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Community Schools Right at Home in Rural Areas

The Bangor Area School District, in the rural heart of the Lehigh Valley in northeastern Pennsylvania, encompasses 87 square miles and four adjoining townships. Philanthropic groups, youth sports, and other organizations in the close-knit community already use school buildings for games, concerts and other activities. However, it wasn't until the district started implementing the community schools strategy that its vision of its schools as vital hubs of the community was fully realized.

Bangor's community schools have seen improvement in the schools' climate even as unemployment and the number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch has risen. Attendance is up for students and staff. Family centers are located in each community school. Bangor community schools even opened their doors during recent hurricanes and snowstorms for residents to take showers, recharge their electronic devices, and refill water supplies.

"The community has come to realize we're all in this together," said Deborah Bowman, the community school director for the school district.

We know that community schools are finding great success in urban districts and inner-tier suburbs such as Philadelphia, New York, Portland, and Evansville, where diverse populations converge with a variety of different challenges.

But Bangor, PA, Kings Mountain, NC, and Bozeman, MT, are just a few of the places demonstrating the effectiveness of the community school strategy for the unique issues and opportunities facing remote and rural communities.

Effectiveness in rural settings is crucial for the community school movement since more than 10 million students are enrolled in rural school districts, according to the National Center of Educational Statistics. From the deepest parts of the Appalachians to the heartland of the Midwest all the way to the farmland and forests of the West - these schools are in some of the most remote and poorest areas in the country. Forty-one percent of rural students live in poverty and the number is only growing. The fight for funding and additional resources for rural districts is often overshadowed by larger school districts. Rural students receive nearly 18 percent less in funding for instructional support than the average public school student ([Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2008-09, pp. 2, NCES](#); [Why Rural Matters 2011-12](#)). The community strategy becomes a matter of creating equitable conditions for learning and teaching in rural communities.

Similarly to urban schools, many rural school districts have to combat harsh realities in their encompassing communities, including high poverty, soaring unemployment, and devastating drug addiction. Transportation, housing, and teacher recruitment become are particularly noteworthy obstacles to quality education opportunities in rural places. However, the intimate trust and familiarity between residents, their business communities, places of worship, and local organizations make rural schools ripe for community-school partnerships.

“While many (rural schools) don’t *explicitly* say they are a community school, the reality is they are in fact practicing community schools work,” said Rob Mahaffey, Communications Director of Rural School and Community Trust and president of the Organizations Concerned about Rural Education. Mahaffey also serves as the vice-chair of the Coalition’s Steering Committee. “Rural places are in fact more engaged in community learning.”

Many students in rural districts learn technical and vocational skills from local businesses. Town clinicians and doctors have long visited schools to provide services for students in many rural communities. There’s a much deeper sense of personal interaction in rural places, Mahaffey said.

While there’s no way to ascertain just about how many rural community schools there are at this point, several schools in rural areas unequivocally incorporate the community school strategy.

Bangor, Pennsylvania

DeFranco Elementary School and Bangor Area Middle School are **Bangor, PA’s** two community schools and part of the [COMPASS community school initiative](#) led by the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

In a region with very limited options for youth outside of school, the COMPASS initiative has been hugely important to providing enriching after school activities for students, Bowman said. Northampton Community College, the lead partner for Bangor community schools, opens its campus for Bangor’s after school students to work on projects while also utilizing Bangor school sites as a service learning portal for its college students. Bangor community schools’ Exploring Your Future after school program, funded by the state Department of Education and 21st Century Community Learning Centers engages some of the most vulnerable 5th through 8th graders in various educational and enrichment activities they would not otherwise have an opportunity to experience, Bowman said.

Attendance at both community schools hovers at 96 percent. Teachers have become enthusiastic and engaged. The number of substitute teachers being called in at the two schools is the lowest in the district.

The acting superintendent for the Bangor Area School District has enthusiastically reiterated his support for the community school strategy and pledged to help students better transition from elementary to secondary school utilizing the COMPASS partnership.

Kings Mountain, North Carolina

[East Elementary School](#) in **Kings Mountain, N.C.** has used the community school strategy to great success since the early 1990s, winning several state awards and recognitions along the way. The school's initiative is part of [Communities In Schools \(CIS\)](#), national community school model. The organization staffs a site coordinator at East Elementary that helps families connect to needed community agencies with the help of the school's counselor. Inside its Family Resource Center, the CIS partnership manages academic supports including a homework club, tutors, class-related projects, as well as a food and clothes closet for emergency assistance.

"It's a family atmosphere," said Phillis White, executive director for Communities In Schools chapter in Cleveland County, N.C. which includes Kings Mountain. "Because we're small enough, we know each other and we're willing to help each other."

Bozeman, Montana

The geography of rural schools in many instances force community schools in rural areas to adopt slightly different practices than those of community schools in urban and suburban locations, Mahaffey said. Many rural community schools for example have do not have resource coordinators housed at each school and instead of relying on centralized coordination for an entire school district.

Such is the case in **Bozeman, MT**. The [Thrive](#) organization started out in the 1980s as an anti-child abuse and community empowerment initiative but has since morphed into a multi-faceted partnership with the Bozeman School District that was funded by the Greater Gallatin United Way to provide coordinated supports to children and their families such as mentoring and in-home family prevention services. Through this work, the Greater Gallatin United Way forged [Graduation Matters Gallatin](#) with Thrive and the school district to prevent dropouts through increased parental involvement.

Conclusion

The close intimate knowledge and relationships found in rural settings make the community school strategy a natural fit for improving student success and uplifting communities. These areas have a wealth of resources and a passion to help neighbors and better their hometowns. The community school strategy allows community stakeholders to improve the lives of children and community in a more coordinated way.

Are you from a rural area that supports community schools? Email us and [share your story](#).

Additional Resources

Resources from the 2012 Community Schools National Forum

How Community Schools are Reinvigorating Rural Education ([Presentation](#))

Coalition Publications:

[Making the Difference](#)

[Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships](#)

Center for American Progress:

[The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinvigorate Rural Education](#)

Web Sites:

[Rural Schools and Communities Trust](#)

[Forum for Youth Investment](#)

[U.S. Department of Education Rural Education Resource Center](#)

[Communities in Schools](#)

[National Research Center on Rural Education Support](#)