SECTION 1

The Fundamentals of Community Schools

Courtesy of Joey Kennedy for Remake Learning

SECTION I

An Introduction to Community Schools

Every student should have access to schools with the resources, opportunities, and supports that make academic success possible and create strong ties among families, students, schools, and communities. Doing so will provide more equitable opportunities and prepare students for success in life and as citizens. That's what community schools offer. They are a powerful, evidence-based strategy for creating excellent schools for students, regardless of their race, family income level, or the ZIP Code in which they live.

This guide provides tools for policymakers, students and families, community leaders, allies, and advocates who want to advance community schools as a strategy to improve schools. It builds on a large body of research and excellent resources that have been developed by community schools advocates and practitioners. It has also benefited from the review and input of local and national experts in the field.

What Are Community Schools?

Community schools are public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students' school success. Like every good school, community schools must be built on a foundation of powerful teaching that includes challenging academic content and supports students' mastery of 21st century skills and competencies. What makes community schools unique is the combination of four key pillars (or features) that together create the conditions necessary for students to thrive. The pillars are: 1) integrated student supports; 2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities; 3) active family and community engagement; and 4) collaborative leadership and practices. We discuss each of these features in detail in Section II.

Because each community school is a reflection of local needs, assets, and priorities, no two look exactly alike. What they do share, however, is a commitment to partnership and to rethinking—and at times rebuilding—relationships based on a strong foundation of trust and respect. School staff, under the leadership of the principal and community school director, work with families and community partners to create and implement a shared vision of student and school success.

What's in a name? We use the term "community school director" here and throughout the playbook to emphasize that this should be a leadership position within a school. In other publications and in local and state policies this position is also referred to as a "community school manager" or "community school coordinator." When discussing particular policies or programs, we use whatever term is specified in the example cited.

Many community schools stay open year-round, from dawn to dusk, and on weekends. The most comprehensive community schools are academic and social centers where educators, families, and neighbors come together to support innovative learning and to address the impact of out-of-school factors, such as poverty, racism, and violence, which can undermine the effectiveness of in-school opportunities. For example, a health clinic can deliver medical and psychological treatment, dental care, as well as glasses to nearsighted children, and inhalers for asthma sufferers. Extending the school day and remaining open during the summer enables the school to offer additional learning opportunities and supports, as well as co-curricular activities like sports and music—all of which are important enrichment experiences that can prevent summer learning loss; that is, the widening of learning gaps that happens when school is not in session. Community schools engage families as learners as well as partners, offering them the opportunity to develop a skill, such as learning English or coding, or preparing for a GED or citizenship exam, and can support their efforts to improve the neighborhood—for example, by partnering to secure a stop sign or get rid of hazardous waste.[1]

Oakland International High School in California is a community school serving recently-arrived immigrant students and part of the Oakland Unified School District's strategy to create community schools districtwide. Students experience a rigorous academic program in which they create a portfolio of work that allows them to develop advanced academic skills and demonstrate what they have learned in more meaningful ways than on a single test. Health and social services, youth development, and family/community engagement are supportive of and integral to the academic program and directly address the out-of-school barriers to learning faced by students. Through the school's many partnerships, available supports include free legal representation for students who are facing deportation, afterschool tutoring, English as a second language classes for families, mental health and mentoring services at the school wellness center, medical services at a nearby high school health clinic, and an afterschool and weekend sports program.

Oakland International students thrive at high rates. Two-thirds of those surveyed in 2015–16 said they are "happy at school," compared to just over half of other Oakland high school students. The class of 2015 had a 72% 5-year graduation rate—high for this extremely vulnerable population. Fifty-one percent of the Oakland International graduating students were eligible for admission to California state universities, compared to 24% of their English learner peers districtwide and 46% of all students in the district. College enrollment rates in 2014 were 68%, outperforming the 2009 state average of 52% for English learners (the most recent statewide data available).

Why Community Schools?

We focus here on community schools as a core element of an *equity strategy*. All children and families benefit from access to resources, opportunities, and supports to advance learning and healthy development. Community schools can address systemic barriers that limit opportunities for students and families—often based on race and class—ensuring fair access to the supports that will prepare

students for future success. By tapping into a community's assets and culture—from nonprofits to museums to businesses—community schools bring powerful learning opportunities to schools that are under-resourced, and which may have narrowed the curriculum in response to fiscal constraints and testing pressures. In doing so, they help reduce the achievement gap—the inequalities in students' performance on test scores, grades, and other observable school outcomes that result in part from a lack of access. Although community schools alone cannot compensate for years of disinvestment in low-income communities and communities of color, they hold considerable promise for mitigating the impact of this disinvestment and creating high-quality, equitable schools. This is very good news in the face of increasing inequality in our diverse democracy.

Courtesy of Ben Filio for Remake Learning

Ample research is available to inform and guide policymakers, educators, and advocates who want to advance community schools. A comprehensive review of more than 140 studies demonstrates that well-implemented community schools help meet the educational needs of low-performing students in high-poverty schools and leads to improvement in student and school outcomes. Strong research supports the efficacy of integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, and family and community engagement as intervention and improvement strategies. Promising evidence supports the positive impact of the type of collaborative leadership and practices found in effective community schools. Together, the evidence demonstrates that community schools can help mitigate out-of-school barriers and reduce gaps in both opportunity and achievement.

Well-designed studies also suggest that schools providing integrated student supports and other community school services promote positive outcomes for everyone by contributing to collective social and economic benefits. This includes an excellent return in social value on investments for these schools of up to $15 for every dollar invested.[2]

What Makes Community Schools Effective?

Community schools are effective when they are comprehensive, research-based, locally owned, and designed in response to local needs and assets. Comprehensive community schools share a commitment to new ways of collaborating and sharing leadership, the use of research-supported practices, and a forging of powerful partnerships that define a community school.

All four pillars combine to form a comprehensive strategy. The community schools pillars are the supporting practices through which schools achieve good outcomes for students. They enable educators and communities to create safe and welcoming schools that are also high-achieving, even in places where poverty and isolation make that especially difficult.[3]

Courtesy of Ben Filio for Remake Learning

The synergy among these pillars is what makes community schools an effective approach to school improvement. It increases the odds that young people in low-income and under-resourced communities will be in educational environments with meaningful learning opportunities, high-quality teaching, well-used resources, supports to address learning barriers, and a culture of high expectations, trust, and shared responsibility. With all four pillars in place, community schools have the features found in high-quality schools in better-resourced communities and countries where local institutions, family resources, and the combined capabilities of community members complement what the local schools can provide.

They are designed to fit the local context. Those developing community schools must implement the four pillars in ways that fit the local context. Effective community schools engage students, families, staff, and community members to assess local needs and assets and design the four pillars accordingly. They link schools to like-minded community-based organizations, social service agencies, health clinics, libraries, and more. They also identify and take full advantage of local assets and talent, whether it is a nearby university, the parent who coaches the soccer team, the mechanic who shows students how to take apart an engine, the engineer who advises a robotics team, the chef who inspires a generation of bakers, or the artist who helps students learn how to paint. This type of customized, responsive programming takes time to develop. Many schools have invested a full year conducting their needs assessments and building solid relationships.

Not only do students' needs and community assets differ across contexts, so does the capacity of the local school system. Not surprisingly, then, community schools vary considerably from place to place in their operation, programmatic features, and, in some cases, their approach to school improvement. At the same time, experience and an emerging body of research tells us a great deal about what works and how community schools should be organized.

They are locally developed and owned. The community schools approach is not a prescriptive "model" with a set of predetermined activities and services that district or state education leaders should impose on families and educators. Instead, the role of policymakers is to stipulate a framework (represented in this book by the four pillars) to guide the work, offer technical support and advice to school teams, and

provide the resources and infrastructure needed to sustain these efforts. With these supports in place, local educators, partners, families, and community members engage in a deep and collaborative inquiry process to develop a comprehensive understanding of local needs and assets. They can then design (or redesign) the schools, adapting the specifics of the pillars to address the local context. Engaging all sectors of the school community in understanding and co-constructing community schools is key to creating a shared vision and building the trusting community needed to facilitate and sustain—indeed, take ownership of—the desired changes.

What Does Effective Implementation Require?

Pay attention to all parts of the community schools framework. To be effective, community schools must implement all four pillars, integrating them into the core life of the school (rather than viewing community school partners and services as add-on features, for example). That said, many districts and communities go through stages of development before becoming comprehensive community schools. Two foundational first steps are to: 1) develop a collaborative approach to leadership; and 2) conduct an assessment of needs and assets, the results of which should drive the priority-setting and phasing of the various elements.

Capitalize on local assets. As noted above, community schools use the assets of the entire community, including the gifts and talents of people who live and work there—parents, families, residents, educators, school staff, and community partners—to create the optimal learning conditions for each student. They build on these assets to strengthen school, families, and the community.

Four Keys to Successful Implementation:

- A Community School Director
- A Comprehensive Assessment of Needs and Assets
- Site-based Problem-Solving Teams
- Stakeholder/ Partner Teams

Maintain a rich academic focus. Education leaders and policymakers should focus on the goal of creating school conditions, practices, and relationships that characterize high-performing schools, as well as on reducing out-of-school barriers to teaching and learning. This might entail designating common planning time for teachers to develop a shared vision for what students should know and be able to do upon graduating, and other mechanisms for professional learning. A clear focus on transforming teaching and learning—and allocation of sufficient resources to realize this vision—is critical to ensuring that the implementation of various community school elements will result in improved educational outcomes.

Courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action

Provide sufficient depth and time. Students benefit most from attending community schools that offer in-depth and sustained services and opportunities and that have been allowed sufficient time to mature in terms of program implementation. Program monitoring

"Educators, partners, community members, and families must agree upon shared goals, desired results, and the indicators of progress."

should include engaging students and families and attending to early indicators of progress, such as improved attendance. These improvements are likely to precede academic gains.

Use data to inform improvement. Anticipate that the context of schools and communities may change over time and will require modifying the original implementation. Implementation is stronger when partners, educators, and school administrators use data in an ongoing process of continuous program evaluation and improvement, while allowing sufficient time for the strategy to fully mature.

Create a supportive infrastructure at the system or district level. Individual community schools are more likely to be successful and sustained when there is strong support and infrastructure in place at the system or district level. Schools that are part of an intentional system to be scaled both vertically (from pre-k to high school and beyond) and horizontally (across a district or county) receive more support in terms of funding, resources, and capacity-building and are better able to thrive. The Coalition for Community Schools highlights best practices and exemplars for scaling up community schools in its *Scaling Up Guide*.

Share responsibility and accountability to achieve clear goals. Educators, partners, community members, and families must agree upon shared goals, desired results, and the indicators of progress. With these in place, success is more likely, and stakeholders are better able to hold one another accountable.

The Coalition for Community Schools, in partnership with dozens of community school leaders across the country, has developed school and system standards to support high-quality implementation of community schools. These standards reflect best practices and dive deeper into systems and structures at the school and district levels. The Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools also publishes a thorough implementation guide titled *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action*. We list these and other implementation resources in Section III.

Courtesy of Ben Filio for Remake Learning

Endnotes

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About The Partnership for the Future of Learning

The Partnership for the Future of Learning is a national network dedicated to an affirmative, equitable, evidence-based vision of a racially-just remodeled public education system. This playbook makes available research and tools to create a future of learning together, for all of us.

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