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# It takes a community: Community schools provide opportunities for all



*Everyone benefits when a school assumes responsibility for coordinating services that address the many nonacademic needs of students and their families.*

## By Reuben Jacobson, Lisa Villarreal, José Muñoz, and Robert Mahaffey

At one school, a teacher shows up every day with a solid lesson plan and a great attitude. She has most of her students engaged, working in groups, and doing all the classroom practices we know represent high-quality pedagogy. However, several of her students are missing from school — again. One student is absent because he cares for two younger siblings in the

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morning, but the teacher doesn't know how to get him help. One is too hungry to focus, but there is no breakfast program at her school. One has trouble staying awake and cries a lot, and two others are frustrated because they need glasses and can't see what's written on the blackboard. At the end of the day, many of her students will head home to an unpredictable, unsafe environment or may wander the neighborhood unsupervised, perhaps getting into trouble. The teacher remains committed to her work, but she wonders how she will ever be able to succeed with students who have "so many problems."

At another school, students start their day by meeting with local mentors over breakfast. During third period, a student must be excused for her annual checkup, but instead of leaving school to go to the doctor, she sees a pediatrician at the school-based health clinic and then returns to class. When the traditional school day ends, a dozen volunteers come to the school to lead after-school activities that students have asked for, including robotics, music, and athletics. Later that evening, students and their parents come to the school for a regularly scheduled community dinner provided by the district, where teachers are on hand to help students with homework, and parents receive guidance on registering for health insurance and connecting to needed social services.

The second school is a community school, one of a growing number of schools that provide both the familiar K-12 curriculum and a much broader range of supports to students and families — high-quality academic instruction, and mentoring, health care, college and career counseling, financial advising, and much more. In many cases, the community school

serves as a neighborhood hub, bringing together educators, families, business leaders, elected officials, and many other local partners to ensure that students have real opportunities to succeed in school and in life.

At a time when federal policy makers are rightfully asking local educators and elected officials to take more ownership for how schools operate, community schools are becoming more important than ever. After two decades, the education reform pendulum has finally begun to swing away from the no-excuses world view. Today, the public understands that students need a variety of supports — academic and nonacademic — to help them learn. As the 2017 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools revealed, 77% of Americans strongly support after-school services, 76% strongly support providing mental health services at school, and nearly two-thirds strongly support providing health services. Clearly, the public believes in the commonsense strategies that are core to the community schools approach.

Community schools are a contemporary approach built on more than 100 years of experience. Their roots lie in the teachings of John Dewey, the great education philosopher who believed that schools should be centers of community life, and learning should be relevant, helping young people address the real-world problems that face them, their families, and their neighbors. Their roots lie also in the caring practices of the social reformer Jane Addams, whose 19th- and early 20th-century settlement houses were designed to help immigrants and the poor gain solid footing so they could contribute to the country's prosperity. In the past century and up until the late 1970s, many of the functional services of community schools were

publicly funded via federal initiatives including affirmative action, bilingual education, Medicaid and Medicare, low-income and public housing, social security, unemployment, food stamps, and programs to place case managers, social workers, and nurses in the schools. These foundational services, whose roots were nurtured by the community organizers of the 1960s, helped level the playing field so American schools became the greatest in the world. But fast-forward to the year 2000, and most of these foundational services had been eviscerated in favor of broad tax cuts, and the public and political will to serve all children (particularly low-income children of color) had nearly vanished.

> *The community school is the hub of the neighborhood, uniting educators, community partners, and families to provide all students with opportunities to succeed in school and in life.*

Community schools today are a historical return to the notion of school as the center for community life. They are hyperlocal institutions where neighbors, students, faith-based leaders, teachers, principals, school district officials, and parents can come together to share their concerns and aspirations, combine their resources, and find effective and sustainable ways to respond to challenges such as neighborhood violence, hunger, housing shortages, and environmental pollution. Further, community schools tend to be valuable partners to local businesses, joining with them to create student internship and job training opportunities and workforce development programs.

Every school — whether urban, suburban, or rural — can become a community school. And increasingly, school and community leaders across the country are stepping up and saying they want their schools to operate this way.

## Unique community needs

We used to say that no two community schools are the same, given that their programs and services differ from building to building and from neighborhood to neighborhood. Over the past 15 years, however, we've learned a lot about how community schools operate, and research has pointed to some fundamental practices and principles that all effective community schools have in common and that get results when they are well-implemented. So what does a community school require?

Every community school should start by asking local students and their families what needs to happen so students can succeed in school and graduate ready for college, careers, and citizenship. Depending on how they answer this fundamental question, they may choose to focus on any number of priorities, such as ensuring that young children are ready to learn, improving student attendance, strengthening family involvement in the school, promoting physical and mental health, or providing opportunities for academic enrichment. The specific programs and services they choose to offer will depend on the local context, but the guiding principle should always be to start by identifying students' most critical needs and strongest assets and then bringing together the programs, partners, and resources necessary to meet them.

Every community school should also be committed to building equitable and trusting relationships with their many stakeholders. No school can succeed for long without doing so, but, especially for community schools, success depends on the quality of the relationships that school and district staff maintain with various partners, including teachers, counselors, social workers, parents, clergy, elected officials, business leaders, volunteer tutors, and others. They must understand themselves to be providing services with people, not to them. Thus, community schools assemble a leadership team that embraces students, families, and other partners and includes them in the decision-making process. Further, and unlike other schools, community schools and their partners share accountability for student and community outcomes — and, again, this requires that partners have a seat at the table when important decisions are made.

> *When the community has greater ownership over its schools, people are more likely to trust them and less likely to move from reform to reform, program to program, and partner to partner.*

Finally, community schools are distinct in that their senior-level administration typically includes a site coordinator (sometimes called a community school director or site manager), who works hand in hand with the principal, other school staff, partners, and the broader leadership team to manage the process of identifying needs, locating resources, implementing programs, and assessing their impact.

An example from Cincinnati Public Schools illustrates how such coordination works. In Cincinnati, every

school is, in effect, a community school. Known as Community Learning Centers, each school employs a resource coordinator who works closely with school leaders and the school's Local School Decision-Making Committee to gather data about student needs, monitor their performance, and create targeted interventions for individual students and the school as a whole. Cincinnati's process, which goes by the acronym REFORM, requires the site coordinator to:

- Review needs and asset data to plan for the year;
- Engage partners to assist in meeting school goals;
- Focus supports for individual students such as increased tutoring for students who are behind in reading or mentoring for those struggling with behavior issues;
- Offer opportunities for partners to meet together and share updates on overall progress;
- Reset partnerships or interventions that aren't working as intended so changes can be made as part of a continuous improvement process; and
- Measure effects and outcomes so the school, partners, and families can stay focused on the results they seek and make adjustments as necessary.

# Community schools guiding principles

The Coalition for Community Schools has learned a great deal from practitioners about the effective design and implementation of this model. Working with partners from across the country, we developed a set of voluntary community school standards this year to create a common language for the field and help new schools and scaled-up initi- aitives get started quickly in building out their approaches.

The seven principles include:

**#1. Pursue equity.** Educational excellence and equity are inseparable. Community schools identify and confront policies, practices, and cultures that keep students of different backgrounds and races from achieving equitable outcomes.

**#2. Invest in a whole-child approach to education.** Meaningful teaching and learning embraces but goes beyond mastery of core academic subjects to include youth development principles; holding high expectations for children, youth, and adults; and developing their social-emotional, health, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

**#3. Build on community strengths to ensure conditions.** Community schools use the assets of the entire community — including the gifts of people who live and work there, parents, families, residents, and community partners — to create optimal learning conditions for each student.

**#4. Use data and community wisdom to guide partnerships, programs, and progress.** Reliable and community-specific data, coupled with the wisdom of youth, families, and residents, guide how educators and community partners work together to achieve measurable results.

**#5. Commit to interdependence and shared accountability.** Mutually agreed-upon results and related indicators, as well as written agreements, enable educators and community partners to hold each other accountable.

**#6. Invest in building trusting relationships.** Trusting relationships fuel school transformation by helping create a safe and respectful climate where caring adults, families, and students come to rely on each other as part of a shared approach to student success.

**#7. Foster a learning organization.** Improved student learning depends on a school community where educators and community partners work together toward continuous improvement.

**www.communityschools.org/standards**

## Three priorities

The opportunities provided by community schools can be grouped into three broad areas: powerful learning, integrated health and social supports, and authentic family and community engagement.

First and foremost, community schools are schools that are dedicated to effective teaching and learning. Thanks to help from community partners and volunteers, a lot of meaningful, authentic, and challenging learning opportunities occur during and

outside of the regular school day (including tutoring sessions, after-school and summer programs, social-emotional learning, business internships, musical performances, and more).

Second, most community schools provide a mix of social services and supports, commonly known as wraparound services, that address student needs related to physical and mental health, housing, nutrition, and much more. Simply put, succeeding in school is hard when one is hungry, homeless, or needs glasses. Rather than dismissing such conditions as mere excuses, community schools recognize that they present significant barriers to learning, and they remove them while also maintaining a focus on powerful learning.

Third, because families are the primary source of support for children's learning and development, community schools prioritize reaching out to parents and other family members to see what resources they need — from books to visiting nurse programs to mobile libraries and workforce development opportunities — and encourage them to be involved in the life of the school. The more they engage with the adults in the neighborhood, the more community schools can do to address local civic and educational needs.

### Effectiveness of community schools

A growing body of research findings suggests that community schools work. For example, recent reports from the National Education Policy Center and the Learning Policy Institute (Oakes, Maier, & Daniel, 2017; Maier et al., 2017) offer the most comprehensive review of the research to date. Having surveyed the available evidence about community schools' outcomes — as

well as evidence on component parts of the model, such as integrated student supports, expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership — the authors argue that community schools are an evidence-based strategy that education leaders and policy makers should support. They find that community schools can help improve attendance, reduce the dropout rate, and close the achievement gap. For example, in Baltimore, 77% of community school students in grades 6 to 8 were less likely to be chronically absent than a control group. In Tulsa, students in high-implementing community schools outperformed noncommunity schools in math by 32 points and reading by 19 points. Research also suggests that community schools are a good investment of public dollars and offer a strong social return on investment.

Also significant, we find that community schools are an education reform strategy that is built to last, in that they rely on partnerships that live on after individual leaders depart or funding sources change. When the community has greater ownership over its schools, people are more likely to trust them and less likely to move from reform to reform, program to program, and partner to partner.

Community schools are a viable way to promote equity as well. They focus especially on relying on the wisdom and assets of the most vulnerable students and families while providing opportunities, services, and supports at the time they are needed. Community schools are found in urban areas from Tulsa to Oakland, from Chicago to Salt Lake City, from Austin to Grand Rapids. They are also growing in inner-ring suburbs and rural areas, from Montgomery County in suburban

Washington, D.C., to Broome County, N.Y., in rural
upstate New York.

Finally, community schools can be designed and
launched by just about anyone with the will to marshal
local community resources on behalf of students and
families. Successful initiatives have been created by
organizations as varied as school districts, United
Ways, universities, funders, local governments, and
other community-based organizations.

Across the country, the number of community schools
continues to grow, as local educators, community
leaders, and others look for equitable, efficient, and
effective ways to provide the broad range of supports
and services that allow young people to become truly
well-prepared to enter college or a career. The Coalition
for Community Schools counts at least 5,000
community schools nationwide, has helped organize 15
state-level coalitions for community schools, and is the
national intermediary for our local, state, and national
partners. Moreover, with the recent passage of the
federal Every Student Succeeds Act, states, cities, and
towns have an important new opportunity to rethink
how they want schools to function. In particular, do
they want them to continue to be stand-alone
institutions that meet only a portion of students'
needs? Or are they ready to build more dynamic and
supportive partnerships among schools, families, and
other local stakeholders? The community schools
movement offers a commonsense, nonpartisan, and
very promising way to bring together programs and
partners to make a lasting effect in their communities.

## Community schools enable the features of good schools

| Community school pillars | Associated "good school" characteristics |
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| Integrated student supports address out-of-school barriers to learning through partnerships with social and health service agencies and providers, usually coordinated by a dedicated professional staff member. Some employ social-emotional learning, conflict resolution training, and restorative justice practices to support mental health and lessen conflict, bullying, and punitive disciplinary actions, such as suspensions. | • Attention to all aspects of child development: academic, social, emotional, physical, psychological, and moral<br>• Extra academic, social, and health and wellness supports for students, as needed<br>• Climate of safety and trusting relationships |
| Expanded learning time and opportunities, including after-school, weekend, and summer programs, provide additional academic instruction, individualized academic support, enrichment activities, and learning opportunities that emphasize real-world learning and community problem solving. | • Learning is the top priority<br>• High expectations and strong instruction for all students<br>• Sufficient resources and opportunities for meaningful learning |
| Active parent and community engagement brings parents/community into the school as partners in children's education and makes the school a neighborhood hub providing adults with educational opportunities they want, such as English as a second language classes, green card or citizenship preparation, computer skills, art, STEM, etc. | • Strong school, family, and community ties, including opportunities for shared leadership<br>• Climate of safety and trusting relationships |
| Collaborative leadership and practices build a culture of professional learning, collective trust and shared responsibility using such strategies as site-based leadership/governance teams, teacher learning communities, and a community school coordinator who manages the multiple, complex joint work of school and community organizations. | • Culture of teacher collaboration and professional learning<br>• Assessment as a tool for improvement and shared accountability |

**Source:** Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). *Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement.* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.
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## 3 Comments

**Sam Whalen**  January 30, 2018 at 3:12 pm - Reply

As someone who spent a lot of time evaluating the first wave of community school models here in Chicago, I am excited to see the progress in conceptualizing the workings and

impacts of community schools in ways that articulate to the broader conversation about data-informed school improvement. Congratulations to the authors and the community school advocacy community.

**Charles Porter** January 30, 2018 at 4:01 pm - Reply

You don't focus on how you bring about Community Schools and where does the leadership come from. Is there not a need for a Comm. Schools coordinato? Who can make this happen?.

**Farla Steele-Treat, EDD** February 20, 2018 at 9:03 pm - Reply

In our fast paced world with nuclear families, I believe community schools are our missing link for the future.

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