



# Building Community Schools Systems

Removing Barriers to Success in U.S. Public Schools

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By Abel McDaniels August 2018

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

*“Making every school a community school has to be our collective vision. This has to be the rule rather than the exception.”<sup>1</sup>*

*—Former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, New York City,  
October 22, 2009*

If the United States is ever to fulfill its promise of full equality for all citizens, its public schools need to work for all children. In the information age economy, the benefits of postsecondary educational attainment on lifetime earnings are higher than ever before.<sup>2</sup> However, family poverty status remains the best indicator of educational attainment, and as of 2013, the majority of public school students live in or near poverty.<sup>3</sup> U.S. public schools must improve how they serve low-income students and communities.

The community schools strategy rethinks public schools in order to provide children in low-income communities with a high-quality education. It centers public schools as hubs for communities and combines a rigorous, relevant educational program with extended learning opportunities, family and community engagement, and an infusion of social services. There are roughly 5,000 community schools in the United States today, and a social return on investment study indicated that every \$1 invested in community schools affiliated with Children’s Aid in New York City delivers an additional \$12 to \$15 in social value. This value refers to additional revenues generated and costs avoided, as well as qualitative impact such as the value of specific programming.<sup>4</sup>

Many community schools are operated at the individual school level, often with the assistance of intermediary nonprofit organizations but with little school district involvement. However, in order to educate students in low-income communities at high levels, school districts should and can play a larger role in coordinating and supporting community schools. The community schools strategy offers districts serving low-income communities a way to overcome structural

obstacles that make it more difficult to give children a high-quality education; these include poor access to physical and mental health services as well as to meaningful enrichment opportunities. District engagement can strengthen individual schools and, perhaps even more importantly, help bring this promising strategy to scale.

Leaders of large school systems are recognizing this opportunity. In 2010, then-Oakland, California, Superintendent Tony Smith announced that Oakland would transition to a full community schools district. It was one of the largest school districts to do so. About four years later, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio followed suit, committing to the creation of 100 community schools across the city.<sup>5</sup> Overall, there are 215 community schools in New York City today.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, in order for the community schools strategy to truly be an integral part of the nation's school system, state governments must drive this work. New York's 2016-17 enacted budget created a \$100 million set-aside within the state's funding formula for community schools programming in 225 school districts identified as "high-need."<sup>7</sup> In order to support a community schools strategy, the statewide commission charged with updating Maryland's school finance system recommended that the state consider the number of students living in poverty when funding school districts.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps the growth achieved by students in Kentucky best demonstrates how an aspect of the community schools strategy can be integral to educational progress. The state's 1990 education reform law required schools serving low-income communities to have family resource and youth services centers (FRYSC), which help remove nonacademic barriers to learning. Today, Kentucky has 820 FRYSCs operating in 1,166 schools and serving 612,741 students. According to an index that combines multiple educational attainment and achievement factors, Kentucky improved its national ranking from 48th in 1990 to 33rd in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

A community schools strategy is both reasonable and feasible for school district leaders to adopt. This report details the evolution of community schools initiatives, which are increasing in number and are being led by school districts. It first explains how concentrated poverty affects the student populations of high-poverty schools in very low-income neighborhoods. The report then describes the community schools strategy, before looking at the examples of three case studies: Union Public Schools in Oklahoma, Oakland Unified School District in California, and Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut. These school districts have built and sustained community schools initiatives from the bottom-up,

giving students in low-income communities the high-quality education they need to be successful. The report concludes by discussing policy recommendations that district leaders looking to implement a community schools approach should keep in mind. Ultimately, however, state governments must lead in making the community schools strategy a reality for all schools that serve low-income students.



# Concentrated poverty poses challenges for public schools

Concentrated poverty exerts powerful constraints on access to opportunity and upward mobility. Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty—often defined as areas where at least 40 percent of residents are low income—contend with high rates of unemployment, population turnover, and housing instability.<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath of the recent recession, and amid rising income inequality, more Americans—and more American children—live in areas of concentrated poverty. The number of high-poverty census tracts has increased 50 percent since 2000, and 11 million people live in census tracts where at least 40 percent of their neighbors are low income.<sup>11</sup> Concentrated poverty fuels racial inequality in the United States, as blacks and Latinos are more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty than white people.<sup>12</sup>

Working in isolation, schools cannot overcome the effects of concentrated poverty. Sociologists studying neighborhood context measured the effects of four neighborhood factors: presence of residents with professional jobs, residential stability, economic deprivation, and community demographics. They found that the presence of middle-class, professional residents in a neighborhood was a stronger predictor of student achievement than students' effort at school or their family's choice to enroll them in a private K-12 school.<sup>13</sup>

Another study examined the math test scores of 10 million middle school students by census tract. It found that as poverty levels in a school's neighborhood increased, student achievement decreased, from an average score of 0.4 in schools with the lowest poverty levels to an average score of negative 0.2 in schools with the highest poverty levels.<sup>14</sup> Living in a high-poverty neighborhood has been shown to reduce black children's verbal abilities by the equivalent of missing a year of school; this is due to the quality of the school environment and other community factors.<sup>15</sup>

And the impact of concentrated poverty on student achievement compounds over time. More recent research has shown that a family's exposure to neighborhood poverty over two consecutive generations can reduce a child's cognitive ability by

more than half of a standard deviation.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, growing up in a high-poverty neighborhood has been shown to reduce the probability of graduating high school from 96 percent to 76 percent for black children and from 95 percent to 87 percent for nonblack children. Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood has been shown to increase a child's future earnings by 4 percent per year.<sup>17</sup>

By no means are these effects the fault of people living in low-income neighborhoods; nor are they the fault of educators who staff the neighborhoods' schools. Other challenges facing these neighborhoods—such as high rates of unemployment, rapid population turnover, and changes in the job market—exacerbate the effects of poverty.<sup>18</sup> When neighborhood disadvantage is concentrated in this way, it weakens community institutions and informal social norms that support conventional behavior—or behavior consistent with expectations that are broadly socially acceptable, like having children in marriage.<sup>19</sup> Historically, policies at all levels of government have helped create neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and they too often facilitate disinvestment in these communities.<sup>20</sup>

A 2017 analysis from the Center for American Progress suggests that roughly 10 million children currently attend extremely high-poverty K-12 schools, in which 3 in 4 of their classmates are low income. The analysis was based on eligibility for federal free and reduced-price school lunch programs. The increase in poverty found in other research suggests that even more students attend schools affected by concentrated poverty.<sup>21</sup>

The public generally understands the effects that living in poverty can have on an individual child's ability to do well in school. Policymakers and education leaders need to look beyond poverty's effects on the development of individual children and consider how concentrated poverty affects an entire school's ability to deliver the quality education that students in high-poverty neighborhoods deserve—and need to be successful.

To improve the quality of education for low-income children in consistently low-performing schools, policymakers have raised academic standards, focused on teacher quality, increased instructional hours, and experimented with new models of school governance. While these efforts have brought improvements to some states and school districts, no previous interventions have significantly improved outcomes for low-income children at scale. Overall, American students scored behind 19 other nations in 2015 on the reading section of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). But American



students at schools in which less than 25 percent of students were in poverty finished first, while students at schools in which more than 75 percent of students were in poverty finished 33rd.<sup>22</sup>

Schools must be reimagined and retooled to help high-poverty communities educate students to high levels. Although the policies mentioned above address core elements of state and local education systems that clearly need to be improved, they alone are not enough for schools in high-poverty neighborhoods. The Obama administration correctly attempted to approach issues of housing and intergenerational poverty by using place-based strategies, which consider how a community's built environment and social and economic assets affect the people who live there.<sup>23</sup> Between 2010 and 2016, the federal government awarded \$340 million to 64 grantees in order to develop the Promise Neighborhoods program.<sup>24</sup>

While admirable, this approach will not allow all public schools and districts to provide the comprehensive supports that children in high-poverty communities need. Given the challenges that continue to face schools in high-poverty neighborhoods—as well as the latest research on neighborhood effects and social mobility—leaders, policymakers, and lawmakers need to fully embrace a place-based approach, ensure education leaders have the resources to enact it, and remove barriers that hinder their work.

# The community schools strategy

The place-based community schools strategy would allow public schools to comprehensively address the holistic needs of a student population, especially those arising from poverty. The community schools approach is rooted in the belief that strong connections between the school system and local resources benefit all students, families, and communities.<sup>25</sup> By developing strategic partnerships to align school and community resources, this strategy combines a strong instructional program with supports for families and youth development, as well as health and social services. The Coalition for Community Schools defines community schools as a “place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources.”<sup>26</sup> Children’s Aid, a New York City nonprofit organization that serves children and families in low-income neighborhoods, says community schools are a “strategy [that] delivers services tailor made for a particular student population and positions those scholars to overcome the barriers to academic success.”<sup>27</sup>

A community school is a strategy or an approach—not a specific program that can be replicated—because the particular services or supports it offers are designed to meet the needs of a targeted population of students.<sup>28</sup> A given school or district’s theory of school improvement, a community’s assets, and capacity at the school and district levels shape what a community school may look like in a given place.<sup>29</sup> In a comprehensive review of the research on community schools to date, the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center identified four common “pillars” of a community schools strategy:

- **Integrated student supports:** Sometimes called wraparound services, integrated student supports (ISS) are resources, programs, or services that schools coordinate with outside organizations to provide services on a case-by-case basis in order to meet students’ and families’ needs as well as to address structural barriers to students’ educational success. Examples of these services range from tutoring, housing or food assistance, medical or dental care, and mental health services to English language or parenting classes.

- **Family and community engagement:** Family and community engagement practices include students' family members as partners in their education and involve community members in school governance and decision-making.
- **Expanded learning time and opportunities:** Also called out-of-school-time (OST) programming or extended learning opportunities (ELOs), this term refers to programming that takes place outside the traditional school day—after school, on weekends, or during the summer. While some extended school day initiatives just lengthen the academic school day through additional instruction time, OST can include additional instruction or individualized tutoring as well as enrichment or other meaningful learning opportunities
- **Collaborative leadership and practices:** Community schools employ structures that share responsibility and decision-making within school buildings and across relevant sectors that pertain to children's well-being. This can include the school district, municipal agencies, and local nonprofit and community organizations.<sup>30</sup>

A community school should have a full-time school-level coordinator, also called a community school director, who brings these four components together by conducting an assessment of a student population's needs and then working in partnership with the principal to execute a plan to meet the identified needs.<sup>31</sup>

The community schools strategy is not new; it simply reflects what makes sense to educators and the general public. Throughout history, educators have used elements of a community schools strategy to improve outcomes for children in high-poverty communities. In the late 19th century, social workers such as Jane Addams founded settlement houses in poor, urban, immigrant, and black neighborhoods in order to provide children and families with services and programs that helped acclimate them to America or to urban life.<sup>32</sup> During the Great Depression, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation launched a model that used school buildings outside of school hours to provide educational and recreational programs for students and families.<sup>33</sup> Since the 1990s, community-based organizations have operated programs outside of school time for low-income children through New York City's Beacon Community Centers and Children's Aid community schools.<sup>34</sup> Today, the Coalition for Community Schools estimates that there are more than 5,000 community schools nationwide.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, there is growing demand for a more comprehensive approach to the education of low-income children. Seventy-seven percent of all Americans think that public

schools should provide extended learning opportunities, and 76 percent of all Americans—including 65 percent of “strong conservatives”—think that public schools should provide mental health services to children as well.<sup>36</sup>

There is also a growing evidence base behind each of the community school components, as well as comprehensive models that bring the four components together. After examining studies of community schools pillars—and synthesizing several studies of eight models that incorporated all of these pillars to some degree—the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center concluded that community schools satisfy the evidentiary requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In short, this means that studies of multiple levels of rigor supported community schools.<sup>37</sup>

- **Integrated student supports** are associated with a range of positive student outcomes. An evaluation of one popular ISS model shows that students who received these services scored higher on a standardized test in reading, writing, and math than their peers at other schools who did not receive the services. English language learners who received these services had report card scores similar to their English-proficient peers. They also had higher rates of retention and lower rates of chronic absenteeism than their peers in schools that did not use this ISS model.<sup>38</sup> A review of 19 randomized control trial or quasi-experimental evaluations of ISS interventions found positive impacts in all but two studies, which ranged from increases in math or reading test scores to higher attendance and graduation rates.<sup>39</sup>
- **Family and community engagement** is associated with reduced absenteeism, improved academic outcomes, and greater levels of trust between schools and families. Researchers found a positive relationship between family involvement and student outcomes across families of all races and socioeconomic and education backgrounds. This included higher GPAs and standardized test scores, enrollment in more challenging courses, better attendance, improved behavior, and better social skills.<sup>40</sup>
- **Extended learning time and opportunities** have been shown to have a positive impact on student engagement and achievement. An analysis of 14 scholarly reviews found higher rates of attendance and education attainment as well as improved standardized test scores.<sup>41</sup>

- **Collaborative leadership and practices** is a key mediating factor for ensuring that the previous three pillars have the intended impacts on student outcomes. Collaborative school structures improve a school's capacity to improve academically and help develop teacher feelings of efficacy, relational trust, and strong ties between parents, educators, and community members.<sup>42</sup>

The community schools pillars address the challenges that concentrated poverty can present for public schools. Moreover, studies of varying degrees of rigor show that these pillars can be effective in overcoming these barriers and promoting positive outcomes for students, families, and school communities. Research also suggests that these pillars are most effective when brought together in coherent, data-informed models or initiatives.<sup>43</sup>

# Building community schools districts:

## Case studies

About 100 school districts have taken on the community schools strategy at scale. This section highlights evolving initiatives in three urban schools districts and describes in detail how these districts adopted a community schools strategy. These districts reflect the size, student demographics, and fiscal and enrollment challenges that confront many midsize and large urban school systems. The section looks at the following three case studies: Union Public Schools in southeast Tulsa, Oklahoma; Oakland Community Schools; and Hartford, Connecticut, Community Schools.

### 1. **Union Public Schools: 100 percent graduation-, college-, and/or career-ready.**

Union Public Schools in Oklahoma, which serves 15,847 students in southeast Tulsa and a portion of Broken Arrow considers itself a community schools district.<sup>44</sup> The district's eight elementary schools—which all receive federal Title I funding—have a community schools coordinator on staff, and two schools have full-service medical clinics on-site. These are available to the community as well.<sup>45</sup> In addition, mental health providers see students throughout all district schools, and families have access to districtwide clothing support.<sup>46</sup> The Tulsa City-County Health Department also offers nutrition programs and health and wellness programs for students, as well as demonstrations for parents. The Oklahoma Caring Foundation offers free immunizations for all students. Additionally, community schools in the district offer a range of early childhood programming and adult education.<sup>47</sup>

Union's after-school programming has evolved from simply a safe place for students to be in the afternoon to one where students take part in meaningful learning opportunities that their families may not be able to easily provide.<sup>48</sup> At the elementary school level, community school coordinators have brokered partnerships with a wide range of after-school program providers, with support from the school district. At Union, after-school programs have five main areas of focus: science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); health and wellness; youth development and service learning; fine arts; and academic enrich-



ment. The local zoo, for example, operates a program that brings small animals to schools for a STEM-based curriculum. Microsoft offers coding programs, and the Woody Guthrie Center provides programming in social justice, local history, and music. Other partners include the Tulsa Glassblowing School, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa Symphony, and Tulsa Regional STEM Alliance.<sup>49</sup> There are a total of 211 after-school programs across Union's eight Title I-eligible schools. Based on standardized test scores, an external evaluation that controlled for individual student poverty and the diffusion of the strategy in a school concluded that Union's community schools have narrowed the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers.<sup>50</sup>

2. **Oakland Community Schools: A holistic approach to educating children by eliminating educational inequity.** In Oakland, a community schools strategy emerged from a substantial public engagement campaign after California released the district from state receivership. Today, all Oakland schools are considered community schools, and five common community school systems are in place across the district. First, all schools have a coordination of services team that responds to students' behavioral and academic needs; they also have attendance teams and the resources necessary to operate them. Second, the district has established processes to assist schools in developing partnerships with community organizations and to help schools secure security clearances for partners and make sure a partner's focus is well-aligned with a school's goals. The district also manages transition programs and initiatives to support students and families as they progress between Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) school buildings.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, there are 16 school-based health centers throughout the school district. Lead agencies, most of which are federally qualified health centers, staff and operate the centers, and they provide medical, dental, and mental health services as well as health education classes.<sup>52</sup> A range of staff members at all schools can refer students for health services.

3. **Hartford Community Schools: Partnerships for excellence.** Education and civic leaders in Hartford, Connecticut, turned to community schools to build equity in the city's school system. Today, Hartford has six community schools, comprising roughly 14 percent of the total district schools.<sup>53</sup> Hartford Community Schools currently use the lead agency model, in which each school partners with a community-based organization that provides and coordinates other services. The initiative currently works with four lead agencies.<sup>54</sup>

Hartford's community schools initiative is informed by an extensive theory of change rooted in a holistic framework. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to develop a "sustainable and thriving community" in Hartford, and student success in academic, social, emotional, and health domains are the preconditions for this ultimate goal.<sup>55</sup> Across Hartford's community schools, students and families have access to after-school programming; academic support in reading and math; tutoring programs; mental health services for both students and families; GED and English as a second language (ESL) classes; food assistance; case management services; and home visit supports.<sup>56</sup> Hartford Community Schools have raised student achievement, decreased chronic absenteeism, and strengthened parent and family engagement.<sup>57</sup>

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## Adopting a community schools strategy

Educators in the three school districts discussed above turned to a community schools strategy in order to address the range of obstacles to student success. After individual sites demonstrated evidence of success, district leadership built system-level structures to support the strategy and developed policies to define and maintain these structures.

### Union Public Schools

Educators in Union Public Schools adopted a community schools strategy in response to persistent challenges that arose while serving an increasingly disadvantaged community. Traditionally, Union was a predominantly white, affluent district, but it saw rapid demographic changes throughout the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> The share of students in the district eligible for free or reduced-price lunch rose from roughly 10 percent in the 1990s to current levels of around 60 percent.<sup>59</sup> In the early 2000s, as the student population continued to change, staff at Roy Clark Elementary School noticed higher rates of students moving away as well as general low academic performance among students and widening gaps between different subgroups.<sup>60</sup> Many teachers at the school were requesting transfers to different buildings since students began to require more support than a traditional school or teacher could provide.<sup>61</sup> In 2004, teachers and administrators at Clark Elementary met to identify students' unmet needs and figure out what they as a school community could do to address them.

After talking to parents and looking at student data—including behavior, attendance, test scores, and mobility rates—as well as neighborhood crime rates, school staff identified persistent unmet needs in the areas of health care, after school programming for supervision, and mental health services.<sup>62</sup> Shortly after, school staff partnered with the University of Oklahoma to convert the teachers’ lounge into a medical clinic.<sup>63</sup> The school also engaged a local behavioral health provider to provide mental health services during the school day.<sup>64</sup> The Community Service Council—a research, planning, and action-based organization—was interested in supporting public schools. After attending a conference hosted by the Coalition for Community Schools, it started the Tulsa Area Community School Initiative (TACSI) and began fundraising to hire a coordinator to implement the community schools strategy and manage after-school program offerings.<sup>65</sup> School staff, district administrators, and community members saw the impact that the strategy was having as staff at Clark Elementary and other schools began to implement the model. In 2013, the board of education adopted the strategy as part of the district’s strategic plan.<sup>66</sup>

The community schools strategy informs how the Union Public Schools district functions, and several collaborative leadership structures support this aspect of the district’s work. The district’s mission is for 100 percent of its students to graduate from high school prepared to attend college and/or secure a living-wage job, and it has identified early childhood education, STEM access, college- and career-related programming, and community schools as the strategies to reach this goal.<sup>67</sup> As former Union Public Schools Associate Superintendent Kathy Dodd explains, the district’s “mental bandwidth and personnel [are] invested into these strands.”<sup>68</sup> At the district level, the associate superintendent and the executive director of elementary education oversee the community schools work, as the schools that have coordinators are elementary schools.<sup>69</sup> There is also a district-level community schools coordinator whose efforts are focused primarily on developing and engaging community partners and resource development for the community schools strategy. At the eight Title I schools, coordinators work in partnership with building principals, school staff, and parents to identify families’ needs and secure resources to meet them. Principals understand and value the community schools strategy because it is part of Union’s administrative training and preparation process: All prospective principals must have served as an assistant principal at one of the community schools that has a coordinator.<sup>70</sup> Because of the range of services provided, all of the district’s major departments—including transportation, payroll, maintenance, and child nutrition—are involved in the community schools strategy and

have adjusted their functioning to support the strategy.<sup>71</sup> Sandi Calvin, the district’s executive director of elementary education, says “Here at Union, [a community schools approach] is embedded in the culture of everything we do.”<sup>72</sup>

## Oakland Community Schools

District leaders in Oakland understood that in order for students to thrive academically, the school system would have to address the structural inequities that confront students and their families. OUSD serves a racially and ethnically diverse community with many identified needs. OUSD’s student population is 25.4 percent African American, 13.3 percent Asian, 41.8 percent Latino, 11.4 percent white, and 4 percent multiethnic. More than half of the district’s students—50.3 percent—live in households where English is not the first language, and roughly 1 in 3 are English language learners.<sup>73</sup>

Over the past century, discriminatory practices, coupled with government policies and practices, fostered the growth of surrounding suburban communities at the expense of cities, disadvantaged nonwhite residents, and these residents’ neighborhoods. Today, the technology economy is reinvigorating Oakland’s economy, but it is also creating challenges with displacement and affordable housing for the very residents that have long suffered intentional disinvestment.<sup>74</sup> These unequal patterns of investment in OUSD’s metropolitan area created real challenges for its families, including joblessness, underemployment, and food or housing insecurity. All of these things affect a child’s ability to come to school every day ready to learn.

OUSD began its transition to a full-service community schools district in 2011, when the state returned the district to local control. Then-Superintendent Tony Smith led a community engagement process that consisted of 13 different task forces across multiple domains, involving over 5,000 community members.<sup>75</sup> OUSD had already joined other urban districts in California to create an accountability system that measured school performance by indicators beyond test scores, and this work and holistic focus laid the groundwork for a community schools strategy.

As with Union, the community schools strategy strongly informs OUSD’s mission, vision, and operations at nearly all levels of the school system. OUSD’s current strategic plan says that the district seeks to “build a Full Service

Community District focused on high academic achievement while serving the whole child, eliminating inequity, and providing each child with excellent teachers, every day.”<sup>76</sup> District leaders believe that this will require them to “transform a public education system that reinforces race and class-based fault lines into one that breaks down barriers to achievement.”<sup>77</sup>

The district created the role of a community schools manager to support the community schools initiative at the school level. Community schools managers are senior administrators that coordinate, oversee, and lead efforts to support school and student needs.<sup>78</sup> During the 2017-18 school year, 35 schools had a community schools manager, and the district is planning to have a manager at 39 schools for the 2018-19 year.<sup>79</sup>

Schools are complex organizations, and the additional functions that a community schools strategy requires complicates operations even further. Distributive leadership—a model in which school leaders share responsibility across several levels of administration, organize work through teams, and foster a sense of collective responsibility—supports the community schools strategy across OUSD.<sup>80</sup> In line with this approach, some OUSD principals incorporate culture and climate staff, community schools managers, and even essential outside partners onto leadership teams. Some principals have even built intentional processes or structures, such as parent action teams or parent councils, in an attempt to involve parents in decision-making at the school level.<sup>81</sup>

At the district level, the Department of Community Schools and Student Services (CSSS) organizes the community schools initiative. District leaders built on what the partnership workgroup from the strategic planning process developed to engage partners at the district level, and a district-level partnership coordinator helps community school managers identify and build relationships with partners in order to fill specific school-level needs.<sup>82</sup>

District-level administrators support the work happening at the school level by setting minimum expectations for practices and then working collaboratively to build schools’ capacity to adopt them. For instance, the district’s central office scaled a system of behavioral supports rooted in restorative practices district-wide. The district developed the model of trauma-informed, culturally responsive positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) that it expected to be used systemwide. It then provided schools with training in the models, as well as resources—in the form of full- or part-time restorative coordinators—to

help begin its implementation. The district central office also built a leadership framework to teach principals how to lead in the distributive leadership model, provided professional development to train leaders in the framework, and aligned it with the principal evaluation process.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the central office offers professional development for community school managers and works with managers and their principals to structure the manager's work and ensure it is aligned with the school's goals.<sup>84</sup> OUSD also provides schools with resources such as standard memoranda of understanding templates, rubrics to assess relationships with site-level partners, and support hiring community school managers in order to build schools' capacity to operate in line with a community schools strategy.<sup>85</sup>

### Hartford Community Schools

Education and civic leaders in Hartford, Connecticut, came together around a community schools strategy in order to create more equitable schools. Then-Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools Steven Adamowski saw the value of a community schools strategy and was open to innovation. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving had already made investments in after-school programming in the area, through its after-school initiative, and the community schools work was built on this foundation. In 2008, leaders from Hartford Public Schools, the city of Hartford, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut formed the School-Community Partnership (SCP) and launched Hartford's community schools initiative.\* In 2012, the SCP assumed a broader agenda and re-named itself the Hartford Partnership for Student Success (HPSS). It has created an infrastructure that includes staff capacities, a shared budget, a governance structure, a memorandum of understanding, Hartford Public Schools board policy, a comprehensive theory of change, a common funding application process, and policies and procedures that ensure continuous improvement. The Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools supported these stakeholders in developing the initiative.<sup>86</sup> Recently the partnership has expanded to include other funders and stakeholders, including The Fund for Greater Hartford.

The theory of change behind Hartford Community Schools is designed to promote a holistic understanding of student success. It outlines the pathways of intermediary conditions that students, parents, schools, the school district, and community members must experience for students to be successful academi-



cally, socially, and emotionally—and to be healthy. Schools are tasked with, one, respectfully and appropriately engaging parents and families in student learning; two, ensuring students attend school and understand what they are learning; three, training staff in best behavior management practices; four, maintaining a physical environment conducive to learning; and five, supporting students' holistic needs. To support schools in performing these five functions, the HPSS supports family engagement work, allocates and leverages resources for community schools, facilitates community-school partnerships, and collects, analyzes, and appropriately shares data.<sup>87</sup>

The lead agencies funded by HPSS to implement the model support school-level community schools directors who integrate services with the school's core instructional programs. Community schools directors and the school principal apply to the partnership for funding using a common funding application that is aligned with the community schools initiative's theory of change and the school district's strategic plan. The funding application then serves as a basis for a work plan, which describes how the funded work will be executed and is also aligned with a school's improvement plan.<sup>88</sup> Community schools directors are embedded in a school's leadership team and work closely with school principals.<sup>89</sup>

The institutions that make up the Hartford Partnership for Student Success collaborate to manage Hartford's community schools at the systems level. The leadership team—which includes the district superintendent, the mayor, and the presidents of the Hartford Foundation, The Fund for Greater Hartford, and United Way—meet several times per year as champions of the work.<sup>90</sup> Senior leaders from each supporting institution also meet on a monthly basis to provide governance, strategic direction and resource development to support the partnership's infrastructure and the network of schools. The Hartford Foundation supports a director of HPSS, who manages the strategic planning, policy, and governance work to sustain the initiative, and a community schools coordinator, who provides technical assistance and implementation support to the Hartford Community Schools Network—which includes the lead agencies, school administrators, and other partners. The HPSS also convenes the network on a monthly basis to discuss the initiative's progression and troubleshoot common issues that may arise.<sup>91</sup> HPSS facilitates the relationship among schools and their lead agencies, and, through monthly outcomes reports, it monitors the progress of the lead agency's work plans.<sup>92</sup> The work plans are developed based on the needs and goals outlined in each school's improvement plan.<sup>93</sup>

Hartford Public Schools supports the community schools initiative. Cabinet-level district staff work in partnership with HPSS, and this helps to align school leadership with the community schools model because these designates oversee district and school-level administrators and may also supervise school principals.<sup>94</sup> The district's current strategic plan, the District Model for Excellence, has family and community partnerships as key priorities.<sup>95</sup>

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## Sustaining the work

After leaders in these districts committed to a community schools strategy at the systems level, they developed models to sustain the strategy financially, and policymakers took steps to codify and establish the strategy. This systems-level commitment and leadership supports schools by garnering and maintaining the financial resources they need to sustain the strategy.

### Union Public Schools

Union pulls together multiple funding sources to sustain its community schools approach. Initially, the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) raised money from corporate partners to fund the coordinator position. After seeing the impact, the district decided to use its ESSA Title I funding to pay for coordinators at its Title I elementary schools.<sup>96</sup> Currently, coordinators take on the responsibility for raising money or securing in-kind donations to support partnerships and programming, and the district-level community schools coordinator assists with this.<sup>97</sup> Often, community providers are willing to offer programming as long as they have space and a ready audience.<sup>98</sup> At the district and school levels, community school coordinators also secure various grants on their own. TACSI, now the Center for Community Schools Strategies, serves as the fiduciary agent and manages grants to support Union's community schools.<sup>99</sup> During the 2017-18 school year, grant awards, corporate donations, and coordinator-driven fundraising amounted to a total of \$299,457 to support the OST programming at the Title I eligible sites. In addition to diverse funding sources, strong relationships and partnerships, combined with the strategy included in school board policy, help to sustain Union's community schools.

## Oakland Community Schools

OUSD uses multiple funding sources to support its community schools.

The district has successfully applied for and secured a range of government grants—including the Full Service Community Schools and School Climate Transformation grants administered by the U.S. Department of Education; HIV prevention funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and state community school and OST program grants.<sup>100</sup> Local private foundations also help finance community schools work, including the San Francisco Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, Atlantic Philanthropies, and Oakland Fund for Children and Youth.<sup>101</sup>

The collaborative governance between the school and district levels helps sustain the community schools initiative. The arrangement in which the central office garners funding, establishes base-level expectations for programs and practices, and builds schools' capacity to meet them both allows for innovation at the school level and fits well with Oakland's culture and tradition of school-level autonomy.<sup>102</sup> The district's general budget supports central office staff who lead and coordinate community schools work.<sup>103</sup> Initially, the district is using the various funding sources to support programming and personnel costs for schools, but school leaders are expected to gradually build community schools costs into their budgets over time.<sup>104</sup> Oakland's community schools work has continued through five superintendents over eight years.

## Hartford Community Schools

The collaborative governance model of Hartford's community schools helps sustain the initiative. The institutions that comprise the HPSS contribute toward infrastructure costs to support the initiative, including staffing, evaluation, training, and technical assistance. In 2017-18, the HPSS' total investment—which includes both the infrastructure budget and grants to lead agencies in support of their designated schools—was approximately \$2.5 million. This is not inclusive of other in-kind supports or funds that are leveraged by lead agencies from other grants or partners.<sup>105</sup>

To support school-level costs, lead agencies both provide and broker services and often leverage additional support through other federal, city, or private funding streams. Medical and mental health services are eligible for third-party reimbursement. Lead agencies also provide in-kind supports—which take into

account the time that senior leadership has to attend meetings and spend time on community schools work—and existing agency services, such as financial services or parent trainings.<sup>106</sup>

The success of the partnership’s initial cohort of community schools is proof of the concept’s potential.<sup>107</sup> Now, Hartford Public Schools would like to work toward creating community schools at every school site by 2022 as a part of its strategic plan, the District Model for Excellence.<sup>108</sup> Through a tiered approach to partnership practices, the plan to scale the community schools model district-wide is a major accomplishment for Hartford.

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## Evaluating and continuously improving

Data drive the community schools strategy by giving leaders and stakeholders information about initiative strengths and areas for improvement. District officials established systems to collect data to gauge progress on short-term outputs aligned to their theory of change or their district strategic plan. Leaders of the initiatives also partner with outside evaluators to gauge progress toward more long term intended outcomes.

## Union Public Schools

In Union Public Schools, data from several sources inform how the various parts of the community schools strategy are working toward goals outlined in the district’s strategic plan. The plan identifies Union’s overall goal as graduating 100 percent of its students college- and career-ready. To that end, principals and coordinators look at student achievement scores in reading and math, as well as improvement in student behavior, participation in STEM programming, surveys to solicit feedback from students and families, and participation rates in the various health services.<sup>109</sup> Because each nonprofit or public agency that acts as a provider collects its own data, there are some challenges in creating centralized data repositories. However, because community schools coordinators are school district employees, they can access a range of student data points across the district.<sup>110</sup>

In addition to these internal metrics, Union partners with researchers from the University of Oklahoma to conduct a culture and climate survey every year. The researchers distribute the survey to students across one grade level—fourth grade—at each elementary school in order to measure students’ opinions on the services provided and the perceived levels of trust between students and school staff.<sup>111</sup>

An external evaluation of Union’s community schools shows that the strategy is closing the opportunity gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers. In 2010, researchers at the University of Oklahoma compared data for students in community schools supported by TACSI with that of students in non-community schools. First, researchers determined the extent to which a school had fully adopted the strategy by noting evidence of observable structures and norms to support the strategy’s pillars. They then categorized a school’s diffusion of the model as “inquiring,” “emerging,” “mentoring,” or “sustaining.”<sup>112</sup> Students in “mentoring” and “sustaining” schools had an average math achievement score of 734.7, compared with an average score of 701 for students in non-community schools. Meanwhile, the average reading achievement for students in non-community schools was 701, whereas students in the “mentoring” and “sustaining” community schools had a mean average reading score of 719.82.

The diffusion level of a school’s community schools strategy was a stronger predictor of student achievement than a school’s average poverty level. Low-income students in the most developed community schools had an average math score of 730.42, compared with an average score of 728.08 for non-low-income students in more affluent, non-community schools and an average score of 695.42 for low-income students who attended the more affluent schools. For reading achievement, low-income students in the most developed community schools had an average score of 717.46, compared with an average score of 723.88 for non-low-income students in non-community schools and 694.02 for low-income students in non-community schools. The evaluation concluded, “the evidence suggests that bringing the community school model to scale in TACSI schools has the potential to enhance student achievement and to narrow the achievement gap attributed to poverty.”<sup>113</sup>

District leaders measure the performance of the community schools initiative in relation to the broad goals outlined in the strategic plan. OUSD partnered with the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities to develop a strategy map that outlines a logic model connecting community schools work to the strategic plan. The ultimate goals are for students across the city to come to school ready to learn, attend a school with a healthy and supportive environment, and receive effective instruction so that they can graduate “college, career, and community ready.”<sup>114</sup> The district-level activities—for example, providing student supports, facilitating partnerships, and supporting collaborative leadership—are intended to realign resources so that schools can offer the support students need to come to school ready to learn and so that teachers can provide high-quality instruction in a climate conducive to learning.<sup>115</sup>

District leaders use a range of indicators to gauge the success of these processes toward the district’s larger goals. The district-level Department of Research, Assessments, and Data developed more than 50 interactive data dashboards that centralize student, school, and community information in one place. Community members can access facility-planning maps, teacher credential information, and school-level student achievement plans. School district employees have access to even more student-level data points, ranging from a student’s grades, suspensions, or referrals to their preschool experience.<sup>116</sup> The district also maintains on-track warning systems and a universal system of student discipline data that shows every instance in which students across the system are removed from their classrooms for disciplinary reasons.<sup>117</sup>

Initial evaluations show that community schools services are already reaching the students most in need and improving student attendance. In 2016, the Gardner Center evaluated OUSD’s community schools implementation and early impacts on students. The study showed that the district has successfully adopted community schools as a strategy to promote equity, with the district’s most disadvantaged students attending these schools. In 2014, 68 percent of English language learners, 57 percent of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 54 percent of students who were living in foster care, and 68 percent Latino students attended a community school. Nearly 3 in 4 students at community schools—73 percent—participated in some type of OST programming, compared with 31 percent of students in traditional, non-community schools. Participation in OST programming was associated with a one-day increase in a student’s overall attendance rate and a 4 percent decrease in the likelihood of being chronically absent.<sup>118</sup>



The Hartford Partnership for Student Success measures the success of the community schools programming—and whether the outputs identified in the initiative’s theory of change are being met—in several ways. The monthly outcomes reports provide school- and systems-level staff with a range of site-specific indicators to gauge the success of programming at school sites, as outlined in the work plans.<sup>119</sup> In addition, the monthly provider meetings create an opportunity to share qualitative data about program performance in a more informal setting.<sup>120</sup>

An independent evaluation shows that Hartford’s initiative has raised student achievement, decreased chronic absenteeism, and improved school climate. In 2016, students who spent three or four consecutive years in community schools after-school programs notably improved their scores on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) test, which measures what students know and informs what they are ready to learn. In reading, students who spent three years in the program improved their scores from 183 in spring 2013 to 200 in spring 2016, while those who spent four years in the program saw their scores increase from 189 to 207.4 during the same period. In math, scores increased from 184 to 203.97 and 191 to 208.29 for each respective group.<sup>121</sup> During the same time period, academically at-risk students in 14 of 17 targeted community schools intervention programs improved their MAP scores by 10 points in reading and 12 points in math. Students who were enrolled in these support programs for two and three years improved by 20 points and 15 points in reading, respectively, and 19 points and 16 points in math, respectively, during the same time period.<sup>122</sup> Between spring 2015 and spring 2016, MAP scores for English language learners who received targeted community schools services improved 4 raw points at one school and 7 points at another.<sup>123</sup> The rates of chronic absenteeism went down in the five community schools that previously had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. According to survey data, students across Hartford’s community schools more positively perceived their school’s peer climate in 2016 than in 2013.<sup>124</sup> Finally, between 2014 and 2016, at four of the seven schools, the number of parents or family members who reported feeling welcomed by the school increased.<sup>125</sup>

# Policy recommendations

The work underway in Union, Oakland, and Hartford offers valuable lessons for education leaders and policymakers who want to improve outcomes for low-income students at scale.

Community schools is an educational strategy, not simply a model program to be replicated. But the strategy requires policy that both reduces its barriers and ensures that administrators and practitioners have the resources and capacity to do this work. Policy should clearly define the strategy for practitioners and education leaders; specify what functions, practices, and services should be in place; and make the necessary resources available. Existing models can serve as valuable proof points, demonstrating that the strategy is possible at the school—and now systems—level and building public and government support for the strategy. Then, district- and state-level policymakers can help sustain current initiatives while also retooling their own organization and functioning and creating new funding streams to support current work in order to allow new initiatives to be established. At every level of decision-making, advocacy can be built around existing proof points.

Ultimately, state governments must lead, so that every school serving students living in concentrated poverty can be a community school. While the initiatives that this report describes have been sustained for multiple years, they require annual grants and only operate in those particular communities. The community schools strategy is not an integral part of the nation's school system, and it does not inform how public schools are funded, staffed, operated, or held accountable to the extent it should. This section outlines actions that decision-makers at different levels of government can take to move the nation's school system in that direction.

The federal government should:

- **Maintain and then increase funding levels for grant programs that support a community schools strategy.** In addition to Title I, there are several other existing federal education funding streams that can help sustain community schools work, including the U.S. Department of Education’s Full Service Community Schools and Promise Neighborhoods programs; the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program; and 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants. There are also noneducation funding streams that can support the strategy. In its past two proposed budgets, the Trump administration proposed reducing or eliminating some of these programs.<sup>126</sup> To support existing and new community schools, lawmakers should continue to maintain current funding levels for these programs, or even increase funding for them.
- **Encourage states, school districts, and schools to adopt a community schools strategy.** Research shows that elements of a community schools strategy are essential to successful school improvement work. The Education Department can advise school districts to adopt a community schools strategy, encourage state education agencies to support this work by issuing guidance describing the strategy, and clarify how federal funds across different agencies can be used to support community schools. With new flexibility under ESSA, the department can also encourage states to incorporate metrics that reflect a holistic approach—like student attendance or school climate—as accountability indicators.

State governments should:

- **Adopt a comprehensive community schools policy.** State governments must make a community schools strategy attainable for all schools that serve students in areas of concentrated poverty. State boards of education or legislatures should adopt a policy clearly defining the strategy for school administrators, local boards of education, teacher and administrator preparation programs, and all other education stakeholders. State legislatures must then incorporate financial support for a community schools strategy into statewide school funding formulas. This would include funding for programmatic components of the strategy, like OST programming, as well as contributions toward salaries for community schools coordinators. In the interim, state governments can supplement current federal funding sources to support schools and school districts in implementing specific parts of a community schools strategy by creating new grants or setting

aside existing appropriations to support this work. However, making a community schools strategy possible for all schools in need will require proactive leadership from states.

- **Include competencies that support a community schools strategy in educator preparation programs.** Leading a community school requires an inclusive and collaborative understanding of school leadership, and teachers at a community school need to understand and see the value of the strategy. State departments of education should require that preparation programs for teacher and administrator candidates include coursework in family engagement, community engagement, and cultural competency; and these programs should include clinic or fieldwork requirements. In the short term, state departments of education can support professional development offerings in these areas and create optional credentials or endorsements in these competencies, similar to what Massachusetts did to build teachers' capacity to meet the needs of English language learners.
- **Establish children's cabinets to coordinate and align the work of children-focused agencies at the state level.** Children's cabinets are councils or commissions that bring together leaders of the various government agencies focused on children.<sup>127</sup> These working groups can focus the attention and resources of these agencies and better coordinate their work at the state—and even local—level. In 2017, 36 states had a children's cabinet of some sort.<sup>128</sup> Governors can establish these groups through an executive order.

School districts should:

- **Adopt a community schools policy.** School districts that take on a community schools strategy should adopt a policy clarifying the strategy and establishing basic expectations. This policy should explain how the district will support schools in providing services in line with the four pillars of the model described in this report. It should also establish structures to support collaborative work and partnerships between schools and community organizations. Once in place, this policy can influence a district's strategic plan, resource allocation, hiring, and even employee evaluation processes. In most communities, the board of education can pass this policy.
- **Create community schools coordinator positions and compensate coordinators on par with building-level administrators.** Community schools coordinators play a key role in integrating the various parts of a community schools strategy.

Because of the importance of this role for the strategy, these people are sometimes also called community schools directors or community schools managers. At the school level, coordinators assess the needs of a student population and then find partnerships and services to address them. District-level coordinators can build the capacity of their school-based colleagues to complete these functions. This role is not yet well-defined in the education field, but it requires a range of skills, such as program management, fundraising, budgeting, and the ability to work effectively with school personnel and community members. School district leaders should create job descriptions that clarify the responsibilities and the experience that the role entails, and they should compensate coordinators appropriately.

- **Coordinate professional learning in a community schools strategy for all levels of staff.** School districts need to educate all levels of staff about the community schools strategy and invest in their capacity to operate in a school environment informed by the strategy. School districts can model collaborative government and build schools' capacity to operate in this way. District-level administrators need training in this area. In addition, people who work in schools need job-embedded professional development in community and family engagement and a holistic perspective on educating children. This and traditional professional development also need to include traditional instructional staff as well as OST programs and other community schools staff.
- **Invest in systems to collect and manage data.** Data guide the community schools strategy. Various grants that support a community schools strategy require reporting, but broader processes of continuous improvement also require a group of decision-makers who can access a range of data points about individual students, schools, and communities. Given privacy laws and the multiple partners often involved in a community schools strategy, data collection and management can be unwieldy to manage at the school level; therefore, district leaders should invest in collecting and managing data at the district level. Integrated data systems (IDS) link administrative data across government agencies, which allows leaders to see how one agency's policy or program affects a person or group's outcome in another agency. These systems can be especially useful for community schools initiatives integrated with local or county governments. IDS can be established when leaders from multiple agencies come together to develop a memorandum of understanding and create a formal governance structure to review and approve specific projects.<sup>129</sup>

# Conclusion

The community schools strategy is an important component for schools and school systems that want to provide a high-quality education to children in low-income communities. School districts serving communities of concentrated poverty should adopt this strategy, and state and federal governments must help them make it a reality. A community schools strategy is essential to delivering the high-quality, thorough public education system that most state constitutions require.

Despite nearly four decades of reform, the nation's public school system still fails to impart all children with the skills and knowledge necessary for economic agency and full membership in their community. This is because public schools largely have not been reimagined and retooled to educate children living in poverty to high levels. On international assessments, the nation's most affluent students perform first in the world, while students in poor communities perform on par with Romania or Chile.<sup>130</sup> Recent shifts at the federal and state levels aside, reforms to address this crisis have focused only on students' academic needs, and accountability systems have historically centered on students' reading and mathematics proficiency and high school graduation rate. Obviously, all students must be able to meet rigorous standards in core academic subjects and finish high school; but for schools to achieve these outcomes, lawmakers and education leaders must equip schools and school systems serving low-income communities to comprehensively meet students' holistic needs.

The community schools strategy can make it possible for public schools to do the job they were assigned. As former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan observed, it is time that community schools become the rule rather than the exception.

*\*Correction, August 24, 2018:* This report has been updated to correctly state the key partners involved in launching Hartford's community schools initiative.



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## About the author

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