The essential elements that make a San Diego community school thrive

by Katharine Fong

EACH COMMUNITY SCHOOL is different — they have to be. The community school model draws on the unique strengths of a neighborhood to address its students’ unique needs. This is particularly clear at bustling Hoover High School in San Diego, one of five designated community schools in the San Diego Unified School District last year (another 10 have been designated to begin their transformation this year, 2023-24).

Hoover, with 2,136 students, is situated in the most ethnically diverse neighborhood of the county, City Heights. Many students and families are newcomers to the United States; 100% are eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch. “We have over 40 languages represented among our families,” says Candace Gyure, the school nurse. The demographic breakdown, according to Hoover’s website, is 75% Latino/Hispanic, 12% Asian, 9% African American, 1% White, 22.3% English Learners and 7.5% Homeless Youth.

“Hoover High serves one of the highest need communities in San Diego,” says Kyle Weinberg, president of the San Diego Education Association (SDEA), which with CTA has long advocated for community schools. “Community schools are a great way to identify the unique needs of a community like City Heights, and also to transform how we do education within the classroom, have more culturally sustaining curriculum — more community-based curriculum, real-world projects, collaboration with community organizations on the issues that are facing our communities.”

Like many schools, Hoover offered various services — including a wellness center, mental health center, etc., before officially becoming a community school. But the community school structure brought shared decision-making among students, families, educators, district and community as well as a data-oriented approach to assess needs and assets. This has resulted in more accessible, coordinated services, and resources directed to or developed for specific needs. The structure has also allowed for enhanced partnerships with community organizations and stronger connections among the school, students and families.

“It’s a long-term approach,” Weinberg says. “Addressing [social, mental, physical] needs now will impact such things as academic performance, social emotional learning, and attendance in the coming years.”

Here are the elements that Hoover has put in place and continues to refine:

Community Schools Site Governance Team

Composed of 10-12 elected positions who have an equal voice and represent all stakeholders: students, parents, community, union educators, district leaders. The team oversees the working group subcommittee, composed of about 22 people who work on strategy and communication, assessing needs and assets, developing protocols and processes, etc. SDEA has a precedent for shared governance won in a contract fight in the 1990s - see page 38 for details on how key this is to the community schools model, and what it requires.

Involvement of all stakeholders

Parents: “Convincing parents that this is not district-driven but truly collaborative is hard,” says Richard Gijon, Hoover High’s community schools coordinator. “But I can see them get excited when I ask, ‘What are the top priorities for your students’, and we actually listen to them and ask them to work with us and be part of that process.”

Students: It’s the same with students, Gijon says. “To see their excitement has been amazing — ‘not only are you asking me for my voice, but you’re actually telling me what you’re hearing’.”

Educators and community: A big part is played by the community schools coordinator and site coach, says Chase Fite, Hoover’s site coach. “You need someone who’s trusted, [who can convince others that] this is something that is going to improve our site and improve the life of the students as well as all people surrounding our community.”

“We’ve had top-down approaches to school transformation. But they didn’t take into account the unique needs of each school. The community schools model is different.”

—RICHARD GIJON, Hoover High Community Schools Coordinator
People power
It takes a village, of course, but specific people in specific roles are crucial to success.

RICHARD GIJON, Community Schools Coordinator. Gijon works full time to coordinate all student and family support services and creates an environment that helps support student achievement and wellness. “The students and families in our community dictate what I do. Some days a family comes in in crisis [over] issues of food, security, housing, and I connect them to the resources we have. Sometimes it’s mental health...We had all these resources [before, but] it was a little disjointed. Part of my role is trying to get all these programs to develop a plan to engage all our students.”

CHASE FITE, Community Schools Site Coach. The AP government teacher spends one class period on community schools work, including needs assessment and data collection and analysis; implementing expanded and enriched learning; and developing and implementing collaborative leadership and decision-making protocols and structures. “A site coach helps build up the relationships and the onboarding of the staff as well as the community partners on site. I’m also developing collaborative leadership protocols and structures and helping implement them.”

SITE GOVERNANCE TEAM, see previous page. The site team approach, with its shared governance, was actually established in the SDEA contract in the 1990’s to ensure members’ ability to democratize the workplace. “Site governance is a product of union fights, union work.”

EDUCATORS, a critical force in supporting community schools as drivers of equity, democracy and engagement among students, families and community — and educators.

Assessment of needs and assets

“Because of community schools, we were able to expand Hoover Market; it gave us the infrastructure to give everyone more access. What made it meaningful is that it’s infused throughout campus, it’s part of our curriculum. Our lessons this month are on the connection between mental health and food, and how eating nutritious food can change your mood and decrease depression. Students are part of the transformational knowledge about how food impacts people, their health and their communities.”

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Goal 1

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In a second semester AP Government class, Fite had students refine the working group protocols for collaborative dialogue about solutions the community would want to see implemented. Students then presented their findings to other classes, teachers and administrative leaders, and engaged in

• Class projects: In a first-semester U.S. History class with juniors, Chase Fite’s students worked on a public health advocacy project using the community schools framework. “For me, this was a rough draft/dry run for implementing the framework before doing so with other stakeholder groups,” Fite says. Focusing on the bathroom issue (see previous page), students developed a needs and assets assessment survey and pushed it out to the school for completion, and created a website where they analyzed survey data, presented historical context of the issue, explained the science behind why the issue is harmful to the community, and put forward philosophical and ethical theories that they used to argue whether or not to act on the issue.

Students then presented their findings to other classes, teachers and administrative leaders, and engaged in collaborative dialogue about solutions the community would want to see implemented.

In a second semester AP Government class, Fite had students refine the working group protocols for determining and implementing solutions. This class found that the root cause of the bathroom issue was vandalism due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use and vaping, which cause other students to avoid bathrooms. Students suggested those who are caught using the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use and vaping, which cause other students to avoid bathrooms. Students suggested those who are caught using the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use and vaping, which cause other students to avoid bathrooms. Students suggested those who are caught using the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use due to lack of student ownership, and that a student art installation, for example, could allow them to regard the space as their own and discourage vandalism. Another class found the root cause to be bathroom drug use...
Our counseling team facilitates attendance, academics, mental health, education, referrals. We saw that there is a high need for parenting workshops, how to parent your teen, so we recently started them, with childcare available. We have lots of resources for families — Hoover Market, our upcoming Cardinal Closet with clothing, lawyers to help with the undocumented, wrongfully eviction, students who have lost their only guardian or parent.”
—ANDREA MUNOZ, head counselor

“The biggest part about shared decision-making and why it is a strength is that no one has to be the most important voice in the room. We draw upon all the knowledge and experiences. So when we add all the voices, including student voices, we hear multiple perspectives and have to really think through what the impact for the student is.”
—TRACEY MAKINGS, Principal

Strong partners
In addition to community partners at individual school sites, a steering committee at the district level includes representatives from San Diego State University, community organizations, educators, high school students and others who meet monthly, oversee work groups and provide recommendations. SDEA is a member of the San Diego Community Schools Coalition, which advocates with parents, community organizations, school board members and at the bargaining table to elevate parent and educator voice in the decision-making process.

Hoover High School maintains an extensive network of community, district and city resources for students and families in multiple arenas, including legal services, food and shelter, health and wellness, tutoring and more.

“The Union Role
San Diego Education Association is unique in that it won a contract fight with the school district in the 1990s that codified shared decision-making. This has proved crucial to San Diego community schools’ success — and is a sticking point for other locals who do not have such contract language. Without it, educators, as well as parents, students and community members, often struggle to be heard and participate as equals. Many locals are now organizing to ensure shared governance is codified, for community schools and for the public education structure that best serves students.

“SDEA has advocated for community schools because we view them as a way to elevate the voice of our highest-need school communities and get more resources and better processes to the students that we serve,” says SDEA President Kyle Weinberg.

CTA’s role is important on a statewide level. “CTA has been essential to establishing strong community schools in California — lobbying with the State Board of Education, with the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, to make sure that the pillars and mechanisms of transformative community schools are embedded into state policy,” Weinberg says.
CTA and California were well-represented at an eight-person panel on community schools, held at NEA's Representative Assembly in July and moderated by NEA President Becky Pringle. In addition to UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz and Anaheim Secondary Teachers Association (ASTA) President and CTA/NEA Coordinator Grant Schuster, a recent graduate from Anaheim's Sycamore Junior High (a community school) also spoke.

The significant Golden State presence reflects California's nation-leading $4.1 billion investment in community schools as well as CTA chapters' success in organizing, bargaining for and now implementing community schools in multiple school districts.

"The community schools model — an actual democratic model that includes every stakeholder — is for every school across this nation — urban, rural, suburban and every school in between," said Myart-Cruz. "It is the absolute antidote to privatization."

In 2019, following a six-day strike, UTLA reached a deal with LA Unified School District that included funding to convert 30 campuses to community schools. LAUSD now has 55 community schools, with plans to add more.

Student Emma Alvarez, who was on Sycamore Junior High's community schools site team, spoke of being heard as an equal. "I get a say in what I want in my classroom, what I want to learn. I have the same amount of voice as my principal, my administrator, my parent, my friend and the people in my community."

Schuster talked about his and ASTA's experience in working with the school district, parents and students and community allies to open/transition 15 community schools.

"What we've learned is that listening is critical in building trust. We engaged with and educated our members and built relationships with community partners. Then we went together to the district and said, 'we want to implement this model.' We built a steering committee including teachers, ESPs, parents, students, community groups and our district.

"We set out a five-month path for teacher leads and community school organizers to talk to every teacher, ESP and facility worker at every site, and then followed up with parent and student conversations, and community circles and one-on-one interviews. Before we started, parent participation averaged 15 percent. We made it a goal [to reach] 75 percent — and we got that at every one of the community schools.

"We were able to bring [what we learned] into the classroom. At Sycamore Junior High, for example, immigration [came] out in all the surveys. Parents did not understand what their rights were or what resources were available. Students were anxious about their families' future, and teachers saw that reflected in the classroom.

"The site team got together to talk about solutions. We now provide services around immigration, so parents can understand what they can do. The 7th grade English teachers got together to create a unit on immigration, so students can study U.S. policy on immigration and deportation to not only relieve their anxiety and express how they feel but to learn about opportunities for civic engagement and to advocate for themselves and their families.

"We are only two years into this process, but we are learning that we must go intentionally slow to build the structures so that in the future we can go much faster."

—ASTA President Grant Schuster