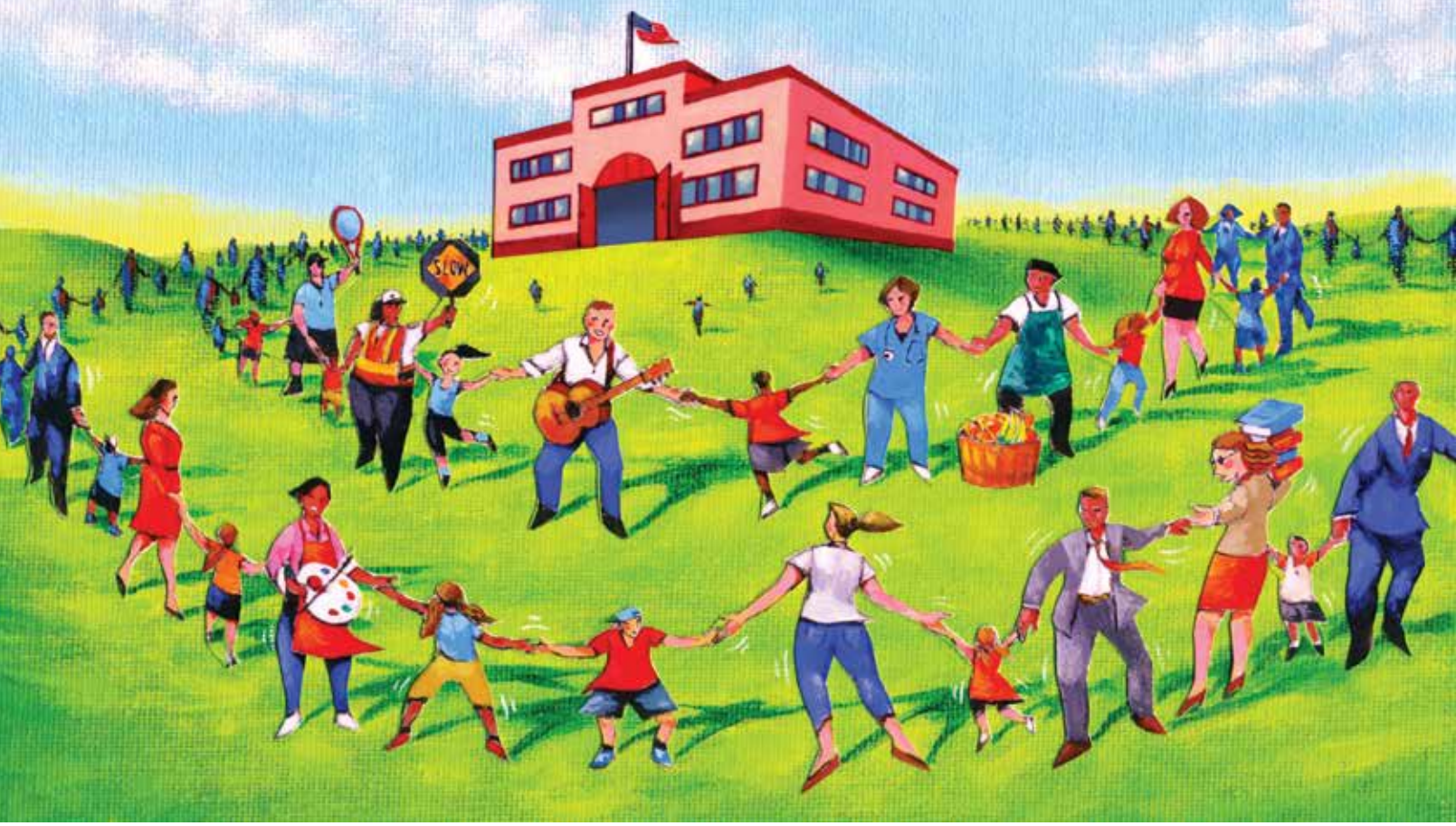
Where It All Comes Together

How Partnerships Connect Communities and Schools



By Martin J. Blank and Lisa Villarreal

The modern-day community schools movement reached a new plateau in 2008 when Randi Weingarten made community schools a central element of her platform as the new president of the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT's action was a milestone on a journey that began a decade earlier, when advocates for community schools determined that it was necessary to renew a core American value—that our public schools should be centers of flourishing communities where everyone belongs and works together to help our young people thrive.

The AFT's leadership understood then, and continues to understand now, that students need the organized support of their communities to succeed, and that schools alone cannot provide all the educational and developmental experiences young people need to graduate and succeed in life.

Leaders in local government, local United Ways, community foundations, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and beyond are coming to the same conclusion. Across the country, they see a public school student population that is more than 51 percent poor[1] and increasingly diverse. And they see young people who are more isolated and distrustful,[2] and who face deep and pervasive inequities.

Community schools purposefully partner with youth organizations, health clinics, social service agencies, food banks, higher education institutions, businesses, and others to meet students' and families' academic and nonacademic needs, so teachers are free to teach and students are ready to learn. Community schools are becoming the chosen strategy for action among these leaders. Such schools represent a comprehensive—and transformative—school reform strategy that views young people holistically and expects everyone to step up to support them.

The Coalition for Community Schools, which was organized in 1997, has become a driving force in the community schools movement. With 214 partners in education, health and mental

Martin J. Blank is the president of the Institute for Educational Leadership, director of the Coalition for Community Schools, and author of numerous articles and reports on how schools and communities can work together to increase student learning. Lisa Villarreal is the education program officer for the San Francisco Foundation and chair of the steering committee for the Coalition for Community Schools. She has worked in public education for more than 30 years, serving as a teacher, counselor, and administrator.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAZUSHIGE NITTA

health, youth development, civil rights, local government, child and youth advocacy, philanthropy, and local community school initiatives, the coalition has helped raise the visibility of community schools and has led many partners to pursue the development of community schools as part of their own agendas.

In this article, we outline how far the community schools movement has come since the AFT made community schools a priority in 2008. We explain why the movement has grown, clarify what exactly makes a community school different from other schools, lay out how community schools work, and show the positive results that community schools are attaining. We conclude with a brief discussion of the challenges that lie ahead.

The Rise of the Community Schools Movement

Approximately 5,000 schools in more than 150 communities across the country currently employ the community school strategy, serving around 2 million students. Exact numbers are hard to determine because community schools come in so many shapes and sizes and often don't follow a formal model. Large school districts (such as Baltimore; Chicago; New York City; and Oakland, California), medium-size districts (such as Cincinnati; Evansville, Indiana; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Salt Lake City), and smaller districts (such as Vallejo, California; Evanston, Illinois; and Allentown, Pennsylvania) are embracing community schools. University-assisted community schools, where higher education institutions partner with schools, are also growing, as is Communities In Schools, a national nonprofit focused on eliminating the barriers that contribute to students dropping out of school. These places and approaches cut across political perspectives, reflecting the fact that gathering the community at the schoolhouse in order to better support young people and the community is a traditional American idea.

Significantly, these school districts and communities are not just organizing individual community schools; they are working to transform every school into a community school, where both the school district and the community share responsibility for ensuring better outcomes for young people.

Multiple factors have led to the continuing adoption of community schools. First, the test-based accountability movement simply has not achieved what its architects set out to do: dramatically improve student achievement, especially for poor children and children of color. While that movement has illuminated the achievement gap, it has not addressed the inequities in young people's lives, the toxic stress,[3] and the sense of isolation that come from growing up in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. Nor has it addressed health disparities, chronic absence, school discipline, the lack of social capital, and other challenges receiving growing attention today.

The increase in poverty among our nation's students cannot be overemphasized as well. The majority of public school students now come from low-income families, and that number seems likely to grow as the squeeze on the middle class continues. Our country's population is also more diverse than ever,* with the percentage of English language learners continuing to increase,[4] and the number of languages spoken and cultures present in public schools continuing to challenge a predominantly white teacher workforce.

*For more about the increasing diversity of language and culture in the United States, see the article by Claude Goldenberg and Kirstin Wagner on page 28 of this issue of *American Educator*.

Also, a growing recognition that children learn and develop across multiple domains has bolstered the community schools movement. The success of young people depends not just on their academic achievement but on their cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth, as well as their civic participation. This realization harkens back to the work of Abraham Maslow, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and James Comer,† who have argued for the importance of these multiple domains and for addressing the needs of the whole child.[5]

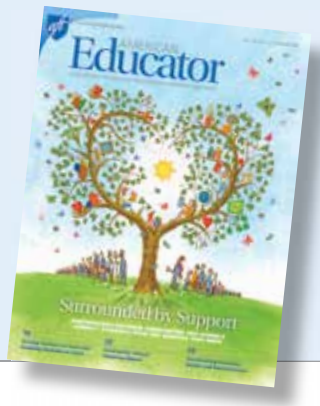
Moreover, as Robert Putnam demonstrates in his new book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*,[6] too many of our young people lack access to opportunities to find their talent for art, music, athletics, and other abilities—opportunities that help them develop vital skills and build connections and relationships to adults. The contrast in access to opportunity is stark for low-income children compared with their upper-middle-class peers.

> Our public schools should be centers of flourishing communities where everyone belongs and works together to help young people thrive.

The rise of community organizing efforts calling for community schools is another significant development. Family and community engagement have always been key components of the community school strategy. Now, families, young people, and community residents are coming together in deeper ways, demanding that their public schools not be closed. Community members are calling on state and district officials to give their schools the option to become community schools.[7] They want the stable institutions their communities deserve—places where their children can get the education they need.

†For more on the work of James Comer, see "School Ties" in the Spring 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2013/dubin.

For more on the history of community schools and how coordinated partnerships meet students' academic, health, and social service needs—and also free teachers to teach—see the Summer 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at **www.aft.org/ae/summer2009**.



These community organizers have come together under the banner of the national Journey for Justice Alliance, a coalition of grassroots organizations. They also belong to the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, a broader union-community organizing coalition that has helped introduce community schools legislation in 10 states.*

Finally, teachers know firsthand the impact that a changing student population and difficult family circumstances have on a child's education. In a recent survey by the Council of Chief State School Officers of 46 state teachers of the year, 76 percent named family stress and 63 percent named poverty as significant barriers to student achievement.[8] And in a Communities In Schools survey, 88 percent of teachers said poverty is a major barrier to learning.[9] Additionally, a survey conducted by the AFT in spring 2015 highlighted the workplace stress that teachers face—stress that many educators believe impedes instruction and demeans the profession.†

*For more on the Journey for Justice Alliance and the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, visit www.j4jalliance.com and www.reclaimourschools.org.

†For more on the AFT survey, visit http://go.aft.org/AFT-Workplace-Survey.

Conditions for Learning

- Early childhood development is fostered through high-quality, comprehensive programs that nurture learning and development.
- The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.
- Students are motivated and engaged in learning—both in school and in community settings, during and after school.
- The basic physical, social, emotional, and economic needs of young people and their families are met.
- There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents and school staff.
- The community is engaged in the school and promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful, and that offers students access to a broader set of learning opportunities.

SOURCE: COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, *COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS; A RATIONALE AND RESULTS FRAMEWORK* (WASHINGTON, DC: COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, 2010), 10.

We can no longer afford to ignore the voices of teachers, who know our children best, or the data on the conditions in young people's lives that influence their learning and development. And more and more school and community leaders agree. That is why they are partnering to establish community schools.

Elements of a Community School

To be clear, academic achievement is central in community schools. After all, we all want young people to be ready for college, career, and citizenship.

But if we focus on academics alone, we fail to understand that young people develop, as we previously discussed, across multiple domains, and we fail to see that it is the responsibility of the school, family, and community, working in concert, to fulfill the necessary conditions for learning (for more on these conditions, see the box to the left).

From a community school perspective, fulfilling these conditions requires deep, respectful, and purposeful relationships among educators, families, and community partners. These partnerships ultimately help build and integrate the common elements of a community school: (1) health and social supports for students and families, often called wraparound services; (2) authentic family and community engagement; and (3) expanded learning opportunities inside and outside the school building that support the core curriculum and enrich students' learning experiences. For school and community leaders, community schools are not a "silver bullet" but a strategy for developing collective trust, collective action, and collective impact.

By establishing partnerships with child and family services organizations, community health centers, mental health agencies, and hospitals, community schools can respond to the fear, hunger, physical pain, and psychological distress that many students experience. Such partners place mental health counselors in schools and sometimes work with schools to operate and house health, dental, and vision clinics inside the actual school building. If such clinics are not located within community schools themselves, the schools link students and families to clinics located in the community.

Family resource centers that connect students and families to the services they need are also common in community schools. And it is not unusual for staff members from community partner organizations to sit and participate on student support teams.

Restorative justice programs have increasingly become a feature of community schools, as well. The term "restorative justice" describes approaches to discipline that help students "proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing."[10] Such programs can improve student behavior and help students avoid the pipeline to prison. By coordinating these services, community schools can reduce chronic absences due to poor health, decrease disciplinary issues and truancy rates, and help create a more stable living situation for children at home.

Authentic family and community engagement is the second dimension of a community school. Research clearly shows the important role that families play in their children's learning and development.[11] To that end, community schools seek to build mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families, and school staff. Community schools don't happen *to* families but *with* their active involvement.

Working with community-based partners, educators at many community schools interact with families beyond traditional parent-teacher conferences. Often, community schools embrace parent-teacher home visits,[‡] participate on academic teams of parents and teachers, work with parents in leadership development, and engage in the work of community organizing groups. At community schools, families are seen as valuable resources for the education of their children. Such collaboration between teachers and parents helps create a more welcoming, respectful, and supportive culture and climate across the entire school. As teachers know all too well, the better the school climate, the more teaching and learning occur.

Finally, the enriching learning experiences that community schools offer can take place before, during, and after school, and may even extend into the summer. These experiences engage young people in real-world problem solving around issues of critical concern to students, families, and their neighborhoods. Issues such as decreasing violence, improving the environment, increasing access to healthcare and good nutrition, and others enable the community to become a focal point for learning, with service learning as a common strategy. In community schools, partnerships with businesses, higher education institutions, and healthcare systems and hospitals offer students career-focused learning experiences, apprenticeships, and internships.

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How Community Schools Operate

Strong leadership across multiple institutions, a focus on results, and the presence of a community schools coordinator are among the key ingredients for bringing community schools to life. School and community leaders have learned about these and other key ingredients for organizing effective community schools over the past two decades (see the box on page 8), and they are learning how to grow systems of community schools where partners and educators develop relationships with multiple community schools that coordinate resources, share best practices, and get results.

Focusing at the systems level is essential if community schools are to become a permanent part of the education and community landscape, and if they are to avoid the pitfalls of leadership transitions, policy shifts, and other forces. There are more than 150 places scaling up community schools, among the most recent being New York City, where Mayor Bill de Blasio has overseen the development of 128 community schools and has set a goal of establishing 200 by 2017.

Growing systems of community schools has become a key priority for the Coalition for Community Schools. Our experience shows that establishing interactions among a community-wide leadership group and site leadership teams from community schools within the same school district, with the support of a strong intermediary organization, is the key to building a successful system of community schools. In the coalition's guide *Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community Schools Strategy*, we outline the structural elements that experience tells us are necessary for the most sustainable system.[12]

The community-wide leadership group, made up of members from the school district, local government, United Ways, businesses, teacher unions, and community- and faith-based organizations, is responsible for setting the overall vision, developing policy, aligning resources, and outlining accountability plans to build and sustain a system of community schools. A school-site leadership team, consisting of parents, residents, principals, teachers, school staff, community partners and usually a community coordinator, and students, is responsible for school-based decision making, which includes planning and implementation, and satisfying local needs that align with the school's academic mission. An intermediary entity (an organization or a working group composed of key managers from one or more partner agencies) provides planning, coordination, and management. Intermediary staff ensure communication among community-wide and school-site leaders. With these leadership structures in place, educators and partners can increase the number and effectiveness of community schools across a school district.

It's important to note that community schools are well-suited to engage with related efforts to help young people, families, and communities. For instance, the Becoming a Man program,[13] a prototype for President Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative,

[‡]For an example of how parent-teacher home visits can work, see the article on the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project on page 24 of this issue.

was designed by Youth Guidance, the lead partner in a number of Chicago community schools. (For more on the Becoming a Man program, see page 11.) Other community school initiatives also have taken up the call of My Brother's Keeper—to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color so all young people can reach their full potential.

Similarly, in addition to major organizational partners (e.g., the Afterschool Alliance, the School-Based Health Alliance, the National League of Cities, the School Superintendents Association, and United Way Worldwide), the coalition works with broad national initiatives that are related to community schools, including Attendance Works, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, Partners for Each and Every Child, and the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign. Community schools welcome such efforts because each one requires the active engagement of the school and community to succeed. This makes community schools a powerful vehicle in collective impact and place-based strategies.[14]

Community Schools Are Effective

Multiple research studies show that community schools work, including a recent Child Trends meta-analysis that found that community schools support young people's needs, reduce grade retention and dropout rates, and increase attendance, math achievement, and grade-point averages.[15]

Key Ingredients of an Effective Community School

- A principal who knows his or her community, sees achieving equity as fundamental to his or her work, and makes the school building a place where educators, partners, and the public feel comfortable working together.
- Skilled teachers who have high expectations for their students, enjoy collaborative relationships with families and community partners, and offer students robust learning experiences that draw on community resources and expertise.
- Community partners with the expertise to help achieve the goals of the community school, and who are well integrated into the life of the school.
- A community schools coordinator who serves as a bridge between the school and community, aligns the work of educators and community partners toward a common set of results, and supports a site leadership team.
- A site leadership team that gives families, students, and residents a voice and involves them, along with educators and community partners, in the planning, implementation, and oversight of the community school.
- A community assessment that identifies the needs of the school, students, families, and community, as well as the assets of individuals, formal institutions and agencies, and informal organizations in the community that can be mobilized to meet these needs.
- A focus on results and accountability that uses data to define specific indicators that the community school seeks to improve, and the capacity to collect and analyze data to measure progress.

SOURCE: COALITION FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, "FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS," WWW.BIT.LY/1NBfNfR.

In Chicago, which has been subject to a variety of reforms over the years, research by Carnegie Foundation president Anthony Bryk and his colleagues found that schools with community school characteristics were more successful in terms of academic achievement in reading and math scores, and in reducing chronic absenteeism, along with other key indicators of student success.[16] Spanning many years, the research concluded that successful schools had robust parent-community ties, a student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance. Trust among school leaders, teachers, families, and community members was also an important predictor of school success.

Similar findings appear in studies of community schools across the nation. For example, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, students in community schools that successfully implemented student and family supports had math scores that were 32 points higher and reading scores that were 19 points higher than their counterparts in other Tulsa schools.[17]

Students involved with City Connects in Boston community schools showed higher reading, writing, and mathematics report-card performance in grades 3–5, and higher third-grade math scores on the state standardized test. In middle school, students earned higher overall course grades in grades 6–7, and performed better on math and English language arts state tests in grades 6–8.[18]

Evaluators of Baltimore's community school initiative found that schools that had been implementing community school practices for five or more years had significantly better attendance rates and lower chronic absence rates than noncommunity schools. From the 2009–2010 to 2013–2014 school years, these community schools increased average attendance by 1.6 percent, compared with a 1.8 percent decrease for noncommunity schools, and decreased chronic absence rates by 4.1 percent, compared with a 3.6 percent increase for noncommunity schools.[19] (For more on Baltimore's community school initiative, see page 11.)

Finally, a study by the Finance Project shows that community schools return $10 to $14 in social benefits for each dollar invested.[20]

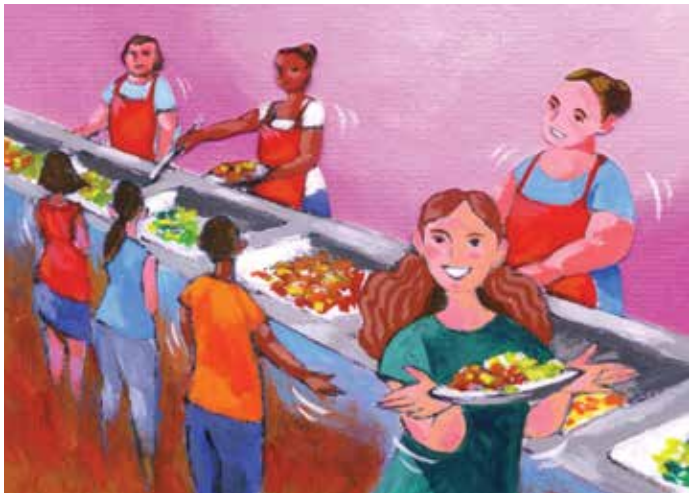
The Policy Environment for Community Schools

At the federal level, we continue to impress upon policymakers the importance of addressing the challenges that community schools take on. Progress is incremental but promising. As Congress debates the renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the coalition has been promoting the authorization and funding of the Full-Service Community Schools Act[21] as a specific program, while also advocating for a set of principles that reflect the operational elements of community schools.

Key principles include a broader accountability framework, with elements such as health, wellness, and discipline; language undergirding the role of community school coordinators; professional development that enables principals, teachers, instructional support personnel, and community partners to work more effectively with families, communities, and each other; and capacity building that supports community school partnerships and better aligns and coordinates programs. In our discussions with members of Congress, these principles have received a positive reception.

At the state level, we have seen a marked increase in interest in community schools. New York and the District of Columbia have appropriated funds for community schools. Legislation supporting community schools has been enacted in Connecticut, Maine, and New Mexico. And in July 2014, the West Virginia Board of Education approved a policy framework endorsing community schools for statewide implementation.

A number of other states, often at the behest of community organizers, have already introduced or plan to introduce legislation this year to support community schools, including California, Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Texas, and Wisconsin. (For more on legislative efforts in Texas, see the article on page 12.) Passing bills will not be easy, but in the short term, introducing legislation raises the visibility of the community school strategy and strengthens the foundation for future growth. To support state efforts, the coalition is convening state-level community school advocates in order to promote supportive policies, provide technical assistance, and create a statewide peer learning group.



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The Way Forward

Across the country, the widespread adoption of community schools shows great promise. The way forward is hopeful, but challenges as well as opportunities lie ahead.

Viewing Our Young People Differently: A fundamental transformation in the way our society sees young people is necessary. Our society must view our youth as assets to be developed, not problems to be addressed.[22] We must rebuild their trust in the people around them and help them to develop the agency—the sense of control over their own lives—so important to success.

Engaging Teachers and School Staff: Teachers and school staff members, who all play an enormous role in helping to create a safe school climate and culture, are becoming more deeply involved in the planning and implementation of community schools. And they are making clear the importance of addressing poverty, family stress, and other issues for success.

But there is more work to do to engage teachers in school-based decision making and in the nuts and bolts of community schools. With both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association strongly committed to community schools, there is a significant opportunity to strengthen local ties between teachers and community partners.

Changing Mindsets, Enhancing Leadership, and Strengthening Professional Development: Leadership and professional development programs in education, social work, community development, and other fields need to offer a sharper picture of the inequities that influence public education. Principals and teachers not only need to be able to lead and deliver instruction, they must be prepared to work more effectively with families, community residents, and community partners. So too must the mindset of community partners change. They need to understand the culture of public schools, and as education allies, they must find effective ways to share their expertise.

Preparing Coordinators for Community Schools: Community school coordinators require interdisciplinary expertise in youth and community development, social work, and student learning, as well as data-driven decision making and strategic planning. To date, much of the preparation of these individuals has been handled at the local level, with limited resources. Only the University of Chicago offers a comprehensive master's-level program.[23] Much greater attention must be given to how coordinators are prepared and to professionalizing their role as the field grows.

Providing More Extensive Support for Capacity Building: There is a paucity of funding for capacity building of community schools, with minimal federal and state investment. While the National Center for Community Schools at the Children's Aid Society provides assistance, as do other local and regional groups, the support of public and private funders is essential.

Becoming a Community School District: As more school districts and communities work to bring community schools to scale, districts and community partners must consider ways to build and sustain their relationships. All partners must ask how they must change as an organization.

Districts will need to answer questions such as: How must data systems, leadership, professional development programs, facilities planning, and other practices change? How does the district integrate the assets of community partners into its school improvement planning so that the work of educators and community partners is aligned toward common results? How does it support principals and teachers in that endeavor?

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Where It All Comes Together

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A similar set of questions must be asked of community partners: How must their policies, practices, and professional development change to sustain a community school? The emerging experience of school districts and communities in taking community schools to scale provides the foundation for a set of standards that the coalition is currently developing.

Strengthening Leadership Networks: The coalition now coordinates networks of community school leaders, superintendents, community school coordinators, United Ways, higher education institutions, and funders. Expanding the reach of these networks to share lessons learned and broaden participation is crucial to achieving the coalition's goal of having 200 school systems and their communities adopt a community school strategy in the next five years.

Investing in Our Children: Inequities in school funding formulas in many states, and inadequate funding for critical opportunities and supports (e.g., early childhood education, afterschool programs, and mental health services), are obvious to many education observers. These funding gaps must be remedied at the federal, state, and local levels. A strong economy and equitable society require such investments.

Ultimately, community schools benefit students, families, and teachers in three important ways: They reduce the demand on educators and other school staff by addressing the academic and nonacademic challenges that students bring to school. They nurture students' social and emotional development. And they enable students and families to build social capital—the networks and relationships that support learning and development, and that enable young people to envision and enjoy a successful future.

In sum, the community school strategy is built on recognizing that the education and development of our children is a shared responsibility. Only together can schools and communities achieve positive outcomes for young people and our society. ☐

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Austin's Community Schools

(Continued from page 17)

And so Weeks and Zarifis are using community dinners and other strategies funded by the grant to seed changes in Austin's other high-poverty schools. At these dinners, the two men, along with facilitators from their organizations, ask parents, teachers, and students to join together in small groups to answer three important questions: What do you like about your school? What does your school need in order to be the school you want it to be? And what resources would make that happen?

While transformations at both Webb and Reagan resulted from times of crisis, Zarifis says that the union and the district "want to move away from change born from crisis to change born from need." To do so requires asking communities what exactly they need.

One night in April, about 50 people answer these questions at a community dinner at J. J. Pickle Elementary School, one of the schools that feeds into Webb. Parents, many of them Hispanic and a few African American, all of them pushing strollers and carrying small children, file into the gym for Pickle's first community dinner—a meal of chicken and tortillas, and a chance to share their thoughts on the future of their school.

After they eat, Weeks asks everyone to split up into groups of Spanish speakers and English speakers. Each group files into separate classrooms to discuss the three questions Weeks had asked them to answer. Children, supervised by staff members from Austin Voices for Education and Youth, stay behind in the gym to play and watch a movie.

In one classroom, several of Pickle's teachers and Patricia Sewall, a parent, sit in chairs arranged in a circle. As Gabriel Estrada, a youth and community facilitator from Austin Voices, begins asking questions, and Bernard Klinke, an organizer from Education Austin, records the group's thoughts, a teacher turns to Sewall. "I really appreciate you being here," she says. "I'm really sad more parents aren't here. We don't have parent involvement."

Sewall explains that she listened to the voice mail message from the school telling her about tonight's event. "That's why I'm here," she says and smiles. "I saved the message, too."

Zarifis, the president of Education Austin, nods. It's a good start. ☐