

The Future Is Bright for Community Schools

By Martin J. Blank Posted on December 7, 2018, 9:02 am



Getty/Los Angeles Times/Bob Chamberlin

Following the opening of a Los Angeles elementary school in October 2005, kindergarten students sing a counting song in their new classroom.

America's public schools have historically been centers of community and bastions of democracy. They have thrived as places where families and communities can gather to educate their children and support their community.

The community schools movement has sought to renew the nation's commitment to that vision and tradition and to strengthen U.S. public schools. The rise of community schools was cataloged in a recent Center for American Progress [report](#) calling for an evolution from community schools to community school districts. The report argued that providing wraparound services such as health services and social supports, in addition to other supports for students beyond academic programs, should be a core function of the joint efforts of school districts and their community partners.

A comprehensive vision for community schools

The CAP report gets closer to a full understanding of the vision for community schools for which the [Coalition for Community Schools](#) (CCS) has advocated for more than 20

years. That vision, refined over time, sees public schools as places where educators and community partners provide powerful learning opportunities, effective family and community engagement, and integrated student supports, thereby becoming part of the fabric of the school.

In short, this vision considers the work of community partners to be integral to student success, not just an add-on benefit for students who happen to attend schools that adopt this approach.

Building successful community schools

Since philosopher John Dewey declared that [schools should be social centers](#) more than 100 years ago, there have been ebbs and flows in the growth of community schools. It has been challenging for the community school strategy to become a permanent part of the education and community landscape. Advocates have faced philosophical arguments about schooling; tensions between institutional leaders and grassroots efforts; funding shortfalls; challenges of sustaining partnerships; and overwhelmed school bureaucracies.

But three factors offer hope for greater traction. First, educators and policymakers are no longer as heavily focused on testing, standards, and accountability as the tools for improving student performance. There is now greater recognition of the impact of [poverty and trauma](#) on students' educational journey than ever before.

Second, as the CAP report indicates, more school district leaders are organizing and sustaining community schools, as well as embedding the vision in their operations. The most successful ones are doing so with a respect for the assets and complementary expertise that community partners bring to schools to support students and public education.

Finally, through the efforts of the CCS and others, community schools have support from the grassroots to the grasstops. Community organizers such as the [Journey for Justice Alliance](#), the [Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools](#), and the [Coalition for Education Justice](#) mobilize the voices of students, parents, and community residents.

Meanwhile, [superintendents](#), [local governments](#), the [American Federation of Teachers](#), the [National Education Association](#), [United Way](#), and [higher education institutions](#) all drive resources and policy to support community schools. Policy groups such as the [Learning Policy Institute](#) and the [Opportunity Institute](#), to name just a few, are also allies.

To gain even more commitment, create more effective community schools, and continue increasing the number of school systems that adopt the approach, the community schools movement should build on four key strategies:

- 1. Sustaining an organizing strategy.** Before the CCS was founded, famed [community organizer Ernesto Cortés Jr.](#) urged its emerging leadership to go into the field to find out if such a coalition was needed and how it could be most effective. With help from the Institute for Educational Leadership, the coalition's founding partners spent large amounts of time in the field; they talked with leaders of national organizations in education, health, youth development, and other arenas and held local meetings with grassroots organizers, community-based organizations, and school system leaders. A decade later, as a growing number of communities started to implement the community strategies in particular states, the CCS decided that it was time to reach out to these groups in an attempt to organize state coalitions. Such coalitions have now emerged in 17 states, and organizing has been the driving force behind the many local community school initiatives across the country. Strengthening this organizing mentality—reaching out and listening to allies, engaging partners, and forging common ground—will be essential to broadening and deepening the organizing culture at all levels, from Washington, D.C., to individual schools and neighborhoods. Only then can advocates create and foster the kind of ownership that is necessary for community schools to thrive.
- 2. Balancing community voices and expert knowledge.** In an era when policymakers and researchers are looking for evidence-based programs to inform planning

processes, the voices of students, parents, and community residents are all too often overlooked. Community organizers work hard to bring these voices to the table. In the most successful community schools, professionals listen attentively, explain why a particular strategy may be effective, and adapt their approach to what students and families say they need. But there is more work to do. [Margaret Wheatley](#), a leadership and organizational change expert, stipulates the [first principle](#) for creating healthy communities: “People support what they create.” Applying this principle will not only unlock community wisdom, it will also lead to the mobilization of often-overlooked [community assets and gifts](#).

3. **Centering curricula focused on community issues.** Community schools are widely known for their efforts to address not only students’ academics but also their health and social needs, as well as their efforts to engage parents more effectively. Yet one prong of the community school strategy has received less attention: robust, engaging curricula that incorporate community issues. Community schools attempt to address challenges faced by young people and their communities more broadly, including civic, environmental, public health and housing, and workforce issues. The CCS calls this “[community-based learning](#),” and it must become a core part of all schools’ curricula. Today’s emphasis on student-centered learning, student voice and choice, and student engagement in education circles opens the door to further progress. However, educators, teacher unions, and community partners need to work together to give more attention to this area.

4. **Cultivating effective leadership.** Much more must be done to prepare people to work in the collaborative environment of a community school. This will require major change in how policymakers and education administrators think about leadership development for educators and human services professionals today. Until now, many leadership programs have too narrowly focused on academics and

accountability and have ignored the larger set of issues and challenges faced by students and their families. It is imperative that leaders in education and across society know how to build community; work toward equity in challenging, racially and culturally diverse environments; and create the school cultures and climates that are essential for success. Local school districts, higher education institutions, nonprofit leadership organizations, and foundations must transform their leadership development efforts to include this set of issues for all school leaders, including teacher leaders and youth development and human services professionals.

Money matters, of course; additional funding is necessary not only for the unique aspects of community schools, but also for public schools in general and for the opportunities and supports that students need—for example, after-school and mental health services. That said, the fact that the community schools movement has grown with little federal or state investment—although that investment is important and needed—suggests that the four factors detailed above will have a significant impact on its future trajectory.

Conclusion

In the face of national and state divisions, community problem-solving is alive and well in America on many fronts; the community school strategy is one example of such collaborative local action. The fact that community schools have grown in the fertile soil of local communities has helped cultivate that collaboration and build ownership for the community school strategy. In the next decade, more public schools will be equipped to nurture their historic role as centers of community and democracy, where the next generation of citizens is educated and families and communities are stronger.

Martin Blank was the founding director of the Coalition for Community Schools. The ideas expressed in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the coalition.