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Starting and sustaining community schools

10 tips for district leaders

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Across the country, school district superintendents are transforming into community school leaders. Responsible for systems of learning that also include school nutrition, bussing, safety, finances, community engagement, and so much more, superintendents recognize that they need a different strategy to effectively address the learning needs of the whole child. Only with a collective approach—one where nonprofit organizations, community members, families, government agencies, institutions of higher education, afterschool programs, museums, faith-based groups, and others can rally around the school and its children—can they successfully create the conditions where children can learn and thrive. Increasingly, district leaders are finding community schools to be the strategy they need and are taking advantage of federal grants and supportive policies in states such as New York, Maryland, Vermont, New Mexico, and California to start and sustain community school initiatives.

Given the crucial role played by superintendents, this brief lays out 10 tips for district leaders to effectively start and sustain community schools.¹

The tips below come from experienced community school superintendents and other district leaders. Together, they constitute a resource for the growing number of superintendents taking leadership roles in initiating or expanding the community school strategy. This resource will also be useful for community partners that are working with school districts and who want to better understand the superintendent's role.

Here is the advice leaders wanted to share.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL?

A community school is a local school transformation strategy that creates the conditions for all students to excel in their learning, pursue their passions, and access the resources and skills needed to reach their goals. Grounded in trusting relationships, collaboration, and data-informed, inclusive decision-making, community schools are able to leverage and coordinate the resources and voices of the whole community in service of a shared vision for student flourishing and a thriving school community.*

*Definition taken from an upcoming resource developed with input from the [Community Schools Forward Task Force](#).

¹ Lessons are drawn from conversations with superintendents and district staff with responsibility for community schools across 11 places and with community school experts who work with superintendents.

1. Recognize that the challenges students and families face show up in school.

Superintendents have a strong rationale for community schools: They recognize that the role of schools has had to adjust to address growing inequities and attendant student and family needs. They also appreciate that there are incredible assets in their communities—from families to organizations—that often go untapped, but when coordinated effectively could be extremely powerful.

Michael Hayden, superintendent of Clyde-Savannah Central School District, a mostly agricultural community between Rochester and Syracuse, New York explains, “In my role as superintendent, you really do see and get a global understanding of the interdependence of everything in the school and the greater community at large.”

In understanding the changing needs and identifying underutilized resources in their community, superintendents hone in on areas they want to improve. They take a holistic view that demonstrates understanding of the whole child—their needs and assets—and seek to address a variety of areas that influence student learning.

Sometimes superintendents focus on a specific challenge as a driver for their work, such as students’ chronic absence or achievement. Superintendent Hayden has chosen to focus on access to health care in his rural community, where [there is only one health care provider for approximately 3,910 patients](#) and where many of the families don’t have cars, severely limiting access even more. In Lost Hills, a rural area in central California, five districts are working together to address needs within each district—from early childhood to access to social and health services to school transitions—and are leveraging expertise and resources across each district. Focusing on these types of issues can help a community understand the connections across the ecosystem.

2. Develop a shared vision and strategy for community schools.

In each community, district leaders have a clear rationale for starting community schools, and the most successful ones develop their visions with partners. They identify the strengths and areas for improvement by talking with community members, partners, families, students, principals, educators, and other school staff. They then work with these groups to develop a shared vision.

Community school superintendents recognize the assets in the community and the opportunity for partners to share in addressing the changing needs of schools. They also know that sustainable and effective approaches rely on co-development.

When he was superintendent of the Batavia school district in New York, not far from Niagara Falls, Anibal Soler, Jr. recognized that students were struggling with food access, clothing, and homelessness—and this was negatively impacting their attendance at school. He created a community school advisory board comprised of community members, nonprofit and business leaders, board of education members, principals, teachers, and other staff. This group developed a vision for community schools as a way for schools and the community to enhance the support students receive so they can learn. Speaking about the vision for community schools, he says, “You invite people to come be a part of our district. We’re always going to keep our doors open...For a community like Batavia, everything is around the community schools initiative.” Now, he is making the [school the hub of the community in Schenectady, NY](#), where he is the new superintendent.

In Oakland, California the district decided to become a community school district in 2011, even changing the district motto to “community schools, thriving students.” Since that initial vision, set by Superintendent Tony Smith and the community he engaged, each successive superintendent has put their own spin on the community school approach, with its focus on equity across the district. The initial vision was formalized by a comprehensive district policy infrastructure, ensuring the sustainability of the approach while allowing each new superintendent to contribute to a dynamic, shared community school vision.

3. Mobilize community stakeholders and resources to share responsibility for student success.

Superintendents understand the resources, assets, and priorities in their community and strive to engage families, community members, and organizations as partners in starting and sustaining the community school initiative. While that can be challenging for school systems that are used to—and often are designed for a siloed approach—district leaders are well served by creating organizational structures that facilitate shared decisionmaking responsibility and accountability for implementing, sustaining, and deepening a community schools initiative. Reflecting on the recent multibillion dollar California community school grant programs, two local leaders representing parent organizations [write](#) that: “Through shared power and decisionmaking, students, families, community, and educators can co-create relationship-centered schools and lay the foundation for an education system built by and for us all.”

Oakland began its initiative in partnership with local organizations. Oakland Unified School District Chief of Staff Curtiss Sarikey, reflecting on the district's first steps on becoming a community school district, spoke about bringing people together, listening to their ideas, and jointly building a vision (see Tip #2)—a collaborative approach that “paid huge dividends” and supported the district’s “ability to sustain the initiative over time.” Further, Sarikey notes that the process of engaging the community is *ongoing*—the district is constantly working to renew its engagement practices. He adds, “Living the community school ethos is about doing things *with* people, as opposed to people.” Districts can create tables of partners who are empowered to share responsibility for the initiative, while also mobilizing their own resources. In [Massena, NY](#), community school leaders created a community schools advisory board while Lost Hills, CA uses a children’s cabinet to guide their community school approach.²

4. Align the community school strategy with the district’s strategic plan.

Community schools need to clearly show up in the district’s strategic plan and other guiding documents to illustrate how district staff, school leaders, educators, and partners prioritize community schools. In times of staff and leadership transition, as well as tough budgets, such alignment helps sustain community schools.

Massena, NY superintendent Patrick Brady explains, “We've put this out front and center, that we're community schools. It's in our strategic plan. There's always something in our district goals each year.” In Oakland, Sarikey asked rhetorically, “How can you do systems change if the community schools approach language and framework is not evident in your strategic plan?” He recommends that community schools are clearly defined and integrated into the district so that they aren’t one element of student services, but rather integrated into “reinventing how school happens.” He adds:

. . . you have to have something memorialized that can build some accountability into the system. Accountability to your community, to your board and to your staff. . . . This is what we're committed to. It's baked into our values. It's baked into what we're measuring.

² To learn more about structures for organizing community partners and sharing responsibility for the initiative, districts may consult the [Coalition for Community Schools' resources](#) on Collaborative Leadership Structures and the National Education Association's [System-Level Structures for Effective Community School Implementation & Support](#).

5. Transform the district’s culture through dedicated staffing, organizational change, and building knowledge and capacity for implementation.

Superintendents realize that they need to make changes to expectations about how schools and school districts operate in order to champion community schools. To accomplish this, they create community school-specific staff roles, offices, and resources; spread knowledge about community schools throughout the district; and help principals learn about the benefits of the strategy and how it operates.

Having a trusted and empowered individual responsible for guiding the initiative, like a “district community school coordinator,” is helpful, according to Abe Fernandez, vice president of Collective Impact and the director for the National Center for Community Schools at Children's Aid. This role ensures that someone will “create the cross-departmental and the cross-functional work that needs to happen. . .the grind of actually making this stuff happen,” as Sarikey underscores. In Oakland, that role became the district’s first associate superintendent for family school and community partnerships. In other districts, it could be the head of an office for community schools, a district community school coordinator, or the head of the family engagement office.

And of course, this district-level community school leader needs to be supported by and work well with the superintendent. Kristin Colarusso, community schools director of Massena, NY, and Superintendent Brady emphasized the positive relationship characterized by “good communication” and program implementation based on their community’s needs assessment.

Districts also create or utilize existing district staff to support the strategy. Culture changes when understanding about and responsibility for community schools is diffused across staff positions. Regardless of the size of the district or the number of community school staff, the superintendent needs to demonstrate they are executing the district’s vision for community schools, are breaking down walls between offices and budgets, and have decisionmaking authority. In large districts like New York City, this means creating a dedicated central office of community schools with an executive director to oversee the initiative, as well as a director of capacity building and numerous program managers to support the school and community partnerships; whereas in smaller Massena, this means creating a rapid response team of existing office leaders that utilize the community school strategy most effectively. In Deer River, a school district with one elementary and one high school in north-central Minnesota, Superintendent Dr. Jeff Pesta elevated the community school role to a cabinet level position because he saw integration as most effective.

And, district leaders build expertise, knowledge, and capacity about community schools within the district staff and with partners. Understanding how the strategy works for a particular district requires time and attention from key cohorts across the school district and the community since both share the strategy. Internally, leaders ensure that district staff are knowledgeable about community schools and see how the strategy impacts their responsibilities. In New York City, the district worked with its area superintendents to better understand the strategy, which helped with implementation and alignment. In Hartford, Dr. Torres-Rodriguez supports her district leadership team by deepening their understanding of community schools through professional learning opportunities and by including community schools in the district's strategies. Externally, districts help community partners understand the strategy and the way schools operate with partnerships in mind. For example, New York City works with its many partners who have transformed the way they operate by aligning to the community school strategy.

The leaders I spoke with suggested that going forward, communities should incorporate knowledge of community schools into their superintendent searches, professional learning opportunities for superintendents should include discussing community school strategies, and pre- and in-service educators should receive more education about community schools.

6. Help principals become community school champions.

Community schools are most effective when the principal fully supports the approach at the school. Superintendents play an important role in helping principals understand the value of the approach, how it is connected to learning and other school priorities, and how it helps the principal secure partnerships and resources. District leaders should communicate their priority for a community school vision with principals, involve them in implementation, and help secure on-site coordinators who work with the principal. Absent principal support, the superintendent's initiative may get lost in implementation.

Schenectady, NY's Superintendent Soler explained that the principal's understanding of and support for community schools is "fundamental," particularly since "The community schools is a whole school reform model... It is a way of thinking." Similarly, Dr. Ingrid Williams Horton, director of community schools for Prince George's County Public Schools, ensures her team supports community school principals by hosting a "welcome to community schools," which includes information-sharing; meetings both with her and with the community school specialist to discuss community school strategy; and a leadership retreat with community school coordinators to discuss roles and responsibilities, performance goals, and the support they will receive such as coaching and mentoring throughout the year.

7. Communicate the vision for and commitment to community schools.

Superintendents are champions for the community school strategy and use their positions to communicate their vision for partnerships in everything they do, signaling to district staff, school leaders, and community partners their commitment. Superintendents can do this by consistently explaining their rationale for community schools to their boards of education, the press, and the community.

Sarikey notes that former Oakland superintendent Tony Smith talked about community schools as an equity strategy everywhere he went. He would tell community members that while the district was unique in its role serving children every day, it was just one piece of the puzzle and required partnerships. District leaders can even brand their community school work. New York City created banners, t-shirts, and customizable brochures to raise the visibility of their approach.

8. Support sustainable financing through aligning and leveraging resources.

Superintendents identify funding streams to support community schools by repurposing existing dollars and securing new funding. They also continuously seek to diversify funding from public and private sources. Districts have a variety of sources, both internal and external, to fund community schools. And when the district invests its own resources, it demonstrates its commitment to the strategy and has the potential to significantly advance their initiative and rally partners and funders.

[Metro Nashville Public Schools](#) used federal funds (Race to the Top and now Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds), the district operating budget, school budgets, and community grants to support the development of community schools. Hartford (CT) Public Schools received significant start-up support from the Hartford Partnership for Student Success (HPSS).³ Now, district funds are leveraged to support operations in their community schools, and lead community partners in each school leverage braided resources to support programming.

³ HPSS was comprised of four critical local organizations: The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, United Way, the City of Hartford, and the Fund for Greater Hartford.

Grants can also help district leaders start an initiative. Lost Hills, CA, leveraged its \$500,000 full-service community schools grant from the U.S. Department of Education to \$15 million in resources from other state and federal grants. Every incoming grant is built around the organizing principles of their community schools.

There are several resources to help superintendents and their community partners to think about how to fund their community schools creatively.⁴

9. Evaluate and continuously improve community school approaches, systems, and engagement.

Sustainable community school initiatives need continuous refinement to strengthen and deepen their impact. Superintendents set clear outcomes, evaluate progress, and use data to make decisions and are looking for ways to understand and improve processes and systems through research and community input. They engage internal and external stakeholders in the improvement process as part of their shared accountability for the initiative.

New York City worked with the RAND Corporation to conduct a comprehensive implementation and outcome [evaluation](#) of their large-scale community school initiative. Oakland and Lost Hills both partner with universities to study their initiative. Sarikey notes that long-standing initiatives like Oakland need to take stock, refresh, and look for areas where the initiative still needs to grow.

10. Sustain the initiative through policy that codifies the community school approach.

Superintendents and partners understand that school leaders frequently change, and that policy can help sustain the transformational work. They support and create school board policies, internal policies, and inter-governmental policies to help community schools endure.

Kyle Serrette, the community school campaign manager at the National Education Association and a national community schools expert who has helped local leaders start community schools,

⁴ See, for example, [Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability](#); [District Leaders' Strategies for Funding and Implementing Community Schools](#); and [Investing in Community Schools: How States and Districts Can Use Federal Recovery Funds Strategically](#).

encourages local organizers and leaders to create a [school board policy](#) to support community schools for when superintendents change. As more states create supportive community school policies, district leaders will gain support for sustainable community school approaches. Oakland has had multiple superintendents since it first launched its community school approach. The board policy helped sustain it so that school sites and the community know they can depend on the consistency of that approach. Oakland has gone further and signed a master agreement with Alameda County that specifies how district and county agencies will support community schools. [Maryland](#) has a state policy that turns schools with high concentrations of poverty into community schools. In Prince George’s County, MD, the district has an [administrative policy](#) that mandates a representative steering committee to guide its community schools initiative. Director of Community Schools Dr. Ingrid Williams-Horton recommends that if the district wants schools to have a steering committee, then the district should model that same collaborative approach. Community school policies are growing across the country.

Looking forward

Increasingly, superintendents and community leaders need to transform the way schools and school systems operate to be responsive to local needs and assets. The pressures they face from external factors such as the economy, health care, and housing require them to think, align, and implement differently. At a time when our country is [losing superintendents](#) who led their districts through the pandemic and face many challenges, including political, community school initiatives are a promising approach to unite the community in supporting students.

Superintendents have the ability to transform districts through effective community school initiatives. In Hartford, the pandemic gave the district an opportunity to demonstrate its transformation. Dr. Torres-Rodriguez says that their effort to build a community school initiative gave them the “muscle memory” for how to effectively leverage partnerships. When the pandemic crisis emerged—they immediately reached out to their existing partners.

Across the districts interviewed, district leaders say that when these measures are taken, community schools are here to stay. Their experiences underscore that “community schools” is a way of work, it’s how schools operate, and it’s how good things happen.

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