

Social Justice Humanitas Academy

Los Angeles, CA



Social Justice Humanitas Academy in Los Angeles ensures all of its students have Individualized Pupil Education Plans (IPEP). IPEPs help determine how teachers and partners involved in the community school can best help struggling students and reflect the close relationships between students and teachers. This relationship led to a decrease in suspensions—only 0.2% students were suspended last year—as well as rising graduation rates, from 83 percent to 93.9% in the last year.

Demographics

Location: San Fernando, CA
 Grade Levels: 9-12
 Number of Students: 509
 Race/Ethnicity:
 2% African American
 95% Hispanic
 1% Caucasian
 1% Native American
 ELL Students:
 52% Reclassified English Proficient
 12% English Learners
 Special Education: 10%
 Free/Reduced Lunch: 87.7%

Results

- Graduation rates have increased from 83% to 93.9% in the last year
- 0.2% of students were suspended in 2013-14 year
- 96% of students have an Individual Graduation Plan
- 75% of students are passing all college pre-requisite classes
- 93% of students and 95% of parents feel the school grounds are safe
- The high school exit exam first time pass rates increased from 68% to 78% in the last year

Contact:

Jennie Carey
 Social Justice Humanitas Academy
 Community School Coordinator

jcarey@laep.org



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Meeting Students' Needs Through Partnership and Teacher Leadership

The Individualized education program—or IEP—helps millions of students with special needs receive the services they need in order to reach their educational goals. But the leaders of Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA)—a community school in Los Angeles—felt that all students could probably benefit from a similar process, one that added a focus on learning.

That's why they created the Individualized Pupil Education Plan (IPEP), which was developed about four years ago and pulls together detailed information on students' needs as well as their strengths. The profile includes common indicators, such as test scores, but also covers information such as whether parents attend conferences and where students compare on the [Search Institute's list of 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents](#).

Every five weeks, when teachers review student data, the IPEPs are used to determine how teachers and partners involved in the community school can best help struggling students who face the most obstacles. The IPEP process is also a reflection of the close relationships between students and teachers that are part of the Humanitas model.

“While I will always do my best to help them, I also know that there are many others in the community who have the desire, skills, and resources to support my students in the areas where it's hard for me to reach from within my classroom and within the bounds of my curriculum,” says Jeff Austin, who teaches Advanced Placement (AP) macroeconomics and AP American government at the school. “Our students constantly talk about Humanitas as a family, and that feeling is almost tangible as you walk through the hallways, classrooms, and offices.”

An initiative of the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), which is SJHA's lead agency, Humanitas is an instructional model in which teachers collaborate to provide rigorous, interdisciplinary instruction that engages students in relevant, real-world learning. One of four autonomous high schools located on the campus of Cesar Chavez Learning Academies in San Fernando, CA., SJHA was founded by teacher leaders, such as Austin, through a process in which teams of teachers could propose to start their own school. As a community school, SJHA also has a community school coordinator provided by LAEP, creating a site which brings together LAEP's two major approaches to improving outcomes among low-income students – Humanitas and community schools. Jennie Carey, the school's coordinator, is part of the school's governing council, which

helps to ensure that the work of community partners is aligned with and in support of the school's core curriculum.

The school's "adoption" process, in which teachers take added responsibility for following up with a few students to continually encourage them to keep working toward their goals, is further evidence of the bonds formed between students and teachers. Daily advisory classes provide another structure through which students can receive support from teachers and peers. It's through "these relationships with teachers that help students achieve self-actualization," says Carey, who was previously a coordinator at Sylmar High School and involved in writing the plan for the SJHA. Teachers put "the IPEP into the hands of students," and ask them what is going on in their lives and what they need to succeed, she adds.

Adoption has been a strategy for supporting students since the school began and involves not only teachers, but also community partners and AmeriCorps members working on campus.

"I know it works," Austin says about the adoption process. He describes one 9th grader who he has adopted this year and how he was able to overcome the obstacles in his way. "I push him to make better decisions, he promises to do so, then messes up, and I talk to him again. And again. And again. He'll get there. I've seen my adopted kids do better in grades as well, but it's funny because I rarely get a chance to celebrate their victory because by then it's part of their DNA. They almost forget about who they were, and I usually try to forget so I can enjoy who they've become."

Through those relationships, student attendance and performance increases. Over the past three years, the attendance rate has climbed from 62 percent to 80 percent, and the graduation rate has increased from 83 percent to 92 percent—compared to the Los Angeles Unified School District average of 67 percent.

Focusing on Social Justice

Embedded into the school's curriculum is a focus on social justice, which has been strengthened through the school's partnership with [Facing History and Ourselves](#). An international education and professional development organization, Facing History engages students in understanding the Holocaust, discussing other social justice issues and understanding how history is connected to the moral choices people face every day. With a predominantly Latino population, a lot of lessons focus on exploring identity and culture, and the entire school read "Enrique's Journey," the Pulitzer Prize-winning story of a Honduran boy searching for his mother in the U.S. SJHA is considered one of Facing History's model schools because it takes a whole-school approach to weaving the core themes throughout the school's curriculum, climate and mission. Samantha Siegeler, who teaches 10th grade English with a history focus, says it's "a blessing to have the

opportunity to develop interdisciplinary curriculum with social justice-minded folks who bring a critical lens to our curriculum.”

A restorative justice process is also teaching students how to take responsibility for poor decisions and is having an impact on behavior trends at the school. For the past two school years, only two students have been suspended. Another strong partner, Youth Speak Collective, gives students opportunities to improve their communities and develop leadership skills. Eight Youth Speak interns, four of which are SJHA students, help facilitate after-school programs such as digital arts and the “Womyn’s Circle,” which gives girls a safe place to express themselves and talk about women in society. Interns receive stipends and students can earn service-learning hours for participating in Youth Speak programs.

“Our passion is youth, and they are going to be the next leaders of our city,” says David Andres Kietzman, an art teacher before joining Youth Speak. He adds that there is a noticeable difference in working with an established community school, compared to other schools where he says partnership is more a “tagline.”

The EduCare Foundation, a youth development organization, also is an effective SJHA partner. At the beginning of every school year, instead of jumping immediately into assignments and quizzes, students at the school participate in EduCare’s ACE (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) workshops. The experience focuses on self-reflection and bonding between teachers and students and starts the school year off “on a positive note,” Carey says. “They’re all going through something and it’s very real and they learn they’re not alone.”

Through the 9th Grade Leadership Academy—an out-of-classroom experience required for graduation—students also focus on building character and positive relationships. Additional support and wraparound services are available to both students and families as part of the Los Angeles Promise Neighborhood grant provided by the U.S. Department of Education to the Youth Policy Institute (YPI), an anti-poverty and community empowerment organization. Parents can receive financial literacy programs, referrals to housing and health care services and legal support.

Preparing for Post-Secondary

While community schools often work with partners to build students’ “college knowledge,” as it’s often called, those efforts are often still separate from what is happening in the classroom. But not at Humanitas. Topics such as completing applications and understanding the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) are being integrated into the curriculum to help all students take steps in that direction.

Because of LAEP’s emphasis on teacher leadership, Carey says the partners play an important role in helping the faculty be more effective. “We have to support our

teachers as much as our students,” she says. “When they are doing their very best, and [a student] is still failing, something else is going on. We know we have to have these partners.”

Principal Jose Navarro says he’s a “champion of community schools” because of how the model addresses the barriers that even the most effective teachers can’t break down.

“I am the California teacher of the year, the LAUSD teacher of the year, the L.A. County teacher of the year, and I am National Board certified. Based on these accolades I am one of the most effective teachers my students can have,” Navarro says. “Yet I still have students who fail. I still have students who have needs I can't meet. We can't do it alone. My students need all the resources their community can offer. Good teaching alone cannot mitigate the effects of poverty.”