



COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE 2017

Community Achieves

Addressing Students' Needs through Community Schools Makes Common Sense to Nashville Leaders

When the academy model was implemented in Metro Nashville Public Schools' (MNPS) high schools about 10 years ago, the [Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce](#) was actively involved in designing the academies and leading efforts to connect schools with businesses in a variety of career pathways.

In the academy approach—with themes such as culinary arts, automotive technology, and banking and finance—industry leaders work with educators to give students hands-on learning and preparation for real-world careers. Educators noticed, however, that students were not taking full advantage of the career education and opportunities available to them because of poor attendance and personal and family issues.

“All the poverty and the barriers that we see—teachers began to work in teams with the academies and made those things bubble up to the top,” says Alison McArthur, the coordinator of [Community Achieves](#), MNPS' community schools initiative.

Schools realized they needed a much larger network of partners to address gaps in food, clothing, health, and mental health for students. And when the Community Achieves Oversight Committee was formed in 2012 to identify priorities and outcomes to measure, the Chamber was at the table.

In its recent [Education Report Card](#), the Chamber held up Community Achieves as a bright spot in the district and recommended expansion to more schools as well as additional summer and extended learning time for students.





“The district’s Community Achieves initiative identifies, recruits, and coordinates organizations in the community to support the needs of students and their families at the school level,” the report says.

For McArthur, such recognition from the community couldn’t have come at a better time. “Being in a transition year for leadership,” she says, “That goes a long way for sustainability.” In fact, when Director of Schools Shawn Joseph released his proposed operating budget for the next school year, he listed Community Achieves as an “investment priority.”

“To us it was common sense”

Nashville’s community school strategy was born at [Glenciff High School](#), which won a Community School Award for Excellence from the Coalition in 2011. At the same time Glenciff was doing community school work, community organizations were beginning to have conversations about the community school strategy and invited the Children’s Aid Society to visit Nashville.

McArthur, who was an academy coach at Glenciff, said school leaders and partners had little awareness that there was a community school movement taking place across the country. “We were doing the work because it was what our students and families needed,” she says. “To us it was common sense.”

Then Glenciff’s principal, Tony Majors, carried the community schools philosophy with him when he was

promoted to lead the Support Services department at the district level.

“He wanted to take that work and create a district-led initiative,” McArthur says, adding that he got some help when former Glenciff assistant principals advanced to leading their own schools.

Since 2012, Community Achieves has grown to include 23 schools, serving over 17,000 students, and more schools are moving in the direction of becoming community schools. MNPS hires the site managers and provides them with professional development, particularly in the area of collecting, analyzing and using data to improve services for students. As part of their own professional learning community, the site managers attend professional development provided by the Community Achieves office and the department of Support Services. Principals have similar experiences so that they and the site managers can “communicate a shared message” about community schools to school staff members and partners.

“As a principal, I understand that the needs of the whole child must be addressed in order for the scholar to be available instructionally,” says Michelle McVicker, the principal of Buena Vista Enhanced Option Elementary School. “The Community Achieves efforts allow us to systematically identify and place partners with the appropriate families, initiatives or projects in order to meet the needs of scholars beyond the basic school parameters.”

McVicker says she sees growth in students’ abilities to track their own academic progress as well as an increase in parents participating in school events and training opportunities.

From the beginning, Community Achieves was built on a framework of four principles that must be part of a community school—school-level coordination, community schools as part of the school improvement process, extended learning opportunities, and results-focused partnerships.

The Oversight Committee also identified four pillars of support for students—college and career readiness, parent and family engagement, health and wellness, and social services—as well as 10 outcomes that would be tracked. A few of the outcomes include, “Families will be actively involved in children’s education,” “Students will be actively involved in their learning,” and “Students will have basic needs of food and clothing met.” Progress towards the outcomes are measured using a variety of sources, such as faculty surveys, the number of online parent portal accounts, health screenings, discipline data, test scores, and attendance.

Site managers and school teams receive an annual data snapshot that includes data around the four pillars and participate in a summer strategic planning session to align the results with their school improvement plans. Site managers also have access to a data warehouse where they can more closely monitor students’ individual progress throughout the year.

While aggregated data on students are shared with community partners at specific schools, McArthur says some partners are beginning to see a need for data on individual students. One partner recently told her, “We definitely are going to get parents to sign a data agreement next year.”

The district has seen progress in several areas targeted by the Community Achieves framework and the 10 outcomes. Regarding the outcome “Students will prepare for postsecondary education and career,” for example, compared to 2013, scholarship funds offered have doubled to almost \$16 million. In the 2015-16 school year, there was a four percent increase in the number of students scoring at or above the ACT benchmark score of 21. More than 2,100 students took advantage of college and career readiness opportunities last school year, and almost 1,600 students were served in programs focusing on health and wellness, such as mentoring and school-based mental health services. Opportunities for family involvement are also increasing, with more than 170 events, such as literacy nights and open houses, scheduled last year.

Updating policies to support community schools

Community partners not only give students access to opportunities they wouldn’t have otherwise; they also allow teachers more time to focus on improving instruction. At Whitsitt Elementary, for example, organizations such as Junior Achievement, Adventure Science Center and the National Museum of African American Music participate in Power Monday—a monthly two-hour block of time in which teachers have collaborative planning time while students participate in activities such as robotics, songwriting and yoga.

“Every principal wants to offer enriching opportunities for their students; however, there are only so many hours in the day,” says Whitsitt principal Justin Uppinghouse. “Through the work of Community Achieves, our amazing faculty, and partnerships, our students gain experiences and opportunities that are invaluable.”

As partnerships continue to grow and deepen at the local school level, the district is working to revise policies that encourage parent and partner involvement in the schools. The former Parent Involvement Policy, for example, is now the Family Engagement Policy and has a stronger emphasis on equity. A Collaborative Student Referral Process has also been developed to create a consistent process that staff members and partners can use to identify students in need of intervention.



While the original Oversight Committee helped to identify the results that would be important for Community Achieves schools to address, McArthur says the district saw the need for the group to split into two committees—one that can focus on advocacy and action for community schools and another that is focusing more on operations and programs and services. The second group, now called the Community Achieves A-Team, is facilitated by a local nonprofit organization, Alignment Nashville, and will focus on how schools continue to grow and demonstrate the principles of community schools.

The community schools strategy and framework has allowed partners to “go deeper in their work,” McArthur says. Some, for example, have decided to expand their services vertically and stay with students as they progress from the elementary grades to middle and high school. Teachers, she adds, now have someone they can immediately contact if they think a student has a need. For example, a teacher recently overheard a child talk about being cold in his house. The teacher talked to the site manager who could find out if the family’s electricity had been disconnected.

“There were a lot of things going on in buildings that were similar, but they didn’t know about each other,” McArthur says. Community Achieves has “really aligned a lot of internal and external partnerships and resources.”

The YWCA Nashville and Middle Tennessee is one of several organizations that has benefitted from the networking and relationship-building that a community school infrastructure provides. The organization operates [Girls Inc.](#) in eight schools, as well as the [MEND](#) program, which educates boys about violence against women and girls.

“Prior to [Community Achieves], there was really no coordination of services in the building. There were several organizations providing the same or similar services and rarely communicated with one another,” says LaRhonda Magras, the YWCA vice president of community programs. “[Community Achieves] helps inform partners of what the needs are of the schools through specific school plans. This is very helpful in ensuring your services are aligned with their needs.”

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Since 2006, the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership, has highlighted the effectiveness and power of community schools across the country. The Awards for Excellence, distributed every two years, highlight schools and initiatives that have become the hub of their neighborhood, created partnerships for better learning, and responded to the unique needs of their students and families so all young people learn and thrive.

This year’s winners were judged on the strength of their partnerships, ability to align supports and opportunities with the school’s or initiative’s core mission, engagement of families and the community, commitment to equity, creation of sustainable policy and finance structures, and powerful results.

On behalf of the Coalition for Community Schools Steering Committee, the Awards Selection Committee, and Staff, congratulations to all of our 2017 Award winners!

Community School Initiative Winners: Community Achieves (Nashville, TN), NYC Community School Initiative (New York, NY). **Neighborhood Community School Initiative Winner:** Enlace Chicago (IL); **Community School Winners:** Oakland (CA) International High School, Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School (Nashville, TN), P.S./M.S. 188 The Island School (New York, NY).

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