

Executive Summary

A Handbook for State Policy Leaders

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Improving Student Learning/Strengthening Schools, Families, and Communities



As states strive to meet increased expectations for student achievement, there is a growing understanding that learning takes place in many places—after school, at home, and in neighborhoods and communities as well as during the school day. Research also recognizes that children need support from their families and their communities to reach their full potential. The Coalition for Community Schools believes that children will learn best in a school that:

- Meets their basic needs, including their safety
- Offers high quality curriculum and teaching aligned with academic standards, during the school day
- Provides learning experiences that extend learning beyond the formal school day
- Shows them opportunities for success beyond academics
- Engages them as active learners and contributors in their communities.

Our public schools should not assume sole, or even primary, responsibility for creating this environment for learning. Schools can, however, form *intentional partnerships* with families and with a wide range of different community organizations and institutions for this purpose. Together, they can create community schools.

Community Schools are Making a Difference

Research shows that community schools are making a considerable difference in cities and towns in almost every state. Here are some of the ways that community schools are strengthening students, families, schools and communities.

- **Strengthening Students.** Community schools improve student learning; engage students in real world learning; and involve students as resources to serve their communities as they learn.
- **Strengthening Families.** Community schools involve families in their children’s education, and help families address issues that are barriers to learning.

“We [educators] tend to put considerations of family and community off limits in education reform policy discussions. However, we do so at our peril.”

Paul E. Barton
Senior Associate
Educational Testing Service

■ **Strengthening Schools.** Community schools marshal community assets to improve students' learning; help teachers focus on teaching; and allow principals to keep schools moving toward high standards for all.

■ **Strengthening Communities.** Community schools help make public programs more effective and efficient and leverage private resources. They are accountable to community members. Community schools bring communities together.

■ **Community Schools have Public Support.**

According to the Ohio's Education Matters Poll, 84 percent of Ohioans support community use of schools for activities such as recreation programs and parenting and adult education classes; 79 percent agree that schools should offer mental health services for students; and 65 percent agree that social services for children—like health services, dental services and after-school programs—should be located in local schools (KnowledgeWorks Foundation).

■ **And Community Schools make good sense!**

"The notion that students... should be held to high standards is simple and compelling. But...every aspect of a needy student's life needs reinforcement in order for him or her to concentrate on the work of the classroom."

*Gene Maeroff,
Altered Destinies*

What State Policy Leaders Can Do

The Coalition for Community Schools calls on state policy leaders to take action to support community schools. States can provide necessary leadership in three areas:

■ **Develop and promote a VISION for improving student learning that incorporates the critical role of families and communities, as well as schools.**

1. **Articulate and promote the vision of community schools.** The vision should focus on supporting young people's learning and development, while strengthening families and communities.
2. **Create a framework of results.** This framework can focus local action and increase accountability.

■ **Ensure that all state programs and policies FOCUS on supporting student learning.**

3. **Coordinate categorical grant programs across agencies to improve student learning.** To reduce fragmentation, states can create strategies for planning and evaluation across categorical programs.

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Community schools are public schools that are open to students, families, and community members before, during, and after school throughout the year. They have high standards and expectations for students, qualified teachers, and rigorous curriculum. The staff knows that students and their families need more to succeed, so community schools do more.

Before- and after-school programs build on classroom experiences and help students expand their horizons, contribute to their communities, and have fun. Family support centers help with parent involvement, child rearing, employment, housing, and other services. Medical, dental, and mental health services are readily available. Parents and community residents participate in adult education and job training programs, and use the school as a place for community problem solving.

Community schools use the community as a resource to engage students in learning and service, and to help them become problem-solvers in their communities. Volunteers come to community schools to support young people's academic, interpersonal, and career success.

Individual schools and the school system work in partnership with community agencies to operate these unique institutions. Families, students, principals, teachers, and neighborhood residents decide together how to support student learning.

- 4. Provide incentives for coordination at the local level.** Local school improvement plans and plans for programs and services to be provided at schools can include provisions for coordination and integration.
- 5. Connect existing task forces and advisory groups.** The goal is to reduce fragmentation among agencies and programs.
- 6. Rethink State Education Agency (SEA) and related organizational arrangements to promote coordination.** Place similar programs in the same unit, with a mandate to align their activities to support student learning.
- 7. Coordinate technical assistance resources.** Expand available technical assistance resources by developing public/private partnerships and coordinating TA from a range of state programs.
- 8. Recognize the value of community collaboration and community decision-making.** Allow existing community collaborative groups to coordinate a community schools initiative if they can demonstrate sufficient capacity.

9. Allow each locality to select its lead agency for different state programs. When communities are able to select an organization to serve as lead agency for a particular initiative, collaboration is more likely to occur than when the state decides who should be in charge.

Together, through a community school approach, all of our children will become educated people, productive workers, strong family members, and active participants in American democracy.

■ **Make targeted INVESTMENTS in community schools to increase the effectiveness of existing programs and resources.**

The Rural School and Community Trust

10. Support community school coordinator positions. Community school coordinators engage community resources to improve student achievement and ensure that school staff can remain focused on learning.

11. Provide sustained funding. Community schools need support for a period of time sufficient to demonstrate their effectiveness.

12. Support planning at the school–community level. Planning grants for local community school initiatives can engage potential partners and ensure quality programs.

13. Build schools as centers of communities. When communities invest sizable public resources in school buildings, these facilities should be designed and built to accommodate the community’s needs for space and services.

14. Provide intensive technical assistance on ways to foster the involvement of families in their children’s education. Family involvement improves students’ school achievement, and agencies and organizations in the community can play a vital role in reaching and engaging parents.

15. Provide a source of flexible funding to achieve priority results. Flexible funding helps bring community partners to the table to determine what needs to be done to support student learning.

16. Strengthen professional development. All those involved in community schools need access to professional development. Skills for working in collaboration with community organizations should be included in professional development for principals.

Cover photo: Second grade class field trip to the Colorado state capitol (PhotoDisc).

ESSENTIAL OPERATIONAL ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

1. **Clear vision and goals** as well as ways to measure effectiveness
2. A **full-time community school coordinator** to provide leadership for planning, management, and collaboration
3. A source of **flexible funding** to attract new partners and allow the partnership to respond to urgent priorities
4. **Sufficient programs, services, and resources** at the school site to achieve desired results
5. **Effective, research-based, service-delivery strategies** coordinated at the community school
6. **Integration of after-school programs and community-based learning experiences** with the school curriculum
7. **Engaged community leadership** at the school site and at the community or school-district level
8. **Technical assistance and professional development** to support quality services
9. **Adequate and accessible facilities.**

This document is available online at www.communityschools.org.

Coalition for Community Schools



Strengthening schools, families & communities

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