

How Community Schools Connect Community to Classrooms

[nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/how-community-schools-connect-community-classrooms](https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/how-community-schools-connect-community-classrooms)

We use cookies to offer you a better browsing experience, provide ads, analyze site traffic, and personalize content. If you continue to use this site, you consent to our use of cookies.

NEA News

A closer look at Community School initiatives that benefit students, families, and neighbors.



Parent Pascuala Chan teaches a lesson on K'iche' – her native language in Guatemala.

By: James Paterson

Published: February 29, 2024

Key Takeaways

1. When community schools identify needs and assets, families and their lived experiences top the list of assets.
2. Community schools gain from the community while also giving to it.
3. A model for transforming public education, community schools empower everyone to help students and schools succeed.

The young woman became a mother as a teen and never had any formal education in her home country of Guatemala. Now, however, she was teaching, and her carefully prepared lesson – complete with a colorful Power Point presentation and delivered with her young son on her hip – was a huge hit.

It was one of the most popular lessons presented by a group of 23 parents sharing their expertise on a variety of subjects for elementary school students at Pio Pico Dual Language Academy school in Santa Ana, CA.

Parents are a valuable resource for schools, and their experience with different cultures enriches curriculum. Community schools like Pio Pico tap into that resource and the knowledge flows.

“Ms. Chan was uncertain how to approach a lesson about her native language, K’iche,’ and the culture in Guatemala,” says Lupe Gomez, community school director for the Santa Ana Unified School District. “But she was a great, natural teacher – and students really loved her. Even her daughter, who is a student there, gained newfound pride in her heritage and its language.”

Parents as Guest Educators: Celebrating Culture and Community

The presentation by Pascuala Chan was part of a unique community school program that developed when teachers and community school leaders recognized that parents had valuable knowledge and could make the critical connection between the classroom and the community, which is key to the community school concept.

The parents in Santa Ana – who after careful preparation and a seminar in lesson planning – offered programs on topics ranging from cooking native dishes or using plants found in nature for medicinal purposes to discovering the various types of chocolate or the history of their homeland.

Gomez points out that the parent lessons touch on several of the pillars of the community school model: shared leadership, parent involvement, and strengthening of the curriculum through the direct, diverse learning experiences in the classroom.



Parents share lessons on dance and dress from their culture and information about medicinal uses of plants.

Community school initiatives nationwide are continually finding new ways to bring enriching services and experiences into schools and make school resources available to the community.

Due to their success, community school programs increasingly are being funded by districts, states, and the federal government, with guidance and other support throughout the process from NEA.

With NEA advocacy and applause, the Biden Administration advanced the growth of community schools with \$74 million in community school grants in December 2023.

Gaining From and Giving to the Community

Diana Padilla, the community school coordinator at Milagro Middle School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, credits NEA with playing a key role in bringing state funds to her program that have allowed her to develop a range of programs, including several educational trips to nearby museums and wildlife centers and involvement from experts at the facilities in classrooms.

A community garden project involved science and math classes in planning the garden and growing plants from seed, while parents who work at a local garden center and farmer's market helped with maintaining the garden, harvesting the produce, and cooking for the community. The students are also exploring hydroponic growing, building a student-designed greenhouse and ways to expand the sales at the market.

The school's newest project is a labyrinth, with rocks, some brightly colored, forming the circles. Art, science, AVID, language and math classes helped in the design of it, and the entire student body played a role in its construction, led by a local labyrinth expert with help from parents and staff.

“We had a ribbon cutting with school officials, and some students were actually teary about it being completed and existing as a place for them to calm down and relax. But they were also pleased it was located where the whole community can use it,” Padilla says. “It was important to us all – and critical to the community school philosophy – that we gain from the community, but we also offer something to them.”

Students Help Identify and Meet Community Needs

Oftentimes, the students themselves find ways to bring in and serve communities.

At the Anaheim Union High School District, where the community school approach has grown perhaps as fast as anywhere in the country, students at Magnolia High School are working out the details of community improvement projects they designed in a senior Google Project Management/English class.

Seniors David Sanchez and Daisy Quezada, for example, analyzed data from the community school needs and asset surveys and determined that a “pop up” library, designed and built by woodshop students with donated books, would help students and surrounding community who only had access to one library.

“We wanted to see students with books in their hands instead of their phones. We wanted to also leave this positive change for others after graduating.” Daisy said.

Katrina Mundy, an English teacher at Magnolia said the student-led projects met the criteria for the community school initiative, including collaboration, creativity and compassion.

“They organize and lead the project, and then reflect on their work and how it affects the community – all real-world skills that prepare them for a broad scope of experiences in their lives.”



Students paint the benches they made to put around campus for calming and connection.

At nearby South Junior High school, another Anaheim community school, history teacher Jason Collar can tick off a steady stream of community projects that boost student learning.

In a “green bench” project, students in art and woodworking classes used their skills to design, build and paint a series of benches in a soothing shade of green where students and others could rest and connect. The benches also meant to “bring awareness to mental health,” Collar notes, and feature a QR code that will take users to mental health resources.

One bench was welcomed on the property of a neighboring church, which the community school initiative is now collaborating with to develop an improved community garden on shared school and church property.

“Our math department is determining the dimensions of the raised beds, and our woodworking department will help build them,” Collar says. “Our science department is studying sustainability and using artificial intelligence to create the most efficient water irrigation system.”

Meanwhile, Collar hopes members of the church congregation and others in the community with knowledge or interest in gardening will collaborate with the students, including local businesses who will potentially donate wood and other materials.

“Community schools transform public education. We're making the school the center of the community -- more than just a place for students to attend classes,” says Collar. “It's a place where anybody can expect to get the resources or educational services they need to better themselves or assist with a community project. Our role is also to bring those outside resources into the classroom. It's really cool when it works.”

Building a Campus Labryinth

With the help of a local labyrinth expert, students at Milagro Middle School, a Community School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, designed and built their own campus labyrinth that everyone can use for walking meditation or to just admire. See the progress in the photos below, with the last image showing the smiles of the students as they meet in the middle after the project is done.

We're here to help you succeed in your career, advocate for public school students, and stay up to date on the latest education news. Sign up to stay informed.