

Strategies for Student Attendance and School Climate in Baltimore's Community Schools

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Strategies for Student Attendance and School Climate in Baltimore's Community Schools

Executive Summary

In 2012, the Community School Engagement Strategy was adopted by the Family League of Baltimore as a way to address historical racial and structural inequalities that have produced unequal educational outcomes among the city's children and youth. The goals of community schools include integrating health and social supports for children and their families, and providing additional opportunities for academics, socioemotional learning, and enrichment for youth during and after school. These goals are accomplished via partnerships with families and community-based organizations to eliminate barriers to student learning and promote community well-being. By 2015-16, 45 Baltimore City Public Schools were implementing community school models in partnership with a number of lead community-based agencies.

In this study, we identified community schools with higher student attendance and more positive school climate than peer community schools. We interviewed those schools' community school coordinators to learn how their work was structured to elicit "effective practices" around attendance and climate. Overall, coordinators reported that having clearly designated roles, reliable protocols and procedures, and a leader who consistently communicated expectations to parents and students helped ensure that community schools could maintain high attendance and a positive school climate. Alignment of goals across school and community stakeholders, supportive, respectful relationships with families, and cooperative partnerships with community-based organizations also served to make that work coherent and effective. Specifics are provided below.

Building Relationships

Honest communication was predicated upon trusting relationships built through shared experiences and understanding. Coordinators said that the best approach was to offer a

listening ear, and then to work with family members on potential solutions as a team working together for the child's benefit. Positive relationships can form organically, but the coordinators in community schools with strong climate explained how they had:

- Creatively and purposefully made the space and time for relationships to grow, especially between staff and parents, as well as between students.
- Developed relationships with parents by deliberately maintaining a steady, reliable presence and offering sincere support.
- Remained visible, continually available, and listened without judgement.
- Always approached parents and community members with respect.
- Recognized that families' lives extend beyond the school campus, and that they confront authentic, unique challenges.
- Reset their own personal expectations and biases, and worked with other school staff to help them do the same.

Developing Community Partnerships

Healthy partnerships with community-based organizations were consistently described by coordinators in effective schools as mutually beneficial and self-sustaining. Coordinators in schools with positive climate reported that they:

- Found ways to provide a benefit to the partner, even if that benefit was just providing a space for them to hold meetings. Small tokens of exchange helped establish further trust and solidify shared goals.
- Sought out partners that could provide unique opportunities that students and families expressly wanted, which in turn provided students a way to develop an identity and take pride in their school.
- Nurtured partnerships until they were able to flourish independently after scheduling and expectations were set collaboratively.
- Looked for ways to leverage partners' services for the benefit of teachers and other staff in the school to improve the working environment overall.
- Continually assessed the value brought by a partner and severed ties with those that were not aligned with students' or families' needs, or the school's culture.
- Embedded partners in the school.

Increasing Attendance

Higher attendance was achieved by using consistent processes and procedures.

Coordinators also reported that efforts to improve attendance positively impacted their schools' climate, as well. Specifically, effective community schools:

- Implemented an attendance team and assigned specific roles and expectations for staff at the start of the year. All tasks were predictable and systematic, so that no student absence or need was overlooked.
- Integrated teams with other staff in the school, especially teachers who worked most closely with students and knew them best.
- Focused on improvement, and held regular celebrations of accomplishment rather than relying on punitive measures or focusing on fault.
- Used data and documented outreach efforts to families and outcomes among students.

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Background

The Family League of Baltimore launched the Community School Initiative as a coordinated city-wide effort in 2012. The strategy was a response to the fact that many families served by Baltimore City Schools struggle against the effects of intergenerational poverty (Maryland Alliance for the Poor, 2016), decades of geographic isolation and hyper segregation due to discriminatory housing policies (Brescia, 2009; Pappoe, 2016), as well as community stress due to police militarization and high rates of incarceration (Gamal, 2016, Gomez, 2016). In addition, residents face challenges with housing instability (Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, 2016), health care access, environmental threats (Baltimore City Health Department, 2013), and well as lack of transportation and employment opportunity (Turney, Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, Kling, & Duncan, 2006).

Each community school in Baltimore establishes a network of partners and community resources to support student and family well-being, which allows them to address a much broader set of objectives than traditional public schools. Resources are tailored to meet local needs, with each set of community-school partnerships offering somewhat different sets of services, e.g., food pantries, housing stability programs, health centers, mental health or family stabilization services. Each community school in Baltimore receives a full-time coordinator employed by the primary partnering agency. Coordinators' roles vary across schools, but in general, they are responsible for overseeing the coordination of partnerships, out-of-school-time programming (OST) and enrichment activities, and family engagement.

Prior research on Baltimore's community schools using data from the 2014-15 school year had found differences in outcomes between schools that were more 'seasoned,' and those that were in earlier stages of defining the systems they would use going forward to achieve a comprehensive set of supports for students and families (Durham & Connolly, 2016). These findings raised questions about whether the participating schools had particular practices or strategies that were allowing them to succeed, and whether time was a central variable, given the length of time it may take to establish strong partnerships.

The community school theory of change suggests that two outcomes, student attendance and school climate, are especially critical and sensitive leading indicators of community school progress. Thus, we used these outcomes as guideposts in identifying community schools for more in-depth study.

Data and Methods

Data Sources

Sources include both City Schools administrative data received from the Office of Achievement and Accountability, as well as new data collected using semi-structured interviews with community school coordinators.

Methods

City Schools administrative data, including student demographic and service characteristics, yearly attendance, and annual school survey data collected from school staff, were assembled for the 45 community schools in Baltimore that were fully-implemented in 2015-16. Next, statistical analyses were conducted to identify community schools with higher- or lower-than-expected attendance and school climate, relative to all community schools in Baltimore. Further analytical details and the results of the analysis identifying focal schools are available in Appendix A.

Seven schools were identified in the analysis and became the focal schools for the current study, with five relatively “higher” and two comparatively “lower” schools. Each school served students in preK through 5th or preK through 8th grade. The schools’ coordinators were contacted to schedule one-hour, face-to-face interviews about the topic for which the school was identified as an outlier -- attendance, climate, or both. The interview protocols were developed in partnership with community school oversight staff within the Family League of Baltimore, and can be found in Appendix B.

Interviews took place during March and April 2017 at a time and location chosen by the coordinator. The conversations were guided by the following questions: How do coordinators structure their work in community schools on attendance and school climate, i.e., what processes, structures, or partnerships have worked well (or not worked well)? How are community school partners engaged by community school staff, specifically to improve attendance or school climate? How do coordinators assess the strength of their partnerships with families and community-based agencies toward the goals of strong student attendance and positive school climate?

Interviews with coordinators were transcribed, and qualitative analyses of the resulting transcription data were conducted using NVivo version 11.

Research Questions

Answers to the following research questions are provided in the Results section below.

- What are the characteristics of student and families served by community schools in Baltimore?
- Are practices that impact attendance and climate different in some community schools? Specifically,
 - How do coordinators or other school staff effectively establish relationships with students and families?
 - How do coordinators effectively identify and leverage community-based partners?
 - How do coordinators describe their work around student attendance?

Results

Characteristics of Students and Families Served by Community Schools

The demographic and educational service characteristics of students in community schools and non-community schools are presented in Table 1. Baltimore’s community schools serve populations with higher shares of minority students, and students qualifying for social services such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Students in community schools were also more likely to receive special education services and over twice as likely to be learning English as a second language. To reiterate, these differences suggest that community schools serve students with higher levels of need than other schools in Baltimore.

Table 1

Demographic and Service Characteristics of Community Schools, 2015-16

	Community Schools	Non-Community Schools
Demographic Characteristics		
% African-American	83.1	85.4
% Hispanic/Latino	12.3	5.1
% Male	51.6	50.9
% Female	48.4	49.1
Student Service Characteristics		
% Direct Certification Services/FARMS*	80.5	72.5
% Received Special Educ Services	16.8	15.8
% Received English Lang Services	6.8	2.5

*As a Community-Eligibility Provision district, all City Schools students receive free meals, and the district no longer collects data on free/reduced-price meal eligibility (FARMS). In 2015-16, City Schools began capturing the proportion of children receiving direct services (Direct Certification) to identify circumstances of poverty, which captures TANF and SNAP receipt, homeless students, and students in foster care. This approach undercounts the number of students in circumstances of poverty. In 2015-16, both Direct Certification and students’ 2014-15 FARMS status were used to identify eligible students.

Differences in Practice at Effective Community Schools

Within the information collected from the coordinators at the seven focal schools, we discerned that practices described by respondents at the community schools with higher

Table 2

Comparison of Practices at Focal Community Schools

Best Practices	Practices in Struggling Schools
School Climate: Relationships	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberately make time and space to connect and build close, trusting relationships between students and with family members • Relationships with family members characterized by empathy and respect • Work with school leaders and other staff to meet needs of the ‘whole’ child and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships with family members or students form on an ‘as-needed’ basis • Relationships with family members are focused on arbitrating problems • Work is isolated from teachers or school leaders, focused mainly on identifying and managing external partners
School Climate: Coordinating External Partnerships	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build and maintain mutually beneficial and self-sustaining collaborations with community partners • Identify enrichment opportunities that help students develop an identity and attachment to school • Identify external partners to support both students’ and teachers’ needs, as well as for families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value external partners mainly for what they offer the school • Identify opportunities that occupy students during out-of-school time • Identify external partners solely for students’ needs
Attendance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance team meets regularly and uses timely attendance data and consistent procedures • Work is focused on improvement and incentivizing good attendance and pro-social behaviors, and celebrations take place at regular intervals • Attendance work involves teachers, in recognition of their deep knowledge about students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No attendance team or team does not meet consistently, and no reported procedures • Work is focused on students with poor attendance or behavior, and documentation • Attendance work happens in isolation of teachers, or no school-wide explicit focus on attendance
Attendance and Climate	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares ownership across all work, building leadership capacity among all school stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts are disjointed, have limited shared ownership, or are uncoordinated across school stakeholders

climate and attendance were substantively distinct from those discussed by coordinators in struggling community schools. In particular, we noted differences in the manner in which they talked about how they built relationships with family members, how they described the roles of external partners, and the methods by which they worked on student attendance. In Table 2, we highlight these differences, with practices shared by coordinators in successful community schools listed in the left-hand column and the practices reported in struggling schools on the right.

Overall, coordinators in struggling community schools primarily focused on the challenges they confronted in terms of working with parents to address student problems, and they did not offer examples of how their work overlapped with the work of teachers and other staff in the building. In contrast, coordinators in effective schools consistently described ways that they had proactively formed connections with parents and also talked about their work on climate and attendance in terms of its alignment with a school's broader mission. Finally, coordinators' reports about how they identified external partners, how they managed these partnerships, as well as how such partnerships supported school climate were also notably different across schools.

Below, we highlight themes from the conversations we held with the seven community school coordinators from the focal schools. We pay particular attention to what were described as consistent practices or systematic factors to which coordinators attributed their success, as well as differences in how partnerships were conceived and leveraged. We also discuss differences across effective and struggling schools in how coordinators described efforts to improve student attendance.

Building Positive School Climate through Relationships

Community school coordinators' responsibilities varied by school, but they were typically responsible for identifying and coordinating community partners, enrichment offerings, out-of-school-time programming and family engagement. Above all, coordinators spoke of how the relationships they developed with the school leader, parents and teachers were the core of their efforts, and they talked at length about the importance of developing trust with families and other stakeholders. These relationships served as currency during their daily work in promoting positive climate, identifying unmet needs in the community and among students, and in providing opportunities to increase parent engagement.

One of the focal schools' coordinators had a unique perspective about how positive school climate happens, as his school had been identified as having strong climate based on data from 2015-16, but patterns had changed during 2016-17 when we spoke. We asked him how positive climate had initially come about, and he replied:

When I came on, the work I was tasked with was building parent relationships. Lots and lots of meetings with family members to get to know them. I was tasked with finding missed opportunities for the students to explore opportunities they wouldn't normally get during the school day, to make [School Name] a place where people would want to be. Years of stability with the same people contributed to good climate, we all knew each other.

However, he also shared that his school's climate had collapsed since the beginning of the year upon being merged with the students and staff of a closed school. He attributed the decline to a loss of sense of community, a lack of strong relationships, and subsequent conflict between the students and staff of the two schools. Having watched what had previously been a small, tightly-knit community transform into a fragmented, contentious one, he contrasted the old feeling in the school to the new, stating, "Last year, people would walk in and say, 'I love it here...Parents would describe the school as a family, and the children spoke of the school as a family.'" The change noted by this coordinator underscored the importance of relationships, communality, and the resulting familiarity that contribute to positive climate in a school.

Relationships with Students

In recognition of the central importance of personal relationships in generating strong climate, other coordinators in successful schools reported how they had deliberately created time and space for feelings of community to develop. One said he believed that connectivity was made possible by taking his students and family members outside the school to commune both with each other as well as other adults in the neighborhood:

"[L]ast year I did a walking club, and I brought the two [neighborhood] associations, parents, students, and we walked in the morning and talked about issues. Instead of sitting in a room somewhere -- you can't just sit in a room, you have to be out in the

world talking about things. Connecting with one another and making sure they're getting everything they can out of the school."

At another of the community schools that had demonstrated consistently strong climate, the coordinator described a summer program to onboard incoming students before the school year began. The purpose of the program was to get to know students as individuals and help them have positive interactions from the outset. She also said that mutually respectful relationships formed outside school, e.g., during sports activities, could translate into supportive connections and behaviors in the classroom later on. She shared,

"Each week we have a cultural field trip, swimming...exploratory sports, not commonly done stuff, like low level parkour, and just fun trips. [Last year] we took them to Fort McHenry and then the pool afterwards. Athletics help kids understand what's expected in [the] classroom."

In schools with positive climate, opportunities to form positive relationships were a motivating factor in having regular, less formal occasions, as well. For example, one coordinator reported, "We put a basketball hoop out back, and the team are outside monitoring safe play, so kids want to play touch football, do a little track activity, and people come watch them. So, 45 minutes early we're meeting, and that helps start the day." He also explained his general approach to establishing trusting relationships within the community this way: "As a [coordinator], I'm able to have those experiences others can't have, so I went to functions, fairs, or neighborhood block parties where kids thought I lived in the same neighborhood as them, standing there eating deviled eggs with someone's aunt. If we all experience that, it becomes a different thing."

Another coordinator gauged the health of relationships in her school by looking for indications that interactions between students and staff were emotionally supportive, even during passing interactions. This particular coordinator worked in a school where climate had been rated as positive several years in a row and illustrated her emphasis on emotional connectivity with an example:

"The [assistant principal] does this thing, when they're in line in the cafeteria. I mean, who knows what someone just went through? So she says to each one, 'hug or handshake?' and 90 percent of the students come in for a hug. That says more about the relationships at our school than anything else. It's critical -- that connection for our students."

The same coordinator reported that she promoted positive relationships among her students by attempting to set an example through her own interactions, by consistently showing respect. She also prioritized what she heard through her relationships with children in appraising her school's climate and how staff interacted with them. She shared:

“I talk to more kids than adults. Once they trust you, no fences are put up. They need immediate answers, whether it’s a program or an experience, opportunity, if you treat 20 people good, even if they’re not one of those people, they’re watching how you treat others. Even if they don’t tell you or talk to you. That’s critical, we have to have certain leadership here. They’re here because of the kids, so treat them with the utmost respect.”

However, in schools that were struggling with their climate, relationships were couched in terms of potential solutions for problematic behaviors, or a lack of programing was framed as a result of insurmountable obstacles. For instance, in a school with comparatively lower climate, the coordinator did not point to ways that connectivity could be intentionally cultivated from the outset. Instead, relationship-development opportunities were discussed as potential solutions for problems that were already manifest, offered to students with disruptive behavior:

“Last year, there was a mentoring program but because there wasn’t enough staff presence, it had to be scaled back. This was something done as an intervention in the moment to assist in the climate. We’re working through desperate measures to keep our head above water. You know, the dean couldn’t suspend everyone in the school, so instead, let’s direct these behaviors, put them in a leadership role, hold restorative circles with the kids. We had [organization name] in to do the restorative with the high flyers, that created a relationship with those who were disruptive.”

Relationships with Parents

For schools with strong climate, relationships were reported to be central to building deeper family engagement. Specifically, establishing close, trusting relationships with parents was discussed as a key aspect to building a successful community school model. A coordinator in a school with strong climate advised, “Build relationships! Look at the time your school starts, and not necessarily when the agency says you start the day, but see

when you can build those relationships. See the time when your parents are there. You need to be there; they need to see you. They need to know you're available. Build those relationships so they know they can trust you."

First, building close relationships with parents was discussed as important for engendering a perspective of schools as sites of hope and possibility, and several coordinators emphasized relationships as a means to improving student attendance. A coordinator at a school with comparatively high attendance explained her reasoning:

"We recently did some class meetings, and the principal and [assistant principal] went into classes to find out what kids said about getting to school. A lot of the things they listed were issues pertaining to the parent. Elementary aged kids depend on their parents to get to school. I'll state that some issues may be the parents' understanding of value of attending, every day, on time...usually the kids have been here before and attendance is a mindset, so some of them had attendance problems previously. How do you change the mindset of families so that they understand it's important to get your child here?"

Resources for Parents

Second, coordinators worked to establish that trust to effectively connect families to the right set of resources. Toward that end, coordinators identified services for parents, such as GED courses, assistance with housing or rent, and mental health services like grief counseling. Some coordinators did not consciously distinguish between services for students and parents, however, seeing students and parents as integral parts of a whole, perceiving relational trust with parents as foundational to providing unique opportunities for students. For example, one coordinator reflected:

"With the walking school bus, it's been very successful. I realized this year, we didn't need to do incentives to participate in that, it's mostly food and a trip. Who doesn't like going to an Oriole's game, or chips and soda? I realized the success of a program like that has nothing to do with those types of things. It's about the relationships with the parents and do they trust you."

Another coordinator from a school with consistently positive climate remarked how the community school strategy had enabled a greater focus on parents' needs, thereby offering a

more holistic focus on the child. In effect, improving the circumstances of parents and helping them overcome daily challenges were seen as ways to support the children, as they frequently internalized the strain and anxiety experienced by their parents. In sharing some of the challenges facing his schools' families, the coordinator reflected on how such stress would sometimes manifest itself in interactions he had with parents, as well as ways that he had learned to change his and fellow staff members' mindsets about their experiences so that relationships with family members would remain productive and focused on identifying needs and solutions:

“A community school [meant] me really connecting with those families, making the space welcoming, and helping staff understand that parents come with their own baggage that has nothing to do with the school. That just comes with being a human being. How do we support them with that? Sometimes if mom’s coming to the office, and she’s pissed, it’s not about you, it’s something that might’ve happened on the way to the school, and how do we work with them on that. We learned to be a lot more caring...along with services we provided for the students, we had programs solely for mom or dad. If we didn’t have those services, we were at least able to make referrals and connections with folks that weren’t more than a mile away.”

Another coordinator from a school with positive climate noted her sentiment in a similar way: “I always look at it as we don’t know what our parents are going through. We don’t know how they feel about being in this school building. You have to be sensitive to that when you talk to them.”

Identifying Barriers

Coordinators in successful schools also shared how trusting relationships helped school staff better respond to barriers to attending regularly. One explained how she leveraged trusting relationships to identify needs among her school’s families:

“We try to establish a relationship with them so that they come to us with any problems, like homeless or whatever so we can make arrangements. We try to establish a relationship with them so that they feel comfortable enough to tell us they’re homeless – ‘we live on the other side of town,’ but you need to let us know – a lot of parents don’t want to transfer [their] students – you need to let us know so we can make arrangements for transportation, etc.”

Similarly, another shared:

“When you know people, you’re breaking down barriers. The comfort level is a lot higher when you know a person, for example, they might say, ‘I’m struggling with my rent this month,’ so I’m going to do what I can to help them. Maybe we can’t do everything, but at least we have communication.”

The Value of Proactive Practices

One of the coordinators whose school showed comparatively positive climate reported that she thought a major cause of disruptions was a lack of rapport between the school and its families, which in turn led to too little understanding among staff about students themselves. To overcome this barrier, the coordinator explained a strategy she had created to improve relationships between parents and teachers:

“Well, I call it tea with teachers, and I’ll set up in my room a conference with a teacher and a parent. Not a school-wide conference, just if they wanted to talk to each other. Not formal, or an SST [Student Support Team] meeting. You know, I try to bring snacks, make it informal and comfortable enough for the parent and the teacher. Parents are not as comfortable talking to teachers. That’s one of the biggest issues I see -- bridging the gap where teachers can see the parent as a partner.”

The same coordinator explained that she had also advocated for proactive solutions to student disciplinary problems in her school. In her anecdote, the principal had been preparing to use suspension for a behavioral problem that had re-occurred several times over the course of the year, so she reminded him how suspensions had increased from the year prior without any improvement in the behavioral problems they were confronting. So instead, the coordinator advocated for a more proactive solution and began hosting a regular coffee hour for families to talk informally with the principal. She believed finding such spaces for trust and relationship-building were crucial and allowed for true partnerships to form that could avert future problems.

We also asked coordinators at these schools what methods they used to develop strong relationships with parents. Those working in schools with strong climate often shared simple strategies, such as remaining visible and consistently present at times that family

members were likely to come to the school, helped them establish familiarity. These casual interactions with parents reportedly relayed a sense that their child was known and that their presence was valued. Coordinators expressed the desire that parents would, over time, see them as a source of support if problems arose, and as someone available to listen if parents needed someone to talk to.

Consistency in maintaining relationships was also mentioned as a critical element, with one saying, “you have to engage in those conversations. You can’t walk by anybody. You’ve got to stop and talk.” Implicit in this practice is an assumption that parents’ perceiving the school in a positive light would translate into strengthening the child’s connection to the school, as well. In this way, coordinators in successful schools worked through parents to improve the likelihood that their children could get to school regularly and benefit academically.

In contrast, the coordinators in struggling schools tended to discuss relationships with families in the context of available options, their levels of responsiveness, or even how they handled “difficult conversations.” The coordinator at a school facing severe climate issues the prior year did not share specific strategies by which he actively worked to form relationships with parents or connect them to teachers or the school community. Rather, when asked about how parents were engaged, he described one specific opportunity for parents to check in or receive updates about their child’s behavior using an online platform. He stated,

“We have...kind of like an education Facebook. It’s a behavioral management system used by teachers to rate a child’s behavior, their academic progress, and parents can see it...so you can track the child’s progress while we’re tracking progress...They get classified by color, the highest is green, and according to your behavior and proficiency in getting work done, that would determine if you could go on trips, different incentives.”

The coordinator at the struggling school continued, “I sent out letters and every letter had an invitation to come to the school, to volunteer, to pop in on your scholar to make sure they’re doing well.” In essence, the coordinator at this school explained his engagement strategy as making opportunities available to parents and sending notes home; yet this strategy contrasts with other coordinators’ proactive attempts to get to know and form

relationships with parents by making themselves frequently visible, available for conversation, and creating events that would be attractive to parents.

The coordinator at a school with comparatively high attendance explained how she had integrated a regular line of communication into her everyday routine:

“My day starts at seven a.m., and I’m at the door saying ‘Hi, how’re you doing, I like his boots, how’s he doing?’ Once they know that you care about them, they know your face. When children register new, they see my face...so if they need me, they’ll come to me. We let them know that their concerns are our concerns, too. We have our busy days, but I still say ‘I’m busy right this second, but I got you.’”

Another explained an analogous approach: “[Y]ou see why I sit out in the lobby in an open space...it’s important that I don’t have a wall. It’s important for you that I be that first option, but accessible to everybody in the building. So you have to engage in those conversations.”

Parent Involvement at School

Coordinators in schools with positive climate had also put into place strategies to generate greater parent involvement at the school, especially for parents who weren’t being readily engaged. One spoke about how typical parent conference nights had not been successful in getting parents into the school, so instead, she had attempted to re-brand events in a way that would be more appealing and fun for parents:

“We also do a lot of academic engagement nights. Instead of parent meetings where only a few came, we have literacy night at our school, so 100 parents come to that. Before it starts, I present opportunities and fun stuff...We’ll have pizza and progress nights, and the parents can look at their kids’ data, their test scores, whatever, and we have a little bit of popcorn or pizza. We [also] do Science Night -- I got a little grant from the Maryland Science Center for a science night...We’ve pushed away from the regular parents’ board to do those things.”

Other coordinators prioritized empowering parents and instilling a sense of ownership of their child’s education, which they believed would empower parents to be advocates for

their children. While sharing how she worked with parents, a coordinator at a school with strong attendance reported, “I teach my parents to be advocates for children. When you advocate for them, you advocate for all. Last year, we took a field trip to a school board meeting, I wanted them to see the process. This [parent] last year, she did so well before, she was employed at the school last year. That’s what we want – getting parents to be supports in the classroom.”

Other community school coordinators cited the importance of helping parents gain a sense of ownership in the school. The coordinator at a school with both high attendance and strong climate reported that he had generated many opportunities for parents to volunteer at the school, believing that both short and long commitments of time and effort helped to instill connectivity across the entire school community. He also noted that greater ownership led to higher levels of parent advocacy, and so opportunities to build those relationships was key to more meaningful engagement. He shared why this approach had been a high priority for him:

“I think through the support I see, with the entire school, it’s not just like they’re saying, ‘I’m here because I want to be in my child’s class.’ They’re here and they want to support, whether it’s three lunch shifts, [organizing] the fruit and vegetables, they’re engaged with other children. [They] go through the process, the background check, fingerprinting, and at the same time, if it’s not something they’re comfortable with, they’ll advocate on behalf of what they think needs to happen.”

While coordinators in successful schools often shared multiple reasons why trusting relationships were important, strategies by which they established trust and closeness, and how engaged parents would improve opportunities for students, coordinators in successful schools were also quick to respond when we asked how they could recognize a strong relationship with a parent. The coordinator at one school stated,

“When I’d see them at more than one event, when they brought someone with them to an event, when they directed another parent to me, like when someone would say, ‘I heard you did this for someone, and I need that too.’ Or you come into the office in the morning and they’re sitting there waiting for you, and no one else knows why they’re there.”

Another shared,

“There’s more two-way communication, parents will actively call and share info, like ‘hey this is what’s going on with my child.’ They’ll ask questions, and there’s a stronger feeling for me that this person trusts me, they can confide in me. They respond to a call and show up somewhere. I think there’s a mutual sense of being known.”

Coordinating Community-Based Partners Effectively

A unique responsibility of community school coordinators is developing and maintaining partnerships with external organizations. This was often complicated not by having too few partners, but rather by effectively coordinating many, and identifying those most likely to benefit their school’s students and their families. All the coordinators were able to list myriad occasions when local organizations donated items for students, such as backpacks and school supplies, funding for field trips or field days, coats, uniforms, shoes, and trophies or awards for attendance incentives. While these short-term or one-time arrangements were common, creating long-standing partnerships with agencies that were mutually beneficial was more complex.

Mutually Beneficial and Self-Sustaining Partnerships

We found that community school coordinators in schools with comparatively high attendance or climate could immediately describe the school-partner dynamic as a “win-win”, or in other words, both parties are gaining something of value in the exchange. One coordinator remarked, “[we] let them use our space for meetings, they give us volunteers. It’s give and take. It’s the little things.” Similarly, another noted that “partnerships are two-way streets. It shouldn’t be just the school standing there with its hand out.”

One coordinator described how their community partners should even receive *unexpected* benefits from the collaboration:

“[T]here’s lots of two-way communication with the partners I work with. The relationship isn’t just a one time or quid pro quo, but there’s a finessing of my interests and your interests in a way to serve one another and sometimes stepping

outside the organization's standard role to do something for a partner that wouldn't ordinarily get done."

On the other hand, coordinators in community schools experiencing difficulties were less nuanced in their description of such partnerships. When asked how she would define a strong partnership, the coordinator at a community school with comparably lower climate and attendance offered a list of organizations that had supplied donations for students, talked only about the school's needs, and did not describe a more holistic purpose of partnerships:

"I think the strength of the partnership is related to what services are offered. Some can't be there every day, some are about volunteers, others are ad hoc, so I can say right now the majority - they show up and just respond when we need them. Last year it was a bit difficult because it was [my school's] first year as a community school on top of the transition and changes. It was also a first for having a community-based OST program. So a lot of that year, the partners weren't partners as a community school describes 'partners'."

In contrast, the coordinator in one of the more effective community schools explained,

"Do you normally see a neighborhood association or a synagogue organizing people to give people money for school uniforms? No, but in a good partnership, people go above and beyond to make things happen because they care about the success of the school and the partner. We've developed a partnership team in the neighborhood. The institutions have decided to come together to support our resources, to make sure we're not duplicating, and are supporting each other's work, and that's when it's become a personal relationship. So instead of calling [organization name] I'm calling 'Beth.'"

Nurturing Partnerships

Nurturing partnerships was also a skill that coordinators at effective community schools had been able to develop over time, primarily by recognizing the unique contributions a partner made and by regularly communicating the vital nature of the contribution they were making to the community to encourage further participation. For example, one described it this way:

“Two-way street, it’s give and take, it’s authentic. You know, and everyone understands what everyone’s gift is. Also, there are some partners that only want to do their one thing, and you can’t get mad, but whatever their organization says and requires...you hug and nurture that relationship. Like, ‘ok next year, you want to do more than those 3rd graders? What about 4th graders next year?’ And I’d say, ‘We’re not gonna be able to do this well without you.’”

Coordinators also described strong partnerships as being self-sustaining. For instance, a coordinator stated “I had sign-in sheets, and we’d coordinate them, but then they should take on a life of their own.” One commented that not only was such a dynamic necessary given coordinators’ time constraints, a self-propagating partnership was an indicator of strength, noting:

“For me, a good partner -- I don’t need to check in with them weekly, we give you space and students and we meet with new partners regularly, but we have a lot of programs. They want to be here for a variety of reasons and our students and families still have needs. Our job is not to allocate ... there are a lot of reasons why [partners] want to be here.”

Similar to the self-sustaining trait of healthy partnerships, another coordinator in a school with strong climate talked about a partner’s ability to be self-sufficient as a measure of whether the services and the culture they brought into the school were well-aligned with the school’s mission:

“If they’re able to operate independent from me. As you can see the [farmer’s market outside the school] is operating without my support. I’ll go help out, but if they needed me to run the stand every Friday, I can’t do that...If I need a regular two-hour weekly meeting, it’s not working. You need to have the people, the structures, and be aligned with what we do...We take that serious, we protect that.”

Ensuring Appropriate Partner Fit

According to another school’s coordinator, relationships with family members had helped her better customize the set of partners the school worked with. She noted that because over a quarter of her school’s students were English Language Learners, she initiated a

partnership with a local Latino advocacy group that offered parents English classes, immigration support, and Spanish-speaking psychologists for family counseling. She explained how finding partners that met the specific needs of their local families had contributed to her school's strong climate and community:

“We partner from preK through eighth grade, it depends on their needs. And as a community school, we offer a lot of different supports. I spearhead food options. Our food pantry is open twice a month. We’re where families know if they need emergency food, they can get that. We send home bags of food over the weekend. We offer flu shots in the building. We take kids to get eye exams if they need it. We have financial literacy programs once per month. [Those are] built into family breakfast, all families know about these and are invited to them...we’re open for everything...everyone is very supported.”

Another theme arising in our conversations was the belief that students benefit from partners' enrichment opportunities that help them form an identity and greater attachment to school. Moreover, such opportunities were seen as a way to instill school pride that would translate into a positive environment. For example, the coordinator at a community school with both strong attendance and climate stated,

“That’s big part of climate – making sure kids have outlets. OST is big for us. We use our partnerships a lot, having sports, academic experiences, debate club, national academic league, Girl Scouts, an anime club...Having those experiences where you’re allowing for kids to say, ‘this is a great school.’”

Nearly all the coordinators we spoke with described the work of building positive climate in terms of using partners to identify appealing opportunities for kids. For example, one stated, “I think you want to create opportunities for children you don’t normally get. Volunteers creating programs for children – chess, Spanish, board games club, to make this a place kids would enjoy being.” However, coordinators in successful community schools additionally saw partnering with the community as a way to develop compassion and leadership in students. One shared:

“Turning on light bulbs is the key to a partnership. Like the food bank is a partnership, but I use a group of the young men. We have a small storage area, where the kids put boxes of food together, and...we have them say, ‘I’d love for you to take a box home,’ or if we give 50 boxes of food out quickly, they say ‘you’re helping me by

taking a box of food home.’ On the stigma of it, it teaches them never to tease them tomorrow. It’s the shared experience of, we’re all trying to take care of one another. I guess if you push the platform of taking care of one another, the experience becomes better. That’s how we solve things, by giving kids leadership exposure to see where we’re all trying to go.”

While not all the coordinators in our study had performed a systematic needs assessment, the ones in successful community schools said they were continually engaging with families in ways that helped them identify offerings that would meet the school community’s needs. The coordinator in a school with relatively high attendance credited the availability of art, science, and sports opportunities as a critical reason why attendance had increased at her school and had remained strong for several years. She reflected, “[W]hen I came on... I was tasked with finding missed opportunities for the students to explore opportunities they wouldn’t normally get during the school day, to make [our school] a place where people would want to be.”

Partners to Support School Staff

But significantly, successful community schools could be distinguished from struggling community schools by having leveraged external partnerships to support staff, as well. One stated:

“Other ways partners contribute is focusing on the staff. I’ve tried to bring our partners to a place where they’re asking, what do staff need to be happy? [We have] partners doing acupuncture for staff, a partnership with [agency name] to teach staff how to do restorative circles, and more importantly integrating restorative circles in how we do staff meetings at the school and getting things off our chest.”

Another coordinator at a school with strong climate had also recognized the importance of creating a positive working environment for teachers. Upon learning that teachers were feeling over-worked and taxed with large classrooms, she had identified a partner capable of serving in a productive and supportive role at the school. She stated,

“[University Name] is a big partner. I had six interns coming from there, and I was planning, how can I use them to take weight off the teachers? I advocated for an additional experience, where student teachers come in on Thursdays—that’s 20 or

more people. I use partners to kind of turn it over and just pollinate the building with positive energy and resources.”

Increasing Attendance

The community school coordinators said their families encountered a number of issues, personal and systemic, that cause student absence from school. Among those most often mentioned were housing instability, a lack of school-related supplies (e.g., backpacks, coats, uniforms), and logistical challenges faced by parents, such as lack of transportation or irregular work schedules. Several common effective practices emerged, including integrated teamwork, consistent communication, and leaders working to set expectations and norms, as well as focusing on improvement.

Overall, coordinators seemed to take for granted that the strength of a school’s climate was evident in students’ attendance. One coordinator explained, “[T]here’s a stronger correlation between attendance and climate than just our ability to identify different barriers. Even when a family is facing barriers, if they have a relationship with the school, the teachers, then they want to get to school.” Thus the relationships coordinators and other staff had with families within community schools were perceived as currency the school could leverage to prevent students from becoming chronically absent.

The community schools found to have either strong climate or comparatively higher student attendance all reported they had an active attendance team. According to coordinators, attendance teams typically included the coordinator, a social worker, the principal or assistant principal, and sometimes included the school secretary. If the school had budgeted for a dedicated attendance monitor, this individual typically led the team, though full-time monitors were not always feasible given schools’ limited budgets. Some school attendance teams also included a homeless student liaison, the school nurse, or resource staff, such as an English-as-a-Second-Language teacher.

Data Use

The reliability of the data system accessible to the team was also reported to be key to having a successful attendance strategy. Notably, the partner agency for a community

school with comparatively high attendance had developed a system to interface with the student attendance data that coordinators could access. When asked how they prevented students from getting lost in the shuffle, the coordinator shared how her school managed the data in a format that allowed all the staff to share in the responsibility:

“[My agency] built a database where we take the info, upload it to the database, it pops a database of kids who are chronically absent and at risk for chronic absence, and from there it tells us the communication interventions that are triggered based on the number of absences. So, it triggers the strategy, like sending a letter, the phone call, home visit, and they work off that list what needs to be done...From there, we also log any of the resources or interventions we’ve done for the child to address their needs.”

Other schools organized attendance work alphabetically or by grade level, and outreach was prioritized by the severity of the accumulating absences. Consequently, attendance teams heavily relied on accurate as well as timely attendance data. Often, the manner in which data were manipulated was surprisingly low-tech. Whereas at one of the successful community schools, color-coded spreadsheets identified students who were at-risk for chronic absence, another school had implemented a “data wall” with names on index cards, allowing the team to keep a visual record of particular students with attendance challenges, as well as follow-up steps taken to support the students. Such routing mechanisms were crucial, since in some schools, chronic absence had historically been higher than 30 percent, and prioritizing which students to provide intensive support was crucial.

Celebrating Success

Yet another important distinguishing feature of attendance work in schools with high attendance was a focus on celebrating high attendance or improvements in attendance. In schools with relatively low attendance and climate, coordinators spoke of attendance work in terms of documenting students with high levels of unexcused absences, truancy court referrals, and triage. However, in successful schools, coordinators mentioned an explicit focus on recognition for good attendance, rather than punitive measures for those with poor attendance. While the coordinator at one successful community school led the attendance team, she had divided the team into two core parts:

“There are two parts of an effective team: one part focused on the improvement of attendance, and the second part focused on celebration and recognition for good attendance, [like] monthly perfect attendance celebrations and all the fun stuff that teachers can do better. The one I’m on is focused on getting kids to school...[Teachers are] often more in tune with what kids are interested in, they have a good sense of what would be fun, what would be a good incentive, it’s light-hearted work and teachers spend a lot of time doing heavy work, and it’s fun for them. Teachers can do it better than we can.”

The imperative to recognize students with good attendance was a common refrain in schools with comparatively high attendance, as several coordinators said they thought that incentivizing had been more effective than any sort of punishment or threat. These coordinators also said they tried to ensure that positive recognition occurred on a regular basis. One described her school’s approach to address absences and tardy arrivals:

“We did some things, like little daily incentives. We would go through with a cart and everyone who was here on time got a token, like a little pencil or something small. We did something weekly, monthly, like an attendance party, just a small celebration, they had ice cream or a few minutes dancing in the cafeteria. We did a lot of that [in 2015-16].”

Shared Ownership

The theme of shared ownership around attendance work was also mentioned by coordinators in successful schools. In a school where the community school strategy was mature and attendance had been high for several years, the coordinator explained how roles and expectations had been clearly established early on. She credited everyone knowing everybody else, saying, “we are a family,” and she explained that everyone knew what the principal expected of them, as it had been consistently communicated.

Principals’ ability to distribute leadership, by assigning roles and responsibilities appropriately, ensured that all the staff shared part of the heavy load. Further, when a family-like environment had been established, all felt accountable to one another and none wanted to let others down. Coordinators spoke about the essential nature of the school leader’s role in establishing such an environment, in terms of setting the tone for all the

work taking place and determining what issues would be prioritized. A coordinator at a community school with high attendance discussed how his principal set the stage for progress during the year, sharing,

“She pretty much assigns roles at the beginning of the year. She lays out the road map. She brings our attendance data to all the [instructional leadership team] meetings, compares that with academic performance data. She does a lot with the data. She makes sure her [assistant principal] is on it if she can’t be on it. We also sit down as coordinator and principal to talk about how the attendance work is going. I’d say she’s involved, and she goes through the data. She talks to the parents about attendance, their performance. She asks a lot of questions.”

However, in a school with comparatively low attendance, the coordinator explained how she thought attendance work had fallen by the wayside as a result of a lack of prioritization from the principal, who had been new in 2015-16. That same year, the school also did not employ an attendance monitor. She explained about the work, “It’s changing. This is my second principal. My first [principal] was like ‘yes, this is a community school!’ This principal is learning the strategy, and I’m not sure he values that strategy or the work.” She shared how she attempted to persuade her school leader to communicate and maintain greater emphasis on attendance when interacting with families, especially those with very young children starting school for the first time. She shared,

“We do have an open house or a pre-K and [kindergarten] orientation. For pre-K, I’ve said to my principal, we have to establish a culture of attendance. From the very first day. We need to stress that, keep giving that message...I think [attendance] should always be at 94 percent because that was the state standard. Because it’s not anymore, I try to keep it in front of the principal’s mind.”

Respecting Teachers’ Knowledge and Relationships

Particularly in the community schools with relatively high attendance, coordinators also spoke of their reliance on teachers’ knowledge of students to identify families for outreach. Attendance teams strongly leaned on teachers to communicate with them about problems they perceived among students, concerning chronic illnesses, unusual behaviors, problems at home, or challenges in getting to school on time every day. Many viewed teachers as

their first point of communication about potential struggles occurring within a family. A coordinator in a school with comparatively high student attendance reported,

“Teachers are our first line of defense. The first day the child is out, the teachers are the first contact, even at the first day absent. They find out, do you have a uniform? Transportation?” She continued, “[Teachers] tell me, ‘hey I haven’t seen this child in a while’, or ‘I noticed this child is getting picked up early, can you help me figure that out?’ Sometimes they’re important to ping the team on a student. They notice patterns more easily than we can with the numbers.”

Interfacing with other staff in the school was rarely discussed by coordinators in schools with comparatively low climate or attendance, however, with regard to attendance work, managing partnerships, or in thinking about how the community school strategy as a whole could support the entire school community. Coordinators at struggling community schools seemed to be more isolated in their efforts, with the strategy compartmentalized from the core of the school day.

In contrast, coordinators in schools with high attendance and climate spoke more about how elements of the community school strategy were informed by students, staff and family members together. Our conversations about attendance brought such differences and the need for greater communality and cross-functionality into greater focus, since attendance impacts the classroom, student peer groups, and is heavily impacted by issues facing families. Coordinators in successful schools relayed the conviction that attendance needed to be everyone’s job. One illustrated this belief about attendance work with a comment about effective coordinators: “They have to be a relationship-builder with parents, and with staff and the community. All the folks that can support your attendance, they got to be willing to put in the work and knock on doors. But you can’t do that by yourself!”

Summary and Discussion

The Community School Strategy in Baltimore has been implemented in some of the city's most disadvantaged areas as a response to structural inequalities that have led to unequal educational outcomes among the city's youth. To promote equity, community schools aim to access local resources and develop partnerships to provide additional health and social supports to remove barriers to student learning and improve community well-being.

The coordinators in the effective schools in this study reported they work to establish long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with community-based organizations, proactively build trusting relationships with family members, collaboratively identify goals with both school- and neighborhood-based stakeholders, and integrate services for students and families across the school. Given time and adequate resourcing, they hoped to achieve a virtuous cycle of relationships, partnerships and services within their community school.

However, even with unlimited time, circumstances can change and jeopardize efforts, such as systemic challenges within a neighborhood, staff turnover, or changes in funding or the political climate. For example, several district-level dynamics were impacting the community schools featured in this study. Three schools were experiencing the effects of the school district's building renovation and reorganization plan. Two had been combined into a single community school and had previously enjoyed being small schools with fewer than 250 students, an environment that one coordinator described as "a dream." A third school, which in 2015-16 was only in its first year of implementing the community school strategy, had been combined with a non-community school that had been closed the prior year. This involved students and staff from both schools being physically relocated to a different building and neighborhood.

From the coordinators of these three schools, we heard stories of students mourning the community they had lost, and anxieties about what the future would hold for them, even while the reorganization was being done to "provide healthy, safe, efficient and modern buildings children deserve" (21st Century Schools Baltimore, 2017). Such shocks can have unintended consequences on student attendance and school climate, even in the absence of the usual challenges faced by urban schools. With these potential hazards in mind, we set forth to ascertain general tenets of operating a successful community school and identify institutionalized practices, even as individual community schools prioritize different

services and confront different challenges. To ensure the usefulness of the information gathered, we wanted to hear from those most closely involved in building up community schools, and we sought to gain insight from schools that attendance and climate data suggested were thriving, as well as those that appeared to be struggling.

Coordinators shared that they were most successful when they approached parents and community members with respect and established friendly relationships proactively, forming a team working together for the child's benefit. Coordinators in schools with either comparatively strong climate or attendance had brokered these connections from the outset, in recognition of the importance of supporting the whole child – in effect, by finding ways to support students' families. In doing so, they helped ensure that any fundamental needs – food, clothing, shelter – were addressed, so that parents could nurture their children without added stress, and children could arrive at school ready to learn.

Partnerships with community-based organizations also took on a life of their own in successful community schools. In less-successful schools, partners were viewed as providing activities to occupy students after school, but little else. From the coordinators in schools with relatively high attendance and strong climate, however, we learned that both the partner and the school shared a vision for supporting students and their families, and both were willing to go the extra mile to achieve their mutual goals, even when it meant providing a service for which they were not originally commissioned. Besides providing after-school enrichment opportunities, the partners in Baltimore's successful community schools were reportedly mobilized to meet families' needs based on a desire to improve conditions in their shared community. Further, the value of the partnership was measured by whether they could offer experiences that were unique and valuable to students, and by the extent of alignment between the partner's and the school's culture.

Attendance work differed between successful and struggling community schools, as well. In schools with either strong climate or attendance, attendance teams met regularly, used reliable, timely student data, and their work overlapped with that of teachers and other staff. Notably, coordinators reported that school leaders had established the tone by explicitly prioritizing student attendance and consistently relaying its importance when communicating with family members. Moreover, attendance work in successful schools was described as having a focus on incentivizing good attendance and recognizing students with strong or improved attendance often, instead of relying on punitive measures or threatening parents with legal action as a first measure.

For both attendance and climate, having consistently communicated expectations was essential, as was ensuring that the whole community could take ownership of school efforts. This entailed cross-functionality and putting into place reliable processes and procedures to address the first absence, or the first sign of a behavioral problem. To instill reliability, school leaders and coordinators reportedly worked together with students, parents and external partners to both set and reinforce their collective expectations and goals.

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Appendix A

Analytical Details on Identifying Focal Schools

School-level regression models for the 45 schools fully implementing the community school strategy in 2015-16 were estimated for the outcomes of average daily attendance, percent of students chronically absent, and each of five dimensions of school climate. Climate dimensions reflected those identified by the National School Climate Center (2012) and included perceived safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment, and leadership/professional relationships. (See Appendix C for definitions of these climate dimensions.)

Regression models allow the analyst to “predict” an outcome from characteristics that theoretically relate to that outcome. In our regression analysis, we were essentially asking, how does the average level of attendance or climate student relate to school characteristics? We used the following characteristics as predictors: attendance or climate measures from the prior year, percent of students eligible for direct services, English language learner, homeless, and special education services, percent Hispanic, African-American, male, school enrollment size, and number of principal changes between 2012 and 2016. The results of the regressions helped identify “outlier” community schools, or schools that had significantly different trends than community schools on average. In other words, we identified schools whose attendance and climate outcomes for 2015-16 were higher or lower than was predicted by the ‘effects’ of school and student characteristics. Schools with standardized residuals of at least plus or minus 1.5 for any of the seven outcomes were deemed to be “high” or “low” outliers, respectively. Seven schools were identified using this approach and became the focal schools for the study.

Student Attendance and Climate in Community Schools

Attendance and climate data for the seven “outlier” focal schools in 2015-16 are presented in Table A.1, along with the average for all community schools. The reader may note that even among the schools labeled “higher outlier,” chronic absence rates were somewhat high, or mean levels of satisfaction on school climate dimensions were rather low. However, this seeming contradiction is due to the high levels of challenge in those schools. Recall that

outliers are identified by having attendance and climate outcomes that are higher (or lower) than the *expected* estimate, based on the schools’ characteristics. For instance, while School F had a chronic absence rate of 36.8%, given the characteristics of the school population, the average school with the same student and school profile had an even higher level of chronic absence. This suggests that the school had found solutions or best practices that allowed it to beat the overall trend.

In Table A.1 the outcomes for which a school was deemed an “outlier” are shaded. For example, School C was an outlier due to its higher-than-expected school climate outcomes, whereas School D had outcomes that were better than expected on both attendance and climate. Our interviews with each school coordinator were tailored to the topic(s) on which their school stood out.

Table A.1
Unadjusted Mean Attendance Outcomes and School Climate Agreement Ratings for the Focus Community Schools, 2015-16

	Lower Outliers		Community School Average	Higher Outliers				
	A	B		C	D	E	F	G
Attendance								
ADA, K-5 th	91.2	91.9	91.4	94.8	--	90.6	90.5	93.8
ADA, 6 th -8 th	88.3	--	89.2	93.4	97.3	--	--	--
% Chronically Absent, K-5 th	36.5	28.5	28.3	12.8	--	34.7	36.8	20.0
% Chronically Absent, 6 th -8 th	42.3	--	31.4	19.2	4.1	--	--	--
Climate								
Safety	60.0	95.9	76.7	94.8	95.0	91.0	67.5	96.8
Teaching & Learning	78.8	94.8	86.5	97.1	97.1	95.2	83.0	96.0
Interpersonal Relationships	79.6	95.9	85.4	96.0	97.5	93.3	78.9	96.1
Institutional Environment	73.1	92.4	82.1	94.7	93.7	93.2	80.3	90.0
Staff/Professional Relations	72.8	88.7	83.0	94.5	91.7	94.3	74.9	91.8

-- not applicable

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Topic: Attendance

1. Can you please tell me how you worked on student attendance? Prompts:
 - a. Ask them to reflect on how they use data, any teams, who participates, etc.
 - b. Were there pieces you tried and then abandoned, or was there anything you tried that did not work as well as you hoped? Tell me about different things you tried along the way before you found something that worked?
 - c. What infrastructure did you put in place to increase attendance?
 - d. What systematic efforts/practices were tried and abandoned (if any), and what did you learn from them?
 - e. What worked best with different populations, ELL, Spec Ed, younger students, middle grades, etc.?
 - f. How do you know when you've been successful connecting with parents?
 - g. Do you work with key partners (agencies, non-profits, funders, etc.) around attendance? Do you rely on them heavily for particular issues, like housing, food security, etc.? How have they helped you?
 - h. How do you assess the strength of your school partnerships? In other words, how do you know you've been successful with your partner organization(s)?
 - i. How do you decide what to focus on? Were there opportunity costs?
 - j. How does your school leader engage with attendance? Does s/he assign roles? Teams? Were roles modified as you learned more? How do you describe their leadership style?
 - k. When new staff come on board, do they receive an orientation on your attendance work?
 - l. If you've put into place new processes, how do you document them? How do you ensure they are optimal? Are processes reviewed regularly?
 - m. If you've put into place new processes, how do staff react, and do you have problems with engagement? How do you overcome resistance?
 - n. How is this work reflected in your Community School Action Plan? Can you please show me that section?
 - o. Would you describe your current practice as flourishing? If not, why not and what will you be trying next?
 - p. Does your school have an infrastructure that goes beyond anything Family League funds?

Topic: School Climate

1. Can you describe your school climate, and please tell me how you think about creating a positive climate? Prompts:

- a. Would a student, staff member or parent have the same definition of climate?
- b. What do you think makes it positive?
- c. How do you go about measuring your school's climate?
- d. Ask them to reflect on how they use data, any teams, who participates, etc.
- e. Were there pieces you tried and then abandoned, or was there anything you tried that did not work as well as you hoped? Tell me about different things you tried along the way before you found something that really worked?
- f. What infrastructure did you put in place to increase climate?
- g. What systematic efforts/practices were tried and abandoned (if any), and what did you learn from them?
- h. Have you focused on special subpopulations (ELL, Spec Ed, younger/older students, etc.) when doing school climate work?
- i. How do you know when you've connected with parents?
- j. Do you work with key partners (agencies, non-profits, funders, etc.) around climate? Do you rely on them heavily for particular issues, like housing, food security, etc.? How have they helped you achieve success on school climate?
- k. How do you assess the strength of your school partnerships? In other words, how do you know you've been successful with your partner organization(s)?
- l. How do you decide what to focus on? Were there opportunity costs?
- m. How does your school leader engage with climate? Does s/he assign roles? Teams? How do you describe their leadership style?
- n. When new staff come on board, do they receive an orientation on your school climate work?
- o. If you've put into place new processes, how do you document it? How do you ensure they are optimal? Are processes reviewed regularly?
- p. If you've put into place new processes, how do staff react, and do you have problems with engagement? How do you overcome resistance?
- q. How is climate work reflected in your Community School Action Plan? Can you please show me that section?
- r. Would you describe your current practice as flourishing? If not, why not and what will you be trying next?
- s. Does your school have an infrastructure that goes beyond anything Family League funds?

Appendix C

School Climate Dimensions and Definitions

School Climate Dimension	Definition
Safety	The respondent's perception that the school provides both physical and emotional safety, in terms of having clear and consistently communicated expectations about student behavior, bullying, teasing, etc., as well as norms for staff intervening to prevent harm.
Teaching and Learning	Perception that the school provides ample opportunities to learn, rigorous instruction and curricula, that it challenges students to learn all they can and take risks, and that teachers provide individualized support when needed. It also indicates that students are given opportunities in social and civic learning, and the school provides a means for conflict resolution.
Interpersonal Relationships	Perception that school has a caring environment, that all stakeholders have respect for all persons regardless of background, and that students have meaningful and supportive relationships with both students and adults in the building.
Institutional Environment	Perception that school is clean and well-maintained, and that staff have adequate resources. It also captures the sense of belonging and connectedness that students and other stakeholders (e.g., parents) feel for the school, and that there are ample opportunities for participation in school-based activities.
Leadership / Professional Relations	Perception that the school administration is available, responsive, and offers and communicates a clear vision, and that staff have professional, collegial relationships with each other that support student learning.