INTRODUCTION

It is nearly impossible to imagine that, in just three years, a school that had experienced a dropout rate of 84 percent by grade 10 managed to transform itself into a school with a graduation rate of 100 percent. But that is the story of Cincinnati’s Oyler Community Learning Center, which is one in a system of community schools that has helped raise the citywide graduation rate from 51 percent in 2000 to 83 percent in 2009. With the school board’s 2002 commitment to make every school a community school, Cincinnati has built citywide structures that foster the collaborative provision of high-quality learning opportunities and supports for students. Cincinnati is one of dozens of communities across the country that is scaling up a system of community schools.

Why? In simplest terms, the community schools strategy provides a coherent framework for all children to succeed in college, career, and life. More pragmatically, in today’s test-oriented school culture, an effective community school offers the opportunities that all children deserve and helps remove barriers to learning; it ensures a foundation for principals to lead, teachers to teach, and students to learn.

A thriving system of community schools focuses joint community and school resources on student success. Making that happen at scale is the subject of this guide.

Dr. Jerry Weast, former superintendent of the Montgomery County, Maryland, schools, emphasizes that change is about creating structures and cultures that advance change. That notion applies here. Typically, some structures need to be put in place to support a system of community schools, but, unless a culture is in place to support all children, community schooling efforts will fall short of their goals.

The community schools strategy can have its broadest, deepest, and most sustainable impact when a school system and all of its community partners use the strategy in many schools. A multisite effort embeds the vision of a community school in the principles and practices, beliefs, and expectations of its schools, partner agencies, families, and community members. As the effort scales up, the community schools vision becomes the new culture. In that new culture, individuals and organizations alike share the work, responsibilities, and benefits of improved results for children, families, schools, and communities.

There is no one path for advancing a community schools agenda. Sometimes a citywide organization such as a United Way chapter, a county or city, a non-profit agency, or a school district steps up to create an opportunity for collaboration and provides an anchor presence in a set of schools. Often, a local community school serves as a template for expansion. Many schools already operate with some of the typical elements of a community school—after-school programs, health and mental health services, parent leadership, service learning, a preschool program, a tutoring or mentoring program, and/or adult education programs—but they do not undertake such activities with the explicit goal of fostering synergy among partners and the school to achieve better results. This guide helps you determine your current status, work from your assets, and build toward your shared vision of a system of community schools.

A scaled-up system of community schools refers to a vertical network of schools from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in a single attendance area with all schools linked horizontally across one or more school districts. What does it take to build a scaled-up system of community schools? That is the question posed by school leaders, service providers, and government officials around the country as they come to appreciate the value and importance of community schools.

Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community Schools Strategy builds on both practice and research to describe the what, why, and how of system-wide expansion of community schools. The guide is written for a wide audience and for communities at different points in planning for, implementing, and sustaining a community schools strategy. It targets grass-roots advocates, including parents, students, teachers, and community partners; school district, civic, business, and government leaders; and funders at the local, state, and national levels.

For those already working to build a scaled-up system of community schools, Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships offers insights and field-based guidance immediately useful in deepening and sustaining your work. For those whose efforts focus primarily on establishing individual schools, Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships provides an opportunity to think about why and how to take on a scale-up effort. Others with no earlier involvement in community schools leadership will be encouraged to consider the logic of community schools and see the value of beginning with a systems approach.

The guide is organized as follows:

- **Part One** lays out the rationale for a community schools strategy. It describes what a community school looks like and its advantages over traditional schools.
- **Part Two** describes the essential characteristics of an effective scaled-up system of community schools. It draws on systems theory to help think about how complex organizations such as community schools work and suggests a framework for creating the culture and functional capacity needed to create and sustain a scaled-up system.
- **Part Three** outlines a 6-stage spiraling strategic process to help schools and communities steer their scale-up work.
- **Part Four** tells the scale-up story of selected communities, permitting readers to see the spiraling process in action.

Brief sketches from the field illustrate specific stages, barriers to progress, and solutions. Various tools are referenced throughout the text; the tools are accessible with a simple click and are also presented in the Appendix as well.
PART ONE: THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS STRATEGY

Ours is a robust, youthful, and determined nation. When families, schools, and community partners join together in common purpose, we can ensure that America’s promise—equal opportunity and freedom with responsibility—stays strong.

Since our founding, public education has been charged with imparting both the democratic spirit and can-do skills each generation needs to capitalize on and expand our nation’s many opportunities. In every era, schools have played a central role in meeting the charge. Today is no different. Fully preparing our young people for tomorrow is a task that belongs to all of us.

A Vision and a Vehicle for Change

A community schools strategy is a collaborative leadership approach designed to ensure that every student graduates from high school ready for college and/or career and prepared for a successful life as a family member and citizen. It offers a vision of schools, communities, and families linked in common purpose.

Experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of a community schools strategy is based on a culture that builds collective trust and promotes a set of core principles (Figure 1), including high expectations for schools and students, reliance on family and community strengths, and the development of the whole child as critical factors for student success. A set of structural elements, including partnerships, alignment of funding streams with the natural assets of communities, and the integration of academic learning with essential supports and opportunities, helps diverse communities craft their own vehicle for change. Further, it recognizes that parents and care givers play a critical role in their children’s social, emotional, physical, and academic development while intentionally supporting parents/care givers in their role as their child’s chief advocate.

Figure 1. Community School Core Principles

- **Shared vision and accountability for results.** A clear, mutually agreed-upon vision focused on results drives the work of community schools. Agreements enable partners to hold each other accountable and move beyond “turf battles.”

- **Strong partnerships.** Partners share resources and expertise and collaborate to design community schools and make them work.

- **High expectations for all.** Community schools are organized to support learning. Children, youth, and adults are expected to learn to a high standard and to become contributing members of their community.

- **Community strengths.** Community schools marshal the assets of the entire community, including the people who live and work there, local organizations, and the school.

- **Respect for diversity.** Community schools know their communities. They develop respect and a strong, positive identity for people of diverse backgrounds and are committed to the welfare of the whole community.

- **Local decision making.** To unleash the power of local communities, local leaders make decisions about their community schools strategy while people in individual schools respond to their unique circumstances.
The Scale-Up Imperative
A community schools strategy can have its broadest, deepest, and most sustainable impact when a school system and its community partners use the strategy in several schools, across one or more districts. A multisite effort embeds the vision of a community school in the principles and practices, beliefs, and expectations of its schools, partner agencies, families, and community members. As the effort scales up and collective trust grows, the vision of a system of community schools becomes the new culture—one in which individuals and organizations alike share the work, responsibility, and benefits of improved results for children, families, schools, and communities.

Thousands of schools across the country have already adopted some variant of a community schools strategy for better meeting student and family needs, and they are seeing a difference in a wide range of indicators that spell school success. However, the advantages of community schooling are not consistently available to students throughout their education from pre-kindergarten through grade 12. To wrap their arms around all their children, communities must expand and sustain a scaled-up system of community schools across neighborhoods and throughout districts.

Clearly, the most important reason to scale up community schools—sometimes referred to as full-service community schools or community learning centers—is the mounting data showing that community schools work. They not only improve test scores but by also ignite the interest and energy of students, teachers, families, and community members in learning and working together. Stated another way, the vision-based culture and collaborative leadership structure created by a community schools strategy sets the stage to achieve—on a large scale—the essential elements that, according to current research, are needed for long-lasting reform: leadership, parent and community engagement, professional capacity, a student-centered learning environment, and instructional guidance.

The second reason to scale up is that a community schools strategy provides a much-needed and effective way to organize fragmented services and to integrate funding streams, permitting scarce dollars to generate a greater impact. Students and families gain access to services when they need them, and more expensive crisis intervention is avoided. According to a recent Coalition for Community Schools study, every dollar spent by a school system to implement a community schools strategy leverages at least three dollars in federal, state, and local funding and in philanthropic and community partner resources. Other estimates are even higher.

The third reason to scale up is that the 2010 Census shows continuing growth in the diversity of America’s student population. The corresponding increase in the number of students whose first language is not English calls for schools that fully engage, challenge, and support these students and their families. A community schools strategy recognizes the tremendous strengths of parents as taxpayers, civic leaders, and advocates.

The fourth reason to scale up is that the policy environment is ripe for expanding community schools. At the federal level, the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, Race to the Top Fund, School Improvement Grants, Title I, and the Invest in Innovation Fund i3 all contain elements of the community schools strategy. P-
20 Councils at the state level and in some localities also call for expanded partnerships and resource alignment. They all require a vehicle—which a community schools strategy provides—to help schools and community institutions knit their wide-ranging assets into measurable improvements.

Finally, an emerging body of knowledge provides a useful evidence base for how to scale up and sustain the community schools strategy. Two decades of experience in a growing number of multisite initiatives provide a strong foundation on which other communities can build. National models that employ a community schools strategy offer additional knowledge, including Schools of the 21st Century, Communities in Schools, university-assisted community schools, Children’s Aid Society models, and Beacon Schools. Their lessons and insights inform this guidebook.

What a Community School Looks Like

A community school is a place and a set of partnerships connecting school, family, and community. A community school is distinguished by its integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. Its curriculum emphasizes real-world learning through community problem-solving and service. By extending the school day and week, it reaches families and community residents. The community school is uniquely equipped to develop its students into educated citizens ready and able to give back to their communities and to strengthen families and communities.

Community schools are built on a fundamental premise—that every child and every school is capable of excellence given the right conditions for learning. A community schools strategy creates the structure and culture needed to ensure fulfillment of the following six conditions:

- Early childhood development programs are available to nurture growth and development.
- The school offers a core instructional program delivered by qualified teachers; instruction is organized around a challenging curriculum anchored by high standards and expectations for students.
- Students are motivated and engaged in learning—in both school and community settings—before, during, and after school and in the summer.
- The basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.
- Parents, families, and school staff demonstrate mutual respect and engage in effective collaboration.
- Community engagement, together with school efforts, promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and that connects students to a broader learning community.

Of course, schools cannot create these conditions on their own. They require strategic partnerships among schools, partner agencies, families, and community members. A community schools strategy leverages, coordinates, and maximizes resources, often including a coordinator to manage day-to-day activities at each school site.

Partnerships with community agencies, cultural institutions, colleges and universities, foundations, and others expand the number and type of learning opportunities available to help children master skills and content. These opportunities are directly aligned with the children’s academic curriculum while...
broadening their interests and developing their talents. By engaging families and community partners with school staff in designing and participating in activities, a community schools strategy fosters shared ownership and collective trust. Referring to a community schools coordinator on loan from a community partner, one principal described that individual’s function by stating, “We are joined at the hip. We work together to make sure every student gets what they [sic] need. She works on the social supports and I work on the instruction and together, we make it work.” Support for students extends to support for families.

The Advantages of Community Schools

Many schools have created partnerships with various community institutions. But it is the partnerships forged around the principles of community schools and committed to creating the conditions for learning that make the difference. As a result, partnership-based community schools offer three distinct advantages over traditional public schools by:

- Providing learning opportunities that develop both academic and non-academic competencies
- Building social capital—the value attached to the social networks and relationships that support learning and create opportunities for young people while strengthening their communities
- Garnering additional resources that directly support schools’ teaching and learning goals while reducing demands on school staff

While much-touted school reform efforts largely focus on in-school improvement, a community schools strategy builds on research that has demonstrated the important connection between in-school and out-of-school factors in student achievement. In-school factors are concerned with the quality of instruction and curriculum. It is commonly accepted that an effective teacher is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement, but students also need a challenging curriculum that engages them as active learners in real-world problem-solving. Often, in the schools serving our neediest children, the curriculum is narrow and neither rigorous nor engaging. Classes are often unmanageably large, and instructional materials and supportive technologies are frequently limited. Worse still, neither the school climate nor adult behavior adequately communicates the expectation that every student will succeed.

Out-of-school factors that affect a student’s ability to learn include residence in a high-poverty neighborhood, an unmarried teen mother, irregular attendance, and the ripple effects of family substance abuse and mental health issues, unemployment or frequent mobility, social isolation, poor health care and diet, and lack of educational support. Each of these factors has a pronounced impact on a child’s cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.

Issues as basic as whether a child attends school regularly or has an adult at home to encourage him to do his homework or to applaud her best efforts all affect school performance. Research shows, for example, that chronic absence is prevalent for young children. “Every year, one in 10 kindergarten and 1st grade students misses a month of school with excused and unexcused absences. By middle and high school, the rates of chronic absence are far
higher.”\textsuperscript{x} A study of students in kindergarten through grade 5 in New York City showed one in five students chronically absent.\textsuperscript{x} These absences affect academic achievement, leave children unable to read well by the end of grade 3,\textsuperscript{xii} and can set a pattern of poor attendance and academic failure for older students, fueling the dropout rate.

Community schools identify resources that help address out-of-school factors and connect home, school, and community in ways that make student success possible. Families become their children’s most important influence and are encouraged to become school decision makers. By paying attention to both academic and non-academic learning, community schools reach the whole child and encourage the growth and development of a range of reinforcing competencies—social, emotional, physical, and academic. In community schools, engagement precedes achievement—and intensifies it—in classrooms and community-based learning opportunities. Relationships with caring adults help young people build networks of support, develop important social skills, and expand their horizons. In community schools, students come to school because they want to learn; what is more, they are ready to learn.

![Figure 2. A Community Where Learning Happens](image-url)
Toward a Community Where Learning Happens

An individual community school lays the foundation for success; just ask any child, family, teacher, or community partner who is a participant. The challenge is to extend the community schools logic—and the conditions for learning—across school boundaries so that all children and their families in a community may benefit. When schools and community partners take steps to link individual community schools into coordinated systems, the systems become the building blocks of a fully engaged child- and family-centered community. Together, they build an infrastructure of support and opportunities to create the conditions for learning across entire localities. The result is the development of “communities where learning happens”—every day, for every child.

Figure 2 depicts a community where learning happens.

In communities where learning happens, there is a broad foundation of citizen participation. Families and community partners stand together to promote action on child, school, and family issues. Children and families are not isolated but rather are surrounded by interconnected rings of learning and support. First in importance are relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers who share information and often offer a helping hand—monitoring children’s safety and sending messages about the importance of education. At the same time, students are closely connected to their community schools while the schools are linked to other helping institutions such as houses of worship and community organizations, libraries, health clinics, and volunteer agencies—all of which enable students to explore and participate in the larger community. In addition, crisis intervention and treatment services are readily available to support students and families as needed.

Ideally, the interconnected rings of learning and support are held together by a sturdy infrastructure in the form of good jobs, effective transportation, affordable housing, and public safety. Every child should live in a community where learning happens, but many do not. These are the types of places that are envisioned in a variety of efforts to revitalize our nation’s neighborhoods (e.g., Promise Neighborhoods and the White House’s Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative). Community schools should be at the core of such efforts, just as public schools have always been the centerpiece of strong communities.

Figure 3 illustrates the connections between an individual community school, a system of community schools, and a community where learning happens.

A scaled-up system of community schools does not spring up over night. We are well aware of the difficulties faced by well-funded, comprehensive community initiatives that have sought to change the way education, health, and social services are designed, delivered, and evaluated. These important efforts have clearly demonstrated that systems transformation takes time, coupled with a guiding vision and the capacity to build and sustain new relationships, policies, and practices. A 2010 study of two decades of comprehensive community initiatives notes that progress grows out of “better alignment of mission, action, capacity, collaboration and learning.” We also see the need for greater effort to understand how complex systems—such as communities

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and community schools—operate and where and how they respond to change.

In contrast to many comprehensive community change initiatives, community schools partners have focused on a single entry point—public schools—as a strategic way to build more responsive communities. The most successful initiatives forge relationships and craft collaborative agendas that are “plausible, doable and testable.” The lessons learned by many of these initiatives have helped shine a light on the various “moving parts” of a community schools strategy. Part Two of the guide looks at how these various components work together.

Figure 3. A Fully Developed Community School Vision

A community school is...

...a place and a set of partnerships connecting school, family, and community. A community school is distinguished by an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. Its curriculum emphasizes real-world learning through community problem-solving and service. By extending the school day and week, it reaches families and community residents. The community school is uniquely equipped to develop its students into educated citizens ready and able to give back to their communities.

A system of community schools is...

...a vertical network of schools from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in a single attendance area, linked across one or more school districts. The networks use a community schools approach to align services, support, and enrichment opportunities with young people’s development needs and the school system’s academic objectives. They sustain these efforts through policy and financial support of the school district and its public and private community partners.

A community where learning happens is...

...a community-wide infrastructure able to support the social, emotional, and physical development of all children and families; to engage them in learning; and to connect them to relationships and opportunities that will help every young person achieve in school and make successful transitions from childhood to adulthood.