



Netter Center  
for Community Partnerships  
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA



## The Community Schools Research Agenda

### Introduction & Background

The Institute for Educational Leadership's (IEL's) [Coalition for Community Schools Research Practice Network](#) (CCS RPN) is composed of community school researchers and practitioners who together create, maintain, and execute a research agenda focused on improving implementation and outcomes for students, community schools, families, and community members. The Research Practice Network also serves as a clearinghouse for research and best practices, convenes community school stakeholders around areas for collaboration and joint research, and identifies new funding streams to support high-quality research on community schools.

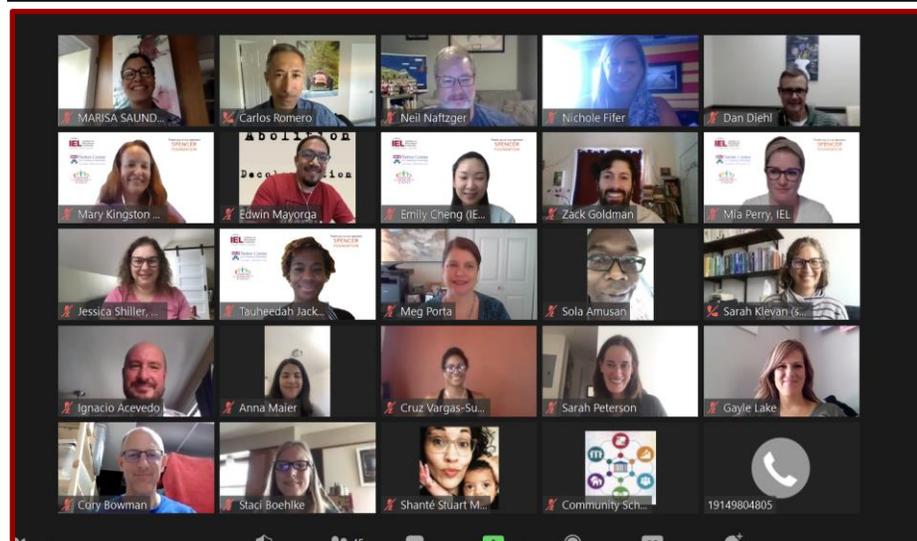
In collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships, IEL's Coalition for Community Schools Research Practice Network hosted a three-day virtual convening in July to develop a national Community Schools Research Agenda. The convening - "Powerful Learning: How Community Schools Support Learning and Thriving Students, Families, and Communities" - took place from Tuesday, July 21 to Thursday July 23, 2020. The three-day event brought together over 60 multi-disciplinary researchers and practitioners who have contributed to the community schools knowledge base.

The event began with a welcome from Dr. Ira Harkavy, Director of the Netter Center, and José Muñoz, Director of the Coalition for Community Schools at IEL. Opening panels on the first two days included leaders in the field who illustrated the potential of research-practice partnerships and highlighted priorities for community schools research. A final presentation on the third day of the convening by Dr. David E. Kirkland, Executive Director of the New York University's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, presented a bold community-driven vision for community schools.

On each day, participants spent time in facilitated break-out groups co-creating a national research agenda for community schools. On the first day, participants were invited to review a

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summary document that presented the recommendations of prior national research convenings from the past two decades held in Chicago, Baltimore, and Toronto. Participants also reviewed a set of “pre-work” guiding questions and responses compiled prior to the convening. Then, the group brainstormed topics, questions, processes, and methods to prioritize as we seek to grow and support the community schools movement. On the second day, participants returned to their break-out groups to “tune” the Research Agenda, expanding on ideas and filling in gaps. Finally, on the third day, participants considered how to enact the Research Agenda and articulated their individual role in advancing the work.



## Research Agenda Validation Process

To validate the Community Schools Research Agenda, IEL and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships conducted an iterative feedback process, involving both July 2020 Convening participants and the broader CCS RPN group. As a first step, all convening participants were sent the revised Research Agenda, which organized agenda items into 11 themes. Participants were asked to complete a survey offering feedback on whether the agenda resonated with them and if they noticed any gaps or suggested any edits. We received 46 responses in this initial round of feedback. Following this step, we held a one-hour follow-up meeting on November 5, 2020 with the July 2020 Convening participants; about 40 participants attended. In this session, we presented the revised agenda, discussed revisions incorporating feedback received, and held breakout groups to discuss how to effectively enact the agenda.

As the final validation step, we held a one-hour webinar on November 12, 2020 to present the penultimate Research Agenda to the entire Research Practice Network; about 100 participants attended. Volunteers from the July 2020 Convening, as well as IEL and Netter Center representatives, discussed each content area of the agenda and provided examples of how agenda items have begun to be enacted in their individual roles. Following this presentation, we invited additional feedback through the survey, and we received an additional 11 responses from the larger CCS RPN group. CCS RPN co-chairs further incorporated this feedback to produce this final version of the Community Schools Research Agenda.

## Enacting the Research Agenda

The Research Practice Network has created a CCS RPN Facebook group to serve as a platform for connecting, collaborating, and enacting the Agenda. CCS RPN co-chairs will kickstart discussion groups around each Agenda content area and then identify volunteer leads to facilitate this work in each area. CCS RPN will serve as a place to house research that has already been conducted, lift up best practices and innovative studies currently happening in the field, and connect individuals seeking to engage in this work for future projects. **Join us** at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ccsrpn>.

## **The Research Agenda**

### **I. Approaching Community Schools Research and Impact**

#### **1. Measuring Outcomes**

The first theme involves how to collect leading, lagging, and process indicators to measure community school success. How can we consider indicators that go beyond test scores - indicators that consider how community schools create the conditions for learning? We should pay special attention to non-academic factors such as attendance, health, and wellness, as well as the social/emotional benefits of community schools, including how they are impacting trauma and healing. We acknowledge that there may be a window of greater receptivity to a more diverse set of outcomes in the COVID-19 context. Finally, we must consider new ways to communicate the evidence of success in academic learning. We should approach academic metrics through a lens of developmental science, and include comparison groups selected in ways that control for student composition and neighborhood context among other factors.

In addition to school and student-level outcomes, we should examine the impact of the community school strategy on the entire community, such as housing stability and health outcomes. For example, how can community schools be a hyper-local economic and community development strategy to break intergenerational poverty by investing in revitalization? How does access to adult and family services through the community schools model, such as career and adult education opportunities, improve family economic mobility? Community health and neighborhood-level indicators are important to consider. At the school level, what is the impact of the community school framework on school staffing quality, stability, and diversity?

Lastly, there is a need for more longitudinal and community-based participatory evaluation and research frameworks. Ongoing, multi-year research and evaluation could follow students from elementary school throughout their postsecondary experiences, focusing on how the community school strategy impacts student postsecondary enrollment, persistence, attainment, and career outcomes. Potential research questions include the role of non-academic factors, such as health and wellness, on longitudinal student success. Moreover, in the course of a community school's development, it is important to better understand the expected impacts at different phases of implementation. Outcomes could be understood in light of the length of time and stage of development of a community school. We acknowledge that longitudinal research is critical for effective advocacy, but such research requires a long-term commitment, raising practical considerations of sustainability and stability.

## **2. Elevating Student, Family, and Educator Voice in Research**

Another key theme relating to the process of research was the need for case studies that emphasize student, parent, and educator voice. Overall, we hope to create a participatory action research agenda that is transformative, longitudinal, and based on trust. By centering the voices of grassroots stakeholders, research can lift up the ways that community schools are a democratic strategy. Community-based participatory research methods are a tool to achieve both research outcomes (e.g. generalizable knowledge) and action (community change). Youth voice, including middle and high school students, should be a priority. We should consider accountability to the community of stakeholders impacted -- how are community schools impacting their lives from their perspective? This again calls for a more participatory methodology and could merit developing guiding principles for those engaging in such research with communities. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) has guiding principles for evaluation and collaboration that could provide an example. Essentially, we would like to reflect on whose voice is at the table. Engagement should be authentic, and voices should be genuinely heard and not just present. Researchers should cultivate diverse perspectives, and researchers themselves should come from diverse backgrounds representative of the communities they serve, including people of color. Lastly, research should contribute back to communities and build capacity. How do we create research-practitioner partnerships that are truly collaborative, instead of simply favoring research-outcomes? How can we support and build capacity in schools in conducting their own research and evaluation to answer their most pressing questions, either through tools, networks, or direct support?

## **3. Translating Research into Practice**

More must be done to bridge the gap between research and practice. Research needs to be accessible to practitioners, must be responsive to practitioners needs, and must accurately reflect practice. Research should support the feedback loop between data and decision-making. One key lever in this process is the democratization of data -- making data more available. We need to better understand how to collect and share program participation data effectively across agencies and partners. This includes best practices around data-sharing agreements, data-sharing software, and other tools. A national database of research and evaluation tools that are used throughout community school initiatives would help in sharing best practices. Finally, in addition to linking research and practice, we also need to link research to policy and funding, including how funders craft Request for Proposals (RFPs) and grant programs.

## **II. Themes for Further Research and Study of Community Schools**

### **4. Defining and Adapting the Community School Model**

The fundamental question: “what makes a community school a community school?”

continues to merit further exploration. This could including a further explication of the various discreet models of community schooling. A priority is ensuring that schools aren't community schools in name only. This requires developing a better understanding of what quality implementation looks like. A related theme is conceptualizing the stages of community school development and specifically which aspects of implementation have the most impact. Also, how do we manage expectations at each phase? As we consider these questions, we also need to bear in mind the evolving nature of the community schools strategy, and that resources, implementation, and the approach to research/evaluation vary across contexts. Specific attention could be paid to implementation of the community schools framework in rural versus urban settings.

## **5. Collaborative Leadership and Relational Trust**

We should better understand how to measure, foster, and facilitate shared and collaborative leadership, including how to do this in a virtual environment. This includes how we share power inside and outside of schools. Potential questions include: How do we develop leadership at multiple levels? How do we share power in a virtual environment? How do we bring student voices to the table and share power with young people in community schools? How does this look in different grade or age levels? How do we build leadership inclusive of families and students? What do we know about the impact of leadership development on student outcomes?

In addition to shared leadership structures within schools, there is also a need for research relating to the system-level shared leadership structures. Specifically, what are the linkages between schools, districts, states, nonprofits, foundations, and other agencies? What are the different approaches to leadership structures within these different entities that anchor community schools within a city? How do we realize the mantra of "top-down support for bottom-up change"? What are the advantages to district-led, non-profit led, city-led, or university-led initiatives? What are the benefits or challenges for "stand-alone" community schools that are not connected to a community school system?

Finally, a core component of shared leadership is relational trust. We need more research addressing how we build and foster relational trust among community members and other actors in the community school space. We need to consider the following questions: How do we measure relational trust? Are community schools poised to support deeper engagement/trust? If so, what makes it possible? How are we holding community schools accountable for relational trust?

## **6. Defining and Supporting Staff, Family, Administrator, and Partner Roles**

Another primary theme that emerged from our discussion concerns the roles of the different community school partners/constituents. The main interest is in defining the

unique roles of the teacher, administrator, and coordinator, as well as family and community members in the community school setting. Specifically, there is a need to define the ways in which teachers and principals work differently in a community school. There is a different level of collaboration expected, there is a need to understand how preparation and ongoing professional support happens for them, and what successful community school teachers and principals look like. Moreover, there is a need to understand the role of the coordinator, and its value added to the community school. We know that the role is significant, but there is a continuing need to delineate the ways in which coordinators contribute to the success of the school. Similarly, we need to understand how family and community members contribute to the community school in ways that are unique and different from a traditional school. We need to document and know more about the decision-making role they play as well as the ways in which their ongoing partnership is sustained.

## **7. Racial equity and social justice**

Racial justice is undoubtedly a core component of community schooling, but more research is needed into the connection between community schooling and racial justice. There is a need to communicate and demonstrate the ways in which community schools work against oppressive systems and improve equity. We also need to lift up best practices around pedagogy to understand the degree to which culturally responsive education is being implemented through the community school model. Moreover, we need much more research that focuses on the ways in which community schools are and/or have the potential to be more responsive to minoritized groups than traditional schools. Lastly, this area of research can also be a jumping-off point for understanding to what extent minoritized families and communities are engaged in the community schools in terms of decision-making and voices reflected in the daily life of the school.

## **8. Organizing**

More research is needed to understand the value of community organizing for sustaining and supporting community school implementation. There is a need to understand in what ways grassroots community organizing is present in the daily work of community schools and the ways in which it could be. We need to understand how the role of the community school coordinator is deployed in service of community organizing, versus service provision and partnership development. This will help us understand to which degree the community school is responsive to the issues with which families and communities are concerned and need advocacy around.

## **9. Sustainability**

Sustainability is an issue for all school reform initiatives. Sustaining community schools is

no different. Community schools require additional funding to support the work of the coordinator as well as, but not limited to, special programming that undergirds the work of the community school. There is a need to delineate the specific aspects of community schools which need sustainable funding on top of what maintains traditional schooling. There is also a continued need to demonstrate the value of community schools, both in terms of economic cost-benefit analysis as well as their impact on other indicators like teacher and principal stability and job satisfaction, the ability to attract a diverse pool of teachers and principals, and the contribution to supporting community and family needs which in turn create the conditions to support student learning.

## **10. The Impact of COVID**

There is little doubt that the COVID pandemic will continue to have a significant impact on the ways in which community schools are implemented. Research is needed to document the role of community schools during the pandemic period, including the ways in which coordinators' efforts have supported families' and community members' needs with food and housing insecurity as well as technology needs. There is a need to gather evidence for the hypothesis that community schools are particularly well-positioned to respond to crises like the pandemic. Moreover, we need exploratory studies that may be able to show how community schools, and their unique design, may be a more functional model of schooling in a post-COVID environment.

## **11. Teaching and Learning in Community Schools**

A consistent theme that has echoed throughout many Research-Practice Network convenings is the need for more attention on teaching and learning in the community school context. Both current and historical examples of community schools reveal a distinct pedagogical approach that has been core to community schools' success. This approach often integrates community-based learning, real-world problem solving, and local experience and wisdom into curriculum. Educators often work closely with community partners to achieve instructional aims and extend learning beyond the classroom. Many research questions persist related to the implications for teaching and learning in community schools and how it differs from traditional schools. There is a need to understand how pedagogical approaches such as multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, restorative practices, social justice education, and project and place-based learning are used in the community school context. Additionally, we need to know more about how teachers connect with and use various partners, programs, and resources that exist at the school and in the surrounding community to teach effectively in the community school. Lastly, there is a need for evidence on the degree to which teachers in a community school may be more aware of the impact that out-of-classroom experiences have on in-classroom learning.