

# How Charter Schools Can Leverage Community Assets through Partnerships

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NATIONAL  
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RESOURCE CENTER



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# Introduction

This brief is intended as a resource for charter school operators in any phase of school development in their design and implementation of community partnerships. The following sections explain what community partnerships are and [how they can benefit charter schools](#), [provide snapshots of four charter schools' use of community partnerships](#), [summarize what makes successful community partnerships](#), and [articulate a process for designing and launching a community partnership](#), including resources for learning more.

**Community partnerships empower charter schools by strengthening their capacity to serve the needs of students, families, and staff through deliberate partnerships with community-based entities. The autonomy that charter schools are afforded uniquely equips them with the flexibility to engage partners and even design schools for which one or more partnerships are a key design element—such as with traditional public schools/districts, industry partners, colleges, universities, or other educational or community institutions.** With help from community partners, school leaders can collaborate with community organizations to provide valuable resources for students and the entire school community. In turn, schools, students, and their families can contribute to the community through service-learning opportunities and by sharing school resources with community organizations.

**For the purposes of this paper, we consider a community partnership to be a mutually beneficial and supportive relationship between a school or charter management organization (CMO) and at least one organization or provider based in their community that enhances academic offerings at the school and/or helps address issues of mutual concern.** While some charter schools are based on a model that makes reciprocal involvement with their communities part of their approach to learning, community partnerships can expand the capacity of any school to deliver on its mission, values, and goals.

## THEORY TO PRACTICE

In the process of creating and sustaining community partnerships, charter schools should consider grounding their efforts in the [collective impact model](#), which is a structured approach to bringing community members together to create change and achieve results. Schools can use the eight collective impact [Principles of Practice](#) to design community partnerships that

- Focus on equitably serving all students,
- Include community members in the collaborative efforts, and
- Leverage data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve the work of the partnership.

# The Benefits of Community Partnerships

Overall, community partnerships are a way to increase the likelihood of school success by coordinating similar efforts and aligning interests to maximize the end result. **Charter schools can leverage community partnerships to enhance student outcomes and increase equity through support of a healthy and responsive school environment for students, staff, and families.** Schools and CMOs may, for example, have gaps in specific teacher expertise areas, have inadequate facilities for activities such as arts, sports, or enrichment, or lack the ability to serve the comprehensive needs of students that relate to their well-being and readiness to learn. Similarly, community partnerships can also expand options for courses not available in a school; enhance independent study or skill development opportunities, e.g., career and technical education (CTE) or work-based learning; and build sustainability of program offerings. Community partnerships can also improve the receptiveness of a community to a new charter school.

Some of the most common benefits of charter school-community partnerships include

- Increasing access to health and well-being supports,
- Providing individualized and supplemental academic support and interventions,
- Broadening opportunities for student choice and enrichment, and
- Creating more socially and culturally responsive learning environments.

**Increasing access to health and well-being supports.** A student's ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in school is inextricably tied to their health and well-being. Aspects of health and well-being that affect student outcomes include social and emotional supports, physical and mental health care, healthy food, and family-focused services, such as housing assistance.<sup>1</sup> Community partnerships can be critical to expanding charter schools' capacity to meet the physical and mental health and well-being needs of students and, in many cases, their families. Partnering to provide social services and wraparound supports, such as nutrition assistance and counseling for students and their families, can boost children's access to care that may otherwise be difficult to obtain and can establish a charter school as a community hub.

**Providing individualized and supplemental academic support and interventions.**

Partnerships can enhance charter schools' ability to differentiate instruction for students, both through small-group supports, such as direct instruction, as well as through individualized supports, such as tutoring. For example, partnerships with local universities and other educator preparation providers can enable teacher candidates to partner with a teacher of record in a classroom as part of a residency or mentorship program, which makes an additional educator available to provide small-group or individual academic support. Moreover, supplemental educational services provided by community partners may include interventions such as tutoring, occupational therapy, or supports for students with specific needs. Partnerships that serve to enhance academics can be integrated into the school day or can be provided via

<sup>1</sup> Edley, C., Koenig, J., Nielson, N., & Citro, C., eds. (2019). *Monitoring Educational Equity*. The National Academies Press. <https://www.nap.edu/read/25389/chapter/1>.

home visitation, in before- and after-school programming, or even in other community-based settings, such as local Boys and Girls Clubs that partner with charter schools to provide services.

**Broadening opportunities for student choice and enrichment.** Student enrichment can include activities and courses beyond the school's academic core subjects, such as art, music, maker space activities, and hands-on learning opportunities like community service. Examples include science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) workshops provided by a local museum or after-school provider, or partnering with municipal agencies or industry partners for structured field work or career-focused opportunities for students. At the high school level, for example, community partnerships can provide access to credit-bearing, college-level coursework through a partnership with a local college or university. CTE programs can work with industry partners to offer mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities leading to additional career-related certifications. In some states, enhancing CTE offerings can be supported by additional state or federal funding, such as federal Perkins funds, to support teacher salaries, which can help schools promote program sustainability. These types of partnerships not only enable students to access rich academic opportunities, but also can provide additional avenues for increased student agency through challenging project-based learning and career opportunities.

### **Creating more socially and culturally responsive learning environments.**

Partnerships can help create learning environments that leverage the social and cultural assets and knowledge that students bring to their learning. Educators who emphasize the cultural backgrounds of their students as assets have a greater likelihood of engaging students and increasing academic achievement.<sup>2</sup> Examples of this kind of partnership include land-based learning that connects to cultural traditions for schools serving indigenous communities or other forms of environmental education that help students learn about the cultural histories of their communities. Such efforts might be led by local conservation organizations or departments of parks and recreation. Similarly, community organizations can provide programming,

## THE AUTHORIZER LENS

For some charter school authorizers, community partnerships are an important criterion in considering how a school will be able to actualize its vision and meet the needs of the population it will serve. In New York, for example, the New York Board of Regents (the state's authorizing entity), has prioritized charter applicants utilizing design partnerships with existing community-based organizations (CBOs) and/or institutions of higher education in the school district or region, in alignment with the state's goals in its Every Student Succeeds Act plan. Likewise, in Florida, charter applicants are encouraged to include information about community engagement efforts and community partnerships to date. In Nashville, the application for new charter schools also underscores the importance of partnerships with parents, community and faith-based organizations, local residents, and other stakeholders as a way to "effectively provide the most comprehensive and relevant educational opportunities to their respective student populations."<sup>1</sup> Charter school developers looking to integrate community partnerships into a charter application can check out the [six guiding principles](#) for community-centered charter school authorizing from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

<sup>1</sup> Metro Nashville Public Schools Office of Charter Schools. (2020). Charter school authorization handbook. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57752cbcd1758e541bdeef6b/t/5d3e49ad8a48b600013a8d33/1564363183020/2020+Charter+Authorization+Handbook.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Fergus, E., Noguera, P., & Martin, M. (2014). *Schooling for resilience: Improving the life trajectories of African American and Latino males*. Harvard Education Press.

such as literacy instruction in students' native languages. These organizations can provide access to educators that share students' culture and language, which has been shown to boost student learning.<sup>3</sup> As an additional benefit, partner organizations steeped in the social and cultural environment of students' communities can become providers of professional learning that help school-based teachers learn how to better connect to students' cultural assets.

<sup>3</sup> Egalite, A. J., & Kisida, B. (2016). The many ways teacher diversity may benefit students. Brookings Institution Brown Center on Education Policy. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/08/19/the-many-ways-teacher-diversity-may-benefit-students/>

# Snapshots of Charter Schools in Partnership

Depending on the needs of an individual charter school and the community assets that are available, school-community partnerships can look and feel quite different. The following snapshots provide a glimpse into how four different charter schools are putting community partnerships into practice in different contexts across the country. As you'll learn from these examples, partnerships are being leveraged to increase instructional capacity to provide for individual student needs (Central Queens Academy); to create a culture of community service (Kairos Public Schools); to prioritize the health and nutrition needs of community members (Denver School of Science and Technology); and to provide wraparound supports that bridge the school and community (City Garden Montessori).

## Central Queens Academy Charter, Queens, NY – A Longstanding Partnership to Enhance STEAM and Other Enrichment Opportunities

*Serving 400 students in grades 5-8 (expanding to include K-1st in August, 2021)*



Central Queens Academy charter school in Queens, NY has two campuses serving middle-grade students in Elmhurst and Glendale. A partnership with a community-based organization has enabled Central Queens Academy to expand its academic remediation and other offerings to students, creating a mix of academic and enrichment programs matched to students' interests and needs. The school's local partner for this effort, South Asian Youth Action (SAYA), enhances the school's ability to serve students in many ways. This partnership with SAYA is longstanding and is deeply valued by both organizations. As the school's main enrichment partner and in combination with the school's teachers and staff, SAYA provides arts, music, dance, health, and fitness instruction throughout the school day. According to

Interim Executive Director Ashish Kapadia, SAYA provides great instructors and mentors who provide some instruction during the day alongside teachers of record and then run the after-school program.

As a result of its partnership with SAYA, Central Queens Academy has been able to include an additional instructional period that enables every student to have an enrichment period at the end of the school day. SAYA staff co-lead courses with certified teachers, which enables the school to focus

more time on academics. With this additional instructional period and teaching support, Central Queens Academy has established an interdisciplinary studies course (run by the school), which has enabled the school to focus on how core subject areas integrate with each other. This unique course reinforces learning, makes connections across subjects, and also enables the school to better serve the 1st- and 2nd-generation immigrant student population by using this period to reinforce reading, writing, and students' ability to connect literacy to science and other subjects. In addition, this community partnership has enabled the inclusion of science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM), which includes coding, robotics, and

“Our partnership with SAYA is a win-win, particularly since there are many young adults that want to support schools and mentor students. The key is to tap into that potential opportunity.”

*Ashish Kapadia, Executive Director at Central Queens Academy*



technology integration, into the school day. This longstanding relationship with SAYA has been funded in different ways over the years. There have been years when the school has had to pay SAYA, other years when the partnership has been fully grant-funded, while in some years, programming has been supported through both funding streams.

## Kairos Public Schools, Vacaville, CA – Multiple Partnerships in Service of Civic Engagement

*Serving 600 students in TK-8*

Civic learning is at the heart of Kairos Public Schools in California, which has been recognized by the California Department of Education and the California Judicial Council for its community engagement. Kairos sees itself as a servant leadership model that teaches students to take responsibility for their city. The Solano County campus is a school built on community service and nurturing responsible citizens, as is reflected in its mission statement and charter. As a way to live this mission of creating lifelong community collaborators, each Kairos middle school student

contributes at least 30 hours of community service at 80 locations in Solano County. The leadership of Kairos Public Schools believes that service can be customized for any age or grade level, and that it's possible to teach and model the principles of serving others in ways that enable all age levels to participate and understand.

Kairos seeks out partners that align with their mission of developing servant leadership and supporting the local community. Over time, Kairos has established a number of school-community partnerships that have largely focused

on food insecurity, clean-up of neighborhood blocks, and fundraising efforts. At the middle school level, Kairos's community leadership class partners with the Vacaville Storehouse, where students go monthly to distribute meals to the homeless community. Students are responsible for unloading and packaging food. Likewise, Kairos partners with a community-based organization called 68 Hours of Hunger to provide socio-economically disadvantaged families with meals for the weekend. Fundraising efforts by Kairos students have raised money to build a Play for All park in the community and have also benefited the Vacaville Public Education Foundation, which supports public schools in the city and, according to Kairos Co-Founder Jared Austin, is a "way to show that we can be good neighbors."

## DSST, CO – Bringing Schools and Communities Together to Address Food Insecurity and Promote Understanding

*Serving 6,422 students across 15 middle and high schools in Denver and Aurora*

For the STEM-focused public charter schools operated by DSST, community partnerships have been an essential way to bring their schools and communities closer together. Community partnerships have been critical to meeting the challenges of the pandemic and to supporting DSST community



members. Community partnerships have allowed DSST to provide much-needed wraparound services, such as food assistance. Specifically, DSST has partnered with the Denver Metro Emergency Food Network to produce and deliver nutritious meals to up to 1,000 DSST families and staff members in need. In April 2020, the DSST community launched their own COVID-19 Family Relief Fund with a goal of raising

\$50,000 to support their 7,000 students, families, and staff in need of access to food.

By bringing community resources and leaders into their schools, DSST are also increasing their schools' presence in the community. Engaging with their communities is an intentional way for DSST staff to gain greater understanding of the history and richness of the communities they serve. Over the summer, DSST schools held sessions that invited community leaders to the schools to talk about community

history. These types of sessions continued this year in an effort to build a stronger connection between schools and the communities they serve. Similarly, DSST leaders deliberately spend time during staff training on better understanding their school communities so that staff has a foundational understanding of community needs. For example, DSST has partnered with community leaders and organizations to lead professional learning opportunities for staff on community background and culturally responsive practices. For DSST, these partnerships are one way to act on their mission to run schools that eliminate educational inequity, although DSST leaders recognize they still “have a long way to go in this work.”

## City Garden Montessori, St. Louis, MO – Partnering to Build an Ecosystem that Centers on Children

*Serving 260 students in PK-8th*

At City Garden Montessori in St. Louis, partnerships with community organizations ultimately serve to enhance City Garden's mission and enable the school to advance its vision of building a local ecosystem that is child-centered and is moving the needle towards equity. City Garden uses partnerships to provide a variety of supplemental services

and resources for students. Several community partnerships are in place, which include local universities and colleges, neighborhood and housing organizations, social service organizations, health and mental health providers, and other education organizations and schools, including Montessori networks. Many of these community partnerships have been in place for more than ten years.

Some of the direct services and supports for expanded instructional and student support capacity are provided through a partnership with St. Louis University, which is also the school's authorizer.

“We want every member of the DSST extended family to survive this challenging time and recover to thrive to make that positive contribution to the human story.”

*Hillary Hoffman, DSST Director of External Affairs and Student Recruitment*

“Although it takes significant time and energy to build partnerships and to engage in collaboration, it is absolutely worth it. Our students benefit from many resources that we would not be able to access without partnerships—from utilities and rent assistance for families, to free dental check-ups, to excellent teacher professional development opportunities, and being able to provide our students with state-of-the-art facilities.”

*Christie Huck, CEO/Executive Director of City Garden Montessori*



This partnership includes a reciprocal agreement with the university's Speech and Language Therapy Department to place graduate students at City Garden for their practicum and to contract with the department for speech and language services. These placements enable the school to receive these speech and language services at a lower rate than was paid to a previous provider. In addition, the mutual benefit is obvious—City Garden students benefit from specialized services, while the university's graduate students benefit from their experiences at City Garden.

# Features of Successful Community Partnerships

Though what makes a partnership a success will vary from school to school, based on needs and local context, there are some features that are more likely to yield success in school-community partnerships. In general, successful educational partnerships make use of an educational ecosystem that includes the full set of experiences and opportunities that students can access to support their learning and development.

**Taking a systems approach to education—including by utilizing additional resources and connections across different systems and sectors within the broader community—is a way to support the health and social, emotional, and academic growth of a school population.<sup>4</sup>**

Across research studies and reflections from community partnership participants, the following factors are among those most likely to contribute to successful school-community partnerships:

- A school leader with a strong commitment to the partnership;
- A leadership team for the partnership that comprises school and community stakeholders;
- Clear and consistent communication among partners;<sup>5</sup>
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities across the partner organizations;
- A shared culture that fosters relationships, trust, and respect among participants;<sup>6</sup>
- Continuity of collaboration—that is, a willingness to sustain the collaboration—including a long-term plan for sustainability;<sup>7</sup> and
- Regular data collection and evaluation activities that ensure transparency about results.<sup>8</sup>

The section below describes how schools can build the new community partnerships that include these factors.

<sup>4</sup> Aspen Institute. (2017). The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development. [https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FINAL\\_CDS-Evidence-Base.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FINAL_CDS-Evidence-Base.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Gross, J. M. S., et. al. (2015). Strong school-community partnerships in inclusive schools are “part of the fabric of the school... we count on them.” *School-Community Journal*. 25(2).

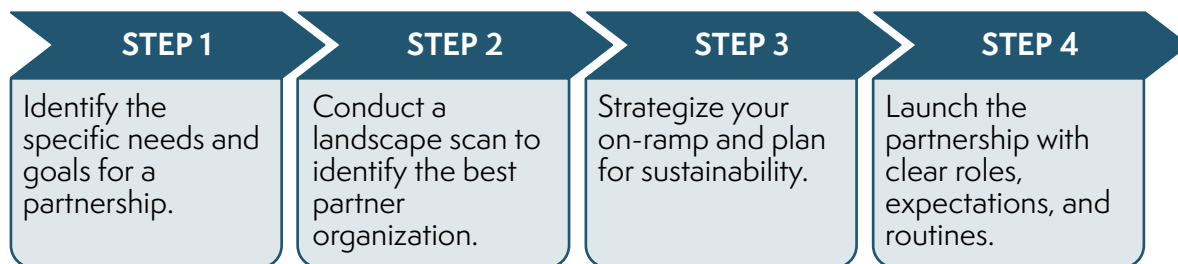
<sup>6</sup> Collective Impact Forum. <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact>

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, J., Moore, J. B., Blake, C., Morris, S., & Kolbe, M. B. (2013). Characteristics of successful community partnerships to promote physical activity among young people, North Carolina, 2010-2012. *Preventing Chronic Disease*. 2013; 10: E208.

<sup>8</sup> Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. (2018). School-community partnerships: Joining forces to support the learning and development of all students. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Community-School-Partnerships-Case-Study.pdf>

# Getting Started: How to Turn Your Community Partnerships Vision into Reality

The following is a 4-step process that charter leaders can use to guide their design, planning, and launch of a community partnership. This process is based on the practices and success factors for community partnerships identified in the previous section.



## STEP 1 → Identify the specific needs and goals for a partnership.

*Think broadly about what will make a partnership successful for your school community.*

- Identify the unmet needs or challenges affecting your school and gather information to understand the scope of the needs or challenges. Be sure to create ways for families and other community stakeholders to share their input about needs.
- Based on the collective impact [Principles of Practice](#), use a data-informed approach to identify the scope of the partnership and be specific about the ways in which your goals are centered on educational equity.
- Quantify the scope of the need, as best you're able, and consider setting "SMART" goals, that is, goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound. Be explicit about who will be served, over what period of time, and through what goals.
- In creating a new partnership, consider what success will look like for your school community. In addition to identifying the overall goals of the partnership, specify goals and metrics aligned with explicit needs in your community.

### *An example of how to do it:*

You can create a [logic model](#) to help map your school's needs and goals to intended outcomes and measures of success that are meaningful for your school. Use the logic model to consider the short- and long-term goals of your community partnership. For example, what do you hope to accomplish in a semester, one year, three years?

## COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Creating a community partnership is not only an opportunity to amplify your school's mission, but also one way to engage in new ways with your community. Be sure students, staff, and families get to help shape the design of the partnership and participate in decision-making. You may be able to create new leadership roles for school or community members with unique leadership skills specific to the structure of your partnership. Engage early and often with your school community around a potential partnership to gather family and staff input.

### Resources:

For help developing partnership objectives, check out the National Charter School Resource Center's [SMART Objectives Toolkit](#), which combines planning principles with CSP grant requirements to guide current and prospective grantees in developing objectives and performance measures that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (SMART).

The National Charter School Resource Center's [Logic Model Toolkit](#) can help charter school operators develop logic models, either as a part of their design process or to help align project activities, goals, and resources with intended outcomes.

## **STEP 2** → **Step 2: Conduct a landscape scan to identify the best partner organization**

*A landscape scan is a great way to create a broad search to identify possible partners in your community.*

- Activate your network! Talk to teachers, leaders, families, and other community members. Are there other charter schools or local education agencies (LEAs) that you might reach out to?
- As you learn about potential partners, look for alignment of organizational values and shared goals and alignment between your school's, students', and families' needs and the capacities and assets of the partner organization.
- Lean into your school community to explore the landscape of potential partners and consider if there's a role in community outreach for the staff members and families whom you engaged in Step 1. Ultimately, an ideal fit matches the school's, students', and families' needs with the community partner's assets, and vice versa.

### *An example of how to do it:*

Working with families and other community members, create a “map” of potential partners that shows the connections of each potential partner to each of the needs identified in Step 1, as well as the benefits of working with the partner organization.

### Resources:

Check out the National Charter School Resource Center [family engagement toolkit](#) for strategies to support authentic, inclusive family engagement you can use to make sure that families are included meaningfully in this process.

[The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) provides a number of resources for family-school-community partnerships and engagement.

### STEP 3 → Strategize your on-ramp and plan for sustainability

*Once you've selected a mission-aligned partner organization, strategize what you'll need to do to launch and sustain the collaboration.*

- Think forward about the budget implications and how you'll sustain financial support for the partnership. Consider what staffing and resources are needed to implement and sustain the partnership.
- Consider the resource and operations implications of the partnership, such as changes needed in staffing, facility use, or permissions or approvals needed for partners serving in the school building or for students who will be engaging in the community.
- Understand the steps necessary to formalize the partnership, such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

*An example of how to do it:*

Here are some questions to consider when thinking about financial support and sustainability:

- Will you need to fundraise on a regular basis? Which organization will have this responsibility?
- Are there state or local funding sources, including public agencies such as community health entities, that may be of assistance?
- Are there state and federal programs or grants that could support the development and sustainability of your program?

*Resources:*

To learn more about how to sustain community partnerships using the principles of a collective impact model, visit the [Collective Impact Forum](#).

For resources to help with a range of community partnerships, such as those with businesses and other local organizations, check out the tips and strategies on [this Edutopia webpage](#).

### STEP 4 → Launch the partnership with clear roles, expectations, and routines

*As with any new initiative, it's important to know where responsibility and decision-making lie.*

- Decide who in your school community will own and manage the relationship with the partner organization and identify their counterpart in the partner organization.
- Create either a small leadership team or a specific liaison in both your school and in the partner organization. Consider including parents and students in the team that liaises with the partner organization.

- Begin with transparent agreements about how decisions will be made, including clearly defined mutual roles.
- Set mutually beneficial routines for managing the partnership, such as a schedule for regular data collection, collaborative reflection, and other shared continuous improvement practices.
- Finally, using the collective impact model, take intentional steps to deepen relationships and foster trust in and respect for all participants involved in the partnership.

### *An example of how to do it:*

Leaders of both organizations should regularly meet to (1) review the shared vision of the collaborative relationship, (2) review partnership outcomes and impact data, (3) identify new and emerging school and community needs, and (4) assess the quality of services or activities enabled by the collaboration.

### *Resources:*

For lessons learned about how to establish strong relationships between after-school providers and schools, check out [Connecting School and Afterschool: 15 Ways to Improve Partnerships](#) for recommendations from school and program staff across the country.

For a more comprehensive description of opportunities for community partnerships, see the CDC's [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child](#) framework, which provides a student-centered way to think about the role of the community in supporting the school in making connections between student health and academic achievement through evidence-based policies and practices.