



## A REVIEW OF THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL Implications for future practice

### INTRODUCTION

This white paper reviews existing evidence evaluating community schools, aiming to help communities plan, implement, and expand a community schools strategy by identifying key factors that may affect their success. The concept of community schools first emerged in the early 20th century as an approach to transforming public schools into “social centers,” serving multiple social and civic needs.<sup>1</sup> In 1978, Congress passed the Community Schools and Comprehensive Community Education Act, making federal grants available to encourage collaborative programming between schools and their communities.<sup>2</sup> The modern era of community schools began in the early 1990s, as research emerged showing that fostering community partnerships and emphasizing family well-being in schools in low socioeconomic areas improved academic achievement.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) established its Full-Service Community Schools Program (FSCS) in 2008 to provide “support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination, integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families, particularly for children attending high-poverty schools.”<sup>4</sup> Since 2018, the grant has funded over 100 community school networks. In 2024, the DOE appropriated \$150 million for grants through the FSCS program. In December 2025, the Department of Education abruptly discontinued FSCS funding for a substantial number of ongoing grants. Through legal challenges, some program funding has been restored,<sup>4</sup> and, despite administrative cuts, the U.S. Senate actively worked to keep the program funded for Fiscal Year 2026.<sup>5</sup>

The community schools model integrates community resources into schools, aiming to reduce environmental and social barriers to academic achievement. Breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty requires sustained interventions at the neighborhood level in addition to nationwide social safety net programs.<sup>6</sup> Research has consistently demonstrated a connection between a child’s environment and academic success. About 10 million children in the United States currently attend high-poverty K-12 schools, where nearly 3 out of 4 students come from low-income households.<sup>7</sup> Overall, studies suggest that the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood in which a child is raised more strongly predicts academic achievement than student effort or private school enrollment.<sup>6</sup>

Children need attentive caregiving, safe and stable surroundings, nutritious food, and healthy habits for proper development. To meet these needs, parents rely on four types of resources – financial, psychological, time, and human capital – all of which are

### Figure 1. Challenges faced by students from low-income households



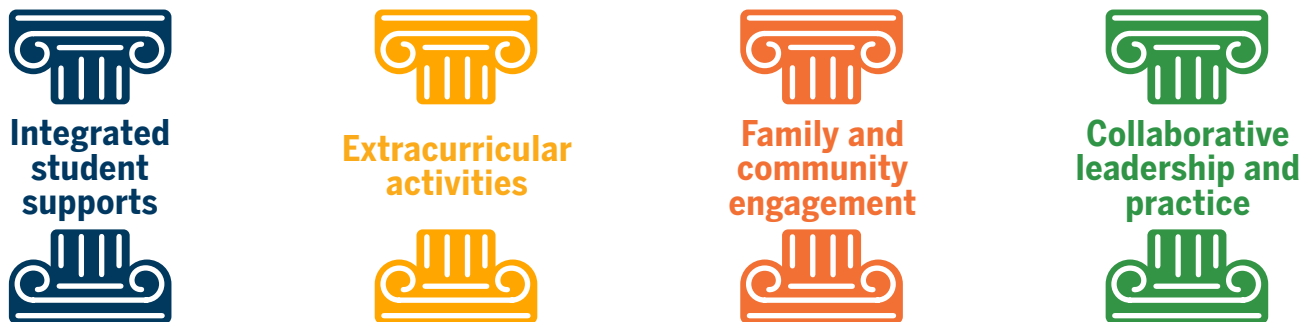
depleted by family poverty. In addition to the family environment, children’s physical environment can also support or undermine their growth.<sup>6</sup> Neighborhood factors, such as poor-quality public services, crime and violence, and negative peer influences, can weaken a family’s capacity to meet children’s needs.<sup>6</sup> Students from low-income households often face additional challenges, such as chronic absenteeism, limited access to extracurricular activities, and inadequate mental health support. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in learning loss, further exacerbating these challenges (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup>

A 2018 study found that growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods reduces the likelihood of graduating from high school from 96% to 76% for Black children and from 95% to 87% for non-Black<sup>A</sup> children.<sup>6</sup> These disparities are especially concerning because data shows areas of concentrated poverty are disproportionately non-white. Therefore, barriers to achievement in these communities reinforce existing racial disparities, not just economic ones.<sup>6</sup>

## THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL

Community schools have gained traction nationwide for reducing barriers to achievement for students in low-income schools. However, understanding why the model is effective has proven challenging because there is no standardized definition of a community school, as programs and operations vary based on local context. Nevertheless, researchers and practitioners, such as those working with the Institute for Educational Leadership's Coalition of Community Schools<sup>B</sup> and the Learning Policy Institute<sup>C</sup> support the inclusion of certain guidelines and unique elements. They have identified four key pillars (Figure 2) that community schools typically use, aiming to reduce environmental and social barriers.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2. Four pillars of community schools**



### **Pillar 1: Integrated student supports**

Community schools partner with local institutions such as health providers, welfare agencies, and recreation centers to deliver integrated supports or wraparound services, including healthcare, counseling, and other social services to students and their families. By tapping into these community resources, the community schools model aims to improve educational outcomes by stabilizing their home environments and offering them nonacademic support.<sup>10</sup>

### **Pillar 2: Extracurricular activities**

Extracurricular activities embody a range of structured programs, like sports, arts, tutoring, mentoring, and civic engagement. These programs aim to engage students in productive activities and extend their participation in education and development beyond the classroom.<sup>9,11</sup>

### **Pillar 3: Family and community engagement**

Community schools engage families and community members to improve parental involvement in a child's education. Parental involvement is essential both at home and at school and can take several forms—from helping with homework, to volunteering at school, to participating in parent-teacher organizations. Community schools uniquely prioritize parental involvement by

<sup>A</sup> The source does not explicitly define non-Black, but for this report, the research team interprets non-Black to mean all groups other than Black/African American. This may include white, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American, and multiracial students, though the exact composition is unclear.

<sup>B</sup> To learn more about the Coalition of Community Schools visit: <https://iel.org/coalition-community-schools-aligns-networks-amplify-reach/>

<sup>C</sup> To learn more about the Learning Policy Institute visit: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/>

recognizing the valuable insights they have about their child’s well-being and promoting reciprocal relationships, enhancing transparency and trust between the school and the community.<sup>9,12</sup>

#### **Pillar 4: Collaborative leadership and practice**

The community schools model emphasizes collaborative leadership, encouraging school leadership and staff, community partners, and community members to jointly determine needs, set goals, and coordinate services. This strategy also aims to increase accountability and collective trust between all partners.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, by emphasizing community engagement and partnerships, community schools can serve as a center for community networking, pooling their resources to expand the support and services they can offer.<sup>9,13</sup> Work done under the collaborative leadership and practice pillar has broad implications for the other core components of the model. These efforts can indirectly impact student outcomes by improving school and partner capacity and school climate.<sup>8</sup>

### **IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE, CONTEXT, AND STRATEGY**

While these pillars remain consistent across community schools, their implementation varies according to the specific needs and resources of each community.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the community schools model is also a place-based approach to education because the neighborhoods in which these schools are located influence them, and they, in turn, impact the neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Through community partnerships, these schools have the potential to alleviate nonacademic barriers to learning.<sup>6,9</sup> This flexibility is a core strength, enabling schools to tailor services to address local challenges and priorities, ultimately fostering student success.<sup>8</sup>

This white paper focuses on the first three pillars because research shows they have a direct impact on educational outcomes. The first section provides an overview of community schools, detailing their theoretical foundations. The second section presents evidence related to four key considerations—mechanisms of change (steps that lead to improved student performance and behavior), local context, desired outcomes, and implementation strategies. Current and prospective community school implementers should address these factors systematically to ensure effective planning and execution. The second section also provides relevant evidence. Finally, the paper assesses the cost-effectiveness of community schools.

### **MOVING FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

Implementers must consider whether the impacts of a community school program will be similar if replicated in other local contexts. Scholars at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)<sup>d</sup> recommend utilizing a four-step framework to make evidence-based policy and programmatic decisions.<sup>15</sup> This framework serves as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of community schools by answering four key questions adapted for this paper (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the community schools model**

- 1** What theory lies behind the community schools model?
- 2** What local factors impact the transition from theory to practice?
- 3** What evidence demonstrates that community schools affect student outcomes?
- 4** What factors might influence effective implementation?

<sup>d</sup> Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global research center that focuses on poverty alleviation through evidence-based policy. In North America, the lab is housed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

# 1. WHAT THEORY LIES BEHIND THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS MODEL?

The community schools model combines various interventions to improve student academic performance and behavior. Understanding the mechanisms of change, or the specific steps that drive improved academic outcomes, is essential for determining the conditions under which an educational model is likely to be successful.

Several theoretical frameworks can explain the mechanisms of change for each pillar of the model. These frameworks clarify the pathways through which community school services are expected to contribute to specific academic outcomes. The following subsections delve into the theoretical mechanisms of change of the three core pillars discussed in this paper.

## **Mechanism behind integrated student supports**

Resilience theory offers a framework for understanding how incorporating student supports into the school environment can foster positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to overcome adversity, such as socioeconomic challenges or health issues, often faced by low-income students.<sup>16</sup> Educational resilience refers to an individual's capacity to thrive academically despite facing environmental or personal challenges.<sup>15</sup>

According to resilience theory, protective factors—assets or strengths that help individuals navigate stressful situations—can enhance resilience and promote positive development within their environments.<sup>17</sup> Understanding the risks that undermine students' educational resilience and then identifying how schools can counteract these risks through targeted protective factors is crucial to support students as they navigate stressful situations. However, schools often lack the resources to address the numerous obstacles students face.<sup>15</sup> Community partnerships can bridge this gap by providing essential services like healthcare and food access while offering opportunities for students to explore their identities, build relationships, and engage more fully with their environment.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, research on the integration of community supports and services within schools indicates that aligning the educational environment with community resources help students thrive academically and developmentally, despite the presence of risks.<sup>17</sup>

## **Mechanisms behind extracurricular activities**

Various theories explain the influence of extracurricular activities on a child's learning and behavior. Ecological systems theory suggests individuals are shaped by their genes and the various environmental systems they interact with, including the school and its subsystems.<sup>19</sup> Extracurricular activities can provide a space for students to learn new skills, form peer groups, and develop their sense of self—all of which contribute to their overall development and can impact their school performance.<sup>20</sup>

Complementary to ecological systems theory, stage-fit environment theory suggests that as children age, their social, emotional, cognitive, and personal needs evolve. Their environment must concurrently adapt to these changes to support positive development.<sup>21</sup> Scholars find that extracurricular activities can provide students with school-related spaces in which they feel a sense of belonging and increased engagement with the school. This increased sense of belonging helps students develop a stronger bond with the school, which subsequently boosts their school performance.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, research suggests involvement in extracurricular activities provides students with the opportunity to bond with peers and adults. Students develop personal and mentoring relationships with them that bolster academic achievement.<sup>19</sup> Participation in extracurricular activities can also reduce negative behaviors, as peer groups can enforce positive behavioral norms.<sup>19</sup> Combined, these two theories emphasize the importance of the out-of-school environment's influence on a child's overall development.

## **Mechanisms behind family and community engagement**

A variety of theories can explain the mechanism of change underlying parental or caregiver engagement. Foremost is modeling theory, which suggests that parental engagement and involvement in their children's academic activities serves as a model, highlighting the importance of school. The theory also indicates that when parents reinforce school-related activities, their children increase the value they place on academics. Finally, modeling theory suggests that students are more likely to develop

critical thinking skills if their parents are involved in their academic activities. Based on these findings, parents can enhance the overall school experience, model positive behavior, and help students develop skills that contribute to academic success.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. WHAT LOCAL FACTORS IMPACT THE TRANSITION FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE?

Because community schools are place-based initiatives, implementers need to consider local conditions and community needs during the planning and design phase.<sup>8</sup> They must also evaluate how well the model aligns with the specific educational challenges of their area and whether it is likely to produce meaningful change. This section outlines key factors to consider while assessing the model within a local context.

First, it is crucial to consider whether a community school is in an urban or rural area when implementing the model, as there may be differences in how the model performs in these settings. Both urban and rural community schools face common challenges in connecting with communities, involving families, building data systems and sustaining funding and resources that are addressed in a later section of this paper. However, most research and evaluation of the community school model to date has focused on urban areas. Rural areas interested in adopting the community schools approach may struggle to find relevant evidence on effective strategies.

Case studies of community schools in rural areas indicate that they face unique challenges that the model must address. A Harvard EdRedesign paper highlights the case of Leslie County, Kentucky, to illustrate the specific challenges rural schools face that may be different from urban schools. In this report, researchers underscore that rural public schools are chronically underfunded and short-staffed. In Leslie County, like in many rural counties, the population is spread across a large geographic area. This causes transportation issues when adverse weather events, or unprecedented public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, force school closures. Poor broadband infrastructure exacerbates these issues, as schools are unable to provide or students are unable to consistently access e-learning opportunities.<sup>24</sup>

Given these challenges, several factors contributed to the early success of implementing the community school model in Leslie County, including flexible use of classroom time, recruitment of local educators, alignment of community partners with community school goals, and intentional outreach efforts. The Leslie County schools made progress in improving school culture over time but systemic and intergenerational problems—such as unemployment, social isolation, and lack of everyday necessities—still persist. In the face of the interconnected problems unique to rural areas, school systems must evaluate their capacity to strengthen community partnerships as they contemplate implementing a community school.<sup>23</sup>

Second, most implementation evaluations report that community schools were built on preexisting community structures and partnerships. Across the four schools in the Pittsburgh Community Schools initiative, 77 partners or programs provided powerful learning opportunities, and 51 partners or programs provided opportunities for integrated health and social support. The Chicago Public Schools' Community Schools Initiative established school advisory committees that included school and partner agency staff, students, family members, and wider community members.<sup>25</sup>

These are long-term structures and functions that often predate the implementation of a full-fledged community school. Typically, partnerships and communication plans are restructured or refined to support a new community school initiative. Implementers should assess whether they have the foundational structures and partnerships to build upon. If these structures are lacking, they should assess the amount of time and resources required to establish them.

Finally, unprecedented factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, among other health and financial crises, can have unpredictable effects on the outcomes of community schools. A study found that by the end of the 2020–21 school year, students nationally were, on average, five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading compared to expected progress without the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Students of color and from low-income families suffered the most. Parents also reported increases in

clinical mental health conditions among their children and concerns about social-emotional well-being, as students experienced family deaths, loss of family income, and social isolation on a larger scale than they had before the pandemic struck.<sup>7</sup>

Community schools across the country have faced challenges funneling additional resources into student supports at short notice. While shifting their focus to address emergency needs during the pandemic, many were unable to invest in developing the structures and practices necessary for long-term service provision. Future implementers should account for potential learning loss caused by external factors and evaluate their ability to manage additional resources during periods of distress. The evidence outlined in this section provides some examples of when local, institutional, or environmental factors might influence the impact of a community school. These examples are non-exhaustive and only serve to illustrate how implementers must interpret existing evaluations and prepare to adapt to new circumstances.

### 3. WHAT EVIDENCE DEMONSTRATES THAT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AFFECT STUDENT OUTCOMES?

Establishing a successful community school is a gradual process, and significant academic gains are unlikely to be achieved in the early years. Initial indicators of success often appear in school climate, culture, attendance, and relationships. However, evidence is mixed about whether these improvements translate into individual-level academic achievement.<sup>26</sup>

For example, ICF International<sup>E</sup> performed a rigorous five-year evaluation to investigate the effectiveness of the national Communities In Schools (CIS) program on both school and student outcomes.<sup>27</sup> CIS is a nonprofit organization that works with school systems to expand integrated student supports by employing site coordinators and building community networks. The study found that CIS schools<sup>F</sup> had a significant positive impact on dropout and graduation rates compared to non-CIS schools.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, the study found mixed effects on behavioral outcomes—measured by out-of-school suspensions and disciplinary referrals. While the ICF report assessed 694 schools across seven states, the evaluation produced findings that were highly specific to the CIS model and its portfolio of services. A more recent evaluation of the Oakland (California) Unified School District found community school programs had the greatest impact on disadvantaged students. Their attendance rates improved, and chronic absenteeism decreased by 4%.<sup>28</sup> In addition to contributing to academic success, community schools have demonstrated positive effects on family engagement, student health, and social-emotional well-being (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Positive effects of the community schools model**



Despite these evaluations, drawing overall conclusions about the community schools model is challenging due to the lack of standardized structures and practices across all community schools. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that the model will produce the same results in every setting. Most community schools implement a collection of interventions loosely aligned with the model's core pillars. Dismantling the core pillars and evaluating evidence of their specific outcomes offers a more practical approach to assessing the model's efficacy.

<sup>E</sup> ICF International is a global advisory and technology services provider that evaluates various community development and social programs including community schools.

<sup>F</sup> Implementing the model with a high degree of fidelity to its guiding principles in the four pillars.

## Effect of integrated student supports

Theory suggests integrated student supports can improve academic outcomes, but evidence is mixed. Less rigorous studies show stronger results than more rigorous randomized evaluations. A 2014 evidence review found that integrated student supports had largely positive effects on student progress, reading and math achievement, and attendance in the nine evaluations analyzed. However, few of them assessed whether outcomes differ for children of varied ages and backgrounds.<sup>29</sup> A 2017 review of 19 evaluation studies found that integrated student supports have mostly positive or statistically nonsignificant effects on educational outcomes, with negative results being rare.<sup>30</sup> These results indicate that while integrated school supports show promise, they are not yet a proven approach for improving educational outcomes.

Community schools anticipate that integrated student supports will foster protective factors, like resilience, in students, which ultimately impact academic outcomes. Although the conceptual model includes nonacademic outcomes, they are rarely measured in practice. Most evaluations directly assess the academic impacts of integrated student supports, often overlooking nonacademic competencies, like social skills or resilience. This prompts the need for a critical examination of whether the mechanism of change, grounded in resilience theory, accurately reflects how student outcomes are influenced in practice.

Additionally, studies remain unclear on which nonacademic support improves academic outcomes. The Coalition for Community Schools<sup>6</sup> encourages community schools to offer a flexible range of services tailored to local needs, but this flexibility can lead to ineffective, non-evidence-based, or costly student supports.<sup>28</sup> Even when schools implement integrated supports, staff lack evidence on which elements—like teacher-student relationships or full-time coordinators—are essential for success.<sup>29</sup> Without clear standards or oversight, this decentralized model can lead to inconsistent implementation and hinder the development of effective programs.<sup>28</sup>

Despite broad consensus among researchers and practitioners that community services in school environments benefit students, evaluating whether they are necessary in the first place is important. A Harvard study of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) Promise Academy, a K-12 charter school that provides community services, asked whether high-quality schools, without community services, were enough to improve educational outcomes. Researchers found that Promise Academy students who received community services improved in academic achievement comparably to those who did not receive the services. Additionally, siblings of Promise Academy students who had access to the same community services but were not enrolled in the charter school showed no detectable gains in achievement. From these two findings, they conclude that high-quality schools are sufficient for significant increases in poor minority students’ achievement, and community services are unlikely to have directly or indirectly influenced this outcome.<sup>31</sup> A New York University study further reports that “a good student support program cannot compensate for a weak core instructional program.”<sup>3</sup>

## Effect of extracurricular activities

Studies consistently show that extracurricular opportunities correlate with improved student attendance and behavior, with some evidence of academic benefits.<sup>8</sup> A Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC)<sup>h</sup> analysis found, on average, middle-school students who participated in extracurricular activities attended 3.2 more days of school, and elementary school participants attended 0.8 more days of school compared to carefully matched nonparticipants (statistically significant). Analysts anticipate that sustained participation in extracurricular activities will foster a desirable attachment to school, which may eventually improve academic achievement.<sup>32</sup> However, this has not been scientifically proven for community schools.

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<sup>6</sup> Coalition for Community Schools is a national effort led by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) to provide technical support to and advocate for community schools.

<sup>h</sup> Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC) is a research practice-partnership between institutions of higher education in the Baltimore (Maryland) City Public Schools, organizations that serve families and children in Baltimore, and other civic and community partners.

A study about the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative (CSI) reported both behavioral and academic benefits of extracurricular activities. Researchers found participating students had an 11% lower suspension rate compared to nonparticipants. Additionally, youth who reported more interest and engagement in afterschool programs demonstrated improved peer and teacher relations, deeper engagement with academics overall, increased knowledge of resources, and a stronger bond with the school community.<sup>33</sup> Academically, extracurricular activities had positive impacts on students' annual grade point averages, scores in reading and mathematics, school-day attendance, and instances of misconduct for students participating in Chicago's CSI programming.<sup>1</sup>

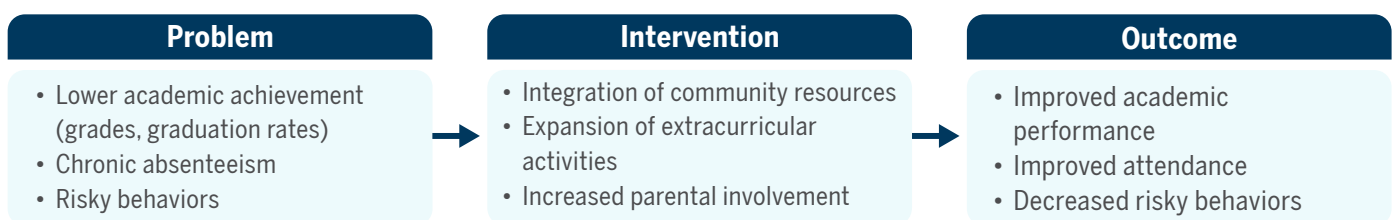
### Effect of family and community engagement

Unlike evidence for integrated student supports and extracurricular activities, many studies find that parental involvement has a direct impact on student academic achievement. One analysis of 37 studies found that parental expectations and communication about school activities with their children enhance academic performance.<sup>34</sup> Another 2011 Stanford University study in Redwood City, California, showed that students whose caregivers took part in family engagement programs scored almost two points higher per year on state-mandated mathematics tests compared to children of similar nonparticipants.<sup>35</sup> Students whose families were actively involved in their schools were also more likely to progress in English language development and improve their attitudes toward their schools.<sup>36</sup>

Community schools also engage with community members and organizations to extend their impact on students and families. For example, some community schools offer supplemental services such as parental training, housing support, and access to essential resources like food pantries and laundry facilities to support families experiencing social, physical, and economic challenges. The 2011 Stanford study reported Redwood City community schools' supplemental programs reached more than 70% of enrolled students' families, particularly the most disadvantaged students.<sup>34</sup>

Engagement with community members improves community cohesion, which is likely to increase parental engagement. A descriptive study of Providence Full-Service Community Schools in Rhode Island explored the impact of school-community collaboration on parent-teacher relationships. Although communication and involvement declined in the first year, both indicators improved over time, suggesting a positive long-term effect.<sup>37</sup> In practice, researchers speculate these positive effects result from three pathways. First, community programs strengthen the multiple relationships in which parents are involved—parent-child, parent-teacher, parent-parent relationships. Collective activities hosted by the school, like English-language classes or mental health consultations, provide caregivers opportunities to expand their social networks by forging ties with other caregivers, professionals, as well as referral agencies. Establishing efficient partnerships among families, schools, and neighborhoods that share an interest in student well-being provides a second pathway to positive child outcomes. Finally, researchers theorize efficient family-school-community collaboration improves access to community resources.<sup>36</sup> These pathways serve as a mechanism through which family and community engagement may indirectly improve student academic achievement.

**Figure 5. Community schools model theory of change**



<sup>1</sup> These results are for students who participated in extracurriculars for 120 hours or more during two school years.

## 4. WHAT FACTORS MIGHT INFLUENCE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION?

Evidence suggests high-quality implementation and fidelity to the community schools model is necessary to achieve positive results.<sup>8</sup> During the planning and design stage, implementers must clearly outline the specific programs they want to implement under each of the model's pillars. Doing so consistently yields the strongest results, although many factors can impact this process.<sup>8</sup> The following subsections highlight common bottlenecks that occur in community schools and illustrate how they can be overcome (Figure 6). Assessing whether these vulnerabilities currently exist and evaluating local capacity to alleviate them can help implementers execute the community schools model more effectively.

### **Community connections**

Cross-sector collaboration is crucial to place-based education reforms. Community schools require leaders and practitioners from different sectors to work together and share their power and organizational resources.<sup>13</sup> Yet many of them struggle to engage authentically with community partners.<sup>38</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic further weakened partnerships due to the shift to virtual engagement, and this has had lasting effects.<sup>37</sup> Evidence from community schools across the country has shown that cross-sector collaboration is feasible and has often fostered trust and cultural norms, paving the way to sustainable change. Examples from large community school networks in Multnomah County, Oregon; Oakland, California; and Baltimore, Maryland, demonstrate how communities can establish systems and practices that foster collective impact.<sup>13</sup>

Maintaining strong community partnerships takes resources and dedicated staff. Schools typically hire a community school coordinator to manage these relationships and keep communication flowing.<sup>39</sup> This role is essential. An evaluation of Pittsburgh Public Schools found that schools met with partners in 5 out of 6 months during the study period, highlighting the importance of ongoing coordination.<sup>38</sup>

Securing strong community connections at the outset of a community school project is crucial for success.<sup>40</sup> Forming these collaborations ensures local input and support. Partners can actively contribute to the community school vision and jointly define goals, along with delegating roles and responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> Successful community schools often demonstrate that building relationships early fosters stronger buy-in from community partners and resource providers.

### **Family involvement**

A core component of the community schools model is parental engagement and involvement. Parental engagement often exists along a spectrum, and a school's ability to connect and build trust with parents influences their level of engagement.<sup>8</sup> Evaluators of the New York City Community Schools Initiative found robust family engagement led to leadership and collective decision-making opportunities, social and educational services for the whole family and opportunities to collect and share data with caregivers.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, an evaluation of Pittsburgh Public Schools indicated low parental involvement with community schools due to issues with communication, transportation, and staff or facility capacity to accommodate activities outside of school hours.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, the community schools model is a place-based approach, but interventions included in the model specifically target students and their families who may, in reality, move in and out of the target area, affecting their eligibility for services. Continuing engagement and tracking outcomes in such a scenario is an ongoing challenge. Parents are likely to engage more when their goals and expectations for their child align with those of the school. Initiatives to improve engagement, such as training to increase parenting skills for successful academic engagement with their students, often require additional financial resources. Researchers at the Urban Institute<sup>j</sup> argue that a broader systemic approach is needed to account for changes within a given place as well as resident mobility.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>j</sup> The Urban Institute is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that conducts economic and social policy research.

## Data systems

Timely and rigorous data collection is crucial for community school implementers to enhance classroom instruction, program delivery, and decisionmaking, ultimately promoting better educational outcomes and expanded opportunities for all students.<sup>42</sup> However, community schools across the country face challenges in securing data from various sectors for practice and evaluation. The education, health, and social service sectors each have distinct rules and procedures for data collection. Legal and capacity limitations further complicate sharing data across organizations.

Without a streamlined process for data collection, evaluation, and feedback, implementing the community school model becomes inefficient. School staff rely on a variety of data, including student administrative information (such as attendance and academic performance), program delivery metrics (e.g., referrals to external providers, parent workshop attendance), and community data to assess local needs. An example of overcoming these challenges comes from Los Angeles County's Community Schools Office, which worked with the University of Southern California to create integrated data systems and real-time dashboards linking school-level and community-level indicators.<sup>41</sup> This initiative highlights how data systems can strengthen community schools while also demonstrating the resources and collaboration required for effective data utilization.

## Sustainable funding and resources

Securing funding remains a major challenge for place-based education initiatives, both in sustaining long-term support and coordinating resources across diverse services. Long-standing and large-scale community school initiatives have developed expertise in aligning existing resources and coordinating funding across multiple government agencies and levels. Effectively utilizing multiple funding streams to achieve objectives is a key characteristic of successful place-based education initiatives.

Public resources are often inequitably distributed within neighborhoods, school districts, cities, and counties. At scale, this can lead to competition for resources, forcing school leaders to prioritize certain schools or partnerships.<sup>13</sup> The Austin (Texas) Public School district funds the Family Resource Center at its community schools by piecing together donations from a local children's hospital, leveraging existing programs, filling gaps through additional money coordination, and taking advantage of tutoring and food distribution volunteers. Brooklyn Center Full-Service Community Schools District in Minneapolis, Minnesota, arranges funding resources through the federal 21st Century Learning Center grant, partner donations, and the district's general budget.<sup>27</sup> Such case studies show community schools can creatively leverage multiple funding sources to provide desired services. A mix of short- and long-term funding from public and private sources, as well as transparency of funding information, is essential for growth and sustainability.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 6. Implementation considerations for community schools**



## **COST-EFFECTIVENESS**

Communities must also consider cost-effectiveness, defined as the ratio of a program's costs to the economic value of its benefits, in their decision to implement a community school in a new setting. Community schools incur both direct costs (e.g., staff wages) and indirect costs (e.g., time spent building community relationships). Cost-effectiveness studies allow the comparison of programs with similar goals by evaluating the value derived from every dollar spent.

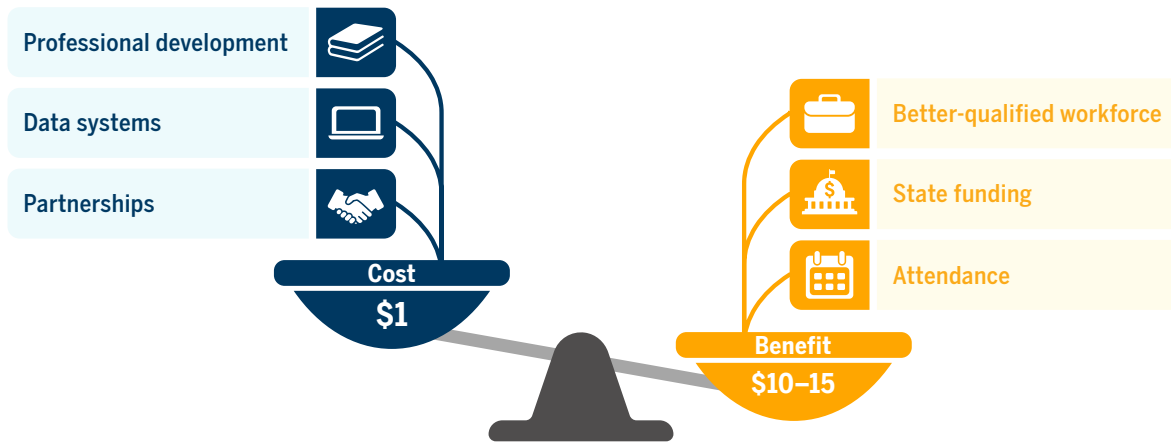
In practice, some initiatives repurpose existing resources for a community school, while others set up new systems to transform a school into a community school. Cost-benefit models that do not account for existing resources yield a more conservative ratio than models that estimate all costs associated with a community school.<sup>8</sup> The Learning Policy Institute's Community Schools Costing Tool includes school-level staff salaries, initiative-level staff and leadership salaries, data system maintenance, professional development costs, strategic partnership costs, and other coaches' salaries in estimates of high-level costs.<sup>44</sup>

The benefits of community schools are calculated in various ways and can be considered in the short- or long-term. For example, researchers may calculate short-term benefits as the value of increased state funding attributable to improved student attendance, and long-term benefits as the economic value of a better-qualified workforce.<sup>8</sup> Although evidence evaluating the economic returns of community schools is limited, a systematic review of existing research indicates that investments in schools offering wraparound services and other community support programs can yield a strong return in social value, with savings ranging from \$3 (excluding economic benefits) to \$15 for every dollar spent.<sup>8</sup>

A study of the economic impact of the CIS program, outlined in a previous section, finds that every \$1 invested created \$11.60 in economic benefits. Costs included direct CIS investments in staffing, infrastructure, local operations, and the opportunity cost of students staying in school instead of entering the workforce. Benefits were based on the higher earnings of students who graduate and taxpayer savings from improved outcomes associated with higher academic achievements. Costs of support services provided by community-based partners were not factored into the analysis, which helps explain the high return on investment for each dollar spent. However, the study reports that it will take nine years before all investment costs are fully recovered. Human capital investments are known to be highly beneficial in the long-term to both individuals and society.<sup>45</sup>

A study of the Children's Aid Society's comprehensive community programs in two New York-based elementary schools found a return on investment of \$10.30 per dollar spent at one school and \$14.80 per dollar spent at the other. The calculated benefit, or social value, was based on the additional revenues generated and the costs avoided with improved student outcomes. The costs included direct program expenses (staffing, materials, administrative and operational overhead) and in-kind contributions (free space, donated food, and volunteer hours). Researchers concluded that 73% of the benefit at one school and 67% at the other school could be attributed directly to the community school intervention itself.<sup>46</sup> A similar study of Boston's City Connects community schools program found a return of \$3 for every \$1 invested, considering direct and indirect program costs, as well as social benefits of positive educational outcomes (educational attainment, dropout rates, and test score performance).<sup>47</sup> Community school coordinators are crucial to the community schools strategy as they oversee implementation and share responsibility for the outcomes. A New Mexico-based study found that every \$1 invested in the coordinator returns \$7.11 net benefits during a five-year period.<sup>48</sup> Overall, most community schools report that every \$1 spent generated economic benefits worth between \$10 and \$15 (Figure 7). These returns demonstrate that community schools can deliver strong long-term economic and social returns, although actual cost-effectiveness varies based on implementation strategy, existing resources, and how benefits are measured over time.

**Figure 7. Cost-effectiveness**



## CONCLUSION

The Coalition for Community Schools advocates for a scaled-up system of community schools, which refers to a vertically integrated network of schools serving pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in a single attendance area, with all schools also connected horizontally across one or more school districts. The organization bases its case on the evidence of community schools outcomes. Moreover, evidence shows this community schools strategy provides an effective way to organize fragmented community services and integrate funding streams, generating greater impact and cost efficiency. With complementary efforts being implemented at the federal, state, and local levels, the coalition also asserts that the environment is ripe for the expansion of community schools.<sup>49</sup> However, before scaling up community school programs, it is essential to evaluate whether the model can be replicated effectively across diverse contexts to achieve similarly positive outcomes. Existing evidence gathered regarding the community schools model can provide some general insights to answer these questions.

Community schools show promise, particularly in improving school climate, attendance, and family engagement. However, the evidence of their impact on academic outcomes remains mixed. While some studies report improvements in attendance and higher graduation rates, academic improvements take time and vary across contexts. While the model's flexibility is a strength, it also poses a challenge in identifying which specific support services contribute most effectively to student success.

Successful implementation hinges on strong community partnerships, clear planning, and consistent coordination. Despite higher initial costs, research indicates that community schools offer a strong return on investment, especially in the long term. Overall, community schools have significant potential, particularly for disadvantaged communities, if implemented thoughtfully. However, implementers must assess their local conditions and community needs to determine whether this is the best strategy to achieve their educational goals or if a more appropriate and cost-effective alternative exists.

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