Full-Service Community Schools: Combating Poverty and Improving Student Achievement

How are my students supposed to become proficient when they are hungry, sick, or constantly changing schools? How will my students be able to focus on learning when they are experiencing neglect, abuse, or addiction in the home? How can I focus on teaching and learning when I must also be a counselor or social worker?

The effects of poverty, neglect, and deprivation may be widespread in your school or concentrated among a small group of students. Either way, as an educator, you have seen firsthand how these social problems—life problems for your students—can affect a student’s performance in the classroom. And, as Varlas recently emphasized, “If community characteristics such as poverty are strongly associated with student achievement, then efforts to improve student performance must focus on the community as a whole, not just on the school” (2008, para. 3).

Community schools, also known as full-service schools, are one such approach. They aim to not only achieve positive student outcomes, but also to help strengthen families and communities. In order to do this, schools partner with community agencies and organizations, leverage the resources and expertise of each, and offer supports and services to children, families, and the community. This requires schools and community organizations to break away from the traditional approach of operating in isolation and enter into a new type of relationship where disparate entities work together to achieve common goals.

The reality is that no matter how high the standards, how rigorous the curriculum, or how qualified the teacher, students will still be affected by their lives outside of school. Community schools recognize this and aim to address the whole range of factors that can affect student achievement.

Community schools, or full-service schools, address the barriers to learning created by social problems, such as poverty, that affect students’ home life and well-being. These schools do this by partnering with community services and agencies to offer students and their families the supports and services they need to remedy the life problems that impede learning and achievement. This Informed Educator describes effective implementation of community school models and discusses considerations in planning and sustainability.

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in order to ease some of the burden placed on schools and teachers. By alleviating the barriers to learning that social problems can create, community schools ultimately allow teachers to focus on teaching.

**What Are Community Schools?**

Community schools do more than educate; they partner with the community in order to provide the necessary supports and services that students, families, and communities need through one comprehensive, coordinated effort. According to The Children’s Aid Society, “a community school is a public school that combines the best educational practices with a wide range of vital in-house health and social services to ensure that children are physically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn” (n.d.a, para. 1). The Coalition for Community Schools offers the following in-depth vision of a community school:

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day, every day, evenings and weekends.

Using public schools as hubs, community schools knit together inventive, enduring relationships among educators, families, volunteers and community partners. Health and social service agencies, family support groups, youth development organizations, institutions of higher education, community organizations, businesses, and civic and faith-based groups all play a part. By sharing expertise and resources, schools and communities act in concert to transform traditional schools into permanent partnerships for excellence. Schools value the resources and involvement of community partners, and communities understand that strong schools are at the heart of strong neighborhoods. In an increasingly complex and demanding educational climate, schools are not left to work alone. (Blank, Melaville & Shah, 2003, p. 2)

According to Melaville (2002), community schools intentionally link activities in the following five areas:

- quality education
- positive youth development
- family support
- family and community engagement in decision making
- community development

A common misconception is that schools are going to be asked to do even more. However, while schools are natural community hubs, it is not feasible for a school to start offering and funding an array of services. The key to integrated services, therefore, is partnership.

The Federation for Community Schools (n.d.) outlines the following principles, which they call the ABCs of community schools:

- **A**—Align out-of-school time with classroom learning
- **B**—Bring communities, families, and schools together
- **C**—Coordinate resources for children and families

Community schools offer a variety of services and opportunities based on the particular needs and resources of the community. Some of the services offered include:

- primary health care
- dental services
- nutrition counseling
- mental health services
- immunizations
- referrals
• early childhood education
• after-school programs
• mentoring and tutoring
• community service opportunities
• family resource centers
• adult education classes
• parent workshops
• job training
• immigration assistance
• housing assistance
• case management
• food and clothing
• sports and recreation
• career education

For example, Thomas Edison Elementary School (NY), which began developing a full-service community school 10 years ago, offers numerous site-based services to students and their families, such as:

• School-based health center—Students receive primary care at the center, including screenings, vaccinations, and prescriptions. Families can receive nutrition and wellness education and assistance with obtaining medical insurance.

• Mental health services—A family caseworker and social worker provide crisis counseling to students and families.

• Parent education—Parents can attend workshops, seminars, and discussion groups on topics that are of interest to them, such as understanding state standards and assessments (Santiago, Ferrara, & Blank, 2008).

Schools are seen as the central place where integrated services can be provided. By offering services on-site, these schools can eliminate some barriers that families face, such as problems with transportation, lack of health insurance, and inability to take time off from work (Warger, 2001).

In addition, locating services at the school may help families overcome any stigma associated with receiving assistance.

A common misconception is that schools are going to be asked to do even more. However, while schools are natural community hubs, it is not feasible for a school to start offering and funding an array of services. The key to integrated services, therefore, is partnership. Partnerships are fundamental to a community school. Generally speaking, communities have multiple organizations and agencies working towards the same end—positive youth outcomes, healthy families, and strong communities. Yet, these services are scattered in various locations and work in solitude. The idea is to identify and bring together disparate providers under one roof in partnership with the school so that each entity can help one another achieve their goals. Ultimately, “the primary responsibility for high quality education rests with the school authorities, while the primary responsibility for ‘everything else’ rests with the outside agencies” (Dryfoos, 2002, p. 396).

There are numerous community school initiatives underway across the country, such as Bridges to Success, in Indianapolis (IN), and Beacons, in New York (NY). Community schools exist at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas (Melaville, 2002). There has been increasing national attention focused on community schools with the introduction of the Full-Service Community Schools Act in 2007 and the expressed support from Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). No two initiatives or models are exactly the same, but they all have a similar premise—schools, families, and communities working together can have a mutually beneficial impact.
on youth outcomes and on one another. “Community schools make a difference because they have advantages that traditional schools, acting alone, do not. They bring more human and financial resources into the schools so teachers and students can focus on learning” (Blank & Cady, 2004, p. 27).

Melaville illustrates how one community school, Stanley Elementary School (KS), brings together the elements of partnership and integrated services:

Designed as a “community haven,” Stanley Elementary School is generally open and in use from 7 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week. Stanley is a Communities in Schools, Inc. (CIS) site that houses stations of the city’s departments of Health, Human Resources, Parks and Recreation. Stanley’s services are the most widely used in the city: Twenty-three repositioned personnel provide support services to CIS students and families each semester. Services are provided using funds from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.

There also is an on-site city/school district library and a senior service center. Evenings and weekends, the school hosts college classes, community programs and recreation for adults. At weekly Family Learning nights, parents come to Stanley with their children. Adults take part in English as a second language and other literacy activities. Their school-age children study with reading tutors while preschoolers play together in child care provided with Title I funds. Participants from Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA, a branch of the Corporation for National Service Americorps program) work with the CIS site coordinator to organize literacy activities, raise funds and promote community service.

Partnerships with Washburn University and the Yamaha Corporation have introduced astronomy and keyboard-based music instruction into the curriculum. Stanley’s third-grade teachers are working with a local arts group to integrate classroom language arts into a musical production of the Pied Piper tale. Extended-day tutoring and mentoring is provided by 45 volunteers including local college students, foster grandparents, and Big Brothers and Big Sisters program participants. Program measures show positive impact. Students involved in CIS activities improved their 1999 reading scores by 21 percentile rank points—up from six points the year before. Ninety-five percent of all students were promoted to the next grade. (2002, p. 7)

Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and now U.S. Secretary of Education, calls community schools “a triumph of common sense,” noting “their power to bring together assets from across the city and align them for children and families” (Blank et al., 2006, p. 16). Duncan views community schools as an opportunity for school districts and their surrounding cities to mix resources and provide unique ways of meeting residents’ needs, and both he and Richard M. Daley, Chicago’s mayor, are proponents of the city’s community schools initiative. According to Blank et al., “community schools [were] an integral part of Duncan’s reform strategy for the Chicago Public Schools” (2006, p. 16).

As U.S. Secretary of Education, it is likely that Duncan will continue to push for more prevalent community schools. President Obama has often mentioned the importance of community involvement in efforts to improve schools, and Duncan has attributed community schools to helping increase Chicago Public School students’ test scores between 2001 and 2007. Additionally, Duncan found that “getting students and parents involved in community schools . . . dramatically reduced student mobility from school to school, even when parents move to other locations” (Wolfe, 2008, p. 3).

In fact, the largest community schools initiative in the country is in Chicago. Following success with the Full Service Schools Initiative pilot project from 1996 to 2000, the Chicago Campaign to Expand Community Schools established a goal of implementing 100 community schools in Chicago by 2007 (Swanson, 2005). This led to the establishment of the district’s Community Schools Initiative, “a groundbreaking effort to take to scale a framework for community schooling” (Whalen, 2007, p. 1). By 2008, 150 of Chicago Public Schools’ 600 schools were community schools, operating 12 hours a day and run by “a community partner, a full-time site coordinator to oversee programs, and a community advisory group to plan programs” (Wolfe, 2008).
“Maybe in an ideal world we wouldn’t have to do these things, but in the real world we have to,” Duncan said. “For years, our schools were islands and swept kids off onto the street at 2:30 in the afternoon. I have a huge problems with that” (Wolfe, 2008, p. 3).

But Are They Effective?

Evaluations of community schools have concluded that there are positive outcomes associated with the approach, such as:

- improved student achievement
- increased parental involvement in student learning
- higher student and teacher attendance
- improved school climate
- decreased special education referrals
- improved mental and physical health
- greater knowledge of and access to community agencies and facilities
- safer schools and communities (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; The Children’s Aid Society, n.d.b.)

Communities In Schools (CIS), a dropout prevention organization, is one model of a full-service community school. Initial results from a longitudinal study of CIS found the following:

- **Increased graduation rates**—“For every 1,000 high school students, 36 more students at high implementing CIS schools remain in school. For every 1,000 high school students, 48 more students at high implementer CIS schools graduate on time with a regular diploma” (Communities in Schools, 2008, p. 5).

- **Greater percentage of students reaching reading and math proficiency**—“For every 1,000 elementary school students, 53 more achieve proficiency in math and 20 more achieve proficiency in reading. For every 1,000 middle school students, 60 more achieve proficiency in math and 49 more achieve proficiency in reading” (Communities in Schools, 2008, p. 6).

In St. Paul (MN), two community schools have documented substantial gains in reading achievement scores on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment. Between 2002 and 2005, one school saw reading scores rise an average of 43%. The average gain at the second school was 36% (Blank et al., 2006). In Tukwila (WA), students participating in the extended-day program have higher GPAs and reduced absenteeism (Blank et al., 2006). At East Hartford High School (CT), the dropout rate went from 22% in 1994 to 1.7% in 2000. The school also saw a 50% reduction in suspensions and now sees 80% of its students go on to at least a 2-year college (Blank et al., 2003).

While findings such as these are common in the literature, Dryfoos (2002), who looked at approximately 49 evaluations of school/community programs, cautions that only a few of the evaluations were scientific in nature and many offer only preliminary findings. She also finds that:

although research has documented various benefits of community schools, it has also found that student test scores are slow to improve. First, the school has to be transformed into an effective learning community, which requires at least several years of hard work on the part of teachers, administrators, service partners, and the broader community. The transformation process is labor intensive; it requires open communication, endless meetings, and a lot of patience. And even with all the extra supports provided by community schools, experience has shown that the quality of instructional leadership and professional development is still the key determinant of student academic achievement. (2008, p. 42)

Dryfoos does add, however, that “the weight of the evidence suggests that community schools are beginning to be able to demonstrate their positive effects on students, families, and communities” (2002, p. 398).
Community Schools: Beneficial for Students, Schools, Families, and the Community

Undoubtedly there will be some reservations about community schools. For instance, some may be concerned that integrating services at the school places an increased burden on the school and its staff and detracts from the primary purpose of educating (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). As leaders address these concerns, it is useful to know how a community school can potentially benefit everyone.

First, community schools address nonacademic factors that have an impact on student success. As Barton (2001) points out, the research on the effect of nonacademic factors on student achievement is clear. Consider some of the following:

- Student mobility, hunger and inadequate nutrition, parent involvement, and reading to young children can impact student achievement. Minority and poor students are more likely to be negatively affected by these conditions; for example, they are more likely to be highly mobile and less likely to be read to as young children (Barton, 2003).

- Gains in student test scores have been shown to be greater when their health and developmental needs are being met. Lack of exercise, drug and alcohol use, and concerns about student safety can impede student progress (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004).

- One in ten children suffers from a mental disorder that can cause impairment, which suggests that partnerships between schools and health and social service agencies could help students receive mental health services (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2008).

Findings such as these and others tell us that student outcomes are affected by factors other than those controlled by the school and that, in order for students to be successful, we must address all of these factors. Unfortunately, “typically, our society views educational achievement as the route to greater socio-economic opportunity, but fails to see how current socio-economic conditions affect achievement in the first place” (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 24). As Agosto puts it, “if children's basic needs for support, shelter, health care, supervision, and guidance…are not met, the best efforts to promote learning through education alone will not work” (1999, p. 57). All too often, teachers are the ones who have to confront these factors in their classrooms and serve as social workers, counselors, parents, and police officers. Having to serve in these multiple capacities takes meaningful instructional time away from both teachers and students.

Second, community schools get parents and the community involved. We know that, when parents and communities are involved with student learning, students do better. As Henderson and Mapp sum up, “when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (2002, p. 7). For example, research has shown that when parents are involved in their child’s education and learning, regardless of income or background, students are more likely to:

- “earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs.
- be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits.
- attend school regularly.
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education.” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7)
Third, community schools promote strong communities. While research findings such as those above may convince educators and parents of the benefits of community schools, why would community members, community organizations, and businesses be interested in them? The answers to this are very practical. Community-based organizations are often confronted with obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their mission, such as lack of space or lack of transportation for students. Community schools could help them to overcome these challenges (Azcoitia, 2002). Benefits to business can include a better-qualified workforce and reduced turnover and training costs (Timberman, 1999). And everyone in the community can benefit from a strong economy and improved quality of life. It is commonly believed that good schools and thriving communities go hand-in-hand.

While the potential benefits for students, families, schools, and communities are apparent, not every school needs to be a full-service community school. For example, the majority of students who attend affluent suburban schools may have access to health services and after-school enrichment programs. However, even in affluent schools, there may be some students who are living in poverty, which can inhibit their learning and make it more difficult for them to access these services easily. These schools may find that applying some aspects of the community school concept can benefit those students.

### How Do You Implement a Community School?

Since every community school looks different depending on the needs, interests, and available resources of the particular community, it would be difficult to give a step-by-step guide for implementing one. As The Children’s Aid Society points out, “it is not the separate program elements that make a community school, but the long-term commitment to bring parents, teachers and community together to ensure that children have whatever they need to learn and grow” (2001, p. 53). Developing and sustaining a community school will require a cadre of dedicated, strong, and relentless individuals, including a school principal who champions the cause and support from the district’s central office. Perhaps some of the best advice offered in the literature is to start small and build gradually. The discussion that follows provides information on planning, sustaining, and scaling up a community school initiative.

### Plan, Plan, and Plan Some More

Planning is probably the most important step in the development of a community school. There are so many facets that must be considered and negotiated that Dryfoos and Maguire (2002) suggest that leaders interested in developing a community school should prepare to spend at least a year planning. This section will take a look at the various pieces of the planning process. Funding—a crucial aspect of the entire process—will be discussed in the next section, which looks at sustaining your initiative.

**Get buy-in and do your research.** In order for a community school to be successful, it must be a truly collaborative effort from the very beginning, with shared decision making and a shared vision (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001). This will require careful attention to ensure that input is gathered from all groups and that everyone feels they have a say in the initiative. This may make for some very long meetings during the initial phases, but experienced principals will tell you that these are necessary to get buy-in from everyone (Colgan, 2003).

Teachers and staff should be included in planning meetings, as their input is absolutely critical. Teachers, in particular, may be apprehensive at first and think that a community school approach will take away already scarce funding and time. Make sure to fully explain how a community school operates so they understand what they can gain from such an approach (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). One teacher, for example, who was skeptical about implementing a community school, had the following to say after his school began the transformation:

I…saw that time for quality instruction wasn’t going to suffer but in fact was going to be enhanced. I now had a whole system of support for my students. If a child or family needed help, we looked at our menu of services to see what was needed. This only made my job as classroom teacher easier. (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002, p. 41)
While discussions may start internally among a group of educators at the school, parents and the community should be brought into the discussion as soon as possible (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). Families and community members offer insight into community resources and needs. Community organizations provide needed services and opportunities (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001). Ultimately, a planning team should be formed that is representative of all partners, both in the school and in the community.

**Schools are natural community hubs. The key to integrated services is partnership.**

The planning team will want to spend some time doing research and learning about community schools, particularly by visiting them, if possible (Melaville, 2004). A community assessment must also be undertaken to determine what the community’s needs are and what its strengths are (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001). This “extensive and professional community survey must be completed” (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 79), and should collect the following information:

- **Demographic data**—What is the median income? What is the crime rate? What is the unemployment rate? What trends can be seen in these indicators over time?
- **Community perspectives**—Through surveys, interviews, community forums, etc., find out what residents think. What are the most pressing needs of the community? What services are currently available? Are there barriers to these services? Ask community leaders, such as religious leaders and law enforcement officials, what they perceive to be the needs of the community and the availability of services.
- **Available services in the community**—Find out what services are actually available in the community. Are they accessible? Are they utilized? If so, by whom? Are these agencies financially or otherwise strained?
- **Community strengths**—What are the strengths of the community, both tangible and intangible? Is there a college or university in the town? Are community members civically active? Are there strong social networks?
- **Future considerations**—What are the issues confronting the community over the next several years? What will the future needs of the community be (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001)?

A thorough assessment will distinguish what the community’s needs are. For example, “the mother of three in a Title I school may spend so much time doing laundry that she cannot help her children with reading. The solution…washers and dryers in the schools” (Kronick, 2005, p. 47). It can also clarify what services are not needed. For example, if most parents speak English fluently, then it might not be necessary to offer English as a Second Language classes in the family resource center.

### Three Questions to Keep in Mind

- What services are you going to offer and where will they be located?
- How will you pay for the program?
- How will you measure the effectiveness of the program?

Source: The Children’s Aid Society, 2001

**Working out the kinks.** This concept will most likely be a drastic shift for schools and community partners (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 68). It challenges them to think and operate in new ways. It asks practitioners from different professions with different training, different codes of ethics, and different languages to share resources, people, and space in order to accomplish common goals. Developing these partnerships, therefore, is no easy task and may require considerable time and attention. As one principal characterizes it, “it takes a great deal of effort to share decision making and to let go of turf issues” (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002, p. 115).

For example, “Bringing outsiders into the school to use school facilities after school hours and in the evening opens a Pandora’s box of potential trouble”
Teachers may not be keen to share their classrooms, custodial schedules may have to be adapted to accommodate new hours of the school building, and schools that are already overcrowded may have very limited space in which to create a family resource center or a health clinic (Dryfoos, 2002). Keeping schools open before school, after school, and on weekends will raise concerns regarding utility costs, custodial services, etc., but they can generally be resolved through joint efforts between the school and district, local government, families, and community organizations (Blank et al., 2003).

Here’s how one school set out to tackle these issues:

In Washington Heights, specific problems areas were recognized from the very beginning: Who makes decisions on allocating space in the school? How do you control access to rooms with valuable equipment and materials such as the computer room, library or music rooms? How would custodial contracts and opening fees be handled? To facilitate problem-solving in these and other areas, ground rules were agreed upon by partners early in the planning process. By setting broad, shared goals for your community school program—goals that are larger than the goals of any one partner and cannot be achieved by any one group alone—you can help create a sense of cohesion and common purpose among the several partners on your team. (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001, p. 69)

Ideas to help you work through some of these scenarios include:

- Set ground rules, such as who will lead meetings and how decisions will be made (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001).
- Look for unused or underutilized space in the school. Can a closet be transformed into an office or a medical suite? It might be small, but it is one way for the school to demonstrate that they welcome outside individuals and agencies and view them not as tenants, but as integral partners (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001).
- Encourage teachers who have concerns about the use of their classroom for after-school programs to meet with the adult who will be supervising the programs to work out a satisfactory arrangement (Colgan, 2003).
- Commit to ongoing team-building (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001).

**Governing and managing.** Governance structures for community schools vary from school to school. In a number of community school models, there is a lead agency that works side-by-side with the school as the primary partner. The school concentrates largely on the education aspects and the lead agency focuses predominately on the community involvement aspects (The Children’s Aid Society, 2001). The lead agency might be a local government agency, such as the Health and Human Services Department, or a community-based organization, such as the local United Way or YMCA. Some communities find that they need to form a new nonprofit agency to specifically fulfill this role. At Molly Stark School (VT), the principal served as the lead agency (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). There are advantages and disadvantages for all potential lead agencies, and the selection should be made carefully (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002).

A community school coordinator is also important. According to Dryfoos and Maguire, “every full-service community school needs a full-time coordinator to partner with the principal” (2002, p. 55). The coordinator focuses on getting the community involved and organizing and managing the services and programs so the principal can focus on...
academics. He or she finds appropriate partners, develops relationships, coordinates resources and activities, and ensures that everyone is working towards the specified goals. Melaville (2004) emphasizes, however, that school coordinators are not directly involved in providing services. This means that, while it may seem useful to have the coordinator serve on lunch duty, this can prevent them from fulfilling their actual role (Melaville, 2004). Sometimes this individual is employed directly by the lead agency, other times school funds are used to fund the position (Blank et al., 2003). According to Dryfoos and Maguire (2002), funding for the position often comes in the form of a grant, at least in the beginning phases, which means that the decision of who serves as the employer will most likely depend on whether the grant is awarded to the school or an outside agency.

In addition to a coordinator, community schools often have local advisory committees or oversight boards that are composed of the various constituents, including students, parents, school staff, community residents, and representatives from partner organizations. These committees and boards fill multiple roles and serve in numerous capacities. They learn about the ongoing needs of the community, advocate on behalf of the school, promote events and accomplishments, develop policies, seek funding, provide expertise, etc. In the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) initiative in Multnomah County (OR), these elements come together as follows:

A non-profit Lead Agency serves as the managing partner for each SUN school, bringing social service expertise, knowledge of the community, and additional resources to the SUN School. Lead Agency staff work with the Principal and Advisory Committee to select a Site Manager. The SUN Site Manager coordinates extended-day programs; links SUN activities to the academic school day; fosters strong relationships with school personnel and community partners; and identifies networks of services, programs and resources that can benefit youth and the larger community. The SUN Initiative as a whole is managed by staff in Multnomah County’s Office of School and Community Partnerships. (Hamann, 2003, p. 9)

The Bridges to Success (BTS) initiative grew out of a partnership between Indianapolis Public Schools and the United Way of Central Indiana. In the BTS model, key policy makers form a communitywide governing council that develops system-wide initiatives and allocates resources. There may be subcommittees within this governing council, such as the evaluation subcommittee or the health subcommittee, to oversee particular aspects of the initiative. BTS also utilizes school-based site teams, which include school staff, families, and community members, that are charged with planning and implementing the initiative at the school. They set priorities and act according to the specific needs of their school. Area school coordinators support the site teams and serve as a liaison between the team and the governing council. In contrast to other community school models, where one coordinator works full-time for one school, area coordinators serve multiple schools (Melaville, 2004).

Sustaining Your Community School

As with any initiative, consideration must be given to sustainability. According to Melaville, “adaptability to changing conditions and the ability to take advantage of opportunities is a key to sustainability” (2004, p. 44). The four factors relating to sustaining a community school that will be discussed here are funding, training, communicating, and evaluating.

**Funding.** Funding is a paramount concern for every school today. According to The Children’s Aid Society, however, “one of the most appealing aspects of community schools is their cost-effectiveness” (2001, p. 88). As they point out, a streamlined system of services can create opportunities for both schools and organizations to save money, for example, by avoiding redundancy.

Still, stable funding will be a challenge. As Blank et al. point out, “the relentless pursuit of funding and support can destabilize community strategies, leading to staff turnover, weakened partner relationships, and unreliable services and supports for children and families” (2006, p. 15). To be sustainable, schools and communities will need to (1) constantly search for possible funding and (2) utilize a combination of funding sources. Sources
of funding can be public or private and can range from a one-time grant or donation to an ongoing commitment of funds. The key is to ensure that you have diversified funding so that the discontinuation of one funding stream does not derail the entire initiative.

There are a range of public financing sources that can contribute to the development of a community school. Dryfoos (2002) suggests that Title I funds may be the most reliable source to begin a community school. She points to a number of other sources of public financing as well, such as: Medicaid and Child Health Insurance for health and mental health services, Safe Schools—Healthy Students and Drug Free Schools and Safe Communities for prevention programs and counseling, 21st Century Community Learning Centers for after-school initiatives, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families for providing childcare. As this list illustrates, schools are not limited to public financing that is specific to education. Community partners often receive or are eligible for funding from public programs, which can potentially be used to offer or relocate services to the school.

Private sources of financing have proven vital to many community school initiatives. Foundations, philanthropists, community organizations, businesses, and corporations have provided donations and grants that have assisted with start-up costs, the provision of direct services, program evaluations, technical assistance, etc. In Indiana, for example, local contributions from Smokefree Indiana, the Teachers Federal Credit Union, and the Welborn Baptist Foundation have all helped to fund community schools in Evansville. In addition, the local United Way gave $100,000 to fund social workers in the schools (Blank et al., 2006).

Schools can also look at ways to use the building itself in order to maximize potential funding options. According to Decker and Boo, schools use “less than a third of their potential, operating six

Dryfoos and Maguire (2002) discuss some of the barriers to full-service schools that leaders will need to work out during the planning phase:

**Space**—Many schools are already overcrowded, making it nearly impossible to accommodate additional services within the existing building. Further, most schools cannot construct new buildings to accommodate health clinics and family resource centers. However, through creative thinking, schools are finding ways to overcome this. For example, some communities bring mobile units to the school in order to open health clinics or create family resource centers. Other schools convert closets into offices or health suites.

**Turf**—Issues over turf must be decided upon from the very start. Classrooms, supplies, equipment, etc. will need to be discussed during the planning phase. The point that needs to be communicated and agreed to by all is that “the space is there to be used for whatever purposes best serve the needs of the children” (p. 149).

**Transportation**—Transportation costs are a huge concern for many districts, which can make the idea of a community school seem impossible. Some schools have moved to a 4-day school week or cut bus routes in order to confront the rising cost of transportation. How, then, can a school transport students who are at school from early in the morning to late in the evening, on weekends, and in the summer? Schools and their partners have to consider this during the planning stage and see what solutions they can come up with. Community agencies may be able to share some of the cost. In New Jersey, for example, a community organization was able to offer its van for various purposes.

**Confidentiality**—Different professions are guided by different confidentiality requirements. Find out what each of your partner’s privacy policies are and determine if there are ways for school staff and partners to share pertinent information without breaking confidentiality codes. One school found that the key to confidentiality issues was negotiation.
or seven hours a day, five days a week, nine months a year, while their maintenance, debt service, and other costs continue year-round” (2001, p. 8). Fees for use of the facilities can generate funding from community groups who are interested in using the building at night and on weekends.

Being able to provide services does not always require an increase in funding and may actually result in reduced costs in some instances. For example, at Molly Stark Elementary School (VT), a retired dentist operates a practice out of the school’s family center. The school provides the space and the dentist collects his fees through Medicaid. The dentist has been able to reduce his overhead since he does not have to pay rent or utilities and has thus established a “viable and sustainable small business” (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002, p. 65). Schools and districts may also find that, whereas they previously had to channel money into efforts that address some of these barriers to learning, they are now able to shift that money to more education-related endeavors.

The Finance Project identifies the following eight elements that are critical for establishing a base of both fiscal and nonfiscal resources that promote long-term sustainability of community initiatives (Bryant, 2002):

- **Vision**—Have a clear objective that states how a community school will improve student, family, and community outcomes.

- **Results orientation**—Specify the indicators and performance measures that you will use to track progress towards meeting the objectives.

- **Strategic financing orientation**—Know what resources you need to sustain the initiative and how to access those resources. Use a variety of funding sources and make sure to align resources with specific functions, such as training or evaluation.

- **Adaptability to changing conditions**—Know the trends, policies, and shifting priorities that may have an impact on your initiative.

- **Broad base of community support**—Build support for your community school among everyone in the community. If the community feels that the initiative is vital, they will fight to keep it funded.

- **Key champions**—Cultivate relationships and build support for the community school initiative among influential community leaders. Key champions use their power to build support for a community school.

- **Strong internal systems**—Demonstrate that your community school is a high-quality initiative by ensuring that all internal systems, such as accounting, procurement, and governance, follow the generally accepted standards and best practices in the field.

- **Sustainability plan**—Bring all of the elements together in a plan that spells out where the community school initiative currently is and where it intends to go. The plan should address the strategies that will be used to obtain necessary resources and the potential obstacles that may need to be addressed along the way.

Funding will always be a critical aspect to sustaining community school initiatives. While it requires ongoing attention, one school’s community coordinator emphasized that the number one obstacle community schools face is bureaucracy, not funding (Hardy, 2007). In addition, as Decker and Boo point out, “using schools as community centers is a cost-effective, practical way to use one of a community’s largest investments—its school buildings” (2001, p. 11).

**Technical assistance and professional development.** While financial contributors often want their funding to go directly to providing services, it is important that funding goes towards staff development and technical assistance as well (Blank et al., 2006; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Melaville, 2004). Technical assistance providers offer ongoing support to local communities in areas such as training and development, assessing community needs, developing action plans, and mediating issues between partners (Agosto, 1999; Multnomah County, 2008). For example, early evaluations of the Schools Unitng Neighborhoods (SUN) initiative indicated that extra support for school and partner staff was an important component and, therefore, technical assistance is provided by the Multnomah County Office of School and Community Partnerships.
and contracted service providers with specialized expertise (Hamann, 2003). Some of the common training and technical assistance topics include the development of advisory committees and the linking of school-day activities with extended-day activities (Hamann, 2003). Professional development and training is important for both schools and partner organizations, as it allows everyone to learn how community schools work and to clarify individual roles and responsibilities. When training and team building exercises can be done jointly, it can help “bridge professional gaps” (Rice & Harris, 2003, p. 218).

Communication. Your public relations program is important. It needs to consist of two-way communication between the school and the community, meaning that it should keep the community informed about available services and recent accomplishments and also seek input regarding the effectiveness of the initiative. Parent and community involvement is a challenge. Just because you develop a community school does not mean that individuals will flock to the school to take advantage of the added services. It will take a persistent effort to let the community know what services and opportunities are available at the school. According to Dryfoos and Maguire, the key to parent involvement is “ensuring that the services and opportunities made available are ones that parents really want and need” (2002, p. 178). Here’s how Decker and Boo describe it:

once a community school program begins to address community problems and expand local learning opportunities, community members must be kept informed…. Through a variety of media—newsletters, press releases, advertising, newspaper articles, and radio and television features—news about what is happening in the community school can be shared with the community. Key community leaders and groups can provide feedback about the effectiveness of the program. (2001, p. 20)

Assessment and evaluation. As with any initiative or program, it is important to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the community school. Is the school meeting its objectives relating to students, families, and the community? In addition, “effective community school programs are sensitive to a community’s changing needs” (Decker & Boo, 2001, p. 20). Therefore, in order “to make sure a program is responsive” (Decker & Boo, 2001, p. 20), schools should also regularly assess what new community needs have arisen and what needs are no longer a concern.

Scaling Up

Scaling up community schools will require a dramatic shift in current thinking and operating. In order to accomplish a network of full-service schools across a city or large district, “a large-scale public reimagining of the role of schools and human services in our society” is needed (Bundy, 2005, p. 79). It will take “the alignment of existing systems” (Bundy, 2005, p. 80) and a solution to the inflexible public categorical funds (Bundy, 2005).

The Full-Service Schools Roundtable (2007), a coalition working to bring full-service schools to scale in Boston, points out that community school initiatives in Boston are being carried out on a school-by-school basis rather than through a citywide commitment. They conclude that this “school-by-school approach to scaling up poses sustainability challenges” (2007, p. 2). Or, as another observer put it, “a one-school-at-a-time approach was leaving too many children and communities behind” (Bundy, 2005, p. 74). Some communities, however, have found that when they try to scale up, they are met with a lack of and/or underfunded service providers. For example, a district that wants to extend what it is accomplishing at a community elementary school to the middle or high school might find that there are not enough service providers to make this possible (Lawson, 1999).

According to Bundy (2005), there are a number of lessons that have been learned thus far that can be beneficial to communities interested in expanding community schools across entire school systems, such as:

• **Embrace a mission, not a model**—Focus on the strategic approach of community schools and not on one specific model.

• **Enlarge the vision to align the work of many, overcoming “the silo effect”**—Leaders and professionals in the various community organizations must continuously work to find
ways that they can integrate their efforts and overcome “vertically organized, noncooperating systems of care and education” (p. 77).

- **Build relationships based on trust and a willingness to take risks**—All stakeholders must build trust with one another and agree to taking a collective risk.

- **Target multiple systems**—It is not solely about reforming schools. It is about “accessing, reforming, and realigning multiple systems of care and education to improve outcomes for children” (p. 77).

- **Plan for and take advantage of leadership changes**—Incoming leaders can become new partners.

Leaders in communities such as Chicago (IL) and Lincoln (NE) are turning pilot projects into community-wide initiatives by “consistently and intentionally” focusing on four strategies (Blank et al., 2006, p. 15). These strategies, which parallel the sustainability strategies discussed above, may also help to guide districts, cities, and states that are interested in bringing community schools to scale:

- **Develop diverse financing.** Leaders and partners allocate resources from their organizations; refocus federal, state, and local funding streams; redirect existing programs and services; reach out to private funders; and develop new sources of support. They strive to fund their entire vision, not just one program.

- **Change policy and practice through technical assistance and professional development.** Technical assistance to solve implementation and operation problems and professional development to strengthen staff knowledge and skills are key. These essentials should be an ongoing part of every community school initiative—planned for and provided before implementation difficulties occur.

- **Collect evidence of student and family success.** The success of community schools rests heavily on their ability to improve a range of important results that contribute to young people's development—intellectual, physical, social, emotional, civic, and moral.

- **Build broad-based public support.** Partnerships may flourish on school grounds, but unless the public learns about the work of community schools, they are not likely to appreciate their value—or support them (excerpted from Blank et al., 2006, p. vii).

The Bridges to Success (BTS) model offers one way to absorb the expansion of community schools across a system. The developers have shifted from using site coordinators to using area coordinators that oversee multiple schools. As a school site team develops, the area coordinator can focus less attention and energy on that school and move on to the next school (Melaville, 2004). This differs from other community school models where each community school has a full-time, on-site coordinator.

**Summary**

Barton writes that it is “at our peril” that “we tend to put considerations of family, community, and economy off-limits in education-reform policy discussions” (2001, p. 20). Stabiner argues that “we have to acknowledge and address the difficulties our students face in their lives outside of school so that they have every opportunity to learn and achieve in school” (in The Children's Aid Society, 2001, p. 50). Community schools recognize that family and community factors can have an impact on student achievement. They forge partnerships with community organizations and agencies in order to address these factors by providing the services students, families, and the community need. Yet they are not often mentioned in the school reform literature (Dryfoos, 2002). If, however, community schools such as Thomas Edison Elementary in New York and Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary in Minnesota continue to document positive outcomes and cities such as Chicago and Boston succeed in bringing community schools to scale, more schools systems may decide that a community school makes sense for them too.
Resources


Visit the NAESP e-Knowledge Portal at http://www.principalsportal.org for additional online resources on community schools. Simply log in or register and click on the “Search” tab.

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