



## EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AT THE EAST LOS ANGELES PERFORMING ARTS ACADEMY IN CALIFORNIA

### Background

The East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy is one of five schools located on a single campus. Together, the five schools make up the Esteban Torres High School.

The Esteban Torres campus uses the community school strategy to meet not just the academic, but the social and mental health needs of students. There is a health clinic onsite, staffed by a pediatrician, a reproductive health provider and several mental health therapists. The school also partners with community professionals who offer special workshops and classes to students and their families, touching on everything from diabetes prevention to nutrition and healthy eating. The campus also has a community school coordinator who works closely with families to identify social problems that impede student learning—such as alcohol abuse or peer pressure to join gangs or crime hot spots near school and home.

Each of the schools that makeup Esteban Torres also share these characteristics: each school has some areas of autonomy from the Los Angeles Unified School District, each school offers expanded learning opportunities to students, each school uses a career theme to help drive teaching and learning practices, and each school is small enough (with a student population of several hundred) to allow the principal to know every student by name.

The high school campus is located in East Los Angeles, an area that is home to many low-income Mexican-Americans. Some East L.A. families are second and third generation, with family roots that are deeply tied to California history and culture. Other families are relative newcomers to the United States and may include undocumented immigrants. East L.A. was home to a thriving Chicano rights movement in the 1960s and today recognizes Latino contributions through its Latino Walk of Fame. As much as it has a reputation for cultural pride, East L.A. also has a reputation for being a tough place to live. Gang life in East L.A. has been documented in books like Luis Rodriguez' "Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A." and "East Side Stories: Gang Life in East L.A." In fact, Esteban Torres High School is located in an area where several gangs are involved in turf fights, and many students who walk to campus report being intimidated or harassed by gang members or affiliates.

### The Purpose of Expanded Learning Opportunity at the East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy

Many of the students who attend the Esteban Torres High School campus come from striving, low-income or poor families who do not have the money or social capital to set up extracurricular activities or afterschool programs for their children. Carolyn McKnight, the principal of the East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy, one school on the campus, says that since many of her students don't have many opportunities to get out and see the world, her school aims to bring the world to them:

My students come from families that are nearly broke; parents do not have the money or the time to drive kids back and forth between basketball games and music lessons. What we are doing as a school is stepping in and providing enriching experiences. And by doing this, we are

helping to fill in some of the background, experiential knowledge that helps our students succeed in school.

For example, many of our students have literacy challenges—and it's not because they can't decode words. It's because they struggle with the *meaning* of the words. They don't have the background experience to understand what's being talked about on the page. The more we can help these students broaden their knowledge of the wider world, the more they will have to draw on, when reading literature.

Because the school is performing arts-based, the students are immersed in dozens of experiences, shows, and opportunities that involve collaborations with professional arts organizations in the Los Angeles area. Says McKnight:

This week, our kids are doing a show with the L.A. Repertory Theater. Next, the students will perform an original opera in collaboration with the L.A. Opera.

Most of the work involved in preparing these productions happens during the school day. In addition to the many stage productions that students put together, McKnight says students are experiencing the arts in a myriad of other ways at the school:

We have Contra-Tiempo, an urban Latin dance company, do workshops with our kids. We've also invited in many other groups --the Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, Little Kids Rock, a poetry performance group, a hip hop artist and a Brazilian capoeira instructor.

### **Why the Community School Strategy is Critical to the Delivery of Expanded Learning Opportunities**

As a community school, the East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy sees partnerships with community groups as core to the school's philosophy, values, and mission. Says Carolyn McKnight:

Our partnerships with community groups are not "add-ons". Our partnerships are part of the fabric of who we are as a school. We have included our community partners from the very beginning. Community partners helped play a role in designing our school plan and they play a role in our plans for teaching and learning.

For example, our students will soon put on an opera performance in collaboration with the L.A. Opera. We want all of our kids to see this. And so we are intentionally changing our class schedule for that day so that all of our students can be a part of the experience. We don't see these performances and shows as interrupting our work. No, they *are* our work.

McKnight also says that the academy's community school coordinator, who also serves the other schools on campus, is key to keeping alive the practice of expanded learning opportunities at the school:

Expanded learning opportunities can't be at the top of my list, because, as a school principal, what's at the top of my list is getting a substitute to cover for a sick teacher or getting a technician to fix a leaky roof or making sure that two of our students, who are both in the last trimester of pregnancy, can access the school elevator. But expanded learning opportunities ARE at the top of our community school coordinator's list. She is the one who can make sure

that all the logistics are taken care of to make our community partnerships run smoothly. She is the one who can make sure that all of our community partners sign in once they come onto campus. She is the one who can make sure that all the paperwork that accompanies these school-community partnerships gets taken care of.

A community school coordinator helps integrate expanded learning opportunities into everyday school practice, continues McKnight. She/he is the person who makes sure that expanded learning opportunities become embedded so deep in the school's daily practice that the partnerships have true staying power.

### **Why Expanded Learning Opportunities Help Drive Student Achievement**

Attendance at the East Los Angeles Performing Arts Academy is ninety five percent. This past year, the school graduated 97 out of its 112 seniors. The school recently saw an increase in students' English language arts test scores.

McKnight says expanded learning opportunities are helping to drive student engagement and student achievement:

Our kids have a reason to read and a reason to write—because they are in charge of a production in which they are going to present their show to an audience! Their learning is high stakes... high stakes in a positive way. We have two different productions coming up and both have been written and researched by students. These students know that the script has to be clear and has to have a beginning, a middle, and an end... because they are going to perform it in front of their peers.

These performances give students the opportunity to take on a project, practice it, polish it, and present it. That's a learning experience that few of our kids would have otherwise. Our students don't have private music lessons. Our students don't belong to the junior cheer leading squad, where kids meet, practice a routine, and prepare to present in the parade. This kind of project-based work—where you choose to take on a group project and carry it through—changes the very way that our students approach learning. School is no longer doing something because someone tells me to; it's doing something because it's important to me and to my peers.