

# Community Schools Leadership Toolkit Part 1: Building a Foundation



New York State  
**COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**  
Technical Assistance Centers  
Central/Western Region,  
Binghamton University



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*Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.*



(Leithwood, et al., 2004, p. 5)

# The Community Schools Strategy

Community Schools, as a strategy, work to bring together educators, families, and community stakeholders to attain collective impact. Community Schools also function as a place, or hub, where the community gathers to support the education of its children and provide learning experiences connected to the community.

As an advocate of the Community Schools strategy, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) recognizes that Community Schools make a positive difference in the lives and well-being of students, the school, and its community by countering a range of factors that impede student achievement.

This toolkit is designed for school and organizational leaders, and provides core information and resources to meet the unique needs of each Community School's development, implementation, and growth.



## **Leadership Tip # 1:**

**Celebrate the recognition, motivation, and the mindset that brought your school to consider the Community Schools strategy, and get excited about the transformations about to occur!**

# Elements of the Community Schools Strategy

Four fundamental pillars or key elements have shaped the initial development and implementation of the Community Schools strategy. Recently, the Community Schools Forward Project (2023) added two additional elements (#5 and #6) to reflect a growing body of research of the strategy and effective school improvement {[Community Schools Forward Essentials for Community School Transformation](#)}. Together, the elements are the building blocks of effective Community Schools.

**1) Integrated Student Supports:** address out-of-school barriers to learning through partnerships with social and health service agencies and providers. Integrated services, sometimes referred to as wraparound services, support academics and may include dental, vision, physical and mental health care, social-emotional learning, conflict resolution training, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice practices, among others. These services are often available before, during, and after school and are provided year-round to families and the community. Service space is often allocated within the school building or is easily accessible, and some services may include remote access.

**2) Expanded Learning Time & Opportunities:** include before- and afterschool, weekend, and summer programs to provide additional academic support, enrichment, real-world learning, and community problem-solving opportunities.

**3) Active Family & Community Engagement:** build school partners with families and other community members through active engagement and shared-decision making, centering the school as a hub of resources for adults and young people. Authentic parent/caregiver, family, and community engagement is promoted, so the entire community can actively participate in planning and decision-making. This process recognizes the link between the school's success and the community's development.

# Elements of the Community Schools Strategy

**4) Collaborative Leadership & Practices:** requires governance structures and processes that foster cross-boundary approaches to intentionally engage parents/caregivers, students, teachers, and partners with different perspectives and areas of expertise to share decision-making. This allows them to learn and work together toward achieving the school community's vision, mission, and goals through a comprehensive and strategic school improvement plan. Leaders must create meaningful mechanisms for the following: parent/caregiver and community engagement, teacher participation in decision-making and professional learning communities, a dynamic of reciprocity between principals and Community Schools directors, partnerships of mutual benefits with community organizations, and district-level cooperative goal-setting. Such leadership helps to cultivate a culture of trust, safety, and shared responsibility.

**5) Rigorous, Community-Centered Learning Opportunities:** ensure that curricula are engaging, culturally relevant, and challenging. Schools offer a robust selection of classes and afterschool programs in the arts, languages, and ethnic studies, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses. Also offered are services for English Language Learners and special education students, GED preparation programs, and job training. Pedagogy is student-centered and there is an emphasis on high-quality teaching, not on high-stakes testing. Assessments are used to provide data for teachers to meet the needs of students. Educators have an authentic voice in professional development that is high-quality and ongoing and includes strengthening the understanding of, and professional alignment with, the Community Schools strategy.

**6) Culture of Belonging, Safety, and Care:** establish positive discipline practices, such as restorative justice and behavioral supports, so that students can grow and contribute to the school, community, and beyond. Exclusionary discipline practices and harsh punishments are eliminated or significantly reduced.

# Elements of the Community Schools Strategy

Every school can be a Community School. Community Schools can be located in urban, suburban, and rural communities, and include public, charter, magnet, parochial, or private schools. Every Community School is unique, and depending on its local context, each school may vary in its operations and programs within and across the six elements. It is most important for leaders to recognize and respond to their school's local needs and prioritize a plan of action that will support the development of a climate and culture that enables all students to thrive.

## Leadership Tip # 2:

**Be Strategic! Recognize that becoming a Community School is a journey and long-term commitment. Know that not everything will happen all at once. Think big and start by prioritizing what is most important for your school.**



### Voice of a Leader:

**Principals transformed the leadership culture by keeping the vision of collective responsibility for student learning at the forefront of action.**

**(Adams & Jean-Marie, p. 367)**



# Benefits of the Community Schools Strategy

Each Community School shapes its programs and services to overcome identified barriers and meet the needs of its own community and students. Although specific outcomes may vary, important benefits of implementing the Community Schools strategy can be found below.

- ***Impact on Student Development and Outcomes:*** Through the Community Schools strategy, all stakeholders work through barriers to improve all students' educational opportunities and outcomes. Benefits to students include an engaging and rigorous academic program, expanded learning activities coupled with a strong network of support, access to a full range of school-based and school-linked programs and services that address the comprehensive needs of students and their families.
- ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI):*** The activities associated with the Community Schools strategy provide educators and their partners with realistic points of entry for meaningful DEI work. In Community Schools, the obligation is to build collaborative structures, which ultimately create viable pathways for meaningful DEI work within each element. The strategy's emphasis on community voice, representation, and participation in school governance processes encourages the empowerment of all stakeholders to affect the decisions that impact their lives. The needs assessment process {[Community Schools Needs Assessment Toolkit](#)} is an important first step in establishing collaborative practices that are inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives. It is an opportunity to expand who is invited into identifying barriers to educational access, opportunities, experiences, and outcomes so that the group can work together to remove those hurdles and address needs to benefit all students.

# Benefits of the Community Schools Strategy

- **Enhanced School Culture:** The transformational effect of removing barriers to learning and ensuring a high-quality, engaging, and relevant curriculum creates a positive culture for teaching and learning. When implemented effectively, Community Schools offer the necessary support for students, allowing teachers to be more present in the classroom, concentrate on academics, and create engaging learning environments for all students. Teachers are empowered to be effective instructional leaders in their classrooms and can provide an education that enables students to succeed.
- **Return on Investment (ROI):** Community Schools funding comes from many different public and private streams. Recently, the White House published a toolkit outlining relevant resources {[White House Toolkit: Federal Resources to Support Community Schools](#)}. With increased public and private funding, leaders are often called upon to measure and communicate Community Schools' economic and social value, cost-benefit, or return on investment (ROI). Research on the economic returns from Community Schools suggests an excellent return in social value on investments in schools providing wraparound services and other Community School supports, ranging from \$3 to \$15 in savings for every dollar invested (Maier et al., 2017). The New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) 2021 Community Schools Report states that the national average ROI for every dollar invested in establishing a Community School and hiring a Community Schools coordinator is \$7.3.

## Leadership Tip # 3:

**Leadership matters at all levels! To truly make a difference, all stakeholders must have a voice and take on leadership roles. Broaden your definition of leadership and seek out leaders whose voices need to be heard.**



# Expanding Community Schools Beyond K-12

## A Cradle-to-Career Perspective

The Community School strategy mitigates barriers to learning at the elementary, middle, and high school levels by addressing students' specific needs so that they are effectively positioned to experience greater educational opportunities, outcomes, and efficacy. This strengthens students' academic and social-emotional readiness to progress successfully through each grade level. The Community School strategy reaches beyond the K-12 years to include services to students and the community from birth through adulthood.

- **Early Childhood:** Early childhood programs familiarize children with the school environment and facilitate early detection of various challenges that might undermine their ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Early detection and awareness empowers educators so they can respond with timely interventions and support for the child and family. It allows educators to assist parents/caregivers with accessing resources that will support their child's development through the early years which will serve as a strong foundation for the child's educational journey to and through high school.
- **Readiness for Postsecondary Transitions:** Through their partnerships, Community Schools can leverage organizations, businesses, and industries to expose students to experiences that will expand their career opportunities and assist them in developing 21st-century skills needed for postsecondary success. Educators and their partners should work intentionally to provide students with career and leadership ventures (e.g., student-led banks, cafes, health centers, daycare centers, etc.) in their schools and communities that support all students' journeys through middle and high school.

# Expanding Community Schools Beyond K-12

## A Cradle-to-Career Perspective

- ***Lifelong Learning:*** Lifelong learning has always been an important component of the work of schools through professional development for educators. Community schools, through family engagement, work with partners to offer programs in Adult Education, English as a Second Language, High School Equivalency, Computer & other Vocational Skills Training, Leadership Development, College Courses, and various professional certifications.

### Leadership Tip # 4:

**Think outside the K-12 box! Use the Community Schools Strategy as a filter for thinking about what will have a transformational effect for your students, families, staff, and community.**



### Voice of a Leader:

**“The Community Schools philosophy appealed to my personal and professional values and beliefs; it also provided guidance for how to approach serving children and families in poverty.”**

**(Adams, p. 299)**



## Resources and Next Steps

### Questions/Thoughts for Consideration:

- Looking at the key elements, what Community Schools strategies does your school already implement?
- Whose voices do you need to elevate?
- Do you currently have a Community Schools Coordinator?
- What data do you have already that could help drive the work and demonstrate the needs?
- Many schools throughout the region are exploring or implementing a Community Schools approach – consider ways to plug into your local network.
- Early steps don't require a budget, although best practices include hiring a Community Schools Coordinator.
- A Community Schools approach is guided by the school community's priorities, builds off existing strengths, and expands where you have capacity. Start by implementing a needs assessment to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Utilize an initiative inventory to review current practices and guide decisions for new work.
- Stay tuned for Part 2 of this Toolkit, coming soon: *Community Schools Leadership Toolkit: Strategies for Implementation*.
- Reach out to the Community Schools Technical Assistance Center (TAC) in your region for additional resources and guidance:  
<https://www.nyscommunityschools.org/>

## Resources and Next Steps

### Additional Resources for Exploration:

- [Community Schools in New York State](#), NYSUT Fact Sheet
- [Community and School Resource Mapping](#), *The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism*
- [Community Schools Needs Assessment Toolkit](#), *New York State Central/Western Community Schools Technical Assistance Center & Binghamton University Community Schools*
- [Essentials for Community School Transformation](#), *Community Schools Forward*
- [Community School Strategy Implementation Roadmap](#), *NYSED CS Eastern Technical Assistance Center (ETAC)*
- [The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#), *NYSED*
- [Community Schools Resources](#), *NYSED C/W CS TAC Website*

### References:

1. Adams, C. M. (2019). Sustaining full-service community schools: Lessons from the Tulsa area community schools initiative. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 24(3), 288-313.
2. Adams, C. M., & Jean-Marie, G. (2011). A diffusion approach to study leadership reform. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(4), 354-377.



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