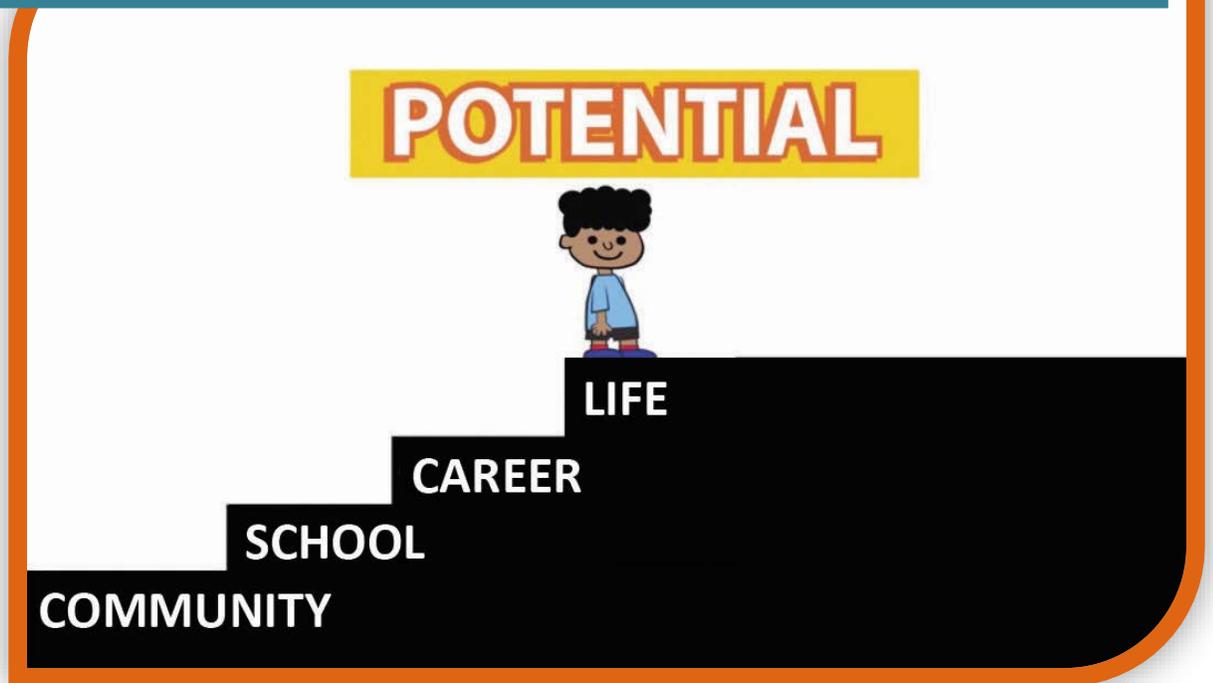


Community Schools are an Essential Equity Strategy



Letter from the Leadership

Sixty years after Brown versus Board of Education, achievement gaps have grown bigger, especially for children of color. In theory and practice, we have pretended to be a color blind society, but the data does not lie. As the complexion of America's children changes and poverty persists as an influence on children's education, we will need to garner the public and political will to maintain equity focused laws and initiatives. We must demand the full service community school approach, both in policy and in practice, in order to close the equity and opportunity gaps for all children.

This past year, the Coalition for Community Schools has been developing ways to more deeply embed an equity focus in existing community schools and to drive community schools forward as an equity strategy. This draft statement is a work in progress to articulate our beliefs and plan of action towards an equity agenda for the community schools movement.

Please provide us with your feedback to help improve how we, as a movement, address the equity issue. Send comments to equity.communityschools@iel.org.

We extend our gratitude to the following individuals who served on the Community Schools Equity Work Group: Janice Chu-Zhu, National Center for Community Schools; Diana Hall, SUN Community Schools, Multnomah County (OR); Frank Mirabal, Youth Development, Inc (NM); Melissa Mitchell, Illinois Federation for Community Schools; Brent Schondelmeyer, Local Investment Commission (MO); Shital Shah, American Federation of Teachers; and Sarah Zeller-Berkman, Youth Development Institute (NY).

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Community Schools are an Essential Equity Strategy for Increasing Access to Opportunities

Opportunity is at the heart of the American dream. We firmly believe that each and every person should have an equal opportunity to work hard and use their talents to climb the ladder of success. For too many American children, that dream has been denied, over and over again, across generations.

The barriers are significant and recurring: not enough food, unaddressed health issues, low quality schools, parents unable to find a job, unsafe neighborhoods, exposure to trauma, lack of access to essential services, and the list goes on.ⁱ These barriers are not only life barriers, they directly affect school success.

Equally, if not more significant, too many children do not have the opportunities that middle and upper class kids take for granted. Poor children lack rich early childhood experiences and do not have the chance for history lessons at the museum or life lessons on the soccer field. They do not have a chance to learn about college and the career possibilities that open up with higher education.

When children face multiple barriers to learn and lack opportunities to grow, they start life steps behind and often fall further and further behind as they grow up. They are not ready for kindergarten, early reading skills do not develop, lower academic achievement ensues; and the pathways that follow too often lead to dropping out of school, not being able to find a stable job with a family sustaining wage, incarceration, lower life expectancy, and a lifetime of challenges. Which of us would find this path acceptable for our own children?^{ii,iii}

Acknowledging these challenges is not about “making excuses.” It is about the principle that what’s good for my child is good for *all* our children.

Removing barriers and delivering opportunities to enable all our children to reach their potential is not the job of a single individual, organization, program, or school. Yet, many think our public school principals and teachers alone can perform miracles. And while they do perform miracles every day, they do not have at their disposal all the resources and expertise they need to ensure that every student succeeds. Yes, some children and parents will thrive in spite of their starting point. But this is the exception and history has shown that the bootstrap theory is insufficient. The challenges our communities face are too complex and the need to vast.

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities.

We need a place where we can bring a wide array of resources together to support children and their families, and where we can share responsibility for ensuring that all our young people have access to equal opportunities to learn and succeed.

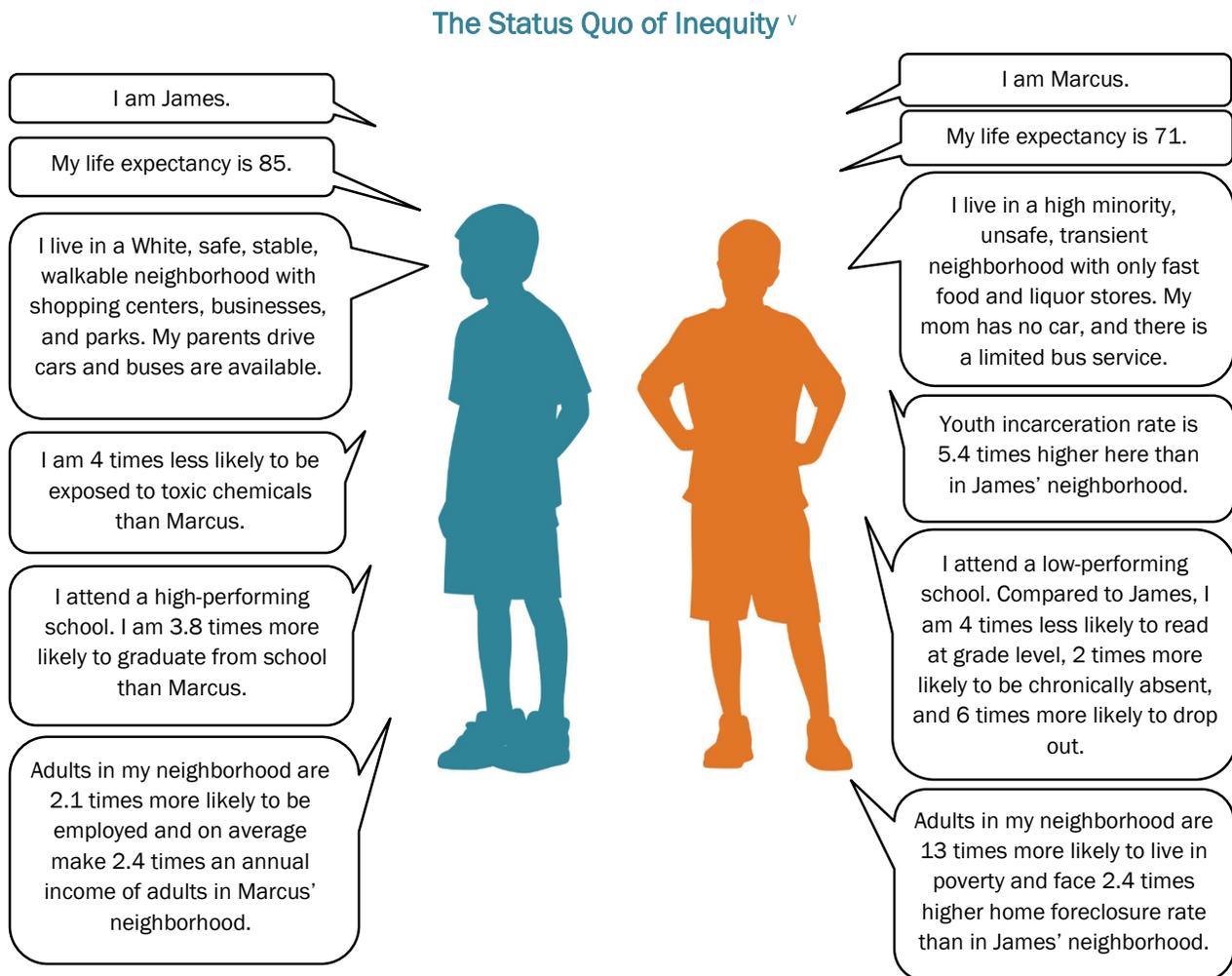
One place where this happens with regularity is a community school. A community school offers a powerful framework for addressing inequities, providing opportunities, and helping students navigate barriers so they can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, and become active participants in our democracy. Community schools are able to perform these important roles by:

- Organizing community resources in a school setting to provide opportunities and services;
- Ensuring everybody in the school—youth, teachers, principals, and families and community partners—have a voice, work together, and share accountability for student success;
- Believing in and setting high expectations for every child; and
- Building on community strengths and embracing diversity.^{iv}

Community schools are an educational, developmental, and community change strategy designed to empower children, youth, and families to realize their American Dream.

James and Marcus

We can better understand the equity challenge in our society and the role of community schools through two students, James and Marcus.



The story of James and Marcus is all too common. A child's zip code continues to contribute to or impede opportunities for learning and positive development. In far too many communities, children like Marcus face multiple challenges.

Although racial inequity is the most pronounced, children of all demographic backgrounds face inequity. It affects children in rural areas who are cut off from digital technology and unable to access college and career preparation classes. It affects youth with disabilities who lack accessible spaces and tools to assist in their learning. It affects LGBTQ youth who face daily safety concerns due to bullying and are afraid to walk down the school halls.

Our nation can no longer ignore the facts. We have to own up to the problems in our society and invest in equity-driven strategies. The education reform strategies we've tried thus far are insufficient. We must address poverty, social justice, and education together. We need to be smart and recognize that Marcus's classroom teacher has a much greater challenge than James's and commit to leveling the playing field. We need a comprehensive approach to our most complex problems.

Restorative Justice in Oakland, California

Too many African American males end up in our prison system. Restorative justice is a way out. African American suspension rates nation-wide have grown 12.5 percentage points since the 1970s, compared to 1.1 percentage points for White youth. In Oakland, African American boys are 6 times more likely to be suspended than their White peers. High rates of suspension lead to increased absenteeism and disengagement from learning, leading to a higher likelihood of student dropout.

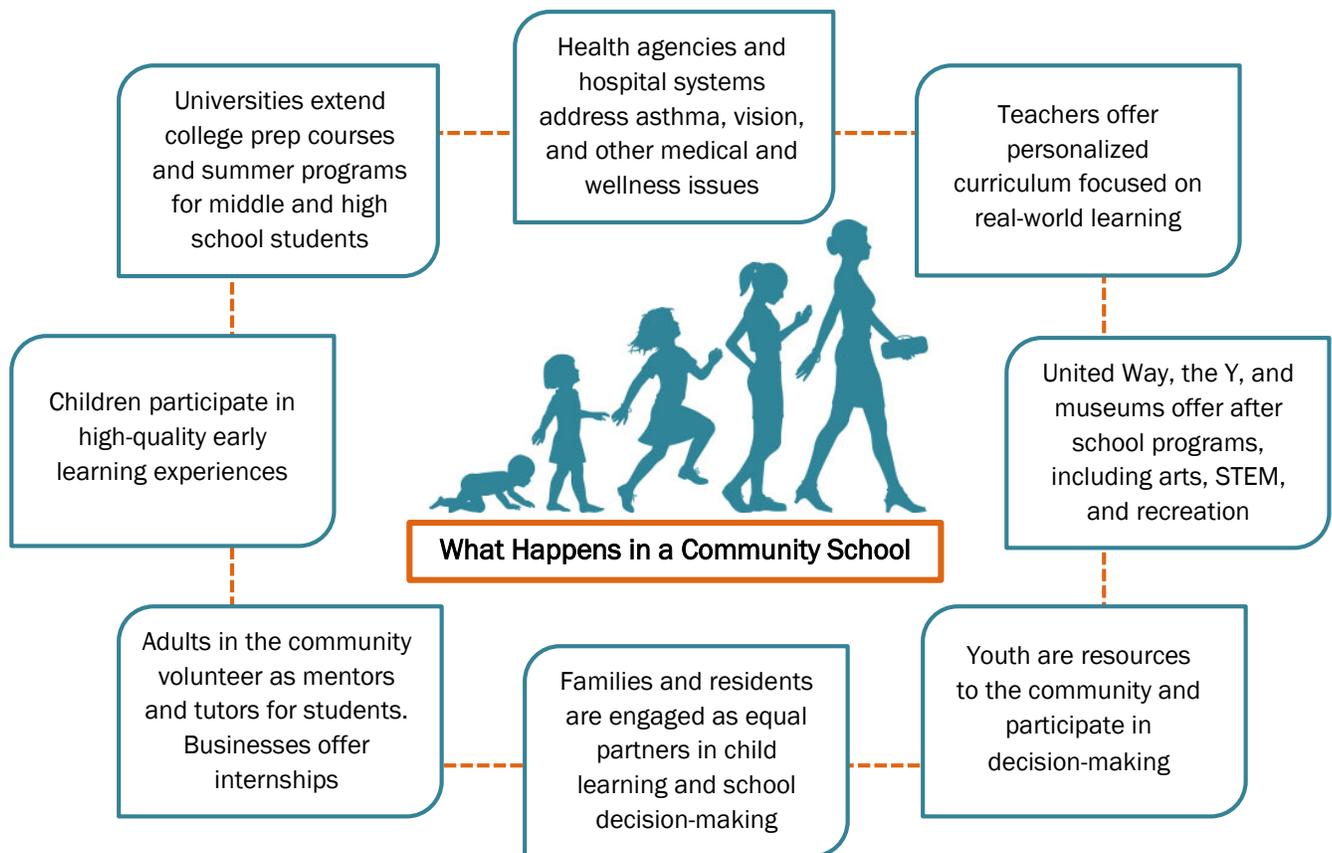
To combat the problem, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is transforming all its schools into full service community schools, building partnerships that directly address suspension rates, as well as other key indicators including chronic absence, 3rd grade level reading, and asthma. A Leadership Council for Community Schools that brings the Superintendent together with heads of city and county agencies and nonprofit leaders guides the community schools work. Oakland's approach is equity-centered and built on the theory of action that reducing disparities in school discipline requires addressing the whole child in the context of their family and community. This requires addressing the health, academic, and social emotional well-being of all students.

The Family, School & Community Partnership department and Office of African-American Male Achievement (AAMA) lead the suspension reduction work in community schools, introducing Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support Strategies and Manhood Development classes, and designing early intervention systems. OUSD has moved away from exclusionary practices to restorative practices and tiered systems of student and family supports. The new approach is keeping African American males engaged and changing the system where educators and community partners work together to emphasize prevention, intervention, academic mentoring, and social-emotional support.

With its focus on reducing disproportionate school disciplines and adopting restorative policies and practices, the Oakland Unified School District's suspension rate has dropped from 8% to 6% from 2012 to 2013 (a 25% reduction district-wide), and suspensions for African American males dropped from 21% to 14% from 2012 to 2013 (a 33% reduction) and suspensions for Latino males dropped from 8% to 6% (mirroring the district's 25% reduction).

Community Schools are an Effective Equity Strategy

Community schools are a comprehensive and effective equity strategy that works to provide children like Marcus opportunities and supports that children like James routinely experience. Community schools pay attention to both academic and out-of-school factors that influence student learning and development. They understand that developing the whole child involves working in multiple developmental domains that interact with each other—physical and psychological safety, healthy lifestyle, intellectual development, a sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and positive peer and adult relationships.^{vi} Community schools also serve as a hub for the community, creating positive conditions for learning that prepare students for college, career, citizenship, and life.



Graphic 1: Different elements of a community school that help support the growth of a child.

The experience of many school districts and communities gives the community schools movement the know-how to bring community schools to scale. A vision focused on results, shared data systems, evaluation and improvement, alignment and integration of the resources of schools and community partners, and ongoing leadership and professional development are part of a community school strategy. Policies must ensure that community schools have the support of leadership in school districts and among community partners and broad community engagement is essential to create the political and public will to fund and sustain a shared commitment to community schools.

Implementing what we know works requires leaders to build effective collaborative leadership structures to translate a shared vision into action and results. Three leadership structures in particular are necessary:

- **Community-wide leadership** groups comprised of school districts, government, United Way chapters, businesses, community- and faith-based organizations are responsible for overall *vision, policy, and resource alignment*. It supports policy development and communication and ensures accountability.
- **School-site leadership teams** involving parents, residents, principals, teachers, community partners, and young people are responsible for *planning, implementation, and continuous improvement*. Site teams ensure that implementation satisfies local needs, aligns with the school's academic mission, and generates practice knowledge and data to inform improvements in community-wide policy and site practice. A resource coordinator serves as a liaison between the school and partners to align resources for children and youth.
- **An intermediary entity** provides *planning, coordination, and management*. It powers the work by ensuring communication between community-wide and school-site. It convenes school and community partners, provides strategic planning, and ensures that what happens at the community leadership level empowers students, families, and practitioners at school sites.

Collective Action in SUN Schools, Multnomah County, Oregon

According to the Southern Education Foundation 2013 report, 48% of public school children are low-income. In the West, more than half of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In Multnomah County, Oregon, 56% of students qualify for this federal lunch program, and their families experience low food security throughout the year. Hunger and nutrition are but two of the challenges that the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Community Schools initiative is addressing in the County. After school opportunities, family support, parent leadership as well hunger and nutrition programming are part of the mix.

The 70 SUN schools in six different Multnomah school districts are governed by a Coordinating Council that includes County, City, State, school district, business and nonprofit leaders, including representatives of the local Cradle to Career initiative. Equity, with a focus on racial justice, is at the heart of SUN's effort. At SUN sites, this is evident in the whole-family approach, which incorporates both inclusive strategies and targeted services that offer content-specific support to those most affected by disparities.

Cultural responsiveness and relationship building are considered essential aspects, and SUN providers and partners are focused on ensuring strong practice in these areas. SUN has been effective in reaching the community's most vulnerable populations with 78% of students served qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, 70% students of color (compared to 48% in the host districts) and 24% English Language Learners. Results for students who participate regularly in SUN supports is strong across races, with students of color showing greater progress than their White counterparts in the majority of areas.

This integrated approach to partnerships, governance, and systems ensures that everyone has a voice and works collectively to level the playing field for children like Marcus, so they too have opportunities like James.

A Child Trends 2014 report synthesized rigorous evaluations of integrated student supports and community school initiatives and concluded that there is growing evidence that community schools reduce grade retention and dropout rates, while increasing attendance, math achievement, and grade point average.^{vii} The authors also reported that community schools offer a positive return on investment.

In addition, data from community school initiatives including Tulsa, OK, Hartford, CT, and San Francisco, CA, indicate that participation in community schools' opportunities and supports boosts students' academic performance and increases their motivation and engagement in learning.^{viii}

Everyone Succeeding in Cincinnati, Ohio

Over a decade ago, the Cincinnati Public Schools Board of Education created a vision for the transformation of the district: every school in the district as a community learning center (CLC). Recognizing that the success of the school and the success of the neighborhood are inextricably linked, the vision was not only about creating the conditions necessary for learning to bring the public back to public education, but also focused on the revitalization of the community.

Each Cincinnati CLC engages community partners who are aligned and integrated with the academic goals and the needs of each student. The CLC also works to improve the quality of life for each neighborhood based on its own vision: a cultural arts center, a farmer's market, and an international welcome center all have emerged. All schools in Cincinnati are intended to become CLCs - the struggling and the higher performing, the poor and the wealthy. They are all community learning centers, leveraging the public investment to ensure a return for all of our citizens.

Built on the foundation of a major school construction and rehabilitation program, the CLCs have on-site resource coordinators who integrate school and community resources and support individual students. A cross boundary leadership team brings together leaders of program networks focused on health, mental health, after school, mentoring, and other key supports to ensure sufficient capacity, quality, and choice of partners by each community learning center. The intermediary assistance of the Cincinnati Public Schools and the Community Learning Center Institute and the financial support of the school district, Greater Cincinnati United Way, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Interact for Health, the Schiff Foundation, and other private funders undergird CLC implementation.

The collective effort is working. Cincinnati is the highest rated urban school district in Ohio.

Better Together: Our Challenge, Our Opportunity

The disparities our nation is experiencing are a cause for great national concern, particularly when we consider the demographic shifts in our nation. Children of color are becoming a majority in our public schools and will make up much of our future labor force. The urgency with which we must tackle inequity together is amplified by our widening social and economic gaps, and a growing body of research that directly links inequity with individual and shared consequences (e.g., lower employability, higher health care costs, decreased tax contribution, decrease in civic participation). It is in our collective moral, democratic, and economic interest to address inequity.

We cannot end institutional inequity without a systemic approach. There are no silver bullets or quick fixes.

Centered around one of the few remaining great public institutions that reaches all students and many families, community schools are a critical component of a broader equity strategy that must also address income inequality, affordable housing, access to quality early learning, and child and health care. We need a system of opportunity and support that ensures children and families do not fall through the cracks.

What is unique about community schools, and what is so sorely needed today, is the ability to build trust among people and institutions and a sense of collective investment in the future of our young people, our schools, and our neighborhoods. We don't lack the strategies, we simply lack public and political will. Together, we can do better.

“We need horizontal partners and vertical partners. We need all the elements in the education system to come together so kids don't fall between the cracks, starting at birth and going through graduate education. We need our health and human services, our criminal justice, our housing and economic development forces to come together with us in education.”

Paul Reville, Harvard Graduate School of Education,
former Massachusetts Secretary of Education

Our Pledge: Leaders, practitioners, and advocates in the community schools movement have been engaging in a discussion about equity over the past year. We have a better understanding of the specific equity strategies that local community schools have been using, and we are developing ways to more deeply embed an equity focus in existing communities and to push community schools as an equity strategy more widely. As a movement, we commit to:

- Promoting a shared vision to improve young lives that reflects an understanding of equity
- Looking at data to reveal inequities, and deepening our search for effective solutions
- Establishing child and youth outcomes that focus on equity and achievement, and sharing accountability for those outcomes
- Building equitable, trusting relationships among youth, schools, families, and communities
- Working to expand investments that help to close the opportunity gap
- Advocating for policies to promote equity in alliance with other organizations and advocacy groups.

Together, as a community, is our only way forward.

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- ⁱ Edelman, M. W. (2012, May 18). No holiday for hunger. *Child Watch Column*. <http://www.childrensdefense.org/newsroom/child-watch-columns/child-watch-documents/no-holiday-for-hunger.html#sthash.zum9MMts.dpuf>; Collin, R. W., & Collin, R. M. (1997). Urban environmentalism and race. In J. M. Thomas & M. Ritzdorf (eds.), *Urban planning and the African American community: In the shadows*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications; Fry, R., & Taylor, P. (2012, August). *The rise of residential segregation by income*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Available from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/01/the-rise-of-residential-segregation-by-income/>; General Accounting Office of the United States. (1999). *Lead poisoning: Federal health care programs are not effectively reaching at-risk children*. GAO/HEHS-99-18. Washington, DC: Author; Hoffman, K., Llags, C., & Synder, T. (2003). *Status and trends in the education of Blacks*. NCES 2003-034. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement; Koch, K. (2002). Hunger in America. *CQ Researcher*, 10(44), 1034-1055; Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Whiteman, S., Williams, C., & Shah, A. (2004). *Improving community health survey: Report 1*. Chicago: Sinai Health System.
- ⁱⁱ Children's Defense Fund. (2014). *The state of America's children*. Washington, DC: Author. <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/2014-soac.pdf>; Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; also see Spotlight on Poverty: http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/consequences_of_poverty.aspx
- ⁱⁱⁱ Rothstein, R. (2013). Why children from lower socioeconomic classes, on average, have lower academic achievement than middle-class children. In P. L. Carter & Welner, K. G. (eds.), *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance* (pp. 61-74). New York: Oxford University Press.
- ^{iv} Learn more <http://www.communityschools.org/>
- ^v Data originate from: Alameda County Public Health Department. (2013, July). Bay area regional health inequities initiative. Oakland, CA: Author.
- ^{vi} Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.) (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- ^{vii} Moore, K. A. et al. (2014). *Making the grade: Assessing the evidence for integrated service supports*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. <http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=making-the-grade-assessing-the-evidence-for-integrated-student-supports>
- ^{viii} Coalition for Community Schools. (2013). *Community schools results*. Washington, DC: Author. <http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Community%20School%20Results%202013.pdf>

