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Community Schools Impact on Student Outcomes

Evidence From California

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Summary

The $4.1 billion California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), launched in 2021, is the nation's largest community schools initiative, now serving more than 2,500 schools. This study assesses how effectively the CCSPP grants reached high-need schools and the early impacts of CCSPP implementation grants on student attendance, suspensions, and academic achievement. After the first full year of implementation for CCSPP grantees, impacts were apparent in multiple student outcomes. Compared to matched comparison schools, CCSPP community schools' chronic absence rates dropped by 30%, suspension rates fell by 15%, and academic achievement rose—particularly for historically underserved students. Black students and English learners saw gains equivalent to at least 50 additional days of learning in both math and English language arts. The strongest academic improvements occurred in schools with the greatest progress in attendance. These early results suggest that community schools' holistic approach can reduce educational inequities and improve multiple student outcomes.

The report on which this brief is based can be found at https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-community-schools-impact-student-outcomes.

Introduction

Community schools are an evidence-based strategy rooted in partnerships between schools and local agencies. They aim to strengthen learning conditions and support the well-being of students, families, and communities through four core pillars: integrated student supports, expanded learning opportunities, collaborative leadership, and family engagement. Since 2021, California has made an unprecedented $4.1 billion investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), establishing the nation's largest state-level community schools initiative. California's investment in community schools focuses on the state's highest-need schools and far exceeds any prior funding for community schools in the United States.

The state investment came at a critical time, as the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered California's educational landscape, exacerbating long-standing challenges and creating new ones. Chronic absence rates surged to unprecedented levels; test score gaps widened; and student, staff, and educator mental health challenges intensified.[1] These impacts were particularly severe in high-poverty schools and

among historically marginalized student groups. Community schools offer a comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges by finding and orchestrating health, social service, and academic resources and transforming how schools engage with students, families, and communities.

This brief assesses the early impacts of California's investment in community schools on critical student outcomes. Specifically, we examine how CCSPP-supported community schools are affecting chronic absence, exclusionary discipline, and academic achievement. We also analyze the extent to which these grants reach California's highest-need schools to ensure resources are directed where they are most needed.

What Are Community Schools?

Community schools are more than just an approach to service delivery; they represent a fundamental shift from traditional factory model schooling toward a whole child, community-engaged approach. Community schools invest in what matters to the community: rich learning opportunities for all students, strong teaching, meaningful family and community engagement and collaboration, a welcoming school climate, and necessary supports that address students' barriers to learning. Where historical disinvestment has occurred, they seek to redress inequities, rebuild trust, and repair relationships between communities and their public schools.

A growing body of research has linked core community school principles and implementation to positive outcomes for students and for schools, including improved student attendance, achievement, and school climate. A 2017 research review of more than 143 studies found that well-implemented community schools and their component pillars have led to improvements in student and school outcomes.[2] Recent studies of larger-scale comprehensive initiatives reinforce these findings—most notably in New York, where community schools are funded through a state set-aside and supported by technical assistance centers.[3] A rigorous RAND evaluation of New York City's community schools found reduced chronic absence and discipline rates, improved on-time grade progression and graduation rates, and gains in math and language arts test scores after 3 years of implementation.[4] This study of California's CCSPP initiative provides a unique opportunity to examine the effectiveness of community school approaches supported at an unprecedented scale across a large, diverse state.

How Do CCSPP Grants Support Community Schools Implementation?

The CCSPP implementation grants provide both detailed frameworks and structured support at the state and regional levels while allowing for local adaptation—a balance that is critical to the community schools approach. The program is designed to transform the relationship between the assets and needs of communities and the education of their children, rather than simply adding services to traditional school models. The state-approved CCSPP framework identifies four key areas of community schools implementation: (1) pillars or foundational practices of community schools; (2) key conditions for learning grounded in the science of learning and development; (3) cornerstone commitments to aspects of implementation, including shared decision-making; and (4) proven practices drawn from long-standing community school initiatives, including employing a community school coordinator (see Table 1).[5]

Table 1. The "4 x 4" State-Approved Framework for CCSPP

The Four Pillars of Community Schools	The Four Key Conditions for Learning
1. Integrated student supports 2. Family and community engagement 3. Collaborative leadership and practices 4. Extended learning time and opportunities	1. Supportive environmental conditions that foster strong relationships and community 2. Productive instructional strategies that support motivation, competence, and self-directed learning 3. Social and emotional learning that fosters skills, habits, and mindsets that enable academic progress, efficacy, and productive behavior 4. System of supports that enable healthy development, respond to student needs, and address learning barriers
The Four Cornerstone Commitments	**The Four Proven Practices**
1. A commitment to assets-driven and strength-based practice 2. A commitment to racially just and restorative school climates 3. A commitment to powerful, culturally proficient, and relevant instruction 4. A commitment to shared decision-making and participatory practices	1. Community asset mapping and gap analysis 2. The community school coordinator 3. Site-based and local education agency–based advisory councils 4. Integrating and aligning with other relevant programs

Note: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program.
Source: California Department of Education. (2022). *California Community Schools Framework* (accessed 07/16/2025).

These four areas are further broken down into 16 total features, which CCSPP grantees are expected to align with through their work and reporting of their work. These ensure a comprehensive approach to whole child and community-grounded development. Overall, the features of the CCSPP framework serve as design anchors to ensure that the state's investment leads to transformative and sustainable systems change, rather than isolated service expansion.

The analyses presented here focus on schools that received a CCSPP implementation grant, which provided between $150,000 and $500,000 per school annually for 5 years to help sustain or expand existing community school initiatives.[6] However, the broader CCSPP initiative has several components that, together, are intended to support coordinated efforts to implement quality community schools across the state. These include allocating approximately $200 million for technical assistance resources,

including a statewide technical assistance center to serve as the "coordinating hub" and a network of eight regional technical assistance centers led by county offices of education with support from local partners to provide on-the-ground support to grantees within their region. County Office Coordination grants were also established for county offices with two or more CCSPP grantee local education agencies (LEAs) to coordinate partnerships between LEAs and county-level external entities to support community school implementation.[7]

The Current Study

This study assesses the extent to which the first cohort of CCSPP grants effectively reached high-need schools and evaluates the impact of the community schools practices that were induced and supported by those grants on student attendance, suspensions, and academic achievement. The study compares changes in these outcomes over time between schools that received CCSPP grants (treatment group) and a matched group of similar schools that did not (control group). Employing a matched difference-in-differences technique, the analyses focus on whether outcomes diverge between these groups after grant implementation. We also control for changes in school composition over time and test for potential student sorting. This method leverages the fact that these school groups exhibited similar trends in outcomes before the grants and would be expected to continue parallel paths without the CCSPP intervention.

The primary analyses use publicly available data from the California Department of Education on all California schools from 2018–19 to 2023–24, excluding schools with prior federal community schools grant experience.[8] This brief focuses on the 458 schools in the first cohort of implementation grantees, as they are the only schools that currently have a full year of student outcome data available after receiving their grant, planning, and staffing. We plan to incorporate longer post-treatment timelines and additional cohorts as data become available for subsequent years.

CCSPP Grants Reached High-Need Schools

CCSPP implementation grants successfully distributed resources across varied school levels, geographic regions, and settings with differing levels of prior exposure to community school approaches, ensuring broad representation. In the initial cohort, the average school served a student population in which roughly 90% of students were from low-income households, English learners, and/or in foster care. These students are identified as part of the unduplicated pupil count (UPC), a measure used in California to capture a school's concentration of historically underserved students.[9] Table 2 shows that the CCSPP implementation grants reached a diverse set of high-need schools.

Table 2. Number and Characteristics of CCSPP Grantees Prior to Grant Allocation (2021–22), Compared to State Averages

Characteristic	California	Cohort 1 (funded in 2022)	Cohort 2 (funded in 2023)	Cohort 3 (funded in 2024)	Cohort 4 (funded in 2025)
CCSPP award characteristics					
Amount awarded	N/A	$611.1 million	$750.5 million	$1.29 billion	$633.5 million
Number of LEAs	1,016	76	128	288	127
Number of schools	10,121	458	570	995	470
Schools with over 80% UPC	45%	90%	69%	78%	84%
Student characteristics					
Total enrollment	5.9 million	246,382	293,746	519,094	284,981
Average enrollment per school	580	538	515	525	613
Percentage of UPC students	65.4%	89.1%	85.1%	85.9%	86.8%
Percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students	59.8%	86.5%	83.7%	84.6%	85.3%
Percentage of English learners	21.1%	36.2%	29.7%	30.9%	33.5%
Percentage of White students	20.3%	8.3%	11.0%	11.9%	8.5%
Percentage of Asian students	6.9%	4.3%	4.3%	3.0%	2.8%
Percentage of Black students	4.6%	8.5%	7.3%	4.7%	5.2%
Percentage of Hispanic/Latino students	51.2%	70.1%	68.7%	72.9%	76.9%
Percentage of students of other race/ethnicity	17%	8.8%	8.7%	7.5%	6.6%
School characteristics					
Charter	12.8%	9.4%	15.6%	18.0%	10.3%
School level					
• Elementary	59.7%	62.0%	59.5%	58.7%	61.5%
• Middle	13.7%	14.2%	17.2%	13.4%	15.5%
• High	21.0%	20.3%	19.5%	23.9%	19.6%
• K–12	5.6%	3.5%	3.9%	4.4%	3.4%
Locale					
• City	41.1%	53.0%	39.4%	27.8%	35.3%
• Suburban	39.5%	25.6%	34.6%	40.1%	41.3%
• Town	7.1%	6.1%	13.5%	15.2%	11.4%
• Rural	12.4%	15.3%	12.5%	16.9%	12.1%

Characteristic	California	Cohort 1 (funded in 2022)	Cohort 2 (funded in 2023)	Cohort 3 (funded in 2024)	Cohort 4 (funded in 2025)
Student outcomes					
Chronic absence rate	34.1%	44.0%	41.7%	40.6%	41.5%
Suspension rate	3.0%	3.2%	3.7%	4.1%	4.2%
Math standards met	17.7%	11.8%	13.4%	13.0%	12.0%
ELA standards met	24.8%	19.0%	21.3%	21.3%	19.7%

Notes: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. LEA = local education agency. UPC = unduplicated pupil count. ELA = English language arts. "Other race/ethnicity" includes students who are identified as Filipino, Native American/Alaska Native, and Two or More Races, as well as students who did not report their race/ethnicity. Implementation grant funds were awarded in the summer of the listed year. Student characteristics, school characteristics, and student outcomes data are based on the 2021–22 school year, before grant allocation to the first CCSPP cohort.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2017–18 to 2023–24 data from the California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files, and National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates locale data. CCSPP grantee information is retrieved from May 2022, May 2023, May 2024, May 2025, and July 2025 California State Board of Education meeting agendas.

CCSPP Grants Had Positive Impacts on Student Outcomes

The most recent school data available for this study (2023–24) allowed us to examine results for the first cohort of schools funded in 2022. Because the first year of funding supported planning and hiring, 2023–24 represents the first full year of implementation for these schools. Even though the schools had only been engaged in this work for a short time, our analyses of student outcomes reveal early and consistently positive impacts across multiple domains.

Reduced Chronic Absences

CCSPP schools demonstrated a meaningful reduction in chronic absences—a reduction that was, on average, 30% greater than that experienced by similar matched comparison schools. Improvements in regular attendance—or lower rates of chronic absence—were most pronounced in elementary schools, suggesting particularly strong early implementation of attendance-focused strategies at this level. Because of the scale of the grant program, these reductions in chronic absence rates equate to more than 5,000 additional students attending school regularly in 2023–24.

Reduced Suspension Rates

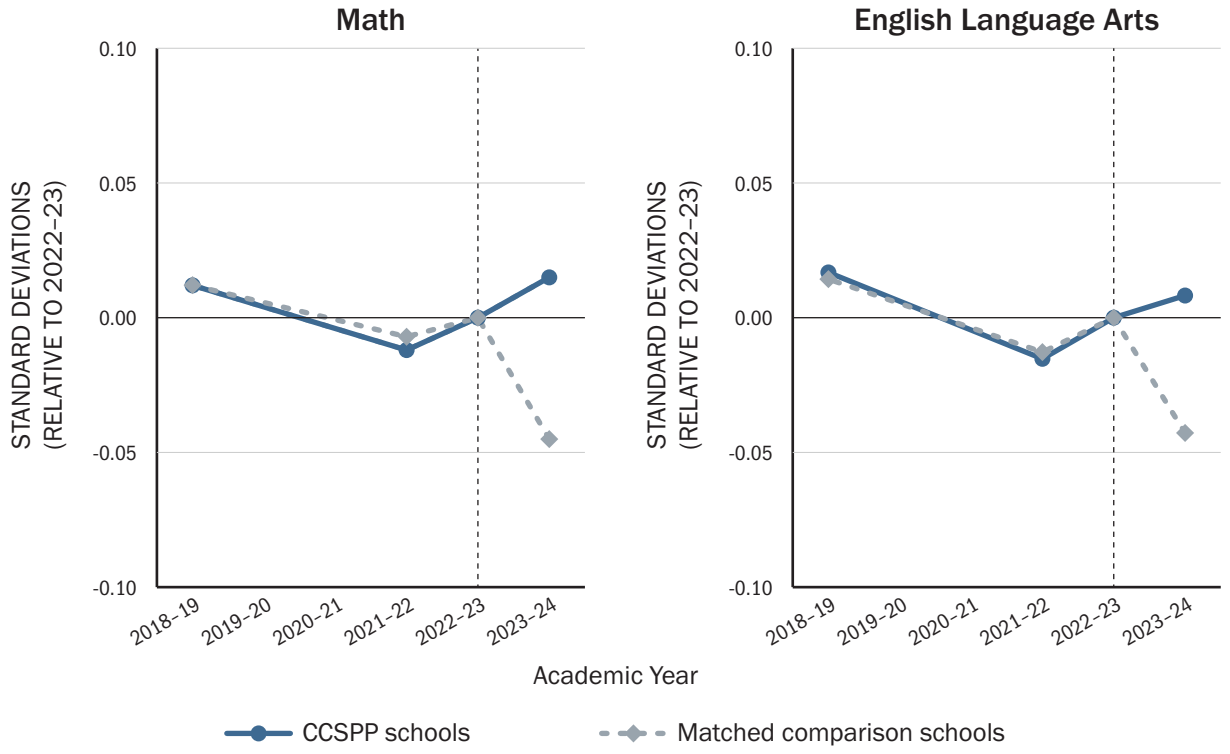
Implementation of community school approaches corresponded with a 15% reduction in average suspension rates.[10] Reductions in suspension rates were greatest among Black students, whose suspension rates decreased by 1.8 percentage points, and in secondary (middle/high) schools, with a decrease of roughly 1.3 percentage points (both marginally significant at the $p < 0.10$ level). Notably, these are the sets of students and schools where suspension rates were highest before treatment. The

community school approaches implemented by schools that received the grants also significantly reduced the suspension rates of English learners and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Improved Student Test Scores

Schools newly implementing and expanding community school approaches showed significant gains of 0.06 standard deviations in math compared to matched schools—roughly the equivalent of 43 additional days of learning. CCSPP community schools also showed larger-than-expected gains in English language arts (ELA) scores (0.05 standard deviations), equivalent to approximately 36 additional days of learning. Improvements in ELA were significant for English learners ($p < 0.05$) and for socioeconomically disadvantaged and Black students ($p < 0.10$). Figure 1 depicts how CCSPP schools' and matched comparison schools' achievement in both math and ELA tracked closely prior to implementation but diverged after treatment, with community schools continuously improving while comparison schools showed relative declines.

Figure 1. Trends in Predicted Standardized Math and English Language Arts Scores (Indexed to 2022–23 Rates), by Treatment Status



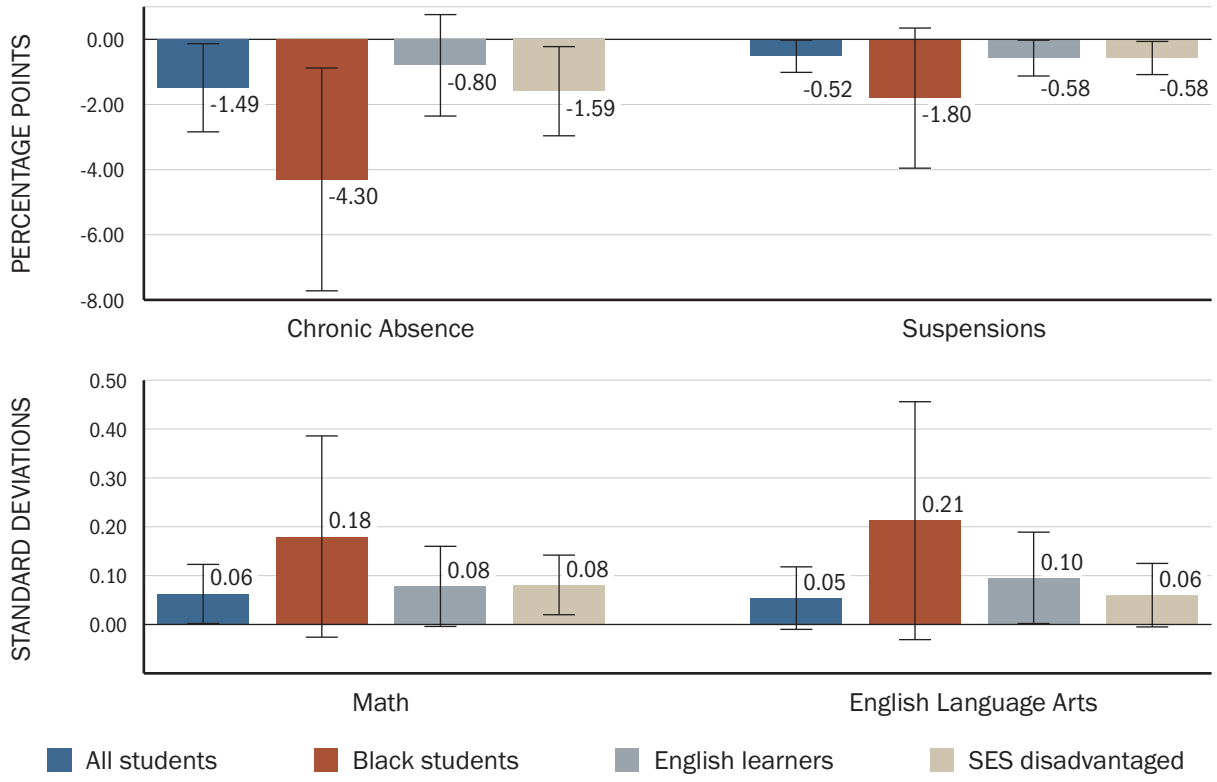
Notes: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) scale scores standardized within the analytic sample are modeled controlling for school characteristics (enrollment; percentage of unduplicated pupils, homeless students, English learners, and youth in foster care; and racial/ethnic composition) and include school and year fixed effects. Adjusted standardized test scores shown in this figure reflect levels relative to 2022–23, the baseline year when most schools were hiring community school coordinators and setting up for full implementation the next year. Due to limited in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2019–20 and 2020–21 data are excluded. Districts with federal Full-Service Community Schools grants are excluded from this analysis because of prior exposure to the community schools approach.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2017–18 to 2023–24 data from the California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files and the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files.

Gains Were Largest Among Historically Underserved Students

While students from all backgrounds benefited from the community school investments, there were larger-than-average effects for Black students, English learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (see Figure 2). The differential impacts for Black students translate to approximately 130 days of additional learning in math and 151 days in ELA, representing substantial acceleration in academic progress. Benefits for English learners equate to 58 and 72 days more of learning in math and ELA, respectively. For socioeconomically disadvantaged students, these impacts are roughly the equivalent of 58 additional days of learning in math and 43 days of learning for ELA. The larger effects observed among Black students and English learners suggest that the community schools approach may be particularly effective at addressing long-standing opportunity gaps and barriers to achievement that disproportionately affect these student populations. Black students in CCSPP community schools also experienced a reduction in chronic absences and suspensions at more than double the overall rates.

Figure 2. Estimated Effects of CCSPP Across Outcomes, by Student Group



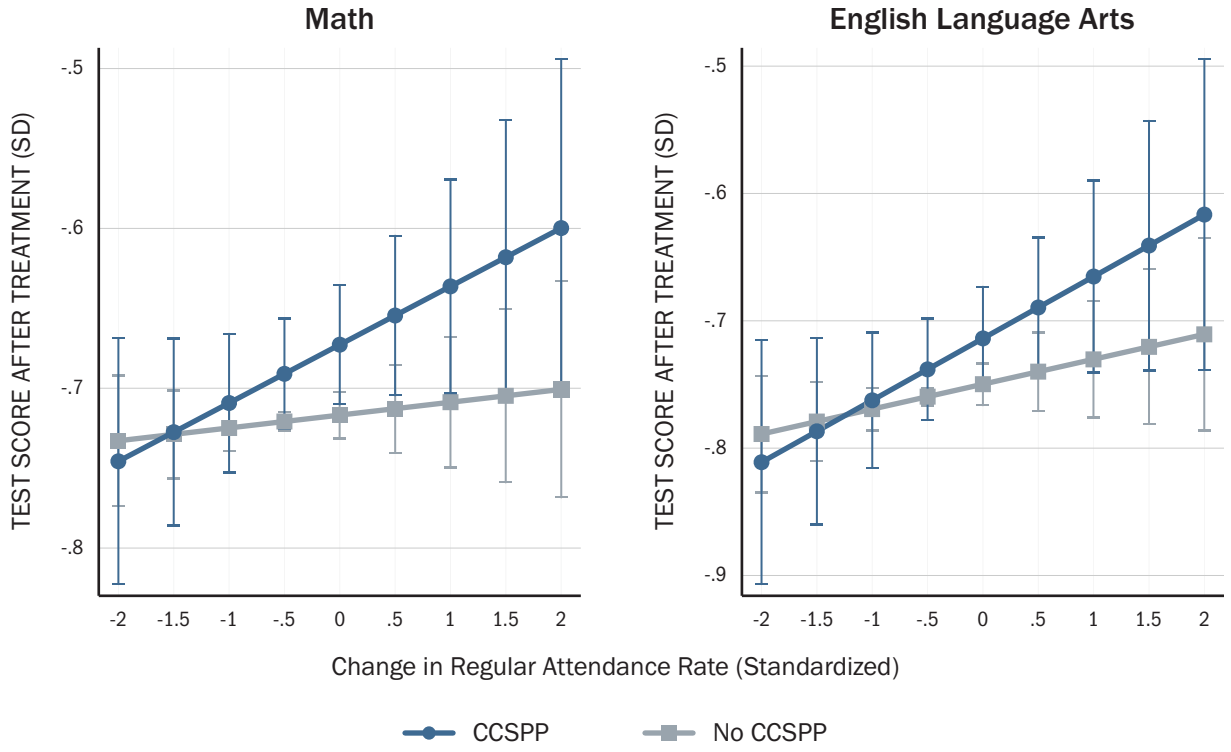
Notes: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. SES = socioeconomic status. Chronic absence is calculated as the percentage of students who miss 10% or more of the school year. Suspensions are the percentage of students with at least one suspension. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients are modeled controlling for school characteristics (enrollment; percentage of unduplicated pupils, homeless students, English learners, and youth in foster care; and racial/ethnic composition) and include school and year fixed effects. Models for student achievement also include grade fixed effects. Math and ELA scores are standardized within subject, grade, and year. For each student subgroup, the sample is restricted to schools with at least 10% representation of that group. Districts with Full-Service Community Schools grants are excluded from this analysis because of prior exposure to the community schools approach.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2017–18 to 2023–24 data from the California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files and the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files.

Improvements Were Most Substantial in Schools With the Greatest Progress in Reducing Chronic Absences

CCSPP schools with increased proportions of students regularly attending school (equivalent to reductions in chronic absence rates) over time exhibited greater improvements on achievement scores than comparison schools with similar attendance improvements (see Figure 3). Each standard deviation improvement in CCSPP school regular attendance rates was associated with a near doubling of the main effect on achievement. The significant relationship between attendance gains and increased learning suggests the interconnected nature of student engagement and academic performance, enabled by the holistic impacts of community school engagement strategies. This finding suggests that community schools' comprehensive approach amplifies the academic benefits of improved attendance beyond what we see in non-community schools.

Figure 3. Relationship Between Improved Regular Attendance and Test Scores, by CCSPP Status



Notes: CCSPP = California Community Schools Partnership Program. Regular attendance rate is calculated as the percentage of students who attended school at least 90% of the time. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Values are modeled controlling for school characteristics (enrollment; percentage of unduplicated pupils, homeless students, English learners, and youth in foster care; and racial/ethnic composition) and include school and year fixed effects. Models for student achievement also include grade fixed effects.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of 2017–18 to 2023–24 data from the California Department of Education Downloadable Data Files and the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress Research Files.

The strong association between achievement gains and improvement in regular attendance has several plausible explanations that could operate independently or collectively within the community schools framework. First, improved attendance may directly increase instructional time, with compounding effects particularly important in sequential subjects like mathematics, where missed instruction creates significant learning gaps. Second, the integrated supports implemented through community schools—such as health services that reduce illness-related absences while enhancing physical readiness to learn, or mental health supports that address both stress-related chronic absence and cognitive functioning—may address underlying barriers affecting both attendance and learning capacity. Third, enhanced family engagement, a core community schools pillar, may simultaneously strengthen parents' commitment to regular attendance and their capacity to support learning at home. Finally, the cultural shift toward greater belonging fostered by community schools may motivate students not only to attend more regularly, but also to participate more actively when present, enhancing both the quantity and quality of learning experiences. These potential mechanisms, whether operating alone or in combination, suggest that the most successful community schools effectively integrate attendance interventions with broader strategies to enhance student engagement, well-being, and learning supports to promote growth.

Implications and Future Directions

These early positive findings from the CCSPP demonstrate the potential of large-scale state-level efforts to support community schools approaches as an effective strategy for promoting student learning and engagement. This study extends prior evidence on the impacts of community schools to a statewide implementation model now serving nearly 2,500 diverse schools. This statewide CCSPP initiative demonstrated substantial reductions in chronic absence, meaningful decreases in suspension rates, and notable academic gains, particularly for Black students and English learners. This pattern of improvement across multiple outcomes has been documented across a range of studies examining the community schools approach,[11] including New York City's rigorous multiyear community schools evaluation. As a whole, the evidence shows that comprehensive supports addressing engagement and learning barriers and building on community assets typically yield correlated gains across interconnected domains.

The results of this study, combined with findings of prior work, have important implications for states and localities pursuing sustained expansion of community schools. Notably, some states, including Maryland and New York, have begun embedding community schools directly in their funding formulas, ensuring ongoing, stable support for these models. Federal Full-Service Community Schools investments have reached a broad array of states—including Idaho, Kentucky, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, and South Carolina.[12] In addition, a dynamic landscape of local grassroots and community-led efforts shows that community school initiatives are advancing not only through major state policy shifts but also through smaller-scale, locally tailored strategies.[13]

While this study examines several critical student outcomes with promising results, we acknowledge that many important domains of impact remain unmeasured in our analyses, especially at this stage. Community schools aim to influence a wide range of outcomes valued by families and communities, including student physical and mental health, family economic stability and well-being, student

social-emotional development and sense of belonging, community cohesion and social capital, and student civic engagement and agency. These unmeasured outcomes may be of equal or greater importance to communities and families than the metrics included in our analyses.

Further research is needed to more comprehensively understand the impacts of California's historic investment in community schools. This includes examining a broader range of outcomes for the first cohort of implementation grantees, such as school climate measures, teacher retention rates, student grade progression, and graduation rates. It also means tracking these schools' progress over additional implementation years and examining potential mechanisms and practices associated with the results. As cohorts 2–4 advance in their implementation journeys, incorporating their experiences and outcomes into the analyses will provide a more complete picture of the initiative's effectiveness across diverse contexts.

One of the strong values of community schools is building a sense of responsive community, which is particularly important for families and children who have had negative experiences with public institutions. The initial positive findings presented here suggest a promising return on California's historic investment in community schools, indicating that new resources and approaches are helping to get students back to school, lessening the use of exclusionary discipline, and increasing the rate of learning, especially among students who have been historically underserved.

Endnotes

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

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4. Covelli, L., Engberg, J., & Opper, I. M. (2022). *Leading indicators of long-term success in community schools: Evidence from New York City* [EdWorkingPaper No. 22-669]. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/59q2-ek65; Johnston, W. R., Engberg, J., Opper, I. M., Sontag-Padilla, L., & Xenakis, L. (2020). *Illustrating the promise of community schools: An assessment of the impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html

5. California Department of Education. (2022). *California Community Schools Framework*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/documents/ccsppframework.docx. For more information on the community school coordinator role, see: Sanders, M., Galindo, C., & DeTablan, D. (2019). Leadership for collaboration: Exploring how community school coordinators advance the goals of full-service community schools. *Children & Schools*, *41*(2), 89–100. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdz006

6. The CCSPP also provided planning grants, offering up to $200,000 per local education agency for up to 2 years of planning, which were only available in fiscal years 2021–22 and 2022–23. Starting in fiscal year 2025–26, extension grants will offer up to $100,000 annually per site for 2 years after the implementation grant ends.

7. California Education Code § 8900-8902 (2022). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=EDC&division=1.&title=1.&part=6.&chapter=6.&article= (accessed 07/31/2025).

8. Our analyses specifically exclude schools with prior federal community schools grant experience to isolate the effect of the California initiative on schools that were new to the community schools approach, though patterns in Full-Service Community Schools districts are explored in the full report.

9. Student disadvantage in California is commonly measured by unduplicated pupil count (UPC), which captures the percentage of students who belong to one or more of the following categories: (1) English learners, (2) meet income or categorical eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch program, and (3) foster youth. "Unduplicated count" means that each pupil is counted only once even if the pupil meets more than one of these criteria. California Department of Education. (2025). *LCFF frequently asked questions*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/Fg/aa/lc/lcfffaq.asp#CALPADS (accessed 06/26/2025).

10. The suspension rate includes both "in-school" and "out-of-school" suspensions. California Department of Education. *Suspension indicator FAQs*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dbsuspfaq.asp (accessed 08/05/2025).

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

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