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Community Schools: A Game Changer For Public Education?



Raymond Pierce Contributor ⓘ

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

I write about how we can advance education equity and why we must.



Ellen Ochoa Elementary School in east Tulsa, Oklahoma. A community schools site and part of Union ... [+] HOLLIS + MILLER ARCHITECTS

President Biden’s budget request for the U.S. Department of Education includes an investment of \$443 million to expand the Full-Service Community Schools program. That’s more than 10 times the amount invested in fiscal year 2021, and for good reason. In his [testimony](#) presenting the Department’s proposed budget, Education Secretary Cardona explained, “This program recognizes the role of schools as the centers of our

communities and neighborhoods, and funds efforts to identify and integrate the wide range of community-based resources needed to support students and their families, expand learning opportunities for students and parents alike, support collaborative leadership and practices, and promote the family and community engagement that can help ensure student success.”

As Secretary Cardona and President Biden both know, community schools are also an important tool in ongoing efforts to achieve education equity, providing both the resources students need to support their learning and the academic rigor that offers them access to the opportunities associated with a high-quality education. Community schools can be a game-changer for public education and this education model deserves significant investment.

While they may appear new to some, community schools have been a part of the American education system for more than 100 years. Almost since their inception, they have been a central strategy in establishing education equity. As we approach a post-COVID [reset](#) of our public education system, community schools must be one of the models we expand. They serve not only as hubs for high-quality education, but also places that support communities. They meet local community needs and help to ensure that the whole child is addressed in education by providing what are known as “wrap-around services,” such as health care, afterschool tutoring, school meals, and more.

According to Anna Maier, a research analyst and policy advisor at the [Learning Policy Institute](#), “the community schools movement has deep roots that go all the way back to early 20th century efforts to make urban schools ‘social centers’ that were equipped to respond to increasing social forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. The focus was really on addressing the needs of the urban poor.”

The community schools movement also has roots in the rural South where Jeanes Teachers – recruited and educated through the Negro Rural South Education Fund (also known as the Jeanes Fund, created by Anna T. Jeanes,

a wealthy Quaker woman from Philadelphia) – helped to establish schools that not only educated Black children but also provided support to them and the local Black community. These Jeanes Teachers held meetings with communities to determine their needs and created night schools (known as ‘moonlight schools’) where adults learned literacy skills. They also **created** parent associations, land cooperatives, penny savings clubs, mothers’ clubs and reading circles. (I should note here that the Jeanes Fund was one of the four foundations that merged in 1937 to create the Southern Education Foundation.)

Many Jeanes Teachers taught in the **Rosenwald Schools**, built by Sears Roebuck founder Julius Rosenwald to educate African American students in the early 1900s. These Rosenwald Schools, which totaled more than 5,000 across the South, were also built serve the communities those students lived in.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, community schools emerged in some instances around desegregation efforts as a way to unite communities and schools for greater service to the neighborhood population. Maier notes that they “represented one way to make schools more responsive and accountable to Black families.” They were also promoted by African American and Puerto Rican leaders in the 1970’s as vehicles for improving the quality of education, creating positive school-community relations, and establishing local control of schools.

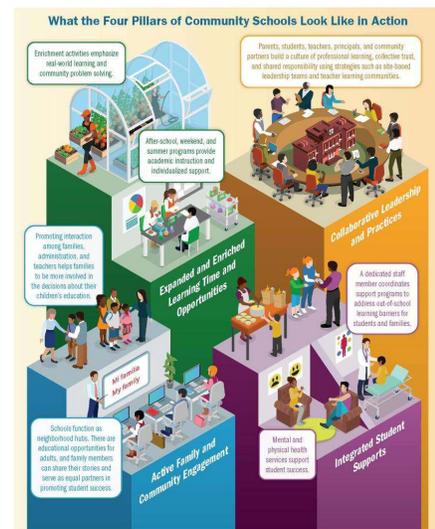
The community schools that operate today are built on **four evidence-based “pillars”**:

1. *Integrated student supports* for academic needs, mental and physical health, nutrition, and social services that are often facilitated by a full-time coordinator;
2. *Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities* including after-school and summer learning programs, internships, and project-based learning;
3. *Active family and community engagement* through meaningful partnerships, as well as classes, services, and events; and
4. *Collaborative leadership and practices*, including shared decision-making structures, such as site-based leadership teams, and professional learning communities for educators.

Community schools are a **key strategy** in school improvement efforts and the ongoing effort to achieve equity in education. **Union Public Schools** in Oklahoma provides an important example of what community schools can look like and achieve. Dr. Kirt Hartzler, Superintendent of Union Public Schools and Sandi Calvin, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and

Learning for Union Public Schools, shared with me some important insights into why their school district decided to invest in the community schools model and how that model is closing equity gaps in Tulsa and Broken Arrow, where the school sites are located.

An important aspect of these community schools (and all community schools) is that each site provides different supports based on the specific needs of the community it serves. Union Public Schools includes 13



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The Four Pillars of Community Schools
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elementary community school sites, each with a parent liaison and each providing programs, activities, and supports to meet community needs. The parent liaisons coordinate the supports for each specific site, including afterschool activities, community engagement activities, access to social workers and more. Many of the sites also have access to health clinics.

One such site may well be the jewel in the Union Public Schools crown. Union's Ochoa Elementary School, completed in March of last year, is a \$42 million, comprehensive, state-of-the-art elementary school and health facility, and the first site that the district has taken from concept to creation. Located in east Tulsa, a low-income area which Dr. Hartzler also calls a "medical desert," Ochoa Elementary School was created through a partnership with Community Health Connection, an agency that has been providing free health care to the community. Today, the community school, located on 32 acres, serves 1,200 pre-K to 5th grade students, their parents and other community members, and provides medical, vision, dental, and mental health services, in addition to other supports.



The clinic at Ellen Ochoa Elementary School in east Tulsa, Oklahoma CHRIS PAYNE

Many people may not understand why a school should also function as a health center. The answer is not complicated – a student is better able to receive a high-quality education and the opportunities that go with it, if they are ready and able to learn. That means having enough to eat, a safe place to live, and a healthy body and

mind. In east Tulsa, the lack of health care was recognized as a significant impediment to students' education and one that needed to be addressed.

According to Maier, community input into programs and services at a school site is crucial to community schools. She recommends needs and asset

assessments with students and families to help guide decisions about what programs and services to bring to the school site.

Clearly, this is an approach that requires significant resources, but [studies](#) show that community schools are a good investment and an effective school improvement strategy. The results in Oklahoma bear that out.

According to Dr. Hartzler, “We now have been at this long enough that we have incredible academic and engagement data that speaks to the value of investing in the community schools philosophy. This year alone, a good number of our valedictorians and salutatorians came from our community schools. They began with us in kindergarten and first grade. Of the 28 students who completed our early college high school program roughly 20 began in an elementary community school.”

He continued, “Certainly the reason we chose to invest heavily in community schools was to address the equity gaps, especially students who are underserved and underrepresented. Not all will take advantage of the educational activities and opportunities given them, but given the option, we know they can flourish. Our goal is 100 percent graduation college and career ready. I think it’s a game changer for public education if it’s done right.”

I agree.



Raymond Pierce

As the President and CEO of the Southern Education Foundation, I lead the organization in pursuing its historic mission of advancing educational opportunities for African...

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