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Achieving Results Through Community School Partnerships

How District and Community Leaders Are Building Effective, Sustainable Relationships



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Introduction and summary

A community school is a place and a set of partnerships connecting a school, the families of students, and the surrounding community. A community school is distinguished by an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. Community schools extend the school day and week, reaching students, their families, and community residents in unique ways. Community schools are thus uniquely equipped to develop their students into educated citizens who are ready and able to give back to their communities.

The community school strategy is central to efforts to improve America's public schools. Community schools use partnerships to align school and community resources in order to produce successful students, strong families, and engaged communities. They combine quality education with enrichment opportunities, health and mental health services, family support and engagement, early childhood and adult education, and other supports.

Research shows that low-income families regularly experience economic and material hardship. Missed rent, utility shutoffs, inadequate access to health care, unstable child care arrangements, and food insecurity are common experiences that inevitably affect students' readiness, attendance, performance, and completion rates at school.¹

By sharing resources, expertise, and accountability, community schools can address challenges related to economic hardship and create essential conditions for learning by concentrating on a single access point—public schools—to effectively target their efforts. Any type of public school can become a community school, including traditional, charter, alternative, magnet or others. The vision of a community school must be at the heart of emerging place-based initiatives, including Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, cradle-to-career programs, and P-20 networks integrating educational opportunities from preschool through college.

This paper outlines how school and community leaders develop a common vision for a community schools strategy and explores six key strategies that successful community school initiatives use to build effective partnerships with local government agencies, teachers' unions, and other organizations. It begins by describing the elements of a community school strategy, then draws on the experiences of several community school initiatives that use the following strategies to form and maintain key relationships:

- **Ensure that all partners share a common vision.** The entire community and all involved partners should agree on the same goals and expectations.
- **Establish formal relationships and collaborative structures to engage stakeholders.** Initiating and sustaining stakeholder participation often requires creating structured opportunities ranging from developing taskforces to creating formal agreements.
- **Encourage open dialogue about challenges and solutions.** To foster shared ownership, stakeholders must engage honestly and constructively with each other to solve problems and make midcourse corrections.
- **Engage partners in the use of data.** Sharing data enables all stakeholders to understand where things stand and hold each other accountable for making measurable progress.
- **Create and empower central-office capacity at the district level to sustain community school work.** Continued capacity can be created through establishing a high-level management position within a district's central office or through creating an office dedicated to supporting a community school agenda.
- **Leverage community resources and braid funding streams.** Community schools capitalize on the financial assets of community partners and funding streams to support programs and activities aligned with their common vision.

Successful community school partnerships deliver strong results

The community school strategy is already proving to be effective around our nation. Research shows that students in community schools in and around Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, are outperforming noncommunity schools on state tests

in math by 32 points and reading by 19 points.² What's more, another study found that community schools outperform matched noncommunity schools on measures of dropout and graduation rates.³

Then there are the students who regularly participated in the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods community schools initiatives in Portland, Oregon, and nearby Multnomah County. These students showed strong gains in academics, attendance and behavioral areas, with increased state benchmark scores in reading and in math.⁴

And in Cincinnati, Oyster Community Learning Center graduated more students over the past three years than in the previous 85, improving its Ohio Performance Index (which measures student achievement) each year. The reason: Oyster is part of a districtwide community school initiative that is seeing results: In 2010–11 Cincinnati Public Schools earned an “Effective” status on the state’s rating system for the second straight year.⁵

This paper demonstrates the effectiveness and importance of community schools to reforming our public school systems in ways that are creative, enduring, and based on measurable results.

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