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Policy Brief

Community Schools: Partnerships supporting students, families and communities

Research has consistently demonstrated that students' academic achievement is influenced by a variety of conditions outside the school, including their physical, social, emotional and economic circumstances. Therefore, a comprehensive, communitywide approach to meeting the needs of the whole child could potentially make a significant impact on students' educational outcomes and help close the achievement gap among student populations. The creation of "community schools" is a growing trend that is designed to support student achievement through service-based interventions, expanded learning time models and increased community engagement. When implemented together, community school interventions maximize benefits and allow schools to address multiple factors in students' lives.

Although similarly named, the community schools described in this policy brief are not the same as county community schools or district-operated community day schools that provide services for expelled students. Rather, these schools serve all students and provide a variety of services to address multiple challenges facing students and their families.

What is a community school?

A community school is defined as both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources.¹ Sometimes called a "full-service school" or an "extended-service school," it is a "hub of community" where an array of public and private agencies collaborate with the school and its staff to provide a comprehensive set of integrated services designed to meet the full range of learning and developmental needs of the students.²

The school district or county office of education may work with other public agencies, community-based organizations, private entities and families to provide

and coordinate on-site programs and services, such as academic support programs; social, mental, physical, vision and dental health services; parent and community involvement; family support services; after-school activities; service-learning projects; early childhood education; adult education; and/or youth and community development activities. Community schools are a convenient location for students and their families to access services.

"Schools alone cannot address all the challenges of closing the achievement gap and educating all students at high levels. Now more than ever we must develop creative partnerships and collaborate to bring community resources to our schools. School boards can play a pivotal leadership role in ensuring that schools are effective community centers that provide a hub for a wide range of coordinated services to help families and empower parents and their students. Truly effective community schools are more than a collection of services at a site. They are a strategic effort to link the academic program of the school with a set of support services driven by assessing the needs of school families."

—Ed Honowitz
Pasadena Unified School Board Member

Key characteristics

Community schools may differ substantially in the way they are organized, staffed and funded, but they share a common purpose and philosophy. Key features of community school models include:

- A shared philosophy and vision throughout the community which is dedicated to meeting the needs of all students in the community and is based on an

understanding that student achievement is impacted by conditions of children and families

- Collaboration in leadership, planning, governance and oversight (i.e., “shared leadership” and “shared accountability”) among the school district/COE, its community partners, and families
- A core educational program based on high expectations for student learning
- Linkages of school and community resources and alignment of those resources with student learning and the identified needs of students and families
- Expansion of learning opportunities, such as after-school and summer programs, early childhood programs, youth leadership, service learning, extended school calendar and/or use of the community as a resource for learning
- Access to on-site or school-linked services to address issues that are barriers to learning
- Assignment of a community school coordinator (who may be a district staff person or a coordinator on loan from a community agency) and establishment of site-based teams to ensure ongoing focus on school goals and meaningful involvement of stakeholders
- Strong involvement of families in their children’s education

Funding

Community schools generally use a combination of resources to fund planning, coordination, implementation and evaluation activities. These will vary depending on the services provided at the school and may include:

- **Resources and/or in-kind support from the district/COE, city and county agencies, health providers, nonprofit organizations or other partners.** Agreements about the resources that will be provided by each partner should be made early in the planning process. In-kind support may include personnel, facilities, utility costs or other operational support.
- **Federal, state and local grants.** Funding for a limited number of community school initiatives is available

through the federal Full-Service Community Schools program. Eligible applicants consist of a consortium of one or more local educational agencies and one or more community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations and other public or private entities. In 2010, only 10 new awards were anticipated, with amounts ranging up to \$500,000.

Other grants may be available to support specific support services and activities, such as the After School Education and Safety program; 21st Century Community Learning Centers; child care and development funds; Mental Health Services Act funds; Title I funds for educationally disadvantaged students; federal Health Resources and Services Administration grants for school health center facility construction, renovation and equipment and for expansion of federally qualified health centers’ services into schools; McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act funds; and community development block grants.

- **Support from educational foundations, businesses and private foundations.** Educational foundations and local businesses may be encouraged to provide one-time or occasional donations, supplies or services to address specific needs of the community school. The partnership also should explore private and corporate foundations which may specialize in support for health services or other needs of children and families.
- **Use of volunteers and work-study students.** To supplement the work of staff, community schools may seek assistance from parents, community members, other volunteers and high school and/or postsecondary students paid through work-study funds.
- **Fees and third-party reimbursements.** When allowed by law, students and families may be charged a fee for some services. However, community schools typically provide services at no cost or on a sliding fee scale in order to facilitate access for low-income households. Many school health centers receive billing revenue from health insurance programs, such as MediCal, for medical and oral health services provided to students.³

Tight budgets require districts/COEs to be creative in identifying, securing and sustaining funding. However, the community school model has the potential to reduce costs throughout the community by promoting shared resources, maximizing joint use of facilities and avoiding duplicative services.

Case Study

Redwood City Community Schools

Redwood City's community schools project, launched in 2003, is designed to unite the most important influences in children's lives—school, families and communities—to create a web of support that nurtures their development toward productive adulthood. Four of the 17 schools in the Redwood City School District have been designated as community schools: Fair Oaks Community School (K–5), Taft Community School (K–5), Hoover Community School (K–8), and Kennedy Middle School (6–8).

Each community school is unique, but they all share common features. The primary emphasis of each community school is student learning, linked to quality instruction and high academic standards. Student learning is supported by strong community partnerships that provide shared leadership and a range of comprehensive services.

The key strategies include safety-net supports; family engagement; school transitions; extended day learning; physical health, mental health and wellness; and coordinated services. Each community school houses a family resource center where students, family and staff can access counselors, parent involvement facilitators and benefit and insurance specialists. Program components include mental health and case management services, referrals to medical care providers, health insurance and county benefits enrollment, family support services, child protective services prevention and early intervention, after-school recreation and academic support/enrichment, tutoring and mentoring, community-based learning experiences, school readiness home visits, parent involvement and leadership, parent/adult education and youth leadership (middle grades only).

At each school site, a community school coordinator has been designated to coordinate and support these programs and services. Programs and services are integrated with each other and with the school's core instructional program.

Along with the school district, major partners in this initiative include the City of Redwood City, San Mateo County Human

Services Agency, Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center, Youth and Family Enrichment Services, John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University, San Mateo County Sheriff's Office, Redwood City Policy Department, Sequoia HealthCare District, San Mateo County Health Department and Cañada College's Community-Based English Tutoring Program.

A 2008–09 evaluation of the Redwood City Community Schools initiative found some encouraging trends as well as some challenges. Two-thirds of students/parents in those schools participated in community school programs, although participation levels were uneven across schools and grades. Program participation was linked to higher school attendance rates, physical fitness and English language development, but did not positively impact math scores. Finding resources to improve the evaluation process itself is also a challenge.

The Redwood City Community Schools are still in development. In addition to the four full community schools, two others are currently emerging (Garfield School and Hawes Elementary School) and others have begun implementing a few community school strategies (primarily after-school programs). According to Sandra Portasio, the district's Director of Community Schools, the vision is to expand community school strategies to most schools in the district.

For further information, see the district's website at www.rcsd.k12.ca.us or Redwood City's website at www.ci.redwood-city.ca.us/manager/initiatives/rwc2020commschools.html, or contact:

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Evidence supporting the community school approach

Although more quantitative studies are needed to examine the effectiveness and benefits of the community school approach, early studies of community schools have found significant gains in student achievement, higher student attendance, fewer suspensions, greater parent/family and community involvement with the schools, increased teacher satisfaction and improved school climate, improved mental and physical health for students, increased family stability and increased security and pride in neighborhoods.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}

Other research, while not specifically looking at community schools, has examined the relationship between student learning and the conditions of children. For example, a California Department of Education report cites evidence of the links between student learning and physical health (e.g., nutrition, physical activity, substance abuse, access to health care), school safety and supportive school environments.¹⁰ Another study found that supportive neighborhoods can mitigate the effects of economic disadvantage and form the foundation for high achievement.¹¹ These types of research support the community school model by demonstrating that efforts to improve the conditions of children and families can raise student achievement.

Role of the school board

There are opportunities for the governing board to encourage and support the community school model through each of its major areas of responsibility:

Setting direction

When adopting a long-range vision and goals for the district/COE, the board can incorporate statements recognizing the value of parent and community involvement in schools and encouraging the development of community partnerships. These concepts should be woven into the district's strategic plan and other key documents. As partnerships are formed, the board can participate in the creation of a collaborative vision statement that ensures that the work of the partnership is designed to support the core academic mission of the district/COE.

Goals and priorities related to the establishment or maintenance of community schools should be based on the results of an assessment of student and community needs, an inventory of available and accessible resources in the community, and a determination of the schools that have the greatest need as well as a commitment to implement services.

Establishing structure

Working with the superintendent, the board must ensure that structures and resources are in place to enable effective implementation of community school services and programs. Board decisions related to policy, budget and facilities will impact the success of the community school.

The board can adopt and align policies that encourage and facilitate collaboration, effective service delivery and joint use of facilities. (For example, see CSBA's sample board policies and administrative regulations BP 0000 - Vision, BP 0100 - Philosophy, BP 0200 - Goals for the School District, BP 1020 - Youth Services, BP 1400 - Relations Between Other Governmental Agencies and the Schools, BP 1330.1 - Joint Use Agreements, BP/AR/E 5141.6 - School Health Services, BP/AR 5148 - Child Care and Development, BP/AR 5148.2 - Before/After School Programs, BP/AR 5148.3 - Preschool/Early Childhood Education and BP 6142.4 - Service Learning/Community Service Classes.)

The board must approve the level of funding, staffing and other resources that will be contributed by the district/COE toward various programs and services offered at the community school and toward coordination of services. It also should work with its partners to identify available community resources and alternative funding sources and to develop a long-term plan to provide financial stability and flexibility.

When constructing new school facilities or determining the use of existing facilities, the board should consider how school facilities can support the board's vision to expand services for students and families and allow for community use as appropriate.

Any joint use of facilities or joint program delivery should be formalized through a joint use agreement or memorandum of understanding, approved by the board, which spells out the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Providing support

The board has responsibility—through its behavior and actions—to support the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board. The board can provide support by continually demonstrating its commitment to the community school model, upholding policies that have been adopted by the board, modeling collaborative behaviors in relationships with other local officials, appointing a board representative to participate on planning/oversight teams and publicly recognizing school accomplishments.

Ensuring accountability

The board must continually monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of community schools in order to ensure

accountability to the public. The board and superintendent should work with partners to agree upon desired results and select indicators that will be used to evaluate progress. Examples of indicators may include levels of participation in programs/services; changes in students' school attendance, classroom behavior, academic achievement, health or other outcomes; feedback from students, families and partners regarding program benefits; review of program costs; and other indicators aligned to specific program and school goals. Reports to the board and partners should be scheduled on an ongoing basis and timed to allow evaluation results to inform decision making.

Acting as community leaders

The success of community schools depends on the efforts of key stakeholders throughout the community. In their role as community leaders, board members can help identify these stakeholders and initiate partnerships. Regular communications between board members and other local officials will lead to increased understanding of the operations of various governmental systems and areas of mutual concern. Board spokespersons should share information about collaborative efforts, including program evaluation results, with students, parents and the community in order to publicize the availability of services, garner support and thereby sustain community school efforts.

Resources

California School Boards Association: CSBA provides sample board policies, policy briefs, publications and other resources on a variety of topics related to youth services, student wellness and collaboration, including *Building Healthy Communities: A School Leader's Guide to Collaboration and Community Engagement* and *Expanding Access to School Health Services: Policy Considerations for Governing Boards*. With assistance from a grant from the Stuart Foundation, the California School Boards Foundation is working with the University of California at Davis, School of Education, to help establish a California Center for Community Engaged Schools.

www.csba.org

California Department of Education: The CDE provides resources related to student health, nutrition, safety, youth development and parent/community involvement.

www.cde.ca.gov/ls

California School Health Centers Association: CSHC helps school districts expand their health services programs and assists community schools in starting school health centers that offer medical, mental health and/or dental services. CSHC facilitates linkages between community

health services providers and schools, and supports new and existing school health centers in their applications for federal grant programs. Resources, toolkits and technical assistance services can be found at CSHC's website.

www.schoolhealthcenters.org

Center for Community School Partnerships, University of California Davis, School of Education: Housed within the UC Davis Center for Cooperative Research and Extension Services for Schools (CRESS), the Center is a diverse team of professionals invested in strengthening community school partnerships through direct work with youth and community-based leaders and advice to a statewide network of after-school program providers and Healthy Start service providers. The Center provides technical assistance and training in areas common to the full-service community schools approach: expanded learning opportunities, health services, family support and engagement, school infrastructure to support collaboration, and systems to gather and analyze data. The Center also works closely with community and school partners to evaluate their work for the purpose of identifying effective best practices in the field.

<http://education.ucdavis.edu/cress-center/community-school-partnerships>

City County Schools Partnership: The CCS Partnership is a joint effort of CSBA, the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties to promote the development of public policies that build and preserve communities by encouraging local collaborative efforts among local governments. The Partnership's work focuses on educating local leaders in the art of collaboration, identifying and promoting examples of successful cross-jurisdictional collaboration and encouraging effective collaboration through the Healthy Children - Healthy Communities Campaign and the Conditions of Children Task Force.

www.ccspartnership.org

Coalition for Community Schools: The Institute for Educational Leadership's Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in K-16 education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks. It works to mobilize the resources and capacity of multiple sectors and institutions to create a united movement for community schools. Its website offers numerous resources on successful practices, including *A Handbook for State Policy Leaders: Community Schools: Improving Student Learning/Strengthening Schools, Families, and Communities* and *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*.

www.communityschools.org

Communities in Schools: Communities in Schools is a network of nearly 5,000 professionals in 25 states and the District of Columbia (including three affiliates in California) which works to surround students with a community of support and thereby reduce the dropout rate. It works within the public school system to determine student needs and establish relationships with local businesses, social service agencies, health care providers and parent and volunteer organizations to provide needed resources.
www.communitiesinschools.org

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities: The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University promotes policies and practices to help youth and communities grow. The Center partners with communities to develop leadership, conduct research and effect change to improve the lives of youth.
<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>

National Center for Community Schools: The National Center for Community Schools, created by the Children's Aid Society in 1984, provides consultation, resources and advocacy to facilitate the development of community schools nationally and internationally.
<http://nationalcenterforcommunityschools.childrensaidsociety.org>

National Community Education Association: NCEA provides training, information and advocacy in support of parent and community involvement in public education, the formation of community partnerships to address community needs, and the expansion of lifelong learning opportunities for all community residents. Members include community education directors or coordinators, school board members, superintendents, education professors and others.
www.ncea.com

Partnership for Children and Youth: Formerly named the Bay Area Partnership for Children and Youth, the Partnership's mission is to ensure that school-age children and youth living in low-income communities have the support and the opportunities they need and deserve to be successful in school and in life. Its community schools initiative includes school nutrition and school-based health efforts.
www.partnerforchildren.org

U.S. Department of Education: USDOE provides information about the federal Full-Service Community Schools grant program, including the program application, *Frequently Asked Questions* and other resources.
<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/communityschools>

End Notes

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