

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: AN EVIDENCE-BASED, EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR REOPENING NEW YORK SCHOOLS



INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has presented unprecedented obstacles to students learning, health, and overall well-being. School closures amid this pandemic reveal that schools provide more than just academic support for students, and accentuate how schools will need all the support they can get to reopen safely and address academic and non-academic issues that support students' overall wellbeing. As an evidence-based, effective strategy, community schools have continued to provide the critical support students and their families need, building on their robust relationships with community partners and awareness of specific community needs. The community school strategy emphasizes flexibility while maintaining a localized, customized, and collaborative approach to addressing student needs. In this time of uncertainty, we are sure of this - New York community schools work.



This brief highlights how community schools are stepping up amid COVID-19 and shares recommendations collected from the field on how New York can build on its investment in the community schools strategy. The State must further implement the community schools strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities, especially communities of color and low-income communities that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 at a disproportionate rate.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL?

Community schools are a collaborative strategy that organize community resources to best support the success of students. As a place, the community school functions as a hub providing services tailored to the needs of students and families. Community schools address the needs of students in a holistic way — not just their academic achievement, but their overall health and well-being — to create the conditions for learning, growth, and success. Community schools connect partners, convene stakeholders, coordinate services, and align resources, using various funding streams to meet students' academic, enrichment, social, emotional, and health needs. They mobilize resources including social services, health services, mental health services, expanded learning opportunities, and family engagement. Community schools work to address the potential needs of students and remove barriers to learning.



We were able to get our staff to support our partnering school to distribute tablets and workbooks for all of the students. Then in the first two weeks, they [staff] supported the families to ensure that they had WiFi by calling the providers and getting equipment installed at the students' homes. During weeks three to five, we did wellness calls, virtual support groups, parent engagement, student individual calls, and referrals for mental health services. Weeks three to now, we have provided students and their families with food pantry and cash assistance through a private donation at \$500 per family for a selected group of students. We have also provided immigration services to our non-documented students, plus an array of other services and resources to help them cope with the impact of COVID 19.

— Community agency working with a Manhattan community school to support students amid COVID-19

HOW DO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS WORK?



Most community schools involve a community school coordinator/director who serve as a liaison and facilitator to connect families and teachers to help navigate the educational process. They plan collaboratively with school staff; recruit, manage, and coordinate partners; and bring in and align resources to meet identified needs.



A community school team works together to assess needs of specific communities for students to succeed. A team may involve families, community partners, school staff, youth, and other stakeholders that work in collaboration.



The team plans development and implementation that includes sustainable efforts to organize resources in new and more effective ways.



These teams coordinate and connect to the community to use the school as a hub for support services that are available for students, families, and other community members.



The team ensures that the community school strategy remains central in the decision-making process.

HOW ARE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS SUPPORTING STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND STAFF AMID COVID-19?

A June 2020 survey conducted by the New York State Community Schools Network revealed that community schools and organizations partnered with community schools are providing important wraparound services to support students and families. During this pandemic, community schools in New York are:

- Providing equitable access in academic support and tutorial services to high-needs students to improve student learning
- Leveraging resources, personnel, outreach efforts, and communication platforms to develop and share supportive and enriching activities



We partner with over 45 community agencies across our county. These partnerships help us to sustain counseling, college planning, internship opportunities, academic supports, and basic needs for our students and families. As districts in rural NYS, we could not provide these services without a community schools model.

– Wayne County community school working with local agencies and community-based organizations to support students amid COVID-19

- Providing social emotional and enrichment supports remotely to mitigate learning loss and help students earn credits towards graduation
- Helping to develop and create processes and structures that support schools and families
- Providing new and modified professional development for teachers to help them adapt to teaching online and participating in other virtual learning opportunities
- Responding to students and parents' urgent needs by providing hotspots to families, access to food, and personal care packages to support comprehensive mental health and family services
- Providing professional development opportunities for students who are entering the workforce or exploring career pathways
- Providing technical assistance and professional development to staff and helping them prepare for the 20-21 school year
- Providing social emotional support for families that are stressed about working and supporting their kids, including providing access to childcare so parents can return to work
- Researching strategies (What can be done? What should be done? What should not be done?) to address the trauma of the pandemic and its impact on students and families
- Activating and channeling youth and family voice by providing platforms and other spaces to do so



We have offered virtual drop-in centers and cafes, as well as providing gas cards and facilitated referrals to community agencies. We are leveraging the relationships of Community School Coordinators as they problem-solve together around needs in their communities.

– Community agency working with a community school in Broome County to support students amid COVID-19



We are a trusted point of contact for our families and can mitigate rumor and anxiety by sharing information and leading with transparency and calm. If schools have flexibility in their reopening, we will include students and families in designing the reopening plan. We will continue with remote activities; support public awareness campaigns for PPE and other social distancing guidelines; provide support for blended learning; provide workshops and referrals for job training and employment resources; and distribute PPE.

– Community agency working with community schools in Brooklyn and Manhattan to support students amid COVID-19

WHY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS?

Community schools work effectively to support students, families, and communities because they are:



An evidence-based, school transformation strategy. The community school strategy holistically supports students and produces strongly positive results in student achievement and social-emotional growth and development. Furthermore, community schools actively engage families and community members by building on previously established strong relationships to meet the needs of students and families. A recent 2020 RAND report¹ on New York City's community schools found that community schools have a positive impact on student attendance, a reduction in disciplinary incidents for elementary and middle school students, and a positive impact on math achievement and credit accumulation.



A collaborative strategy: Community schools are built on four key pillars: active family and community engagement; expanded and enriched learning time; integrated student supports; and collaborative leadership and practices. The strategy is deeply rooted in a collaborative framework of pooling and integrating resources to help students address the obstacles they face.



A cost-effective strategy. The community schools strategy also provides a cost effective way to respond to community needs. A \$1 investment in a community school coordinator returns about \$7.11 in net benefits.² Community schools also utilize and blend diverse funding streams to provide the maximum level of support to meet students' academic, enrichment, social-emotional, and health needs.



A racial and economic justice strategy. Community schools prioritize academic and non-academic needs, some of which are born out of the insidious role that systemic racism and historic underinvestment continually play in economically distressed communities, typically communities of color. The community schools strategy can disrupt these oppressive patterns to level the playing field so that all children in New York have a better chance to thrive and succeed.



A resource mobilization strategy. During this time, students, families, and communities need more wraparound resources (grief counselors, social workers, nurses, afterschool and other expanded learning programs, etc.) to combat the grave impact of COVID-19. Community schools will adequately prepare and provide students with the tools and resources they need to confront academic, social-emotional, mental health, and other non-academic needs aggravated by the pandemic.

¹ Johnston, William R., John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Padilla, and Lea Xenakis. "Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative." City of New York, 2020. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html.

² Bloodworth, Michelle R., & Horner, Anna C. "Return on Investment of a Community Schools Coordinator: A Case Study." Apex & ABC Community School Partnership. http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/ROI_Coordinator.pdf

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

How community schools are responding to the COVID-19 crisis today highlights and reinforces the effectiveness of this strategy and its positive impact on communities. Broad implementation of this integrated approach will help mitigate the challenges caused by COVID-19 and also address disproportionate harm the pandemic has brought to vulnerable students and communities. New York must further strengthen this strategy to leverage academic, emotional, and family/community support for NYS communities. New York State must:

- Increase funding for education aid and the community schools set-aside. The State must build on its current investment to provide additional funding to school districts that implement the community schools strategy. The community schools set-aside enacted in the State's budget has consistently allowed for needful flexibility to use this critical funding: Community schools have always utilized this flexibility to maximize support for their students, which will be even more crucial now as education stakeholders emphasize the need for flexibility to support New York students and families, school staff, and communities.
- Provide increased financial support for community schools through expansive grants and increases to funding streams that support afterschool and summer programs, school-based health services, mental health services, and other funding streams leveraged by community schools to provide needed services to students and families.
- Provide legislative support to the community schools initiative by introducing and passing legislation that fosters the community schools strategy. This includes efforts to ensure the sustainability of funding for the community school strategy that will allow schools to ensure long-term viability.
- Provide funding for health and safety equipment, including PPE, and timely guidance on health and safety protocols.
- Include community school representatives and community partners as critical voices in reopening conversations and policies.
- Support and fund targeted and research-based mental health efforts to address the trauma of under-resourced communities and their families.
- Support and fund summer programming and child care for families that need to go back to work.
- Provide flexibility by allowing each community to utilize additional federal funding in a way that precisely meets the needs of their families.



We have worked with Head start, Advantage After School, 21st CCLC, satellite mental health clinics, prevention providers... everyone really...we needed everyone. This was big. This is big. It takes us all.

– Wayne County community school working with local agencies and community-based organizations to support students amid COVID-19



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