

# CS Journeys



Photo courtesy of Veronica De Leon

## Cross-District Partnerships for Rural Community Schools

West Kern Consortium collaborative allows  
districts to maximize community school resources

*In conversation with Bethany Ferguson,  
Fidelina Saso, and Julie Boesch.*

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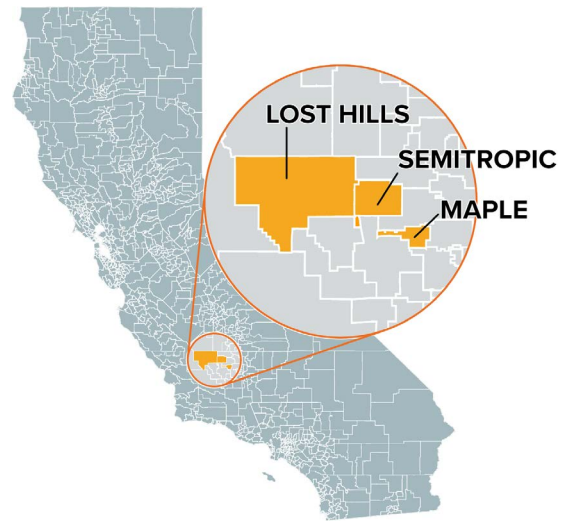
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## INTRODUCTION

Kern County sits at the southern tip of California’s Central Valley, nestled amongst almond orchards and framed by rolling foothills. The area of West Kern County is primarily an unincorporated, rural, farm and oil community, serving a mix of farmworker and landowner families. The three districts featured in this story – Lost Hills Union Elementary, Semitropic Elementary, and Maple Elementary – serve 920 preschool-8th grade students across 650 square miles. Semitropic and Maple are single-school districts, administered by a Superintendent-Principal; Lost Hills Union includes two schools. In 2018, all three districts were joint recipients of the highly competitive federal **Full-Service Community Schools Grant Program**.

Since then, the consortium has established the Children’s Cabinet<sup>1</sup> of West Kern County, hired parent liaisons and community school coordinators, created a regional preschool program and Expanded and Summer Learning Program, hired a shared math coach to increase instructional effectiveness, created an attendance campaign to address chronic absence, and secured regional social workers and other mental health resources. In August 2022 – in spite of the vast challenges facing the district and communities because of the Covid-19 pandemic – Lost Hills Union was recognized as among the most improved districts in the state in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math.



These Kern County districts are pioneering a unique kind of community school partnership in low-resourced, geographically spread out, rural communities: a cross-district community school strategy. District leaders Julie Boesch, Bethany Ferguson, and Fidelina Saso share how they built this work.

<sup>1</sup>. To learn more about Children’s Cabinets, see [here](#).

## Table 1: District Snapshots

Academic Year 2018-19, CA Dashboard data

District	Lost Hills Union	Maple Elementary	Semitropic Elementary
<b>Student Population</b>	418	288	214
<b>Number of schools</b>	2	1	1
<b>Socio-economically disadvantaged</b>	85.6%	55.1%	83.2%
<b>English Language Learners (ELL)</b>	62.4%	11.3%	65.9%
<b>Suspensions</b>	3.8%	0.3%	0%
<b>Chronic Absence</b>	9.5%	1.3%	12.6%
<b>Math, Difference from Standard (DFS)<sup>2</sup></b>	94.9 points below	46 points below	113.4 points below
<b>English-Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy, DFS<sup>3</sup></b>	50.9 points below	32.3 points below	80.9 points below

2. Distance from Standard (DFS) on the CA Dashboard (the state’s annual reporting of school/district performance) shows the average distance of how “far” above/below students are from meeting Standard – i.e., on track for college and career readiness at their grade level. These scores are based on how students (grades 3-8 and 11) do on the state’s standardized tests – the Smarter Balanced Assessments. Generally, for Math, scores are Very High if the average score is 35 points and above Standard, or Very Low if the average score is below -95 points from Standard.
3. For ELA/literacy, scores are Very High if the average score is 45 points and above Standard and Very Low if the average score is below -70 points from Standard.

# The Community School Design Challenge

Community partnerships are at the core of the community school approach. And in rural communities, the partnerships landscape presents unique challenges. Rural communities seldom have the breadth of service providers available in urban settings; specifically, fewer organizations or entities offering support services.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, rural districts often span vast geographic areas, and partners are not always located *within* or even nearby the community. Partner organizations, and their service-providing staff, might be based in a relatively nearby urban center – which may still be dozens of miles from schools.

This all has implications for partnerships. Service providers may not necessarily be from or familiar with the community’s context, which can make it take longer to create trusting relationships with students and families. Requirements for on-site service provision may mean lengthy commutes for providers, which can limit the pool of providers willing to service the community. Lastly, rural service providers are more likely to be part of public agencies, such as county health departments. For school districts, engaging with public systems can often be challenging, especially when the district or school’s organizational systems, priorities, and cultures are not aligned to those of partner organizations. Additionally, if service-provider staff are contracted through public agencies (like the County Office of Education, or Health and Human Services), hiring for those positions can be a long administrative process, leaving months of staffing and service gaps. All three Kern County district leaders cited staffing shortages and retention as major challenges in their districts – of both core staff and partners. The staffing issues have implications for current staff capacity, as well as for longer term planning. Saso commented, “It just becomes overwhelming at times. You feel like you’re spread too thin.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, from these challenges comes innovation, creativity and a “get it done” approach that makes rural communities and their schools well-suited for community schools work. The three leaders point to some of their powerful assets. In small rural communities, educators have often been working together, in different capacities, for years, and therefore, have a certain degree of relational trust<sup>6</sup> – a critical element of sustained community school work. And, in small rural communities where staff often hold multiple roles and there are fewer administrative hurdles than in larger organizations, districts can be more flexible and nimble. “We don’t have to ask permission from the ... facilities [manager] or health department to expand our after hours program. We can decide we’re doing it, and make it happen” said Boesch.

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4. Public funding mandates seldom take into consideration the lack of viable community-based service options available to rural communities. For example, a grant parameter requiring districts to get multiple competitive bids before awarding a service contract, when there is only one service provider in the community.

5. West Kern’s struggle to hire and retain staff mirrors trends across the state of California. A **January report** by the Learning Policy Institute found that half of the districts surveyed reported 10% of vacancies still unfilled at the beginning of the 2021 school year. The study also noted that the effect of the staffing shortages are exacerbated in more remote areas: “In small rural districts, even one teacher leaving can have a significant impact on staffing and course offerings.”

6. For more information on relational trust and enabling conditions for community school development, see Myung et al (2020) “**Enabling Conditions and Capacities for Continuous Improvement**” PACE: Stanford, CA. And Community Schools Forward **Framework: Essentials for Community School Transformation**.



# How a cross-district partnership is born

The cross-district partnership – which now includes six districts, including two high school districts<sup>7</sup> – came together in 2018 when Michael Figueroa, Founder and CEO of Figueroa Consulting, reached out to leaders in Maple Elementary, Lost Hills Union, and Semitropic to gauge their interest in applying for a multi-million dollar federal Full-Service Federal Community Schools grant.<sup>8</sup>

Boesch had known Figueroa from his prior work at the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. Figueroa, raised in the Central Valley, had left California to pursue a doctoral degree in education, and returned to the area in 2015 to continue serving the community. When Figueroa proposed applying for the federal grant, Boesch and the other two leaders jumped at the opportunity. Says Boesch:

*“All of us are very much willing to do whatever it takes in order to serve our kids. That’s really what our focus is. Whatever that means, we’re willing to do that. If it requires some work, we’ll do work. If it requires creating a program, we’ll create a program. If it requires billing each other and sharing staff and sharing resources, we’ll do that because the focus is always on doing whatever we can to get additional resources for our students. That’s how it got started.”*

Despite each of these educators knowing each other and having some degree of collaboration prior to the FSCS grant,<sup>9</sup> the grant catalyzed a much closer and intentional partnership. District leaders began by identifying the root causes of the challenges all three school communities were experiencing. All three were struggling with student performance in ELA and math, chronic absenteeism, and staff retention. Ultimately, the districts identified five shared priority areas: **early childhood education; expanded learning; math instruction; family and community partnerships; and social and health services.**<sup>10</sup>



***“We don’t have to ask permission from the building facilities or health department to expand our after hours program. We can decide we’re doing it, and make it happen.”***



District Leader  
Julie Boesch

7. The current West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools Expansion includes Wasco Union High, Taft Union High, Lost Hills Union Elementary, Maple Elementary, Elk Hills Elementary, and Semitropic Elementary.  
8. For more on the federal Full-Service Community Schools Grant Program, [click here](#).  
9. The three district superintendent teams already knew each other. They had been meeting with some regularity through what they called the Westside Collaborative, where they and other regional superintendents met to share best practices and professional development opportunities.  
10. In subsequent years, the partnership has expanded to include additional neighboring districts, and have successfully accessed additional grant funds. These five shared priorities continue to ground the cross-district work.



## Strategically hiring mental health staff to stretch budgets and expand support

As in communities across the state and the country, the need for mental health services and social-emotional support became even more pronounced during the pandemic. In rural communities, however, affording, hiring, and retaining mental health staff pose unique challenges. These three districts were no exception. “Individually, none of us can afford all the people we need,” said Boesch. So, they got creative.

When Maple’s intern school psychologist mentioned to Boesch that they would be interested in a full-time position after their internship ended, Boesch came up with an unusual idea. Unable to afford a school psychologist solely with funds from her school/district’s general budget, Boesch went to Lost Hills Union and Semitropic with a proposition: sharing the position across their four school sites. Together, the three districts created a customized job description, along with a plan to share the psychologist’s time and salary. The results: “Together, we get one school psych[ologist] that does all the social work, and all of the counseling...as well as special ed[ucation] testing. Alone, we can’t have that. We don’t have that.” says Boesch.

Sharing mental health staff is not always ideal – in contrast to a full-time equivalent (FTE), site-specific staff person. But small rural districts are used to not letting the perfect get in the way of a reasonable alternative. By collaborating to create a shared job description and role allocation, the three districts were able to attract a high quality candidate for one full time position rather than compete for a much-harder-to-hire part-time position.

Similarly, the three districts struggled with retaining social workers. Most social workers were County Health and Human Services employees, who lived in the nearby city and preferred a job closer to home. The long commute (1-2 hours each way) was a deterrent, so the districts often ended up with a small pool of willing candidates, with service gaps between hires (e.g., a lag between when the former staff left and the new staff person was brought on board). After years of frustrations, the partners again got creative and decided to build their own in-house program: “We came together and we decided, ‘Hey, we can develop our own social worker program. We can develop our own job descriptions. We can hire a lead to oversee [the program]’”, said Saso. In contrast to contracting with the County, the districts were able to better screen candidates and be more hands-on in the hiring process. Additionally, hiring their own social workers in-house has allowed for closer relationships and collaboration between school staff and social workers. The program also created a career pathway for training and hiring local prospective social workers, and a more tenable and long-term solution to ongoing staffing issues.



***“If it requires creating a program, we’ll create a program. If it requires billing each other and sharing staff and sharing resources, we’ll do that because the focus is always on doing whatever we can to get additional resources for our students.”***



**District Leader  
Julie Boesch**

**PRIORITY AREA: MATH INSTRUCTION**

## Building on existing strengths to improve math learning

Each of the districts’ data showed that math was a shared challenge. Says Saso: “Academics is part of our community school model because we’re serving the whole child. Our scores showed that’s where we had a need; not only our state assessments, but also our local assessments, and our classroom assessments indicated we had to do something about... our math learning.... When the community school model came along, math became one of our [shared] pipelines across the districts.”

The districts struggled for the first three years to hire somebody to strengthen math instruction (e.g., coaching for math teachers). They ended up each hiring consultants to help each of the districts, with some success. In early 2022, the consortium was able to hire a full-time, shared math coach: a sixth grade classroom teacher at Maple who was strong in math and looking to leave the classroom. The three districts came together and offered the teacher the math coach position. Saso reported:

*“We were able to quickly come together and make that happen. [And it was such a win] to keep somebody with that knowledge within our small school districts because generally, we lose those people to bigger school districts. To be able to keep her and have her assist teachers in other school districts was what we needed to do.”*

Hiring and building capacity from within has tremendous advantages. Through their prior, ongoing collaborative work, the coach was already familiar with all three districts. The coaching position also allowed Maple to retain a skilled educator. Sharing the position across sites has led to rich sharing of instructional practices and resources. For example, Lost Hills Union had already been holding regular professional development “math talks” with staff; the coach was able to build on that practice, expanding math talks to include Maple teachers in the subsequent year.



By combining staff and resources, our partners at WKC were able to provide an expanded learning program for students at Maple and Semitropic over the summer season. Photo courtesy of Veronica De Leon.

## Leveraging strong relationships to host cross-district summer schooling

Expanding the quality and quantity of time students spend engaged in learning is one of the central tenets of community schools. When the three districts received the federal FSCS grant in 2018, Maple’s campus was in the middle of construction so they were unable to hold summer school that year. Boesch called her colleagues at Semitropic, and asked if they could run Maple’s summer school on their campus. Semitropic agreed. Each District independently contracted with the Boys and Girls Club, and both districts’ bus drivers worked together to coordinate transportation for students. “My bus drivers took my kids to [the Semitropic] bus driver, and their bus driver then took my kids to [the school] site. We all worked together to make that happen,” says Boesch.

The following year (2020), early in the pandemic, summer school was held virtually. In 2021, Maple hosted summer school for both districts on their (newly built) campus. And in 2022, each district had built enough internal capacity to host their own summer program. Growing talent and support from *within* the community—for example, identifying and leveraging local talent to staff a robust summer program—has been an important facet of the WKC districts’ approach to community school development. In small and rural settings, where staffing can be a limiting factor, community schools can be an avenue to identify and cultivate capacity within the community, reflecting a longstanding ethos of community schools as hubs contributing to **neighborhood revitalization** and **community life**.<sup>11</sup>

The districts have recruited staff from other neighboring districts as well. Staff have plans for eventually each district to host its own program. Says Ferguson: “The goal this year is to really take all of our staff, all of her staff, train them all so that they both have a phenomenal experience and are ready to run their own programs next year. Obviously, with a lot of support, potentially still shared resources, whatever we need to do to make it happen for all of our kids.”

Boesch interjected: “It’s not that we don’t want to work together because we really enjoy serving our kids but we would really love that we would have the opportunity that the kids could attend at their homeschool as well.” As of fall 2022, summer school will continue jointly between Maple Elementary and Semitropic Elementary, whereas daily afterschool programming will be held individually at each site.

Ferguson confirms: “[Semitropic summer staff] have built the relationship with people from Maple. If they need the help, they can easily shoot that email to them and who knows, we might have somebody that roves between the two sites just for the summertime.... I don’t see us completely breaking apart in the years to come. I think it’s a great opportunity, not only for my staff but her staff as well.”

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<sup>11</sup>. The nation’s early community schools—including iconic **Hull House**—reflected this community commitment.



# Community School Essentials: Unpacking rural district partnerships’ approach to CS work

The work underway in Kern County and the partnership amongst district leadership and team members reflect many promising community school practices, enabling conditions, and capacities, as described in the **Community Schools Essentials Framework**.

## Shared vision

At the core of the collaborative’s work are five common priority areas: **early childhood education, expanded learning, math instruction, family and community partnerships, and social and health services**. These five priorities drive collaborative decision-making across the partnership; when negotiating action and resources across multiple stakeholders, the shared vision is essential to cohesive action.

Additionally, while each district has their own unique culture and context, they have a common commitment to creatively solving both shared and unique problems in service of students’ success.

## Trusting Relationships

Quality relationships are the foundation of all of the districts’ community schools work. One of the advantages of small/rural communities is the fact that oftentimes in small communities, folks know each other through formal and informal networks and relationships. The power of those relationships help district staff to identify opportunities for collaboration.

As their partnership has grown over time, the district leaders have come to lean on each others’ unique strengths and work together to address different needs. “I think that’s what makes our team stronger: different personalities, different people have different knowledge in different areas,” remarks Saso. Drawing on Boesch’s prior experience as an expanded learning leader to provide guidance to the cross-district program is one such example.

In working together, the districts have also been creative about helping each district meet their individual needs. When asked what advice she’d offer to those pursuing collective work, Saso urged others to “be ready to do for others,” and to put the needs of partner districts in step with your own.

## Sustainable Resources

Over the past five years, the three districts have developed a braided funding strategy that draws from multiple funding streams, including Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) funds, Expanded Learning Opportunity Program (ELO-P), Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program (SSAE), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) funding, School Climate Transformation grants, Title I funding, Federal Full-Service Community Schools Grant Program, the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) pilot, and the Emerging Bilingual Collaborative. In isolation, the funds that each district receives from each discrete grant still do not cover the resources necessary to best support all of their students. But when district leaders come together and explore ways to braid funding, share resources and apply their strengths to each other’s challenges, funding can go much, much further.

The shared staffing across partnerships is one example of strategic use of resources. Districts usually consider funding strategies that bridge across traditional income sources – general fund, one-time use dollars, philanthropic donations. The West Kern Consortium expands this notion to consider how districts can blend and match funds across partner districts to create a more distributed and sustainable funding strategy that does not rely solely on one district’s revenue.

Without intentional and strategic collaboration, each of the districts individually would not have the resources to accomplish what they have done collectively. Boesch reflects, “It’s not that everybody gets an equal amount but everybody gets what they need the most.” For example, participation in the consortium has benefited Maple students; with a 55% unduplicated student count<sup>12</sup>, Maple often does not qualify (individually) for state funding opportunities that are directed to districts with high percentages of higher need students. But by working together with the other districts and averaging their demographics, Maple both contributes to and benefits from available resources.

## Strategic Partnerships

All three district leaders agreed that this work would not have succeeded without convening and facilitation support from a strategic partner organization. Since the start of the initiative, Figueroa Consulting has played the role of a backbone partner in the West Kern Consortium’s community school development and implementation. Figueroa has been not only grant-writer for the collaborative, but also organizer, facilitator, strategic planner, mediator, and intermediary. Figueroa’s time, expertise, and willingness to roll up his sleeves and work alongside his school-based colleagues were essential, especially in the early years of the initiative as the districts were building their individual and collective community school capacities.

Community school development entails expanding the traditional role of the school by incorporating both more functions and stakeholders into the school’s fabric. A backbone agency can provide critical staffing and guidance to facilitate this work. Additionally, an effective backbone agency will bring an orientation towards data-informed decision-making, continuous improvement, and deep knowledge of the landscape (including and outside of the education sector). This is especially important in terms of the ability to bring new partners to the table to support the community schools effort.

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<sup>12</sup>. Unduplicated pupils refers to students who (1) are English learners, (2) meet income or categorical eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program, or (3) are foster youth. “Unduplicated count” means that each pupil is counted only once even if the pupil meets more than one of these criteria .

In many successful community schools, backbone support is provided by a local community-based organization. For example, Children’s Aid in New York is a child and family service agency that, in addition to providing discrete services, plays an active, collaborative and advisory role in community school development. In small and rural settings, a large community-based organization may not be available, nor qualified, to provide this support. In this case, rural districts may need to be creative in how they apportion and staff the functions of a backbone agency to support community school development.

## Practice Questions:

1. What are your district or schools’ most pressing priorities? What data do you have that confirms this? Who are they priorities *for*?
2. Who in your community do you consider a partner? How are you currently engaging with those partners? What are some ways you could be more strategic and/or collaborative in how you work together?
3. Who would be an “unexpected” partner in your community? Who else has a stake in students’ success? What are some ways you could begin a conversation with them?



Field trip fun for students at Maple and Semitropic. Photo courtesy of Veronica De Leon.

# Policymakers and advocates: Want to support more equitable and more robust community school development?

## This is what our West Kern partners inspire us to consider.

The California Department of Education signaled their recognition of some of the challenges rural districts face by giving priority points to CCSPP applications from rural LEAs. Policymakers and advocates wishing to support equitable access to community school funding opportunities for small/rural students and school should consider:<sup>13</sup>

- ▶ **Adjusting the unduplicated pupil count priority thresholds for CCSPP planning and implementation funding for small and rural districts.** CDE has prioritized CCSPP implementation funding for schools with at least 80% unduplicated pupil counts.<sup>14</sup> However, this measure has troubling equity implications for under-served students in small/rural communities. Many small and rural districts – even if serving the majority of their region’s most vulnerable and under-served students – do not meet the threshold, due to the nuances of rural student population size and geographic span.<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ **Incentivizing rural cross-district collaboration in CCSPP funding applications to help districts build economies of scale and braid funding.** Whereas in urban settings, we typically think of “partners” as community-based organizations and public service providers, in rural settings, neighboring districts and County Offices of Education may become each others’ best core partners. The CCSPP could incentivize cross-district partnerships, common MediCal regions (e.g., to maximize school-based billing for health and mental-health services), or an elementary-to-high school feeder pattern.
- ▶ **Providing more guidance to LEAs on how to leverage, align, and braid the various whole-child student learning & support initiatives in California.** Currently The FY 2021 and FY 2022 budgets have infused much needed resources into our state’s education system, e.g., Expanded Learning Opportunity Program, Universal Transitional Kindergarten, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support expansion, CCSPP, CA literacy grant, P-3 alignment funds, dual immersion, Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, teacher professional development block grant, Golden State Pathways Program.

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13. See also this 2022 [opinion piece](#) by Boesch and colleagues providing comments to CDE on improvements to the CCSPP.

14. Unduplicated Pupil Count refers to the number of students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals (FRPM), are English learners (EL), and/or who are foster youth.

15. Economic segregation has increased 40% within districts over the last 30 years. This has troubling equity implications for using a district’s unduplicated pupil count as an indicator of priority. For example, an urban district serving 4,500 students, with an unduplicated pupil count of 55%, likely has several schools in which those low SES students are concentrated—resulting in a higher unduplicated count at those school sites—that can qualify and be targeted for CCSPP funding. In contrast, a rural district serving 350 students, with an unduplicated pupil count of 55%, would not qualify for CCSPP funding, as low-income students are not concentrated in one specific qualifying school and therefore, the school does not meet the criteria for CCSPP funding—despite that school serving the highest need students in the area. For a more thorough discussion of increasing economic segregation in US schools, see the Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis’s [Income Segregation between Schools and School Districts report](#).



While these programs administratively may live in different departments at the state-level, they exist simultaneously for districts. In small/rural districts especially, the administrative burden of managing unaligned programs is disproportionate. It is often the same 1-4 people administering, managing, and sometimes staffing ALL of these programs. Consider developing a state “Whole Child Funding Opportunities” master document, with a description of each program, allowable expenditures, application deadlines, and clear case studies of how specific districts have strategically leveraged funding from multiple streams.



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