

# Collaborative Community Schools

## From Wraparound Services to Co-Leadership



By Emily Lubin Woods

**E**ducators, policymakers, and researchers find themselves now, more than ever, at a moment of inflection. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health and wellness disparities, food insecurity, housing challenges, and the digital divide. Our country is poised to confront its history of racial inequity and perhaps start to think about education reform as something not done “to” kids, but something that entire communities, especially those that are the most disenfranchised, can make decisions about together.

Community schools are an example of a comprehensive education reform initiative that brings communities together to address many of the pressing challenges facing education today.<sup>1</sup>

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Unlike traditional schools, community schools serve as a hub, engaging educators, families, and community partners. Open to the community during evenings, weekends, and summers, these schools work with families, students, teachers, and local organizations to identify and coordinate health and social services and to become centers of the community. In this article, I briefly review the research supporting community schools, then turn to the most critical factors for creating sustainable community schools. I also underscore community schools as an equity strategy, focusing on community-based problem solving, drawing on local strengths to address local needs, and engaging in a thorough planning process that ensures shared decision making.

### The Case for Community Schools

There is a small but growing number of noteworthy studies that illustrate many of community schools’ positive outcomes. These studies include evaluations conducted by Fordham University and ActKnowledge in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> a 2017 landmark study out of the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center (LPI-NEPC),<sup>3</sup> and a 2020 study by the RAND Corp.<sup>4</sup>

These studies found improved outcomes in areas such as attendance; chronic absenteeism; high school graduation rates;

perceptions of school climate by teachers, parents, and students; and reductions in disciplinary incidents. Gains in academic performance were more nuanced, but the 2017 LPI-NEPC study concluded that well-implemented hub schools reduce barriers to learning and help at-risk students succeed academically.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, LPI-NEPC researchers concluded that “Ample evidence is available to inform and guide policymakers, educators, and advocates interested in advancing community schools, and sufficient research exists to meet the ESSA [Every Student Succeeds Act] standard for an evidence-based intervention.”<sup>6</sup>

These studies, along with the work of policy analysts, have also revealed an important emphasis on equity. As deftly explained by Christopher Edley Jr. and Linda Darling-Hammond of the Learning Policy Institute,

The promise of community schools is in how they prioritize the education and enrichment of vulnerable students and how they integrate services with systems of governance, professional support, and ongoing community-level dialogue. Comprehensive community schools represent a powerful equity strategy because they are designed to identify and address inequitable practices, disrupt the systems that perpetuate educational and economic disparities, and increase opportunities for all through partnerships among all of the actors who shape children’s opportunities. By building from the knowledge and assets of students’ families and fostering collaboration across a community, these schools provide students with integrated supports and enrich their academic skills in ways that fundamentally undermine entrenched inequities.<sup>7</sup>

The LPI-NEPC study found that community school partnerships among the school and various community-based organizations are intentional, strategic, and relationship-driven, and as such, can serve to replicate some of the learning environments of students in higher-resourced areas and help close opportunity and achievement gaps. A brief from Policy Analysis for California Education corroborates these findings, explaining that in community schools, families “Are not blamed for students’ behaviors or challenges, and instead school staff and partners are trained and explicitly supported to disrupt habits and patterns of racism and inequality as they appear in classrooms and schools.”<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to note the power and impact of community schools to mitigate some of the longer-term hardships exacerbated by the pandemic. The relationships, partnerships, and infrastructure that were in place from the start provided an immediate network of support and clear channels of communication with families. Community school advocates argue that community school strategies enable a more agile and streamlined approach to crisis response than many non-community schools, some of whom compare school staff

to paramedics and the work during the height of the pandemic to triage.<sup>9</sup> At Harlem Park Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, for example, the head of the BellXcel afterschool program expressed that the school had been able to sustain at least 80 percent of what they had been doing prior to the pandemic. She also noted that at the outset, staff would often spend 10–12 hours a day on the phone with families helping with issues such as child care and mental health needs.

Still, community schools are not a Band-Aid or a silver bullet. In the wise words of Jane Quinn and Marty Blank, two community school pioneers, community schools “represent a long-term strategy, not a quick fix.”<sup>10</sup> While the community school movement is fully aware of the difficulty of its mission, proponents believe that real systemic change will only happen slowly over a long period of time.

## Understanding Community Schools

Many scholars have studied community schools and offered helpful insights into their essential elements. One basic working definition describes the community school as “both a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities.”<sup>11</sup> It further states that community schools use public schools as a locus to cultivate “inventive, enduring relationships among educators, families, community volunteers, business, health and social service agencies, youth development organizations and others committed to children.”<sup>12</sup> Community schools are not a standalone program; they are a comprehensive strategy.<sup>13</sup>

## Making Community Schools a Reality

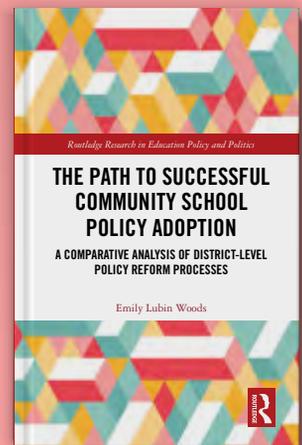
Though much research demonstrates the promise of community schools to improve academic achievement and mitigate structural inequality, very little work has investigated what must happen in the policy process for these schools to become a reality. This book helps to fill this gap in policy research by looking closely at policy processes in two districts—Boston and Baltimore.

I approach this work through several different lenses. I am first and foremost a qualitative researcher who spent close to a year and a half conducting interviews and extensive follow-up conversations with nearly 100 policy actors and community school advocates who care deeply about this work and were eager to share their part in the history. I dug through files upon files of minutes from budget hearings and convenings of activist groups, trying to make sense of what happened.

I am also a former Boston Public Schools middle school teacher who later spent the better part of a decade in classrooms all over Boston as one of two senior trainers in the district’s New Teacher Development Program. As a teacher, trainer, and colleague of teachers at all levels across disciplines, I have lived a day-to-day, on-the-ground urban school experience.

It is my hope that this book will catalyze policymakers and school leaders to think about comprehensive school reform efforts such as community schools and will provide some concrete starting points. To that end, this article drawn from the book includes key questions stakeholders should ask themselves to determine if they are ready to establish community schools.

—E. L. W.



It is important to consider several other attributes of community schools. Compared with other schools, community schools engage a far broader range of stakeholders to educate students<sup>14</sup> and offer a “more concrete alternative to standardized testing and privatization, one that begins to connect school reform to broader community development efforts that holistically address the needs of children.”<sup>15</sup> Some scholars see community schools as a hybrid of community centers and traditional schools,<sup>16</sup> becoming better able to respond more democratically to a variety of unpredictable issues facing communities when they serve as central institutions and spaces.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, community schools must respond to idiosyncratic community contexts, including differences in populations, potential external partners, and general community needs.<sup>18</sup> More simply, every single community school is and must be different from the next.<sup>19</sup> As such, community schools serve as a narrative that presses against the “powerful crosscurrent of bureaucracy and centralization” and campaigns against the notion of the school as a separate and isolated institution.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the Black Panther Party was a staunch supporter of community schools, instituting the Oakland Community School that existed from 1974 to 1982.<sup>21</sup> It provided

An education that, among other things, taught African American and poor people about their history in the United States ... and [served to challenge] existing public education concepts for black, brown and other poor and racially marginalized communities during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

This coordinated, community-centered, heterogeneous, and community asset-oriented approach is one that is currently absent from the dominant education reform discourse.<sup>23</sup> While community schools can benefit all children, they are perhaps most potent in meeting the needs of students who face the greatest challenges both within and outside the educational system.<sup>24</sup> It is also important to note that an assumption of community schools is that these challenges arise from “policies and social/economic structures rather than with the characteristics of individual children and their families.”<sup>25</sup> This notion stands in sharp contrast to

the assumption that these inequalities stem from some sort of deficit model. In other words, community schools seek to build upon and leverage community assets. At their core, they require collaboration, community wisdom, and true participation.<sup>26</sup>

One way of conceptualizing community schools is rooted in what’s known as the “Four Pillars” of a community school strategy, as identified by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center.<sup>27</sup> These four pillars are:

- Integrated student supports: through partnerships with social and health service providers, coordination of a strategic set of services and supports is designed to meet previously identified needs.<sup>28</sup>
- Expanded learning time and opportunities: out-of-school-time enrichment that provides a combination of targeted academic support and activities “emphasize[s] real-world learning and community problem solving.”<sup>29</sup> The *Community Schools Playbook* underscores that out-of-school enrichment opportunities must be co-owned and the responsibility of schools and the community itself.<sup>30</sup>
- Active family and community engagement: families and communities are engaged participants in decision-making around their children’s educational experiences.<sup>31</sup>
- Collaborative leadership practices: school leadership, in tandem with parents and community partners, creates a participatory practice of shared ownership, trust, and responsibility for community school strategies.<sup>32</sup>

Marty Blank and his colleagues describe an additional pillar centered on the connection between teaching and the community: “Using the tools of project-based and culturally relevant learning, a community school curriculum also engages neighborhood assets as a resource for education and community development.”<sup>33</sup>

Together, as a meaningful whole, these components are greater than the sum of their parts.

### Community Schools as an Equity Strategy

One of the key drivers behind the movement to establish community schools is their potential to mitigate entrenched social inequities through the opportunities and resources provided to students and families.

Community schools cannot overcome all problems facing poor neighborhoods—that would require substantial investments in job training, housing and social safety net infrastructures, and other poverty alleviation measures. However, they have a long history of connecting children and families to resources, opportunities, and supports that foster healthy development and help offset the harms of poverty.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, community schools have the potential to increase social capital available to students and families.<sup>35</sup> They “can be important sources of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital that build families’ capacities to facilitate consequential changes in their communities.”<sup>36</sup>

To get to the heart of equity, however, it is helpful to think not just in terms of community schools’ potential to mitigate inequities but about how advocates might get there. This “how” can be fraught with equity implications. Here, it may be helpful to look at the work of education professor Novella Keith, who considered questions of equity throughout the evolution of community schools,<sup>37</sup> and to

Well-implemented community schools reduce barriers to learning and help at-risk students succeed academically.



think about how today's community schools could be the vehicles for a different way of involving the community in their students' schooling. Keith warns against a community schools initiative that solely emphasizes service provision, explaining that those charged with establishing the initiative must challenge the mainstream notion that "Outside professional experts know and have the solutions to the community's problems."<sup>38</sup> Keith also asks the important questions of "who" should be included in the community school partnerships and "what roles should the participants play."<sup>39</sup>

Keith's work provides much to consider and unpack. Inherent in the vision of community schools as a service delivery approach is the danger of seeing parents and community members as willing or passive supporters of the school culture, or worse, those needing to be fixed (often referred to as a *deficit model*).<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, community members must be recognized as valuable, asset-laden "change agents."<sup>41</sup> Many of today's community school advocates view community schools not as a more efficient service delivery strategy but as a way to lift up the voices of the people who have not been able to engage fully in the life of their students' schooling. When partnerships are truly authentic, the families and community members are seen as essential contributors—key educational partners—who can co-lead the work.<sup>42</sup>

Another way in which community schools can become a true equity strategy is with an emphasis on developing "enriching opportunities for learning and engagement that are culturally sustaining and transformative."<sup>43</sup> Among other things, this requires a commitment from school leaders to anti-racist and culturally appropriate pedagogy.<sup>44</sup> For schools to become a true equity strategy, they must be welcoming spaces in which both students and the communities around them can become part of a culturally responsive ecosystem and "feel empowered to exercise collective agency in the quest for broader change."<sup>45</sup>

Tapping social capital to "improve underserved communities' access to power structures and institutions in their surroundings"<sup>46</sup> is a demonstrable way in which community schools can promote social justice. When community members are enabled access to "political leaders, media representatives, activists, grant-makers, and others with critical resources,"<sup>47</sup> they can become agents of change.

In sum, if community schools are seen solely as a mechanism for providing more services to more students; if there continues to be a deficit perception; and if communities, students, and families do not have an authentic and valued voice in how their students are taught and supported, then these initiatives will fall short of their promise to promote equity. Advocates touting community schools as an equity strategy must consider these concerns from the outset as they map out their strategic plan for how to get to a place of equity and transformative change.

## Planning for Sustainable Community Schools

Before trying to implement community schools, advocates may want to examine factors that indicate readiness in their respective districts and may wish to determine a plan to fill any gaps. Even with the growing body of national and international research that speaks to the potential of community schools, so many proverbial stars must align in the policy world for community schools to even have a fighting chance of getting established, let alone staying put as a long-term, viable, and successful policy path.



## Strategic, relationship-driven partnerships can help community schools close opportunity and achievement gaps.

Based on my intensive investigation into the development of community schools in two cities, as well as my review of existing research on community schools, I developed the following questions to help assess a district's and city's readiness for policy action to adopt community schools.

### Policy

1. Is there a strong public perception of one or two pressing and urgent challenges that policymakers and communities feel obligated to address?
2. Can advocates articulate a persuasive case for why community schools fit these problems/challenges, whether as a discrete initiative or a policy option that could operate in conjunction with a new or existing policy solution?
3. Are designers of policy learning from districts nationally that are doing analogous work? Is there a plan to receive ongoing support around implementation and feasibility?
4. Are there people who have the ear of leadership and the ability to exert pressure to facilitate policy adoption?
5. Is there commitment from city leadership and school district leadership to establish a citywide steering committee to oversee the work and/or ensure clear systems for communications between the city and the school department?

### Stakeholder/Community Ownership

1. Do a broad array of the advocates for community schools possess a clear definition of what it means to be a community school, one that provides common language that is owned and co-developed by multiple stakeholders?
2. Has the set of strategies that comprise the community schools initiative been examined from a variety of perspectives, including ensuring that they do not perpetuate any deficit conceptions of students and their families?
3. Is there a shared commitment to involving all stakeholders in developing an outcomes framework to guide the work?
4. Do principals and members of school leadership teams have a commitment to and desire to engage in the work?
5. Has the school district established a set of protocols that enables community voice to influence school practices and policies at each school?

6. Are community organizations aligned with the community school vision and willing to bring together various stakeholder groups around common advocacy issues?

### Technical Feasibility

1. Is there a roadmap that inspires confidence at a number of technical levels, including short- and long-term funding, as well as building and enabling capacity of principals and members of school leadership teams?
2. Is there a plan (agreed to by school and city leadership) that uses an outcomes framework to guide both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the initiative on a school-by-school basis and for the districtwide initiative as a whole? Will this plan address how outcomes will inform ongoing course corrections? Will this plan address how the data that emerge can help bring other stakeholders onboard during determination processes and ensure longer-term sustainability? In other words, will the plan address how to use results and data for proving and improving impact?

### From Vision to Reality

For community schools to live up to their expectation as a true equity strategy, the meeting of physiologic and safety needs must happen with, not to, a community, and the individual community members must play a much greater role. It may be helpful here to bring in once again the work of Novella Keith<sup>48</sup> and her dichotomy between service-provision models and initiatives that build authentic partnerships by viewing community members as valuable change agents who can co-lead the work.<sup>49</sup> Her work begs the question: What would it look like if equitable outcomes are achieved in a way that is truly transformative and does not perpetuate the status quo? Without meaningful participation, it may be that community schools are better able to connect students and families to services, but they will not stand as a true equity strategy.

Pushing the conversation further, are there ways in which community school policies could serve as levers for equity? What would it look like if policy could embed measures of equity that transcend service provision outcomes? Traditional student- and community-centered outcomes include the reduction of chronic absenteeism, increases in attendance, a more positive school climate, increases in the percentages of parents involved in the school, and a higher volume of community partnerships. These outcomes are important, but should there be outcomes that directly address issues of equity? And if so, how does one measure these more invisible, transformational equity components of the work—namely, the changes to how stakeholders participate and the power shifts therein?

Another critical conversation concerns who should be present at the districtwide policy table and who is making decisions on behalf of whom. One community schools advocate summarized key problems:

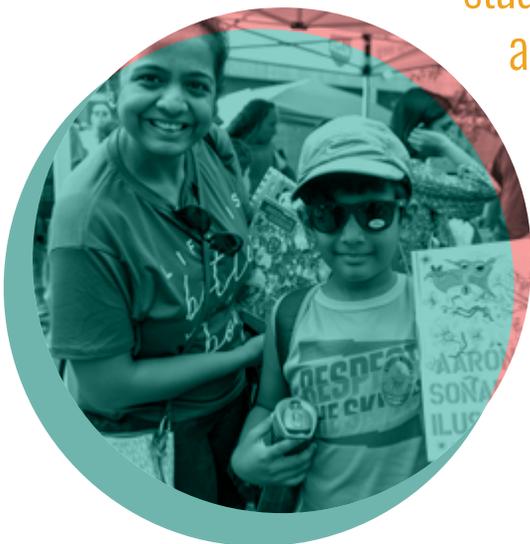
It is very frustrating to me to be in rooms where we're talking about full-service community schools and all of these folks who are middle-class, it becomes more about them than it becomes about the children and the families.... Collaboration works ... when people take the time to be reflective.... What kind of biases am I bringing to the table? What kind of dynamic am I creating? Do I understand the reform process sufficiently to really be a partner in the process? Reform in education is messy and is not easy.... You have principals with a certain level of autonomy, you have community-based folks with a certain level of autonomy, you have teachers with a certain level of autonomy, and you're trying to get everybody on the same page to focus on students. It is not easy. Being at the table is the first start.<sup>50</sup>

As this last statement underscores, it is a question of not only who should be at the policy table but also what types of collaborative and reflective behaviors should be the norm. Moreover, who should hold the power? Future study is needed to begin to scratch the surface of the intersection of race, class, power, and equitable collaboration and participation in the design and implementation of community schools.

For decades, education reformers have wrestled with the complex question of what roles schools can and should play at the intersection of social service needs and in-school learning,<sup>51</sup> leading inevitably to the overplayed yet accurate refrain that “schools can’t do it alone.”<sup>52</sup> This truism has resulted in the argument that education reforms focused solely on efforts inside school walls are not broad enough to transform the educational landscape.<sup>53</sup>

If schools couldn’t do it alone before, they certainly cannot now. Community schools rest on the assumption that students will not succeed in school without a focus on the broader community<sup>54</sup> and that education policy must offer an alternative to the myriad single-reform solutions that have neither narrowed the achievement gaps nor ensured positive academic outcomes for all children.<sup>55</sup> More importantly, they offer a way forward for students, families, educators, and community partners to collaboratively build on their collective strengths and make their own visions of success a reality. □

Community schools help students, families, and community partners build on their collective strengths.



For the endnotes, see [aft.org/ae/summer2023/woods](https://aft.org/ae/summer2023/woods).