

Community Schools: Frequently Asked Questions

What are Community Schools?

Community schools are a strategy for organizing school and community resources around student success. Each 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.ⁱ Schools become centers of the community, open to everyone, all day, every day, evenings and weekends. Community schools represent *a strategy, not a program*.

What results do Community Schools seek to achieve?

Partners involved in Community Schools work to achieve these key results:

- Children are ready to enter school
- Students succeed academically
- Students are actively involved in learning and the community
- Students are healthy physically, socially and emotionally
- Students live and learn in stable and supportive environments
- Families are actively involved in children's education
- Communities are desirable places to liveⁱⁱ

Why are Community Schools better than conventional public schools?

Community Schools increase opportunities for children to succeed in school by adding resources known to make a difference: increased parental involvement in children's education;ⁱⁱⁱ extra learning opportunities through educational enrichment;^{iv} consistent adult guidance and support;^v and access to health, dental and mental health services. Community Schools address significant contemporary economic and social realities.

Are there different models of Community Schools?

"Community Schools" is an inclusive term used to describe a variety of models, including Beacons, Bridges to Success, The Children's Aid Society Community Schools, Communities in Schools, Elev8, Healthy Start, Schools of the 21st Century and University-Assisted Community Schools. All of these groups are active members of the national Coalition for Community Schools. In her book *Full-Service Schools*, Joy Dryfoos singled out The Children's Aid Society's Community Schools approach as a model of "how to put together both sides of the fundamental full-service equation: restructuring of education, plus helping children and their families by providing health, mental health and social services on site."^{vi}

Are there program components that define Community Schools?

Community Schools respond to local needs and are designed by local stakeholders, so there can be considerable variation from model to model and site to site. Since the primary goal is the promotion of student learning and healthy development, typical program components include after-school and summer enrichment, family engagement and services designed to remove barriers to student learning, such as medical, dental, mental health and social services. Many community schools also offer early childhood education, adult education and community-wide events, as well as meeting families' childcare needs. All models reflect a comprehensive approach to healthy child and youth development.

What else distinguishes a community school from a traditional school?

Most community schools have a full-time director or coordinator who partners with the principal to ensure that the needs of students and their families are understood and addressed. The director works with school staff to conduct a systematic needs assessment that guides the school's comprehensive education plan, making sure that the school recruits the right partners—those whose work is aligned with the school's goals, needs and plans. The work of the partners is coordinated by the director and integrated with the school's core instructional plan.

What is the difference between a community school and a charter school?

A charter school can be a community school, and vice versa. These terms are not mutually exclusive and can be, in fact, mutually reinforcing. The term "charter" has to do with a school's governance while the term "community schools" has to do with the organization of school and community resources around student success.

How many community schools are there in the United States?

Reliable estimates from the Coalition for Community Schools indicate that there may be more than 5,000 Community Schools in this country. Several cities have adopted community schools as a preferred reform strategy: New York City and Chicago now have more than 150 Community Schools each; Portland (Oregon) has 84, known as SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Schools; Baltimore has 52; and Lincoln (Nebraska) has 25.

What results have Community School achieved?

A recent synthesis of the work of mature community schools initiatives, conducted by the Coalition for Community Schools, found multi-faceted gains:

- improved academic performance in both reading and math;
- improved student and teacher attendance;
- reduced dropout rates and improved graduation rates;
- improved behavior;
- gains in indicators of positive youth development, such as leadership and conflict resolution skills;
- greater parent involvement;
- community benefits, such as better use of school buildings and safer neighborhoods^{viii}

The Children's Aid Society has contributed to this developing knowledge base through a variety of external evaluation studies conducted since 1992 by teams from Fordham University, the Education Development Center, ActKnowledge and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Taken together, these studies show a variety of positive results from implementation of the Community Schools strategy: improved student achievement; increased parental involvement; higher student and teacher attendance; improved school climate; decreased special education referrals; and improve mental and physical health.^{ix}

ⁱ Martin J. Blank, Atelia Melaville and Bela J. Shah, *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools*, Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools, May 2003, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Coalition for Community Schools, *Community Schools: Promoting Student Success*, Washington, DC, no date.

ⁱⁱⁱ *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*, Washington DC: Center for Law and Education, 1995

^{iv} Reginald M. Clark., *Critical Factors in Why Disadvantage Children Succeed or Fail in School*, New York, NY: Academy for Educational Development, 1988.

^v Bonnie Benard., *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School and Community*, Portland, OR: northwest Regional Educational Laboratories, Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities, 1991.

^{vi} Joy G. Dryfoos, *Full-Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, youth, and Families*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

^{vii} Coalition for Community Schools, *Community Schools Research Brief '13*, Washington, DC.

^{viii} The Children's Aid Society, *Summary of The Children's Aid Society Community Schools Results to Date*, New York, NY, 2006. See also "Results to Date" in *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action*, The Children's Aid Society, 2011.