



## The Power of Community Schools

NATASHA CAPERS AND SHITAL C. SHAH

*The community schools movement has led to powerful collaborations in New York City and nationally between educators, unions, families, communities, and other partners to provide services and transform learning.*

The “community schools” approach builds networks of local organizations and institutions committed to bettering outcomes for youth. Using schools as hubs, these partners offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families, and communities. In this article, Shital Shah, who supports community schools as assistant director for educational issues at

the American Federation of Teachers, and Natasha Capers, a coordinator for the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), a parent-led collaborative of unions and community organizations, discuss the community schools movement and how it has become a lever for equity and deep parent engagement in New York City and nationally. They also explore how this approach provides an opportunity

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for powerful partnership that joins educators and school staff and their unions with family and community members to improve learning opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

**Q How did you get involved with community schools work?**

**A** *Shital Shah:* Prior to working at the AFT, I did policy and partnership work for the National Coalition for Community Schools, managing networks of practitioners from across the country in places like Portland, Oregon,<sup>2</sup> and New York.<sup>3</sup> Three years ago I moved to the AFT to a position dedicated to the expansion of community schools – not just in practice, but also in policy and advocacy.<sup>4</sup> I do policy work and training around community schools – I work with labor, management, and communities. In some places they are already working together for solutions. In others, you might have unions and management working together, but the community is not so engaged. In others, unions and the community are pushing really hard on management. The potential for bringing together multiple kinds of power is one of the biggest trends I’ve learned in my work with AFT. Organized labor brings one kind of political leverage,

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- 1 See the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership ([communityschools.org](http://communityschools.org)), which serves as the research, policy, and advocacy organization for networks of community school initiatives and for more than 150 national, state, and local partners that support community schools. See also Henry Perez and Perla Madera’s article in this issue of *VUE* for the story of two new community schools in Los Angeles. For more on CEJ, see [nyccej.org](http://nyccej.org).
- 2 See <https://multco.us/sun/sun-community-schools>.
- 3 See [childrensaidsociety.org/community-schools/community-schools-new-york-city](http://childrensaidsociety.org/community-schools/community-schools-new-york-city).
- 4 For the AFT’s position on community schools, see [aft.org/position/community-schools](http://aft.org/position/community-schools).

and community organizations can bring another kind of power, and each sector brings opportunities to work toward a common vision of how we want to support children and families for life success. For example, in New York City, advocates did a remarkable job of moving the work forward in a short period of time as they developed a education platform to present to candidates during the 2014 mayoral campaign, with support from unions (see sidebar on PS 2013 for more on this campaign).

### THE PS 2013 CAMPAIGN

In 2012, with the 2013 mayoral campaign coming up in New York City, community organizers decided they were going to develop their own platform for what they really wanted in education and present it to all the candidates instead of depending on the candidates to come up with platforms that might not reflect parents’ concerns. This developed into a citywide, cross-sector campaign known as PS 2013, which produced an “Education Roadmap” for the next mayor. Investing in community schools was one of the recommendations. Mayor de Blasio embraced the community’s vision and promised to build 100 community schools in his first term.

The PS 2013 campaign is described in *VUE* no. 39, *The Education Election: Community Organizing to Envision and Advance a Progressive Education Agenda*, available at [vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39](http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39). The education roadmap, *Whole Child, Whole School, Whole City: An Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*, is available at [aplusnyc.org/education-roadmap/ps-2013-education-roadmap](http://aplusnyc.org/education-roadmap/ps-2013-education-roadmap).

*Natasha Capers:* I'm now the coordinator for CEJ. Three years ago, my children's school was on the list to be closed. Fiorella Guevara of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform was working with CEJ parents at my school, and after that work, I stayed involved in CEJ and became a parent leader with the coalition.

At CEJ, I learned about the community school model and went to Cincinnati to see it in action.<sup>5</sup> Now we're trying to engage the community around community schools in New York City. For the last year, we've been working with community organizations and parents to raise awareness around community schools, define what transformative parent engagement can look like in community schools, and explore how to develop the capacity of parents to be equal decision makers in schools.

**Q How are community schools different from traditional public schools?**

**A** *Shital Shah:* We know that too many of our children and families are not getting equal access to the opportunities and supports that are essential for their success. School is a public democratic institution, supported by tax dollars, so it should be the place in our neighborhoods that affords all children and families equitable education and life chances. All schools should be ones that everyone wants to send their children to. Families should not be at the mercy of "lottery schools" that boast offerings for student success – if the student is lucky enough to be chosen – or the schools in one particular well-off neighborhood that have essential supports and services for their students, plus a rich offering of extracurricular activities and a multifaceted curriculum that offers music, art, and dance as well as math and English. These are the

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5 See [cps-k12.org/community/clc](http://cps-k12.org/community/clc).

opportunities that *every* family and student has the right to access.

Community schools address this goal through their approach to school-community partnerships. Traditional schools tend to have a variety of ad hoc community partners working with their students, families, and teachers, with little coordination. In contrast, the infrastructure of community schools allow these partnerships to be intentional, aligned, and focused on results, thus maximizing their effectiveness.

This design includes a site resource coordinator and strong internal processes that engage parents, community partners, school staff, and school administration. A school-level leadership team includes teachers, school staff, community partners (sometimes the lead agency), a parent representative, and other key partners. This team is responsible for creating a shared vision for the school, as well as identifying desired results and helping align and integrate the work of partners with the school (Coalition for Community Schools 2014). Some community school site resource coordinators hold monthly meetings with all of the community service and support providers to discuss what is happening during the school day, what the needs (academic and non-academic) are, and how those partners can help address those needs. These sorts of regular conversations enable the community to understand how to contribute to the school and students. Their work becomes intentional and aligned, helping the school achieve its goals.

Another key to success is that this strategy must be deeply rooted in neighborhoods. Community schools serve as a hub for the entire community, rather than simply a place where classes and extracurricular activities are held. They develop and coordinate partnerships with community organiza-

tions, public and private agencies, and other key stakeholders to provide opportunities and supports for academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.

**Q What did organized parents and community members contribute to the community schools model in New York City?**

**A** *Natasha Capers:* When the parents of CEJ closed their eyes to envision an ideal school in the early years of the coalition,<sup>6</sup> they had no idea that all they wanted and more was already out there waiting. They knew it was important to have wraparound social services to address the obstacles that made it harder for our children to succeed in school. What they didn't know at the time was that a model existed that could educate their children, support them, and help rebuild their communities. It is called *community schools*.

CEJ ended up creating a platform and vision that would transform not only New York City schools but also the community school model itself. Where most saw the community schools model as a way to deliver critically needed services families wanted and needed, CEJ saw it as a way not only to engage parents and families, but also to transform teaching and learning.

It is important to understand that CEJ parents live in communities with the lowest-performing schools in the city. For example, District 9 in the Bronx has ranked last in the city for as long .....

6 CEJ originally formed in 2006 as a citywide coalition of neighborhood-based organizing collaboratives in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. For the story of how CEJ came together and its early work, see Shaakir-Ansari and Williams (2009).

7 See [nyccej.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CEJ-College-Ready-Community-Schools-Platform.pdf](http://nyccej.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CEJ-College-Ready-Community-Schools-Platform.pdf).

8 See [nyccej.org/1292/community-schools-mayor-deblasio](http://nyccej.org/1292/community-schools-mayor-deblasio).

as the city has been keeping data on student achievement. Little to nothing was done by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) during the Bloomberg administration to turn the district around. The same can be said of other districts, especially in communities of color, including the one I live in. District 23 in Brownsville, Brooklyn, has struggled with bare-bones budgets and very few quality resources. Without proper support from the DOE these schools have been left to languish.

When the community schools model came to the attention of CEJ, the coalition developed a “College-Ready Community Schools” platform.<sup>7</sup> The Bloomberg DOE implemented small parts of it, but not enough to make a difference. But CEJ parents had a chance to move the community schools platform forward in a big way through the PS 2013 campaign, in which community organizers in New York City developed an education agenda to present to mayoral candidates in 2013 (see sidebar), with community schools as one of the recommendations. PS 2013 had a real impact on the candidates and their education agendas, and Mayor Bill de Blasio is strongly committed to building community schools. CEJ has now developed a policy brief with recommendations for the mayor on implementing his plan.<sup>8</sup>

Strong academics are another important theme. Parents didn't just want to be given access to social and health services like a health clinic or dental services. It's not enough for Johnny to have straight teeth if he still cannot do division. It would never be enough for Bianca to have a new pair of glasses if she were still unable to read. In order for the services to be used to their utmost potential, we must provide services *while* dissecting and improving what happens in the classroom. That includes how students are treated when they are disruptive. Suspension does

not resolve conflict, solve any problems, or add positively to a student's educational experience. In fact, it does the opposite and puts students on a path to dropping out of school. Restorative Justice and restorative practices, on the other hand, heal relationships, resolve conflict, and create a positive school climate, all while the student remains in school.

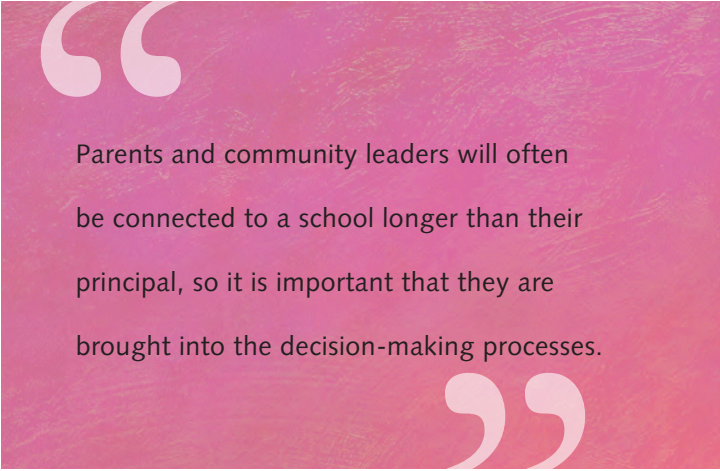
Parent and family engagement is the other critical difference built into CEJ's College Ready Community Schools platform and vision. Parents in New York City, especially in communities of color, were pushed out to the margins of their educational experience. At the same time, many traditional "experts" and the media were crafting and pushing out messages that families didn't care about their children's school or education and did not want to be involved.

One part of that was true. Parents throughout NYC did not want to be *merely* involved; they wanted to be *engaged*. Engagement is more work, because it means you have to create a partnership, and that requires respect. Parents should be seen and utilized as partners, change agents, and, most importantly, as experts.

What does it look like to utilize parents and communities in this way to build community schools?

It looks revolutionary. To create partnership, there must be an acknowledgement of a relationship of equal power. Partners may not bring the same things to the table, but they both bring something that is critical and needed.

Parent and community leadership is key in making community schools successful. Parents and community leaders will often be connected to a school longer than their principal, so it is important that they are brought into the decision-making processes and are



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engaged from beginning to end. Parents also bring critical information and resources to the table that are often overlooked because administrators have a lack of knowledge about the neighborhood. CEJ's plan for transformative parent engagement offers a way for parents and communities to become strong and valuable partners in their neighborhood schools.

**Q** What role can labor unions play in driving the community school agenda?

**A** *Shital Shah*: Leadership is one important role. Researcher Anthony Bryk and his colleagues (2010), from the University of Chicago, identified school leadership as one of five essential supports for successful school transformation. Across the country, in places that have expanded and sustained community schools, school- and systems-level leadership have played a major role – for example, in Multnomah County, Oregon; Evansville, Indiana; and Cincinnati, Ohio. I would argue that union leadership also matters, including representatives of both teachers and school staff. When unions partner with community organizations, they are able to more effectively push forth a common vision for public education. By their very nature, they have the organizational infrastructure

to organize and mobilize. The question then becomes: What can our role be, as implementation of this strategy may not be our purview?

Some examples of leadership roles that labor and community organizing groups can play are:

- *Help create state and local coalitions that can push for policy change to support and fund community schools.* This is taking place in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York City. For example, the Connecticut Federation of Teachers was the driver in pulling together a coalition of the state affiliates of the NAACP, Connecticut Education Association, and University of Connecticut, and others that pushed through supportive policy. There is also a statewide effort through the CommPACT Community Schools Collaborative ([commpact.uconn.edu](http://commpact.uconn.edu)).
- *Get community schools on political platforms.* The United Federation of Teachers collaborated with community organizations (e.g., Natasha’s organization, NYCCEJ) across New York City, including community school practitioners such as the Children’s Aid Society, to make sure that all 2013 mayoral candidates included expansion of the community school strategy in their platforms (see sidebar on PS 2013 on page 28). As a result, after he was elected, Mayor Bill de Blasio made a commitment to invest \$52 million to create more community schools.
- *Build awareness around strategy in their communities.* Education on what the community schools strategy is, how various stakeholders can be involved, and what the eventual outcomes can be is critical to ensure that union members, community members, parents, students, and others are part of the conversation and visioning and have a voice and

decision-making power at the school-leadership and systems-level tables. This piece often gets overlooked. We must also consider the implementation that will come after the organizing stage and how our roles will evolve. Baltimore Teachers Union is a great example of where this is taking place. In partnership with their Education Roundtable, they are holding trainings at schools, inviting community members and parents to learn more about community schools.

- *Use this strategy as common ground for labor-management relationships.* Conversations with the school districts around this need to take place, even in the instances where strong relationships don’t exist. Ultimately, having labor, community, and management working together on this strategy will be a key factor in its sustainability. A great example of this comes from Cincinnati, where work has been taking place for over ten years. The superintendent is working with the Community Learning Center Institute<sup>9</sup> and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Teachers unions also have a major role to play in strengthening academics. Data show that community schools better support a strong, academic curriculum. That’s another piece that AFT contributes in the community schools work. We want teachers in classrooms who can improve the academic trajectory of our children. Instruction is the key piece in how educators (including school staff, not just teachers) engage community partners to augment instruction.

The immediate notion of community partners is that they provide social services to students and families. That is true, but community schools are

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<sup>9</sup> See [clcinstitute.org](http://clcinstitute.org).

<sup>10</sup> See [cft-aft.org](http://cft-aft.org).

more than just wraparound services. They also focus on strengthening academic instruction, through project-based learning, service learning, etc. Across the country teachers are working with community partners to provide engaging instruction that connects to the real world and isn't only relegated to the afterschool realm.

For example, in Cincinnati, Ms. Crawford at Roberts Academy has been partnering with the local fire department to provide mentors to her science and math class. Students spend the entire school year with a mentor, working on math and science tasks, as well as going on field trips. She works with her contact at the fire department to make sure that they are integrated into her instruction when they visit the classroom every month. Another example comes from Boston, where a second-grade science teacher has a partnership with a local garden nonprofit. The partner comes into the classroom to share the lessons with the teachers, working with the students on projects in the school's greenhouse. One of the United Federation of Teachers' Community Learning Schools, PS 30, partners with BookPALS's performing artists to do theatrical readings of teacher-recommended books that coincide with units of study.

**Q How do labor and community and parents work together and create successes?**

**A** *Shital Shah:* Public education is not a business or a transaction. To rebuild, strengthen, and/or create relationships, there must be trust. The people in our schools and communities come with different assets and needs – the only way to provide access to opportunity for all is to collectively come up with solutions that go beyond our own organizational self-interests. Effective community schools make decisions by consulting with all

stakeholders, including school staff and community partners.

One challenge many community schools face is lack of teacher and school staff engagement in the actual visioning and implementation of the community school strategy. Inside the school building, they are the ones who know their students best, so their input on the local site decision-making team (local governing team, etc.) is invaluable.

While it is obvious that labor and community organizations need to work together around the community school agenda, in places where community schools already exist they must also bring in the community school practitioners, who are responsible for working at the school with administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community partners. Their practice must inform local, state, and federal advocacy efforts. If we do not include them, there is a likelihood that our visions will diverge, rather than converge.

The more allies we have in this push, the stronger the movement and the more likely we are to secure the sustainable resources that our schools need. The Coalition for Community Schools did a scan of the community school field and identified the key players that need to be at a systems-level table, in their *Collaborative Leadership Framework*.<sup>11</sup> This collaborative leadership is what will eventually facilitate the sustainability of the strategy.

*Natasha Capers:* Collaboration is hard work. It means learning to work *with* and not *for*. It means respecting other points of view and always searching for common ground. But it also means respecting the knowledge that everyone brings to the table.

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11 See [bit.ly/1uFbmKc](http://bit.ly/1uFbmKc).

Parents don't always come to the table with the same set of skills as teachers, administrators or CBO partners. But parents do bring a powerful set of expertise: their children attend the schools, and they live in the communities. They understand education problems because they see them daily, not just in a study or book. It is imperative that the decision-makers stop looking down at or doubting what we have to offer as parents. Often trust is broken when parents' unique expertise is ignored.

**Q How do you sustain labor and community/parent engagement in community schools?**

**A** *Shital Shah:* Community schools aren't a one-time program; they're a paradigm shift in how we think about schools. Schools need to grow and develop in ways that mitigate a variety of out-of-school factors by partnering with the appropriate local resources.

You might be wondering, *so how does this happen?* A big piece of this is trust and relationships – not just between community partners and teachers unions, but also between unions and school and district administrators. Often, despite differences on traditional labor-management issues, labor and management have come together around the community school strategy – for example, St. Louis, Kansas City (Missouri), Baltimore, and Evansville (Indiana). Unions and administrators both see how supporting the whole child can lead to better academic achievement and, eventually, stronger communities. It's a win-win. Coming together around this strategy can lead to a stronger relationship and trust when it comes to the other issues.

Another key sustainability piece, from the union perspective, is member education. Often we have local union leadership understanding and buying

into the community school strategy as a solution to supporting our children and families, but that message needs to be shared with teachers. Teachers, school staff, and nurses are our boots on the ground. Once they are educated about community schools, they are our ambassadors. They can share stories about how this is supporting their work and improving the teaching and learning environment and help push for more quality community schools. For example, the Baltimore Teachers Union has held several trainings with the schools' union representatives so that they can share with teachers what their role can be.

Finally, funding is a barrier to sustainability in many places, especially when there is not ownership around the common vision. The burden of funding does not lie solely on school districts and other public entities – the nonprofit community, the higher education community, and others must also come to the table. While we do want public funding (local, state, and federal) to be dedicated to helping implement the community school strategy, we must see it as a strategy of public *and* private partnerships. Where this work is being sustained – for example, in Multnomah County, Oregon – county, district, and private funding are all pooling together to support community schools. Of the SUN Community Schools' 2014-2015 cash operating budget of \$8 million, around \$4.9 million came from Multnomah County, \$1.6 million from the City of Portland, \$250,000 from the Portland Children's Levy, \$210,000 from federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, and \$1.1 million from seven school districts. In addition to this core funding, match/partners services cash and in-kind contributions are expected to reach at least their 2012 levels of \$10 million and \$7 million, respectively, and the SUN Service System is likely to contribute at least \$30 million cash



in additional aligned services (anti-poverty, early childhood, health, etc.).<sup>12</sup>

*Natasha Capers:* Building the capacity of parents is important. We have what we call Parent Power School (PPS).<sup>13</sup> It is designed to educate parents on an educational topic like community schools and teach a skill like how to lobby elected officials. We have held five of them this year with sixty to eighty parents from across the city. One element we explored in our Community Schools PPS is, what are some of the differences between traditional schools and community schools? We also have deeply explored the difference between traditional parent engagement and transformative parent engagement. We have also held a “train the trainer event” because so many parents wanted a more in-depth training on how to communicate the vision of community schools with multiple stakeholders.

Another important thing is to recognize that this is a long-term commitment. Something stuck with me that one of the planners for a conference on community engagement in Chicago said in a recent conference call: It can’t be a year-to-year plan – you have to make a ten-year plan. How do you get people to commit to that?

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12 Source: SUN Service System & Community Schools.  
13 For information, photos, and more on Parent Power Schools, see [nyccej.org/category/resources](http://nyccej.org/category/resources).

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