

# MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

*Research and Practice  
in Community Schools*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## ABOUT THE COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

An alliance of more than 160 national, state and local organizations, the Coalition represents community development and community building; education; family support and human services; government; health and mental health services; policy, training and advocacy; philanthropy; and school facilities planning and youth development organizations, as well as local, state and national networks of community schools.

## MISSION STATEMENT

The Coalition's mission is to mobilize the assets of schools, families and communities to create a united movement for community schools. Community schools strengthen schools, families and communities to improve student learning.

***Making the Difference* and this executive summary were written by  
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The Coalition for Community Schools is staffed by the Institute for Educational Leadership.

## ORDERING INFORMATION

Additional copies of this executive summary are available free. The full report and additional resource materials are available to download free of charge at [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org). Single copies of the full report are available for \$12 prepaid; \$2 will be added for shipping and handling if billing is requested. All orders must be received in writing by fax, e-mail or mail. Bulk orders are available at a reduced rate.

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# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES



Universal education is a valued tradition in America, and with good reason — a democracy rises and falls on the education of its children. Universal, however, does not necessarily mean equal or even adequate.

In recent decades, educators, policymakers and others have come to understand that the real question is not how to provide all children with schooling, but how to create the conditions that enable every child to succeed. Today's federal mandate, set forth in the No Child Left Behind Act, gives new urgency to this question — just as shrinking budgets and increasing demands for accountability challenge schools to do more with less.

Many educators and policymakers believe that the community schools approach can lead us to the answer. A community school is a place as well as a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone — all day, every day, evenings and weekends. By sharing expertise and resources, schools and communities act in concert to educate children; schools are not left to work alone.

Research confirms what experience has long suggested: Community schools work. **Evaluations examined the impact of 20 community school initiatives across America, focusing in particular on outcomes that directly affect student learning. Although not all evaluations looked at every outcome, their collective results clearly show that community schools make the difference for students in four important ways:**

◆ **Community schools improve student learning.** By addressing the needs of the whole child — physical, social and emotional as well as academic — community schools create environments that fulfill all the necessary conditions for learning. As a result, community school students show significant and widely evident gains in academic outcomes and in essential areas of nonacademic development.

Fifteen of the 20 initiatives in this study reported improvement in student academic achievement, as measured by improved grades in school courses and scores in proficiency testing.

In addition, more than half of the evaluations looked for and found evidence of positive development as measured by a variety of indicators, including improved attendance (eight initiatives), reduced behavior or discipline problems (five initiatives), greater compliance with school assignments and rules (three initiatives), increased access to physical and mental health services (five initiatives), greater contact with supportive adults (three initiatives), and improvements in personal/family situations (three initiatives).

◆ **Community schools promote family engagement with students and schools.** Families have access to services and opportunities — including chances to participate as both

leaders and learners — that make them effective partners in their children’s education.

More than half of the evaluations measured and reported specific benefits to families, such as improvements in communication with schools and teachers (four initiatives), family stability and ability to provide for children’s basic needs (three initiatives), parents’ ability to meet work-place obligations (two initiatives), confidence in their ability to teach their children (two initiatives), and attendance at school meetings (two initiatives).

❖ **Community schools help schools function more effectively.** Because parents and partners work together with the school staff to support learning, community schools positively influence overall school operations.

Almost three-quarters of the evaluations examined the school’s overall environment, identifying improved outcomes in many areas. For example, principals and staff affirmed the importance of on-site services (five initiatives), more parents participated in their children’s learning (four initiatives), there was nonpartisan support for public education and access to resources through community partnerships (four initiatives), and services were well-integrated into the daily operation of schools (two initiatives). In the classroom, evaluators found increased emphasis on creative, project-based learning and more innovations in teaching and curriculum (two initiatives). School

environments were more cheerful and were more likely to be perceived as safe (two initiatives).

❖ **Community schools add vitality to communities.** When the community is engaged with the school, resources and benefits flow both ways. Community partners provide on-site supports and opportunities for students, their families and their neighbors. In turn, the school maintains an active presence as a community hub, providing opportunities for family involvement, tapping into the community as a resource for learning and serving as a center for community problem solving.

Eleven evaluations that looked at this aspect suggest that community schools play a powerful role in community building. Evaluators noted a variety of improved outcomes, including improved community knowledge of and perception of the community school initiative (seven initiatives); increased use of school buildings, awareness of community agencies and access to facilities previously unknown or unaffordable (seven initiatives); improved security and safety in the surrounding area (two initiatives); and strengthened community pride and engagement in the school (two initiatives).

More information about the initiatives, evaluations, and research methodology and limitations can be found in the full *Making the Difference* report or on the Coalition for Community Schools Web site, [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org).

Overall, evaluation of these 20 community school models and approaches provides some important lessons for future efforts:

**Lesson #1: Quality Counts.** The quality of community school initiatives has a significant impact on outcomes.

**Lesson #2: Attendance Matters.** Higher attendance in community schools contributes to improved achievement. Children in community schools want to come to school, and so they learn more.

**Lesson #3: Everyone Benefits — the Neediest Most of All.** Students with the greatest need — those most likely to be in low-performing schools — benefit the most from the community school environment. Community schools that reach out to low-income and underachieving students can begin to narrow the performance gap among student groups and across schools.

# THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL VISION



**F**or more than 100 years, community schools have promoted a simple and fundamental value: School, community and family are inextricably joined and must work closely together for the benefit of every child.

Walk into a community school and you immediately recognize that it's a special place. That's because it is more than a school — it also is a set of deliberate partnerships that provide the supports and opportunities that are important to students, families and the surrounding community. Community partners can include health and social service agencies, family support groups, institutions of higher education, youth development organizations, government, community groups, or others — but they all are organized around a common goal: To create the conditions necessary for all children to learn at their best.

If you visit a community school when classes are in session, you'll notice that students and their teachers are actively engaged in learning. Because children can receive on-site services important to their mental and physical well-being, they arrive in class alert and ready to learn. Teachers draw on the community — its resources and its challenges — to create rich learning experiences that excite students and align with curriculum and standards.

Parents and other family members are enthusiastic partners in their children's learning. You may find them volunteering in the classrooms, attending

parent-teacher conferences or learning how to better support their child's education at home. They participate in school leadership meetings where they help make decisions about how the community school operates.

If you visit outside of traditional school hours, you'll notice something else unusual: The school continues to be busy and alive with learning, all day, every day. Children and youth participate in after-school academic and enrichment programs, receive tutoring or mentoring, and take part in community service-learning opportunities — all connected to the school day. Adults brush up on parenting and job skills, learn English, receive family counseling or come together to address community problems.

Now, step outside the building and see how it lights up the community — both literally and in spirit. Because the building is in constant use, the neighborhood is more active and more likely to be safe. Because children and families are succeeding, the community shares an understandable pride.

Our vision of community schools is not just a pretty picture. It already is making the difference in hundreds of cities and towns across America.

# WHY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS DO A BETTER JOB



Unlike traditional public schools, community schools link school and community resources as an integral part of their design and operation. Consequently, community schools have three major advantages that schools acting alone do not.

- ◆ **They garner additional resources for the school and reduce demands on school staff.** Community schools reach outside their walls to leverage services and programs that help meet a range of needs that affect student learning — including family mobility, violence, unsupervised out-of-school time and other issues that have become facts of life for too many children in today's society. This approach gives principals and teachers more time to concentrate on their core mission: Improving student learning.
- ◆ **They provide learning opportunities that develop both academic and nonacademic competencies.** Community schools support the intellectual, physical, psychoemotional and social development of young people and understand that assets in one area reinforce development in another. Abundant opportunities for learning and exploration in school, after school and in the community help students mature in all areas.
- ◆ **They offer young people, their families and community residents opportunities to build social capital.** Social capital connects students to people and information that can help them solve problems and meet their goals. Community schools enable all students to forge networks and social skills through mentoring relationships with caring adults, school-to-work learning, community service and other experiences, while providing parents and other adults

with similar opportunities to learn and assume leadership roles.

As a result of these advantages, community schools are in a unique position to fulfill five **conditions for learning** that the Coalition for Community Schools has identified as necessary for every child to succeed, based on an analysis of recent literature. Here is a summary of the conditions and the research on which they are based.

**Condition #1: The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.**

The research shows that:

- ◆ Competent and prepared teachers strongly affect student achievement.
- ◆ A rich curriculum with quality content and effective instruction challenges children to meet high standards and has a direct impact on improved student achievement.
- ◆ High-performing schools are guided by strong leadership and clear vision and create an atmosphere of trust among staff and parents.
- ◆ Small schools and class sizes contribute significantly to improved academic achievement and long-term educational outcomes, especially for minority, inner-city and low-income children.

**Condition #2: Students are motivated and engaged in learning — both in school and in community settings, during and after school.**

The research shows that:

- ◆ Brain functioning from infancy throughout the school years is most efficient when learning is active and concrete.
- ◆ Students learn best when they are personally interested, when they are actively involved and when they consider the content important.
- ◆ Effective learning occurs when schools, after-school programs and other organizations use the resources and challenges of the community as a living textbook for learning.
- ◆ Enrichment activities that enhance rather than replicate classroom work help students acquire skills and competencies that contribute to classroom success.

**Condition #3: The basic physical, mental and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.**

The research shows that:

- ◆ Comprehensive school-based health care helps improve attendance, behavior and grades.
- ◆ In addition to promoting students' self-confidence, mental health services contribute to better school performance and an improved school climate.
- ◆ Proper nutrition and physical exercise have a significant impact on student academic outcomes and participation in school as well as on psychosocial functioning.

**Condition #4: There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff.**

The research shows that:

- ◆ Active parent and family engagement strongly predicts school success.

- ◆ Efforts to build respectful, cooperative relationships among parents, families, teachers and school administrators help family members feel more capable of contributing to their child's education and connected to their child's school.
- ◆ When families are supported in their parenting role, their involvement in their children's learning increases and student performance is strengthened.
- ◆ Consistent parental involvement at home and at school — at every grade level and throughout the year — is important for students' academic success and future aspirations.

**Condition #5: Community engagement, together with school efforts, promote a school climate that is safe, supportive and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.**

The research shows that:

- ◆ Young people who feel safe, accepted and connected to their schools are more likely to stay in school, develop social skills and do well academically.
- ◆ Young people, teachers and other adults benefit from caring relationships, opportunities for participation and an atmosphere of high expectations.
- ◆ Community organizing and community engagement build support for school reform, improve school climate and set the stage for academic achievement.
- ◆ The condition of school buildings has a significant impact on both school climate and student achievement.

Learn more about the specific studies that support each of the five conditions for learning in the full *Making the Difference* report or on the Coalition for Community Schools' Web site, [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org).

# BRINGING THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL VISION HOME: AN ACTION AGENDA



Four elements are vital to the success of community schools:

- ◆ **A motivating vision** that mobilizes school and community, moves schools and their partners toward shared goals, guides their day-to-day relationships, and encourages accountability.
- ◆ **Connected learning experiences** linking classrooms and the real world that are aligned with learning standards, communicated and planned with partners, and focused on the conditions for learning.
- ◆ **Community partnerships** that bring together a range of assets and perspectives, focus on the shared vision and results, and provide for continuous learning among partners.
- ◆ **Strategic organization and financing** that support effective working relationships, a community schools coordinator, flexible funding and a willingness to share resources.

## Action Steps

These action steps, based on the four vital elements, can help a diverse group of community and school leaders develop a community schools strategy. Action steps for leaders of particular institutions, e.g., principals, mayors and heads of nonprofit agencies, are available at [www.community.org](http://www.community.org).

### 1. A Motivating Vision

- ◆ **Engage the community.** Involve stakeholders at both the school and district levels, including local governments and private funders, together with young people, parents, families and community residents to create a shared vision about what is needed in their school and community.

- ◆ **Use data to define desired results and drive decision-making.** In addition to statistical data, consider academic performance and related accountability requirements, as well as other factors that influence teaching and learning, such as attendance; student social, emotional and physical well-being; family well-being and involvement; and local demographics and socioeconomic issues.

- ◆ **Keep schools open before and after the regular school day and on weekends all year long.** This defining characteristic of a community school makes it clear that school buildings belong to the community.

- ◆ **Build and rehabilitate school buildings as community schools.** Bring stakeholders together to plan new buildings not just as schools, but as centers of support for students, families and community life. Rehabilitate older schools that already serve a central community function.

- ◆ **Build small schools or reconfigure existing schools to provide more effective learning communities.** Research proves that students in smaller schools perform better than their peers in larger classes or schools.

### 2. Connected Learning Experiences

- ◆ **Incorporate the community into the curriculum as an explicit resource for learning and improved student achievement.** Community-based learning opportunities such as service-learning, place-based education, school-to-work programs and environmental education can easily be aligned to learning standards.

- ❖ **Provide teachers and principals with professional development to enhance their ability to use the community as a learning resource.** Institutions of higher learning and school districts should focus their professional development efforts on this area.
- ❖ **Integrate in-school and after-school learning experiences.** Partner with youth development groups to offer enriching programs designed to help students achieve at high standards as well as develop life skills.
- ❖ **Draw on youth development resources and share expertise.** Encourage dialogue among educators and youth development professionals to help them understand each other's strategies and methods and focus on agreed-upon standards and competencies.

### 3. Community Partnerships

- ❖ **Create broad-based, local coalitions to advance, develop and sustain community schools.** Bring stakeholders together to create permanent forums to develop and promote a community school vision, mobilize resources, ensure accountability for results, keep the community informed, nurture partnerships and relationships, and build the capacity to sustain the effort.
- ❖ **Create ongoing, site-based planning and decision-making teams.** Bring families and residents, students, school staff, and community partners onto new or existing teams to review data, assess current programs, identify gaps, mobilize community resources and monitor progress toward results.
- ❖ **Engage students, parents, families and residents.** Empower parents to be strong advocates and role models for their children's learning and to participate in school activities and governance.
- ❖ **Focus all partners on creating the conditions for learning.** Ask partners to

demonstrate how their services would contribute to fulfilling these conditions.

- ❖ **Build sustainable partnerships.** Nurture long-term, committed relationships between schools and community partners that can make it easier to access funding and build an environment of mutual support and trust.
- ❖ **Develop knowledge and understanding among partners and across disciplines.** Use site visits, tours, professional development and other opportunities to help school staff and partners understand each other's expertise, policies, philosophies and financial constraints.
- ❖ **Create interprofessional learning opportunities in higher education.** Encourage colleges and universities to offer preservice and in-service professional development opportunities across such fields as education, public health, mental health, social services, early childhood and youth development.

### 4. Organization and Financing

- ❖ **Create community school coordinator positions.** A community school coordinator mobilizes and integrates school and community resources, improves the impact of these resources on student learning, and frees up the time of principals and teachers.
- ❖ **Identify the lead partner for a community school with great care.** There is a growing trend toward having a community organization serve as the lead partner for a community school. This lead organization employs the community school coordinator and mobilizes and integrates the resources of the community into the school. In some places, the school itself will be better equipped to provide the necessary leadership and coordination. Be clear about the mission of the community school and review the assets of the school and potential partners before selecting an organizational approach.

- ❖ **Organize school district funding streams to support a community schools strategy.** This does not have to involve more money, just some planning and creative thinking. For example, bring together public and private funding streams now available through the central office (after-school activities, physical and mental health services, violence prevention, etc.) at the school site to achieve the desired results.
- ❖ **Modify policies governing other public funding streams to support community schools.** Local, state and federal governments can support a community schools approach by defining common planning requirements across agencies, pooling funds and requiring grantees to demonstrate how proposed services will help fulfill the conditions for learning.
- ❖ **Organize private funding streams to support community schools.** Funds from private-sector organizations such as the United Way, community foundations and businesses can be coordinated into a community schools strategy.
- ❖ **Develop joint financing strategies for school facilities.** School districts, local governments and community agencies can jointly finance school facilities that incorporate libraries, recreation centers, health facilities, youth centers and other facilities.
- ❖ **Work together for increased funding.** Advocate for adequate, stable financing for individual programs and services.
- ❖ **Create technical assistance capacity to support the development of community schools.** Encourage policymakers to support coordinated technical assistance approaches that build long-term relationships among schools and their community partners, rather than short-term, categorical programs. Using local intermediary organizations is an important approach to providing technical assistance to support community schools.

## Public Support for Community Schools

A scientific poll of Ohio citizens by the KnowledgeWorks Foundation illustrates public support for many aspects of the Coalition for Community School's vision.

### Services and Opportunities in Schools

- ❖ 91% favor comprehensive after-school programs.
- ❖ 84% favor community member use of school facilities after school hours.
- ❖ 62% favor locating community social services for children on school grounds.
- ❖ 65% favor locating community programs for adults on school grounds.

### School Facilities Planning and Use

- ❖ 70% of Ohioans believe that the general public should be invited to participate in the design and planning of their community's new school facilities.
- ❖ 65% believe city and school district dollars should be combined to build recreation and general public use facilities.

### Citizen Involvement in Education

- ❖ 72% of Ohioans believe local public schools will not continue to improve unless citizens get involved.
- ❖ 71% believe public school officials are interested in the community's hopes and dreams for its schools.

Source: KnowledgeWorks Foundation, 2003.

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE



Community schools across America are improving student learning and strengthening families and communities in a variety of measurable ways.

**Howe Elementary School (Green Bay, WI):** 61% of third graders now perform at proficient or advanced levels in state reading tests, up from just 40% in 1997.

**Marquette Elementary School (Chicago):** Strong family support helped cut the student mobility rate from 41% to 22% between 1995 and 2000, despite a student poverty rate of 96%. Reading improvement exceeded the citywide average.

**East Hartford High School (East Hartford, CT):** The dropout rate decreased from 22% to less than 2% annually over the last six years. Eighty percent of students now go on to two- or four-year colleges.

**Northeast Elementary School (Ankeny, IA):** Access to services by low-income mothers increased tenfold when a WIC federal nutrition program benefits office was added to other services available to students and their families.

**Elliott Elementary School (Lincoln, NE):** Teachers gained 15 to 45 minutes of instructional time per day thanks to classroom management techniques shared by staff of a partnering YMCA. Referrals of disruptive students to the principal's office decreased 80% in one year.

**Parkway Heights Middle School (South San Francisco, CA):** 71% of parents report spending more time with their children enrolled in Parkway's Families on Track (FOT) community school program.

**Carson High School (Carson, CA):** Suspensions were cut in half, from a rate of 10% in 1998 to 4.7% in 2000.

**James Otis Elementary School (Boston):** Parents who are adult literacy students also take leadership roles within the school as volunteers or paid staff. In 2000, the school led all other Boston schools in improvement on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems test.

**St. Paul High School (St. Paul, VA):** 94% percent of students graduate. Nearly 90% meet state reading and writing requirements in core areas, and more than 90% pass state exams in biology and geometry.

**Francis Scott Key Elementary School #103 (Indianapolis):** 100% of kindergartners and fifth graders received their immunization shots and were ready to start school on time in 2001. Almost three-quarters (73.2%) of third graders passed state assessments tests in 2001, up from 29% three years earlier.

**Pinelands Regional Middle and High Schools (Tuckerton, NJ):** Pregnancy rates decreased among young teens from about 20 each year in 1991 to approximately three each year in 2001.

**East Elementary School (Kings Mountain, NC):** 92% of students test at grade level, up from 45% to 50% before East became a community school in 1992.

**North Middle School (Aurora, CO):** The Student Support Team has successfully helped 60% to 70% of troubled students by providing services to help students cope or finding a more appropriate placement.

**Webster Open Magnet School (Minneapolis):** 72% of students in the Beacons program have a 95% or higher attendance rate compared to 55.5% for non-Beacons students.

**Woodmere Elementary School (Portland, OR):** Scores on state benchmarks in third and fifth grade math and reading increased by up to 29 percentage points in the two years that the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods initiative has been in place.



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## Mission Statement

The Coalition's mission is to mobilize the assets of schools, families and communities to create a united movement for community schools. Community schools strengthen schools, families and communities to improve student learning. (See Appendix E for a full list of partner organizations.)

## Steering Committee

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