



PARTNERSHIPS FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE: THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL STRATEGY

MARTIN J. BLANK, IRA HARKAVY,
JANE QUINN, AND LISA R. VILLARREAL
JUNE 2021

Introduction

The American Rescue Plan Act offers school and community leaders an unprecedented opportunity to reinvigorate our public schools as engines of equity and democracy.

The COVID pandemic and the violence against people of color have laid bare deep and pervasive injustice and inequity in American society. The inadequacies in our systems, including the nation's schools, have been graphically exposed, creating a sense of urgency to marshal our resources for transformative change.

For educators, COVID has been daunting and exhausting. The pandemic has exacerbated inequities that always have crossed the school-house door.

Hunger, poverty, violence, mental health challenges, inadequate housing, and more manifest themselves in our schools, leading to increased chronic absence and student mobility, while simultaneously decreasing student engagement and general well-being.

Every system, including public education, must face the destructive impact of racism in America. We must combat its pernicious effect on our nation's students, families, schools, and communities. Together we have the responsibility to educate students to become active, caring citizens in a polarized and threatened democracy.

More than ever, transformation of our schools into engines of equity and democracy demands deep and sustained partnerships. Isolation means failure. Schools simply cannot successfully educate students if they do not reach out to community partners that bring needed skills and resources into this complicated—and opportunity-rich—environment.



The Community School Solution

Across the nation, school districts, United Ways, local governments, higher education, health and human services, youth development and community organizations are working together to help students learn and thrive through community schools—a strategy for organizing school and community resources around student success. The Coalition for Community Schools defines community schools as follows:

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Community schools offer a robust curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings, and weekends.

Several recent studies, including those conducted by the Learning Policy Institute (2017) and the RAND Corporation (2020) have documented the effectiveness of community schools. Approximately 7,000 of America's schools operate as community schools and over 100 districts and their communities have adopted community schools as a preferred reform strategy.



Characteristics of Community Schools

1. **Integrated Student Supports** address out-of-school barriers by providing health, mental health, and social services and by employing such practices as social-emotional learning, conflict resolution training, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice.
2. **Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities**, including after-school, weekend, and summer programs, provide additional individualized academic support, enrichment activities, and curricular opportunities that emphasize real-world learning and community problem solving.
3. **Active Family and Community Engagement** brings parents and other community members into the school as partners with shared decision-making power in children's education as well as in the expansion of adult educational opportunities.
4. **Community-based Learning** connects school-day teaching and learning to the community. Using the tools of project-based and culturally relevant learning, a community school curriculum also engages neighborhood assets as a resource for education and community development.
5. **Collaborative Leadership and Practices** build a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility using such strategies as site-based leadership/governance teams, teacher learning communities, and community school coordinators who manage the complex joint work of the school and its community partners.



Financing and Leveraging Resources

Community schools rely on a broad array of resources: public and private; education and non-education; human and financial. Sources include school systems, local government, United Ways, private foundations and businesses, as well as state and federal programs (e.g., Medicaid, USHHS health and USDA nutrition education programs). Community partners often bring their own financial and personnel resources to the school since the community school is the best place to fulfill their missions.

Partners also have expertise that schools do not, such as mental health and youth development services; higher education institutions can engage their students, faculty, and staff as active partners working with public school teachers and students to improve learning, as well as providing an array of opportunities and the use of university facilities. Two rigorous studies showed a social return of \$11 to \$15 for every dollar invested in community schools.

With the advent of Rescue Act funds, school leaders have a unique opportunity to determine how best and with whom to partner to achieve the results they seek. Creating mechanisms for alignment and coordination of programs and contracting with community partners may offer school districts flexibility for short-term action as well as long-term success.



Investing Rescue Act Funds

- **Support Planning:** Convene partners who have trusting relationships with schools, students, and families and strengthen your work together to plan a community schools strategy; identify additional organizations with resources and expertise that might be brought to the table. Partners should take into account: (a) listening and responding to parents, students, and other community stakeholders about the impact of COVID and their priorities moving forward; (b) redoubling efforts to promote racial equity across all systems and organizations; (c) learning from those who have developed community schools locally, regionally, and nationally while considering your district's specific context; (d) short- and long-term goals and immediate action steps focused on helping students and families learn and thrive; (e) measuring effectiveness as you move along.
- **Fill Immediate Needs:** For example: a) enriched summer learning programs that combine the assets of educators with those of youth development organizations and higher education; b) outreach to reengage students and their families through partnerships with groups that have strong roots in the community; and c) expand mental health services through partnerships with local providers. Every investment must promote racial equity. These investments will build capacity for the long term as well.
- **Create Positions for Community Schools Coordinators:** Each school needs a coordinator to work together with the principal to align the resources of community partners with the mission of the school as well as to mobilize additional partners.
- **Deepen Family Engagement:** Reinforce your capacity to work closely with families by working with partners to build strong relationships with families. This work could include hiring family engagement coordinators.
- **Develop a Culture of Collaborative Practice:** Educate principals, faculty, staff, and community partners to work together in a community school, through ongoing professional development and supportive district leadership. Provide community school materials and examples from local, regional, and national programs.
- **Support Teachers:** Offer professional development for teachers to strengthen their capacity to work with partners and to develop curriculum that grapples with racism and incorporates a focus on community problem solving.
- **Keep Schools Open:** Support the operation of the school before and after traditional school hours, weekends and summers for student, family, and community uses, such as adult education, recreation, and cultural events.

Who Can Help?

Coalition for Community Schools

www.communityschools.org; ccs@iel.org

National Center for Community Schools

www.nccs.org; nccs@childrensaidnyc.org

**Netter Center's University-Assisted
Community Schools Network**

**www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/uacsnetwork;
nettercenter@upenn.edu**

Key Resource Documents

Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement (Learning Policy Institute) <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-equitable-improvement-brief>

Community Schools the New Mexico Way (Learning Policy Institute)
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/new-mexico-community-schools-report#:~:text=A%20community%20schools%20approach%20involves,school%20success%20that%20poverty%20erects.>

Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative (RAND Corporation)
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html.

Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action (National Center for Community Schools)
https://www.nccs.org/sites/default/files/resource/NCCS_BuildingCommunitySchools.pdf

Leading with Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors (National Center for Community Schools) https://www.nccs.org/sites/default/files/resource/NCCS_CS_Directors_Guide.pdf

Community School Standards (Coalition for Community Schools)
http://www.communityschools.org/resources/community_schools_standards_.aspx

Community Based Learning: Engaging Students for Success and Citizenship (Coalition for Community Schools) http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CBL_Book_1_27_06.pdf

Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community School Strategy (Coalition for Community Schools) <http://www.communityschools.org/scalingup/>

An American Imperative: A New Vision of Public Schools (The Superintendents Association)
<http://aasacentral.org/learning2025/>

California's Healthy Start: Strong Families, Strong Communities for Student Success. 1998; Lodge, Rachel D.; California Department of Education.

Universities and Community Schools, Fall 2020 journal issue (Netter Center for Community Partnerships): https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/UCS_Journal_Volume10_Fall2020.pdf

The Promise of University-Assisted Community Schools to Transform American Schooling: A Report from the Field, 1985–2012 (Peabody Journal, 2013)
https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Promise_University_Assisted_Community_Schools_Peabody_Journal.pdf

The Community Schools Playbook (Partnership for the Future of Learning)
<https://communityschools.futureforlearning.org/>

Authors

Martin J. Blank, Founding Director, Coalition for Community Schools (1997-2017); Former President, Institute for Educational Leadership (2009-2017), blank.martin1@gmail.com

Ira Harkavy, Founding Director, Netter Center, University of Pennsylvania; Chair, Coalition for Community Schools (1997-2012), harkavy@upenn.edu

Jane Quinn, Director, Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools (2000-2018), janequinn809@gmail.com

Lisa R. Villarreal, Chair, Coalition for Community Schools (2012 - 2019), lisavillarreal@mac.com

The authors are currently writing a book about community schools, which will be published in early 2022.