**Headline:** How LA’s Teachers Are Making Good on Their Promise to Support Community Schools

**Teaser:** In 2019, LA teachers went on a successful strike. Four years later, they can point to the evidence of what went right with a little district support—and help realize an even better future.

By Jeff Bryant

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**[Article Body:]**

“We should have been miserable,” said Emily Grijalva, recalling the first days of the 2019 strike by Los Angeles teachers. Grijalva, who is currently the community school and restorative justice coordinator at [Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School](https://www.mendezhs.org/), joined her colleagues on the picket line in 2019 despite the biting cold and an unusual, prolonged rainstorm that flooded city streets and sidewalks and drenched picketers. Many of them did not wear, much less own, suitable rain gear for their normally sunny, mild Southern California climate.

“But even through the rain and cold, we felt togetherness and support from the community. Families dropped off food for the teachers, students and parents joined us on the front lines, and people opened their homes to let us dry off or use the bathroom,” she said.

Grijalva’s experience in 2019 might get a replay in 2023 as, once again, teachers in Los Angeles [joined in a three-day strike](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-03-22/lausd-strike-unites-workers-demanding-raises-closes-schools) in support of the 30,000 [school service workers](https://www.seiu99.org/2023/03/11/ready-to-strike-at-lausd/) who are leading the labor action. One factor that may figure prominently in the teachers’ corner is their success in 2019 at [convincing the district](https://edsource.org/2019/agreement-reached-on-la-school-strike-teachers-expected-to-return-to-class-on-wednesday/607523) to provide funding for converting 30 campuses to what’s become known as [community schools](https://www.nea.org/student-success/great-public-schools/community-schools).

The community schools approach seeks to strengthen the relationships between public schools and their surrounding communities by addressing the broader needs and interests of children and families and giving students, parents, and community members more of a voice in guiding school policies and programs.

In its [account of the 2019 strike](https://reclaimourschoolsla.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Building-the-power-to-reclaim-our-schools.pdf), [Reclaim Our Schools LA](https://reclaimourschoolsla.org/) (ROSLA)—a coalition of community groups and the teachers’ union, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA)—noted that one of the demands the teachers won in their contract negotiations was nearly $12 million in funding from the district for the development of community schools.

The demand grew out of an agreement among the groups that formed ROSLA in 2016 to make community schools a key part of the coalition’s organizing strategy. The strategy would include educating the general public on the concept of community schools and forcing district leadership “to take sides: were they for—or against—this research-supported school design?” as [ROSLA’s case study](https://reclaimourschoolsla.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Building-the-power-to-reclaim-our-schools.pdf) of the 2019 strike explained. The strategy appears to have worked.

The 2019 contract hammered out between UTLA and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) called for funding of community schools implementations in 30 campuses, Capital and Main [reported](https://capitalandmain.com/dozens-of-los-angeles-schools-converting-to-community-school-model) in 2021, with allocations of $150,000 in the first year of transition and $250,000 in the second year. It also established the [Community Schools Steering Committee](https://utla.net/app/uploads/2023/02/District-Counter-UTLA-MOU-Community-Schools-02-15-23.pdf), which oversees the transition process. In 2021, the district [added funding](https://achieve.lausd.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=4466&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=107443&PageID=1) for transitioning 40 more community schools over the next three years.

“We knew the community schools idea would better address what our students need,” Grijalva said. Even though implementations of the approach are still very much in their early phases, the schools, and the families who attend them, are already seeing tangible benefits.

**‘The Way Every School Should Be Run’**

“I knew nothing about community schools when we went on strike [in 2019],” said David George, the community school coordinator at [Marina del Rey Middle School and Performing Arts Magnet](https://www.marinadelreyms.org/). But the approach’s appearance on the union’s platform prompted him to read more about it. “I’m now a big believer that this is the way every school should be run,” he said.

Much of George’s conversion to the community schools approach is due to what it’s done for his school, where he taught history for 16 years until transitioning into his current role in January 2020.

The school—a combination of a performing arts magnet drawing students from outside its South Los Angeles community and a marine science academy drawing students mostly from the surrounding community—has long struggled. Enrollment has declined over the past two decades, George said, from 1,400 when he started with the school in 2004 to the current 450 students. He noted, though, that there has been a recent uptick in enrollment in the past two years.

The school’s student population is 45 percent Hispanic and 50 percent Black, two demographics the district is [least successful](https://www.the74million.org/article/achivement-gap-los-angeles-study-2-in-10-students/) at educating. According to George, virtually all the students qualify for the federal government’s free and reduced-price meal program, a common identifier for poverty. “The school has had low test scores for as long as I’ve worked here,” he said.

George’s first few months as a community school coordinator were a bit of a baptism by fire. A mere 60 days after he started, the pandemic closed his school and sent students and teachers into a hastily contrived online learning mode. But he quickly learned how the philosophy of the approach helped the school address some of the pandemic’s most difficult challenges.

First, because one of the supporting [pillars](https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/) of the community schools strategy is “active family and community engagement,” George and his colleagues were already attuned to the need to reach out to families, and they had developed the beginnings of a system for doing that.

“We quickly found out which families had become disconnected from the school, which had become unhoused, and which needed to be told about the weekly food bank that the school had set up with the help of a local partner,” he said. “When we found out we had two students whose parents had been shot and killed, we had the capacity to find out what kind of mental health support they needed and how they could get it.”

George and his colleagues also rallied around another [pillar](https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/chapter-3) of the community schools approach: to develop partnerships in the community for integrating health care, nutrition, and other student supports with the academic program.

“We had success with a mobile dental clinic that came to the school. Now it’s going to come twice a year,” he said. “We had a vision company come and examine our students. Thirty percent had issues related to glasses. Half of the students who got new glasses had never worn glasses before. One student was legally blind in one eye, and his parents didn’t even know it.”

Since a return to in-person schooling, Marina del Rey’s implementation of the community schools approach has also focused on expanding learning opportunities for students, another [pillar](https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/chapter-4) of the community schools approach.

The school has added a girls’ empowerment group that meets twice a week to learn about entrepreneurship and other life skills. It also offers a robotics program, and it’s about to start a program for teaching computer coding. The school has introduced students to local Hispanic and Black artists and had local artists come in to teach students how to paint and draw.

Using a grant from the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the school started a culinary justice program that has students growing and harvesting their own food. “When I took a photo of one of the students working in the garden and emailed it to the parent,” George recalled, “I got the nicest note in reply, saying ‘You don’t know how happy this made me feel. My kid couldn’t wait to come to school because of this project.’”

Another new addition is an adult education program, beginning with students learning English as a second language. Half of the adults enrolled aren’t even parents of students in the school, but they live in the local neighborhood and will help with improving the reputation of the school.

**‘Our Lighthouses’**

Other community school coordinators in LAUSD report similar benefits from using this approach.

“I had absolutely zero awareness of the community schools strategy until my principal asked me to help with the application,” said Julie Chun who is the community school coordinator at [John H. Francis Polytechnic Senior High School](https://www.polyhigh.org/) in the Sun Valley area. “When I learned what [community schools] entailed,” she recalled, “I realized it aligned with my vision of what school should be. The reason I went into education to begin with was to promote equity, and the community schools strategy does that.”

The school, located in the San Fernando Valley area, is quite large with an enrollment of 2,200 students, a large majority of whom identify as Hispanic. Ninety-four percent have been identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, according to Chun. Many of the students are also designated as English language learners, and virtually all qualify for the federal government’s free and reduced-price meals program.

“The four pillars have been our lighthouses,” Chun said, but, so far, most of her energy has gone into assessing assets and needs, a key early step in the community schools implementation process.

“In our assessment, we got lots of confirmation of assumptions,” Chun said, “but a few surprises stood out.” For instance, students had an intense interest in learning job training skills for the here and now and not for future employment. Also, there was a lot of interest in learning Korean language and culture.

So, the school now has a full Korean program of learning, and it offers a full week of instruction in job readiness skills, including job search and interviewing skills.

The school staged weekend job fairs, the last one of which brought in 25 vendors, Chun said. “I don’t have numbers, but I know of students who were able to find employment as a result of that.”

**‘The Only Way You Get Better Test Scores’**

Not all current LAUSD staff implementing the community schools learned about it because of the strike. Martha Gonzalez, the community school coordinator at [Lucille Roybal-Allard Elementary School](https://allardes-lausd-ca.schoolloop.com/), first learned about the approach in 2012 when she was helping to organize with parents and other teachers on a plan to pilot an idea for a small school in the district. The group researched schools in Chicago, where the district operated on a [site-based management](https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol15/iss1/15/) idea with some similarities to the community schools approach.

“Our idea was for the school to act as a hub for the local community,” she recalled, “and to address the social-emotional and health needs of the students, not just academics.” So, she was excited when, as a result of the 2019 strike, the district agreed to fund a rollout of a districtwide community schools effort. “Even before the strike, we had the vision and values of the community schools approach, only now we were going to get the support and funding we need,” she said.

Like other LAUSD schools implementing the community school approach, Gonzalez’s school is still deeply involved in the assessment phase. But some new initiatives are already under way.

The school has been able to partner with outside agencies to bring in mental health counselors. It opened a wellness center with an outside entrance so parents can access the center without having to go through the school.

With funding from the district, the school has added instructional support time after the school day and on Saturdays. It has brought in intervention teachers to address learning problems of struggling students who can’t come to the added support time.

The school has also worked with a partner to start computer classes for parents, and it’s working with the county’s department of parks and recreation to hold outside events at a nearby park.

As current contract negotiations between the district and UTLA continue, Gonzalez is concerned the district will go back on its support for community schools. She fears that, instead, student testing and school accountability, to the exclusion of community schools, will return as the emphasis.

Gonzalez believes that change wouldn’t make sense. “If what you value are test scores and numbers,” she said, “then you have to emphasize community schools first, because that’s the only way you get better test scores.”

**‘Not About Quick Successes and Hitting the Numbers’**

“Already, there are so many success stories from becoming community schools,” said Grijalva, “but people need to realize this takes time. It’s not about quick successes and hitting the numbers. Hopefully, people will understand that adopting this approach must be for the long haul.”

Nevertheless, community school coordinators Our Schools spoke with are working on getting data to show the approach is moving the needle.

“My school has had tremendous teacher turnover, which has been a huge problem,” said George. “But we’re hoping the community schools approach starts to turn that around. Also, we’re hoping to see enrollment declines have at least bottomed out and that they are starting to tick back up.”

Other community school coordinators are hoping to see improved student attendance as a result of the new programs and supports they’ve put into place. They believe that if they can make improvements on quantitative measures like family engagement, teacher retention, and student absenteeism, then test scores will eventually follow.

If there has been a difficult sticking point so far, it’s been in relation to the [fourth pillar](https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/chapter-6) of the community schools approach, which calls for “collaborative leadership practices.” (An email from Our Schools to a district representative agreeing to an interview did not get a follow-up by press time.)

“For one thing,” George said, “some people see anything coming from the union as a tough sell. If the idea had come from the district administration, more people would have been quicker to embrace it.”

Further, community school coordinators Our Schools interviewed are wary that the administration would support the more popular student support services—due to their public relations value—rather than embrace the entire range of principles the community schools approach is grounded in.

Also, district leaders that are used to centralizing services, programs, and decision-making may have a tough time handling a more democratic system of governing. “When a school commits to the community schools approach,” said George, “administrators suddenly become more vulnerable. [They] have to be ready to hear bad things about [their] schools and [their] leadership and be willing to listen to other people and change.”

“The hardest part of being a community school is realizing that everything is a process,” said Grijalva, “and that you have to ask students and families for their opinions of everything.”

Despite these concerns, Los Angeles teachers are upbeat about the prospects for continuing their success with the community schools approach.

“I’m hoping eventually the approach will be more fully embraced, and the district will help with more money,” said George. “Every school in this district needs help. And the community schools approach can turn the whole district around.”