Why can schools help students who struggle the most? Start by meeting their basic needs and ensuring they attend school every day. That is at the heart of New York City’s ambitious community schools program.

In a span of just three years, the City of New York through its Department of Education, has built the largest community schools initiative in the country and is devoting the resources needed to continue expanding and sustaining the work in the future.

Community schools begin with the simple yet powerful idea that in order for students to achieve academic excellence, we must also support the whole child, as well as their family. Approximately 50 community-based organizations are currently lead partner agencies in 150 community schools. Officials announced that they will expand to an additional 69 schools by fall 2017, making the NYC Community Schools Initiative the largest community school system in the nation.

Community schools are a major education priority for Mayor Bill de Blasio, and as part of the City’s Equity and Excellence for All agenda, they are addressing chronic absenteeism, lifting the performance of struggling schools and tackling educational challenges in underserved communities. Over $150 million per year is being directed toward the initiative, shared amongst schools and community-based organizations (CBOs). Most partner organizations receive about $450,000 per year, per school, which covers a full-time community school director, expanded learning opportunities after school and during the summer, enhanced family engagement and mental health services, and a range of other student and community supports determined at the local school level.
“While this work is led from the Department of Education, there is really a call for all public agencies that interact with young people and their families to organize themselves around community schools,” says Christopher Caruso, the executive director of the Office of Community Schools.

One of the city’s model Community Schools is P.S./M.S. 188 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Nearly half of its K-8 students come from families living in temporary housing, about 32% are persons with disabilities, and 28% are English Language Learners. Although P.S./M.S. 188 has long had partnerships with community-based organizations, only since the launch of the city’s community school initiative was it able to effectively coordinate and expand those support systems for students and their families. Principal Suany Ramos, who took over the school three years ago, says, “Now all of our families – not just our students – can come here every day from 6:30 in the morning to 7 at night to access all the services we provide. We are a hub—a one-stop shop—for helping everyone in the family access all the supports they need.”

For parents and guardians, that assistance includes GED and English as a Second Language classes, legal aid, nutrition education, mental health services, and even access to a clothes washer and dryer. In addition to medical, vision, dental, and mental health supports, students receive access to a wide range of after-school enrichment programs as well as mentorship from Adelphi University students through the Community School Office. Jerred Jones, the community school director from the Sports and Arts in Schools Foundation, who oversees P.S./M.S. 188’s community school activities, says, “All of these supports are not only good in their own right, they help to increase school attendance rates.”

With such a high proportion of students in temporary housing, P.S./M.S. 188 has many children enrolling and transferring elsewhere throughout the school year. But Principal Ramos says the strengthening of services through the community school strategy has begun to have an effect on parental choices: “Families who used to live across the street in temporary housing who found a permanent home in Far Rockaway, Staten Island, and the Bronx are still choosing to come all that way to 188. That means we are doing something right.”

Civic leaders have been instrumental in developing the community schools strategy. Mayor de Blasio appointed a Community Schools Advisory Board in the summer of 2014, representing community based agen-
cies, institutions of higher education, advocacy groups, schools, and foundations. The Advisory Board includes a steering committee that helps set priorities and review progress.

Schools that are being transformed into community schools come with a variety of challenges. Some face high rates of chronic absenteeism and are funded through State Attendance Improvement and Dropout Prevention grant funds. Another group of schools, known as “renewal” schools, were persistently struggling academically, and the community school strategy is being used as part of a larger turnaround model that also includes intense support for instructional and school leadership.

“The Community Schools Initiative is about fundamentally changing how we all think about our schools, putting them at the center of communities and ensuring that the education of our young people is everyone’s top priority,” says Caruso. In order to accomplish this, New York City has been intentional about building the capacity of schools and communities to work together to share leadership and accountability. In addition to DOE coaching and program management staff, several intermediary partners including The National Center for Community Schools, part of the Children’s Aid Society, and the United Way of New York City, provide support and training to CBO and school staff.

In partnership with New Visions for Public Schools, the NYC DOE has also created a sophisticated platform for tracking student data related to attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. The system, called Student Sorter, allows the school-based staff to ensure that students are receiving the right services at the right time. The tools were instrumental in helping community schools decrease chronic absenteeism rates by 7.2% over two years.

The Office of Community Schools (OCS) also embraces a results focus and the use of data to drive improvement. Working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation through a leadership development program called Results in Education to Accelerate Change, the initiative helps teams develop the skills and competencies they need to engage in collaborative decision-making, advocate for evidence-based strategies, and build the long-term capacity of communities across the city to help ensure students succeed in and out of school.

“The ultimate mark of success will be that the staff can make leadership decisions that produce results,” says Ashley Stewart, a senior associate on the Foundation’s
leadership development team. “Throughout the school year, these leaders will use their skills to tackle some of the most complex challenges facing the school system.”

A foundation to build on
NYC had a strong foundation to build upon. The Beacon Schools were started by Mayor David Dinkins and Department of Youth Services Commissioner Richard Murphy in 1991. Beacons were designed as school-based, prevention-focused, collaborative, multi-service safe havens for both youth and adults. As Commissioner Murphy put it, the idea was to create dozens of “small universes” in which young people could learn, dream, grow, and, in the process, stay out of trouble. Each host school transformed, during non-school hours, into a neighborhood hub for the whole community.

Around the same time, the Children’s Aid Society worked with the NYC Department of Education as pioneers, establishing five community schools in the Washington Heights neighborhood in Manhattan that included early childhood education, expanded learning time, and health services.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has been a longtime supporter and advocate for community schools and has been a partner to the DOE in the launch and roll out of NYC’s Community Schools Initiative. The UFT serves on the Community Schools Advisory Board.

What was lacking, Caruso says, was “a central system to cultivate school partnerships and coordinate City resources.”

Today, community schools have also become a vehicle for addressing other social service needs. In partnership with the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence, for example, training is delivered to staff members in schools located in precincts with the highest rates of domestic violence. In collaboration with the Office of Immigrant Affairs, immigration legal services are provided in 20 schools with the highest rates of foreign born students. The NYC Children’s Cabinet, led by Deputy Mayor Richard Buery, has been instrumental in bringing these and other city services to community schools.

The initiative has enabled nonprofit organizations that were already involved in schools to have a much greater impact.

“In many ways, this was an opportunity for us to extend what we do well,” says Erin O’Leary, the senior director of the Center for Supportive Schools (CSS). The
Organization already operated Peer Group Connection, a year-long peer leadership and outreach program, in 70 middle and high schools across the city. Now CSS is the lead agency for 13 community schools and will add two more next year.

“We have been able to focus on attendance improvement, community development, family engagement, and health and social services,” O’Leary says. “We’re implementing activities to transform the culture of school at a larger scale.”

Partnership with Children, another organization, has provided mental health services in schools and supported family engagement for over 30 years. As a lead community school partner, the organization is able to integrate those services throughout the school and work with other partners to address students’ needs.

“The families and the kids and schools need these things,” says Margaret Crotty, the chief executive officer for Partnership with Children, now the lead agency for 14 schools. The organization also provides mental health services under a subcontract for an additional six schools.

Before the initiative, Crotty says it wasn’t unusual for some of her agency’s social workers to take on some of the coordinating tasks associated with running a community school. Now, each of their 14 community schools has a full-time social worker and a full-time community school director.

**Taking leadership roles in schools**

Naming the position a community school “director” instead of a resource “coordinator,” was an intentional decision, meant to promote the “concept of distributive leadership,” Caruso says.

“We really felt like this is a position akin to an assistant principal,” he says. “When I see a community school director play a leadership role in the school, have the respect of the families, and be able to introduce professional development and programs, that’s a big success.”

Each school creates a work plan with input from families, students, teachers, the union, and community members. The community-based organizations have also been instrumental in strengthening parents’ connections to their schools. Crotty’s organization, for example, held large neighborhood forums to help explain how schools would be different. “The community-based organization’s job was to make sure parents understood what was going on,” she says, adding that her staff, for example, bought washing machines for...
schools so parents could do their laundry and held summer barbeques to build relationships.

Parent outreach specialists with the district have also used a variety of organizing methods, including phone banks, leadership development training, and simply knocking on doors to build stronger relationships with parents, says Megan Hester, the senior associate for education organizing at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

“Some community schools have put a lot of effort into deep engagement and collaborative governance with parents, and have seen enormous increases in parent leadership and partnership,” she says, adding that specific models being used across the city include Parent-Teacher Home Visits, Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, Parent Education, and Empowerment Partners.

Despite the large scale of the initiative, Crotty says Caruso and other leaders have been very open to feedback and have acted on recommendations such as having community school directors and principals attend the same meetings and adding parents and community members to the steering committee. “This is the first time we’ve ever had this level of engagement with the DOE,” she says.

Early gains in community schools include a 7.2 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism over two years. The schools involved in the initiative have also seen increases in both math (1.8%) and English language arts (5.7%) scores in the past year.

Attendance “is definitely the linchpin. It connects to a lot of the workings of community schools,” Grace Burke, Director of Strategic Planning for the DOE’s Office of Community Schools says, adding that the culture and climate shift “resulting from collaborative leadership” is also taking place. “You walk into a community school and you know it’s a community school.”

**Lead CBOs supporting NYC’s Community Schools**

- Abbott House
- After School All Stars
- ASPIRA of New York, Inc.
- BronxWorks
- CAMBA
- Catholic Charities Community Services, Archdiocese of New York
- Center for Supportive Schools
- Community Association of Progressive Dominicans, Inc.
- Counseling In Schools
• Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation
• East Side House, Inc.
• El Puente
• FHI 360
• Fordham University
• Global Kids
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• Graham Windham
• Grand Street Settlement, INC.
• Harlem Children’s Zone, Inc.
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• Make the Road
• New York Center for Interpersonal Development
• New York City Community Learning Schools Initiative, Inc.
• Partnership with Children, Inc.
• Pathways to Leadership
• Phipps Neighborhood Inc.
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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!


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