

2019 Social Innovation Summit: Pathways to Opportunity
Panel on New Models to Advance Educational Attainment: *What We Learned*

EVENT DETAILS

Date: March 29, 2019

Location: University of Southern California

Speakers:

- Jeimee Estrada, Regional VP - Los Angeles, Innovate Public Schools
- Sunwoo Hwang, CEO & Founder, Sixup
- Julie Marsh, Professor of Education Policy, USC Rossier School of Education
- Moderator: Christine M. Beckman, Visiting Professor, USC Sol Price School of Public Policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Substantial progress has been made in expanding educational opportunities for California students and families. However, the state's public school system still lags behind other states in terms of per pupil spending, adult to student ratios, and persisting achievement gaps, all of which undermine student achievement and impede educational attainment for high need students. On March 29, 2019 panelists at the Social Innovation Summit held at the University of Southern California discussed three essential models for establishing and preserving pathways to opportunity: meaningful community engagement, cross-sector partnership development, and studying the policies and practices of outlier schools.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Despite California's progress under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), underdeveloped school capacity, lack of adequate resources, and persisting achievement gaps continue to impede educational attainment. Currently, educators and practitioners lack the skills, information, and resources needed to properly implement major reforms and use data to guide policy. Additionally, districts require more per pupil spending to meet the state's broad set of policy goals. This inadequate funding combined with high teacher salaries has contributed to a growing shortage of adults in schools (e.g. teachers, counselors, nurses etc.). Moreover, unresolved issues with pensions threaten to destabilize the system and declining resources for special education magnify equity concerns. Lastly, large achievement gaps in race, ethnicity, income, and English language status persist across California, and these disparities are compounded by a shortage of credentialed teachers in high need school districts and deficiencies in early learning programs. As a result, California students in urban, low-income school districts score nearly a full grade level below their peers in other states.



The implementation of the LCFF in 2013 led to more funds in districts with higher concentrations of high need students. However, even with funding increases from LCFF, districts still lack the resources needed to meet all of California’s lofty policy goals. Moreover, stakeholder engagement by school districts remains low, undermining the extent to which the needs and concerns of those most impacted—students, parents, and community members—can guide education policies and priorities. The rise of political polarization compounds this issue by making it harder to connect on common values in a way that facilitates mobilization of parents and cross sector collaboration.

PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY

Panelists spoke on the absolutely critical role played by local communities in understanding and advocating for the needs of students, especially English Language Learners and students of color. Jeimee Estrada, Regional Vice President for Los Angeles at Innovate Public Schools, highlighted the importance of shifting away from the mobilization mindset and towards making deep, meaningful investments in community leaders in order to develop their skills as decision makers and policy agents. Moreover, she emphasized that schools and policy-makers need to meet students and parents where they are—communities cannot wait for 5-year strategic plans to improve California schools because they need excellent schools *now*.

Panelists also talked about the importance of coalition building and partnership development in the innovation of new solutions to improve educational opportunity. Sunwoo Hwang, CEO & Founder of Sixup, stressed the crucial role that partnerships played in the early stages of launching his financial startup. Hwang relied on connections with policy-makers, businesses, and community leaders in order to find low-income students with high potential to offer loans. He also illustrated the significance of thinking through all stages of a social problem, starting with filling the college pipeline with high-achieving, low-income students and then ensuring that once accepted, they can actually manage to attend due to responsible, affordable lending.

The panel also discussed the power of drawing policy lessons from statistical outliers in education. Julie Marsh, Professor of Education Policy in the USC Rossier School of Education noted that while most school districts reported low participation for their community engagement, a few outliers provide important insight into improving the process elsewhere. Outlier districts were more likely to have a history of strategic planning and local leadership invested in education outcomes. They also typically educated parents and community members in data use so that they could participate as equals. Furthermore, they had pre-existing relationships of trust built between teacher unions and the district. Jeimee Estrada added that in Los Angeles County 279 schools are effectively closing the achievement gap, and these outliers provide a roadmap for policy-makers, schools, and communities to change conventional practices. For example, many outliers use open classrooms and schools to foster collaboration and shared best practices between teachers, principals, and parents.