

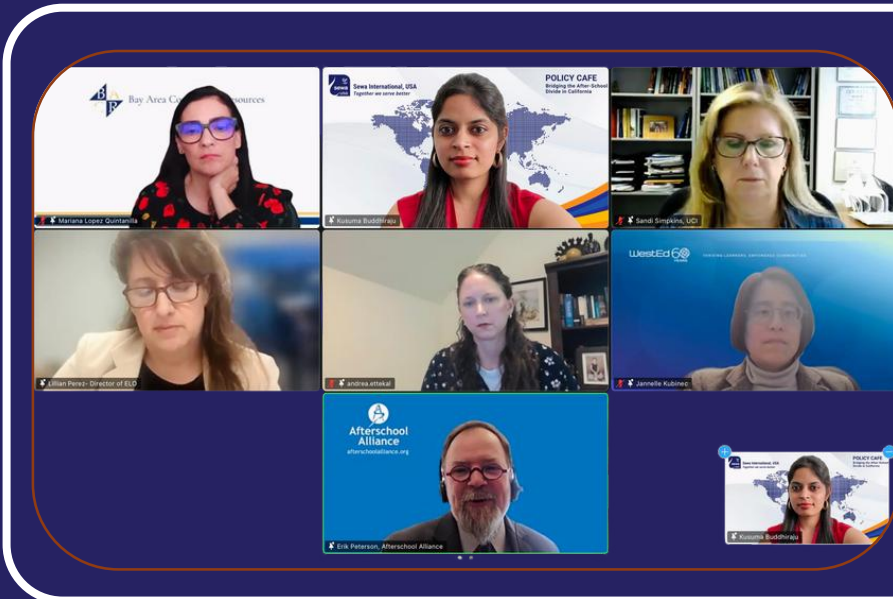


22 APRIL, 2026

EVENT REPORT

BRIDGING THE AFTER-SCHOOL DIVIDE IN CALIFORNIA

Access, Equity, and Community Partnerships



Watch now on YouTube

WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS?

Over the past five years, California has made one of the largest public investments in expanded learning in the United States, with the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program funded at \$4.6 billion in 2025–26, alongside major support through ASES and 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

These programs now serve nearly 1.1 million children. Yet access remains deeply uneven, with nearly 7 in 10 children whose parents want afterschool programs still unable to participate due to cost, transportation, staffing shortages, limited local availability, and lack of culturally responsive programming.

Differences in eligibility, funding structures, and reporting requirements across programs further widen implementation gaps across districts. At the same time, California’s 2025 Dashboard reports a TK–8 chronic absenteeism rate of 17.1 percent, highlighting the ongoing need for student re-engagement.

With the state’s new Attendance Recovery option beginning in 2025–26, after-school programs can become a critical pathway for both enrichment and recovery. This Policy Café will bring together cross-sector stakeholders to explore strategies for strengthening equitable expanded learning across California’s K–12 system.

HOST & MODERATORS



Srikanth Gundavarapu

Entrepreneur and civic leader based in Atlanta. Former Chapter President and key leader during Sewa International USA’s COVID-19 relief efforts, contributing to large-scale emergency food distribution initiatives.



Kusuma Buddhiraju

Associate Director of the Policy Research Team at Sewa USA and holds a Master of Public Administration from Columbia University.



Anupama Belur

Expert in finance and accounting, with diverse experience spanning HR management, billing operations, and academic intervention in public schools.

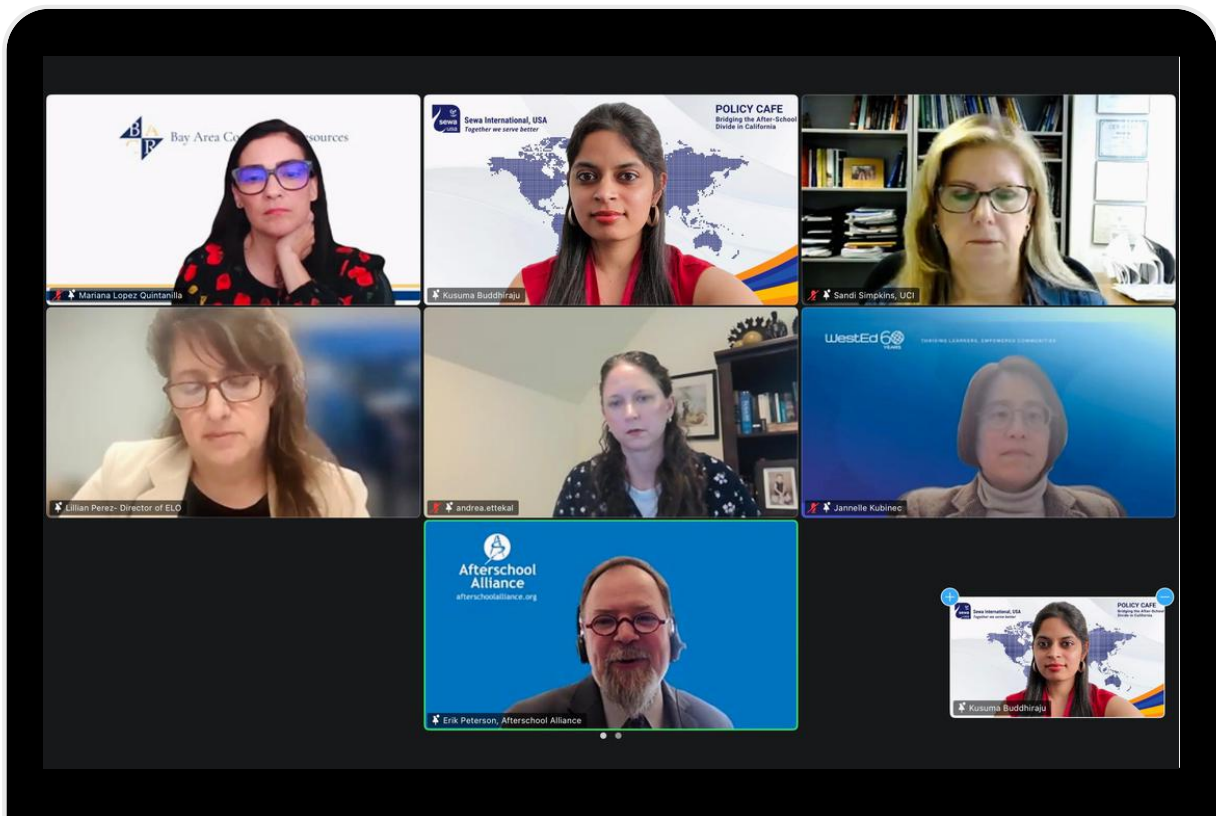
THEMES

THEME 1:

Access, Geography, and System Capacity

THEME 2:

Community Partnerships and System Coordination



MEET OUR PANELISTS



Andrea Ettekal

Associate Professor at Texas A&M University, whose research advances positive youth development and strengthens youth-serving organizations through evidence-based out-of-school learning practices.

Janelle Kubinec

CEO of WestEd, a nationally recognized leader who helped shape California's K-12 funding reforms and expand equitable early learning access.



Lillian Perez

Director of Expanded Learning at Fallbrook Union Elementary School District, a leader advancing equitable afterschool systems and recognized by the California Department of Education for outstanding leadership.

Erik Peterson

Senior Vice President of Policy at Afterschool Alliance, a leading advocate advancing federal and state policies supporting equitable access to afterschool and summer learning programs.



Sandra Simpkins

Developmental psychologist from the University of California, Irvine whose research explores culturally responsive afterschool learning, family engagement, STEM motivation, and equitable youth development.

Mariana Lopez Quintanilla

Executive Director of Expanded Learning at Bay Area Community Resources, a statewide leader advancing equitable afterschool programs, policy advocacy, and expanded learning quality across California.



MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



“We often put the onus on the kids and the families. But I think if we can pull some of that onus back on ourselves and think more creatively about how we design programs”

”

Dr. Andrea Ettekal (Texas A&M University)

Andrea emphasised that barriers to participation should not be treated solely as family or student responsibilities. She called on institutions and program designers to create more flexible, inclusive, and accessible afterschool systems.



“We treat things as status rather than meaning. There's a mental model of how we interact with the design and the evaluation and the creation and the constant improvement that it takes”

”

Janelle Kubinec (CEO of WestEd)

Janelle highlighted that programs are often judged by appearances or compliance rather than their real impact and purpose. She stressed the importance of continuous reflection, thoughtful design, and ongoing improvement to create meaningful learning experiences.



“The school day doesn't end for our students at 2:00 just because the bell rang; our school day continues until 6 PM”

”

Lillian Perez (Fallbrook Union Elementary School District)

Lillian emphasized that learning and student support extend far beyond regular classroom hours. Her statement highlights the importance of afterschool programs as an integral part of holistic education, care, and student development.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED



“We already know what high-quality expanded learning looks like—student voice, choice, and belonging. The real challenge is building policies that reflect the realities of all students, not just a select few”

”

Eric Peterson (Afterschool Alliance)

Eric emphasized that the core elements of effective expanded learning are already well understood—student agency, inclusion, and belonging. He pointed out that policies must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and address the diverse realities of all students and communities.



“When we talk about culturally responsive activities we talk about... caring inclusive relationships, cultural and linguistic affirmation, empowerment and engagement, and relevance and real world connection”

”

Dr. Sandra Simkins (University of California, Irvine)

Sandra explained that culturally responsive programs go beyond academics by creating inclusive spaces where students feel seen, valued, and empowered. She emphasized the importance of connecting learning to students’ identities, languages, lived experiences, and real-world contexts.



“High-quality afterschool programs should not replicate the school day. At a time when educators are deeply burned out, expanded learning must create spaces for connection, creativity, and meaningful engagement.”

”

Mariana Lopez (Bay Area Community Resources)

Mariana explained that effective afterschool programs should offer experiences different from traditional classroom instruction. Her point emphasized creating engaging, relationship-centered spaces that support both student well-being and educator sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS



Non-Profit Organisation

- Build community-rooted afterschool ecosystems that reflect local cultures, family needs, and youth interests rather than one-size-fits-all programming.
- Create strong partnerships with schools, families, and service providers to offer academic, emotional, and social support beyond classroom hours.



Academia

- Bridge research and practice by helping practitioners translate evidence into actionable, adaptable program design and evaluation.
- Expand research beyond test scores to include student voice, belonging, engagement, family experiences, and culturally responsive outcomes.



Policymakers

- Strengthen coordination between schools, nonprofits, and communities through integrated funding, shared data systems, and workforce development.
- Design equitable policies that address transportation, staffing, rural access, and support for multilingual and underserved families.

NEXT STEPS



01

Strengthening Sewa's ASPIRE Programs

Integrate insights from the Policy Cafe into Sewa's ASPIRE Program, with a focus on cross-sector alliances and coordination

02

Building Cross-Sector Collaboration for Education Reform

Strengthen collaboration between nonprofits, academicians, researchers, and community groups for a better after-school program

03

Bridging Grassroots Practice and Policy

Building long-term partnerships with all of you, our esteemed experts and fostering meaningful collaborations that translate dialogue into action.

THANK YOU!

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