

SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Schools of “Yes” for Homeless Students

SUMMARY

The mission of community schools is to transform conventional schools into places where educators, local community leaders, families, and students work together to improve the conditions for student learning and healthy development. Together they can organize school resources and support services to create opportunities that are of particular benefit to homeless students to improve their lives. San Diego Unified Chula Vista School District and San Diego County Office of Education’s (SDCOE) efforts establishing and developing community schools in San Diego County have been commendable.

PROCEDURES

The Grand Jury interviewed directors and administrators from two school districts, including San Diego Unified and Chula Vista school personnel, local community liaisons, and the SDCOE were also interviewed about community schools and issues related to homeless students. The Grand Jury toured three schools in these varying San Diego County districts: Hoover High School, e3 Civic High, and Monarch School.

BACKGROUND

Community schools are not a new concept but in California there is a renewed focus on them due to the passage of the California Schools Partnership Act in 2021 and the passage of additional funding in 2022 to last through 2031.¹ Within San Diego County, there are over 50 community schools for the 2023-2024 school year and many more are in the process of becoming community schools. Community schools are aimed at improving outcomes for children from under-resourced communities. What a community school offers in additional services depends on the needs identified by the community it serves. However, all community schools have four features: 1) integrated student support; 2) expanded learning time and opportunities; 3) family and community engagement, and 4) collaborative leadership and practice for educators and administrators. A systematic review of 143 research studies on community schools found they meet the criteria for an evidenced-based educational intervention.² Studies found strong evidence that community schools meet the needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools, close the achievement gaps for English learners, students with disabilities, students of color, and give a return on investment of \$15 in social and economic benefits for every dollar spent on wraparound services.³

The federal government defines homeless students as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.⁴ An interviewed representative of the SDCOE estimated that there are about 18,000 homeless students in San Diego County⁵. The vast majority of these homeless students are “doubling-up”, i.e. residing with friends or families due to need, rather than desire.

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury was particularly concerned about the needs of the homeless students in San Diego County. They discovered in their interviews and visits that interviewed community schools and SDCOE are doing an excellent job helping provide needed services to low-income families, especially those lacking permanent housing. The Grand Jury found strong support for the Community School Initiative at all levels of education in the county. Uniformly, interviewees reported that the inclusion of communities and families in the development of services at current community schools along with the provided wraparound services have improved the attendance of students in school, the first step needed for their continued education.

The SDCOE provides resources to help schools to develop their community school programming. They assist schools that meet the criteria to write grants for funding from the California Community Schools Partnership. Additionally, they serve as the administrators for the Monarch School which is not strictly a community school but is the largest and most comprehensive K-12 program for homeless students in the country, serving up to 300 students daily. The wraparound services the school provides are critical to these students' lives and these services are a potential model that a community school may want to adopt.

SDCOE reports that most San Diego County teachers strongly support community schools. The presence of outreach workers and services that can meet their students' personal, physical, and medical needs allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning.

The following are highlights from three interviewed community schools.

Chula Vista Elementary School District

The Chula Vista Elementary School District identified Harborside and Palomar Elementary Schools as its first community school cohort in the 2023-2024 school year. These schools were selected through an application process requiring 80% of students to be low-income, foster youth, or homeless.

Each community school serves as a community hub that provides services to students, families, and the community. These services include healthcare, mental health therapy, after-school programs, and adult education classes. The resources provided at Harborside and Palomar include vision and dental services for the children and meals to tide them over the weekend. The district continues to work toward connecting with community partners that can provide needed services to the students.

San Diego Unified School District and Hoover High School

As outlined in the resolution it adopted in 2020, SDUSD has identified the highest-need schools, which they hope to transform into community schools.⁶ In the last year, SDUSD has engaged 200 staff members that identified 1,700 families and 2,200 students needing services and resources.

Hoover High School is a high need school with 80% of its families living in poverty and a 35% rate of chronic absenteeism. Hoover has formed connections with over 29 community partners, such as Rady's Children's Hospital, which provides mental health services, and La Maestra Community Health Centers, which provides medical services. The district is currently working with La Maestra to develop a rent and utility assistance program. It also has a community garden

and food pantry. Fifty thousand pounds of food has been delivered to the campus and has been distributed to more than 20,000 people since the opening of the food pantry. Hoover has also opened a clothing and toiletries closet and a laundry room where students can wash their clothes. The school stays open from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. to give students a safe learning environment and to allow parents to work longer hours without worrying about their children.

COMMENDATION

The 2023/2024 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the SDCOE, San Diego Unified School District, and the Chula Vista Elementary School District for their efforts in establishing and supporting community schools. The Grand Jury believes that interviewed school districts should make the presence of community schools more visible to families, especially homeless families, so they make full use of their services.

FINDINGS

F1: Community schools with wraparound services are important in providing extra support for homeless students and their families.

F2: The education community of San Diego County is supportive of community schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: The Grand Jury commends San Diego County Office of Education, San Diego Unified School District, and the Chula Vista Elementary School District for their efforts in establishing and supporting community schools.

R2: The Grand Jury encourages SDCOE to continue its efforts in establishing and supporting community schools.

¹ California Community Partnership Act https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=EDC&division=1.&title=1.&part=6.&chapter=6.&article=

² Maier, A, Daniel, J., Oakes, J. & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless. <https://nche.ed.gov/mckinney-vento-definition/>

⁵ Note that the Point in Time Homeless Count uses a more restricted definition of homelessness than McKinney-Vento.

⁶ Resolution it adopted in 2020 [https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/files/BYTRCK6D4E36/\\$file/Mar.%209%20BOE%20Community%20Schools.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/files/BYTRCK6D4E36/$file/Mar.%209%20BOE%20Community%20Schools.pdf)

