

FEDERAL CHARTER SCHOOLS PROGRAM IS KEY TO THE EXPANSION OF RACIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY INTEGRATED CHARTER NETWORK

In 2010, Citizens of the World Charter School (CWC) opened its first school in Hollywood, California. Over the next decade, CWC's single school expanded into a network of charter schools that today includes three schools with more than 2,000 students in the Los Angeles region as well as two schools in Kansas City. In the near future, CWC will be opening two more schools in Los Angeles and schools in Cincinnati. This growth has been made possible, in part, by grants from the Federal Charter Schools Program (CSP).

When CWC opened its first school in Los Angeles, the founders envisioned an intentionally diverse charter school -- where the student body reflects

the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of its Los Angeles community -- that embraces a comprehensive approach to child development that challenges students academically, supports them creatively and emotionally, and pushes them to work constructively across lines of difference. CWC has developed a framework for holistic student outcomes that ensures students progress developmentally from transitional kindergarten through eighth grade in developing competencies such as adaptability, critical thinking, cultural competency, empathy, systems thinking, and much more. "We were one of the first charter school networks to embrace social emotional learning in the classroom," says Mark Kleger-Heine,





executive director of CWC Los Angeles. “[We believe] academic and non-academic outcomes improve when students are supported, when trauma is addressed, and when kids feel a sense of belonging, so we build into our curriculum and into our overall school model opportunities for a focus on identity and identity formation.”

The CWC model has led to academic success—each of its three Los Angeles schools outperform the state and the Los Angeles Unified School District in English and math. But it has also positioned its students to become leaders in their communities: “Our kids are trailblazers and they are advocates for others. When people talk to our students, they are blown away by the kindness, empathy, and the orientation to support others who are different from them. We’re building a community that’s developing these lifelong skills,” notes Kleger-Heine.

CWC has received three CSP awards in recent years. In 2018, CWC received a \$160,000 expansion subgrant from the California Department of Education to expand its Mar Vista location into middle school. In 2019, CWC received a \$375,000 planning, implementation, and replication subgrant, also from the California Department of Education. In 2020, CWC received a \$4.1 million Charter Management Organization grant from the U.S. Department of Education for school replication. These grants have provided an infusion of funds to help the network hire staff, build its network infrastructure, and purchase materials. In particular, CSP funds have allowed CWC to hire critical school personnel earlier in the school development process than they would be able to otherwise. Positions such as community and data coordinators, as well as directors of social-emotional learning, special education, and operations are core to CWC’s model, but without start-up funding from CSP, schools often lack the funds to hire for these roles before the schools launch or during their first few years of operation. “So much of what makes a high-quality, student-centered school is people, and having these people in place before school starts is so valuable,” says Kleger-Heine of these positions.

In addition to schools, the CSP has helped CWC build its capacity to support each school’s work by strengthening its central office infrastructure, including hiring operational support and special education experts to ensure its schools are meeting the needs of all of their students. The growth of the CMO’s support capacity also enabled the network to provide more customized support to school leaders.

Moreover, CSP enabled CWC to make significant investments in technology, such as purchasing items like smart boards, laptops, and robotics kits, which were critical as CWC expanded from elementary grades into middle school: “That grant was critical to provide infrastructure needed for middle school growth. We’re not tech heavy in elementary grades because we place a big emphasis on project-based learning, but we wanted our student projects to be more tech-enabled in middle school. The grant allowed us to make a lot of one-time technology purchases that we can leverage for a long time,” says Kleger-Heine.

CSP funds have been critical to CWC’s growth in the Los Angeles region, and will continue to play a role there as the network opens two more schools in the coming years. The successes and lessons learned from its Los Angeles schools translate far beyond those communities, as CWC has taken its model to Kansas City, and, soon, Cincinnati. Explains Kleger-Heine, “We are creating intentionally diverse schools in a country where most schools are segregated. CWC brings together a diverse community of students and staff who understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Without the CSP, we would seriously question this kind of expansion, and being unable to offer our school model as a vital choice for parents would be a huge loss for the communities we serve.”