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COMMUNITY SCHOOLS RESEARCH AGENDA 2026-2030

Community Schools Research Agenda 2026-2030

The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) Research Practice Network (RPN) consists of Community School researchers and practitioners from across the country who collaborate to develop, maintain, and execute a research agenda aimed at improving implementation quality and achieving better outcomes for students, families, teachers, Community Schools, and communities. CCS RPN also serves as a key resource for research and best practices, unites Community School researchers and practitioners in collaboration and shared learning, and encourages new research partnerships to support high-quality research on Community Schools.

About the Updated CCS RPN Research Agenda

The updated Research Agenda marks a new phase in Community Schools practices and studies. Since the release of the 2020 agenda, Community Schools have expanded across states and districts, and the policy and funding environment has become more dynamic. Meanwhile, the field has deepened its understanding of the essential components of Community Schools. There is increasing demand for cohesive evidence that is comparable across contexts and usable for practice and policy. In response, this updated agenda maintains continuity with the 2020 agenda while sharpening its focus on cohesive frameworks, common measures, and research foci that more directly support implementation, sustainability, and scaling.

Through discussions and survey feedback, the RPN participants consistently identified a common set of needs for the next phase of Community Schools research. They stressed the importance of enhancing cohesion across the agenda through a universal framework for the field, providing a clearer description of the stages of Community School development that can be linked to outcomes, and creating more practical research products usable in real-world settings. They also highlighted the need to improve data infrastructure, including guidance on responsible data sharing, and to adopt more consistent methods for demonstrating return on investment and long-term impact.

The feedback also called for several shifts in focus for the updated Research Agenda. Instead of viewing COVID as a separate research area, participants recommended that the network prioritize the ongoing challenges that persist after the pandemic, such as chronic absenteeism, youth mental health, recovery, and resilience. They emphasized the need to

better understand and support the workforce conditions essential for effective implementation, including principal mentoring, teacher retention, and the evolving roles and capacities of Community School coordinators. Participants also proposed expanding measurement beyond school-level outcomes to include community-level indicators such as community well-being, civic engagement, workforce development, and economic mobility. Finally, they stressed that the agenda should stay true to the core elements of the Community Schools strategy while allowing flexibility to adopt implementation across rural, urban, and suburban settings. (See the last page of this document for the crosswalk between the 2020 and 2026 research agenda topics.)

Research Agenda Validation Process

To validate the updated CCS RPN Research Agenda, IEL utilized a phased, iterative feedback process that began with in-person sensemaking and concluded with a targeted review of survey results and draft revisions. First, IEL brought together RPN members and partners in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 27, 2025, to reflect on the progress over the past five years, utilizing the 2020 agenda, highlight the most relevant areas, identify gaps and emerging issues, and discuss ways to strengthen the agenda's cohesion. Insights from this meeting led to an initial set of proposed updates, including clearer alignment with a universal framework, stronger common measures, and a narrower focus on a core set of questions within each area. Next, IEL conducted a network-wide survey in fall 2025 to gather broader input on refinements to current topics, identify research areas missing from the 2020 agenda, and highlight emerging priorities for the next three to five years. IEL analyzed the survey responses and drafted a synthesis of findings to guide the 2026 agenda. As a final step, IEL shared the draft survey analysis and preliminary agenda updates with a subset of network members for review and feedback. This targeted input helped to clarify the articulation of topic areas and suggested questions and improved the final draft of the Research Agenda.

Enacting the Research Agenda

RPN will use this agenda over the next five years to guide collaboration among researchers and practitioners, elevate studies and tools that support high-quality implementation, and strengthen the translation of evidence into actionable practice and policy. The network will continue to bring stakeholders together around agenda areas, support Research Practice Partnerships built on trust and shared responsibility and create products that make evidence more accessible to the field, including briefs, tools, and other resources that encourage ongoing improvement and informed decision making.

The 2026-2030 Research Agenda

Research Topic 1

Defining Community Schools and Mapping the Implementation Journey

Specific description of this topic:

There is a growing need for a clearer, shared definition of the Community School strategy and stronger alignment with the Essentials Framework, including a practical stages document. It is important to articulate the schoolwide approach of Community Schools, including shared leadership structures, integrated supports, and community-connected instruction. Future studies should focus on understanding what quality implementation looks like at different stages, how coordinating entities and governance structures support quality, and how implementation varies across rural, urban, and suburban settings, especially noting the gap in tools for high schools. Upcoming research should adopt a cohesive, universal framework and document how individual schools evolve.

Suggested research questions:

1. What field-facing definition of Community Schools, grounded in the Essentials Framework, most clearly differentiates the strategy from other service delivery programs while maintaining authentic community roots?
2. What readiness conditions and local asset configurations support different Community School implementation models (e.g., partner-led, district-led, or hybrid), and how do cross-sector roles and responsibilities develop across stages of implementation?
3. What stages of development define Community School implementation, and what observable signals indicate movement from launch to established practice, including expectations for outcomes at each stage?
4. How do governance and coordinating structures differ in effectiveness, including district-led models, school-based models, distributed leadership teams, and the division of roles between district-level and school-level coordinators?
5. How should the Community Schools strategy be adapted across rural, urban, and suburban settings? What boundary conditions define acceptable adaptation?
6. How do state and district systems intentionally incorporate the Community Schools strategy as a unifying framework to support existing educational priorities, initiatives, and accountability requirements, rather than setting it up as a separate or additional program?

Research Topic 2

Leadership Practice, Role Design, and Workforce Capacity

Specific description of this topic:

There is a need for a clearer and measurable definition of collaborative leadership and relational trust, including how they manifest in routines, decision-making, and shared power. Research should identify leadership structures such as functional site-based teams that involve administrators, coordinators, educators, families, students, and partners. It should also explore how decisions are made and how conflicts are resolved. Enhancing superintendents' and principals' capacity is particularly critical, involving mentoring and coaching models that improve principals' ability to share power with partners and families and to support coordinators as co-leaders.

The coordinator role requires a clearer definition and additional support, focusing on competencies like managing partnerships, facilitating shared planning, organizing community engagement, and using data for improvement. It should also include realistic workload and supervision structures to prevent the role from becoming a default solution for all unmet needs.

The teacher's role also demands greater focus, including understanding what effective teaching looks like in a Community School setting, how teachers are prepared for community-connected practice, and how districts attract and retain educators. Research should also explore staff stability and retention as key factors for successful implementation, including how leadership styles influence teacher retention and how role clarity can be established without excessive documentation that takes time away from relationship-building. Common indicators of collaboration and leadership should be developed so schools can track progress in trust and shared decision-making, beyond just outcomes.

Suggested research questions:

1. What specific leadership practices and structures foster relational trust and authentic power sharing among principals, coordinators, teachers, families, students, and partners?
2. Which mentoring and coaching models most effectively strengthen principal capacity to lead Community Schools, especially in sharing power and fostering cross-sector collaboration?
3. What competencies define effective Community School coordinators, and how can capacity building be measured?

4. How can the teacher's role in Community Schools be described to support teaching and learning objectives?
5. Which preparation, recruitment, and retention strategies are underexplored?
6. How can role clarity be established without creating burdensome documentation?
7. What essential leadership skills are needed for superintendents, district leaders, principals, coordinators, and educators to effectively implement Community Schools, and how can professional learning systems be coordinated across roles to develop and maintain those shared competencies?
8. How do role design elements like titles, formal authority, supervision, and decision-making rights influence the measurement, sustainability, and institutionalization of shared leadership, community voice, and student voice in Community Schools beyond initial grant funding?

Research Topic 3

Engagement, Organizing, and Shared Decision Making

Specific description of this topic:

Research to date indicates that organizing plays an important role in promoting shared power and building on collective assets. Research should further document what organizing looks like in practice, such as leadership development for families and youth, structured opportunities for community members to set priorities, and collective problem-solving that influences school decisions. Family and community engagement should be strengthened both as a practice and as a measurement domain, emphasizing family leadership, co-design, and sustained participation. Context matters, and research should explore how shared decision-making varies across settings, deepening understanding of network building and alignment and their variations in urban, suburban, and rural settings. This topic should also address the practical question of what creates a true community by examining conditions for participation, such as how trust is built, how communication loops show how input is used, and how schools encourage broad involvement from staff, students, and families. Research should also investigate how responsibilities for organizing are shared among principals, teachers, partners, families, and students.

Suggested research questions:

1. How should organizing be defined within Community Schools to differentiate it from needs sensing, service coordination, and partnership development?
2. What organizing strategies help Community Schools develop shared understanding and shared power, and how do these strategies vary across urban, rural, and suburban contexts?
3. Family engagement should be treated as a distinct research area, and what measures and strategies best capture parent leadership, co-design, and ongoing participation?
4. What conditions motivate broad participation by staff, students, and families?
5. What defines a community, and how can we go beyond strategy to achieve genuine belonging?
6. How does shared decision-making with quality and sustainability improve Community Schools' practices?
7. What facilitation and engagement practices support authentic shared decision-making and sustained community belonging in Community Schools?

Research Topic 4

Community Connected Instruction and Whole Child Supports

Specific description of this topic:

There is a need to place teaching and learning at the core of Community School research by exploring how rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction is designed, supported, and sustained. Research should document specific instructional models, such as project-based units that address local community issues as learning contexts. These experiences link coursework to real-world pathways that reflect community knowledge and identity. Collaboration between teachers and coordinators should be examined as a support mechanism, including how coordinators align partners and resources with classroom goals, how teachers incorporate enrichment activities like arts and science into core instruction, and how leadership teams prioritize instructional improvement. Educator preparation is also a priority, focusing on how teacher and principal preparation programs incorporate community-connected pedagogy, shared leadership skills, and cross-sector collaboration. This topic should also explicitly include whole child supports as part of learning conditions by examining how Community Schools reduce chronic absenteeism, improve student engagement, and address youth mental health needs through integrated approaches connected to instruction. Measurement should include engagement and belonging indicators, as well as school climate and culture measures, to demonstrate how learning environments evolve as instruction becomes more connected and supportive.

Suggested research questions:

1. What does rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction look like in Community Schools across different grade levels, and how does it impact student engagement, learning, and sense of belonging?
2. How do teachers and coordinators work together to improve instruction and learning?
3. What educator preparation and professional learning strategies best prepare teachers and principals to work in Community Schools and implement community-connected learning models?
4. How do Community Schools combine whole child support with instruction to tackle chronic absenteeism, improve student re-engagement, and support youth mental health?
5. How do intentional partnerships between Community Schools and expanded learning (out-of-school time/OST) providers affect implementation quality and student outcomes?

6. What specific OST roles and partnership conditions (e.g., shared goals, data-sharing routines, co-planning, staffing integration) are most essential for success?
7. What pathways do districts follow to adopt and expand community-connected instruction, and how do they cultivate buy-in and align state standards, accountability expectations, and Community School essential practices over time?

Research Topic 5

Data Systems, Data Sharing, and Knowledge Mobilization

Specific description of this topic:

There is a strong need to strengthen the pipeline from evidence to action so research directly supports implementation decisions at the school, district, and policy levels. This includes producing practical products such as definitive research briefs on what works, implementation playbooks, and curated examples of high-functioning Community School practices, along with supports that help educators interpret and use findings. Building data infrastructure is essential, including clear workflows for collecting and reporting cross-sector outcomes and guidance for coordinators and leadership teams on how to use data for improvement rather than simply for compliance. Data sharing remains a barrier and requires proven agreement models and governance practices, such as templates for local data-sharing agreements that specify the purpose, limit access, address consent, and clarify how data will be used and communicated back to communities. Responsible data use also demands safeguards to prevent misuse of student information, especially when expanding shared platforms or technology tools. Technology and AI can help synthesize best practices, support knowledge management, and accelerate learning across sites. Future research should identify when these tools add value and establish guardrails that reduce privacy risks and perceptions of surveillance. Research-Practice Partnerships should serve as the primary vehicle for translation by shifting from transactional data requests to co-designed inquiries that help schools identify needs, set priorities, and test improvements.

Suggested research questions:

1. What formats and dissemination methods, including research briefs, tools, and curated examples, most effectively help practitioners apply evidence?
2. What district-level data infrastructures and processes are necessary for Community Schools to track cross-sector outcomes?
3. What helps coordinators and school teams use data for improvement?
4. What types of data sharing agreements allow partners to exchange information securely, and which governance practices ensure privacy protection?
5. How can research translation effectively connect evidence to policy and funding decisions?
6. What role can technology and AI play in synthesizing best practices and facilitating knowledge sharing, and what safeguards prevent misuse ?

7. How do university-supported pre-service experiences (such as coursework, practicums, and coaching) affect professionals' data literacy, confidence, and real-world data-use routines once they are in the field?
8. How do university–community participatory research partnerships enhance implementation processes (such as inquiry cycles, interpretation norms, feedback loops) and improve the alignment of tools with practice contexts?
9. How can Community Schools responsibly integrate community-generated or “street” data into formal data systems to inform implementation, improvement, and accountability while maintaining trust and protecting privacy?

Research Topic 6

Measuring Success, Continuous Improvement, and Return on Investment

Specific description of this topic:

Measuring outcomes remains a critical research focus for understanding Community Schools. There is a growing need to measure the success of Community Schools in ways that capture both outcomes and the conditions that produce them. Measurement should go beyond student academic performance to include implementation quality and formative indicators like the strength of collaborative leadership, how often and well partners coordinate, patterns of family and student engagement, and shifts in school climate. Various research methods are crucial for combining quantitative measures such as attendance, chronic absenteeism, discipline, course completion, and graduation with qualitative evidence, including student and family experiences of trust and belonging, as well as educator perceptions of collaboration. A common set of measures for leadership, collaboration, partnerships, and school climate could guide data collection and understanding. ROI and cost-benefit analyses should be created with practical tools that allow stakeholders to show value in different ways, such as demonstrating avoided costs related to chronic absenteeism or improved graduation rates, along with wider community benefits. Measurement should also consider place-based, community-level, long-term effects, including whether Community Schools support workforce development, economic mobility, civic participation, and neighborhood wellbeing, and whether these impacts differ depending on the stage of implementation and local context.

Suggested research questions:

1. What shared set of indicators can the field use to measure Community School success, including implementation quality, student outcomes, school climate, collaboration, and community impacts?
2. Which implementation or formative measures are most essential to include alongside outcomes to assess effectiveness beyond just results, and how do these measures align with the key practices of the Essentials Framework?
3. How to best capture the impacts of Community Schools via various research methods that matter to stakeholders, including qualitative evidence of trust, voice, and community wellbeing alongside quantitative outcomes?
4. What ROI framework and costing approach can be applied consistently across different contexts, and how can it help diverse stakeholders communicate the value of Community Schools without oversimplifying the impacts?

5. How can studies track longitudinal impacts on students and communities, including postsecondary outcomes, workforce pathways, and benefits to neighborhoods?
6. How can Community Schools define, measure, and document meaningful outcomes across stages of implementation, supported by appropriate data tools and infrastructure, to demonstrate early progress and sustain impact over time?

Research Topic 7

Expanding Opportunity and Belonging: Removing Barriers and Strengthening Pathways

Specific description of this topic:

There is a need to develop a clearer theory of change for how Community Schools reduce barriers to opportunity and foster belonging for students and families who are least well served by existing systems. This topic highlights how Community Schools address multiple, overlapping sources of inequity, including poverty, disability inclusion, language learning, immigration barriers, housing instability, health access, rural isolation, community disinvestment, and various forms of discrimination. Research should examine how schools confront these barriers through coordinated strategies that combine rigorous community-connected instruction, integrated student support, community organizing and engagement, and shared leadership structures that ensure priorities align with local needs.

Future studies should investigate how instructional improvement and student support strategies work together to enhance true access to learning and future opportunities. This includes how literacy initiatives and postsecondary planning align with community-connected teaching, how attendance and re-engagement strategies relate to classroom practices, and how coordinated support fosters persistence and success for all students. The research agenda should explicitly consider economic mobility and workforce pathways as outcomes, including career-connected learning, employer partnerships, internships, and work-based learning networks, and examine how these strategies and outcomes vary across contexts. Community Schools, as community hubs, should also be examined in relation to civic participation, community problem-solving, and the conditions that enable all families and young people to engage in shared decision-making. Ethical data practices must be at the core, ensuring transparency about why data are collected, how information is used, who has access, and how communities benefit (especially when partners share data or new technology tools are introduced). Furthermore, research should explore how evolving policies influence what schools can do, how communities interpret data and support, and how Community Schools maintain a clear mission to expand opportunities for all families and students and build community trust.

Suggested research questions:

1. What is the explicit theory of change regarding how Community Schools promote equity and community justice, and what mechanisms should research examine or explore?

2. How do Community Schools address systemic barriers to access and opportunity through community engagement, organizing, integrated support, and community-connected pedagogy?
3. How do Community Schools influence economic mobility and workforce pathways as equity outcomes?
4. How do Community Schools enhance civic engagement and democratic participation? What ethical data practices, consent procedures, and governance safeguards are needed to protect minoritized communities?
5. How do Community Schools integrate trauma-informed and resilience-centered approaches across instruction, student support, and engagement to foster belonging and expand access to learning and opportunity?

Research Topic 8

Sustaining and Scaling: Policy Alignment, Funding Models, and Cross-Sector Integration

Specific description of this topic:

There is a need to clarify sustainability as a system-wide issue that includes funding models, workforce stability, governance, and policy alignment. Research should explore practical funding strategies, such as blending and braiding local, state, and federal funds. It should also document how resource needs evolve from startup phases to full implementation, including when and how investments can become stable. Research should also examine how school- and district-level funding models and budgeting practices shift between traditional schools and Community Schools, including changes in budget composition, spending priorities, and resource allocation over time. Policy and system-level factors should be studied more explicitly, including the roles of state education agencies and higher education institutions in providing implementation support, professional learning infrastructure, and research capacity. Cross-sector integration should be examined, including school-based health centers and related initiatives, as well as the governance and data-sharing conditions that promote effective collaboration. Scaling should be approached as an implementation challenge, including how strategies spread across sister campuses in districts, what can be standardized without becoming overly prescriptive, and how to maintain quality as the model expands. This topic should also address the realities of shifting policies and funding by identifying effective approaches to gain administrative buy-in, community support, and long-term investment that remain resilient despite changes in priorities.

Suggested research questions:

1. What sustainable funding models and governance structures best support Community Schools throughout different stages of development, including higher resource needs at launch and stabilization over time?
2. How do blending and braiding strategies work in practice, and what district-level capacities and decision-making processes enable them?
3. What roles do state education agencies and higher education institutions have in improving implementation quality, ensuring sustainability, and enhancing learning infrastructure?
4. How do cross-sector initiatives, such as school-based health centers, connect with Community Schools, and which integration models enhance outcomes and sustainability?

5. What scaling strategies preserve quality while expanding to more schools?
6. How do changing political and funding environments impact sustainability, and what evidence and case-making methods enhance bipartisan relevance and long-term investment?
7. How do Community Schools become a sustained core identity and operational approach for schools and districts, across people, policy, practice, and provisions, instead of being seen as a separately funded program or initiative?
8. How do scaling strategies, costs, and cross-sector integration models differ across nested systems (school, district, city/county, state) and diverse political and geographic contexts? What approaches support place-based sustainability at scale?

Appendix. Table of the Topic Crosswalk: 2020 vs. 2026

2026 research agenda topic	2020 research agenda topic(s) included
1) Definition and Implementation Journey	4 Defining and Adapting the Community School Strategy
2) Leadership, Roles, and Workforce	5 Collaborative Leadership and Relational Trust; 6 Defining and Supporting Staff, Family, Administrator, and Partner Roles
3) Engagement, Organizing, and Shared Power	2 Elevating Student, Family, and Educator Voice in Research; 8 Organizing; 5 Collaborative Leadership and Relational Trust
4) Teaching, Learning, and Whole Child Supports	11 Teaching and Learning in Community Schools; 10 The Impact of COVID; 1 Measuring Outcomes
5) Evidence to Action and Data Systems	3 Translating Research into Practice; 1 Measuring Outcomes; 2 Elevating Student, Family, and Educator Voice in Research
6) Measuring Success and ROI	1 Measuring Outcomes; 9 Sustainability
7) Opportunity, Belonging, and Pathways	7 Racial Equity and Social Justice; 2 Elevating Student, Family, and Educator Voice in Research
8) Sustainability, Scaling, and Systems Alignment	9 Sustainability; 3 Translating Research into Practice; 4 Defining and Adapting the Community School Strategy