

COMMUNITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Community Schools: Supporting One Another As A Blueprint for the Future

PREPARED BY:



During the course of the pandemic, we have all had to adjust in one form or another. Community school leaders across the country have done so in partnership with their school districts and community partners to support their children, families, and communities, especially those who are most vulnerable. This included ensuring access to food, health care, including from school-based health centers, childcare for essential employees, opportunities for young people to build social skills and continue learning in afterschool programs, and internet access for learning and employment.

The Coalition for Community Schools (Coalition), as an alliance of national, state and local partners that advocate for community schools, wanted to provide support and a space for community school leaders to share their challenges and successes. Beginning March 17, 2020 through the present, the Coalition conducted over 100 engagements, including town halls, community conversations, and webinars. Each engagement averaged over 200 attendees. A space was created for Community School professionals, youth, families, community leaders, students, educators, and others, to discuss their most pressing challenges, share innovative solutions, and reimagine new ways forward.

Community Schools are an evidence-based, [results-driven strategy](#), guided by national standards and supported by years of transformational success across the country.

A Community School is a public school—the hub of its neighborhood, uniting families, educators and community partners as an evidence-based strategy to promote equity and educational excellence for each and every child, and an approach that strengthens families and community.

Community Schools provide an evidence-based strategy to promote equity and educational excellence for each and every child.

This blueprint provides examples of how Community Schools effectively responded to the pandemic, highlighting “how” Community Schools operate through collaborative leadership, and offers recommendations for state and local educators, community leaders, and others on how to leverage Community Schools as [a core strategy](#) for communities to efficiently and effectively recover while transforming education and accelerating economic mobility.

How Community Schools Responded to the Pandemic

The pandemic has shown how critical effective coordination of resources and authentic school-family-community partnerships are to recovery. Coordination and partnerships support students' and families' basic needs, student re-engagement, and learning, both during crises like the pandemic and beyond. Throughout the pandemic, Community Schools were able to mobilize quickly and effectively to support the social, emotional, physical, and learning needs of students and their families.

Community Schools proved to be [essential in the response to COVID-19](#). However, the pandemic also accelerated an evolution of Community Schools that highlighted core functions: communication, collaboration, and coordination. The evidence of the importance of these functions existed prior to the pandemic, through previous outcomes and evaluations, but were seldom noted. Additionally, as these functions were employed, themes began to emerge that provide a vital infrastructure, consistent processes and best practices. This lays out a pathway to address the well-being of whole communities and sustainability of efforts.

The following section summarizes common themes in which Community Schools quickly mobilized to support students, families, and their communities. Most of these examples come directly from current Community School leaders in the field implementing the strategy.



COMMON THEMES

1. **Community Schools cultivate strong youth connections.** Chronic absence has been an ongoing problem and presented even greater challenges during the pandemic, especially for high school students. Additionally, there has been an alarming increase in social and mental health concerns expressed by youth. Although these issues were addressed by schools and community partners, youth were instrumental in building connections. The Next Generation Coalition (Coalition youth network), through their engagement of young people during the pandemic, developed a brief, "[Six Strategies to Build Empowering Youth Engagement](#)," to provide guidance to youth and adults on how to address some concerns and sustain lessons learned.

Cincinnati, OH:

The school district is investing federal relief dollars in their community learning centers (Ohio's term for Community Schools) to provide afterschool programming five days a week through June of 2021. The Community Learning Centers stayed open through the the summer for students, families, and the community. Mental health partners are also integrated into the summer session and will work side-by-side with the teachers on social emotional learning. Mr. Jaumall Davis, Kindergarten teacher at Cincinnati's Oyler Elementary School, offers insight into the value of community partners as a Community Learning Center in this [this video](#).

Houston, TX:

Spanish-speaking students took the initiative to reach out to other Spanish speaking classmates to help them with their homework and provide informal wellness checks.

2. **Community Schools build trusting relationships with families that make flexible options of engagement work.** Authentic partnerships paved the way for innovative family engagement practices that will endure even after the pandemic. Mutual support for children between families, teachers, support staff, other educators, and other partners were instrumental in implementing practices and creating organizational conditions for authentic family engagement, as described in the [Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#).

Binghamton, NY:

The family engagement work implemented in two rural districts in Broome County, NY, as a part of their Community Schools framework made possible by a Department of Education Full Service Community Schools grant, led to increased support for all families. More specifically, both districts reported the importance this approach had on grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Through intentional outreach, Community School Coordinators conducted home visits and held grandparent cafes to build their knowledge and understanding of the technology needed to support their grandchildren's learning needs. This service was critical since many grandparents had little to no experience with technology needed to support their students' educational success.

Buffalo, NY:

In early April of 2020, Say Yes Buffalo converted their in-person "Saturday Academy," typically conducted weekly in over a dozen schools, to a virtual gathering that quickly exceeded their capacity of 500 participants. This successful practice continued through the 2020-2021 school year. The virtual sessions engaged families to provide care, maintain connections, and enhance community learning for students and adults.

Vancouver, WA:

During school closures, Vancouver Public Schools Community School Coordinators continued to serve their students and families, providing critical access to resources in new ways as they did the following:

- supplied WiFi hotspots and helped families connect to Xfinity Internet Essentials, ensuring children had access to instruction and families had access to critical public health information;
- conducted "porch visits" to students' homes to take them learning materials and "check-in," drop off food and other essential basic needs, as well as offer interpretation services;
- hosted beep and greets - drive through opportunities to pick up breakfast and lunch, and other resources;
- partnered with Council for the Homeless to help families in the referral process for eviction prevention funds;
- retained students' access to mental and behavioral health through teletherapy, using district issued devices.

The district's long-range investment in Community Schools enabled them to pivot quickly to remote learning and still support the needs of the whole child, thanks to a broad network of partnerships built over many years.



New York, NY:

In addition to their usual mental health and social-emotional learning supports, Children's Aid's Community Schools started offering social-emotional learning sessions in both Spanish and English for parents. The sessions helped them learn to recognize and respond to stress, anxiety, and grief in themselves and their children, and increase social emotional stability for their families. 116 parents enrolled, with almost 99% attending weekly for six sessions. In a survey, one parent said that "what was impactful was the opportunity to share and learn best practices with and from the community members. This opportunity allowed me to recognize that there are others going through the same things I am going through – I was no longer alone!"

West Chicago, IL:

West Chicago's school district has 12 Family Liaisons and three Case Managers that provide families access by linking them to community resources, attendance support, and parenting education. During the pandemic, they also worked closely with their schools on student attendance. The Family Liaisons helped to identify families that needed access to hot spots and the school district provided internet codes. They also provided assistance with helping students obtain a district devices, and learn how to use the basic functions. Between these activities and other strategies like home visits, the district's student attendance rate during the pandemic was maintained at 94.15%. This was a reflection of strong collaboration between teachers, Family Liaisons, principals, and other staff and community partners.

3. **Community Schools generate ecosystems of collaboration.** Cross-Sector collaboration, which is often difficult and elusive, was necessary during the pandemic. Traditional decision-making positions in school districts, universities, cities, towns, counties, and even states relied on Community Schools to coordinate care, learning, basic needs, outreach to families, vaccinations, and employment support. Community Schools regenerative approach, grounded in continuous improvement, informed the innovation of practices for public education, public health and economic recovery. The critical role of Community Schools was best captured by the following comment:

“In the spring of 2020 when schools closed in Nashville so many families were struggling. The city looked to the school district to meet the need and the district looked to the community school initiative. We had the infrastructure in place - school coordinators, volunteers, relationships with the non-profit community for resources.”

---- Alison McArthur, Community School leader of Community Achieves in Nashville, TN

Baltimore, MD:

A variety of committed partners, community-based organizations, and volunteers came together at the very beginning of the pandemic to identify key needs among families in Southeast Baltimore. There are several examples that highlight the power of partnership.

It became clear that food access was a large problem, early in the pandemic, especially among undocumented families. Leveraging existing relationships and the trust that had already been developed in neighborhoods like Highlandtown, Greektown, and Bayview, these partners mobilized and created a variety of consistent opportunities for families to access food.

A United Way partnership with Access Art increased short and long-term food access in Morrell Park through a grant from the Maryland Community Health Resource Commission. Comprehensive health markets were implemented to address multiple social determinants of health and increase food access. The markets are coordinated by a bilingual Community Health Worker. One-on-one assistance to apply for public benefits, obtain health insurance, and gain

referrals for mental health and substance abuse treatment was provided by the health worker as well. The school's Mental Health and Student Support teams were also available to identify students who needed extra support while schools were closed, especially to help navigate the ever-changing procedures.

Another key partnership was the Park Heights Renaissance at Arlington Elementary. This partnership with the Baltimore City Boy Scouts led to services for students and families at two food pantries. Through this, families, community members and volunteers were also able to access legal services from Maryland Legal Aid.

The needs of students were met through a whole-child approach. Existing partnerships between Community Schools and community-based organizations enabled Community School Coordinators to help disengaged virtual learners re-engage. They participated in reading programs, accessed resources, participated in attendance-related activities, and eliminated barriers to learning. A new partnership was also formed with [REACH](#), an organization with the mission to promote the overall well-being of individuals and families in the communities they serve by providing accessible, quality mental health services for children, adolescents, and their families, utilizing a service system that emphasizes trust, respect, confidentiality, and compassion.

Lehigh Valley, PA:

United Way of Greater Lehigh Valley Community School Coordinators have been the “boots on the ground” with helping families navigate the housing crisis. They did not stop at providing rental assistance information - they spent hours on the phone with 211 families. walking through the process to apply for state and federal funding for assistance. Lisa Fiore, Director of the Community School Network at United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley shared that, “our Community School Coordinators are big connectors between the coalition Bank on Allentown and area families.” The coalition is a partnership of the City of Allentown, United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, Financial Literacy Center, FDIC, People First, First Commonwealth Federal Credit Union and QNB Bank to educate and connect families outside the mainstream financial system. These families can take part in financial literacy classes as well as receive guidance on how to open a bank account.



Ludington, MI:

When many families were directly affected by the pandemic due to the loss of employment, Mason County United Way, which leads the area's Community Schools initiative, worked with other agencies to provide critical services for families such as access to housing and utility assistance, transportation, car repair, back-to-school supplies, internet connectivity, and other expressed needs.

Oakland, CA:

One Oakland Community School hosted a community vaccination hub with only one week notice in May resulting in 200+ vaccines taking place on their yard. 66% of the vaccinations were for young people ages 12-15. This Community School mobilized the pop-up clinic within five days of receiving an invitation to do so, showing how efficient and responsive Community Schools are.

4. **Community Schools encourage civic engagement.** When deeply challenging and comprehensive issues effect entire neighborhoods, schools, and families, it takes collective action to find solutions. Community Schools provide many spaces to connect, align, and build relationships that encourage compassion and deepen a sense of responsibility neighbors have for one another. UCLA’s Center for Community Schooling brief illuminates the essential pillar of “[Collaborative Leadership as the Cornerstone of Community Schools.](#)” Below are more examples of how relationships create resilient communities:

Albuquerque, NM:

ABC Community School Partnership Network Coordinators were building for the future as they organized their communities to ensure participation in “hard-to-count tracks” for the 2020 U.S. Census. Their collective efforts led to a nearly 6% greater response than the previous census ensuring 3,820 additional people were counted. This is all the more impressive considering it was conducted during a pandemic, and the state of New Mexico experienced about a 4% drop in responses. The assumption is, if the federal government allocates \$3,200 for each person every year then 3,820 additional people would represent a monetary value of \$12,224,000 annually for the next 10 years. This greatly impacts education and community development grants locally.



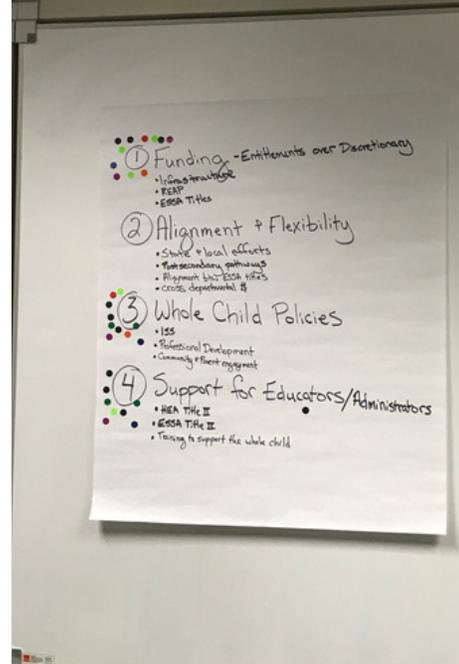
Asheville, NC:

Volunteers play critical roles in Community School programming. When buildings closed, these volunteers were seeking a way to continue serving students and families safely. Coordinators worked with schools and community partners to figure out where volunteers were most needed and ensure this valuable resource was not lost. From handing out family food boxes to assembling resilience kits for kids, volunteers supported 45 local organizations and covered 3,210 volunteer slots (the equivalent of \$500,000 in volunteer time).



Skokie, IL:

After an analysis revealed that a school-based food distribution site would be a barrier for families, over 50 staff members supported a program to deliver meals directly to students' homes. Each weekday, including during winter and spring breaks, 293 breakfasts and lunches were distributed to 241 households. Additionally, 568 healthy snacks were distributed during in-person learning to 183 students. Items from Student Care Closets were packaged into snack, hygiene, learning, clothes, and school supply kits, and placed in Little Free Libraries found outside each school so that families had easy access to materials they needed. With the launch of remote learning, the Community Schools team mobilized 47 volunteers who spent 152 hours assembling 1,687 student materials kits so that each student benefited from an array of hands-on learning materials during virtual instruction.



A BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

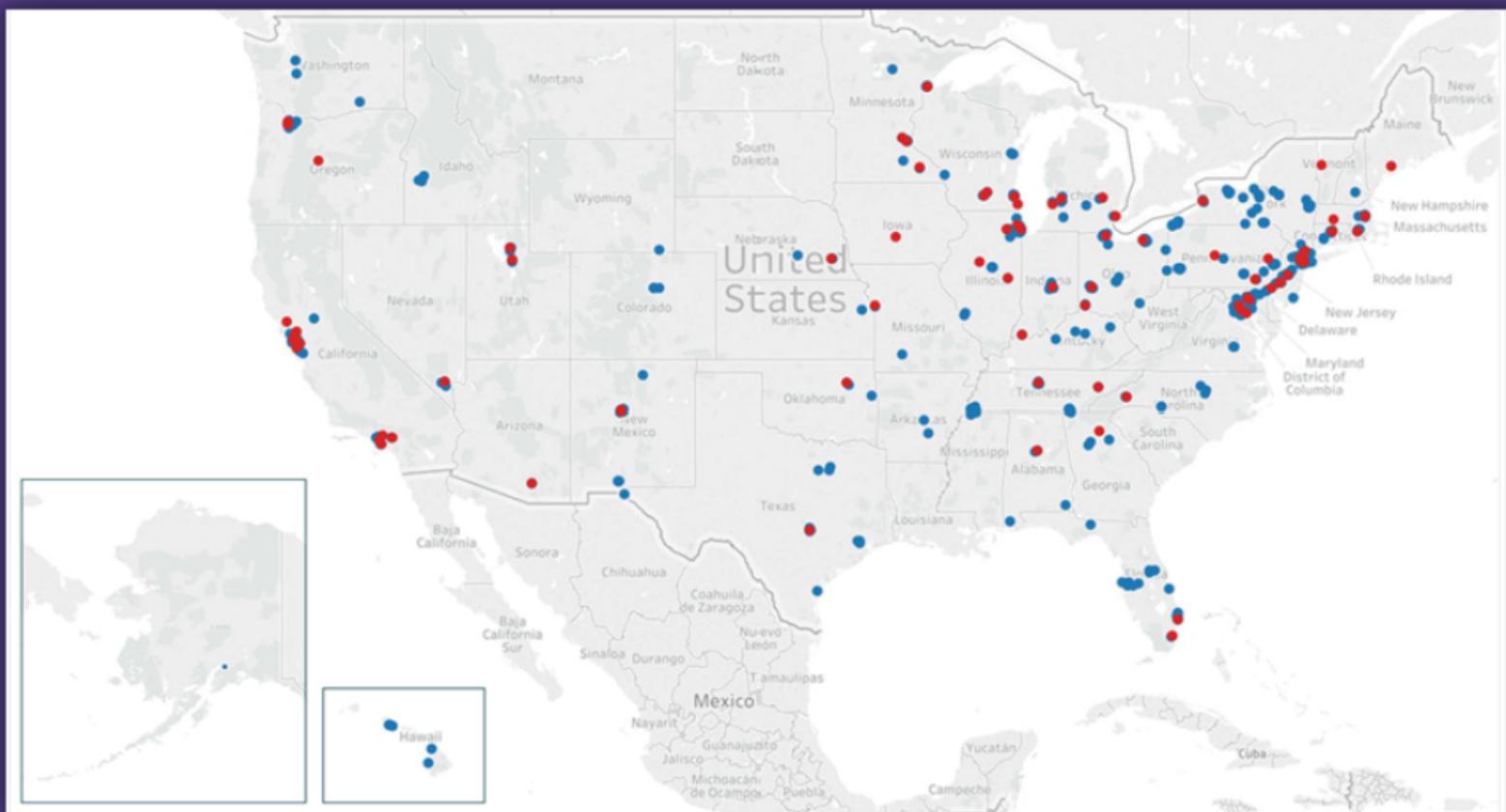
This is a critical and exciting moment to rethink and redesign our various cross-sector systems, including in education, local government, philanthropy, and community-based organizations so that *all* students, families, and communities thrive. Research and evaluations such as [Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement](#) and the recent [RAND study of NYC's Community Schools](#) already show Community Schools are an effective evidence-based strategy for school improvement. Community Schools are also a smart investment: the coordination of resources at both the school and system levels translates to a [return on investment](#) of over \$7 for every \$1 invested in a Community School Coordinator's salary, a key role for successful implementation of the strategy. Additionally, Community Schools have shown to produce up to a \$15 social return of investment.

There are approximately 600 tribal nations; 900 community colleges; 3,000 counties; 5,000 universities and colleges; 13,000 school districts; 16,000 townships; and 19,000 municipalities across the United States. The diversity of resources and funding of these entities in communities alone make it complex to address comprehensive and compounding issues in a coordinated manner. However, there is one common thread where diversity is a strength...the people. Community Schools can be the impetus and nexus for creating ecosystems of collaboration that produce more efficient, effective, and equitable opportunities and outcomes for all.

To achieve systemic transformation, we must create a tipping point or critical mass of all public schools working as Community Schools for nationwide coordination and alignment within a short period of time. This means reaching approximately 25% of the nearly 100,000 public schools in the United States, which is about 25,000 Community Schools.

The [Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund](#) (ESSER) supplies over \$120 billion for which Community Schools is an allowable use. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education released a set of [FAQ's for using American Rescue Plan funds to support Full-Service Community Schools](#) that will provide helpful guidance to states, districts, and schools. This historic federal funding provides an opportunity that can be highly leveraged to not only accelerate relief and recovery by the September 2024 timeframe, but build sustainable systems for future development.

Currently, there are Community Schools in at least 41 states plus the District of Columbia. Over 100 communities are building systems that adopt Community Schools as a preferred coordination and redesign strategy. Therefore, reaching 25,000 sustainable Community Schools by 2025 is a very achievable goal.



HOW TO LEVERAGE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

As a contributor to the [Brookings](#) Institution’s Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools, the Coalition fully supports the recommendation of centering focus on “the 4 percent of school districts that educate approximately 40 percent of the country’s children that have the greatest concentration of unmet student needs.” This would be nearly 50,000 Title I eligible schools.

To further pinpoint our collective focus, the Coalition for Community Schools recommends leveraging federal, state, and local resources and relationships that help to build, advance, support and sustain Community Schools efforts to their fullest extent.

Coincidentally, pre-pandemic, there were nearly 25,000 Title I schoolwide schools.

It is important to note that the implementation of Community Schools are not the end goal, but the strategy to leverage for the systemic transformation described above. Community schools are a mechanism to advance democracy and move us toward more equitable social and economic conditions for all. To optimize the impact and investment in Community Schools, we recommend that school districts support and fund planning for Community Schools by creating and strengthening partnerships with local agencies, nonprofits, community and grassroots organizations, foundations, and businesses to blend and braid funding toward a comprehensive Community School strategy to fund key investments.

As is evidenced by the collection of examples described above, it is essential for states, districts, and communities to invest in coordination and collaboration at all levels—from the school to district to state level. The following recommendations support and strengthen such an investment to maximize the impact of the Community Schools strategy:

School-Level

- **Fund full-time Community School Coordinators** to ensure quality implementation and [increase the return of investment](#) by leveraging civic engagement and community resources toward desired outcomes. Also fund other key staff (e.g., family liaisons, specialized instructional support personnel) at school sites to ensure quality implementation and oversee the implementation of services. District-level staff can help establish systems-level partnerships, streamline operations, and provide technical assistance to support the growth and sustainability of Community School sites.



- **Enhance School-Level Community School Councils**, a collaborative leadership structure inclusive of the Community School Coordinator, teachers, parents, community partners, students, and school leadership, by funding professional development and technical assistance, evaluation and research, and programs and activities corresponding to [the four pillars of Community Schools](#) (integrated student supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices), and by creating access to disaggregated data to facilitate continuous improvement.

District/Community-Level

- **Incentivize Cross-Sector Collaboratives** at the local level by creating competitive grants using federal relief funds that include school districts, local governments, philanthropic organizations, corporate partners, unions, colleges/universities and local intermediary organizations that represent large constituencies to blend and braid funding, align practices, monitor results and develop supportive policies. This will aid in increasing the administrative efficiency of funding, and supporting and evaluating Community Schools. Fund professional development, technical assistance and coaching for Community school coordinators and their schools' leadership teams. Albuquerque's [Joint Powers Agreement](#) that supports its Community Schools initiative is a great example. More recently, Erie Public Schools in Erie, PA is [investing some of its American Rescue Plan funds](#) towards implementing 5 additional community schools, through a partnership with the local United Way which will secure funds starting in 2024 to sustain the schools. We recommend other districts consider these kinds of innovative partnerships to sustain the impact of ARP funds.

State-Level

- **Develop State Coalitions** consisting of statewide intermediaries and organizations that represent the four pillars of Community Schools along with local Community School initiatives to act as the collaborative leadership structure that would gather and share local practices, co-design state policy and funding recommendations, and advise on effective integration of state departments with local efforts. Find out more about state coalitions and the Coalition's network for these [here](#).

RESOURCES

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For Technical Assistance: Coalition for Community Schools (ccs@iel.org), [Children's Aid](#)

[About the Coalition for Community Schools:](#)

The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of local, state and national partners who relentlessly leads efforts to advance equitable systems and opportunities.

[About The Institute for Educational Leadership:](#)

Since 1964, IEL has equipped leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that prepare children and youth for postsecondary education, careers, and citizenship.



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