OPINION

# Commentary: I didn’t know my own hometown, but community schools changed that

by **Coraline Salazar • Special for Catalyst California**
April 14, 2026, 10:46 a.m.

Members of a community group working to make Los Angeles Unified schools more welcoming gather at a collaborative workshop. (Photo courtesy of Equity Alliance for LA's Kids)

I never thought about the issues in my community until I got involved with the community schools strategy at Anaheim High School. Suddenly my history, science, and government classes connected me to what was going on in the streets outside our doors.

We talked about how inflation affects our families and about immigration, not as an abstract idea, but as something my classmates live with every single day. I stopped waiting to be told what to think and became someone who asks why.

I'm a sophomore now. I joined the Orange County Congregation Community Organization in seventh grade because I noticed students like me who weren't a part of things — not included, not heard, not speaking up. As a community partner, OCCCO works with students, families and educators to foster belonging in our schools. Students are more than just students, and teachers are more than just teachers; we see each other as human beings who all have our stories.

Community schools gave me a reason to step up and a room where it mattered. Now I go to monthly meetings with teachers, staff and parents to talk about how to make our school better. I help design surveys to capture students' actual opinions. I push back when adults want to do something I know my classmates won't support. I am only 15 years old, but I have a seat at the table.

Opinion

In January, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a new education governance proposal as a key initiative in his **2026-27 state budget**. The proposal included $1 billion in new funding for California's 2,500 community schools, including mine.

Our school is in the middle of redesigning our days: a new schedule with more room for AP classes, arts, athletics, and college and career pathways; homeroom periods to help students build real relationships with teachers; teaching that connects history and science instead of treating every subject like an island. These are very big changes.

Not everyone was on board at first. When students heard about the proposed new schedule, many were angry because it felt like something was being done *to* them rather than *with* them. So we got to work. We planned an all-school assembly. We made flyers. We used social media. When administrators suggested how to message it to students, we answered back: Let *us* do it together.

That's the thing — community schools bring us together to realize that we're not just a school, we're a family.

California's Community Schools Partnership Program makes it possible to have programs not handed down from above, but change designed from within by the people who know these schools best. It takes a family — of students, families, community and educators — to make this redesign process strong.

The **Assembly Budget Subcommittee** meets Tuesday at the state Capitol to discuss the Community Schools Partnership Program. As legislators prepare for the hearing on the program's future, I want to say directly: Make this funding permanent. The transformation in California's schools is too important to let expire.

The stakes are especially high right now. When the California Partnership for the Future of Learning **surveyed more than 1,800 students and families** last year, they documented the widespread fear — of family separation, economic instability, a fraying safety net. I feel it too. I see it in my classroom every day.

But community schools are where people turn when crisis hits. They are the trusted partner an administrator calls to reach immigrant families, the staff member checking on a student who came to school not knowing whether her parents would be there when she got home, the network organizing safe routes when families are afraid to walk outside.

A student who feels unsafe can't learn. A family living in fear can't partner with a teacher. Community schools reach outside their walls to people's real lives — they turn students like me into problem-solvers — and that's how they make learning gains real.

For California's incoming governor, this is a question of legacy. California has spent years directing more resources toward students who need them most. Funding community schools year after year is how a new administration cements that progress and commits to better schools.

I'm a sophomore. I'll be at Anaheim High for two more years — long enough to see whether the changes we're fighting for actually take root, long enough to find out whether the funding holds. I'll be here when California decides. The question is whether our lawmakers will show up for us the way we've shown up for our schools.

*Coraline Salazar is a sophomore at Anaheim High School, a youth leader at Orange County Congregation Community Organization and a Student Advisory Board member for the Statewide Transformational Assistance Center.*

---