

Meeting 54 Summary

Strengthening Family and Student Engagement in Challenging Times: Community Schools in Garden Grove

February 19–20, 2025

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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 and 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 February 2025, members of the California Collaborative on District Reform convened in Garden Grove, California to discuss strategies for strengthening family and student engagement and ways in which a community schools approach can support these efforts. The meeting focused on the systemic structures, relationships, and practices that promote engagement, trust, and well-being in school communities.

Understanding the Garden Grove Context

Located in Orange County, Garden Grove Unified School District (USD) serves more than 37,000 students from a large immigrant community that speaks over 55 different languages. A majority of their student population, 63 percent, are Ever English Learners—meaning that they have been classified as English learners at some point during their K–12 academic career—and 81 percent of their students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. District leaders, teachers, parents, and students often talk about the “Garden Grove Way,” which is characterized by a longstanding tradition of centralized planning, as well as a culture of caring and relationship building. One contributing factor to the degree of consistency and alignment is the stability of district leadership, especially the superintendency. Over the past 51 years, the district has had four superintendents, each of whom has been appointed to the role from within the district.

The district leadership team detailed the three goals that anchor Garden Grove USD’s strategic plan and serve as a vital tool for aligning district improvement efforts:

¹ Thanks to Emily Agopian, Crystal Aguilera, and Marina Castro for taking careful notes to make this summary possible.

- Goal One is that all learners will develop the *academic skills* necessary for individual success through continual growth toward mastery of standards in all subject areas and development of scholarly habits.
- Goal Two is that all learners will develop the *personal skills* necessary to achieve academic and social goals, including maintaining high motivation, social and emotional well-being, and a positive school climate.
- Goal Three is that all learners will be prepared for *lifelong success* in their intended career paths.²

Educators throughout the district explicitly connect their work to these goals, and members of the district community—including students—illustrated the ways in which these goals are embedded in the work of Garden Grove USD by referencing them, unprompted, throughout the meeting.

Promoting Whole-Child Outcomes

Much of the meeting’s discussion connected directly to Garden Grove USD’s second goal, which focuses on helping students develop the personal skills needed to meet their academic goals, skills such as self-efficacy, growth mindset, and personal well-being. District leaders mentioned a spectrum of structural and program supports embedded from early elementary to high school to promote whole-child outcomes in service of Goal Two. Examples included student groups such as Latinos Unidos; academic programs such as AVID; systemic structures such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS); social-emotional supports such as wellness rooms, support K9s on campuses, and family resource centers; as well as band, choir, orchestra, and art programs. Garden Grove USD district staff would go on later in the meeting to describe ways in which \$12 million in funding acquired through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) has enabled the district to weave together these and other supports as part of a community schools approach.

According to one district leader, the variety of programs focused on promoting whole-child outcomes and developing student’s personal skills is necessary because “if the students are upset, they can’t learn. A warm and welcoming climate and culture is part of that.” In addition to programming, Garden Grove USD also wanted to have policies that support a learning environment for all students to thrive, and in 2017, the school board passed a Safe and Welcoming Schools resolution to assert the district’s ongoing commitment to all students and families regardless of nation of origin or immigration status.³

Leading Schools and Districts Through Uncertainty and Change

While the Garden Grove context framed much of the discussion at the meeting, discussions with district leaders from Collaborative member districts offered additional perspectives on the issues at hand. Superintendents from four different districts participated in a fishbowl discussion to illuminate the complexities of today’s political landscape and the

² <https://www.ggusd.us/assets/files/district/strategic-plan-summary-english.pdf>

³ <https://www.ggusd.us/pages/empowering-our-families>

balance between bold action and strategic caution needed to lead in the best interest of students and their families.

Navigating Immigration Uncertainty and Community Resistance

District leaders acknowledged the heightened intensity of immigration-related challenges as they have emerged in the first several weeks of 2025. The Department of Homeland Security's assertion in January 2025 that immigration authorities can now enter schools changes the dynamics of school campuses that many educators and families have historically considered to be protected spaces.⁴ To help engage and educate families, several district leaders shared that they have partnered with legal experts and nonprofits to hold informational sessions on rights and protections. Leaders also noted the potential interference with these events from others who could disrupt events and dissuade participation.

Balancing Equity Work with Political Realities

District leaders shared that they are seeing an increase in political opposition primarily from community members and outside groups regarding curriculum content and identity-based initiatives. For example, the increasing presence on school boards of members with ties to organizations like Moms for Liberty can complicate efforts to prioritize the work of addressing disparities in opportunities and outcomes in schools. One district leader expressed, "The dynamic of the bullseye is real." As such, meeting discussion highlighted the importance of district leaders responding to and operating within their local context as they pursue strategies to best serve students and engage with various constituents in communication about those strategies.

As a final reflection, one district leader exhorted their colleagues on the importance of remaining centered on care and compassion for students and families while being mindful of the context they work in, stating, "Love is the biggest ingredient in a functional community. The communities we serve are not monolithic and there are individuals that don't support our efforts. We know they exist, but we have to manage these differences and protect people at the same time."

Understanding Family Assets and Needs in a Time of Uncertainty

In times of uncertainty, policy shifts and the lingering effects of the pandemic, understanding the assets and needs of families is essential for fostering student success and well-being. Families bring unique strengths that can serve as critical resources in supporting their children's education, yet they also face evolving challenges that require intentional and responsive district and school-level support.

Recognizing Family Strengths and Assets

Families in diverse school communities often possess deep-rooted strengths that contribute to student achievement and well-being. A panel of Garden Grove USD parents emphasized the power of unity, cultural heritage, and intergenerational commitment to

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/21/nx-s1-5269899/trump-immigration-enforcement-schools-churches>

education. One parent shared, “We are united like a family, and that connection carries through generations. My kids go to the same school I did, and that familiarity creates a sense of belonging.”

Additionally, structured family engagement efforts, such as advisory groups and culturally responsive outreach, can help build strengthened relationships between schools and families. Parent panelists reported feeling heard and included when their input leads to tangible changes, such as increased access to bilingual communication, mental health resources, and community-based support programs. One school leader noted, “You think you know what families need, but sometimes you’re wrong. We’ve learned to go into conversations with an open mind, ask how we can serve them better, and then follow through.” By valuing families as partners, schools can build stronger, more resilient communities that center on student success.

Identifying and Addressing Family Needs

Despite their strengths, many families face barriers that impact their ability to engage fully in their children’s education. Several key challenges emerged from their discussion during the parent panel.

Immigration-Related Anxiety

First is the fear and anxiety related to shifting immigration policies and enforcement actions. Parents explained that although the district provides reassurances about student safety through informational meetings and bilingual outreach, immigration-related fears have affected their children’s ability to focus on learning. Parents also noted sharing these anxieties, worrying about their family’s safety and future.

Economic Hardship

The second challenge is the economic hardships families face. Parents mentioned that many families in the district experience housing instability, financial insecurity, and transportation issues — all factors that affect student and parent engagement. A parent panelist offered one way in which districts can address some of these challenges by sharing, “Some parents have only one car, or work multiple jobs. Having more transportation options for school events would help us participate more.”

In addition to providing direct connections to family resource centers and on-campus social workers, the school district continues to seek to understand the underlying challenges students and their families face. For example, one Garden Grove school leader shared that social workers conduct home visits for students who are chronically absent: “We don’t just look at the numbers; we send teams to meet with families, identify barriers, and create a pathway to get students back to school.”

Communication Barriers

The third challenge parents identified is the language and digital communication barrier to engaging with schools. Several parent panelists emphasized the difficulty of staying informed about their child’s education due to language barriers and reliance on digital communication platforms. One parent stated, “Everything is on ParentSquare or Zoom

meetings, but I don't speak English, and my children don't always have the patience to help me understand." In response to these challenges, school leaders in Garden Grove have implemented multilingual outreach and workshops for parents on navigating digital platforms.

Trust as a Solution to Persistent Challenges

Many of the strategies Garden Grove USD has employed to address family needs are fundamental efforts to cultivate trust between families and schools. The parent panelists expressed that trust grows when school staff are present, accessible, and genuinely invested in student and family well-being. Practices such as school leaders personally greeting families, culturally relevant programming, and ongoing two-way communication strengthen this trust. One principal, who joined the meeting as a panelist of site-based educators, described how simple, everyday interactions can build trust, "I try to take every opportunity to meet families — whether it's at an event, in the office, or during drop-off. When parents see that they are welcome, they begin to open up and share their concerns." Parents agreed that school greeters and visible leadership make families feel included as part of a school community. As one panelist shared, "When the principal is outside greeting us, when they know our names, it makes a difference. It shows they care."

Understanding and Empowering Students as Leaders in their Schools and Communities

While parents provide valuable insight into the challenges their children face, it is equally important to hear directly from students themselves to understand how these fears and experiences impact their daily lives and learning. Meeting participants had the opportunity to hear from a group of students in Garden Grove USD who are actively shaping their school communities through leadership, advocacy, and cultural pride. A resounding theme among these students was their commitment to pursuing higher education and giving back to their communities. Every student on the panel expressed a desire to attend a four-year university, including aspirations to pursue careers in law, education, healthcare, and advocacy. The students shared the challenges they face as they pursue their dreams, and the ways the school district supports them to develop their strengths. Through strong relationships with teachers, access to mental health and college-readiness resources, and participation in clubs like Latinos Unidos (LU) and programs like AVID, these students are growing in self-efficacy, pursuing higher education, and giving back to their communities despite the challenges they face.⁵

Challenges Facing Students and their Families

The students shared some of the challenges they face within their communities. Social pressures and distractions from school can create obstacles to academic success, making teacher encouragement and access to school-based resources even more critical. One student shared, "There is a lot of gang violence. Students here are exposed to these settings

⁵ Approximately 57 percent of GGUSD students are Hispanic/Latino more than 80 percent have a second language background. Garden Grove USD launched the Latinos Unidos program to provide a unique system of supports to students through tutoring, mentorship, community service, college preparation, and cultural events.

and feel pressure to give into these gangs, and that affects our community because higher education stops being a priority for them. Teachers can inspire students to push themselves by checking in with them and praising their strength. This has made students feel a sense of belonging and self-worth..”

Additionally, immigration-related fears remain a significant concern for many families, impacting students' sense of security and well-being. Students expressed appreciation for district-led efforts to distribute information about legal rights and reassure families that schools remain safe spaces: "The district passing out information about our rights has been important. Thank you for doing that."

The Impact of Leadership Opportunities

A defining feature of the student experience is the district’s vibrant club culture, which fosters empowerment, advocacy, and community service. Students are not only participating in extracurricular activities but are also leading and shaping these spaces to reflect their interests and aspirations. One student shared "At [my high school], we have a strong club culture. Today, we organized this group, Fixture, and our photography teacher told us how proud he was. We have other clubs, like LU, to promote and celebrate and empower each other. We build each other up." Programs like LU have been particularly impactful, allowing students to celebrate their cultural identities while inspiring them to engage in community service and advocacy efforts. These leadership opportunities equip students with the confidence and skills to become active both inside and outside of school.

The Importance of Trusted Relationships with Teachers and School Leaders

Student panelists emphasized that strong, supportive relationships with teachers and school leaders play a pivotal role in their success. Student comments revealed that they deeply value teachers who show mutual respect, encouragement, and acknowledge their individual strengths and struggles. Even small, seemingly simple gestures—such as learning students’ names quickly or offering personal feedback on their work—can foster trust and motivation. "Just little things, like complimenting handwriting, noticing something out of the ordinary, those small moments communicate a lot," said one student. These connections create a sense of belonging, making students feel seen and supported in their academic journey. Many students shared how specific teachers’ encouragement inspired them to pursue higher education and leadership roles, reinforcing the vital role that trusted educators play in shaping students' futures.

The Significance of Mental Health and Wellness Supports

Schools in Garden Grove USD have implemented mental health and wellness resources to address the growing need to support students. These include on-campus wellness centers, counseling services, and student-led mental health initiatives aimed at encouraging help-seeking behaviors. One student shared, "At [my high school], we have the wellness center, so that’s a big resource for students. Teachers know that they can send students there if needed." Students emphasized the importance of having dedicated spaces to de-stress and access support such as mental health counseling. Programs such as peer-led support

groups provide opportunities for students to engage in mental health conversations and share resources with their peers.

The Role of Community Schools in Addressing Student and Family Needs

Grounding their conversation in the Garden Grove context, meeting participants explored ways in which a community schools approach can help districts and schools better engage with and provide supports to students and their families.

Community Schools as a Holistic Strategy

Community schools are a comprehensive strategy designed to support students and families, particularly in districts serving diverse and historically underserved populations. However, meeting participants noted that misconceptions about community schools abound, and there are members of the education field who think about them primarily as the colocation of supports for students and families. A presentation about the community schools approach emphasized that community schools are not just about bringing outside services into the school environment. Rather, they are about fundamentally shifting how schools operate and moving beyond traditional instruction to ensure that students and families receive the wraparound support they need to thrive.

At its core, a community school is a strategic approach to integrating student supports, strengthening relationships, and creating conditions where students feel safe, valued, and ready to learn. Several key elements define a well-functioning community school:

- *Belonging and engagement:* Schools should ensure that students, families, and staff feel a sense of connection and trust.
- *Collaboration and shared ownership:* Schools must co-own the work with families and community partners.
- *Data-informed decision making:* Schools should track students' needs holistically, using attendance, mental health referrals, and community feedback to make decisions.
- *Sustainability and coherence:* Community schools must be deeply integrated into district priorities rather than treated as an add-on program.⁶

Given the volatility and uncertainty schools operate under, community schools can provide the structures necessary to build trust and long-term stability.

Garden Grove USD's Approach to Community Schools

Building on feedback from families about the support they need, the district has shaped its community schools approach in response to those insights. By aligning initiatives with the challenges and priorities shared by parents and students, Garden Grove USD has embraced the community school model as a mechanism to support students and families. Unlike many districts that implement community schools as a standalone initiative, Garden Grove

⁶ <https://cslx.org/resources/framework-essentials-for-community-school-transformation>

USD has made them a natural extension of their existing “Garden Grove Way” approach, emphasizing coherence, collaboration, and sustainability.

Meeting participants engaged in discussion on how districts can leverage community schools to address student and family needs, sharing insights, experiences, and strategies to develop responsive and effective solutions. The following paragraphs outline several themes generated from this conversation.

Responses to Immigration Policy

The first theme is about addressing anxiety related to federal immigration and deportation policies. Many parents shared that students experience deep fear and uncertainty due to immigration policies, which affect their child’s ability to focus and feel safe at schools. One mother described how her daughter reacted when seeing police cars: “She thought she wouldn’t make it home. Our children feel that fear, and we need to reassure them that they are safe at school. That kind of fear stays with them.” Community schools have helped create safe spaces for families, providing legal aid workshops informing families of their rights, and bilingual outreach sessions to provide families with clarity and reassurance about their rights and the roles that schools play in supporting students.

Attention to Mental, Social, and Emotional Health

The second theme is about meeting the mental health and social-emotional needs of students, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Community schools in Garden Grove USD have expanded mental health support services to include (a) on-campus social workers and mental health specialists who work directly with students and their families, (b) attendance support teams that conduct home visits to identify and remove barriers to school attendance, (c) wellness rooms in all of the district’s 45 elementary schools, providing students with a space to regulate emotions and seek support, and (d) therapy sessions for students and workshops for parents, ensuring that mental health care is accessible and destigmatized. One parent shared how this approach helped her family, stating, “I took my daughter to therapy, but I realized I needed help too. The school connected me with resources, and now I can better support my child.”

Access to Basic Needs and Community Resources

The third theme is around expanding access to basic needs and community resources. Economic instability affects many families in Garden Grove USD, and the pandemic exacerbated conditions in a community where families already struggled with housing and food insecurity, as well as employment challenges. This challenging backdrop to the students’ lives can impact student success. Acknowledging this, through community schools, the district has expanded family resource centers that provide additional services to families, and developed on-campus hubs where families can meet with social workers, receive financial literacy training, and access emergency assistance.

Site-based Educators as Key Drivers in Fostering Trust in Community Schools

Teacher leaders and other site-based educators play a vital role in shaping a school environment built on trust, meaningful relationships, and shared decision making. Their commitment to listening to families, acting on feedback, and creating inclusive spaces

aligns closely with what students and parents emphasized — the need for educators who genuinely care, follow through on commitments, and provide opportunities for engagement beyond the classroom. One teacher leader noted, “Hearing what matters to families and showing them the results [ways in which the district has responded to family feedback] builds lasting trust.” This sentiment echoed what students described as feeling supported by teachers who check in, learn their names, and encourage them to pursue leadership roles. Parents also reinforced that ongoing, visible engagement from educators, whether through informal check-ins, cultural events, or advisory meetings, makes them feel like valued partners in their child’s education.

Beyond relationship building, teacher leaders are essential in sustaining the community school model by embedding family engagement into existing school structures. They emphasized that collaborative planning, strategic use of data, and open communication with both staff and families ensure that initiatives remain effective and responsive to evolving needs. As one teacher leader explained, “You have to create opportunities for parents to give feedback, and you have to follow through, even if you can’t implement everything immediately.” This mirrors student and parent perspectives from earlier in the meeting that trust is built when schools not only ask for input but also communicate transparently about decisions. By fostering a culture of shared ownership and ensuring that families feel heard and supported, teacher leaders in Garden Grove USD are helping to transform schools into true community hubs where students, parents, and staff work together for lasting success.

The Future of Community Schools in Garden Grove USD

The district currently has eight community schools and plans to submit an application for funding that can spur further growth. District leaders believe the success of this model lies in its ability to integrate into the broader district framework rather than being a separate initiative. As one school leader described, “Community schools don’t replace what we do, they enhance it. They provide the structure and dedicated staff to make sure we’re supporting the whole child.”

Looking ahead, Garden Grove USD aims to strengthen and refine its community school approach by deepening partnerships with community organizations to expand resources, enhancing student leadership opportunities so youth voices are central to decision making, and continuing to adapt services based on family input to ensure long-term impact.

Sustaining and Scaling Community Schools

Although community schools funding in districts like Garden Grove USD has enabled many school systems to create systems and structures that better serve students and families, that funding will expire at the end of the CCSPP grant. As part of their planning and implementation efforts, districts across the state must consider how best to embed the best aspects of community schools work into the fabric of how the district operates and prepare for sustainability over the long haul.

In Garden Grove USD, a centralized, coherent approach has been a key factor in successfully implementing community schools. By leveraging existing leadership structures within the district, such as coaching models and advisory groups, the district ensures that community schools are not dependent on external consultants moving forward. Additionally, by investing in teacher coaches who understand the district culture and can help embed community school strategies at the school level, the district is building the capacity of the teacher leaders within their organization. As one district leader emphasized, “Our teacher coaches already know how to navigate our schools and families. By training and supporting them in this role, we build that capacity internally, which means this work doesn’t disappear when funding shifts.”

Meeting participants identified several key factors that shape a district’s efforts to sustain community schools efforts. Because the grants that supported the launch of many districts’ community schools are time-limited, district leaders must recognize the need for long-term funding strategies. Leaders discussed how Garden Grove USD historically has been a fiscally responsible district, maintaining reserves and planning ahead for budget fluctuations. One administrator stated, “We have always been good budgeters and savers. We knew when we started this work that we had to think beyond the current grant cycle.” Some strategies for financial sustainability include (1) blending and braiding funding sources such as Title I, LCFF, and special education funds to support community schools infrastructure, (2) advocating for ongoing state funding to maintain full-time coordinators and resource hubs, and (3) building local partnerships to offset costs and expand resources.

Other districts have taken different approaches to ensuring long-term sustainability. Long Beach USD, for example, opted to pilot community school strategies before applying for funding, ensuring that the model aligned with existing district structures and long-term priorities. This intentional approach reflects the district’s broader philosophy that they will not take on initiatives they are not prepared to sustain over time. Similarly, San Bernardino City USD sought to build sustainability through deep community engagement. Their approach was driven by grassroots advocacy, with community members and activists pushing for the adoption of community schools at board meetings. Unlike Garden Grove, San Bernardino placed greater emphasis on hiring classified staff rather than teachers to lead implementation, leveraging the deep connections these staff members had within the community. San Bernardino now embraces the challenge of strengthening the alignment of community schools work with academic goals, highlighting the importance of integrating instructional priorities into the model from the outset.

By investing in training school leaders, teacher coaches, and classified staff, districts can ensure that community school practices become an integrated part of school and district culture, regardless of leadership transitions. Garden Grove USD benefits from stable, consistent leadership at both the district and site levels, but also leverages that stability through ongoing investment in staff knowledge and skills. Long Beach’s careful, phased implementation process and San Bernardino’s community-driven approach both underscore the importance of ensuring that staff and community members fully understand and are prepared to sustain the work before expanding efforts.

Meeting participants noted that spreading community schools efforts to multiple sites without losing quality and coherence is a daunting task. One administrator emphasized that district-wide consistency is critical for success, stating, “We want to allow for site-level innovation, but we also need a shared framework so that every school is providing high-quality support.” To promote coherence while scaling, meeting participants encouraged districts to use data-driven decision making to track impact and adjust strategies, facilitate cross-school collaboration so that sites can share best practices, ensure all schools have a full-time community school coach rather than relying on volunteers or part-time staff, and maintain the tight alignment of community school work with the district’s instructional and academic priorities. One district leader agreed, stating, “This isn’t just about adding services. It’s about ensuring that students can access instruction. Community schools and effective teaching go hand in hand.”

The consistency across multiple districts employing a community schools approach suggests that successful, sustainable implementation requires both strong district leadership and deep community engagement. Districts pursue different paths of embracing community schools, but the experiences in Garden Grove, Long Beach, and San Bernardino highlight common themes: the importance of aligning community schools work with district priorities, ensuring staff buy-in before expansion, and maintaining financial and structural stability to sustain the work beyond initial grant funding.

Next Steps for the Collaborative

The Collaborative will meet next in March 2025 to discuss high-quality math instruction. Resources from this meeting, as well as resources from previous meetings are available at www.cacollaborative.org.