

The Case for Community School Districts

A place-based strategy where schools partner with stakeholders, community agencies and local government to support the whole child and family

BY ANNA E. MAIER

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift to distance learning, Oakland Unified School District leaders and staff sprang into action to ensure that their network of school-based health centers remained a reliable support for students and families.

The California district's network of 16 health centers is a foundation of its now decade-old community school strategy. In Oakland, as in a growing number of school districts throughout the country, community schools are a districtwide approach "to serve the whole child and to address unacceptable disparities in education, health

and life outcomes for our students," says Curtiss Sarikey, the Oakland district's chief of staff.

As COVID-19 cases climbed among Oakland's low-income communities of color in spring 2020, Oakland Unified's network of school-based health centers offered much-needed telehealth and, in a few cases, in-person care to students attending the schools and to those living in the surrounding neighborhood.

According to Sarikey, the staff at Oakland's school-based health centers have developed "a rare institutional trust" with students, families and community members, which has been



essential for providing care. During the shelter-in-place, he adds, “our health centers and health partners leaned into these existing relationships.”

Minus these school-based connections, students and families would be likely to seek health care in emergency rooms, a much more costly alternative.

Gaining Momentum

In-person learning has resumed in schools across the country, but the work of community school districts has not slowed. Districts across the country are investing in community schools — from large urban initiatives in Albuquerque, N.M., Bal-

timore, Md., Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City and Oakland, to smaller rural initiatives in Kentucky, California, upstate New York and Vermont.

This evidence-based approach has been bolstered by increased state and federal funding for community schools. Many districts and states also have used COVID-19 relief funds, such as those from the American Rescue Plan Act, to support community schools.

What is a community school and how does it operate? Community schools are a place-based strategy where schools partner with students, families, educators, community organizations and



Anna Maier (right), senior policy adviser for the Learning Policy Institute, believes community schools must address sustainability to provide effective support over the long term.

agencies and local government to support the whole child and family and to improve teaching and learning. The examples that follow show how superintendents and their school district staff members can support networks of community schools as they work with educators and communities to reimagine schools.

Oakland Unified

The 35,000-student Oakland Unified School District is a full-service community school district. The decade-long initiative has its roots in a strategic planning process launched by former superintendent Tony Smith in 2010, which engaged parents, students, teachers, administrators and members of the nonprofit, civic and business community. In 2011, the Oakland School Board unanimously adopted the Community Schools, Thriving Students strategic plan.

Today, 67 of the district's 80 schools have community school managers who help coordinate an array of mental health, health and after-school services, with support from the district's Community Schools and Student Services Department.

The community school manager (also called a coordinator or director, depending on the ini-

tiative) plays a key role that enables community schools to engage students, families and educators, while partnering with external organizations. At high-functioning community schools, the manager is a leader who works closely with the principal and is compensated accordingly.

Additionally, every school in Oakland Unified coordinates supports and services for students, as well as access to district supports for implementing social-emotional learning strategies, restorative justice practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

A 2022 Learning Policy Institute case study of Oakland's initiative, titled "Creating the Conditions for Kids to Learn," shows how the district has been able to sustain its community schools' initiative through five different superintendents, as well as financial challenges and changes to funding sources. The initiative is supported by both general education dollars and the California Community Schools Partnership Program, a \$4 billion state-funded grant program.

The sustainability was bolstered by an inclusive visioning process with community members and outside partners from the program's inception, the blending and braiding of multiple fund-

ing sources (see related story, page 21), and board-approved policies like the strategic plan and a 2004 master agreement between the school district and Alameda County to support student health and wellness. The Alameda County Health Care Services Agency has been an important partner, overseeing school-based health centers and providing training and support on coordination of services team implementation.

The Learning Policy Institute study also documents how Oakland's Community Schools and

Student Services Department has centralized and simplified the school partnership process by offering quarterly onboarding for new partner agencies, maintaining a database of all district partnerships, developing standards of practice and a partnership assessment rubric, and providing a letter of agreement template and evaluation tool.

Through these efforts, 75 Oakland schools are partnered with a lead agency to provide after-school programming, with many community schools offering a range of additional services.

Community Schools Blend and Braid Federal, State and Local Funding

What does it cost to operate community schools?

The most common school district expense is the dedicated staffing required to support a network of community schools. At the school level, the most common cost is a full time community school coordinator (also called a manager or director, depending on the initiative).

In addition, community schools often have other support staff, perhaps a family engagement coordinator, a social worker or a counselor. Often, there is funding for specific programs or services to meet the needs of students and families.

Multiple Sources

What are the relevant funding sources? The federal Full-Service Community Schools program will award \$68 million in grants to states, districts and school consortia in 2022, based on applications submitted in September. While these grants are an important source of funding for community school initiatives in many parts of the United States, especially rural areas, which are prioritized in the grant competition, most school districts combine multiple funding sources to sustain and grow their community school initiatives.

A 2020 brief from the Partnership for the Future of Learning, "Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability," identifies several key funding sources for community schools:

► **Federal.** In addition to dedicated federal grant funding for Promise Neighborhoods and Full Service Community Schools, several other federal resources can contribute to this work. This includes Elementary and

Secondary Education Act's Title I funds to support coordinators and other costs in low-income schools; 21st Century Community Learning Center grants to support after-school programming; ESSA Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants; Statewide Family Engagement Centers; Medicaid support for school-based health services; and AmeriCorps to provide staffing support in schools.

States can blend and braid almost any funding stream through the federal Department of Education to support community schools. Plus, funding from other departments can ensure student and family access to integrated supports such as physical and mental health care (Department of Health and Human Services), mentoring (Justice Department), career training (Labor Department), nutrition assistance (Department of Agriculture) and shelter (Department of Housing and Urban Development).

In addition, COVID-19 emergency relief funds (through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations, and American Rescue Plan Acts) can support community schools. The U.S. Department of Education document "Frequently Asked Questions: Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Support Full Service Community Schools & Related Strategies" provides examples and guidance.

► **State.** Several states provide direct funding for community schools. This includes Maryland, which has established an entitlement grant program for high-poverty schools to become community schools, and New York, which has created a school funding formula


set aside for districts identified as high-needs to implement community schools. California, Illinois, New Mexico and Vermont each established competitive grant programs for community schools, drawing on both state funding and federal emergency relief funding.

States may provide technical assistance for community schools by establishing regional support centers (as New York and California have done) or through a school certification process (as Georgia has done). Community school initiatives also draw on more general state funding sources, such as after-school grants, support for summer programs, public and school-based health funds, health and nutrition programs and early education programs.

► **Local.** School districts can tap into local resources by collaborating with city and county partners to support networks of community schools. These include parks and recreation departments, housing authorities, juvenile justice and crime prevention programs, local education/district funds, libraries and dedicated revenues from cities and counties (as described in the example from ABC Community School Partnership in Albuquerque).

► **Private.** Philanthropy, local business, chambers of commerce and nonprofit and community based organizations can partner with districts to support community school initiatives. Often, private funding can help to establish a new initiative, which then becomes more sustainable over time by diversifying its funding through the other categories described here.

—ANNA MAIER



District staff also provide personnel support. This includes conducting initial screenings of applicants for community school manager positions and providing coaching and professional development for community school managers and other staff (e.g., newcomer social workers).

Oakland's superintendent, Kyla Johnson-Trammell, who is a third-generation Oakland resident and longtime Oakland Unified educator, has articulated in the strategic plan a goal of creating "joyful schools." The district's full-service community schools initiative will play a key role in this effort.

Albuquerque's Joint Powers Agreement for Community Schools

Because schools and school districts do not operate in a vacuum, some superintendents are partnering with local city and county leaders to support a network of community schools. This is what happened in Albuquerque, N.M., where the ABC Community School Partnership was created through a joint powers agreement in 2007.

The JPA, as it is known, includes the city of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County and Albuquerque Public Schools. The governing board also includes representatives from the University of New Mexico, the Hispano Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Central New Mexico, the Albuquerque Teachers Federation and the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions.

ABC is a quasi-governmental organization, meaning it is housed within the county government (with the executive director jointly funded by the city, county and school district) and follows all county rules. (ABC uses a foundation as a fiscal sponsor, dating back to a time before it was formally housed within the county.)

Formal Commitment

The ABC Community School Partnership currently provides approximately \$6 million in funding, training, technical assistance and oversight for a network of 61 community schools in Albuquerque. The JPA structure brings together the school district, city and county to collaborate through a formal agreement and shared goals. This commitment makes it hard for any one entity to walk away in the event of leadership changes and keeps a balance of power among the three entities.

The JPA also brings six elected officials and three agency heads to the table with a commitment to developing community schools, allowing for coordinated decision making to remove barriers and realign funding in support of community schools in Bernalillo County.

The innovative work of ABC was documented in a 2019 research report. "Return on Investment of a Community School Coordinator: A Case Study" examined data from a five-year period that yielded information of value to current and future initiatives around the country. The research team tracked costs (salaries, professional development and stipends) and benefits (grant dollars, volunteer hours, professional time, in-kind programs and services, and physical donations of materials and supplies) accrued by a community school coordinator on behalf of an ABC elementary school during this period.

The bottom-line finding: For every dollar invested in the community school coordinator, the research team found a return of approximately \$7 in net benefits.

—ANNA MAIER

New York City

New York City Public Schools operates the largest community schools initiative at the district level in the country, with 421 community schools in the network. The city launched the initiative in 2014 with a cohort of 45 schools supported by an Office of Community Schools. The Coalition for Community School Excellence — a collaborative consisting of more than 60 lead community school partner organizations, neighborhood groups, parents, advocacy organizations and education policy organizations — offers a valuable example of how stakeholders and partners can play a key role in advocating for and supporting equitable and inclusive implementation of an initiative.

All New York City community schools have a community school director and a lead partner agency, with a focus on six core structures and services: partnerships with community-based organizations; real-time data use; family engagement; expanded learning time; attendance improvement strategies; and health and wellness services. Support for this program includes education funding from both New York City and New York state.

In 2017, RAND published an implementation study of the NYC initiative titled "Developing Community Schools at Scale." The study found the six core structures and services were being implemented consistently across the 118 community schools studied, noting that substantial variation existed in the format and degree of program components that schools have in place. This variation makes sense. Community schools, by their design, should be responsive to the local assets and needs, so the programs and services will vary across sites.

The implementation study also found that schools were more developed in their coordination of services and connectedness among adults and students, compared to their collaboration with families and community-based partners and their continuous improvement efforts grounded in data.

A subsequent 2020 RAND study of the impact of the NYC Community Schools initiative titled "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools" showed promising outcomes. Graduation rates in community schools were significantly higher than in comparison schools. Student achievement also was significantly higher than in comparison schools for elementary and middle school math scores, high school credit accumulation and on-time promotion to the next elementary and middle school grade level.

continued on page 24

Partnerships Empower Community Schools and a Healthier Public

BY KIRT HARTZLER

For those committed to community schools, there is power in partnerships.

Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Okla., has embraced community schools since 2005. The district codified its commitment eight years later by hardwiring the philosophy into school board policy. Collectively, the school district's eight full-service community schools have more than 100 corporate, nonprofit and faith-based partners that help with everything from after-school programs and classroom supplies to student mentoring and holiday meal assistance.

Now Union has taken things one step further with the development and realization of a true "community school village," the first in Oklahoma. In May 2020, our district opened a new state-of-the-art health clinic located on the campus of Ellen Ochoa Elementary School, serving students and the greater community.

Ochoa Elementary is the first purpose-built community school in the district, serving a growing community in Union's northeast quadrant, with a population that is heavily Hispanic. The building opened to a full complement of 1,100 students in August 2019.

Sales Tax Support

The clinic is the culmination of more than three years of work with city leaders who wanted to provide services to immigrants and people living in east Tulsa. It was funded by the Vision Tulsa campaign, a Tulsa County 1/20th of a cent sales tax over 15 years that funds a variety of capital improvement projects. In April 2016, voters overwhelmingly approved the package, which included \$9.98 million toward the funding of the clinic.

Community Health Connection is a federally qualified health center that operates the clinic, providing an array of services, including dental, prenatal/postpartum, pediatrics, family medicine, integrated behavioral healthcare and discounted prescriptions to patients. Private insurance, Medicaid and Medicare are accepted. CHC also serves individuals who



Superintendent Kirt Hartzler stands outside the first community school to operate in the Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Okla.

are uninsured or under-insured by offering services on a sliding fee scale to those who meet certain requirements.

The agency's CEO, Jim McCarthy, had been working closely with city and county leaders for several years to develop a health clinic that would serve east Tulsa. His plans dovetailed nicely with the school district's plans, which resulted in the school district offering land to host the clinic in a location even better than what was originally envisioned.

"We are an integral part of the community, and there is no better way to be even tighter in the community than to partner with public education," he said at the time.

A Replicable Model

In October 2020, as superintendent, I joined Tulsa's mayor and other community leaders to celebrate the clinic's opening. The clinic has been well-received by the community.

"During the first 200 days, we not only provided regular services but also responded to the pandemic," McCarthy said. "We had drive-up COVID-19 testing with the ability to provide results in 30 minutes. We also provided free flu vaccinations to the community."

Serving the health needs of the community is very much aligned with the mission of our public schools. For students to maximize their learning experiences, we need them

to be healthy — and not just our students. We need families to be healthy, too.

I share the credit with courageous members of our school board for innovating when there was little precedent for such work and with my predecessor as superintendent, Cathy Burden, who championed community schools for many years. The clinic exemplifies a philosophy our district has been building over the years. It's a dream we've had for some time, of creating a true community school village.

Because this school-based health clinic for students and families is the first in Oklahoma and probably one of few nationwide, we plan to share the concept with

other school communities across the country. It demonstrates the power of partnerships through an easily replicable model.

Our mayor believes the clinic will particularly benefit immigrants who, with considerable risk, have chosen to live in Tulsa. "We want to live up to the risk they have taken and the belief and hope they have in our city," he said during the opening ceremony. "Not only can they get a great education in this part of the city, but they can also get great health care in this part of our city."

Reaping Gains

Now in its second full year of operation, the 25,000-square foot clinic located on school grounds is serving about 15,000 patients every year. By the end of 2022, it expects to serve over 2,000 pediatric patients (ages 0-18). Without community and government partners willing to share dreams and recognize opportunities, the project never would have happened.

Great things happen when we come together, despite differences in ideas and ideologies. The harvest we reap is going to be immeasurable.

KIRT HARTZLER is superintendent of Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Okla. E-mail: hartzler.kirt@unionps.org

continued from page 22

Chronic absenteeism was significantly lower, especially for vulnerable populations such as high school students in temporary housing, and disciplinary incidents were significantly less frequent in elementary and middle schools.

These results show the potential of this work to improve students' educational experiences and outcomes.

Kern County, Calif.

A federal Full-Service Community Schools grant helped establish the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools, a collaboration among California's rural Central Valley dis-

tricts of Lost Hills Union, Semitropic and Maple Elementary.

Lost Hills Union serves as the lead agency and provides backbone support (such as grants management), along with an intermediary partner who provides coaching and project management support. The districts have tapped WestEd, a research firm, to conduct a project evaluation. Like Oakland Unified, the initiative is supported by both general education dollars and the state-funded California Community Schools Partnership Program.

Each school in the consortium has a community school coordinator, a social worker and an AmeriCorps mentor. Rather than looking for candidates who are willing to drive to rural West Kern County, consortium leaders have focused on training and supporting existing staff. For example, after math education was identified as one focus area for the initiative, the superintendents worked together to train a math teacher who was interested in taking on an expanded role.

These rural districts have leveraged their collective resources through shared staffing and shared/pooled contracts in such areas as math instructional coaching, nursing and after-school programs. To make a summer learning program available, Maple and Semitropic collaborated to hire teachers from multiple districts and share resources, including bus drivers, aides, parent liaisons, facilities and supplies. Consortium consultant Michael Figueroa also helped to establish the Children's Cabinet of West Kern that brings together county agencies, nonprofit partners and rural school districts to collaborate on issues like children's mental health service provision and student attendance.

Leading the Way

District superintendents and central-office staff are uniquely and powerfully positioned to support community school initiatives in collaboration with students, families, educators and community partners. Superintendents can help set the vision, advance school board policies, establish systems-level partnerships with local government and community-based organizations, and offer central-office supports to community school sites.

District leaders also play a critical role in supporting an ongoing process of improvement as schools and initiatives evolve to meet the changing needs and priorities of students, families and educators. ■

ANNA MAIER is senior policy adviser with the Learning Policy Institute in Palo Alto, Calif. E-mail: amaier@learningpolicyinstitute.org. Twitter @annaemaier

Additional Resources

To learn more about community schools, Anna Maier suggests these informational resources.

RESEARCH

- ▶ Apex and ABC Community School Partnership produced "Return on Investment of a Community School Coordinator: A Case Study," www.communityschools.org
- ▶ The Learning Policy Institute published "Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence" and "Creating the Conditions for Kids to Learn: A Case Study of Oakland's Full-Service Community Schools Initiative," www.learningpolicyinstitute.org
- ▶ RAND Corporation published "Developing Community Schools at Scale: Implementation of the New York City Community Schools Initiative" and "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative," www.rand.org

STANDARDS AND IMPLEMENTATION

- ▶ Brookings produced "Community Schools Can Help Superintendents Transform Education: Community Schools Leader Insights," www.brookings.edu
- ▶ Communities In Schools offers resources on partnership opportunities through integrated student supports, www.communitiesinschools.org/k12
- ▶ Institute for Educational Leadership's Coalition for Community Schools published "Community School Standards," www.communityschools.org
- ▶ National Center for Community Schools produced "Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action," www.nccs.org

FINANCE STRATEGIES

- ▶ Child Trends produced "District Leaders' Strategies for Funding and Implementing Community Schools," www.childtrends.org
- ▶ Partnership for the Future of Learning produced "Community Schools Playbook" and "Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability," www.futureforlearning.org
- ▶ U.S. Department of Education released "Frequently Asked Questions: Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Support Full-Service Community Schools & Related Strategies," oese.ed.gov