools. The kinds of tools that will enable districts to take advantage of this opportunity may have more to do with capacity building and access to expertise than financial resources.

Finally, small-group members cautioned that California's accountability system does not reward the work intended for effective community schools. Measures of success need to monitor progress in a way that honors system transformation and student experience rather than compliance to a set of programmatic requirements. They need to focus everyone's attention on the same key goals—to keep everyone rowing in the same direction—rather than establish different expectations for different programs. Although metrics like attendance could reflect good community schools work, the California dashboard is not set up well to do this.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet again in March 2022. For this meeting, we will continue our traditional practice of nesting our deliberations within the context of a host district. We plan to explore the pursuit of equity through the implementation of a districtwide equity policy in the Long Beach Unified School District. In the meantime, Collaborative staff will continue to develop publications as well as other means of sharing key lessons and takeaways from our core meetings with the broader field of California educators. Resources from this meeting, as well as those from previous meetings and updates regarding Collaborative members, are available at www.cacollaborative.org.