

# **THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS REVOLUTION**

Building Partnerships,  
Transforming Lives,  
Advancing Democracy

Martin Blank  
Ira Harkavy  
Jane Quinn  
Lisa Villarreal  
David Goodman



In memory of Joy Dryfoos (1925-2012), whose research,  
activism, and commitment to children and youth fueled the  
modern community schools movement

*Advance Praise for*

# **THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS REVOLUTION**



**A must-read for anyone wanting truly equitable,  
democratic improvements in public schools.**

Cyrus Driver, Partnership for the Future of Learning

**It is hard not to wonder why we aren't doing this kind of work everywhere.**

Professor Charles Payne, Rutgers University

**[A] classic with many ways to build community schools  
and thus transform communities in any city in the nation.**

Dean Laura Bronstein, Binghamton University

**Shows how schools, working with partners, can reduce chronic absence  
and enable student and families to get the...support they need.**

Hedy Chang, Attendance Works

**A valuable and inspiring resource for anyone interested in  
understanding what is possible when stakeholders reimagine new  
ways of being, learning, and leading together.**

Sophie Fanelli, Stuart Foundation



**[Readers] will benefit from the perspectives of the authors—  
all of whom are giants in the movement.**

Abe Fernández, Children's Aid

**A must-read for people looking to improve our education system  
and strengthen our society.**

Jodi Grant, Afterschool Alliance

**This book illuminates the transformative capacity of community schools.**

John H. Jackson, Schott Foundation for Public Education

**Chronicles the key inflection points and lessons that will  
inform the field into the future.**

Eddie Koen, Institute for Educational Leadership

**Provides the essential concepts to start and grow community schools  
in your community and state.**

Terry Peterson, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Riley Institute

**Connects the “why” of community schools to the “how” of effective  
implementation in different local, regional, and state contexts.**

Milbrey McLaughlin, Stanford University

**A pathway toward our goals of fostering freedom and equity.**

Ellie Mitchell, Maryland Out of School Time Network

**We are in the midst of a great awakening that the authors  
of this work have stirred into reality.**

Rey Saldaña, Communities in Schools

**A strong case for “why community schools?” and “why now?”**

Professor JoAnne Ferrara, Manhattanville College





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# FOREWORD

*By Pedro Noguera, PhD*

Poverty is a scourge across America. With 11.6 % of the population (7.9 million people) officially classified as impoverished, the US has the highest poverty rates among the 25 wealthiest nations in the world. Poverty rates are even higher among America's children. According to the most recent census, 16% of children were in households that were at or below the poverty rate. However, it must be noted that poverty is not a race-neutral problem. It disproportionately impacts children of color, with 26.5% of Black children, 20.9% of Latino children, and 20.6% of American Indian children experiencing substantially higher rates of poverty than White (8.3%) and Asian (7.7%) peers (Center for American Progress, 2021).

As the authors of *The Community Schools Revolution* remind us, poverty is more than an economic issue; it is also an educational issue. Our public schools bear the brunt of responsibility for addressing the needs of poor children, and more often than not, they do so without adequate resources. For many poor kids in the U.S., the public school they attend is the only place where they know they will be guaranteed heat in the winter, a warm meal (maybe two), and for the lucky, access to a school nurse. Obviously, children in poverty need more. Many also experience homelessness and housing insecurity, they are often exposed to violence and trauma, and they are less likely than their more affluent peers to have access to academic support outside of school from a tutor or college educated parent. It seems obvious to point out that hungry children are more likely to have trouble concentrating (according the US Department of Agriculture, 5 million children in the U.S. regularly experience food insecurity), but policymakers rarely acknowledge hunger as an obstacle to learning. The evidence is clear: children from households in poverty frequently underachieve in school and are less likely to graduate from high school and to enroll in college (Reardon, 2013).

The authors show us that community schools can be part of the solution to this complex and deeply entrenched problem. They describe how such schools work, and how the relationships that are forged between schools and community, make it possible for schools to mitigate and compensate for the effects of poverty. Part of the way some of the community schools featured in this book do this is by committing to not only providing services, but to empowering and engaging families as well. These examples show that when the concerns and interests of parents are considered as programs are devised—when they also play a role in determining what services are provided and are invited to actively participate in programs that serve their children—they are better able to support their children and the schools they attend.

It is important to acknowledge that mitigating a problem like poverty is not the same as fighting to eliminate it. However, the reason why community schools are being embraced throughout the country in rural, urban, and even suburban school districts is because they represent a viable strategy for addressing the wide variety of needs that too often undermine the wellbeing of children and their ability to perform academically.

In this book, we are reminded that the burden of addressing the needs of poor children shouldn't be left entirely to schools. The political will and commitment to reduce poverty must come from nonprofits, churches, and local businesses, as well as city, state and federal governments. It is important to note that the U.S. made its greatest gains in closing gaps in student achievement during the 1960s and early 70s, when an array of investments in social supports and economic opportunity were made as part of the "War on Poverty" (Barton & Coley, 2010). Though the "war" ended long before the battle was won in the mid 1970s, the community schools revolution has now emerged in many areas as an attempt to resume the fight.

This book presents good news. Through detailed case studies, we see that there is evidence that when significant supports are in place—afterschool programs, health and social services, mentoring, etc.—schools can play a role in improving learning outcomes and advancing opportunities that promote social mobility (Chetty & Chenowith, 2018; Blankstein & Noguera, 2016). This is why this book is so timely and of critical importance.

Twenty-one years after the adoption of *No Child Left Behind*, it is clear that the law and kindred policy initiatives aimed at increasing school accountability that accompanied it have failed to achieve their grand promises. We continue to leave millions of children behind, both academically and socially. We see the results of our failures in the large numbers of Americans who are "structurally disenfranchised" and unable to support themselves and their families. Policymakers in some states have begun to adopt more far-reaching strategies including community schools and the expansion of early childhood education, broadening the focus of education in an attempt to reduce the number of people trapped in a cycle of poverty.

I don't generally subscribe to conspiracy theories, but I don't believe that the failure of schools that serve poor children of color is accidental or merely the result of professional incompetence. In a wealthy, technologically advanced nation such as the United States, the only logical reason why failure among schools serving poor children is so common is that we simply haven't been able to generate and sustain the will to meet the needs of kids. This is especially the case when the children are Black, Latino or Native American. Our negligence is of course a byproduct of our history, and the persistence of systemic racial inequities appears "normal" to many Americans today.

The authors of this book call for using community schools to disrupt a status quo that imperils our future. I agree wholeheartedly. To meet the challenges of the present moment, our country needs a broad and bold vision, institutional engagement, collaboration across sectors, political leverage, and incentives if we are to get serious about truly leaving no child behind. To produce the writers, technologists, scientists, musicians, plumbers, farmers, and entrepreneurs that we will need to create a more just and equitable future, we have to go all in to fight poverty. Community schools are one of the ways we can do that.

**Pedro Noguera** is dean of the Rossier School of Education at USC. For over 30 years he has worked as a researcher in higher education and as a teacher and advisor in schools. He has also served in various policymaking roles. He is the author of several books, including, with A. Wade Boykin, *Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap*. Along with Dr. Lauren Wells, he led the Broader and Bolder Approach to school change in Newark from 2008 – 2012.

# INTRODUCTION

## *Why We Wrote This Book*

The work of community schools brought us together some 25 years ago—and has kept us together as colleagues and thought partners. We have had many opportunities to observe the growth, successes, and challenges of the community school movement as it evolved from a “boutique” school improvement strategy to one that is now embraced by policymakers and practitioners across the country. Tracing a movement’s evolution while you are in its midst is a daunting, perhaps even foolhardy, task but we decided to take it on nonetheless, hoping that our five different perspectives would keep the enterprise trustworthy and useful.

As community school advocates and leaders, we hail from very different professional backgrounds: law (Marty); K–12 education (Lisa); social work (Jane); and higher education (Ira). When we enlisted the assistance of journalist David Goodman, we added a fifth discipline as well as a colleague who provided invaluable writing and research capacity to our team. We have come to understand that this interdisciplinary approach is mirrored across the community school field—a terrain that creates “new institutional arrangements,” according to our Stanford University colleague Milbrey McLaughlin. These arrangements, often seen in the form of strategic partnerships between schools and other community resources, are rooted in local knowledge, creativity, and a commitment to equality, democracy, and justice.

Some readers might wonder why four people who have reached retirement age are still fired up about the work of community schools. Our response: How can we not stay fired up, knowing what we know?

Here is one thing we know for sure: Community schools are both *doable* and *worth doing*.



Described by a leading urban superintendent as “a strategy for organizing school and community resources around student success,” community schools respond to several of our country’s most serious crises: the COVID pandemic, rampant income inequality, loss of faith in democratic principles and institutions, and racial injustice. We explore these underlying realities throughout the text. We chose to tell the story of the current generation of community schools (roughly 1990–2022) through the lens of six mature initiatives located across the country: the state of Florida, and the cities of Albuquerque, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, New York City, and Oakland. This approach allows our colleagues to explain their local contexts, choices, and innovations while also, we hope, inspiring readers to understand that *when we organize the right partners to do the right thing for students, families, and the community, we can achieve systemic change.*

In addition to highlighting these local stories, we describe in the initial and concluding sections how work at the national level has connected and supported local implementation, advanced supportive public policies, increased visibility for the strategy, and enlisted strong and varied partners. These ongoing efforts—including the work of the Coalition for Community Schools, the Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools, and the University of Pennsylvania’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships—have become more important than ever, as new and substantial federal and state initiatives provide welcome financial resources to the country’s highest-need schools and communities.

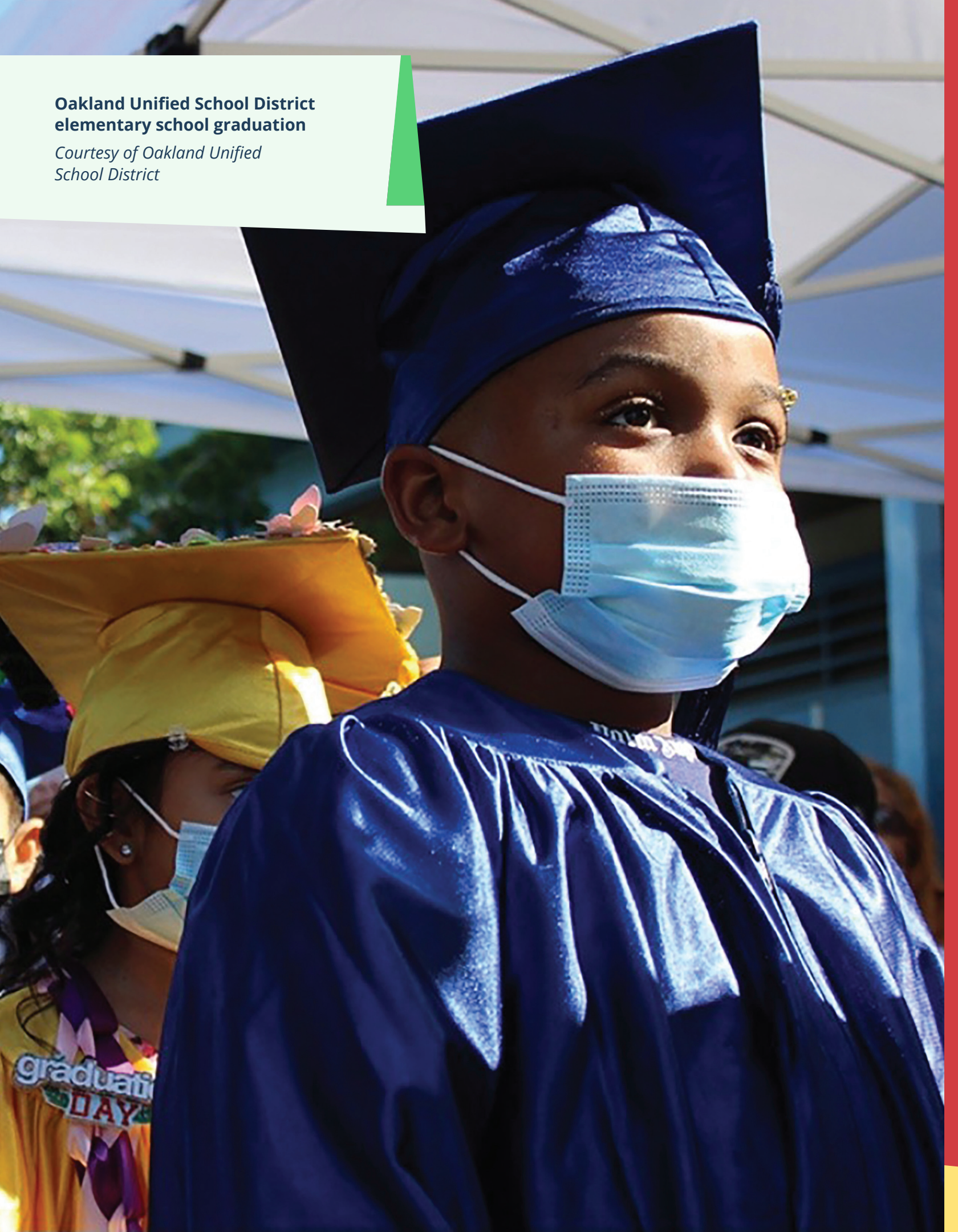
As community school veterans, we have witnessed a concerted multi-decade campaign to discredit and disinvest in public education. We have come to understand that this campaign has deep and tangled roots that include systemic and structural racism. And poor children of every color continue to face obstacles far beyond those of their more well-off peers. The COVID pandemic served both to highlight these inequities and to exacerbate them.

Despite these challenges, we offer a story of hope. Our Cincinnati colleague Darlene Kamine calls community schools “a quiet revolution”—a movement created out of local democratic practice that is changing outcomes for current and future generations of American students and their families by expanding opportunities for positive development. We hope that the choices we have made in putting our book together will make it useful to a broad set of stakeholders, including district-level leaders, principals, teachers who are change agents, community organizations and universities that have a direct connection to schools, policymakers, advocacy groups, parents, and other concerned citizens. With so much at stake, we should embrace a viable and proven solution that addresses so many of our contemporary challenges—challenges that require a true revolution in how we, as a society, choose to allocate our abundant resources.

—Martin Blank, Ira Harkavy, Jane Quinn, and Lisa Villarreal  
Spring 2023

**Oakland Unified School District  
elementary school graduation**

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified  
School District*





# PART I: THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

## *Chapter 1: The Community Schools Solution*

Kimmi Thomas was never expected to graduate high school. She was a student at the Oyler School, a K–12 school in Cincinnati, where two-thirds of students dropped out before graduation. The Oyler School serves the neighborhood of Lower Price Hill, where the median household income is \$15,000. Her school had been written off as a dropout factory, her community consigned to permanent status as a place where hope goes to die.

But something happened at the Oyler School that changed the story—and Kimmi’s life. In the early 2000s, all Cincinnati Public Schools became community schools. In 2009, Oyler partnered with the Community Learning Center Institute to dramatically expand support services for students and families. A health and dental clinic and early childhood center opened in the school. Local businesses were invited to mentor and partner with students, offering the prospect of jobs for graduates. Housing advocates worked to find stable homes for families experiencing homelessness. School-based mental health providers helped struggling children.

Oyler School, whose story we tell in Chapter 5, has been transformed from a place of failure to a catalyst for community transformation. Today, this former “dropout factory” has a graduation rate of over 90%.

In Part II of this book, we will share several remarkable stories of how community schools are succeeding in some of the most diverse communities in America. But first, let’s get clear on what a community school is.

# What is a Community School?

A community school is more than a place—it is a set of partnerships. Community schools are built on a foundation of mutually beneficial relationships between schools and communities. Partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors bring necessary expertise and assets to the school in areas including health and mental health, youth development, academic supports, and college and career readiness. Schools and their partners use resources in new ways to ensure that students and families achieve and that communities thrive.

The modern community school is the result of a late 20th-century movement of civic and community leaders, public officials, educators, families, youth, and service providers from across the country. Amidst today's talk of division in America's more than 15,000 school districts, creative innovators have consistently fostered the capacity of community schools to promote the strength in our diversity. They have done this through collaborative efforts—not by ignoring differences and points of strain, but by acknowledging differences and focusing on the community's vision for its children and families.

Today, community schools are everywhere. Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 schools have adopted the community school approach as a preferred reform strategy, and the movement is growing with increasing local, state, and national support.

Community schools include, but go far beyond, an engaging academic curriculum. Educators and community partners work together to provide the following core elements:

***Student and family support services*** address out-of-school barriers to learning, such as poverty and racism. This work includes providing health, mental health, and social services, and employing such practices as social-emotional learning, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice. These services reduce demands on school staff, enabling them to concentrate on their core mission: improving student learning.

For example, consider the experience of a Florida high school student that you will learn about in the Chapter 6 case study. A sexual assault survivor with a single mom who was HIV-positive and living in poverty, Tim Only brought his trauma to school. He took advantage of every service—mental health, food pantry, family resource center, housing opportunities when he was homeless—all available through the resources of community partners at the schools. He graduated as senior class president.

**Expanded learning opportunities** are available, including after-school, weekend, and summer programs. These offerings provide academic support and enriching, engaging extracurricular activities, which research tells us are significantly limited for children who are living in poverty—particularly children of color. These learning opportunities help develop the core competencies that young people need and help them become active participants in a democratic society.

**Parents and guardians receive services at the Parent Resource Center at Evans High School in Orlando, Florida**

*Courtesy of Evans High School*



Take the example of MS 50, a middle school in Brooklyn, New York, where principal Ben Honoroff and Community School Director Fiorella Guevara (working for the school’s lead partner, El Puente) chose debate as the focal point for expanded learning time. A third of students now participate on the debate team, which has won more than a dozen citywide debate championships. The students of MS 50 went from 10% proficient in English and 6% in math in 2015 to 47% proficient in English and 40% in math in 2022.

**Active family and community engagement** brings in parents and community members whose voices are often ignored. They are viewed as assets in the work of the school and become partners in making decisions about the school and their children’s education. Adult education, workforce development, community-wide arts and cultural events, and health and fitness activities and resources are available through well-planned partnerships with community providers.

We look closely at the community engagement process in Oakland, California, which involved thousands of community residents across 14 task forces in developing their district-wide community schools plan. The reason that Oakland's community schools initiative has not just grown but thrived—over the course of five superintendents, over a decade, over strikes, over COVID-19, over school closures—is because there was so much grassroots buy-in from the outset.

**Families volunteer to revitalize playground at the Oakland Academy of Knowledge in Oakland, California**

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*



**Community-based learning** connects school-day teaching and learning to the issues and challenges students face in their communities and the world around them. Using the tools of project-based and culturally relevant learning, a community school curriculum engages capable community partners as resources for education and community development (Melaville et al., 2006).<sup>1</sup>

An example is the UCLA Community School in Los Angeles, which is run jointly by the school district and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Teachers create curricula on topics such as immigration, democracy, and the justice system that are responsive and affirming to students—expanding their understanding of the world and helping them become critical thinkers about systems that often have marginalized their communities. The school has a 95% graduation rate.

<sup>1</sup> We believe that civic education, environmental education, place-based education, service learning, work-based learning, and academically based community service are part of the broader category of community-based learning.

These four core elements, built on our own initial definition of a community school and a framework created by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center that reflects work in the field, represent the “what” of community schools (Maier et al., 2017). Their effective implementation depends on several “how” factors, including a deep culture of collaboration, a commitment to continuous improvement and shared accountability for results, a strategic orientation, multiple routes to leadership, and a developmental approach to the change process.

Collaborative relationships undergird the partnerships that are the foundation of the work of a community school. Educators, students, families, and community partners plan and act together as part of site-based leadership teams where everyone has a voice. A community school coordinator, who is hired by a community partner or the school—and who works in tandem with the principal—typically manages the joint work of the school and its partners. A culture of learning pervades the community school, where educators, families, and partners build trust with one another. Mistakes are seen as opportunities for improvement and all the assets of the community are incorporated.

Measuring results that matter to everyone involved creates a climate of shared accountability and responsibility. Of course, community schools address academic achievement, but they go beyond, focusing on a wide range of factors that influence achievement: attendance, reduced disciplinary measures, student engagement, growing social networks, health, family circumstances, and conditions in the community. Done well, deep school and community partnerships that engage families and neighborhood residents—and that connect student learning to real community problems—can help community schools function as catalysts for neighborhood and community change.

Organizing the kinds of community schools that we profile in this book demands strategic thinking on the part of educators, families, and community partners. That’s why we describe community schools as ***a strategy, not a program***. Once, we asked a group of school board members from across the country if their districts’ schools had partners that brought programs into their schools; every hand in the room went up. But when we followed up by asking if any of their districts had a plan or strategy for how partners would contribute to results that mattered for the district, no hands were raised. The community school is that strategy.



The emergence of most community schools over the past 30 years began with community partners. Community-based organizations, United Ways, Communities in Schools agencies, higher education institutions, and local governments stepped up to say that they wanted to be partners with the public schools to help students, families, and communities thrive. They made clear that their involvement would be long term and designed to attain outcomes that mattered to the school and the community. Community partners often function as lead agencies, mobilizing and integrating needed opportunities, supports, and services, while sharing in planning and decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

In the past decade, school districts, recognizing the challenges faced by their students and families, have begun to lead community school efforts. Sometimes districts hire community school coordinators. Often, districts work with community partners as lead agencies at individual schools. Research does not yet tell us which approach is better. But we do know that partnerships and active community engagement are central to sustainable community schools.

All the elements of a community school do not emerge in a single stroke, nor is any single element a quick fix. Rather they evolve, through documented stages of development, as educators, families, and community partners realize the potential embedded in their ongoing relationships. As they continue to develop, community schools become powerful engines of equity, vehicles for community change, and inclusive democratic institutions that educate, engage, activate, and serve all members of the community.

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<sup>2</sup> After it was launched in 1991, Healthy Start, a statewide model in California, was among the key pioneers of the lead agency approach. Healthy Start laid the foundation for community schools in California—now the largest statewide initiative in the country and funded at more than \$4 billion over seven years.



# Community Schools Are Not Charter Schools

People often ask about the difference between community and charter schools—and we understand the reasons for their confusion. For example, Ohio’s charter school law calls its charters “community schools.” But charter schools and community schools differ in fundamental ways. Community schools are regular public schools operating under the auspices of local boards of education. They choose to build deep, mutually beneficial relationships with their communities.

In contrast, while charter schools can adopt practices and policies that mirror community school approaches and some even operate by design as community schools, most charters have few explicit relationships with the communities where they are located. Charters are tuition-free schools of choice that are publicly funded but independently run (Prothero, 2018). Parents apply for their children to attend charter schools and there is usually no designated catchment area. Generally speaking, when charter schools have more applicants than available seats, they use a randomized lottery to determine who is admitted. There are approximately 7,000 charter schools nationally: 64% are independently operated schools; 13% are run by for-profit companies (Sullivan, 2019) that tend to have higher enrollment (among these are virtual or online charter schools); and 23% are part of nonprofit charter management organizations that operate multiple schools.

Community school supporters tend to be wary of charter schools for several reasons: Charters are privately run and are too often allowed to operate with inadequate public oversight. When students attend charters, that reduces the level of public resources available to district public school systems. Moreover, very wealthy donors, including a handful of billionaires, have handsomely supported charter schools as part of an effort to severely weaken teachers unions and privatize public education (CBS News, 2018; Rosenhall, 2020). For these donors, among others, charters are part of a broader “school choice” movement that includes vouchers, education savings accounts, and tax credits for families of students attending private and religious schools. Of course, community-based charters that incorporate strategic partnerships and engage and serve neighborhood children and their families can function as community schools.

We remain strong advocates of the public schools as a bulwark of democracy. We expand on these ideas in Chapter 11.

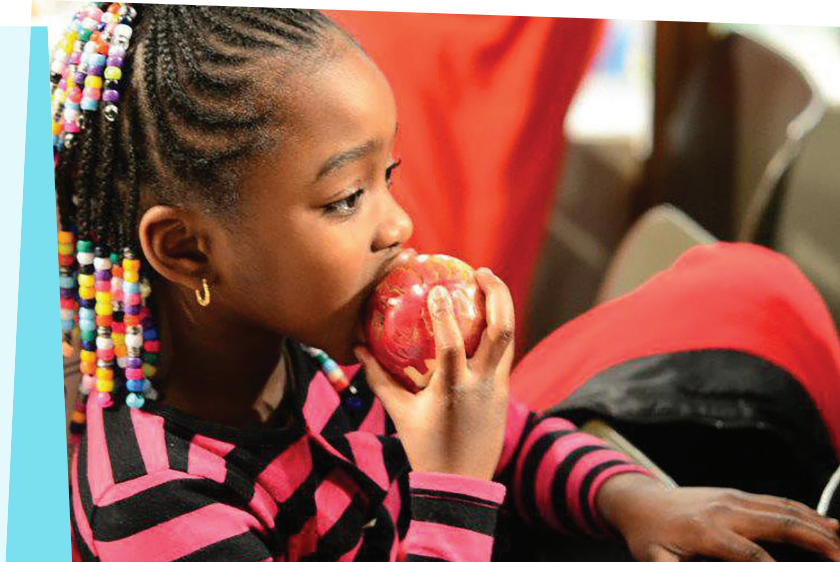
## Do Community Schools Work?

Community schools deliver results. In New York City, where there are now more than 400 community schools, the RAND Corporation found that attendance was higher, more students passed, credit accumulation grew, and high school graduation rates increased in community schools compared to other New York City schools (Johnston et al., 2020). Disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students also fell.

Community schools have also resulted in academic success. In New York City, math achievement increased for elementary and middle school students in the final year of the study. The impact on English language arts in all three years and on math achievement in the first two years was smaller and not statistically significant. There was also evidence that the New York City community schools supported improvements in school climate and culture for elementary and middle schools. Teachers reported an increase in shared responsibility for student success at elementary and middle schools, and there was a positive effect on students' sense of connectedness to adults and peers for elementary and middle school students (Johnston et al., 2020).

### **New York City Schools student**

*Courtesy of New Yorkers for  
Great Public Schools*



A 2017 meta-analysis of 143 community school evaluations conducted by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center determined:

We conclude that well-implemented community schools lead to improvement in student and school outcomes and contribute to meeting the educational needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools. Strong research reinforces the efficacy of integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, and family and community engagement as intervention strategies. Promising evidence supports the positive impact of the type of collaborative leadership and practice found in community schools. The research base examining the “full service” community schools model that includes most or all of the four pillars is newer, more limited in size, and consists primarily of evaluation studies of particular sites. But, here, too, the evidence from well-designed studies is promising. 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 standards for an evidence-based intervention. (Maier et al., 2017)

This study, by virtue of its rigor and comprehensiveness, became landmark research in the community school field as well as more broadly in the world of education policy.

In its 2003 publication, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*, the Coalition for Community Schools examined the impact of 20 community school initiatives across America:

Although not all evaluations looked at every outcome, their collective results clearly show that community schools make the difference for students by improving student learning, better family engagement with students and schools, helping schools function more effectively, and by adding vitality to communities. (Blank et al., 2003)

All these analyses confirm and expand the view of research conducted in 2000 by Joy Dryfoos, who reviewed 49 community school evaluations. Her assessment concluded: “In 46 reports, some positive changes were noted, with 36 programs reporting academic gains, 11 programs reporting reductions in suspensions, 11 programs reporting reductions in problem behavior, 12 programs reporting increases in parent involvement, and 6 programs reporting lower violence rates” (Dryfoos, 2000, abstract).

In addition to the research on student, family, and community outcomes, at least three studies have documented the Social Return on Investment (SROI) for community schools. SROI analyses are designed to determine the benefits that accrue to society from selected investments in policy and program initiatives. In 2013, the Finance Project conducted an SROI study of the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) community schools. The research team found that every dollar invested in student supports and other programs at PS 5, an elementary school, yielded a \$10.30 return on investment. At an intermediate school, I.S. 218, the return was even greater: \$14.80 for every dollar invested in similar supports (Martinez & Hayes, 2013).

These results are corroborated by a 2012 economic-impact study of more than 100 sites in the Communities in Schools network, which showed \$11.60 of economic benefit for every invested dollar (Economic Modeling Specialists Inc., 2012). A third SROI study focused on the impact of a community school coordinator at a single school. That analysis, commissioned by the ABC Community School Partnership in Albuquerque, found that coordinators generated \$7.11 in net benefits for every dollar invested in their salaries.

In assessing this research, it is important to note that there has not been a significant investment in studying community schools. New York City funded its own study and the Learning Policy Institute/National Education Policy Center review and other local studies were supported by private resources. Capturing local dollars for evaluation has been challenging when children and families need so much help. The scope of the research also has been limited by the fact that the U.S. Department of Education, which finances the bulk of educational research, has largely ignored the role of community, focusing primarily on in-school issues. In addition, the level of federal funding for the Full-Service Community Schools program, discussed below, has only recently reached a point that merits significant investments in evaluation.

Taken as a whole, this research confirms what common sense tells us: When students and their families are the focus, when individuals and organizations work toward common goals, when institutions form partnerships and change the way they function, big things can happen and big problems can be solved. That's what community schools are doing. Given the severe problems we face as a nation, community schools are needed more than ever to create a revolution in how we work together to educate our students and improve our communities.

# Who Pays for Community Schools?

Readers must be wondering who pays for all the opportunities and experiences in a community school. Let's start with the fact that the emergence of the community school movement toward the end of the 20th century was not dependent on new public dollars; it was built on more effective use of existing resources. Partners brought assets from various public and private funding streams into close working relationships with schools. Often these were funding sources for which schools are not legally eligible on their own. We never anticipated that a single federal or state program would support community schools. Rather we understood that community schools, by definition, demanded multiple funding sources and multiple partners.

Nearly every federal and state program focused on children, families, and communities can be integrated into the work of community schools. These include health and mental health services from Medicaid and the federal Health Resources and Services Administration; food and nutrition assistance from the Department of Agriculture; community development monies from the Department of Housing and Urban Development; and restorative justice, violence prevention, and community safety funding from the Department of Justice. This range of sources demonstrates the power of community schools to mobilize existing assets, reduce fragmentation, and leverage impact. Examples from our own work illustrate the point.

In 1992, Children's Aid Society closed a free-standing mental health clinic and brought those services into Intermediate School 218/Salomé Ureña de Henríquez Academy, the organization's flagship community school in Upper Manhattan. As a result, the number of no-show appointments at the clinic plummeted and mental health became woven into the fabric of the school. Medicaid and Child Health Plus were the primary sources for the school-based health and mental health clinic. In time, federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds were combined with New York State Advantage and Extended Day/Violence Prevention funds to support after-school and summer programs. Family engagement activities, a bicycle repair program, a school orchestra, and the community school director position received philanthropic support generated and managed by Children's Aid in partnership with the principal and other school leaders.

The Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) saw the human resources of the university as its most potent asset for its community schools work in West Philadelphia. The Netter Center mobilized Penn faculty to create academically based, community-service classes that connected Penn students and faculty with the resources of the school and the community to help solve problems like reducing and preventing lead exposure, food deserts, obesity, environmental racism, and poor educational performance.<sup>3</sup> The Netter Center’s University-Assisted Community Schools staff have been funded through government grants, private gifts, and university support. Federal support includes the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor; the Corporation for National and Community Service; and the National Science Foundation. The Netter Center also blends state and local government funding, including the Pennsylvania Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor and Industry, as well as the City of Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, Public Health Management Corporation, and Philadelphia Youth Network.

Looking more broadly at the community schools field, an analysis by Blank et al. (2010) of how community schools are financed indicated the breakdown of these institutional sources: district (26%), federal (20%), state (14%), local foundations and private sources (13%), city (12%), and county (3%).

One federal program that offered a significant boost for community schools across the country is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program (21st Century program). Initially authorized in 1994 through the advocacy of the National Community Education Association, the program’s stated purpose was to provide for “the educational, health, social service, cultural and recreational needs of a rural or inner-city community”—very much in line with community schools (21st Century Community Learning Centers, 2000). But the U.S. Congress initially appropriated less than \$1 million for a small demonstration project. In 1998, when President Clinton was seeking to expand after-school programs in the face of a recalcitrant Congress, he used the existing legislative authority of the 21st Century program as the vehicle. The Clinton program focused primarily on the expanded learning opportunities element of community schools, specifically after-school and summer enrichment programs.

<sup>3</sup> For further information about Academically Based Community Service, see <https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/what-we-do/courses>.



The 21st Century program also allowed schools limited flexibility to add elements of community schools, such as family engagement and social services. Local community school advocates leveraged 21st Century to embed after-school and summer programs in community schools; in many instances after-school coordinators also functioned in the broader capacity of community school coordinators.

In conjunction with the Clinton-era growth spurt, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, a longtime community schools advocate, agreed to invest in training and other forms of capacity building that the U.S. Department of Education was not able to support. Mott's involvement gave community school leaders and practitioners the opportunity to leverage these significant resources. The 21st Century program grew to over \$1 billion in 2001, and the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 budget was nearly \$1.3 billion.

Congress did not appropriate federal funds explicitly for community schools until FY 2007 when then-House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) secured a special \$5 million appropriation for Full-Service Community Schools. It was not until 2015 that Congress authorized the Full-Service Community Schools program as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The appropriation grew to \$150 million in FY 2023, and major increases have been proposed by the White House and House Committees.

Other significant funding streams have also emerged to help finance community schools. ESSA not only created the Full-Service Community Schools program, it also expanded Title IV, Part A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants, to authorize funds for community school coordinators and other support services. In addition, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2020 and 2021 provided \$190.5 billion in relatively flexible funds to public schools in response to the COVID pandemic; the legislation focused not just on academics but also on social, emotional, physical, and moral/ethical development.

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act passed in 2022 including increased funding for key elements of community schools: \$1.24 billion for school-based mental health services; \$50 million to help schools more easily bill Medicaid for those and related health services; \$1 billion more to strengthen school health and safety as part of aforementioned Title IV, Part A of ESSA; and \$50 million to increase out-of-school-time programming (Katz et al., 2022).



Equally significant are recent state investments in community schools. California is spending \$4.1 billion over seven years to grow community schools (Newbury, 2022). Maryland has embedded community schools in its core school-funding formula focusing on high-poverty schools as part of its Blueprint for Maryland's Future (Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.). Dedicated support in Utah, New Mexico, New York, and other states represents signal achievements for the movement. State funding is important not only from a financial standpoint but because it shows that community schools are becoming an explicit part of state education reform efforts.

We would underscore, in the context of all these financing possibilities, that our approach to financing community schools never anticipated relying on a single funding source. In fact, our advocacy for community schools always included vigorous support for increased appropriations for key programs that are pivotal to the community school vision—after school, mental health, violence prevention, nutrition, and others. We stayed true to the idea that it is the combination of assets from multiple partners and programs that creates the comprehensive and integrated approach of sustainable community schools.

As important as money from many sources is to the stability and effectiveness of community schools, human capital is even more vital. Community schools need contributions from people who are willing to mentor and tutor students and help them expand their social networks; elders who can share their personal stories and the history of their community; businesses that can offer internships and apprenticeships; higher education institutions willing to engage their students, faculty, and staff in public schools; artists willing to share their time and talents; and volunteers from faith-based and other community-based institutions. By creating strong, collaborative cultures, community schools are uniquely positioned to mobilize these assets and deploy them in a way that helps individual students and simultaneously strengthens the whole school and community. One might think of this approach as a return to traditional values, where everyone belongs, works together, and succeeds.

# Chapter 2: *Inequality, Education, and the Case for Community Schools*

With the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, struggles with systemic racism, and current threats to democracy, community schools are more important than ever.

This chapter explains the case for community schools by focusing on three interrelated contexts of American education: what we know about our students; how our schools are organized to respond; and the inextricable link between schools and their communities. Poverty and race—and their convergence—are throughlines in this story.

## **Our Students: Poorer, More Diverse, and More Isolated Than Ever**

One in six American children lives in poverty, according to the 2021 official poverty level (an annual income of \$26,500 for a family of four). When educators think about poverty among students, the measure they often use is the eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, which is available to children in households with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level. During the 2000–2001 school year, 38% of public school students met this eligibility standard. By 2015–2016, that figure had risen to more than half (52%)—a level so troubling that it calls into question basic assumptions about our country's social, public, and taxation policies.

Racial disparities in income are similarly stark. The average annual income of white families (\$76,057 as of 2023) is substantially higher than that of Black (\$45,438) and Hispanic (\$56,113) families, with concomitant disparities in eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch.

Another important consideration is the racial and ethnic diversity of America’s public school students. According to data available from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020–2021 academic year), 45.8% of students are white; 28% are Hispanic; 15% are Black; 5.4% are Asian; 4.5% are two or more races; and less than 1% are American Indian, Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander (Riser-Kositsky, 2023).

An analysis of these demographics demonstrates a significant shift over the past two decades, culminating in an important milestone: In 2014, for the first time, the total number of students of color surpassed the number of non-Hispanic white students, a phenomenon driven largely by dramatic growth in the Hispanic population and a decline in the white population. While many observers, including the authors of this volume, recognize diversity as a strength, we are also cognizant of the educational implications of this development. As Kent McGuire, head of the Southern Regional Education Board at the time, observed, the significance of this milestone revolves around the fact that:

[We] are talking about kids we historically have served least well...Over the decades, we have not managed to reduce the variation in performance between kids of color and white kids, and we haven’t closed the gap between advantaged kids and disadvantaged kids, so now we have to figure out how to do something that we’ve never done before, for the majority. (Maxwell, 2014)

The convergence of race and poverty in schools is critical to understanding the lives of children in America. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), students of color were most likely to attend high-poverty schools, with 45% of Black students, 45% of Hispanic, and 41% of American Indian/Alaska Native students learning in these circumstances. Only 8% of white students and 15% of Asian students faced similar situations, and only 7% of Black students attended low-poverty schools (Hussar et al., 2020).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> High-poverty schools are defined as public schools where more than 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1%–75% of the students are eligible for FRPL. Mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1%–50% of the students are eligible for FRPL. Low-poverty schools are those where 25% or less of the students are eligible for FRPL. See [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_clb.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_clb.pdf).

The consequences of attending a school with a large concentration of students from low-income households is significant. Research has shown that the single most important predictor of racial gaps in educational achievement is the extent to which students attend schools surrounded by other low-income students. Stanford Professor Sean Reardon explains:

School poverty turns out to be a good proxy for the quality of a school. They are in poorer communities, they have less local resources, they have fewer parents with college degrees, they have fewer two-parent families where there are parents who can spend time volunteering in the school, they have a harder time attracting the best teachers.  
(Boschma & Brownstein, 2021)

And of course these students disproportionately face an array of related challenges: hunger, inadequate early childhood experiences, health and mental health issues, bullying, homelessness, and more.

Reardon asserts that the recent national preoccupation with the so-called achievement gap, precipitated by the 2002 No Child Left Behind federal education policy, is misplaced. According to his research, the focus should be on the *opportunity gap*—that is, on the sum total of all the ways children do not have access to the things and experiences they need to learn, in and out of school, starting in early childhood. The opportunity gap has multiple dimensions, from a lack of internet connectivity to an inability to pay for preschool education, after-school experiences, tutoring, and test-preparation services. Inequality compounds the opportunity gap. “High-income families spend nearly \$8,000 per year more on education and enrichment than low-income families—resulting in a spending gap of up to \$100,000 by the end of high school,” according to *U.S. News & World Report* (Cline, 2018). Prejudice or bias also denies students of color equal and equitable access to learning opportunities, as well as the multiple disadvantages resulting from racism itself.

The trauma that children experience also cannot be ignored. More than two-thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age 16 with experiences including physical or sexual abuse, community or school violence, domestic violence, or sudden loss of a loved one, among others (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). Such life events, often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are not felt equally. Nationally, 61% of Black non-Hispanic children and 51% of Hispanic children have experienced at least one ACE, compared with 40% of white non-Hispanic children and only 23 percent of Asian non-Hispanic children (Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

Given these realities—more children in America living in poverty, the nation’s students becoming more diverse, and the convergence of poverty and race in large numbers of America’s schools—one might expect decisions about education resource allocations to address the documented gaps. Instead, we find a picture of widespread inequities woven deeply into the very structure of our public education system.

## Inequity in Action: A Snapshot of America’s Public Education System

Understanding the significance and potential of the community school strategy requires looking at the condition of America’s public schools. Inequities in America’s public education system run wide and deep, and include uneven financing, policies that place inexperienced and poorly trained teachers and principals in schools serving low-income children, and inadequate and unhealthy school facilities. Too many schools ignore the realities in children’s lives and the opportunity gaps they experience daily.

***Inequity #1: The unequal way we finance public education.*** “Why would you want to do a thing like that?” asked a befuddled colleague from New Zealand during a visit to a New York City public school when he learned that American schools tend to allocate the most resources to more affluent students and the least resources to those from the lowest-income families. He explained that in his country the reverse is true: Their system allocates the most resources to the country’s neediest children, ensuring that all students have an opportunity to succeed.

No analysis of the American education system can ignore the deep inequities in our approach to school finance—a system rooted in local control and, intentionally or not, inequality. Given the place-based nature of poverty, local financing subverts the educational goal of increased opportunity for children from families with low incomes. The segregation of our communities by race and income contributes to the fact that the United States spends an annual average of \$10,700 per pupil, and at least \$20,000 per pupil in 8 of the 10 wealthiest districts.

American schools receive less than 10% of their funding from federal sources, while approximately 50% comes from states and the remaining 40% derives from local property taxes. A 2019 report by EdBuild identified a massive \$23 billion annual funding gap between low-income and more affluent schools across the United States. The gap described in this report is so pervasive that fully 47 states have been the subject of fiscal equity lawsuits, dating back to at least the 1970s, when California’s Supreme Court ruled that the state’s education system, which relied largely on property taxes, was violating the rights of students living in poverty to access a quality education. The EdBuild report (2019) notes:

The inherent links between race and class in our country haven’t been remedied by school-funding lawsuits nor the passage of time. They remain ever present, and while we have made some progress on the issue of economic inequality in our schools, we still have a terribly inequitable system...This is unlikely to change unless we finally commit ourselves to challenging the funding aspect of local control. (p. 5)

***Inequity #2: Allocation of human resources.*** The persistent practice of assigning the least-experienced principals and teachers to the most challenging schools and classrooms is another glaring inequity. This common practice leads to constant turnover in low-income schools as an under-prepared workforce attempts to address the multiple unmet needs of students in under-resourced schools.

The COVID pandemic exacerbated this problem. It precipitated a flood of early retirements and other departures from the teaching force that has caused some districts to provide emergency certification for less-qualified personnel.

An added dimension of this challenge is the racial and cultural mismatch between teachers and students: Currently, 80% of the country's teachers are white while approximately 54% of students are children of color. The pattern in racial and ethnic diversity among the nation's public school principals mirrors that of teachers, with educators of color constituting only 20% of U.S. public school principals in 2015–2016.

***Inequity #3: Inadequate facilities.*** Where we educate our children says a great deal about the value our society places on them. Nearly one-third of public school buildings were deemed to be in fair or poor condition, and the American Society of Civil Engineers (2017) gave public K–12 infrastructure a grade of D+ on its 2017 *Infrastructure Report Card*. Moreover, the Healthy Buildings program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (2017) shows that environmental exposures in school buildings—mold, poorly ventilated air, uncomfortable temperatures, noise, or inadequate lighting—can negatively impact student health, thinking, and performance.

According to a Government Accountability Office (2020) report, “The need for investments in school facilities is unequally distributed, with the greatest need for improvements in schools serving high shares of students in poverty, which, in turn, are often located in communities of color.” As readers will see in the Cincinnati case study, a court decision affirming the terrible state of school facilities in that city provided the impetus for creating their Community Learning Centers (community schools) initiative—as is true in Baltimore, Los Angeles, and other locales.

Inequities in school finance, allocation of human resources, and physical facilities are exacerbated by the conditions in the neighborhoods and communities where students live.



# The Inextricable Link Between Schools and Their Communities

Public school students are influenced by the assets, as well as by the many problems, of their neighborhoods and communities. When a school is embedded in a place with extreme and unremitting conditions of poverty and racial isolation, educators face daunting challenges.

We address an uncomfortable truth: The disinvestment in the nation’s most marginalized schools is emblematic of the disinvestment in the marginalized communities that surround these schools. As a result, neighborhood challenges that often include substandard housing, decaying infrastructure, and unrelenting violence compound the problems facing children and families.

Two stories from our community schools experience underscore this reality. When CAS was invited to partner with a high-poverty school in East Harlem (New York City), the needs and assets assessment revealed that fully 40% of students in the school suffered from chronic asthma. This contributed to high rates of chronic student absenteeism and, concomitantly, low rates of student achievement. Further investigation revealed that many families in the neighborhood lived in substandard public housing rife with mold, moisture, and vermin. In addition, the school bordered a busy New York City highway that resulted in high air pollution throughout the neighborhood, including its homes, schools, and outdoor spaces.

## Student activism in New York City

*Courtesy of A+ NYC*





While transforming this school from a traditional public school into a community school could not solve all the neighborhood's environmental problems, several interventions proved helpful, including setting up a school-based health center in the building and establishing an asthma management program to teach students and parents how to prevent asthma-related emergencies. In addition, a newly formed parents' group began to meet with city officials to address some of the environmental justice issues facing the neighborhood.

A second example: Students and staff from the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center for Community Partnerships asked 6th graders at Andrew Hamilton School in West Philadelphia how they envisioned transforming their school's physical environment. The students stepped up with answers. Together with their principal and other school leaders, the students wanted to convert underutilized plots of grass and gravel behind their school into a clean, calm, edible community garden. The desire for the space and the benefits that could accompany its transformation laid bare the aggregated environmental injustices impacting the high-poverty Cobbs Creek neighborhood and its schools: high levels of heat and pollution, flooding, a need for safe outdoor spaces, and a scarcity of accessible healthy food. Together, Andrew Hamilton School, the university, and other local organizations created and maintained an edible garden with over 30 raised beds, a food forest along the school's perimeter, and multiple rain gardens on the school's blacktop. In addition to providing local and organic produce to the school and community, the new garden should reduce the school's urban heat island and capture excess stormwater from floods. Ongoing developments include adding murals, outdoor furniture, signage, and environmental sensors in order to further transform the greenery into safe places to enjoy nature and to learn and teach practical skills—such as growing food, running small businesses, utilizing data, and engaging in storytelling.

These vignettes are indicative of challenges in many communities where racism and poverty converge. Such challenges are significantly the result of public policies across a wide spectrum—including environmental, housing, transportation, taxation, health, and social welfare—that converge in negative ways to the detriment of local communities and their residents.

These examples also illustrate what can happen when schools and their partners take a strengths-based approach that recognizes and builds on the assets and resilience of many high-poverty communities while addressing very real challenges. Indeed, building on community strengths has always been a core principle of our community schools work. We have urged local initiatives to apply the tools of Asset-Based Community Development, a methodology that honors the “capacities, skills, and assets of lower-income people and their neighborhoods” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996) and listens to their voices as an integral part of community schools development (Collaborative for Neighborhood Transformation, n.d.).

More than 40 years ago, psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1981) provided concepts and a language that supported this understanding about the inextricable link between schools and communities. His ecological theory of human development explained how every aspect of a child’s environment affects how the child grows and develops. This focus on the ecosystem approach to children’s development sheds light on the reciprocal relationship among students, schools, and communities.

Public schools have a unique role in that ecosystem. Operating as a bridge between students and communities, schools can help improve the well-being of both, and in so doing function better as educational institutions. This is what can happen when public schools become part of the community schools revolution, embodying core American values of learning, community, and democracy.

# Chapter 3: The Contemporary Community Schools Movement: An Evolving Story

“We have to build a movement,” stated activist researcher Joy Dryfoos, who with her colleagues, Ira Harkavy and Pete Moses, was ruminating over the fact that only three people attended their community schools workshop at a 1997 Memphis conference focused on new models for reimagining schools. Dryfoos, through her writing on full-service schools, along with Harkavy at the University of Pennsylvania and Moses at the Children’s Aid Society, were innovators working to renew a vision of our public schools as centers of community where everyone belongs, works together, and succeeds.

A few months later, they convened a meeting in New York City to explore the historic relationship between school and community. They expected only 30 participants, but 120 people attended. This outpouring of support was energizing, and in early 1997, the Emerging Coalition for Community Schools was formed with the Institute for Educational Leadership as the staffing arm of the enterprise. The word *emerging* was chosen because leaders wanted potential partner organizations to have a voice in framing the work of the coalition.

Today there is a movement with growing numbers of community schools across America. You can find them in urban, suburban, and rural places—from New York City to Cincinnati, Berea (KY) to Las Cruces (NM), and Florida to Oregon. School and community leaders from many different institutions are collaborating to bring the community school vision and strategy to life and help every young person learn and thrive. The Coalition for Community Schools has become a vibrant policy and advocacy organization with 200 partners cutting across sectors and governmental levels.

This chapter captures a brief history of community schools work, the emergence of the movement today, and lessons from the past 25 years of movement building.

# The Roots of the Community Schools Movement

More than a century ago, educator and philosopher John Dewey imagined schools as social centers and sites for building a democratic society. Dewey was an admirer and ally of renowned activist and social worker Jane Addams. It was from Addams and other settlement house leaders that Dewey developed the idea of the school as a social center that would serve and engage the entire community.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1900s, Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington and Sears Roebuck executive Julius Rosenwald worked with Black communities across the deeply segregated South to build schools where one-third of construction costs were raised by the community and the school became the center of education and community life.

This idea of schools as social centers contributed to the movement for community schooling and community education that the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supported for many years starting in the 1930s. An early docudrama developed by the Foundation shows a young boy playing alone on school grounds during the summer. A man approaches and the boy runs into the street and is almost hit by a car. The narrator asks, “Why are our schools closed in the summer?” Indeed, why are they closed and why are they not used for much-needed public purposes?

Two other influential models of community schools developed in the 1930s. Dewey disciple Elsie Clapp’s work in rural Kentucky and West Virginia focused on the community as a resource for student learning and the school as a center for solving community problems. Leonard Covello at Benjamin Franklin High School in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City focused on the school as a community center and a catalyst for community development and democratic neighborhood change.

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<sup>5</sup> “Settlement houses” were places—and part of a movement—where educated middle-class women shared their skills and knowledge with women from low-income communities to help alleviate poverty. They provided assistance with childcare, established kindergartens, taught English to immigrants, and aided with job placement and other social services. The most famous of these was Hull House, founded by Jane Addams, who in 1931 became the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the 1960s, Bill Milliken began Communities in Schools (CIS) with the intention of bringing the resources of the community into the school. Whether students need eyeglasses, tutoring, nutritious food, or just a safe place to be, CIS works to find partners with the resources and deliver them to young people inside schools. CIS meets both simple needs, such as getting kids vaccinated, to more complex needs, such as helping young people find alternatives to gangs. CIS now has sites in 164 communities and 2,900 schools across the country.

All of these efforts were part of the foundation on which today's community schools movement is based. The founders of the modern-day community schools movement began to talk with one another in the mid-1990s. As they left that sparsely attended workshop at a national conference of the now-defunct New American Schools Development Corporation, they knew they had to create something different than other reforms if their vision of community schools was to become a permanent part of the education and community landscape.

They would have to build a movement.

## The Modern Community Schools Movement

The founding leaders of the 21st-century community school movement—Joy Dryfoos; Phil Coltoff and Pete Moses of the New York-based Children's Aid Society (CAS); and Ira Harkavy, director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania—had a clear sense of what they wanted to see happen. But they knew from experience that creating a shared vision with other institutions and organizations was an essential building block of a movement.

Dryfoos' research and writing focused on full-service schools—schools where “quality education and comprehensive social services offered under one roof have the potential to become neighborhood hubs, where children and their families want to be” (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002).

The CAS community school strategy is built on social work principles: meeting human needs, respecting local culture and knowledge, and responding to documented strengths and deficits. CAS conceptualized community schools as a developmental triangle with children at the center, surrounded by families and communities. The triangle’s legs consist of three interconnected support systems: a strong core instructional program designed to help all students meet high academic standards; expanded opportunities designed to enrich the learning environment for students and their families; and a full range of health, mental health, and social services designed to promote children’s well-being and remove barriers to learning.

The Netter Center develops university-assisted community schools (UACS) where higher education institutions work with public schools and other partners to educate; engage; empower; and serve students, families, and community members. UACS focuses on schools as core institutions for community engagement and democratic development—linking school day and after-school curricula to solve locally identified, real-world community problems. UACS programming occurs year-round to improve science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM); health and nutrition; social-emotional learning; arts and culture; college access; career readiness; and neighborhood development.

**Elizabeth, a member of the Sabal Palm Elementary School student news team (Jacksonville, FL), shows off the facility’s anchor desk, used for online broadcasts**

*Photo by Tom Flanigan at WFSU Public Media*



The founders knew that other groups—like Beacon Schools, Community Education, California’s Healthy Start, CIS, Schools of the 21st Century—were pursuing similar work, and they wanted to bring everyone together under a “big tent.” With the assistance of the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), which became the organizational home of the Coalition for Community Schools, the founders began a series of conversations that lasted more than a year. Planning grants from the Mott, Wallace, and Kauffman foundations supported this early work. They started with education groups, on the advice of then-IEL president Michael Usdan, who cautioned that previous efforts by external organizations to align schools and communities had floundered in the absence of support from major educational institutions. They then moved to talk with other stakeholders in the health and human services, youth development, community development, community organizing, higher education, and related sectors—all of whom did some work in or with public schools.

The founders conducted focus groups with local education and community leaders and practitioners across the country. In 1997, all this data-gathering culminated in a national planning meeting to determine a path forward for what was then called the Emerging Coalition for Community Schools. They ultimately agreed on this definition of community schools:

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Community schools offer a personalized curriculum that emphasizes real-world learning and community problem-solving. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings, and weekends. (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.)



Extensive research supported the case that community schools fulfill a broad set of conditions for learning and are consistent with the conditions that families want for their children:

- ▶ 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, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.
- ▶ There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families, and school staff.
- ▶ Community engagement, together with school efforts, promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and connects students to a broader learning community. (Blank et al., 2003)

The founders were clear: The community school is not a prescriptive program. It represents a vision for public schools and a way of thinking that school and community leaders can adopt and adapt to their own unique circumstances.

The community school stands in counterpoint to much of the education policy dogma that emphasizes test-based accountability and narrowly focused “gold-standard” prescriptive programs that turn out to be nearly impossible to bring to scale. Instead, leaders of the movement wanted to create a vehicle that would join schools with their communities to provide the kinds of learning experiences, opportunities, and supports that most parents want for their children and that we know work.

# A Quarter Century of Movement Building

Today, the Coalition for Community Schools is a robust alliance of over 200 organizational partners at the local, state, and national levels. Many partners are now actively promoting community schools as a core part of their own work, while founding partners continue to build the capacity for high-quality implementation at the local level. Vibrant networks of key players in community schools (e.g., United Ways, higher education institutions, superintendents, and community school coordinators) share their knowledge and experience. National partners' policy staff actively advocate for community schools on Capitol Hill. To reach this point, the Coalition has used a range of movement-building strategies described below.

***Organizing and engaging partners:*** Partners are at the heart of the community schools movement. The Coalition for Community Schools (Coalition) was a key vehicle for growing and nurturing those partnerships. Over time, entities from across the spectrum of education, youth development, human services, health and mental health, and other fields joined the movement. They devoted time to the Coalition's federal policy agenda, opened their conferences and newsletters to community schools thinking and, in some cases, made community schools a core part of their own agendas.

A Steering Committee of individuals representing a wide range of partner organizations has guided the Coalition's work, developing strategic plans, advising on policy, and serving as advocates for community schools within their organizations and as spokespersons for community schools. Though the Steering Committee did not have the legal authority of a board of directors since the Coalition operated as an arm of IEL, it played a pivotal role in giving the Coalition legitimacy and credibility.

Initially, the Steering Committee included representatives of key education organizations; colleagues from health and human services, youth development, advocacy, and other fields related to community schools; as well as founding partners. Early on, we decided to include local community school initiatives as partners. We recognized that the voices of the local groups doing the work in schools and communities were essential if we were to learn from those partnerships. Their experience kept the work of the Coalition and other partners grounded in the reality of implementing community schools.

Over time, a number of partners have made community schools a key element of their own school improvement agendas. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), for one, was an early supporter of community schools. The relationship reached an entirely different level, however, when incoming AFT President Randi Weingarten said in her 2008 inaugural address:

Can you imagine a federal law that promoted *community schools*—schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together under one roof all the services and activities they and their families need? Imagine schools that are open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities. And suppose the schools included child care and dental, medical, and counseling clinics...or other services the community needs. For example, they might offer neighborhood residents English language instruction, GED programs, or legal assistance. (Dillon, 2008)

Weingarten's commitment led to full-time staff working to support community schools development and coverage in AFT's *American Educator* magazine (American Federation of Teachers, 2009). Over time, local affiliates in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other communities successfully negotiated for community schools as key elements in their local contracts.

Another longtime partner, the National Education Association (NEA), has increased its active support for community schools in recent years. From the NEA perspective, "Community schools provide not only tremendous opportunities for learning and success for students, but they also offer hope, opportunity and transformation to entire communities" (National Education Association, n.d.). NEA national staff are building a network of local and state leaders working to organize local community school efforts. The NEA passed a policy statement on community schools in 2018 and launched the NEA Community School Institute, which is working with dozens of local school districts around the country and states to advance community schools.

Looking back, another key set of partners were community organizing groups, epitomized by Journey for Justice (J4J), a network of community organizers devoted to public school reform. J4J was created "in response to the growing problem of school privatization (starving of neighborhood schools, school closings, charter and contract school expansion, turnarounds) impacting cities" (Journey for Justice, n.d. ). For J4J, community schools represented what parents and students in their network wanted.

J4J and other organizing groups—the Center for Popular Democracy, Gamaliel Foundation, and NYU Metro Center—are now partners with labor unions (AFT, NEA, SEIU) and advocacy groups (Advancement Project, Alliance for Quality Education, Schott Foundation for Public Education) in the Alliance to Reclaim our Schools (AROS). AROS promotes a national organizing agenda that includes backing community schools from a racial and social justice perspective.

The Learning Policy Institute is dedicated to high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. It has assisted the movement with a synthesis of community schools research in 2017 as well as a series of state reports, fact sheets, and stories that have helped the movement reach a broader audience of education policymakers and researchers.

The Partnership for the Future of Learning (Partnership) is a network of 20 funders and 300+ organizations from across the country that “protects, strengthens, and advances education equity and meaningful learning.” (Partnership for Future of Learning, 2019). Community schools are a priority for the Partnership. It has prepared a community schools video and the Community Schools Playbook, a practical guide to community school strategies. It also supports a storytelling communications network.

Without the contributions of these and other partners the community schools movement would not have achieved the success it has, nor grown as widely.

***Nurturing leadership and learning networks:*** According to the Center for Creative Leadership, “Leadership networking is about developing and using your networks in a way that builds relationships and strengthens alliances in service of your organization’s work and goals” (Leading Effectively Staff, 2022). The Coalition for Community Schools made supporting multiple leadership and learning networks a core element of movement building.

By 2005, there were a growing number of local community school initiatives. A Chicago convening eventually led to the creation of the Community Schools Leadership Network. The network, chaired and facilitated by local practitioners, consists of individuals who are leading local initiatives to grow multiple community schools in their districts. Coming from school districts, United Ways, local government, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions, these leaders learn from one another and are powerful advocates for community schools at the state and local levels. The Coalition, the National Center for Community Schools, and the Netter Center support the network.

In partnership with the School Superintendents Association, the Coalition organized a Superintendents Leadership Council to share knowledge among these key leaders, and also created a partnership with the United Way of America to nurture a network of local United Ways driving community schools forward. Over time, demand emerged for a community school coordinators network. The unique bridge-building work of coordinators requires particular know-how, and the network provides them with a professional learning community.

As local community school initiatives ramped up, it became clear that state networks were necessary both to share knowledge and to influence state policy and funding. At the Coalition's 2014 National Forum in Cincinnati, the process of building state coalitions began. With no funding to kickstart these groups, the Coalition relied on local community school leaders to get the state networks going. As of this writing, there are now formal coalitions or emerging groups in 27 states. In New York, New Mexico, and Maryland, community schools and after-school networks are now aligned and working toward shared goals. In other states, various agencies spearheaded the development of state networks, including United Ways, teacher unions, higher education institutions, and local community school initiatives.

Other networks that emerged after 2014 include: a Next Generation Coalition of young people to inform the field and keep it contemporary; a Research-Practice Network focused on studying how community schools work and improving their quality; and a University-Assisted Community Schools Network, which is described elsewhere in the chapter.

**Convening partners:** Bringing people together is what community schools do at the local level, so naturally that became a core part of the work of the national movement. Beginning with a national planning meeting in 1998 to lay out the work of the Coalition, National Community Schools Forums (National Forums) have been held on a biennial basis since that time. The first event in Kansas City, supported by our local partners at the Local Investment Commission, attracted 400 participants. Demonstrating the growth of the movement, the 2018 Forum in Baltimore attracted 2,000 participants, and the 2022 Forum in Los Angeles drew some 3,500 attendees. Reflecting the emphasis on a “big tent,” the first Forum included workshops on Children’s Aid Community Schools, University-Assisted Community Schools, Schools of the 21st Century, Beacon Schools, Communities in Schools, and comprehensive systems of student supports.

As the National Forums evolved, leaders selected host cities that were centers of significant community schools initiatives. Helping participants understand the story of how each initiative evolved was an essential element of the National Forums. So too were site visits to community schools where participants could experience the work of educators, families, and community partners on the ground.

Regular meetings of partners from national organizations are another element of Coalition convening work. Held twice yearly, these events keep the work of community schools in front of our allies and give partners the opportunity to disseminate their work through the Coalition.

**Building capacity:** Founding partners The Children’s Aid Society and the Netter Center were pivotal to the movement’s growth through their ongoing capacity-building work. The National Center for Community Schools (NCCS) at Children’s Aid has provided capacity-building assistance to most of the country’s major community school initiatives over the past 28 years. Study visits to its pioneering schools in New York City, its annual national Community School Fundamentals and Practicum conferences, and most significantly, its on-the-ground technical assistance have been pivotal to the development of the movement. NCCS has contributed substantially to the professional literature on community schools through its book, *Community Schools in Action: Lessons from a Decade of Practice* (Dryfoos et al., 2005), as well as by preparing and distributing several free “how-to” implementation guides: *Building a Community School* (National Center for Community Schools [NCCS], 1994); *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action* (NCCS, 2011); and *Leading with Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors* (NCCS, 2017).

**Community Parade float celebrating Ernie Pyle Middle School in Albuquerque, New Mexico**

*Courtesy of ABC Community Schools Partnership*





Since the late 1980s, the Netter Center has advocated for UACS. Through conferences, publications, and site visits, the Netter Center has helped nurture the work of higher education institutions with community schools. Its many publications that have contributed to both the community schools movement and university-assisted community schools include: the *Universities and Community Schools* journal (published since 1989); *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform, Civil Society, Public Schools, and Democratic Citizenship* (Benson et al., 2007); "The Promise of University-Assisted Community Schools to Transform American Schooling: A Report from the Field, 1985–2012," *Peabody Journal* (Harkavy et al., 2013); and *Knowledge for Social Change: Bacon, Dewey, and the Revolutionary Transformation of Research Universities in the Twenty-First Century* (Benson et al., 2017). In partnership with the Coalition, the Netter Center has developed a UACS network of more than 70 higher education institutions involved with community schools across the country.

The Coalition focused its capacity-building work on developing research papers, guides, and other tools over the years. Its first publication, *Community Schools: Partnerships for Excellence*, helped readers see what a community school looks like. *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools* (Blank et al., 2003) provided the research base for community schools and analyzed data from 30 initiatives that demonstrated the effectiveness of community schools.

The Coalition emphasized the importance of district-wide initiatives on the theory that having multiple community schools in a district was critical to growing the movement. Multiple schools generated more leadership support, greater community recognition, and increased demand from other schools for the opportunities and supports that community schools could provide. To facilitate that work, the Coalition published *Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community Schools Strategy* in 2013.

By 2017—nearly 20 years after the current movement began—the field needed a set of voluntary standards that would help guide local practice. With a team of colleagues from local community school initiatives and national partners, the Coalition worked to build consensus on specific standards for both individual community schools and systems of community schools (Coalition for Community Schools, 2018). The standards have served as an important tool for community schools—whether they are just getting started, are seeking to improve quality, or are moving toward a district-wide effort.



We want to pay special tribute to the crucial work of Joy Dryfoos (1925–2012), the godmother of the present generation of community schools. Her books, including *Full-Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families* (Dryfoos, 1994) and *Inside Full-Service Community Schools* (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002), to name just two, were instrumental in giving the Coalition its intellectual foundation. Her paper, *Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to Date*, issued by the Coalition in 2000, provided a vitally important contemporary data research base for the movement.

**Advocating:** Partners have been pivotal to our advocacy strategy. Many other partners participate in the Coalition’s Federal Policy Working Group and have been willing to bring their muscle to advocate for including community schools in ESSA, and for expanding federal investment in community schools. Partners from national education, health, youth development, human services, advocacy, and other organizations, as well as state and local groups, have been stepping up for community schools.

**Funding:** Our advocacy strategy focuses not only on increasing financial resources available to community schools but also on bolstering supportive policies that consider the strengths and needs of students, families, and communities. A related strategy addresses the role of private philanthropy as another key partner in advancing the growth and sustainability of community schools.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation offered early and sustained support for the Coalition, the NCCS, and the Netter Center, as well as for other key players in the field. The DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, which supported the national expansion of four community school models—the Beacon Schools, Children’s Aid Community Schools, University-Assisted Community Schools, and United Way Bridges to Success—made a crucial contribution to the development of the current community schools movement.

Several other national foundations supported movement-building work along the way, including Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Stuart Foundation. Today, major funders include the Ballmer Group and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

In addition, a wide variety of local funders, including community foundations and United Ways, provide support for community schools implementation. In addition, several local philanthropies support the Coalition’s biennial Community Schools National Forums.

The authors of this volume have played ongoing roles in working toward sustained funding for community schools. As head of the Coalition for Community Schools, Marty Blank made sure that one of the Coalition’s networks brought private funders together on a regular basis to strategize and share best practices. These funders, in turn, advocated for community schools within their circles of influence, such as Grantmakers for Education. Jane Quinn and Lisa Villarreal both worked for several years as grantmakers—Jane at the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (1993–1999) and Lisa at the San Francisco Foundation (2005–2016)—where they developed grants programs that expanded community schools nationally and in the Bay Area. During this entire period, Ira Harkavy has worked on expanding funding for university-assisted community schools through a variety of sources, both public and private.

It is probably worth noting that all of these efforts took place during an era of test-based accountability, with its narrow vision of the role of schools and measures of effectiveness. As leaders of the community school movement, we have struggled in the past to advance a very different vision and strategy in an unsupportive policy environment (Harkavy & Blank, 2002). That focus has borne fruit today as more and more funders are coming to see the power of the community school strategy.

**Graduation at an Oakland, CA Community School**

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*



# Harnessing the Power, Passion, and Spirit of People and Relationships

We share Albert Einstein’s view that “not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.” And while it may be tough to quantify the impact of community school leaders and the relationships they build, they matter.

We know from our work in local communities, from Coalition networks and national forums, and from conversations with individuals that the people involved in community schools bring a special passion and spirit to their work. Does that passion and spirit emanate from working collaboratively with people coming from different types of organizations and different disciplines? Does it emerge from being in an inclusive setting that brings together people from different races and ethnicities where equity is a priority? Or does it emerge from the power of the relationships that community schools build among people and between schools and other organizations? Perhaps it comes from seeing students and their families access the opportunities and supports so important to their development.

Regardless of the why, we know that the people involved with community schools bring a special joy and commitment to their work. It is their deep passion and their revolutionary spirit that have enabled the community schools movement to move forward. Indeed, they *are* the movement.



**Family holiday gifts donated by  
community members at Grant  
Community Middle School in  
Albuquerque, NM**

*Courtesy of ABC Community  
Schools Partnership*





# PART II: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AT WORK

## Chapter 4: Hope Out of Hardship: The Albuquerque Community Schools Story

New Mexico is a tough place to be a child. The state ranks 50th nationally for child well-being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). The schools in Albuquerque, the state's largest city (pop. 560,000), are a microcosm of the state's challenges. The overwhelming majority of students live in poverty, with 70% receiving free and reduced-price meals in 2021–2022.

The sprawling, diverse district in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains includes 143 schools—100 of them qualify for schoolwide Title I funding, meaning that 40% or more of students live below the poverty level (American Federation of Teachers, n.d.). As a report from the Learning Policy Institute states, "Children and young people who face barriers to school success from poverty and systemic racism are the norm in the state, rather than exceptions" (Oakes & Espinoza, 2021).

Schools in Albuquerque needed help, and old reforms seemed to have had little impact. Could community schools be the solution?

In 2007, following months of discussion and planning between representatives from education, government, business, and nonprofits, a joint partnership agreement was signed by Albuquerque Public Schools, Bernalillo County, and the City of Albuquerque to operate a community school pilot program for the school district (Bernalillo County Community Services, n.d.).

Each entity contributed \$100,000 to operate the pilot program in one community school, which would be managed by the new ABC Community School Partnership. Other key partners included the United Way of Central New Mexico, the University of New Mexico, and the Albuquerque Business Education Compact. The National Center for Community Schools and the Coalition for Community Schools consulted with Albuquerque leaders to help them launch the effort. Soon after, the ABC Partnership won a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to fund three more community schools. The schools showed promise, and in 2012, the City of Albuquerque allocated \$1.2 million for the ABC Community School Partnership to partner with 70 schools for out-of-school programming, which helped build support for an expansion of community schools.

In 2013, the New Mexico Legislature passed the Community Schools Act, which allowed any public school to be transformed into a community school, though it did not provide funding. In 2019, the legislature amended the act and initially provided \$2 million—raising the appropriation to \$3.3 million a year later—to fund community schools.

The ABC Network of Community Schools has grown from 26 schools in 2018 to 61 in 2022. Most of the schools braid together three funding sources, ensuring that if one funding stream is reduced or eliminated, the community school is still sustainable.

“Our goal,” said current ABC Partnership executive director Danette Townsend, “is to transform a school into a community school with permanency in mind.”

## Community Schools Take Root in Albuquerque

José Muñoz was uniquely qualified when he was hired to become the first executive director of the ABC Partnership in 2012. A former NFL player (he proudly displays his San Diego Chargers helmet in his office), Muñoz worked as a community organizer in Chicago before moving to Albuquerque and taking a job as a juvenile-detention-reform coordinator for Bernalillo County. He was working with the state’s largest high school to reduce the number of young people being referred to the juvenile detention center. When kids landed on his doorstep, he saw in sharp relief how schools were failing the poorest kids. Muñoz took a collaborative approach to discipline, bringing together families, students, educators, and school resource officers to help troubled children. His approach brought fast results: “In less than six months, the high school wasn’t referring any kids to the detention center at all,” he said proudly.

Muñoz was attending meetings of the ABC Partnership and was soon tapped to lead it. He made a simple, compelling case for why community partners should work together to support education. “It makes sense. Community schools make sense to bring all your resources together to support those who really need it now and deserve it most. They’ve been neglected over time. It makes sense that you need a coordinating strategy to make all your resources be more efficient and effective. And it makes sense for each entity, because it is leveraging all of their resources for what they all ran for office for: to help the people across an entire geographical area.”

Utilizing data was fundamental to Muñoz’s approach: “In community organizing you present the problem. The data are very powerful. You allow as many people as you can into the room. And you start asking, how do we change?”

Muñoz worked to establish the Learning Policy Institute’s four “pillars” of community schools: collaborative leadership and practices; expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities; active family and community engagement; and integrated student supports (Maier et al., 2017). The latter typically includes an on-site food pantry, clothing, housing and employment assistance, and legal assistance through the University of New Mexico Law Clinic. Each school has a community school coordinator, who works closely with the principal to coordinate services and work with partners to address identified needs. A Community School Council is a site-based leadership team that often includes school personnel, parents, students, nonprofit organizations, elected officials, health partners, local businesses, and sometimes faith-based organizations that assess and make decisions about community needs.

Muñoz sponsored monthly meetings with parents to hear their needs and concerns. Food was always included.

“I learned never to shy away from burritos at our meetings,” he said with a laugh.



# The Difference a Community School Makes

As community schools were established in Albuquerque, problems that were once intractable began to diminish. “The first data point to change is attendance,” Muñoz observed. “There’s a direct correlation between truly engaging parents in decision-making and actually having them play a part in taking care of the stress of other parents. Their investment in the school was heightened, and therefore their students felt more engaged, and attendance improved.”

Another key indicator of success was enrollment. In some schools, the mobility rate—a measure of how many students started the year in one school and then moved away to another school—was as high as 91%. In the community schools, parents and students were becoming invested for the first time. Parents were joining the Community School Councils and participating in expanded out-of-school activities. Muñoz saw something remarkable happen. “People weren’t moving around as much, even when they were still struggling economically. They did everything they could to keep their kid at that school.” The result was the mobility rate in one struggling elementary school dropped from 91% to 38% in three years and the school’s overall grade rose from F up to C.

## Eugene Field Clothing Bank

*Courtesy of ABC Community Schools Partnership*



Community schools are making a difference throughout New Mexico. The Learning Policy Institute study of New Mexico's community schools observed:

National research finds that, when well designed and fully implemented, *community schools increase student success and reduce gaps in both opportunity and achievement*. Although schools alone cannot “fix” widespread poverty, interventions that provide additional supports and resources can mitigate its disadvantages by *reducing gaps in students’ learning opportunities, improve students’ outcomes, create more positive school climates, and foster trusting relationships among adults and children* that are crucial for learning.

In a study examining community schools in Albuquerque Public Schools, Las Cruces Public Schools, and Santa Fe Public Schools, the Legislative Education Study Committee found results similar to those of other studies. Community schools that had been in operation for more than 5 years and that had fully implemented integrated student supports, expanded learning time, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership showed *better-than-average growth in student achievement scores*. *Many had a higher proportion of classrooms with highly effective teachers, higher attendance rates, and higher opportunity-to-learn scores* than district schools not using the community schools approach... That the community schools *kept pace with and exceeded other district schools* is a notable accomplishment, specifically because *they enrolled far greater proportions of students from low-income families* than other schools. Moreover, although state data did not permit assessing the impact on other key outcomes, local evaluations of community schools in Santa Fe and Albuquerque using district and school data show *higher attendance, grades, and graduation rates, as well as positive impacts on student behavior and well-being*. [emphasis added] (Oakes & Espinoza, 2021)

# Homework Diner: A Family Engagement Strategy

Albuquerque community schools have received national recognition for the novel way that they bring families into schools and engage them in their children's learning. Homework Diner was launched in 2012 at Manzano Mesa Elementary School, one of Albuquerque's first community schools. It was the brainchild of community school coordinator Deanna Creighton Cook, who in turn tapped Monique Mills and Vicki Baxley, both of whom had recently graduated from a local culinary arts program and had children at Manzano Mesa. The concept was simple: Invite parents, children, teachers, and administrators to the school to share a weekly meal, provide tutoring, and do homework together. The benefits are numerous.

"The fact that you had the principal and the assistant principal and teachers and everyone sharing a meal, that gave you the feeling of family," said Mills, a mother of two. "It made parents feel like you could just walk in and talk to the office people. You don't normally get that feeling. When you walk into a school office, it's often confrontational. This really opened the school."

All families at the school were invited. Mills and Baxley were the lead cooks. "We didn't want to turn away anybody," she says. "It turned out to be a lot of people. It was really cool because not only did it bring in a feeling of community within the school, but it also helped the kids understand their schoolwork."

Homework Diner became the gateway for parents to become involved in the school. Parents who might never have volunteered before were joining the Community School Council. "Once you knew about Homework Diner, then you knew that there was something else about this school. It opened my eyes to join the Community School Council and to be part of the decision making within the school," Mills recounted. "The parents and guardians, school staff, local businesses—they all are part of the collaborative leadership within that school and all a part of the decision-making team of the school."

The teachers and families identified reading improvement as a need for students, so the Council launched a mentorship program in which volunteers would come in to help read. Student reading and math scores started improving. Homework was submitted on time. The school jumped up a full grade on the state's annual report card.

Just as important, parents engaged with the school and their children. Mills explained that “in a traditional school, the principal sees what needs to be done, and then it goes from there.” The Community School Council fundamentally shifts the power dynamic and sense of ownership in the school. “This gives everyone who’s involved in the school a chance to say something and the chance to voice their opinion. You start feeling like you are heard and that you are part of the process,” said Mills. “And you see the results. It definitely makes you feel like I had a hand in that.”

Homework Diner has attracted national attention. As part of a three-part series, NBC News (2014) and Chelsea Clinton visited Manzano Mesa to film *Homework Diner Serves Up Success*. The innovative project in community engagement has spawned homework diners in other schools around the country.

For Mills, Homework Diner did as much for her as for her children. She confided to the community school coordinator at Manzano Mesa that she was in an abusive relationship and feared for her safety. “They were able to help me get out of the situation I was in and helped me get a grant to move into an apartment of my own and get back on my feet,” she recalled. Her newfound stability enabled Mills to get a job and helped her kids to thrive in elementary school. Eventually, the school hired Mills as a community school coordinator herself. “So here I am, I’m a coordinator and I get to do this for other people and pay it back and pay it forward,” she said proudly.

A report by the American Federation of Teachers (n.d.) found the community school coordinator is the linchpin of a community school:

As the person responsible for coordinating partnerships, making sure students are receiving the services they need and overseeing the implementation of programs, the [community school] coordinator takes the onus off teachers to be both social workers and educators, while at the same time respecting their expertise in the lives and needs of their students.

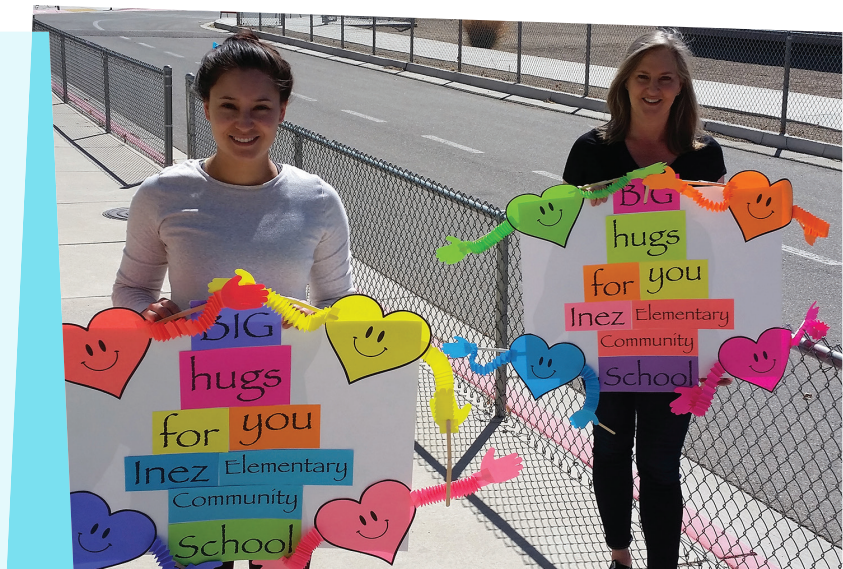
José Muñoz cited a case study that calculated the financial value of Manzano Mesa community school coordinator Deanna Creighton Cook: “For every dollar we invested in her, [we] got a \$7.11 return on investment. That’s what she brought—in cash donations, in-kind contributions, and volunteerism—back to that school.”

Maria Marquez is the community school coordinator at Pajarito Elementary School. She described a typical case that she handled: “I got a call from a mother at 10:00 p.m. last night. She’s a single mom with four kids. She got COVID, everyone gets COVID, and dad disappeared from the picture. We helped this mom find the dad and get child support. She makes a little cash from house cleaning, but she is almost three months without work. Her kids were online learning so she’s staying home with four kids. She’s very behind in utilities, but she gets food from our food pantry in the school. I submitted a request to see how we can help this family. There was electricity but not enough Wi-Fi to support four computers. So we got a hotspot to get everybody online. We got clothing for the kids. We are filling all the little needs in that house. At the same time, I am making connections with the teachers. She is attending Homework Diner, Community School Council meetings, and meetings with the principal.”

“I am the connector,” said Marquez. “I bring the school to families.”

**Volunteers sharing “Hugs” during drive-through services during COVID-19 pandemic at Inez Elementary School**

*Courtesy of ABC Community Schools Partnership*





## The Partners

In 2012, José Muñoz approached Ellen Bernstein, president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation. When he told her, “We need the teachers union,” Bernstein replied, “The teachers union needs community schools. This is a match made in heaven.”

Bernstein, a straight-shooting former elementary school teacher, stated, “I have always been of the opinion that there is no achievement gap, there’s just an opportunity gap. New Mexico has the highest rates of childhood poverty of any state in the nation. I’ve worked with many different kids over my lifetime whose family needed the kind of support offered by the community schools.”

Bernstein cited the example of getting required childhood immunizations. “What if you had to take a bus and transfer three times just to get your kid’s shots so they could attend school? Why couldn’t we have a shot clinic at the school for the kindergarteners? Why can’t we have food pantries? Why not have in-school medical and dental clinics sharing school facilities?” she asked. “We’re not doctors. We’re not dentists. We can’t do that work. But we can be the hub of the community where we connect services with families that need them.”

Asked how teachers feel about working in community schools, Bernstein replied, “I’ve never had anybody complain about the amount of time it took to work in a community school. What really upsets teachers is when they start a community school and establish programs like food banks and weekend backpack programs that would help families, and then they get a new principal who basically kills it. Because the leadership of the school is everything.”

In 2013, the Albuquerque Teachers Federation passed a resolution of support for community schools. Bernstein serves on the board of the ABC Partnership and is attempting to build “a more sustainable, deep structure with community schools so a change in personnel can’t totally change the commitment of the school to the community.”

“A program is just a program,” Bernstein concluded. “Weaving a tapestry of services around these schools with these families and kids—that is deeper than a program. ...Kids can’t learn if they’re not okay at home, not okay physically, and emotionally...Those services make my job possible in a way that matters.”

Community schools create surprising partnerships. One of Bernstein's colleagues on the ABC Partnership was Wayne Johnson, who was a Bernalillo County Commissioner. Johnson, a self-described conservative, had never heard of community schools. He just knew that a new approach was needed to solve Albuquerque's education problems. "Both the council and the mayor were looking for ways to be engaged with education, which plays a major role in economic development, workforce readiness, and just touches most people's lives directly or indirectly. That's part of the genesis for this kind of unique collaborative model that was put together," said Johnson.

Johnson was asked to chair the ABC Partnership when community schools were getting started. "To be honest, when I was appointed chair, nobody really wanted to do it," he said. He was growing impatient with the group as it debated its mission. So when José Muñoz was hired as executive director of ABC Partnership in 2012, Johnson was blunt with him: "If you show progress over the next couple of years, your funding will be fine. But if you don't show any successes, if we don't have any wins over the next couple of years, the organization will die and there's no way that anybody can fund you."

"I think José took that as a challenge," Johnson said with a laugh.

Leadership is critical to the success of community schools. "You needed a true leader to drag the organization towards the goals that it set for itself," he said. He credits Muñoz with being that leader.

Eugene Saavedra, an associate superintendent in Albuquerque Public Schools whose district includes 16 community schools, echoed this sentiment. "There has to be a true commitment to the work that comes from the leadership of the district and the school, all the way down to the Community School Council. If you don't get that commitment, then your school will struggle around the community schools concept," said Saavedra.

Wayne Johnson soon saw results. "All of a sudden, we've got Homework Diner going on, we're getting national attention from NBC News and they're sending Chelsea Clinton out—not once but twice—to do stories on this innovative program," he recounted. Most importantly, he noted, "We started seeing that kids in community schools had better outcomes."

Johnson became a believer in community schools and in the partnerships that power them. "The main selling point is that we are trying to improve educational outcomes for our kids in our county. You have a coalition of partners that leverage each other's resources to address those outside problems that affect learning within the school."



Johnson, who is now county manager in neighboring Sandoval County, recalled a story that captures how community schools make a difference. A large group of kids who lived on the outskirts of Bernalillo County were getting dropped by the school bus at a remote location early in the afternoon and waiting for parents to pick them up after work. The students were coming to school unprepared and falling behind. Once the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) realized what was happening, they donated a portable classroom where the children were being dropped off. “Then APS provided not only the building but also a teacher to help those kids,” Johnson said. “So they dropped the kids off and they had a warm place to be. They had lighting. They had internet access and computers to do their homework and someone to help them. That happened in about three months. The APS representative on the ABC board, she literally cried. She said, ‘That is my Christmas present.’”

## Hope Out of Hardship: Highland High School

Marco Harris is principal of Highland High School, a community school once dubbed “the war zone” due to the large number of its students and families who are refugees from war-torn countries. The school serves southeast Albuquerque, which includes the poorest and most diverse neighborhoods in the city. Virtually all of its students receive free and reduced-price lunch and 91% are minority, primarily Hispanic.

Equity is at the center of Highland High School’s mission. “I have this philosophy that 30% of all kids that come into my school are just going to be fine and you don’t need to worry about them. They’re what the system was built for,” said Harris, bouncing up in his chair to emphasize his point. College pennants line his office wall in an effort to inspire his students.

“Our equity strategy is the other 70% that are having a hard time being successful, getting good grades, and showing up,” said Harris. “That’s because they have to leave school to go to work because they’re trying to get a paycheck for mom who just lost her job.”

Harris believes in “providing opportunities and giving voice to the deficits. You have families that are getting kicked out of homes because they can’t pay their rent.” The school should help vulnerable families know their rights, he insisted. “So we provide legal assistance for families to push back and fight.”

Highland’s Community School Council surveyed families to assess the problems confronting them. Danette Townsend, who succeeded José Muñoz as executive director of the ABC Partnership, explained that “the Council is magic”—it is the key to keeping the school in touch with community challenges, collecting data, and devising solutions.

Albuquerque Associate Superintendent of Schools Eugene Saavedra explained that a Community School Council is fundamentally different from a traditional parent teacher organization. “In a PTO, parents sell candy or popcorn, which brings money from bake sales to be used for other activities. A Community School Council looks at data along with the leadership of the school, says here are some things you are struggling with, and asks what ideas we can generate to solve this problem together? We have families, politicians, board members who get involved and are at the table and everyone contributes,” said Saavedra.

Highland High School’s Community School Council survey in fall 2021 revealed that 325 families were worried about losing their homes. Working together with ABC Partnership, “fifteen different partners were brought into the mix and \$85,000 was leveraged to help 160 of those families stay in their homes,” Townsend explained. “And that is the magic to me of a community school. You look at what’s really happening, you bring the people together that can help, they bring some more people that can help, and 160 families received an average of \$580 towards not getting evicted.”

Highland High School has partnered with the University of New Mexico (UNM) Law Clinic to help its families deal with legal issues ranging from eviction to immigration—challenges that force families and students to move or transfer schools. “Mobility is a bad thing in this conversation, because it means students don’t finish the year in the same school that they started,” explained Serge Martinez, Associate Dean at the UNM School of Law and director of its law clinic. Noting that one nearby school had a mobility rate near 100%, he observed, “It’s no surprise that the poorest communities had the highest mobility rates.”

Highland High School decided to address its student mobility problem by tackling housing insecurity. Martinez noted, “We ended up doing a series of educational workshops at the Homework Diners, and we take referrals through the community school coordinators when families are facing eviction.”

Housing crises are often the result of temporary setbacks that can be resolved by buying a little time. “We’ve seen a lot of people who have a momentary hiccup—a loss of a job, a car repair, a medical expense, a death in the family—and they would fall behind, not because they were bad tenants per se, but because they’re just living that close to the margins,” Martinez explained.

“We were able to in many cases keep folks from being involuntarily dislocated in a calamitous way. That allowed the students to stay in school,” Martinez continued. “A lot of this was done through the education lens: we know that when students are not staying in the same classroom throughout the year, it has negative learning outcomes for the individual students as well as for the classroom as a whole, because of this disruption to the student body generally.”

Highland High School’s equity mission includes offering English classes to its families. “We provide it for our kids, so why would we not provide it for our parents who clearly need the same things that their kids do?” Harris asked. “That’s one way that we try to impact and provide equitable opportunities.” Similarly, Highland is offering technology training to families and opportunities to get certified in IT skills.

Harris challenges his students to use their skills and aim higher. Instead of working as a cashier at McDonald’s, “Why not be the manager? Why not try to own that McDonald’s franchise?”

Delivering on equity requires integrating multiple family supports. That is partly the job of the community school coordinator—who Principal Harris said he “treats as an assistant principal” and is “worth [their] weight in gold.”

The school’s busy medical clinic serves as a one-stop shop for a variety of services needed by families with low incomes. Harris explained, “We have a medical alliance that provides resources and services for our undocumented students and family members, providing them opportunities to submit some of the paperwork for their citizenship. And we have a full-functioning, school-based health center that actually provides an array of services, from dental, behavioral, medical, as well as family supports.”

“If I were to say what is our strongest component within the community school framework, it is integrated services and supports,” concluded Harris.

## Community Schools in a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stress test for Albuquerque’s community schools. “When the pandemic hit, it accentuated all of our deficits,” said Harris. “People are starving, people are getting kicked out of their homes, people are underperforming within the schools. So we as a city and we as a school [district] had to deal with it. What’s been great about community schools in the pandemic is that we were already equipped to deal with it. So I didn’t feel like we were in crisis at any given time through the pandemic.”

Harris continued, “I know that on a daily basis, any family that came forward that we could identify or that we did a home visit to—because we were still doing home visits, pandemic or not—we provided the necessary resources...they ultimately needed to stay put. And that’s my philosophical [priority].”

Supporting families yielded a remarkable result: In the midst of an unprecedented crisis, Highland High School’s graduation rate rose from 48% to 62%, its highest graduation rate in 15 years.

“I am a unicorn,” conceded Principal Harris. “I present things a little differently. I say yes to a lot of things that I don’t know if they’re going to work or not. If you sell it to me that this is going to be good for my kids and it fits into our vision, you get a yes.”

## Democracy and Community Schools

Social justice is part of the DNA of Highland High School. “One of the biggest things that the community school framework provides is the opportunity to organize,” asserted Harris. For example, he cited a school policy that if a student had an unpaid meal bill, they would only receive a basic bread and cheese sandwich for lunch. When a “pissed off parent” complained to the principal, Harris made it a teachable moment. He encouraged the parent to work with students to create a video to expose the practice. The school ultimately canceled student meal debts.

Highland students demanded action in 2017 when President Donald Trump announced that he was ending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allows some children of undocumented immigrants to remain legally in the United States and be eligible for a work permit. Harris beamed with pride when telling the story of what happened next: “I had 400 students the next day protesting out on the road in front of the school. And it went viral, promoting and supporting our students in their voice and in their fight to find equity within this system, and opportunity within the system. Even the school resource officer supported the students by helping to direct traffic so the students could march.”

“I believe most of my counterparts, my other colleagues, they probably would not have been out walking with them,” Harris said. “I felt it was my personal responsibility to be out there to maintain my students’ safety in what they so respectfully did. They told me the day before, ‘Harris, I want you to know that we’re going to walk out and this is why we’re walking out. Is that okay?’”

The principal broke into a broad smile. “Like, how great is that?”

“The only way that equity will happen,” Harris reflected, “is to move us all into equality.”

José Muñoz has seen what community schools have accomplished in Albuquerque, and he is taking the message on the road in his current role as director of the national Coalition for Community Schools. Community schools, he asserted, are “a vehicle for uniting our country. We have lots of division—racial division, religious division, ableism, you name it. This is a unification strategy. This is a compassionate strategy.”

Muñoz and his coalition partners have set a goal of expanding the number of community schools to 25,000 in 2025.

“That’s a large aspirational goal,” he admitted. “And I’m pushing hard for that.”

## CHAPTER 5: *Transforming a School, a Neighborhood, and a System in Cincinnati*

Kimmi Thomas beamed as she walked around the freshly painted rooms of her new home. Her footsteps echoed in the large empty space. A small group of community representatives and a local television crew were on hand for her arrival on January 1, 2020. Thomas poured champagne into a red plastic cup and passed it to the assembled guests. She raised a cup, toasting her community—and herself (May, 2020).

Thomas, a homeowner at age 26, is realizing two dreams: hers and her community's. Her smartly rehabbed home in the Lower Price Hill neighborhood of Cincinnati was recently a blighted building with boarded-up windows and peeling paint. Sex workers operated out of the basement. Habitat for Humanity took on the challenge of fixing up the unit, and Thomas applied and was accepted to become a homeowner. She put in 250 hours of sweat equity by painting, hanging sheetrock, and swinging a hammer. For this young mother, a home “means stability, putting down roots, no more slumlords,” she said.

Thomas is the embodiment of a dream that took root in the nearby Oyer Community Learning Center, which serves the urban Appalachian neighborhood of Lower Price Hill, where the median household income is \$16,000 (Community Learning Center Institute, 2015). Thomas was ranked second in her class when she graduated from Oyer in 2011. But the odds of her succeeding were not good. During her senior year, she had a baby, and then her father died unexpectedly. Few people would have been surprised if she left school; in the early 2000s, about two-thirds of Oyer students dropped out before graduation.

But something had changed in the interim: Her community refused to let her fail. And Thomas was determined to make a better life for herself and her daughter.

Oyler is a community learning center (CLC)—also known as a community school. CLCs are, in the words of the Partnership for the Future of Learning (2022), “public schools that partner with families, community organizations, and local agencies to support the full development and growth of young people using evidence-based, tried and true practices.” Oyler has gone from being a failing school in a blighted neighborhood to being the hub of a community’s transformation.

Leaders of the Oyler CLC came to realize that their success was intimately bound up with the success of the community they served. “The success of the school and the success of the neighborhood are inextricably linked,” said Adelyn Hall, director of School-Centered Neighborhood Development for the Community Learning Center Institute (CLCI), the lead community partner of Oyler CLC.

Transforming one of Cincinnati’s poorest neighborhoods is a daunting proposition. To turn around Lower Price Hill would require decent jobs, affordable homes, and safe community spaces. For Oyler CLC to thrive, Lower Price Hill needs to thrive, and, ultimately, Kimmi Thomas has to succeed.

“Kimmi is the poster child for what we are trying to achieve,” said Hall. “She had a kid at 17, graduated from Oyler at the top of her class, and as a young mother, she got her associate’s degree.” After graduation, Thomas got a job as a preschool paraeducator at Oyler. Then she attended an information session for Habitat for Humanity at the school and became one of its youngest participants. She is now president of the Lower Price Hill Community Council.

Thomas “has invested in the community and the success of school,” said Hall. The success of Thomas and other Oyler graduates will be the return on that investment.

## Coming Apart and Coming Together

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, cities across the country were erupting in civil unrest, fueled by generations of racial injustice. The Kerner Commission, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to investigate the causes of the 1967 urban riots, concluded that white racism was the root cause of the unrest, and declared that the country was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” (Remnick, 2021).



Cincinnati was a microcosm of this racial inequality. The city drew national attention as it exploded in riots in 1967 and 1968. The *Black Diaspora Review* described the conditions that gave rise to the unrest:

In 1948, half of the companies in Cincinnati employed Blacks only in menial jobs. To be sure, the glass ceiling kept Blacks tied to the bottom rung of the economic ladder. And although the Black population increased considerably after 1950, Cincinnati's limited voting system kept Black political representation low. By 1957, the Black population had reached an all-time high, yet the lone Black city councilperson lost his seat in 1966. Oddly enough, there were two Blacks on the city council during the early to mid-1950s, when the Black population was significantly smaller. This was due to a proportional representational system that was later changed to an at-large electoral system.

The 1968 Kerner Commission in its study of Cincinnati pointed out that African Americans attributed the lack of Black city council representatives to "dilution of the Negro vote through abolition of the proportional representation system of electing the nine councilmen." Moreover, by 1967, although 40% of the city's schoolchildren were African American, only one member of the school board was Black—and "of [the] more than 80 members of various city commissions, only three or four were Negroes." (McDaniels-Wilson et al., 2012)

During that period, Cincinnati experienced a wave of "white flight" from the city to the suburbs. The city's population fell steadily from 500,000 in 1970 to 330,000 in 2000. The school system collapsed. By 1999, enrollment in Cincinnati schools was half of what it had been in 1970, dropping from 90,000 to 45,000 students. By 2021, enrollment had dipped to 36,000.

In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision in *DeRolph v. Ohio*. It found that the state's method for funding education through property taxes was unconstitutional, as it deprived poorer school districts of funds. The decision resulted in a massive investment in school construction, particularly in low-income school districts. In Cincinnati, the Board of Education floated a \$1 billion construction bond. It was part of an effort to improve education and bring families back. But school leaders had lost the trust of the community and the bond failed.

The implosion of Cincinnati's schools was showing up in the world of attorney Darlene Kamine. She was a juvenile court magistrate with deep community roots. She founded ProKids, a guardian ad litem program for abused children, and she also co-founded the Cincinnati Children's Museum. Kamine explained, "The inequities in education and the opportunities for the kids on my docket—the kids in the child welfare system—were heartbreaking. I thought about the experiences that *my* child had—after-school activities like drama and just joy. I wanted the children in my courtroom to have the same opportunities that my child had."

Kamine decided to act. In June 1999, she left the courts and became education director for the Children's Defense Fund's (CDF's) Cincinnati office. At that time, the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) leadership realized that they needed to pursue a very different approach to restoring the schools. "They understood that they needed to go directly to the community and find out what it would take to bring people back to the schools and to support the turnaround—beginning with rebuilding the schools," Kamine recalled. At the time, schools were typically underused assets that served only school-aged children and were closed evenings, weekends, and summers.

CPS reached out to CDF as a trusted community organization, and Kamine worked with CPS to develop an intensive community engagement process. In order to pass the bond levy to rebuild the schools, CDF led a community-wide effort to create a new vision for the role of schools as CLCs and neighborhood hubs.

Kamine met two leaders in the national community schools movement, Jane Quinn from the Children's Aid Society and Marty Blank from the Coalition for Community Schools. They came to speak at a citywide forum and proposed a new paradigm for CPS. A series of public forums, hosted by CPS board member and former Ohio Governor John Gilligan, continued throughout the year. A local foundation provided funding for a diverse group of community members to visit a group of CLCs around the country that were recommended by Quinn and Blank. Local press covered the story and helped promote the idea of rebuilding Cincinnati schools as CLCs.

“The community school movement would not have happened without Jane and Marty,” insisted Kamine. “They were the ‘Pied Pipers’ of this quiet revolution. They connected people. They brought us together at national convenings and facilitated our collaboration to help us do what needed to be done. They built a big tent. There was no one way, no prescriptive strategy, no script, and no wrong door.”

**Families celebrating after  
Oyler Community Learning  
Center graduation**

*Courtesy of Oyler Community  
Learning Center*



The outcome of this growing support by the city was a determination that all of Cincinnati’s public schools would become CLCs and include robust student, family, and community supports. In 2003, an overwhelming majority of Cincinnati residents approved a \$480 million bond levy to renovate and replace many of the city’s ailing school facilities. “We knew that schools needed to be overhauled by the customers who were using them. This is the foundational element of our work: It’s got to be grassroots, neighborhood by neighborhood, businesses, churches, old and young, teachers, kids—the entire public that is connected to that particular school and neighborhood. Those are the folks who have to create the vision and create the kind of school they would choose for their children and the kind of neighborhood they would want for their children and grandchildren,” asserted Kamine.

“Each neighborhood developed its own vision for the school as the center of their community, selected the partners who shared their commitment to the vision, and were willing to adapt to a new way of doing business inside a school building.”

“We didn’t know we would eventually have health clinics or legal services or housing services,” Kamine continued. “We had no idea about the scope of what we were getting into.”

Kamine became a consultant to the CPS Facilities Master Plan team—leading the community engagement process to develop each school as a CLC. It took three years for Kamine to facilitate the planning for the first one. “The best thing you can do is listen to the people,” she said, insisting that you can’t “just drop in stuff. The most important thing is to really invest the public in this kind of approach. That’s the most time consuming—and the thing that results in bringing people back.”

The result of Cincinnati’s experiment with community schools has been dramatic. In 2021, the Brookings Institution reported:

In the 18 years since its inception, the Cincinnati Community Learning Centers initiative—which now involves all 65 Cincinnati Public Schools—has continually convened neighborhood-based consultations with families and other residents in order to root its school-change efforts in the community’s strengths and unmet needs. Through a board policy, Cincinnati also established Local School Decision Making Committees (LSDMCs) that include families and community members and that have authority over a wide range of decisions, including budgeting, hiring, and partner selection. The slow, steady growth of the Community Learning Center strategy and the continued community commitment have led to demonstrable results: **From 2006–2015, the achievement gap between Black and white students was reduced from 14.5% to 4.5%; third-grade literacy increased by 20 percentage points; and high school graduation rates increased almost seven percentage points to 77.9% over the 2014–18 period.** By engaging in extensive community organizing, planning processes, and collaborative leadership, a next generation of community school leaders and districts can connect top-down (“treetops”) with bottom-up (“grass-roots”) reform, build community strength and resilience, and ensure that the design and implementation of their community schools reflects the vision, needs, and interests of students and families. [emphasis added] (Brookings Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools, 2021)

## All-In On Community Schools

Cincinnati is now “all-in” on CLCs. All 65 Cincinnati Public Schools are CLCs that partner with a lead agency, like the CLCI, which Kamine founded. CLCI serves as the lead agency for six CLCs; other lead agencies include the YMCA, Grad Cincinnati, and Activities Beyond the Classroom. The lead agency is chosen by the school’s LSDMC—ensuring strong community input into the priorities of a local school.

“Every Community Learning Center may look different because each one reflects different community engagement,” said Amy Randolph, former longtime principal of Oylar CLC and currently Director of Innovation and Strategic Partnerships for CPS. “No leader can walk into a school and say, ‘This is what you need.’ There needs to be stakeholder engagement on all levels: What does your community want? What do your teachers want? What do your students want? What do your families want? What do you want to see out of this school that will ensure your success? You really need everyone’s voice to be heard.”

CLCs offer more than just support services. “It’s wraparound services times 10,” said Casey Fisher, Community Partnership Manager for CPS. “Wraparound services are basic needs. CLCs are focused on more than basic needs. It goes to access. Our schools have school-based health centers. That goes to attendance. We have therapists on site at every school for students, families, and the community. Cincinnati CLCs have five school-based dental centers and two vision centers—the first financially self-sustaining, school-based dental and vision centers in the country.”

Kamine explained that the three distinguishing features of Cincinnati CLCs are community engagement, site-based governance that selects its own partners, and financial self-sustainability so that school budgets can continue to be devoted to education. Medical clinics bill insurance or Medicaid, just as they would if they were free-standing. CPS pays resource coordinators, but all other partners are responsible for their own funding through grants and business models. “Leveraging funds should be priority one,” asserted Kamine. “We are looking for sustainability.”

A key to the sustainability of Cincinnati’s community schools was having the Board of Education originally adopt a policy that affirmed CLCs as a citywide model. Kamine counsels others about the importance of that action: “Don’t get started before the Board of Education passes a policy to create community schools—not a handshake with a friendly superintendent, because that will go away and it won’t be genuinely transformative. Having a policy has taken us through five superintendents and many Boards of Education.”



# Culture Change in Lower Price Hill

Rebuilding the Oyler School required more than just plaster and paint. It required a culture change.

Oyler was founded in 1930 as a K–8th grade school. The neighborhood had never had a high school, and the closest one was miles away. In the tight-knit culture of the working-class community, families prioritized keeping children close to home—which meant students typically would not travel to go to high school. Many typically left school by 10th grade and found work. In 2002, when Kamine started the community engagement process to rebuild Oyler, 85% of the students who graduated from Oyler’s 8th grade never made it to 10th grade. The fallout of deep poverty and low education could be seen in the fact that the greater Oyler community had one of the highest adult illiteracy rates in the country.

“When we started the planning process for a renovated Oyler school building, hundreds of people in this small community of about 1,000 turned out,” Kamine recalled. “They were angry. They didn’t care about the bricks and mortar. They wanted their kids to have the chance to go to high school in the neighborhood. They wanted Oyler to go up to the 12th grade. They said that they expressed this for over 30 years, but they didn’t have the clout to make it happen.”

## **Vision Center at Oyler Community Learning Center**

*Courtesy of Oyler Community  
Learning Center*



Kamine's goal was for Oyler families to "re-believe in public education." For nearly three years, she and community leaders mobilized the neighborhood, including local business leaders, to convince CPS to include a high school as part of the \$21 million facility renovation. The building renovation was completed in 2012.

Through the ongoing community engagement process and the leadership of the Oyler LSDMC, Oyler partnered with the Cincinnati Health Department to create the first school-based health center; a full-time, early childhood education center that accepted children at 6 weeks of age; and a full-time team of on-site therapists.

To address the lack of access to dental or vision care, which the community had identified as a key barrier to student success, CLCI tapped private funders to help build the first school-based dental and vision centers in the country. The redesigned school included space for a food pantry and free clothing store, as well as a daily reading program with almost 300 community volunteers. Dozens of partners were added through the ongoing engagement of the Oyler community including a college counselors, business mentors, and a daily after-school enrichment program.

Pam Bowers, a former member of the Cincinnati Board of Education, is the director of school-based mental health services at Central Clinic Behavioral Health, a CPS community partner. She explained the unique context of the Oyler CLC, noting that it is a neighborhood K-12 school and "most CPS schools are not K-12 and not specific to one community."

"Oyler was struggling to have students attend high school outside the neighborhood," Bowers explained. "They needed the school to sustain their students so they would graduate. The whole Oyler model was based on addressing the high dropout rate. It just made sense to pour a lot of resources into Oyler. Other schools develop strategies that are specific to what *their* school needs."

The transformation in the Oyler School community has been dramatic. In 2020, 92.5% of Oyler seniors graduated high school—the highest graduation rate since the high school opened in 2009. The culture change now includes an expected continuation to college. Three-fourths of the class of 2021 matriculated to college, including attending the highly competitive University of Cincinnati College of Engineering and the Ohio State University Fisher College of Business.



# Identifying the Game-Changer

As Oyler searched for keys to improving outcomes for its students, then-Principal Amy Randolph posed a question to school parents: “What would be a game-changer?”

A consistent answer came back: stable housing. “We are losing students every time a house is boarded up,” Randolph told Kamine. “And students who move more than five times are at high risk of dropout.”

Another intensive community engagement process was launched with Oyler–Lower Price Hill residents to develop a plan for the redevelopment of housing and improvements to the quality of life in the neighborhood. Adelyn Hall, an urban planner, joined CLCI in 2015 as the director of School-Centered Neighborhood Development.

“After the foreclosure crisis, the vacancy rate in Lower Price Hill was 43%,” Hall recounted. “Almost one of every two buildings was vacant. The combination of vacancy and poor housing in the neighborhood was the problem.”

Principal Randolph told Hall, “We’re not going to have a neighborhood school because we are not going to have a neighborhood.”

Hall insisted that for Oyler’s students to succeed, its neighborhood must succeed. “Safety, green space, and stable housing significantly impact a child’s ability to succeed academically. So many students at the time we started were just moving in and out or couch surfing and at risk for homelessness,” she explained. “As a neighborhood, you want families to be located in the community, but with the high vacancy rate it was blighted and uninhabitable. So much of the Resource Coordinator’s job was to find emergency housing for students who were couch surfing. We needed to partner with developers, nonprofits, local government, and others to bring quality housing to the neighborhood, raise the quality of life, and maintain the neighborhood school.”

To assess a community’s needs, Hall follows the same process that Kamine led during the development of the CPS Community Learning Centers. “We focus on community engagement, asking ‘What is the vision for the future of this neighborhood?’”, explains Hall. “Through that engagement process, we heard that the number one priority was quality affordable housing.” Other priorities included economic development, beautification, recreation, and safety.

The community engagement process started in 2015, and it led to the creation of the Lower Price Hill Resurgency Plan. In April 2019, the city approved the plan as the official blueprint for development in the area. Since 2012, an estimated \$104 million has been invested in the neighborhood for housing, economic development, and recreation; another \$37 million more is expected through 2023. Developers have begun renovating the Italianate row houses to restore affordable housing, and Habitat for Humanity is rehabbing 12 single-family homes in the neighborhood. CLCI renovated a building directly across from the Oyler CLC, transforming the vacant and blighted building into the Oyler House, an extension of the Oyler CLC campus. To encourage similar development of CLC campuses around school buildings, the City of Cincinnati passed the first ordinance easing zoning restrictions for buildings owned by the school's partners that are in proximity to the school facility.

Creating affordable housing is one part of revitalizing a neighborhood. Attracting businesses with good jobs is another key element. Dan Meyer is president of Nehemiah Manufacturing, which packages consumer goods for Procter & Gamble and serves as a "second chance" employer of 200 people. The company has already invested \$7 million in building a local warehouse and is embarking on a second stage of investment.

Meyer, who grew up near Lower Price Hill, explained that the revitalization of Oyler School was part of what drew him to the neighborhood. "We wanted to be investing in the community, and part of that community is Oyler School. I didn't know much about it," Meyer admitted. "I was in tears when I visited. What they've done there, adding the medical clinic with vision and dentistry—all the things that can get in the way of kids realizing their greatness. That was new to me to have that inside a school. It showed the transformation of the thinking and caring. The school was not well regarded, the numbers were not good. It was a total transformation to get the community and businesses involved to try to make a difference—one person at a time."

Meyer embodies the ethos of the hardscrabble school. He explained that his company is named for Nehemiah, an Old Testament figure "called by God to rebuild Jerusalem one stone and brick at a time. Our mission is building brands, creating jobs, and changing lives."

Part of Meyer's commitment is to hire people who have previously struggled, such those who have been incarcerated. But he found that, despite his good intentions, these employees would often last only for a short time. "We were too naïve to realize that when they come out of prison, they need transportation, housing, help with legal issues, etc." A colleague suggested that the company hire a social worker. They did, and productivity and job longevity improved. The company now employs three full-time social workers.

“It’s bigger than the job,” explained Meyer. “It’s affordable housing, transportation, [and] financial and personal wellness. That’s what we do to make a difference in our employees’ lives. It has been powerful.”

Nehemiah has been deeply involved in the Oyler CLC. Employees participate in Adopt-A-Class, a program of monthly mentoring, and the company gives school readiness backpacks to children. Nehemiah’s marketing team worked with Oyler’s 7th and 8th grade students for the entire 2018–2019 school year to create a logo for Lower Price Hill, now displayed proudly throughout the neighborhood. Several Oyler parents have also found stable employment at the company.

“We can break the chains of poverty—and it all starts with education,” asserted Meyer. “We need to get these kids rooted in a positive way and have positive mentors to guide them on the journey of life at ages where they can be influenced...My hope is that, as we train them, they may be our future. There’s no magic. It’s caring about people. What we do is common sense. It’s just not commonly practiced.”

Kimmi Thomas was settling into her Habitat for Humanity home in Lower Price Hill. Her daughter Haylee attends Oyler, and her husband works at a new community laundromat. With the help of the Oyler CLC, Thomas was admitted to Northern Kentucky University’s Bachelor Program in Organizational Leadership. She marvels at being a homeowner.

“The pandemic hit hard, but we had a safe place to go and a safe place to sleep,” said Thomas. “We didn’t have to worry about how we pay rent if I lost my job because I pay my mortgage, which is cheaper than rent, and I can pay online so my money order won’t get lost in the mail.”

At the age of 26, Thomas is a community leader in Lower Price Hill. “I really am trying to break out of poverty,” she said with an air of determination. “I’m on a hunt for stability and happiness.”

# CHAPTER 6: *From Surviving to Thriving in Florida's Community Partnership Schools*

Tim Only peered out at the student body of Evans High School in Orlando, Florida. The scene before him was like a dream. Coming from a family shattered by abuse, violence, and addiction, Only was more likely to end up on the streets, in jail, or dead.

Instead, Only was senior class president, addressing his classmates at Evans High School. "My life was very difficult," he said. "I won't even say I was in a single-parent household. I had to raise myself...I was dealing with sexual assault and physical and emotional abuse. I didn't want to have that life, using drugs and engaging in violence."

When Only finished middle school, he did not want to attend Evans High School. "I hated Evans. Because my whole family went there and were defiant and violent. I wanted to go to another school, but I didn't have transportation. I was stuck at Evans. I didn't like the culture and violence of the school."

Evans High School was synonymous with failure. The school was dubbed by one national publication as a "double F dropout factory." In the early 2000s, it was placed under a Florida Department of Education school improvement program.

Evans serves the Pine Hills neighborhood of Orlando, and 99% of its students are minorities—mostly African American. In 2010, the unemployment rate in Pine Hills was over 10% and the median household income was \$40,000. The community is home to about 70,000 people.

But the Evans High School that Tim Only entered in 2013 was very different from the one that his siblings attended. Between 2010 and 2012, Evans High was torn down and replaced by a new facility. More than brick and mortar had changed. The new Evans High opened in 2012 as a Community Partnership School. The high school had four core partners—Central Florida Family Health Center, Children’s Home Society of Florida, Orange County Public Schools, and the University of Central Florida—that would work together to provide robust integrated supports for students and families, including after-school programs, on-site health care, and parent and student engagement.

## “From Suicidal to Senior Class President”

Tim Only did not know what a Community Partnership School (CPS) was, but he was nevertheless embraced by its network of support. In 9th grade, he met Jarvis Wheeler, who was teaching a class in college readiness (he would later become the CPS director). Only had never encountered someone like Wheeler.

“He said if we become successful, he would die for us. I never heard that before,” recalled Only. “I was at a point where I either get help or I pull the plug.” It was not an idle threat. A sexual assault survivor, Only had attempted suicide before and would attempt it again during high school.

Wheeler admitted that Only “was a troublemaker. He had a single mom who was HIV-positive, they lived in poverty, and there were often domestic issues. He came to school and the trauma came with him...But he had a desire to be better.”

Wheeler agreed to mentor Only on the condition that he accept certain “nonnegotiables”—including that Only would participate in the CPS Student Leadership Council and use every support that was available to him at school.

Only embraced the opportunities. “He took advantage of every service—mental health, food, family resource center,” said Wheeler. “When he was homeless, he took advantage of housing opportunities. When there was a shooting in his home, he ended up becoming suicidal and got mental health counseling. He went from suicidal to senior class president.”

“This is a kid who probably wouldn’t have made it with the trajectory he was on,” Wheeler said candidly. But at Evans High, a UCF-Certified Community Partnership School, his teachers and support personnel “were able to see that his ceiling is just as high as any of his peers in more affluent areas. When we started to fill gaps in his ground floor, he started to thrive.”

“I wasn’t violent, but I was grossly disrespectful,” admitted Only. “My words were my fists.” At Wheeler’s urging, Only began visiting the school’s new mental health clinic. The therapist “dug into a lot of things I never knew I would talk about.” Only also visited the school’s dental clinic and health center, something he had never done before. Instead of making distant medical appointments and having to find a way to get there, he could walk down the school hallway for his health care. He reveled in the chance to take care of himself in ways that his parents were unable to do.

Tim Only went on to serve as a page in the Florida Senate, graduate Evans High School in 2017, and attend Florida State University.

Evans High has followed a similar trajectory. When Evans began as a Community Partnership School in 2010, the graduation rate was 64%. By 2019, 98% of Evans students graduated high school (Orange County Public Schools, n.d.).

“Anything the community school offered, I did it,” declared a proud Only. “I was the first student who engaged in everything. I proved it doesn’t matter how bad your life is if you have the right group of people supporting you.”

**Evans High School  
becomes the first  
UCF-Certified Community  
Partnership School**

*Courtesy of UCF Center for  
Community Schools*





# Community School Rising

In January 2009, a group that included David Bundy, president of the Children’s Home Society of Florida (CHS), Michael Frumkin, Dean of the College of Health and Public Affairs at the University of Central Florida (UCF), and Nancy Ellis, Director of Community Partnerships at UCF, traveled to New York City to visit the community schools operated by the Children’s Aid Society. “We felt we were just putting out fires, and we wanted to do something different,” Bundy explained. “Our organization got involved because the state was doing a very bad job on child welfare...We were managing kids from [struggling] families with not a lot of success. We said there has got to be some way where we could bring those resources together for kids at high risk for child welfare involvement. We thought community schools fit that bill.”

Frumkin brought the UCF provost into the discussions about community schools. “I knew it was important to have the university behind it,” Frumkin said, adding that the provost “gave his commitment, and that gave me permission to approach other deans and other colleges. That doesn’t happen frequently in large universities.” With over 70,000 students, UCF has the largest student body of any public university in the United States.

When they returned to Florida, the group began talking to school districts, healthcare providers, and other potential partners who would be interested in hosting a community school. They found interest at Evans High School in Orange County, a school of 2,500 students—100% of whom received free and reduced-price lunches.

Frumkin and Bundy determined that if they were going to invest the time, money, and effort into transforming Evans into a CPS, they wanted a 25-year commitment from the school district and four core partners. That was a high bar—which was intentional.

“The history of Pine Hills [the neighborhood served by Evans High] is they have a two-to three-year program based on a federal grant that disappears, and they never see anything out of it,” said Frumkin. “I was convinced that we had to change the playing field. So from the beginning we had the idea of a 25-year commitment, and that’s why it was important to get the provost on board.” Frumkin acknowledges that such a long time frame is “not normal.” But he also knew that funding would be commensurate with the time commitment. He wanted this transformational effort to last long enough to have an impact on students and communities.

In 2010, UCF, CHS, and Orange County Public Schools signed a 25-year agreement to establish a UCF-Certified Community Partnership School at Evans High. Central Florida Family Health Center, a federally qualified health center, signed on two years later as an additional core partner (it was later replaced by Orange Blossom Family Health). J.P. Morgan provided seed funding.

In 2014–2015, the Florida legislature provided \$685,000 to establish the UCF Center for Community Schools and to replicate the CPS model started at Evans High. In 2020–2021, the statewide appropriation was \$7.1 million.

UCF Dean Frumkin credits the early funding success to an all-out lobbying effort by CHS. “The whole thing was really due to the Children’s Home Society setting this as priority,” Frumkin insisted. “The university supported it, but it was not in their Top 10 list. It was CHS leading the legislative and other pieces.”

CHS President Dave Bundy had a secret weapon to lobby lawmakers: children. He credited CHS’s “top-notch legislative director,” Summer Pfeiffer, who had formerly been a legislative aide and had developed an internship program for high school students. Pfeiffer, now CHS’s vice president for government relations, brought the young people to meet with lawmakers. “Legislators said the conversations with the kids were the most impactful,” recounted Bundy. “Kids told them, ‘This program saved my life and gave me a purpose.’ The legislators paid attention. That was key.”

In 2022, Florida had 29 Community Partnership Schools which were supported by the UCF Center for Community Schools. These schools served 23,000 students, half of whom were in elementary school, 86% of whom were economically disadvantaged, and 75% who were students of color. In 2020–2021, these students received over 100,000 hours of tutoring, academic support, and enrichment activities (UCF Center for Community Schools, 2022).

UCF worked closely with national community school leaders to devise a community school strategy for Florida, with Evans High School as the pilot site that would demonstrate the viability of the model. “The National Center for Community Schools coached and guided us in times of challenge, celebrated our successes, and served as thought-partners in advancing our work,” said Amy Ellis, Ed.D., director of the UCF Center for Community Schools. “From early discussions with Pete Moses, to technical assistance from Jane Quinn and Janice Chu-Zhu, and, most recently, Abe Fernández, our partnership with the Center has been invaluable over the years.”

According to a history of the CPS (UCF Center for Community School, n.d.), “The core partners began an implementation based upon the Children’s Aid Society’s community school model that focused on a strong academic program supported by a wide range of after-school activities for students and the community; access to physical, behavioral and dental health services on site; and a strong parent-engagement program.”

The Evans High Community Partnership School model involves a much greater role and partnership with UCF, drawing inspiration from the University-Assisted Community School approach pioneered at the University of Pennsylvania’s Netter Center. Among the resources that UCF has committed to the partnership are nursing, education, behavioral health, and medicine (UCF Center for Community Schools, n.d.).

A distinguishing feature of the UCF model is having four core partners: a nonprofit organization (which serves as the convening partner), the school district, a healthcare organization, and a college or university. Each CPS has four staff members, each of whom oversees a pillar of the community school: a partnership director, an expanded learning coordinator, a wellness coordinator, and a coordinator for family and community engagement. “This comprehensive model of a community school leverages the social and institutional capital of the partners, making it possible for the school to offer resources and services that address the needs identified by the community,” states the Center for Community Schools website (UCF Center for Community Schools, n.d.).

“The partnerships are transformative,” said Amy Ellis of the UCF Center for Community Schools, which serves as technical advisor to Florida’s 29 Community Partnership Schools and disburses state grant funding to the schools. “Core partnerships in our work are more than business relationships. We come together and commit long-term to a shared vision and purpose. Our partnerships extend to stakeholders at every level, from students to state legislators. Greater awareness of our work has deepened understanding by those investing and, because of this, we have been afforded the opportunity to dig deeper for broader impact across the state. In addition to providing technical assistance, the Center for Community Schools acts as a neutral body that ensures the fidelity of the Community Partnership Schools model framework. Our process allows for continuous improvement and the infusion of community school best practices across the field.”

“In all that we do, we must be adaptable,” insisted Ellis. She said one of the mantras of Community Partnership Schools—coined by longtime CHS leader Tara Hormell—is “We mold like clay.” She concluded, “When we hit a barrier or challenge, we mold. As a field, state, center, and in sites across the state, we must be willing to adapt as we move forward to meet changing needs and advance our practice.”

## From Dropout Factory to Magnet

“Evans was a dropout factory,” said Jarvis Wheeler, who grew up near Evans High, went on to teach there and is now the CHS statewide Director of Community Partnership Schools. The school “was a very intense place,” he said. “We often had SWAT [teams] around during dismissal. You mostly felt safe in school, but immediately on leaving campus you were exposed to a lot of negative influences. It wasn’t pretty. That’s ultimately why my mother transferred me to another school.”

A typical Evans High student comes from a home marked by poverty and instability, explained Curtesa Vanderpool, a former science teacher at Evans who now works for CHS as Area Director for Community Partnership Schools in the Central Florida region. The school now has extended hours, opening at 6:00 a.m. and closing at 5:30 p.m. “We try to ensure school is a safe place,” she said.

A CPS not only supports students. It also transforms the roles of the teachers. “The idea that I could only be a teacher, and not [have to be] a doctor, counselor and mom to students—I loved it,” said Vanderpool.

“If I see that one of my students is not acting as they normally would, instead of calling the dean or sending them to the guidance office, I knew immediately that I could contact the community school director,” Vanderpool explained. “Then I could give that student a pass and she could go to get services. It’s not taking our kids away from the academic environment. This actually allows them to be more present in the academic environment.”

**Students at Evans High, a Community Partnership School, receive medical, dental, and other services at the Wellness Center**

*Courtesy of UCF Center for Community Schools*



Wheeler said that for students from families with low incomes, “there are a myriad of challenges that cause them to focus on survival rather than thriving. The whole key to Community Partnership Schools is that it is an equity strategy,” Wheeler noted. “We learn that at Evans all the time. We say they want after-school programs, but they don’t have transportation and they’re hungry. Because their family is in survival mode.”

Every CPS performs a community needs assessment to establish priorities for the school. “The needs assessment really paints the ‘what,’ but it doesn’t paint the ‘how,’” Wheeler noted. “You can see that mental health counseling is a need, but you are dealing with a community where there is a stigma around it. So when we called mental health counselors ‘student success coaches,’ parents felt they were getting hustled. I immediately said we’ve got to call it what it is and do more education and awareness. So now we take all students to mental health counselors and explain what it is, and I tell them how and why I use it. Now they utilize it so that before there’s a fight, they see their counselor.”

The impact of Evans CPS has rippled from the school to the community. Disciplinary referrals have dropped markedly at the high school. “According to the 2017 Orange County Sheriff’s Office, since the inception of the Community Partnership School at Evans, crime has dropped 19% within a one-mile radius of the school,” reported Amy Ellis.

A CPS is not a case of “build it and they will come,” Wheeler insisted. “You have to meet them where they are and get rid of the blinders. School is not just ‘get your education and leave.’ It’s ‘We care about you. We care about your lives.’”

## Culture of Yes

The CPS model pioneered at Evans High is being replicated around Florida. Four hours away in Tallahassee is Sabal Palm Elementary School, which became a CPS in 2019. Sabal Palm is located in the poorest zip code in the state of Florida. The school ranked in the bottom 300 for reading proficiency. It is a healthcare desert—there are no doctors within five miles of the neighborhood.

Anicia Robinson is the principal of Sabal Palm Elementary. When Robinson ran track and field at Division 1 CalState North Ridge in Los Angeles, she was in it to win. As the principal of a relatively new CPS, her mentality has not changed. “I’m a very competitive person,” she admitted with a laugh. “I pride myself on being the best of the best. And my students deserve that.”

Robinson recognized a winning idea when she was approached in 2016 by Dr. Daniel Van Durme, a physician and faculty member at nearby Florida State University (FSU) Medical School. He explained that FSU had a mission to work in underserved communities and they were thinking of putting a clinic across the street from her school.

“If there was room in her office, she would have done back flips,” Van Durme chuckled as he recalled Robinson’s reaction. She told him stories about students who missed school while waiting weeks or months to get a school physical. “My first promise to Principal Robinson was if there is a child who can’t start school due to a lack of a physical, we will give them an appointment within 24 hours,” stated Van Durme.

As the doctor and the principal discussed how to maximize the impact of the new clinic, they agreed that it had to serve the whole family, not just students. “A fifth grader won’t be successful if his teenage brother is in jail, or his sister is pregnant—that’s the idea of addressing the broader issue,” said Van Durme. “The social determinants of health are identical to the social determinants of education.”

Underscoring the link between health care and learning, Principal Robinson recalled a 3rd-grade teacher who “called to say a student had passed out. The child had rotten teeth. She was in such pain that she passed out. That sparked our conversation with Bond Dental, and now they come every two weeks with a mobile dental clinic.”

Anna Kay Hutchison, CPS Director at Sabal Palm Elementary, said the culture of the school has shifted since it became a community school in 2019. “Where I’ve seen the biggest change is having a ‘culture of Yes.’ I have to constantly remind the staff. We are in the Bible Belt of Florida, so a lot of things are uncomfortable. So I get a lot of ‘No’ or ‘We can’t do that.’ I can’t take ‘No’ for an answer.”

“That culture of Yes is a game-changer for this school,” Hutchison continued. “For example...[the dental clinic] was scary for our students and community. It’s hard to do these things. I said, ‘We can do this.’ A Community Partnership School is like a smartphone compared to a rotary phone. We can do lots of things at once. We can be quick and move the needle. But that’s daunting to lots of people.”

When Rocky Hanna was elected Leon County Schools Superintendent in 2016, he was approached by Tallahassee City Commissioner Gil Ziffer, who had toured Evans High Community Partnership School. Ziffer proposed that Hanna explore developing a CPS in Tallahassee.



“I’ve always told our folks to think outside the box,” said Hanna. “Sabal Palm was both a food desert and a healthcare desert. So we felt that was the best place to create a CPS.” Hanna signed a 25-year CPS agreement with partners CHS, Florida A&M University, and Florida State University Primary Health. “We didn’t want this to be a fly-by-night program,” said Hanna. “Our kids come to school with a lot of needs outside of academics, such as health care and hygiene, dental health, and vision. A lot of those services are hard for parents to access to help their kids to be successful in school. We felt this was an opportunity for us to bring those services to the schools, versus us having parents take off work. In addition to counseling services and issues of trauma, there is a social worker for families dealing with homelessness or poverty. We saw it as an opportunity for us to address some needs outside the classroom while still in the school community.”

Hanna had to explain to skeptics why students needed these supports. “I’ve been in this profession for 33 years. The family dynamic has changed in the last three decades—as have the needs of our children. We can’t ignore the lack of resources and lack of advocacy that kids have at home. They are not going to be successful in school unless those basic needs are met. We realized whether it’s hunger or vision or health issues, those needs are not being met at home, so it’s incumbent on us to offer assistance to families who otherwise wouldn’t be able to help their kids.”

The Sabal Palm Elementary Community Partnership School had been running for less than a year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It provided proof of concept for what a school can do when it offers robust supports.

“What we pulled off [during the pandemic] was nothing short of amazing,” Hanna said. “We broke down 9,000 desktop computers and distributed them to every family that didn’t have a computer. We contracted with Comcast and T-Mobile to provide internet for all. We put hotspots on school buses and parked them in low-income neighborhoods and Section 8 housing. We did everything we could to help those kids get engaged. It helped at Sabal Palm to have those support systems already in place.”

“My biggest challenge,” Hanna continued, “is to replicate Community Partnership Schools in about 10 of our other schools. This is a true example of a village raising a child. You have a school system, two major universities, and Children’s Home Society that have all partnered to ensure the success of the 500–600 students who walk through those doors each morning. Everybody’s all in, like a game of Texas Hold’Em, where everyone pushes all their chips to the center of the table. All the partners have skin in the game for 25 years.”

The school staff also needs to embrace the CPS approach for it to succeed. Principal Robinson works to inspire her staff as they operate a busy food pantry and support local families. “You’ve got to make them believe that they’re winners,” said Robinson, who also coaches high school basketball. “If each player plays their role, we’re gonna win. If your only job is to rebound, then rebound. I am very big about everybody knowing their role.”

“I tell the people I hire, ‘This is heavy lifting.’ But if you are dedicated and you are trying your best, these kids and families will love you and they will buy in, and you will be successful,” assured Robinson. “That and a culture of Yes—we figure out a way to make it work. That’s the single biggest thing that has had an impact.”

With the CPS model, Robinson believes she has hit the winning shot. “What we’re really starting to see is that kids can be kids when they’re here. They don’t have to worry about their tooth hurting. They can tell a teacher, and the teacher can help. A CPS is about removing barriers.”

## From Despair to Dreams

Tim Only has big dreams, which is saying something for a young man who was unhoused and experienced suicidal ideation just a few years ago. In Only’s senior year at Evans High, he straddled the broken world from which he came and the brighter future he was desperate to claim. He was senior class president and a member of the National Honor Society at school, while surviving physical abuse and violence at home.

“I was a poster child who was going through a lot at once,” he recalled. Evans High School and his mentor Jarvis Wheeler “were my safe haven. When I was home, that’s where I was not protected. That’s why I was at school from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.”

Only was showing up at school hungry and wearing the same clothes all week. The Community Partnership School staff engaged with him on every level, from mental health counseling to providing him clothing and food from the school’s on-site food pantry. Ultimately, they helped him find a safe place to live that was run by CHS.

“I was my class president, but I had to move into a group home because it was to the point where I had to leave home or I would kill myself,” Only said.

Only's candor about his struggles drew people to him. "One of my gifts is that people know I'm very real. Most people would hide that trauma and be afraid to tell. But I'm honest. I would just let you know my own truth. A lot of people knew what I was going through and thought, 'If he can do it, I can do it.' A lot of students respected me."

"A real leader is different from everyone else," Only mused. "They know how to bring people together. It doesn't matter what that person's back story is about if they are able to make change at the school."

Tim Only has not merely survived—he has thrived. After graduating at the top of his class at Evans High, he won scholarships to attend Florida State University, where he majored in emergency disaster management. He is pursuing a graduate degree in the same field.

"I correlate that to my life," he said. "My life was an emergency situation which turned into a disaster that I had to manage." He is a mentor to younger students.

"The stars cannot shine without darkness," Only reflected. "You have to embrace your darkness in order to find your light. And when you find your light, you are able to guide yourself through any dark path throughout your life."

"No one is gonna be able to find your personal path through life. That's my motto," he said.

**Tim Only, UCF Center for Community Schools Director Amy Ellis, and Principal Jenny Gibson-Linkh met with Sen. David Simmons in Tallahassee**

*Courtesy of UCF Center for Community Schools*



# CHAPTER 7: "A Tiny Ripple of Hope:" A Sanctuary of Learning at UCLA Community School

What has been going on in the United States over the period of the last three years ... the violence, the disenchantment with our society, the division—whether it's between black and white, between the poor and the more affluent or between age groups—...we can start to work together. We are a great country and selfless country and a compassionate country. ...We should move in a different direction.  
—Robert F. Kennedy (Kennedy, 1968).

The message is as relevant today as when it was delivered just past midnight on June 5, 1968. Senator and antiwar presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) had just won the California primary. Moments after uttering those words, Kennedy stepped off the stage of the Embassy Ballroom in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, walked into the kitchen, and was assassinated.

Kennedy's words and his dream hung in the air, suspended in time and place.

The Ambassador Hotel was purchased by Donald Trump and partners in 1989. Trump planned to raze the hotel and erect the world's tallest building. He was foiled by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which took the 24-acre site by eminent domain and razed the hotel in 2006. In its place, six schools rose from the rubble. The RFK Community Schools were born.

Today, in the former ballroom where RFK uttered his prophetic last words, two 55-foot-high murals by artist Judith Baca, a professor at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), now adorn the walls. *Tiny Ripples of Hope* (Baca, 2010b) shows RFK reaching out as up-stretched hands reach toward him. The other, *Seeing Through Others Eyes* (Baca, 2010a), depicts RFK and civil rights icon Cesar Chavez. The two leaders now peer over a large media center used by 4,000 school children, most of them immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America.



**"Seeing Through Others Eyes," a 12' x 55' digital mural by artist Judith Baca, one of two panels from the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial that is located at the RFK Community School, Los Angeles, CA.**

**Judith F. Baca ©2010**

*Courtesy of the SPARC Archives, SPARCinLA.org*



“There could be no better memorial to my father than a living memorial that educates the children of this city,” said Max Kennedy, RFK’s son, at the 2006 groundbreaking for the \$579 million school construction project (J. Katz, 2018).

This is the story of how a landmark of national tragedy has transformed into a place of learning, community, and hope.

The UCLA Community School was conceived in 2006 in the midst of a historic school construction boom led by LAUSD, which serves 480,000 students, the second largest school district in the country. It was part of a national reform movement that prioritized school choice, small schools, and teacher autonomy. UCLA teamed with LAUSD, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), and the community to reimagine public education. LAUSD operates the school, in partnership with UCLA. The proposal for the school captured their shared vision:

A community-based, learner centered, university-assisted school, a school where many different people come together, driven by the nation’s long legacy of common schooling. Lead teachers were at the core of this design process, and the UCLA-led hiring committee recruited a principal and initial team of three lead teachers to turn the broad vision into a reality. Granted local autonomy over curricula, instruction, assessment, staffing, budget, and schedule, the new school was part of an original cohort of 10 Belmont Pilot Schools, a reform model that traveled from Boston to Los Angeles in response to the growth of charter schools. The UCLA Community School was set to open alongside five other new pilot schools on a historic site—the first wall-to-wall complex of pilot schools in the city. The stakes were high.... (Quartz et al., 2021a, pp. 163–178)



# University-Assisted Community Schools

The UCLA Community School is a university-assisted community school (UACS). The UCLA Center for Community Schooling (n.d.) explains:

**As stable anchor institutions,<sup>6</sup> universities play a unique role as K-12 community school partners. Our research, teaching, and service missions inform and are informed by the work of local schools and communities. In partnership, we are poised to disrupt historical inequalities and reimagine schooling as a public good that prepares all students to succeed in college, careers, and civic life.**

Our partnership vision is rooted in the ideals of democracy, justice, and education. We engage in democratic spaces that build on the assets of all members; work to redistribute access to educational opportunities and resources for low-income students of color who have been marginalized in our educational system; and support community-based education that builds on the assets of students, families, and teachers. Research, teaching, and service activities advance our partnership vision and support the community school approach both within our partnership schools and more broadly.

UCLA is a regional center for the University Assisted Community School National Network, which is organized by the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, in collaboration with the Coalition for Community Schools. (See Chapter 3 for more about UACS.)

<sup>6</sup> Anchor institutions are “enduring organizations that are rooted in their localities,” according to the Anchor Institutions Task Force.

These six new pilot schools share the historic campus and are collectively known as the RFK Community Schools. These schools serve the neighborhoods of Pico Union and Koreatown, which educators said suffered from “30 years of neglect.” Prior to the creation of the RFK schools, the high school dropout rate in the area was around 60%, and fewer than 10% of students continued to college (Martinez & Quartz, 2012). Today the RFK Community Schools complex houses the Ambassador School of Global Education, the Ambassador School of Global Leadership, Los Angeles High School of the Arts, the New Open World Academy, the School for the Visual Arts and Humanities, and the UCLA Community School.

Karen Hunter Quartz, director of the UCLA Center for Community Schooling and research director of UCLA Community Schools, explained that the idea of a campus of public community schools was especially appealing to UCLA, which is often ranked as the nation’s top public university. “The university has a long track record of engaging with communities to advance equity and justice, supporting more than 350 programs across Los Angeles. The UCLA Labor Center, for example, supports worker rights and is located about a mile from the school. ...The school developed as a signature community engagement strategy for UCLA, as part of a national movement to have universities partner in deeper ways with schools,” said Quartz.

UCLA Community School is funded by taxpayers, but the university provides a variety of “braided resources” and in-kind support that promote the mission of the university—research, teaching, and service. UCLA funds enrichment programs, professional learning for teachers, and research grants for graduate students to work with teachers. “This also helps the university,” said Quartz. For example, one-third of the classrooms at UCLA Community School host student teachers from UCLA, as well as graduate students who are artists, librarians, social workers, and lawyers. These emerging community school professionals work and learn alongside school staff. In addition, UCLA teaching artists work with teachers to integrate the arts into the curriculum, UCLA social work students intern with and assist school counselors, and UCLA information studies students work with the school librarian on special projects.

Based on the success of the UCLA Community School, the university and the school district initiated a second partnership with Horace Mann Middle School, a historic middle school that was experiencing declining enrollment due to the expansion of charter schools in South Los Angeles. In 2017, Mann UCLA Community School increased its enrollment by expanding to include high school.

After several years of planning, the UCLA Community School (UCLA-CS) opened in 2009. It had an immediate impact. Students from the surrounding neighborhoods had been enduring long bus rides to attend over 60 schools throughout the city because local schools were critically overcrowded. Now, students could attend school just down the street. Three-fourths of the 1,000 students are from immigrant families: Latinx (81%), Asian (10%), and Filipino (5%). Nearly all speak a language other than English at home and qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

In just over a decade, the UCLA-CS, which spans transitional kindergarten to 12th grade, has changed the trajectory of students' lives. Today, around 90% of UCLA-CS students graduate high school, and 97% plan to attend college.

Quartz, who has been involved with UCLA-CS since the planning stages, recalls an early partnership meeting to establish ways to ensure the relationship between the university and the community was mutually beneficial. A lead teacher used the analogy of clownfish and sea anemones, which have a symbiotic relationship. "It has been really important to view the school and university as interdependent, as stronger together. That's hard to do well," Quartz said.

**Students at UCLA  
Community School.**

*Courtesy of UCLA  
Community School*







**"I AM YOU." CYRCLE. 2016.**

**Artists: Davey Leavitt and David "RABI" Torres.**

*Reproduced by permission of CYRCLE. <https://www.cyracle.com/art/outdoor/i-am-you>*

# I SEE YOU—I AM YOU—WE ARE ONE YOU SEE ME—YOU ARE ME—WE ARE FREE

These simple messages are superimposed over the striking images of two barefoot teenagers in 50-foot-high murals that adorn the side of RFK Community Schools in Los Angeles. They greet the stream of humanity that comes here from all parts of the world in pursuit of a brighter future.

Inside the doors of the UCLA-CS, students were greeted by Leyda Garcia, their principal.<sup>7</sup> Her story is much like those of her students. She emigrated from Guatemala to Los Angeles with her family when she was 7: “I was part of the immigration wave of the 1980s. That informs my practice. I connect to the experience of the students.”

Garcia graduated from UCLA and has returned to this community. “I know that my education and role give me privilege and our circumstances are not the same,” said Garcia. “I come to this with respect for the families here now, their struggles, resilience, and strength. That’s the lens I come with. It took me a long time to see my experience and language as an asset rather than as a deficit.”

Social justice education is the foundation of UCLA-CS. “Social justice permeates [the school]. It’s an orientation. It’s a stance that informs everything we do,” explained Garcia. “Teachers have the autonomy to create curriculum that is responsive and affirming to students. But it’s also expanding their understanding of the world, helping them become critical and interrogate a lot of systems that often have marginalized their communities and who they are. ...not just 30 minutes twice a week, but in everything that we’re doing. ...We are offering a space for human beings to learn to feel safe, to feel like they can ask questions, that they can develop, that they understand where they are, and that there’s always a continuum of learning. ...We want all of our students to be self-directed, passionate learners.”

What does it mean to be a center of social justice education? “Part of social justice education is being active in our democracy and society,” Garcia said. “But there’s also a piece, especially for students of color, to come to that involvement and engagement with their democracy and society knowing really who they are, the assets they bring to the process, and feeling confident about that. That’s really critical in the area where we are and [for] the students that we serve, for them to really appreciate the richness of their languages and histories, struggles and resistance. So it’s embedded into things.”

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<sup>7</sup> After serving as principal of UCLA-CS for a decade, Leyda Garcia left the school in September 2022 to become Associate Director for Professional Learning for UCLA’s Center for Community Schooling.

# Community Schools in Greater Los Angeles

In terms of size and geographic spread, the combined community school initiatives of Los Angeles County and the City of Los Angeles (LA) are among the largest in the nation. With roots going back to the California Healthy Start Initiative (SB 620, 1992), the greater LA region has been implementing models of comprehensive, integrated, school-based services—including family resource centers, after-school programs, youth development centers, and school health centers with hundreds of nonprofit and public agency partners—for over 30 years.

The Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) is headed up by Superintendent Debra Duardo, who was a school-site coordinator in the mid-1990s when the state's Healthy Start and After School initiatives were first rolling out. Today, LACOE is partnering with county agencies and school districts to improve the academic, emotional, and physical well-being of students.

LACOE launched a community schools pilot program in September 2019. It now operates at 15 high schools across the county “that serve as hubs for a range of support services for students and their families,” according to the program website. “Each campus is provided with a full-time program specialist to coordinate services from participating agencies and a full-time educational community worker to support parent engagement” (Los Angeles County Office of Education, n.d.).

LAUSD runs the largest community school initiative within LA County (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.) and has implemented three cohorts of community schools to date, with 35 featured community schools, and more to come. Partners include unions, public agencies, nonprofits, philanthropies, and the UCLA Center for Community Schooling.

In 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom and the state legislature approved investing \$4.1 billion over seven years to expand community schools throughout the state. It is the largest statewide community school initiative in the country. (Newbury, 2022) The Alameda County Office of Education, a lead partner of the Oakland school district (see Chapter 9), the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, the National Education Association, and Californians for Justice are co-leading the technical assistance effort for California's community schools.



# “Language Is a Political Act”

The UCLA-CS opened during a wave of anti-immigrant politics. In 1998, California passed Proposition 227, which made it illegal to teach in a language other than English unless a parent signed a waiver. The law stood for 18 years until California voters repealed it in 2016.

Dual-language education has been a foundational principle for UCLA-CS. A history of the school described it this way:

Teachers envisioned that graduates of the school would read, write, listen, and speak in at least two languages, and be able to use those languages flexibly with different audiences in order to think critically about the world around them, to engage as agents of social change, and to promote democratic practices. (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.)

Language is a political issue, and UCLA-CS takes a stand. “We opened in an anti-bilingual era in California as a dual-language school to build on the assets of our students,” Quartz recounted. “Most bilingual models at that time only used students’ home language as a vehicle to learn English. We said to students, it’s important to maintain your Spanish or Korean and learn English at same time. We had to convince parents that this was going to not only honor their family’s home language and home culture, but it was going to help their students succeed in school. So we developed a 90/10 home-language dominant model that would help students keep their Spanish-language proficiency while developing English as well. That’s a good example of community-based teaching and learning because you are teaching in the languages of the community.”

Educators see positive results from the school's dual-language approach. "When I went to a classroom with Spanish as the language of instruction, students were so engaged and much more enthusiastic and eager," said Queena Kim, a founding lead teacher and assistant principal.<sup>8</sup> "Students were very quickly able to read in their primary language and parents were able to support them. There was a sense of confidence that they *did* know something and they could read and write. I saw how powerful that was to them. Learning Spanish first helps them to learn English so they can be dual proficient."

When someone speaks in Spanish, "no one sees you as a valuable contributor to any space until you know English," observed Kim. Speaking and teaching in Spanish or Korean "is a political act. It's a cultural act."

Dual-language instruction can change a student's educational trajectory. "By third grade, you sort of already know if you're smart, if you're good at math, if you're a good reader, if you're either at grade level or below," said Kim. "Really boosting students' confidence and their cultural assets from the beginning makes such a difference. I saw the students as they went through the grade levels be so much more confident." In a sign of changing times, Kim noted that there is now high demand from English-only students to learn in bilingual settings and it is driving enrollment in the UCLA-CS.

Principal Leyda Garcia insists that bi-literacy—gaining proficiency in multiple languages—expresses the values of the school. "It permeates every space," she said. It tells a student that "everything about you belongs here, and you are proud to do what you are doing."

## School as Sanctuary

The UCLA-CS is a sanctuary school, a place of safety and security for students and their families. To be in community, said Karen Hunter Quartz of the UCLA Center for Community Schooling, "is not just about respecting cultural assets. It extends to the notion of struggle. You are embracing solidarity for immigrant rights."

In the aftermath of President Trump's election in 2016, immigrants felt threatened—and the community school responded. "What safety means is sanctuary and asylum for immigrants," Quartz noted. "Los Angeles is a sanctuary city. LAUSD is a sanctuary district. We have lockdown protocols if federal ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents try to come on campus."

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<sup>8</sup> Queena Kim became principal of UCLA Community School in 2022 following the departure of Leyda Garcia.

“People are working hard to resist,” Quartz continued. “In particular communities, that means resisting federal authorities. We are ready in our school, and we are not alone. There are many stories of schools that have had active ICE agents near their site detaining parents. That’s been life in LA, and it certainly was heightened in 2016.”

As the Trump-era immigration crackdown intensified, students at the UCLA-CS participated in a citywide educational justice coalition called “Students Deserve.” They discussed how they were being affected by the crackdown and then engaged with teachers and parents to devise a plan for the entire RFK Community Schools campus. The RFK Community Schools Sanctuary School Protocol declared:

RFK Community Schools are committed to being a safe place for its students and their families in the wake of immigration enforcement efforts. A sanctuary school is as strong as a school’s organization. We believe it is important to be proactive in protecting and providing resources for our families. Our site, in partnership with community organizations and legal services, will be a refuge where families seek safety, information, and resources if they feel threatened or afraid. (Quartz et al., 2021b, pp. 153–170)

Principal Garcia said that the school is “plugged into the network” of the immigrant rights community. “We tell families to remember your rights and we keep holding ‘Know Your Rights’ workshops so families know how to respond,” she noted, if challenged about their immigration status.

The UCLA-CS is also home to the Immigrant Family Legal Clinic, a partnership of the UCLA School of Law and the LAUSD. The clinic engages in community education, direct legal services, and policy advocacy. Being a sanctuary school also extends to the curriculum. Quartz et al. (2021b) explained:

Complementing the school's sanctuary policy, UCLA Community School has worked for over a decade to foster students' and families' sense of belonging and safety inside the classroom. Teachers have designed instructional units on immigration intended to foreground immigrants' humanity, migration stories, and cultural richness. For example, students in an English class might discuss the social construction of having "papers," while in their government class they will debate the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. economy. In addition, the Spanish teacher might facilitate a discussion on ICE, asking students to critically examine its role in promoting a culture of fear in neighborhoods, as well as ways to challenge anti-immigrant systems. It is difficult work to bridge education and legal status issues, but as one teacher shared, "Teachers have to be very deliberate in creating spaces where students are encouraged to share their identity." In doing so, teachers affirm and honor community members' immigrant origins and prepare students to be active and critical participants in society.

Principal Garcia asserted, "Our families know that we are looking out for them."

# Community Schools and Democracy

For a community school to succeed, the teachers must be partners. The 30,000-member United Teachers of Los Angeles has been part of planning the UCLA-CS from its conception. It was initially a delicate dance: The union had to agree that teachers sign an “election to work” contract that allowed them to work extra hours. In return, teachers were assured that this reform would be led by teachers, not imposed on them (Martinez & Quartz, 2012).

Rosa Jimenez is a founding lead teacher at UCLA-CS and a leader within UTLA. She currently coordinates English language learners at the school, serves on the district’s community schools steering committee, and co-founded Reclaim Our Schools LA, a coalition of parents, educators, students, and community members advocating for public schools. Jimenez noted that ever since the creation of the RFK Community Schools, “Our union has undergone a transformation in seeing itself as a vehicle for racial and social justice. One of the things we talked a lot about is [what does it mean] to be a union for racial and social justice when our schools are under attack and purposely being defunded? If we are saying ‘No’ to [charter schools], what is our vision for schools? We understood that schools were struggling, and that historically Black and brown students were not served here in LA. The idea and model of a community school has many of those elements that we believe are good for students, families, and teachers.”

Jimenez believes there is a natural alliance between the teacher’s union and the community school: “That is rooted in the sense of us as teachers having rights and seeing ourselves as playing a role in a movement. We are not just advocating for our schools, but advocating for issues in the community like immigration, economic justice, and social justice. So a lot of us play a big role in our union and in other movement spaces because we see that our role is more than just educators in the classroom.”

She emphasized that this includes “a commitment to keep growing the movement of community schools to other parts of the county and district.”

A school dedicated to democracy and social justice has to walk the walk. “The fundamental difference [between a traditional school and a community school] is a commitment to democratic practices,” explained Jimenez. “We are constantly trying to figure out how to make decisions and problem-solve in a way that includes as many voices as possible. We’ve tried to flip the school hierarchy on its head and move away from traditional ideas of how

a student learns and how teachers should think about their work. It allows for a lot of collaboration and a lot of decision making and problem solving using real data. It includes experience with curriculum and instruction that is not handed down, but we think it's going to work. We get to know our students and community and try to be responsive to those needs."

The Trump era was a crucial test of social justice education. "When Trump got elected many of our students played a big role in pushing these issues," said Jimenez. "We addressed the fear among immigrant students, the feeling that ICE could come on campus. We organized students to organize a sanctuary schools movement on campus. Almost everyone on campus knows what to do if ICE comes to school and those students would go into the community and connect it to the Black Lives Matter movement."

## **"We Bargained for the Common Good"**

In 2019, UTLA went on strike throughout LAUSD. The strike was about more than teacher salaries. It was about learning conditions and who would control public education. A massive push was underway in LA to launch 260 new charter schools run by private "edupreneurs" that would serve half of LAUSD students. The union countered by demanding more nurses, librarians, counselors, smaller classes, and a commitment to open 20 new community schools. Rosa Jimenez reflected, "After years of teaching, I saw a push to privatization and the economic crisis. I was laid off twice. The instability and issues of housing in our community, issues of over-policing our students—all these things were really brought to light in the street protests around racial justice."

"When we went on strike, the parents were very supportive," recounted Jimenez. "They were out on picket lines and the majority did not cross. They kept students out, they brought us food and drinks. It was a testament to the relationships that we've built with parents over years."

Jimenez proudly noted, "We bargained for the common good. By the time we put forward our contract demands, we said it was about salary and working conditions, but also about winning funding for 20 community schools. A lot of educators learned what community schools were, why we are so committed to it, why we are so concerned with de-policing our schools. We used the strike to end random searches of students, and we did it with parents and families. We had 60,000 people out on the streets."



The strike was settled after six days. As part of the agreement, LAUSD committed to build 20 new community schools.

Community schools have gone from the margins to the center of discussion. “More people know about it, people are talking about it, and we have more unions that are committed to it,” said Jimenez. But she cautioned, “We want to make sure it doesn’t get watered down and become a flavor of the month.”

The goals of the UCLA-CS—advancing democracy, justice, and education—are part of a long-term struggle. “This school existed for 12 years, and we are starting to see the fruits of that. But it takes a long time,” Jimenez reflected. “One challenge is that the nature of public education is to say, ‘We tried that for two years and it didn’t work.’ So while it’s exciting that people see this movement to address racism and economic issues and equity, we want real commitment that allows educators and families and students to take on those roles and make it happen on their own. We need the opportunity to experiment and address the needs of students. A systemic transformation with community schools is part of that.”

## Reflection and Practice

For Principal Leyda Garcia, success at UCLA-CS is defined by deepening engagement with the community: “You have to have the community at the table informing your decisions. Because otherwise you can demonstrate the same system of oppression that has existed for centuries.” She gives credit to the school governance council, which includes their university partners, parents, and students. “They really drive the decisions. That council has a lot of responsibility, and it has enriched what we do.”

“Community school is about working alongside a community, responding to the community, and elevating the voices of that community. Everything we do, we approach like that,” Garcia added.

One of the signature achievements of UCLA-CS is that nearly all of its students graduate from high school, a dramatic improvement from the days when only about 60% of neighborhood students graduated. Garcia remains focused on the handful of students who don’t graduate.

“If you ask who are the three who may not graduate, I know their names,” she said. “You have to be analyzing your system, finding gaps and what’s not working and being obsessed about every single student. This year we hit a 95% graduation rate. But we are still sad about the 5% of students who won’t graduate. We are obsessed about those five. And we are going to keep at it, and they will probably graduate by the end of year.”

“Ninety-five percent is good,” she conceded. “But we are not done.”

Robert F. Kennedy once said:

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. (Kennedy, 1966)

In Los Angeles, the halls and classrooms of UCLA Community School are filled with “tiny ripples of hope” wearing school backpacks and speaking many languages.

# CHAPTER 8:

## *Going Big in the Big Apple: How a Grassroots Movement Helped Launch the Nation's Largest Citywide Community Schools Initiative*

In 2014, newly elected New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio repurposed \$52 million in existing state grants to open 45 community schools in his first year in office. By the 2018–2019 school year, there were over 200 community schools in New York City, with an annual budget of almost \$200 million. This is the story of the grassroots movement that transformed New York City from being a laboratory for market-based education reform under Mayor Michael Bloomberg to being home to the largest citywide community school initiative in the country.

Natasha Capers fondly recalls her time as a student at the elementary school that she attended in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. Her school “was always considered a jewel of Brownsville,” she said. “We had a glee club, and we had athletics, and I think at one point we had a newspaper. And this was just an elementary school...literally surrounded by New York City public housing.” Capers was a “mathlete” and competed in local math competitions.

But by the time Capers' children enrolled at PS 298, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Elementary School, she saw a school in a steep decline. "I could see that there was a disinvestment. There just wasn't the flow of resources that there used to be. At one point, we didn't have a functional library or a librarian...And when my children were going there, the technology was at least 10 years out of date. And so many of the after-school programs have been cut."

Capers was vice president of the PS 298 Parent Association and chair of its leadership team. Starved of resources and serving a low-income community, the school seemed destined to tell a story whose ending she could foresee: Mayor Michael Bloomberg would close it and convert it into a charter school.

Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education in New York City, summarized the Bloomberg approach in a report from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform:

The entire system was aligned to drive up the test score bottom line. Passing state exams became a prerequisite for student promotion. Test scores became the key factor in grading and closing schools... Competition was considered a core driver of reform. Charter schools proliferated, with 183 charters opening during the Bloomberg years. School closings became pandemic, with 160 schools closed due to their test-score-based grades. Frequently, the buildings of closing schools were turned over to charter operators. School buildings were also subdivided to shoehorn a charter school into the same building as a public school, in a practice known as *co-location*. (Easton, 2014)

Sure enough, in 2011, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) announced that PS 298 was slated for closure. But for Capers and her neighbors, PS 298 was not just a school. "It was an extension of my home and of my lineage," she said. "And to think that wouldn't continue, it hurt. It hurt a lot. But I also just knew that changing the name on the outside and getting rid of all the teachers or changing principals wasn't going to fix what was wrong."

As Capers scrambled to figure out what to do, she received a call from Fiorella Guevara at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Guevara was working with the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), a parent-led movement fighting school closures and demanding educational equity. Guevara was on the lookout for emerging leaders with deep roots in the community. “Natasha was a leader,” she said. “I started to introduce her to organizing and advocacy. It was already within her. I just helped bring that out.”

Guevara asked if Capers wanted to fight the school closure. “Yeah, I totally want to save my school,” Capers replied. “Because I had a deep understanding, a historical lens, of where my school had been and all of the wonderful things that were possible there.”

Guevara had worked for five years as a teacher in Baltimore and Washington, DC, before coming to New York to earn her master’s degree. She was subsequently hired by the Annenberg Institute to be an organizer for CEJ, working to expand community schools in New York. Guevara encouraged Capers to see beyond the crisis confronting her neighborhood school.

Capers says that Guevara “just worked with me a lot around understanding that this was a deeper citywide—and even statewide—issue. She helped me to be able to articulate an alternative vision for what could be possible for our school, which ultimately, I think, helped to save us.”

Capers promised, “I will make this a community school if it’s the last thing I do.” She kept her word: instead of closing, PS 298 is now a thriving community school.

**Student advocacy during  
2013 New York City  
mayoral election**

*Courtesy of A+ NYC*



# The Education Election

The story of how New York City went from closing under-resourced schools to opening vibrant community schools had everything to do with the 2013 New York City mayoral election. Education activists viewed the 2013 mayoral election in New York City as a critical opportunity. After 12 years of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and waves of school closures, this was a chance to transform New York City's public schools and make education reform a central issue. "With a new mayor, advocates knew they could really influence these policies," said Guevara.

But first, they had to get the attention of the mayoral candidates. Education activists began meeting in 2011 to plot strategy. Two coalitions were formed to advance an education agenda. A+ NYC brought together 51 neighborhood organizations, social service and education advocacy groups, and community organizing groups to focus on community engagement and policy development. New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (NY-GPS) consisted of 31 groups, including labor unions, churches, and community organizations that focused on engaging candidates, grassroots organizing, and communications.

"The shared goal was to see the next mayor, no matter who won, implement policies that replaced the market-reform agenda with a student-centered opportunity agenda," wrote Billy Easton (2014) of Alliance for Quality Education, which, like CEJ, was part of both coalitions:

A secondary goal was that the next mayor should help drive a new direction in national school reform by using New York City's bully pulpit to articulate a successful vision for reform and provide a compellingly positive counter-narrative to the market reformers.



Teachers were motivated to get involved. Karen Alford, vice president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), New York City's largest teachers' union, said that, under Bloomberg, "Over 100 union contracts had expired and labor felt very shut out of any conversation about our city. But you also had parents who felt shut out of the process and they were not feeling heard."

Alford, who is co-founder of United Community Schools, a network of community schools in which UFT is the community partner, said that, as the 2013 mayoral election neared, educators asked, "How do we take back our schools? How do we empower our parents and get them to know that government is here to serve? We wanted to share our vision that community schools work, have been here a long time, and we think we have figured out a way to do this and engage other city agencies—and we are very conscious about the dollars and cents."

To show the mayoral candidates a model of community schools, the teachers did what they often do to inspire their students: they arranged a field trip. UFT leaders, including Alford and President Michael Mulgrew, took four leading mayoral candidates—city Comptroller John Liu, Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, and former Comptroller Bill Thompson—along with the national union President Randi Weingarten, to Cincinnati to tour the city's successful community schools (see Chapter 5). "We wanted community schools to be part of their platform. Luckily we didn't have to put them in four corners of the plane," Alford laughed, recalling the trip with the team of rivals. The UFT, which represents 200,000 members, made the case to the candidates that the issue was bigger than just schools. Alford said, "If we do this right then we are lowering criminal justice numbers. We are closing off the school-to-prison pipeline. We are thwarting poverty. We are lowering the numbers of people showing up in emergency rooms."

Alford and Mulgrew implored the candidates to "think about what this could mean to our city. Think of what it could mean for everything that surrounds education. We are betting on all of you."

Following the unusual joint trip, the New York *Daily News* declared in December 2012, "The road to City Hall runs through...Cincinnati" (C. Katz, 2012). The full-court education press was on.

As the union wooed and inspired the candidates, activists worked the neighborhoods. CEJ and other groups barnstormed the city and held 75 charrettes—community brainstorming and planning sessions—to engage education stakeholders, including teachers, superintendents, parents, students, principals, and community members. The charrettes posed big questions: What would you like to see in your ideal school? What do you want the next mayor to do for public education?

Armed with answers collected at these charrettes, activists traveled around the city in a bus they painted bright blue. The “PS 2013 school bus” was an education campaign on wheels, and it was impossible to miss. The bus would drive around neighborhoods and park in front of mayoral campaign events. Members of the public were welcome to come inside the bus where, instead of seats, they would find clear buckets labeled with different education issues, such as art and music, better food, physical education, or more robust social services. People could vote on their priorities by placing a piece of paper in one or more of the buckets.

“You could see in real time what people wanted in their schools,” Capers explained. “We tallied the votes, and we came up with an education roadmap for the next mayor for the first year. It was ‘whole child, whole school, whole city.’ That’s how we talked about it. They are all interconnected.”

“What was actually bubbling up a lot of times were things that are core tenets of community schools,” Capers observed.



### The PS 2013 blue school bus

*Courtesy of A+ NYC*

The push for democratic engagement in education was an implicit rebuke of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who wrested control of New York City schools from an elected school board in 2002 and placed them under direct mayoral control. Capers reflected on the grassroots education campaign in an essay that she wrote for the book, *Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out!*:

It was a way of engaging folks in the democratic process that New York does not have around public education, because we have no control. A democratic process around what average New Yorkers wanted to see in their schools. Sometimes we would park the van on random corners and let people just get on and be like, “Come on and vote.”

It was really this two-pronged approach around, “How do we shift away from the punitive school-closure model and toward infusing resources and support into struggling schools? We want to steer candidates toward community schools as a solution.”

Because of all the energy behind [the education campaign], candidates started to uplift community schools as one of the things they were going to put forth. And Mayor de Blasio pledged to open 100 in his first term. (Warren & Goodman, 2018, pp. 64–72)

In 2013, Bill de Blasio was elected mayor of New York City. A grassroots movement was about to transform dreams into action.

## A Community of Fighters for Justice

When Ben Honoroff took the job as principal of Middle School (MS) 50 in June 2015, the school in the South Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn was in a death spiral. “When I came to MS 50, the school had gone from about 1,200 students to less than 200 in the span of eight years—a drastic, drastic decline in enrollment,” he recounted. “That had to do with a lot of factors: gentrification, neighborhood changing, families getting priced out of the neighborhood, and the closing of a couple of the feeder schools. There was a lot of writing on the wall and rumors in the community that the school was going to close.”

MS 50 fit a familiar profile of schools that were slated for closure. Nearly all MS 50 students are children of color and receive free and reduced-price lunch. Under Mayor Bloomberg, MS 50 was flagged as a struggling school—a designation that often resulted in the public school being closed and converted into a charter school. The process had already begun at MS 50, where Honoroff said that more than half the school building was “colonized by Success Academy,” a charter school that occupied three of the five floors of the building.

Mayor de Blasio took the opposite approach. He announced that instead of disinvesting in these struggling schools, he would transform them into community schools. A local community-based organization (CBO), El Puente, which had long run a popular and successful after-school program at MS 50, applied to partner with the newly anointed community school. Frances Lucerna, executive director of El Puente, said, “We wanted to support [MS 50] as partners, galvanizing young people in the school and assuring parents that this is a moment that parents could be pioneers and full partners in a school that would really reflect their values and aspirations and hopes for their children.”

This partnership was critical in transforming the relationship between MS 50 and its families.

Lucerna explained that El Puente had four cornerstone principles for its partner school: creating community; loving and caring; mastery; and peace and justice. “Those were the guiding principles and real practices when we started to galvanize around a transformation,” she said. Community response was immediate: parent meetings brought in 100–200 parents as they developed strategy for the new community school.

“I feel completely lucky and blessed to work with El Puente,” said Honoroff. “It’s a world-renowned human rights organization and they have deep standing in the community.” Honoroff’s partner in transforming the school was none other than Fiorella Guevara, who became El Puente’s community schools director (CSD) for MS 50. Guevara had pushed hard for community schools as an organizer with CEJ and the Annenberg Institute. Now she wanted to ensure that they would succeed.

Guevara explained her transformation from organizer to CSD: “CEJ and Annenberg had been supporting the implementation of community schools in New York City and they had seen that models were needed for where the community school strategy was working. Without examples, community schools would not become a long-term and permanent strategy of New York City schools. Given my background as an educator and then organizer, I said I wanted to become a community school director. But I knew it needed the right community partner and the right principal...El Puente is a group that I always respected, and they were looking for a community school director for MS 50 with Ben Honoroff. Ben and I talked and [we] decided to come on as a team.”

Honoroff and Guevara were in sync in both style and mission. “The success of community schools depends on the relationship of the community partner with the school,” Honoroff observed. “In our situation, it’s essential that the community school director and the community-based organization and the principal have a shared belief in what schooling means, issues of equity and justice in the curriculum, empowering student voice, and in teaching as a political act.”

Their co-leadership was also key because it helped address the under-resourcing of the school. “When I came to MS 50, it was \$500,000 in the red, and it had [laid off] two assistant principals,” recalled Honoroff. This meant that he had no leadership team.

The solution was obvious. “Fiorella acted as my thought partner. She is a co-leader of this school,” said the principal. “That’s not the traditional hierarchy of a school. But from the beginning, that’s how I treated the relationship...In every decision, like when we hired an assistant principal, Fiorella and I were the hiring committee. Fiorella is at every leadership meeting. In every decision, the community school director and El Puente are part of that decision making.”

“The dynamic duo” is how Capers described Honoroff and Guevara, who laughed at the characterization, but recalled the seriousness of the task that they faced: “How do we bring change?”

Their answer: ***Fight for it.***

The first challenge was to reclaim space that had been given to Success Academy, which had announced plans to add a middle school that would directly compete with MS 50 for students. Honoroff, Guevara, and El Puente organized parents to demand that the city stop ceding classrooms to the charter school and instead invest in MS 50. They accused the city of betting against MS 50’s renewal just as the school’s enrollment was increasing. The *New York Times* also reported on MS 50’s quixotic fight (Taylor, 2016).

And then they won. In November 2016, Mayor de Blasio’s office informed MS 50 that it would receive more rooms and Success Academy’s middle-school expansion plans were scrapped. “This was an incredible win, and it built excitement among families, teachers, leadership, and community that MS 50 was indeed changing,” recounted Guevara. Just as important, “It also sparked this mentality that we were a community of fighters for justice.”

## Finding Their Inner Champions

Honoroff and Guevara initially focused on what the school should offer during “expanded learning time,” the additional hour of school for which community schools received funding. Honoroff, who had been a teacher for 15 years, challenged his teaching staff: “What if you could design any course based on your passion? What would that be? From the jump, we designed our expanded learning program based on teacher passion and student choice.” Guevara and her team talked with students to find out what courses they wanted and set out to leverage El Puente and community resources to bring in additional classes.

Honoroff had his own passion that he was eager to share. He had been a debate coach at a previous school. “If you teach kids to do evidence-based argument, it touches all subjects,” he asserted. The school introduced a debate class and integrated debate into all subjects. Then a debate team was launched.



“We needed a quick win,” declared Honoroff. “It was about hopes and dreams, getting everybody to believe in the school again.” Then Honoroff made a bold promise: “We’re going to win the first debate tournament for the whole city. We’re gonna come back, we’re gonna have this big trophy, and it’s not just gonna be for the debate coach. It’s going to be for everybody because we’re gonna integrate this across the school.”

It was an audacious idea for a failing school. And it worked.

“It was a calculated risk,” acknowledged Honoroff, who speaks with the rapid-fire cadence of a debater. Gesticulating emphatically and nearly vibrating out of his chair with enthusiasm, he described how his team drew in Hispanic students, special-ed students, and everyone else in the school whom he and the faculty could interest. “We have kids who literally will come to the country on a Wednesday, they’re in a bilingual class on a Thursday, and on Saturday, they’re debating in Spanish at the tournament.”

School debate teams typically consist of 8 to 10 students. At MS 50, 60 students—one-third of the student body—showed up to participate in the school’s first debate tournament. That was fall 2015, a few months after Honoroff and Guevara arrived.

The MS 50 debate team started winning. And winning more. They won the citywide debate tournament. They also fielded the first Spanish-language debate in the city.

“We won, and then they believed. They wanted to believe—and that helped,” said their proud principal.

The MS 50 debate team has become a phenomenon. In its first four years, it won the citywide debate trophy three times. In 2019, the team went to the national debate tournament, where they argued with the officials (these are debaters, after all) and successfully challenged the English-only norms of the national competition (Zimmerman, 2019). The debate topic was immigration, and the Latinx students argued persuasively that their perspective was essential. As a result, they became the first team in the national tournament to debate in Spanish—and placed fourth in the country. The MS 50 debate team went to nationals three years in a row, and they were National Runners Up in policy debate in 2022.

Honoroff explained that social justice isn't just something that the MS 50 community school teaches. It's something they live. Their pedagogy is rooted in Paulo Freire's philosophy—See, Analyze, Act—which El Puente also embodies. “We teach the kids that schooling is about more than wins and losses,” said Honoroff. “It's about being advocates for peace and justice in the world. We took more pride in breaking the language barrier than we did coming in fourth in the country.”

MS 50 and El Puente “never shy away from teaching our students about understanding the world around them,” Honoroff asserted. “We have an equity team that meets regularly to teach issues of equity and justice. In spring 2020, students were seeing [racial justice] protests in the streets. We talked about two pandemics: COVID-19 and racism. We built lessons around teaching about those two pandemics and [centered] student voice, and El Puente created a video about it.”

## A Community Embraces Its School

The Williamsburg community has embraced its transformed school. From teetering on extinction, MS 50 saw its enrollment more than double in just a few years. “We did that by hustling,” said Honoroff. “We're doing parent-teacher home visits. I was walking the neighborhood with El Puente and community members and teachers and trying to change the narrative about the school. The only way to change it is to provide a counter-narrative... We use debate as a main recruitment strategy, and we went to elementary schools to teach debate and allowed elementary school kids to debate with us.”

The transformation of MS 50 has been remarkable. It came off the city's renewal list of struggling schools and is now a showcase for debate—and for community schools. That transformation is also evident in MS 50's academic performance. Honoroff said that students at the school went from 10% proficient in English and 6% in math in 2015, to 40% proficient in English and 38% in math in 2019. In the first year alone, the middle school doubled the level of students' English proficiency. The reason? “Just from culture, just from hope. There was a different belief. People were happier in the hallways. That had a tangible effect in the data.”

An essential element of MS 50's transformation is its partnership with El Puente. "Community schools had everything to do with our turnaround," Honoroff insisted. "We couldn't have had an enrollment increase without our partnership with El Puente. It allowed us to have this tide of optimism and belief and hope, especially with the community. El Puente being a partner with MS 50 brings a legitimacy. As a white male not from the community, it's very helpful to me if El Puente believes in [me] and Fiorella united as a collective."

"At the base of hope and change is legitimacy," he continued. "Ethos, logos, pathos."<sup>9</sup> People have to believe in who you are. I need instructional legitimacy. But I also need community legitimacy."

"Our philosophy of community schools is that we are going to meet the needs of families no matter what they are. We're going to have a lot of sweat equity, whether that means walking families to the clinic or getting an immigration lawyer for a family. We see it as part of our job, our school, to support the whole family," said Honoroff.

"Our job extends beyond the walls of the classroom. It starts with home visits and asking what are your hopes and dreams for your child? Our model is always about parent empowerment, and how to enable parents to be leaders themselves."

## The View From The Top

Richard Carranza served as New York City schools chancellor from 2018 to 2021, after having previously served as schools superintendent in Houston and San Francisco. He has overseen community schools around the country. Mayor Bill de Blasio's ambitious community schools initiative—growing from 45 community schools in 2014 to 421 in 2023—was by far the nation's largest at the time.

"When I went to New York City, I thought I had landed in heaven," Carranza said. "Because New York City was very comprehensive in terms of how the community schools model was set up. There was an infrastructure that existed centrally to support the community schools with an executive director."

<sup>9</sup> Ethos, logos, pathos—credibility, logic, emotion—are modes of persuasion in rhetoric and debate.

Carranza believes the strength of the New York City community schools is in the power of partnerships with CBOs. “What I really appreciated is that there had been a lot of work done in making sure that there was a seamless-as-possible governance structure between the principal and the chief executive of whatever nonprofit or community-based organization was working with the school—so that the principal and that individual didn’t see themselves as being competing entities, but truly saw themselves as being a team working to meet the needs of their school.”

Sarah Jonas, executive director at NYCDOE’s Office of Community Schools,<sup>10</sup> said a successful transition to a community school requires “a mindset shift around collaborative leadership and practice...To say this is a partner, a leader in your building—that’s a mindset shift, where it’s co-leadership.”

To re-enforce this mindset shift, NYCDOE officials meet monthly with the Coalition for Community Schools Excellence, which represents the community partners. “I think having a group like the Coalition for Community Schools Excellence, which includes members from that original group from the Coalition for Educational Justice, [helps] to kind of keep you honest and hold you accountable if you’re the school district.”

Jonas observed, “It’s easy in a large bureaucracy to think you know what you’re doing and that you’re doing great things. You need to have a space with and trust with community stakeholders and community partners who can hold your feet to the fire and say, ‘Not so fast,’ or ‘It’s not how you think it is,’ or ‘Have you considered this? Because we think this would actually work better.’ So having that is really, really critical for the work.”

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<sup>10</sup> In September 2022, Jonas left NYCDOE to become Vice President of the Youth Division at Children’s Aid.

# *A National Movement*

As head of the New York City Office of Community Schools, Sarah Jonas acknowledged the essential benefits of being part of the larger community schools movement. “Being part of a national movement has been a way to celebrate and showcase our work on a national stage, while at the same time learning from others and hearing about strategies that can inform what we do,” she said.

New York City partnered with and learned from several national organizations over the years, including the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS, part of Children’s Aid), the Coalition for Community Schools, Attendance Works, Everyone Graduates Center (Johns Hopkins University), and the National Education Equity Lab (Harvard University). Jonas considered these “key collaborators” in providing ideas, tools, and other supports that have contributed to the initiative’s design and direction.

The publication of a RAND study (Johnston et al., 2020) documenting the New York City initiative’s positive results with community schools brought further national attention to the work. That led to a flurry of outreach from other community school initiatives around the country that were eager to exchange ideas and dialogue about best practices with New York City.

The NCCS annual Community Schools Fundamentals conference was important in helping members of the NYCDOE central team and site-based Community School Directors (employed by community partner organizations) gain a shared understanding of both the underlying philosophy and effective practices of the community school strategy. NYCDOE Program Managers were “excited and inspired” when they discovered that they were joining a national movement, said Jonas. In addition to providing the Fundamentals conference each year, NCCS served as a capacity-building partner to the New York City Community Schools Initiative throughout its development and implementation period.

Since its inception, the New York City initiative has also actively participated in several Coalition for Community School activities and networks, including its biannual National Forum, Community Schools Leadership Network, Coordinators Network, and Research-Practice Network. Many of these efforts represent what Jonas calls a “two-way street”—opportunities to share key lessons from the work in New York City while also learning from the experience of colleagues across the country.

# A National Movement (continued)

The New York City Community Schools Initiative provided key leadership for an innovative national effort by partnering with the Brookings Institution to create the Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools—a group of thought leaders chaired by Jonas. In February 2021, they published a policy-oriented monograph, *Addressing Education Inequality With a Next Generation of Community Schools: A Blueprint for Mayors, States, and the Federal Government*. The report provided timely, research-based ideas for the incoming Biden administration, as well as for policymakers at local and state levels. The report had twin goals:

**Shaping our educational recovery out of the COVID-19 crisis by implementing community schools in the neighborhoods hardest hit by the pandemic as a first step, and paving the way for a new approach to student-centered teaching and learning that better serves the holistic needs of all students and their families. (Brookings Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools, 2021)**

Observers have credited the report with having influenced the Biden administration to more than double funding—from \$30 million in FY 2021 to \$75 million in 2022—for the federal Full-Service Community Schools program within the U.S. Department of Education. Another substantial increase took place in FY 2023, with \$150 million appropriated for the program.



Terrence Winston, executive director of the Coalition for Community School Excellence, acknowledged, “We have been a pain in the ass at times [but] it was agreed in the relationship [with the NYCDOE]. That’s a role we fill—but not the only role. We are also a valued thought partner with them.”

Winston said it’s important to take a long view when assessing the results of community schools: “[Chancellor Richard] Carranza drilled into my mind that **it’s not a program, it’s a strategy**. So there needed to be a paradigmatic shift in my own mind...There is such an unrelenting push on getting attendance up. But there are not a lot of *why* questions, more on the ‘*what*’—*what* do you need to do? Community schools require ‘*why*’ questions—*why* aren’t students coming to school?”

Jonas insisted that funding community schools initiatives in creative and innovative ways is key to their success. “We have looked at funding that is available to support student success and said ‘How can that be leveraged to support a community school strategy?’ Because we believe that if that funding flows through a community school strategy, you’ll have the best chance of achieving those results. Whether it’s state-level attendance improvement and dropout-prevention funding, whether it’s federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds that we believe are very closely aligned to community schools...we look at community schools as the first place to really make the greatest impact with any of these funding streams that are available to us. And we’ve been successful in doing that, and we’ve seen results,” said Jonas.

Chris Caruso, the founding executive director in New York City’s Office of Community Schools, pointed to three key lessons learned from New York’s community schools program. “One, there was **mayoral leadership**. De Blasio made promises and campaigned on community schools...Political leadership extends to **Chancellor leadership**, and there was investment in infrastructure. We needed to have people who could guide and teach schools how to do this, be [bridges] between schools and other city agencies, facilitate funding, and hold schools accountable. So the creation of an Office of Community Schools with power and authority was a second key feature of this. And then we had **cash**. This is not free. It’s a mindset shift—but it also takes resources. The city allowed me to repurpose funds and identify fundraising opportunities and be aggressive. Those are three system-level features that are important, and early on we were really clear about things we expected,” Caruso explained.

# The RAND Report: "Game over. It's checkmate."

When Mayor Bill de Blasio launched New York City's community schools program, he wanted evidence of the efficacy of the initiative. So he included a provision for the RAND Corporation to study the program's implementation and impact.

RAND published its impact assessment of New York City's community schools program in 2020. The report affirmed the success of New York City's ambitious program, finding that New York's community schools showed higher rates of graduation, attendance, and math scores, and fewer dropouts, retentions, and disciplinary actions (Johnston et al., 2020). The RAND report concluded that community schools "can be a promising approach to support student success in traditionally disadvantaged communities."

For New York City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, the RAND findings were a crucial asset to making the case for community schools. "The RAND report was a silver bullet because it showed the efficacy of the approach and the connection to student outcomes," Carranza said. He noted that this was especially important for persuading decision makers concerned with the bottom line. Carranza explained: "Usually what I will do with the skeptical budget hawks is say these are the current needs in this particular community based on the needs assessment that has been conducted. Invariably, one of the outcomes of those needs is [addressing] disconnected youth and dropouts. So then I juxtapose the cost of the community school model, which will bring resources—from internships, externships, additional tutoring, additional acceleration opportunities, laptops, mentoring programs, all of those things—with the cost of incarcerating a juvenile for a year, which in New York City was \$475,000 a year. And when you compare the cost of incarcerating a juvenile for one year versus what the per-pupil cost of a community school model is, it's usually about 4–5 times the cost to incarcerate a youth. When I show that to the budget hawks, and then on top of that show the student outcome results as researched by the RAND Corporation, it's almost game over. It's checkmate."

Carranza argues that community schools are "...a relatively cheap investment—rather than incarcerating youth, you can actually meet their needs, ameliorate those challenges, and then keep them from becoming the most expensive kind of education, which is incarceration."

## The Next Frontier

Natasha Capers, now executive director of CEJ, is proud of playing a key role in the community schools movement in New York City. Capers conceded that the pressure to implement the program quickly—the first community schools opened just months after de Blasio became mayor—was stressful. “A lot of times, slower is better, because it allows us to learn and evolve more naturally.”

But Capers quickly added, “The most important outcome is that reconnection of communities and schools. The ones that I am most excited about are the ones who embraced the community part of it. How do we bring schools into communities, and vice versa? Post-pandemic, I think those are the schools that had the best outcomes...because they knew where their families were.”

Capers has her eye on the next frontier of activism. CEJ is now leading a campaign to implement culturally responsive curricula. “There are states like Texas [where teachers] can’t even talk about current events [in school],” she noted. “My fear is that if we lose this argument—if we don’t organize nationally—we don’t just lose the argument about culturally responsive education. We lose the argument that race matters. That’s the next horizon. It’s this growing attack. It’s all deeply interconnected across the country.”

Capers insisted that the campaign for community schools requires ongoing effort. “At no point were we so enamored by the win that we thought we could just walk away,” she said. “We’ve continued to work with them around parent engagement...and we’re always—every year, every few months—trying to figure out what’s the next layer of work that schools can take on or that the central office should be thinking about and moving towards taking on.”

The goal, said Capers, is “to actually raise the quality of those community schools so that they can become the big vision we know they can be.”

# CHAPTER 9: “We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For”: Oakland’s Full-Service Community School District

The Oakland schools were in crisis. In 2003, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) declared bankruptcy and was placed under state receivership, where it remained for six years. The schools searched for a different way forward—and that led them to Tony Smith, a former pro football player for the Green Bay Packers and San Francisco 49ers. After retiring from football, Smith went back to the University of California at Berkeley and earned a PhD in education.

In 2009, OUSD hired him as its new superintendent. “It is super unconscionable to me that we haven’t built systems that care for each kid,” Smith said.

Smith believed that to fix failing schools, you must fix the broken educational systems. He committed to recast the mission of the Oakland school district so it “serves the whole child, eliminates health, social, and educational inequity and provides each child with a caring environment that supports student learning and success.”

His vision: to remake Oakland as a full-service community school district, the first such district in the nation. It was a radical experiment.

Today, Oakland’s Full-Service Community School District comprises 80 schools, 67 of which have a full-time community school coordinator. Dropouts have decreased, graduation rates have increased, and academic performance has improved.

Oakland’s pioneering community schools program has made it a model for California. In 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom and the state legislature approved investing \$4.1 billion over seven years to expand community schools throughout the state. It is the largest statewide community school initiative in the country and may spawn others. The Alameda County Office of Education, within which the Oakland school district operates, together with the UCLA Center for Community Schooling (see Chapter 7), National Education Association, and Californians for Justice are co-leading the technical assistance effort for California’s community schools (California Department of Education, n.d.).

“Supporting students outside of the classroom is essential to helping our kids achieve, and community schools provide those resources for local communities to bolster support services,” said Governor Newsom in June 2022. “This strategy is the nation’s most ambitious proposal to improve student learning, health, and well-being—full-service schools centered on the lived realities of students and families that deliver whatever students need to help them thrive in the classroom” (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2022).

Oakland is California’s 8th-largest city and is among the most diverse school districts in the country. Some 35,000 students attend 80 public schools. Another 16,000 students attend 28 independently run district charter schools. One-fifth of the public school students are African American, 45% are Latinx, 13% are Asian and Pacific Islander, 11% are white, and 6% are multiethnic (OUSD, 2021).

**Fremont High School  
Graduation Celebration**  
*Courtesy of Oakland Unified  
School District*



Smith was candid in his assessment of the challenge that Oakland faced. In an early, 5-year strategic plan, *Community Schools, Thriving Students* (OUSD, 2011), he declared: “We continue to underserve a significant proportion of our youth, namely our African American, Latino, and English Language Learning students, as well as our students who live in poverty.”

The strategic plan detailed disparate educational outcomes, such as the fact that only about half of African American and Latinx students graduated from OUSD high schools, compared to more than three-fourths of white and Asian students. But the challenges confronting OUSD had roots beyond the classroom. Disparate educational outcomes reflect challenges confronting the community at large. An African American child born in West Oakland is:

- ▶ one and half times more likely to be born premature
- ▶ seven times more likely to be born into poverty
- ▶ two and half times more likely to be behind in vaccinations
- ▶ four times less likely to read at grade level by grade 4
- ▶ likely to live in a neighborhood with two times the concentration of liquor stores and more fast-food outlets
- ▶ more than five and half times more likely to drop out (or be pushed out) of school (OUSD, 2011).

“Born in West Oakland,” declared OUSD’s strategic plan, “an African American child can expect to die almost 15 years earlier than a white child born in the Oakland Hills.”

Against this backdrop of yawning inequality, Oakland’s plan to remake its schools was literally a matter of life or death.

Superintendent Smith determined to close the achievement gap by addressing the opportunity gap among Oakland’s students. The strategic plan promised to “create a public school system that works with citizens and institutions to coordinate, align, and leverage resources for the well-being of Oakland’s children and families.” In June 2011, Oakland’s Board of Education unanimously approved the plan to make OUSD a Full-Service Community School (FSCS) District.



# Oakland's Road to Community Schools

Community schools have deep roots in Oakland. “There’s an extraordinary history in Oakland and so much of that strategic plan actually has echoes of the past: the Black Panthers and the deep care for kids,” said Smith.

The Black Panther Party opened the Oakland Community School—the first elementary school of its kind in the country—in the early 1970s. The school was based on a founding principle of the Black Panthers, which was articulated in their 1966 10-Point Program:

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else. (Huggins, 2016)

The Oakland Community School provided “quality education for black and poor youth... They established a replicable model for education that was designed to empower whole communities, without regard to race, class, or gender,” according to Ericka Huggins, one of the school’s founders. The school operated for about 10 years before closing in 1983, following years of government surveillance and attacks on the Black Panther Party, including police murders of its leaders (Mitchell, 2019; Solly, 2021).

Earlier programs to address inequity and educational justice served as a foundation for FSCS in Oakland. In the 1990s, California’s Healthy Start program, which was aimed at addressing Oakland’s high rates of infant mortality, enabled the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency to fund eight school-based health centers in OUSD—a key element of the FSCS commitment to care for the whole child. In 2011, with support from Kaiser Permanente, the district doubled the number of school-based health centers.

Another foundational piece was Proposition 49, California’s universal after-school program, which passed in November 2002. It mandated that \$550 million be spent annually on universal K-9 after-school programs. In the detailed study of Oakland schools, *The Way We Do School: The Making of Oakland’s Full-Service Community School District*, McLaughlin et al. (2020) wrote:

Prop 49 brought a sea change to Oakland’s after-school offerings. It represented the biggest expansion and rollout of after-school youth programs and services in Oakland’s history. The model was a stepping-stone to the community school model’s integration of academic, social, emotional, youth development, and community into a comprehensive approach. (p. 17)

Oakland also benefited from philanthropic impact investments. In 2008, Atlantic Philanthropies gave \$15 million for an Elev8 Oakland grant to provide academic support and mentoring, health services, and family support through family advocates at five schools. Alameda County, the City of Oakland, and OUSD also contributed, and Safe Passages, a CBO, was the lead agent. Elev8 “provided a relatable example of what community schools might look like in Oakland and established ‘proof of concept’ for what would be expanded to become the widespread district strategy,” reported the Learning Policy Institute (Klevan et al., 2023).

In 2010, OUSD launched a 10-month-long community engagement process. It consisted of 14 task forces that encompassed a broad range of stakeholders and perspectives. The result was the creation of the 2011 strategic plan, *Community Schools, Thriving Students* (OUSD, 2011). OUSD hired community school managers and the eight neediest schools became Full-Service Community Schools.

Curtiss Sarikey, who has worked in the district since 2011 and is now chief of staff in the office of Oakland’s Superintendent of Schools, said that the planning process was crucial to the success of community schools. “The intensive engagement process had thousands of community people involved across 14 task forces to write that plan,” explained Sarikey. “The reason that community schools have not just grown but actually thrived—over five superintendents, over a decade, over strikes, over COVID, over school closures—is because there was so much bottom-up buy-in from the get-go. People were deeply engaged in all these task forces and they were able to see that their ideas actually showed up on paper. And a lot of the recommendations that came from parents and community were driving that plan.”

With Oakland just emerging from state receivership, a lot was riding on community schools. Sarikey asserted, “This was the moment that we were able to get local control back.”

Today the challenge for Oakland is to “create systems to make sure that the bottom-up change is actually truly happening and it’s not just words on a page,” Sarikey said.

## Visionary Leadership for System Change

Tony Smith had been superintendent in nearby Emeryville, where he instituted a Center for Community Life, a precursor to community schools. He then moved on to become Deputy Superintendent of Schools for Instruction, Innovation, and Social Justice in San Francisco. He was mentored and deeply influenced by Richard Murphy, founder of the Beacon Schools in New York City.

Smith tackled his new assignment in Oakland by thinking differently. “In Oakland, everybody was fighting so hard against different parts of what the problem was,” Smith recounted. “If we came together and put the well-being of children and families at the center, those conversations would look very different. We would solve the condition of lack of thriving in very different ways. Rather than fighting *against* something, people could organize, fighting *for* the well-being of kids.”

Smith reflected on the intensive planning process that culminated in the strategic plan for community schools. “Everybody said, ‘You can’t do so many task forces, you can’t do this, you can’t do that...’ I just kept saying, ‘This is what people are asking for. Our job is to create conditions for people to be in relationship, to share their concerns, their aspirations, their needs. Let’s be in dialogue and create conditions for people to have agency.’ That’s what I thought that the central office or the district should be responsible for.”

OUSD’s strategic plan establishing the Full-Service Community School District—a radical restructuring of Oakland’s schools—unanimously passed the school board. This was a remarkable feat in such a fractious educational and political environment. How did Smith do it? The former schools chief paused and considered it. “Probably the best question I’ve been asked about all of this work.”

Smith said the key was “the deep and authentic pursuit of a relationship with each one of my board members. The approach was not the classic, ‘I’ll give you this, if you give me that.’ The idea of not thinking about it from a place of transaction, but thinking about each one of those board members, believing deeply that the approach we were taking met their personal needs, met the needs of their constituents and in fact would [be] to the benefit of a healthier Oakland. That journey with each one of those members was very, very different— in some cases joyful, in some cases agonizing. We talked about reducing the incarceration of African American males. One board member started yelling, ‘You running for mayor? We shouldn’t even be talking about that!’ It was not simple, and it was not straightforward. [I spent] a lot of time walking in the community, spending time in schools with each of those board members.”

Smith advocates for a “Go slow to go fast” approach. “Because you can’t try to build deep and meaningful relationships quickly,” he said. “You have to have experiences together. Shallow tools don’t get to the roots. You need deeper connection to actually go about transformation. So that [school board approval] came after deep and long dialogue.”

Smith led a radical shift in how an educational bureaucracy approaches struggling schools. “The Oakland work to me is really about a systems view and about the well-being of an entire system and about interdependence,” he insisted. “Liberatory design isn’t knowing the answer before you start. It’s caring deeply that people fully participate, and in that process...come to [a] deeper and more genuine understanding of themselves, each other, and the vision. That’s what has persisted in Oakland that is different than in other places: the idea that transformation—social, spiritual, racial justice—permeates that work.”

# Leadership Change and Rising Outcomes

Just as Smith’s arrival in 2009 was impactful for Oakland, so was his unexpected departure in 2013 for family reasons. It sparked a period of frenetic leadership churn. Between 2011 and 2019, OUSD had five superintendents, including two interim superintendents. OUSD went from having a balanced budget to having a \$30 million shortfall, forcing budget cuts.

In 2017, Oakland native Kyla Johnson-Trammell took the helm of OUSD. By 2022, she was the longest serving superintendent since 1970. She observed that Oakland’s community schools are still evolving and that she remains focused on changing systems. “The community school notion is more than just wraparound services,” she asserted.

“How do you take this notion of ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ and do that at scale?” she posed. “[How do you] think about the systems that you need for different people—in and outside the school—to really be able to personalize supports for students and families?”

The impact of Oakland’s transformation into a full-service community school district can be seen in the changes in student outcomes (Institute for Educational Leadership & Coalition for Community Schools, 2020; Office of the Superintendent, personal communication, October 17, 2022):

- ▶ **Fewer suspensions and dropouts:** Dropout rates fell by half, from 25.4% to 12.6%, between the 2011–2012 and 2020–2021 academic years. The percentage of students who were suspended decreased from 4.2% to 3.4% between the 2015–2016 and 2021–2022 academic years.
- ▶ **Increased access to health care:** There were 36,000 student visits to school-based health centers in 2019–2020.
- ▶ **Academic achievement and growth:** Only 22% of students were reading at or above grade level in 2011–2012; this figure rose to 37% in 2017–2018.
- ▶ **Increased graduation rate:** Up 25% overall, from 59% in 2011–2012 to 74% in 2018–2019.
- ▶ **Growth for students traditionally furthest from graduating:** Black cohort graduation rate increased from 53% to 71%; Latinx from 53% to 64%; English language learners from 46% to 58%. Seven of OUSD’s 11 high schools had graduation rates above the California average of 83%. *Six posted graduation rates of over 90%.*
- ▶ **Increased higher education enrollment:** High school students enrolling in a 4-year college within 1 year of high school graduation increased from 27.2% to 32.2% between the graduating classes of 2012 and 2019.

Johnson-Trammell described her view of success for the decade-old Full-Service Community School District: “Success would be you’re starting to see movement in terms of kids getting what they need so they are able to accelerate their achievement. You should see decreases in suspensions and expulsions and more kids coming to school, because you’re using some of these partnerships ...to increase engagement and to remove barriers as to why kids aren’t attending. High schools should definitely see more kids continuing to graduate, having the choice whether they want to go to college, or work and go to college. That’s grounded in equity, to really ensure that students are staying on the path.”

## Community Schools and COVID

Half of Johnson-Trammell’s tenure has been during the COVID pandemic. “I think this pandemic is not going to be a moment, but an era,” she said. “How do we adapt what schooling is like and the capacity building that we need to have to meet this moment so that kids and families get what they need?”

The answer is clear for this superintendent. “Community schools is a way forward.”

Johnson-Trammell asserted that Oakland’s community schools rose to the challenge of COVID. “I’m proud of our overall response to COVID and our ability to feed families, our ability to really close the digital divide in our city,” she said. “We went from 12% to 98% of our students and families that have access to devices. We weren’t one-to-one [a computer for each student] before the pandemic and now we are. Our ability to use our mission to set up community hubs for our most vulnerable...—whether it was what was going on in their homes or physically where they lived—they just weren’t able to attend school virtually. And so being able to quickly set up those places and spaces for our foster youth, unhoused and other students to be able to access learning in another place was helpful. We were able to set up a virtual academy that served about 150–200 students before the pandemic... [During] the pandemic, it grew to 1,200 to 1,400 students.”



### Families receiving new devices from Oakland Unified School District

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*



“A lot of that was [possible through support from] one of our community-based organizations, Oakland Reach,” she continued. “They really helped us troubleshoot because it was like starting a school overnight. So I would say our overall response, our ability to provide [COVID] testing in the most vulnerable areas in our cities and partnerships with community-based clinics, our vaccination rate was the second best response outside of LA. All of that was basically taking our community schools mindset and putting it into action.”

## Oakland High School

The sprawling Oakland High School (OHS) is home to about 1,500 students. Roughly one-third are Latinx, another third are Asian, and one-fourth are Black. Just over a quarter of OHS’s students are English learners and 87% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Rany Ath is the community school manager for OHS. She runs Shop 55, a hub for a range of health and educational services that is managed by East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), the school’s longtime community school partner. Shop 55 is “a one-stop shop for students to receive services, including medical services, reproductive health, sports physicals, chronic health management, COVID testing and response, dental services, mental-behavioral health services, mentoring, coaching, and crisis counseling,” said Ath. “All this is done in partnership with community programs.” Participating partners include Asian Health Services, Lincoln Wellness, which provides behavioral services, and Oakland Kids First, which runs a youth empowerment and development program.

Ath explained that Shop 55 grew out of the EBAYC philosophy to “center the community first.” EBAYC ran a listening campaign in the community, conducting over 1,000 surveys and 500 interviews to determine the health and wellness needs of the community. “The two main responses were ‘We want a school nurse,’ and ‘We want a place to go to talk to someone, because students don’t always feel they have a safe space to talk,’” she said. EBAYC successfully lobbied Alameda County for a school-based health center at OHS, and Shop 55 was the result.

Shop 55 is a busy hub of activity in the high school. Asian Health Services provides a nurse and doctor. There is also a full-time social worker for newcomers, and a part-time foster-care case manager. Ath explained that the goal of EBAYC and Shop 55 is “to connect with every student and let them know there’s a caring adult that is worried about them, create a safe and confidential space, and invite them to connect with the services we have.”

Ath has a natural connection with students because of her own background. Her parents were immigrants from Cambodia, and they settled in Oakland, a community of refugees and immigrants. “There were language barriers,” she said. “We grew up in poverty and we were on food stamps. I see our students experiencing that.” She graduated from UC Berkeley and went to work for a national nonprofit, “but I felt a loss of community.” So she took a job at EBAYC, paying forward what she received as a child participating in EBAYC’s after-school, summer, and mentorship programs.

A struggling student once challenged her: “Why should I care about what teachers expect of me if they don’t even care about me?” The statement felt like a challenge that went to the very heart of the mission of community schools. “That caring piece is so huge,” said Ath. “I feel like there’s such a huge shift in how we care for young people at Oakland High and also how we care for the teachers.”

Ath said that OHS is based on relationship-centered and healing-centered practices. “When EBAYC first started 15 years ago, we knew we had to build trusting relationships. We wanted to build the humanity of what it means to connect and see each other in a different way than ‘that’s a teacher’ and ‘that’s a student’... We have differences, but we need the commonality and to build and show respect and love for one another. Teachers own it, they value it. I feel proud that people see it and feel how relationships are so important.”

# The Power of Partnerships

A feature of Oakland’s Full-Service Community School District is that partnerships are centrally coordinated, rather than having each school find and manage their own partners. “One of the things that Oakland did from the beginning was to bring community-based organizations and the school district together,” said Andrea Bustamante, executive director of Community Schools Student Services for OUSD. “Becoming a community school district to take this to scale has been a different approach compared to other systems. We are primarily a district-run community school model.” She said the centralization of partnerships helps OUSD “systematize our efforts.”

Another benefit of district-run community schools is that “the principals are quite bought in, and there’s quite a bit of buy-in from the community,” said Bustamante.

“The biggest success is that we’ve been able to scale. We began with a handful of [community school] coordinators and now have 80 schools total; 67 will have a full-time community school coordinator.”

The COVID pandemic put Oakland’s community schools to the test. At OHS, the school-based health center pivoted from providing services just for students to providing telehealth for school families. Healthcare providers did regular virtual home visits and wellness checks. OHS raised \$130,000 for a family relief fund. Ath explained, “We wouldn’t have been able to identify those families if it weren’t for the teachers and administrators. They’re in contact with students who are confiding in them” (Klevan et al., 2023).

**Students working together at an Oakland community school**

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*



## Student Voice

Asked what others can learn from OHS, Rany Ath quickly replied, “The importance of the ongoing uplifting of student voices. We find opportunities to hear from young people about what they are experiencing, whether through focus groups, for pride [LGBTQ] students, for students who are at school but don’t want to go to class. We use that information to shape something, inviting them back and asking if this is what it looks like.”

Justine Santos is organizing director with Californians for Justice, which runs leadership skills programs—an extended learning opportunity—at OHS. Santos explained, “When we talk about student voice, what’s important about students as decision-makers is that [they] are at the table and their views are represented, versus we are going to get student input in this space but the decision is made elsewhere.”

“We are trying to be in deep partnership with the community school manager and the principal,” said Santos.

The COVID pandemic has helped to strengthen the role of students in decision-making. “One of the big, lasting changes that I see was in response to the pandemic. Before, it was optional to bring in student voice. Now, students are fully integrated as partners. Plans don’t get made without students at the table,” Santos said.

A key part of the OHS community school is the Coordination of Services Team (COST), which meets weekly and brings together partners, case managers, and counselors. Teachers or other adults can refer a student to COST, which then creates a care plan. Ath also meets weekly with OHS principal Pamela Moy to “align ourselves.”

Moy emphasized that the community school is one part of a continuum of care. “We try to connect students with external resources,” she said. For example, OHS is home to many recently arrived immigrants, known as “newcomers.” Moy explained, “Our newcomer social worker operates out of the wellness center and supports them by connecting them with legal services as they try to navigate with immigration. It’s a warm handoff—not just ‘Here’s the name of someone—good luck!’”

# Gentrification, White Reformers, and School Closures

Oakland and its schools are transforming. Gentrification and an influx of white and Latinx residents have changed the face of the city. Forty years ago, nearly half of the city's population was African American. Today, Whites are the largest racial group, followed by Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The demographic changes and the siphoning of students to charter schools have left public schools under-enrolled and underfunded.

Against this backdrop, the OUSD school board announced in January 2022 that it would close seven schools by 2024, merge two schools and eliminate middle school grades in two other schools. OUSD cited a \$40 million deficit and declining enrollment (McBride, 2021). Over 40% of students on the school closure list are Black—double the proportion of Black students in the entire district (Finney, 2022).

When Parker Elementary School in East Oakland closed in May 2022, a group of families staged a 130-day occupation that ended when the Oakland school board agreed to convert the school into an adult and family literacy center (Bennett, 2022).

Some of Oakland's challenges stem from the fact that it "has definitely been ground zero for the reformers," said chief of staff Curtiss Sarikey. After OUSD emerged from state receivership in 2009, "the district's uncertain finances and poor performance also opened the door for experimentation from wealthy, mostly White philanthropists with no ties to Oakland," reported the *Washington Post* (Wilson, 2022).

Among the reformers was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which invested \$25 million in a "small schools" initiative that promoted breaking up large schools into smaller campuses. "So there are a lot of small schools by design, and not just because you lost enrollment," asserted Sarikey. "And then there's a lot of investment and a lot of charter growth in Oakland, so a third of Oakland children are sitting in charter schools." This has resulted in a steady depletion of funds available for public schools.



On April 29, 2022, Oakland Unified teachers staged a one-day walkout to protest school closures. This protest followed a 7-day strike in February 2019. Teachers had been without a contract for two years and were demanding small class sizes, more school counselors, and increased pay. This strike was inspired by a national wave of teacher activism that began in 2018 and extended from West Virginia to Arizona and Oklahoma to Los Angeles. When OUSD schools closed during the strike, solidarity schools opened. The 2019 Oakland teachers' strike ended with teachers winning an 11% pay increase and concessions around class size and support staff.

Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell said that the latest protests reflect “a story of what happens over time when you don’t have stable leadership and you have a high level of leadership turnover and how that [turnover] can erode systems of improvement over time. A lot of Oakland’s history is reforms that were great ideas but never had the chance to get seeded in the soil.”

But the superintendent added, “Even though there was all that consternation going on, there is still intense commitment to community schools.”

**Students at an Oakland Unified School District elementary school.**

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*





## “We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For”

The challenges that Oakland has faced, from the pandemic to school closures, have been a stress test for community schools, and the model has demonstrated its resilience and relevance. Its strength is its emphasis on seeking community-based solutions to problems. “This notion of a community school seems to resonate even more with folks because people were able to see it live, in action, as a response to the pandemic,” said Oakland Superintendent Johnson-Trammel. “[We were] able to meld together academic and socio-emotional learning supports. I think those are the pieces that are bright spots in our district. That really becomes baked into your mission. It’s not just an add on. It’s not just an initiative. It’s the way that you’re trying to think about how to have school really aligned to the whole child’s theory of action.”

“Community school isn’t an end, it’s a means to an end,” Johnson-Trammel declared.

Tony Smith, the Oakland superintendent who launched the community school initiative, reflected on Oakland’s decade-long experiment. Smith said he is proudest “that people believed in the idea that we are the ones we’ve been waiting for. That there’s not some other external answer, that the work is the work that [we do] together. The direction and the path have endured.”

**Ribbon cutting ceremony for opening of Evans High, a new Community Partnership School, in Orlando, Florida**

*Courtesy of UCF Center for Community Schools*



*THE EVANS COMMUNITY SCHOOL  
WOULD LIKE TO THANK...*

**Contributors**

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# PART III: THE ROAD FORWARD

## CHAPTER 10: *Key Lessons to Guide the Journey*

Our six case studies reinforce the point we made at the outset of this book: *Community schools are doable and worth doing.*

In Chapters 1 through 3, we outlined key definitions, principles, and practices of community schools that have evolved over the past three decades. In Part II (Chapters 4 through 9), we explore in-depth six model community school initiatives. In this final section, we reflect on how our colleagues around the country have operationalized these principles and what we can learn from their experiences (this chapter, Chapter 10). We then close with our ideas about key opportunities facing the community school movement during the foreseeable future (Chapter 11).

The stories at the heart of our text exemplify both the diversity and the commonalities of community school initiatives burgeoning across the country. Common themes in these stories include leadership, partnership, collaboration, equity, innovation, and systemic change. Key lessons emerge from our colleagues' work:

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### **Lesson 1: Community schools benefit from both outside-in and inside-out leadership.**

Leaders from outside the school districts played a pivotal role in driving the development of community schools across our six diverse areas. Only one of the six exemplars (Oakland) drew its initial vision and impetus from the school district—and even then, the superintendent immediately mobilized trusted community partners that could test and strengthen the central idea of *every school a community school*.

We make this point not to diminish the vital role of district leadership but to highlight the many ways that leadership can manifest itself in local communities and to illustrate how external community leaders can step up to support their public schools as noted here:

- ▶ In Albuquerque, three major governmental entities—city, county, and school district—formed a joint powers agreement that provided both the mandate and the infrastructure to facilitate work across jurisdictional boundaries in addressing shared goals and outcomes.
- ▶ In Cincinnati, a former governor who became a local school board member and a former family court judge joined forces and used their collective political clout to address clear community needs, providing the initial impetus for the development of Cincinnati’s Community Learning Centers.
- ▶ In Florida, a large public university and a leading statewide nonprofit organization convinced their Republican governor and state legislature to fund a statewide community school effort.
- ▶ In Los Angeles, a shared vision of social justice led a major university to combine its rich resources with a like-minded principal, school staff, and community.
- ▶ In New York City, a recently elected mayor listened to the voices of community organizers who had painstakingly canvassed parents and other local citizens, resulting in the creation of the nation’s largest citywide community school initiative.
- ▶ In Oakland, the school superintendent reached out to trusted organizational partners that mobilized community resources in innovative and strategic ways, thus operationalizing the vision of the nation’s first community school district.

**Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio with advocates from New Yorkers for Greater Public Schools in 2013 in protest against school shutdowns**

*Courtesy of New Yorkers for Greater Public Schools*



The engagement of leaders outside schools addresses a well-documented challenge in promoting educational change. As Stanford University professor Larry Cuban (2021) has noted in his writings, including in *Confessions of a School Reformer*, schools and districts often find it difficult to change themselves from within. This insight resonates deeply with how outside partners in our stories and in many other communities are playing a vital catalytic role in fostering systemic change in schools. Indeed, the leadership role played by major institutional partners such as local governments, teachers unions, higher education institutions, and United Ways can be crucial to deepening public support for public education and sustaining community schools during municipal or district leadership changes.

The school leaders in our stories who are working across boundaries with external allies know that collaborative work is a central feature of community schools and necessary for their success. We would nevertheless underscore that the support of school leadership at both the system and school levels is critical to growing and sustaining the work.

Indeed, the local leadership exemplified in our case studies is remarkable—an active exercise in democracy that might, in today’s context, seem revolutionary.

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## Lesson 2: Partnerships are fundamental to community schools.

Partnerships with community agencies and institutions constitute an essential way of working—at individual schools, at the systems level, and at every level in-between. Our case studies offer rich examples of the many kinds of partnerships that have been integrated, from health and social service providers to institutions of higher education to youth development organizations to cultural groups and beyond. These partnerships enable schools to address the holistic needs of their students by putting more caring, competent adults in their lives.

Our stories highlight four unique aspects of partnerships associated with community schools. **First, partners are engaged for the long haul**, as exemplified most explicitly by the 25-year commitment in Florida. In Cincinnati, the Community Learning Center Institute has partnered with its city schools now for 20 years and sees that work as its core mission, as do many of the community-based organizations that are lead partners in that school district. These longer term partnerships are a cornerstone for sustainability.

**Second, community partners bring varying skills and perspectives to community schools that focus on multiple aspects of young people’s development.** A youth development organization like El Puente in New York City recognizes, uses, and enhances young people’s strengths and provides opportunities for fostering positive relationships, building their leadership skills. Health agencies associated with Florida’s statewide initiative not only address critical health and mental health issues but also bring a healthy living framework to the school. In general, additional adults in the school offer more opportunities for students to find mentors to support them. These partnerships enable the community school to address all the interests and concerns of young people.

**Third, partnerships help the school and its community partners do a better job.** Rather than operating in silos, all partners change and improve their practice because their work is integrated into the life of the school. For example, consider New York City’s strategy to engage the city’s vibrant nonprofit sector as lead agencies in its initial cohort of 100 (now more than 400) community schools. With the United Way of New York City as a strategic partner, the initiative recruited 62 nonprofit organizations—many of which had never heard of community schools—as lead agency partners. For many of these organizations with expertise beyond the school, the decision to participate in the initiative changed their service delivery systems by adding school sites as venues for partnership and outreach. Working with the school provided more direct access to their target populations, the use of public space, and the opportunity to influence school culture and operations. It also changed their mindsets by, for example, expanding the advocacy agendas of many of these nonprofits to include fiscal equity and other educational issues.

**Finally, community partners can bring a more diverse group of adults into the lives of students.** Given evidence showing that young people of color benefit significantly from having adults from their own community involved in their lives, this aspect of community schooling is especially valuable.

Our case studies indicate that some community school initiatives support partnerships at the systems level. For example, Oakland has built systems to coordinate partnerships as an integral part of its district-led community school model. New York City combines school-initiated partnerships with some relationships—such as businesses that have provided free eyeglasses and washing machines—that assist schools across the citywide initiative.



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### **Lesson 3: Community voice is essential for authentic collaboration.**

Our stories emphasize the importance of listening and responding to the issues and concerns voiced by students, parents, and community residents, and of continuing to engage them authentically in the work of the community school.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Oakland High School committed to prioritizing issues brought forward by students. At the UCLA Community Schools, students and teachers have direct influence on the curricula, underscoring the value of student voice.

Grassroots community organizing focused on schools enabled the Coalition for Educational Justice and the Alliance for Quality Education in New York to successfully advocate for community schools, and now to hold political leaders' feet to the fire so these efforts are sustained and expanded. Parents and the community helped plan and design New York's community school initiative despite a change in mayoral leadership.

In Cincinnati, the community around Oyler School was deeply engaged in planning for their Community Learning Center and asked for Oyler, which had been a K-8 school, to expand to include high school. The school board listened. Today, Local School Decision Making Committees in Community Learning Centers, including parents and educators, select and hold accountable the partners that enhance opportunities for student success and community vitality.

The struggles of people from low-income communities and people of color to have their voices heard is a historical and present-day reality. This has been no less true in our public schools. Community school leaders from the grassroots to grassroots are showing how this reality can change. They are demonstrating how listening to the people whom our public schools are intended to benefit—students, families, and community residents—can lead to success for everyone.

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#### **Lesson 4: Community schools possess a unique capacity to leverage resources.**

All six of our case studies illustrate the power of leverage—in mobilizing education and non-education dollars as well as human and financial resources from public and private sources. Partners are bringing their programs into the school because it helps them achieve their own goals. None of these community school systems relies solely on education dollars to support their work; rather, they show the myriad ways that community schools can identify and organize resources from multiple federal, state, and local agencies to address documented needs and improve results. Albuquerque’s case study, which showed a \$7.11 return on investment for every dollar spent to support the work of the Manzano Mesa community school coordinator, is but one of many examples of leverage that, in their case, includes cash donations, in-kind contributions, and volunteerism.

Cincinnati illustrates the core community school strategy of engaging partners who bring their own human and financial resources into its Community Learning Centers, sometimes with funding streams for which schools are not eligible. Working at the municipal level, New York City was able to redirect several existing public funding streams to its community school initiative while also engaging the local United Way and nonprofit sector as key partners. In several sites, including Florida and California, colleges and universities have readily agreed to share multiple assets, including the human resources represented by students and faculty. Medicaid underwrites medical and mental health services across the case studies. The bottom line: Community schools are a powerful engine for integrating multiple sources of funding and human capital.

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#### **Lesson 5: Community school coordinators are a vital bridge between the school, students, families, and communities.**

One of the earliest innovations in this generation of community schools was the development of the community school coordinator (also called director or manager) position. The coordinator works closely with the school’s principal, taking responsibility for overseeing the needs and assets assessment process, recruitment and coordination of community partners, and integration of student and family support with the school’s core instructional program.

Coordinators facilitate site planning teams where educators, families, and community partners plan and oversee the work of the community school. They often participate on school leadership teams, which are responsible for developing and monitoring the school's comprehensive education plan, where they bring a community perspective into the discussion. Coordinators also join or lead the student support team, which handles assessing and addressing the needs of individual students. These planning teams are central to running an effective, responsive organization. The leadership role played by the community school director or coordinator is often compared to that of an assistant principal; others have likened the role to chief of staff or air traffic controller.

Coordinators work to build bridges every day—between schools and their students, between educators and community partners, between families and community residents and the school. It is an essential new role if we want to grow and sustain the capability of educators, families, and community partners to work together in strategic ways. As community schools have gained greater visibility, coordinators have most often been employed by lead agency partners that have roots in the community or expertise that schools do not have. Coordinators can also be school district employees, as is the case in Oakland.

At the initiative level, coordinators enjoy support from their districts or sponsoring agencies. For example, New York City provides monthly day-long training sessions for its coordinators. Oakland reorganized its central office around the community school strategy. And the University of Central Florida offers regular professional development and on-site support that helps all the partners move toward becoming certified Community Partnership Schools. Nationally, community school coordinators participate in a network organized by the Coalition for Community Schools that provides opportunities for professional development and ongoing support.

The case studies in this book let readers hear the voices of community school coordinators as they carry out their daily responsibilities in the challenging environment of under-resourced schools. What comes through is their ongoing resourcefulness, their relationship-oriented approach to solving problems, and their bedrock belief in the value of the community school strategy. Of particular note, we have heard many principals, even those who approached the community school idea with some trepidation, observe after a year or two, "I could not do my work without the partnership of my coordinator."

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## Lesson 6: Community schools are problem-solving organizations.

This generation of community schools has spawned a variety of both short- and long-term innovations that help to solve persistent educational and community problems. One of our colleagues, Kyle Serrette at the National Education Association, calls community schools “problem-solving machines”—an apt descriptor that characterizes the work in all our case study sites. From the nationally recognized Homework Diner at the programmatic level in Albuquerque to the reorganization of Oakland’s district infrastructure in support of community schools at the systems level, the leaders of these initiatives created new approaches that built on existing strengths and responded to local needs.

Nearly all community schools now have site teams and citywide planning bodies—key infrastructure elements that did not exist in prior iterations of the work. Other innovations brought forward by our exemplars include data-sharing agreements that allow schools and partners to collaborate while also respecting legal requirements (Cincinnati and New York City), resource-sharing agreements across jurisdictional lines (Albuquerque and Oakland), and state-level guidance and financing that facilitates the replication of an innovative partnership model of community schools (Florida). These systemic innovations provide critical support for the kind of bottom-up reform exemplified by community schools.

Community problem-solving is ongoing as community conditions change and as leadership coalesces and evolves. If you had asked Darlene Kamine in 2001 to predict how Cincinnati’s Community Learning Centers would look in 20 years, she likely would have had trouble imagining the turn of events and the dramatic results that have been achieved: the district’s embrace and ownership of the strategy, the bedrock support of Cincinnati’s teachers union, the citywide policy undergirding the initiative, the national visibility generated by its flagship school, the positive results including dramatic increases in district-wide graduation rates, and the widespread community effects that include improvements in housing and employment.

Each of our case studies reveals a unique story of innovation and evolution guided by visionary leaders, involving multiple partners, based on data, listening and responding to the voices of community residents, and taking advantage of strategic opportunities. For example, Albuquerque found that its early focus on reducing chronic absence fostered changes in parent and student engagement, which, in turn, led to reductions in student mobility—an example of success begetting success and a reminder of the importance of consistent data review on a variety of measures. New York City’s community schools work was so effective that district leaders asked its Office of Community Schools to take on additional assignments, including organizing district infrastructure and services for students living in temporary housing.

Contemporary community schools have shown success because they have the will and capacity to address the problems we can see today and those that are still to come. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, community schools were ready to respond because they had partners and collaborative cultures in place to do so. As more established community schools move forward, they must face the issues raised by Natasha Capers at the conclusion of the New York City case study—the ongoing need to reinvent and adapt to changing circumstances in order to maintain their problem-solving capacity. The words of this veteran activist about the animating question that drives her work and that of her community school colleagues are worth repeating here: “We’re always...trying to figure out what’s the next layer of work that schools can take on...to actually raise the quality of those community schools so that they can become the big vision we know they can be.”

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### **Lesson 7: Community schools are a long-term, results-oriented strategy.**

Community schools foster a culture of innovation and organizational learning and function as centers of ongoing change and development. As such, they represent a long-term strategy designed to improve results on multiple fronts, including but not limited to academic achievement.

In contrast to much of America’s recent history of school reform that revolved around quick fixes—such as establishing academic standards and relying on high-stakes tests as primary measurement tools—community schools take the long view. They commit themselves to both understanding and responding to the realities of students’ lives—realities that often include family instability; lack of access to health care, technology, and other essentials; and systemic inequities such as inadequate housing and environmental racism.

By integrating improvements in teaching and learning with an array of supports and opportunities for students and families, community schools have demonstrated results that include increased graduation rates, improved attendance and achievement, reduced family mobility, increased teacher retention, reduced disciplinary referrals, improved community safety, and improved student and family well-being.

These changes did not happen overnight—in fact, they often took several years. The recent adopters of the systemic strategy, including New York City and the state of Florida, demonstrated initiative-level results quickly because they had the opportunity to learn from more experienced community school systems across the country.

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## **Lesson 8: The community schools movement builds local capacity as well as state and national policy support.**

All six of these initiatives are part of the national movement—one that they both benefited from and contributed to. Each initiative received early and ongoing assistance from the Coalition for Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools, which allowed them to learn from the expanding knowledge about community school advocacy and implementation. All six, in turn, provided support and assistance to others. Albuquerque, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and Oakland hosted Community School National Forums in partnership with the Coalition.

There is now a growing body of literature about community schools. The Oakland experience was extensively documented in the book, *The Way We Do School: The Making of Oakland's Full-Service Community School District* (McLaughlin et al., 2020), while Cincinnati hosted several study visits to its Community Learning Centers for New York City mayoral candidates. New York City subsequently helped build the national case for community schools through its rigorous initiative-wide evaluation, conducted by RAND.

The work of these sites and others helped to create good models and resources that support core practices and quality implementation. The Coalition for Community Schools convened experienced practitioners who created practice standards at both the school and initiative level (Coalition for Community Schools, 2018). The National Center for Community Schools developed implementation guides, including one designed specifically for community school directors (National Center for Community Schools, 2017). These resources are available for free, providing opportunities for new and existing community school leaders to build their work on current knowledge of best practices.

Each of these initiatives has also provided proof points for the emergence of statewide community schools coalitions. These coalitions are having a growing impact as evidenced by dedicated funding in California, Florida, and New Mexico as well as by state-level legislative or administrative support for community school development in Ohio and New York.

Other aspects of individual sites also informed and catalyzed national activity. The work of University of California, Los Angeles, a member of the University-Assisted Community Schools Network, is a beacon for other higher education institutions. The support of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers for Community Learning Centers contributed to national support from the American Federation of Teachers. Education organizing work in New



York moved the field to work toward deeper relationships with grassroots groups. Florida informed efforts to engage state legislatures. Albuquerque made clear how community schools are pivotal to fighting poverty. And Oakland demonstrated the viability of an entire community school district.

The multiple ways in which local, state, and national efforts interact is a testament to the importance and vitality of the community schools movement. By bringing people and organizations together for sharing, mutual learning, and joint action, the Coalition for Community Schools has built a national, state, and local network based on shared values and ideas that is having significant impact on policy, financing, and practice.

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### **Lesson 9: A collaborative culture enables community schools to effect ongoing systemic change.**

Collaborative leadership and practices represent one of the pillars—or essential ingredients—of community schools. Our colleague Abe Fernandez, now director of the National Center for Community Schools, made the helpful observation that the word *labor* is located in the middle of the word *collaboration*, an apt reminder that we are talking about an ongoing way of working, not a one-time event. For many schools and their partners, this way of working represents a cultural shift, moving schools from being strictly a professionally driven enterprise to a democratically driven one.

The idea that *collaboration* can be a strong vehicle for systems change is decidedly different from *cooperation*, where agencies work together to achieve only their own goals (Melaville et al., 1993). As Oakland superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell so aptly observed, her district’s ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic required taking on a “community schools mindset” that involved collaborating with community partners to respond quickly and effectively to the new challenges brought about by the pandemic, including access to technology, health care, and housing.

In addition to the mindset shift represented by working with partners, other indicators of systemic change emanating from our stories include leaders working across institutional and even jurisdictional boundaries, listening and responding to community voices, integrating funding streams from multiple agencies, creating connector roles and organizations, and focusing on shared results and changing policy. Taken together, these indicators make the case that the community school itself represents systemic change—a change that must continue to evolve to meet new challenges.

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## Lesson 10: Equity is at the core of community schools.

New York City's then-Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza observed in a 2019 essay, "We have a high bar of achievement for each student—this is excellence. And we are prepared to deliver the support that each of them needs to meet that bar. This is equity" (Carranza, 2019, para. 3).

Readers have seen throughout our stories the many inequities that students face—including housing, unemployment, and community safety—as well as the myriad approaches used by community schools to close the opportunity gap by bringing together educators and community partners. Community schools are offering curricular experiences that engage students with the world around them in a way that makes them active agents of change and their own development. They are building trust among people and institutions as well as a sense of collective investment in the future of our young people, our schools, and our neighborhoods.

Centered on one of the few remaining great public institutions that reaches all students and families, community schools are a catalyst for community change—a vehicle for pursuing a broader equity strategy that must also address income inequality, affordable housing, decent jobs, and access to quality childcare and early learning opportunities.

Readers will no doubt draw their own lessons from the case studies. The authors' reflections are simply an attempt to extract key insights from the rich descriptions of work we have come to respect and admire. We will build on and refer to these lessons in our concluding chapter in which we examine the opportunities on the road ahead.

# CHAPTER 11: Maximizing Opportunities on the Road Ahead

How do we apply the lessons from successful large-scale local community school initiatives to enact the vision of *every school a community school*? What are the key opportunities that will enable us to make that vision a reality? What will it take to make the community school strategy “the way we do school” throughout our nation, as our Oakland colleagues advocate?

As we look to the future, we must keep in mind the context in which our schools are operating. While the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken our country to its core, it has also created opportunities that favor the community school strategy. We have witnessed a dramatic change in the public’s understanding of the role of education as a key driver of the U.S. economy (Sawchuk, 2020; Sparks, 2020). No longer taken for granted are the childcare, after-school, extended day, health, and nutrition services provided daily by the nation’s schools.

## Film class taught at Oyler Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, Ohio

*Courtesy of Oyler Community  
Learning Center*



Even the worrisome data on students' learning loss during COVID-19 disruption present opportunities to expand community schools. Increasingly, public discussions have broadened the notion of "losses" to include more than academics. There is now a recognized need for trauma-informed practice, mental health support, opportunities for students' socialization with peers, access to mentors and other caring adults, the availability of nutrition and other concrete supports, and access to out-of-school-time enrichment—all of which community schools provide. The COVID-19 pandemic, by laying bare deep and pervasive inequalities, illustrated that the status quo was not working for many Americans and that something significant had to be tried. These developments, together with new federal and state funding and a somewhat more comprehensive policy framework, create a set of possibilities for the community school movement that is different from any that existed before.

This is a time to build upon and go beyond the work of John Dewey, Jane Addams, Elsie Clapp, Leonard Covello, and others who followed in their footsteps. We can now envision community schools as a permanent part of the education and community landscape.

## A Time of Opportunities

As we look across the current terrain, our team has collectively identified several key opportunities to strengthen and expand the work of community schools.

***Act now to make best use of new financial resources.*** Perhaps the most obvious opportunity is to maximize the impact of the new funding available through federal and state sources. Educators, families, and community partners can now create community schools built on partnerships that incorporate all the elements we have discussed: coordinated health and social services; expanded learning; active family and community engagement; and community-based learning, undergirded by a strong and deepening collaborative culture and trusting relationships.

We hope that all stakeholders will apply the lessons emerging from our case studies when developing new community schools. Beyond these lessons, several additional points should be kept in mind. First, we have made clear throughout this book that *community schools are a place and a strategy, not a program*. We urge local leaders—including educators, families, and community partners—to develop a vision for their own community schools and think strategically about how new monies can help them move toward that vision.

Second, from a strategic standpoint, it is important to use community schools funding to align existing programs and services toward a common set of results and allocate new dollars to fill critical gaps. Integrating these programs with the core instructional program is also essential; we know that working in program silos is not effective. To make this happen, teachers must be deeply involved in planning and implementation, and new approaches to engaging students must be considered.

Third, we would remind local leaders that community school funding is about building relationships between educators and community partners. Experienced community school practitioners have observed that schools' standard practice of purchasing services from community groups often results in treating them like vendors, which represents a *transactional* approach; in a community school, educators work with their partners to build authentic, long-term relationships that represent true educational *transformation*.

In addition, successful community school initiatives are often based on first addressing important issues that educators and partners can help improve, such as chronic absence, safe routes to school, and student disengagement. These wins help to build a culture of success, strengthen trust, and create a foundation for future work.

Finally, evaluations must incorporate multiple measures of both short- and long-term success related to students, families, and the broader community.

***Provide quality capacity-building support.*** State and federal investments in community schools are bringing critical funding for local capacity-building efforts. The field has long benefited from the efforts of the National Center for Community Schools, the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, the Coalition for Community Schools, and others, funded largely by private foundations, individual donors, local grants, and fee-for-service contracts, to help support local community school initiatives. Public support will intensify and expand this important work.

As community schools grow, new entities with limited prior involvement in community schools will no doubt offer their expertise. It is vital that these groups take the time to learn the core ideas and approaches of community school strategies from experienced providers, and more importantly not treat community schools as just another program on their menu of technical assistance options.

That capacity-building assistance also must focus more intentionally on creating bridges with teaching and learning. The involvement of UCLA's School of Education as a partner with the Alameda County Office of Education in California's statewide technical assistance program indicates that academic researchers, policymakers, and practitioners want to bridge that gap. Teaching and learning should become a major focus of capacity-building efforts for all community schools.

The strategy of organizing school and community resources around student success requires a tailored approach at the individual school level. This should be based on an assessment of the needs and strengths of the school's students and families that results from an intensive effort to engage, listen, and respond to issues of concern to students, families, and the community. There is no substitute for this outreach and analysis, or for the collaborative planning that brings educators, families, and partners together at the school level to build relationships and agree on priorities for the near and longer term. Well-designed capacity-building efforts have shown the value of providing tools, training, and other supports that help schools and school systems learn how to implement these and other essential community school practices.

Despite the recent dramatic increases in public support for community schools that in some cases include concomitant capacity-building efforts, we see a continued need for private investments as well. An excellent example of this kind of investment is represented by the Ballmer Group's coordinated effort to fund four national organizations—the Coalition for Community Schools, the National Center for Community Schools, the Learning Policy Institute, and the Brookings Institution—to work together on several aspects of field-building. This ambitious national initiative, called Community Schools Forward, is creating a set of tools and resources designed to help local communities understand and implement evidence-based community school practices.

***Reimagine leadership and professional development.*** Bringing community schools to scale requires major changes in preservice preparation of superintendents, principals, teachers, and other professionals (e.g., nurses, social workers, psychologists), as well as in their professional development while they are on the job. There also should be a renewed focus on interprofessional development across education, health, mental health, community development, and related fields.



In the preservice arena, teachers continue to report that their studies did not include any mention of child and adolescent development, the role of parents and families in students' educational lives, or the role of community in public schools. Similarly, principal and superintendent preparation programs have tended to focus on management and instructional strategies to the exclusion of other requisite skills, such as collaborative and shared leadership, community engagement, and partnership building (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

State-level support for community schools and increased national visibility could provide impetus to schools of education to work in partnership with local school districts to prepare educators in new ways. States that have demonstrated a commitment to community schools can lead the way by modifying their principal and teacher preparation standards, changing licensing requirements, and overseeing preparation programs more rigorously. State community school coalitions must make this issue a focal point for their efforts in the coming years as well.

Districts committed to community schools should partner with higher education institutions around principal and teacher preparation. Research has shown the potential of these partnerships, but until now community school leadership and practice have not been included (Wang et al., 2022). This must change. Partnerships between school districts and higher education institutions would be even stronger if expertise from other professions (e.g., community planning, public administration, public health, business, social work) were brought into the mix to emphasize the importance of cross-boundary leadership. Interdisciplinary learning has become common in many academic institutions; it makes sense to include it in education preparation as well.

Professional development schools and teacher residency programs where academic content and pedagogical instruction are well integrated with extensive hands-on clinical experience offer another opportunity. These programs would be strengthened by incorporating community school leadership skills and practices into their curricula. This has happened to a limited extent but there is opportunity for expansion (Ferrara, 2014).

Ongoing professional development for principals, teachers, and other school personnel also must change. While there are a few innovative learning experiences available for principals and teachers working in community schools, that thrust has not yet been fully incorporated into district-run leadership development and professional development for principals and teachers.

These offerings should utilize the best adult education pedagogy, including case studies based on real practice dilemmas and opportunities for the different disciplines to collaborate and cross-train. Experienced community organizers could help educators and other professionals learn new strategies for engaging families and community partners. Community-based groups with expertise in parent leadership and engagement can change how education leaders and other school-based professionals work with families. Partners with knowledge of difficult community issues can enhance the capacity of teachers to bring the assets and issues facing the community into their classrooms. Other community partners can communicate why and how they can help schools meet their goals. Local community school initiatives have a role to play here as well. They can leverage the credibility they have built at school sites to address systemic issues, such as professional development.

In the 1990s, there were a few innovative efforts that focused on collaborative preservice preparation of educators, nurses, social workers, and psychologists, but despite their early promise, these experiments generated no serious uptake. People from these and other fields are expected to work together to help students and their families facing a myriad of challenges. We hope to see more interprofessional learning in preparation programs so that people expect, and are ready, to work together in schools.

Given the increased strength of the field and substantial new funding, now may be an opportune time for local community schools to function as sites for professional development in general, and interprofessional development in particular. Community schools could be sites for learning collaborative and partnership skills for teachers, social workers, and health and human services professionals. Universities could develop certificates for community school teachers, social workers, nurses, and doctors (among other fields) who are engaged with community schools during their training.

Higher education institutions now engaged with University-Assisted Community Schools have an important role to play in reimagining preservice leadership and professional development. Often higher education's community schools work is not connected to the university's preservice preparation programs, such as law, health care, social work, and education. One place to start would be to design on-site learning experiences for future principals and teachers as a prelude to deeper curricular changes. The network of University-Assisted Community Schools would be a good place to initiate and promote this discussion.

A related opportunity is the expansion of preservice and in-service training of community school coordinators. Our society badly needs people who are prepared to build bridges, and they need better preparation. New efforts can complement the National Center for Community Schools Coordinators Boot Camp, the Coalition for Community Schools Coordinators Network, and Binghamton University's online community schools advanced certificate course.

***Strengthen relationships with teachers and deepen the connection with teaching and learning.*** As educators more fully grasp the potential of community schools and as community schools proliferate, there is an opportunity to strengthen relationships between classroom teachers and other partners in the comprehensive work. The vocal and long-term support for community schools by both national teachers' unions has set the stage for greater engagement among the rank and file. State and local union leaders are also supporting this movement.

Across the case studies, teachers have demonstrated the many ways they embrace and add value to the community school strategy. Teachers at the UCLA Community School clearly have a holistic perspective as they work closely with their students on issues that matter to them and the community as part of the curriculum. Teachers in Albuquerque welcome the opportunity to participate in the Homework Diner innovation, recognizing the important opportunity to connect with immigrant parents and their children in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

While teachers are generally represented on site-based leadership teams, the whole-child/whole-school approach of community schools often has not reached directly into classrooms. That is where leaders and advocates must devote more attention. There are solutions to this challenge: professional development that includes cross-training between educators and community partners through active and multiple means of communication; engagement of school-based union representatives; principal leadership that communicates clear support for and expectations about teacher participation in all aspects of the community schools strategy; and helping teachers use community-based learning as a pedagogy to engage their students. We outline these below.

It is worth noting here that we have never heard anyone in the community school movement say that robust student support services could compensate for a weak core instructional program. In fact, community schools have always recognized and highlighted the critical role played by teachers in ensuring that all students have access to high-quality curricula and instruction.

***Expand focus on community-based learning.*** In Chapter 1, we suggested that community-based learning is a core element of the community school strategy. It connects the school-day curriculum and after-school programs to the community, emphasizing real-world issues and community problem-solving. Using the tools of project-based learning and culturally relevant pedagogy, a community school curriculum engages neighborhood assets and expertise as resources for education and community development.

With teachers increasingly recognizing the power of the community school strategy, there is now an opportunity to implement this dimension of community schools far more broadly. Many teachers are familiar with the widely accepted tools of experiential, project-based learning, but these tools are not often applied to community issues. Using community problems as a vehicle for learning can cut across English, math, science, history, and other subjects. This approach creates space for young people to become involved with their communities, learn the power of acting together, and develop a sense of agency that is crucial to their long-term success.

**Fifth grade students from Sabal Palm Elementary Community Partnership School in the IMAX theater at the Challenger Learning Center, the K-12 outreach facility of the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering. Students from several schools in Leon County visited the center for a screening of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and a discussion about the importance of learning STEM subjects.**

*Courtesy of Challenger Learning Center*



Constructing learning experiences with student input helps students grapple with the issues and challenges they see all around them, creating active engagement. The opportunities for authentic student engagement in this pedagogical approach are clear if rigor and relevance are built into curricula and projects. And community-based learning offers a vehicle for uniting the work of teachers and community partners in a meaningful way that can address issues of importance to the community.

Over the past three decades, we have witnessed increased attention to the role of real-world, community-engaged learning in strengthening the core instructional programs at many school sites. Our case study sites offer rich examples. An emphasis on real-world learning is fully integrated into the social justice education approach used at the UCLA Community School—an approach that involves teaching in the languages of the community and fostering democratic activism around local political and social issues, such as immigration rights. The focus of the debate program on issues that matter to students in the MS 50/EI Puente partnership in New York City is key to the program’s success. And the activism of students at Highland High School in Albuquerque exemplifies what can happen when educators listen to student voices and orchestrate learning experiences rooted in local problem-solving.

A survey on student engagement for the 2021–2022 school year found that “while 81% of students in grades 6–12 said they want to do well in school, only 41% said they are interested in what they’re learning in school and just 45% said what they were learning in school is important to their futures” (Arundel, 2021). Done well, community-based learning has the potential to address the challenging problem of student engagement that teachers and schools experience.

***Work to strengthen community.*** As Cincinnati’s Community Learning Centers illustrate, community schools can serve as catalysts for and drivers of community change. Cincinnati Public Schools explicitly recognizes this link when it states that “the goal of Community Learning Centers is to support student achievement while revitalizing neighborhoods and maximizing the community’s return on its investment in public schools” (Cincinnati Public Schools, n.d., “Support Student” section). Educators understand these relationships, as do the school’s many community partners, families, and community residents.

For too long the pressure of public policy with its narrow focus on test scores has pulled schools away from their crucial role as changemakers. The Oyster Community Learning Center in Cincinnati did not begin with a focus on employment and housing, but over time, it became clear that improving outcomes for students required attention to these issues as well. Community schools, with their deep partnerships and relationships, have the capacity to play this role. We urge all community school leaders and advocates to pursue this goal.

***Continue to strengthen the Coalition for Community Schools.*** The Coalition for Community Schools (Coalition) has served as the major national vehicle for growing the community school movement since its founding by a partnership of Children’s Aid Society, Netter Center for Community Partnerships, and the Institute for Educational Leadership. Working with its founders and an ever-growing number of partners, the Coalition has helped bring the movement to this moment of opportunity. Movements do not succeed without a home. Nurturing the Coalition as the vehicle for joint action must remain a priority for the field.

Part of that nurturing involves deeper engagement with existing partners. Entities with cross-cutting community interests and capacity are particularly well suited to lead such efforts. For example, United Ways exist in nearly every U.S. community and their priorities are often well aligned with the work of community schools. Over the past two decades, several local United Ways—including Asheville-Buncombe County (NC), Buffalo (NY), Erie (PA), Lehigh Valley (PA), and Salt Lake (UT)—have provided excellent models of collaborative leadership by using their fundraising, grantmaking, research, planning, convening, and partnership expertise to create community school initiatives. With 1,400 chapters across the country and a united national focus on three issues—education, income, and health—that are well aligned with community schools, the United Way system seems well positioned to make community schools one of its preferred reform strategies. Community foundations, cities, and counties have similar capacity; some have already stepped up to support community schools. Others can do more.

Similarly, many other partners in the Coalition for Community Schools have potential to expand their ongoing efforts, including colleges and universities that function as anchor institutions in many communities; national, state, and local teachers unions; and professional associations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, the School Superintendents Association (AASA), and the associations for elementary and secondary school principals.



Strengthening the Coalition should also entail continuing to engage new partners, particularly other networks and alliances that would bring like-minded players to the table. For example:

- ▶ **Ensuring high-quality school facilities.** The Cincinnati, Florida, and Los Angeles case studies illustrate how community schools have emerged from school construction initiatives. The United States annually invests about \$60 billion in school construction for new and refurbished facilities, too often following outmoded architectural and other planning models rather than envisioning schools as public facilities—as community schools. National school facilities innovators, including the 21st Century School Fund, Concordia Associates, and Reimagine Schools (a program of the National Design Alliance), are leaders in this space. By partnering with school facilities innovators, leaders in the community school movement can help ensure that new schools incorporate the principles and practices espoused throughout this volume.
- ▶ **Achieving fiscal equity in education.** As noted earlier, nearly all states have been the subject of fiscal equity court challenges in recent years, in no small part because organizations such as the Education Law Center, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, and the Partnership for Equity and Educational Rights have challenged, often successfully, existing financing mechanisms that shortchange low-income schools. The potential in deepening this relationship is suggested by Michael Rebell (2012), leader of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, who asserted:

To overcome the impediments of poverty on children’s ability to achieve in an academic setting, disadvantaged children must be provided with comprehensive services alongside important school-based educational resources, including early childhood, health, after-school and other extended learning opportunities, and family supports.

This is the essence of community schools.

Beyond these efforts are others with similar values, such as the work of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; the Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice; the National Human Services Assembly; and the Child Welfare League of America. Building strong relationships with these and other groups offers these allies a broader base of support for their own work and strengthens the community school movement.

***Develop a comprehensive framework for examining student progress and school performance.*** The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to add one non-academic measure of school progress to broaden their definitions of school quality and student success beyond those of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. New measures for quality and student success proposed by states under ESSA include reducing chronic absence or some measure of student and/or teacher attendance, college and career readiness, and school climate indicators (Wilkins, 2021). These new measures that states have chosen are an important step, but public schools need a data framework that is more comprehensive—one that recognizes the multiple forces and factors that impinge on student success.

The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) offers a good example. It already includes a focus on education. According to HHS, “Social determinants of health are the conditions in the environment—in the places where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age—that affect a wide range of health functions and quality of life indicators and risks” (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.). Examples of SDOH cited by HHS include: (1) safe housing, transportation, and neighborhoods; (2) racism, discrimination, and violence; (3) education, job opportunities, and income; (4) access to nutritious foods and physical activity opportunities; (5) polluted air and water; (6) language and literacy skills. HHS and the U.S. Department of Education, working with their state counterparts, should examine how to use data on social determinants of health to increase equity in school settings. Examining these measures could contribute to the adoption of more comprehensive and integrated approaches to education, including community schools. These measures can also serve as a starting point for a community school to identify and work to improve the social determinants of health that negatively affect children and their families in a neighborhood.

**Aggregate federal, state, and local resources.** Growing community schools to their full potential will require an approach to financing that involves the aggregation of government support across multiple agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Despite several past initiatives to foster interagency collaboration among federal agencies, these efforts never quite addressed the underlying difficulties faced by schools and communities that hold a comprehensive vision of education and well-being.

For public schools to function most effectively as vehicles for the kind of program alignment and integration that community schools represent, the work of governmental and nongovernmental agencies must be effectively coordinated and their funding must provide flexibility. This requires bringing funding to local community school efforts through new forms of interaction among federal, state, and local governments and among agencies at each level of government.

This is a necessary step, but it is not sufficient. New forms of interaction among the public, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors are also needed. Government would be a collaborating partner, helping to incentivize cooperation among all sectors of society to support and strengthen individuals, families, and communities. This approach involves adapting the work and resources of a wide variety of local institutions—universities, hospitals, human services agencies, faith-based organizations, and more—to the particular needs and resources of local communities. Government would serve as a powerful catalyst, largely by providing the funds needed to create and strengthen stable, ongoing, effective partnerships (Harkavy, 1997).

The federal Full-Service Community Schools program, which emphasizes partnerships and collaboration around public schools, offers one such mechanism, as does state-level funding for community schools. As government seeks to address a range of issues that engage schools (e.g., mental health, obesity, violence), provisions requiring the kind of partnerships and collaborative culture found in community schools should be explicit and incorporated into the evaluation of proposals.

## Final Observations: Pushback and Promise

As promising as these opportunities are, our country is witnessing a decided pushback against public education. Many constituents are angry that their public schools closed for long periods during and after the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrent with this pushback, the drive to address inequities in our public education system has been met with resistance and outright denial. The history of historically oppressed populations—including people of color, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ people—and discussions of achieving genuine equity for all have been outlawed, while related books, articles, and print materials have been pulled or banned from many public school curricula and libraries. These actions by state legislatures and local school boards run totally counter to our vision of community schools. They raise questions about, and pose challenges to, the potential of the nation’s public schools to be engines of democracy and social transformation.

Equally troubling is the national campaign to undermine and ultimately dismantle public education entirely, the not-so-hidden agenda of many well-funded alternatives, including the so-called “school choice” movement that includes vouchers, charter schools, and education savings accounts referenced in Chapter 1.

### Entrance to Manzanita Community School in Oakland, California

*Courtesy of Oakland Unified School District*



The final major challenge that concerns our team as we look to the future is whether American democracy itself will survive, a nearly unthinkable idea prior to January 6, 2021. The insurrection that day shocked us into recognizing not only the fragility of our electoral systems, but also the extent and depth of the determination of many of our fellow citizens to overturn democratic processes by autocratic, violent means.

In the aftermath of these events, the commitment and ability of community schools to activate local democratic participation seems more essential than ever. Our team has long advocated that the community school strategy has the potential to generate true democratic participation by placing schools at the center of local communities and inviting partners—including individual citizens, nonprofit organizations, organizing groups, teachers unions, and anchor institutions such as colleges and universities, United Ways, and community foundations—to share their ideas, skills, and resources. Now more than ever, with a deeply divided electorate and an often-toxic political environment, community schools may represent a strategy that can bring people together, build community, and even bridge ideological divides.

Community schools educate, engage, activate, and serve all members of the community. They are centers for collaboration across differences and forums for deliberation and decision-making. As such, they help create local democratic communities that are essential for democracy itself.

Community schools represent a true revolution and an idea whose time has come.



**Grand opening of the Wellness  
Cottage at Evans High Community  
Partnership School in Orlando, Florida**

*Courtesy of UCF Center for  
Community Schools*





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