PARTNERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE of LEARNING CALIFORNIA

Transformational Community Schools: Trust, Belonging, and Leadership in Anaheim Schools

What are transformational community schools?

In 2021-22, California made a historic investment of $4.1 billion in seed funding to expand community schools across the state as a transformational, place-based strategy for reimagining public education. Community schools are a holistic approach to how we do school rooted in trust, shared leadership, and deep partnership with students, families, educators, and community members. By organizing in- and out-of-school supports around the strengths and needs of each local community, they create culturally-rooted, inclusive environments that promote academic success, social-emotional wellbeing, and meaningful engagement from cradle to career.

Evidence of Systemwide Improvements

- AESD moved away from surface-level engagement efforts (like one-time events or surveys) toward sustained collaboration and capacity-building with families.
- Parents now take part in decision-making bodies like PTA, school site councils, community school teams, and district committees.
- AESD and OCCCO co-designed and co-facilitated trainings that focus on listening across differences, navigating conflict, and building shared purpose in multilingual, multicultural communities.
- Families are now recognized and compensated for their time and labor, shifting away from the expectation of unpaid, invisible work.
- OCCCO and AESD are launching structured, school-based campaigns that invite families to identify needs and shape priorities.
- Parent leaders informed the design of staff PD on culturally responsive practices, with reported improvements in classroom engagement and student voice.

About the Parent Leadership Institute (PLI)

In Anaheim, parent leaders are helping reshape school culture through a growing partnership between the Anaheim Elementary School District (AESD) and the Orange County Congregation Community Organization (OCCCO). What began with one-on-one conversations in school cafeterias and at after-school pick up has evolved into a parent leadership network rooted in trust and care. Through community schools strategies, they began rethinking how families participate in public education by building family leadership over time and creating space for growth that honors personal experiences and cultural strengths.

Over time, these mothers have been stepping into leadership roles through structured opportunities like serving on PTA, school site councils and community schools teams, and district committees. They now help make decisions about budgets and school plans, host events, lead workshops, and support other parents who are still learning to navigate the school system.

Real changes are visible in the ways parents are stepping forward, helping others, and shaping the systems from which they once felt excluded. Additionally, a sense of belonging grows as families are treated as partners. Combined, this leads to stronger relationships, better decision-making, and school communities that reflect the full diversity of the families they serve.

Improvements by the Numbers

6

Trainings

Held via Anaheim Elementary PLI in the 2024-2025 School Year in collaboration with OCCCO

125-150

PLI parents

Participated in the 2024-25 trainings in collaboration with OCCCO

23

School Sites

Represented at the trainings with OCCCO

93.3%

Attendance Rate

Increased by 0.3% in 2024-2025 with chronic absenteeism reduce by 2%

98%

Parents Feel Welcome

Increased by 2%, as shown in LCAP Survey

In the Words of Parents & District Leaders

"OCCCO has helped me heal. Because first I need to work on myself, heal myself first, and my family. I always just considered myself just like a volunteer, and now I see myself as a leader and more involved, engaged in [my child's] school."

— Eymi Arrellano, OCCCO Parent Leadership Team Member and PLI Participant

"You really don't know the impact that you have until you hear it sometimes. For me, it's just a way of doing things that I naturally do. I don't want our parents to go through the struggles I've gone through, the dismissiveness, the assumptions. I want to show them what I've learned about building relationships and navigating the system."

— Maritza Bermudez, community organizer with OCCCO

"When they asked me to be the president, I never thought I'd be doing something like that. Eymi said, 'Don't worry, we won't leave you alone,' and they haven't."

— Rosy Lezo, PTA president at Edison

"Our school campus would not run as smoothly as it does without the support of these moms. It probably would've fallen apart if they weren't part of the leadership of the school."

— Suzanne Nichols, Principal at Edison Elementary Schools

Additional Resources

Community Schools Toolkit: Center Mental Health and Wellness for Students, Families, and Staff

Shared Learning Series: Partnering to Advance Expanded, Culturally Sustaining, and Enriched Learning Time

Belonging in Action

This partnership centers a shared belief that every family deserves to feel a sense of dignity and belonging in their school community. Parents in OCCCO's network describe unconditional belonging as the ability to speak without fear, be respected for their perspective, and show up as their full selves. These values shape how parents are welcomed, how their contributions are valued, and how schools become spaces where both students and adults can grow.

Through this approach, school leaders and parents are learning to hold space for vulnerability and difference. One parent shared that OCCCO helped them feel seen and heard after years of staying silent. Others say they now feel confident advocating for their children and leading alongside teachers and principals. This is how belonging can be built, practiced, and extended across classrooms, campuses, and district spaces.

A Foundation for Democracy

The partnership between OCCCO and AESD grew out of the belief that public schools can be a foundation for a strong, multiracial democracy where every family, regardless of language, income, or immigration status, has a voice in shaping the future. Rather than treating families as outsiders or guests, this work affirms them as co-creators of inclusive, thriving school communities.

Through community schools strategies, families can build the skills, relationships, and leadership needed to participate in shared decision-making at every level. They help set priorities, influence district policy, and hold systems accountable to the students they serve. In a region where public education faces growing political pressure, the leadership of immigrant and working-class families sends a powerful message at a critical time:

Democracy works best when everyone has a seat at the table and the tools to shape what happens there.

OCCCO
together in faith, forward for justice

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The **California Partnership for the Future of Learning** is a statewide alliance of community organizing and advocacy groups advancing **a shared vision of racially just, relationship-centered community schools** that confront the historical legacy and generational impact of inequitable schooling in California and the country to **birth a transformational education system built for us all**. Our work together centers equity, elevates the voices of students and families of color in partnership with educators, focuses on long-term systemic change, and connects to a larger national effort to strengthen public education systems.