



OPINION

OPINION: To the rescue — The schools we need now are community schools

When the coronavirus struck, the community-school model showed how quickly families and schools needing extra resources could be helped

by JANE QUINN December 2, 2020



Credit: Jackie Mader/The Hechinger Report

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When America's schools shut down in mid-March as a result of Covid-19 and transitioned to some form of remote learning, the nation's community schools responded rapidly. That's because these schools already had strong existing relationships with providers of community resources, both public and private.

At least 8,000 American public schools identify as community schools, meaning that they work in well-planned partnerships with local organizations that offer resources like medical, dental and mental health services; before- and after-school programs; and housing and employment assistance to parents. These partners are integrated into the life of the school, both through formal mechanisms and through informal day-to-day contact, which means they can get the right services to the right students at the right time.

City Connects, an organization that integrates student support services in more than 150 urban schools, saw the coronavirus pandemic highlight its value.

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“Having a systemic and systematic strategy for supporting every student made a huge difference when Covid closed the curtain,” said Mary Walsh, executive director of City Connects, an organization based at Boston College. “We

were able to avoid ‘random acts of student support’ and to ensure that every student had their needs met and their strengths supported.”

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School leaders who might want to pursue this strategy in the wake of the pandemic should know that the shift to community schooling cannot happen overnight, but there are models to emulate and people who can help. For example, the nonprofit organization [Children’s Aid](#) partners with 19 local public schools in New York City and operates the [National Center for Community Schools](#). Its seasoned staff assists schools and districts in other areas to adapt the community school strategy to their specific local contexts.

And researchers have reached consensus on the common features found in different types of successful community schools: integrated student supports; expanded learning time and opportunities; family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership and practice.

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Mary Walsh, executive director, City Connects

This consensus can help other district leaders who have come to understand — through the crisis caused by the current pandemic — that they cannot, by themselves, respond to all the needs of their students and families. They require partners who can bring skills and knowledge to address food insecurity, health and mental health crises, child care needs, technology access problems and housing issues. Community schools across the country

have been able to marshal resources because they've put partnerships in place that provide a quick response to current realities.

In Cincinnati, where the community school initiative now involves all 65 of the city's public schools, many have created new ways to adapt their delivery systems to the needs of children and families during Covid. For example, Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Cincinnati Community Learning Center Institute — the lead agency in half a dozen of the Cincinnati sites — said, “Basically, we migrated our six Community Learning Center Institute schools to a virtual universe, with a website for each of our sites, to ensure ongoing access to all of the services, from teletherapy and telemedicine to critical legal services through our Immigrant and Refugee Law Center and ongoing early childhood education.”

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In 2011, Oakland declared itself the nation's first full-service community school district, with the goal of using the community-school strategy to drive systemic change across its 86 schools. The district's highest-need schools employ full-time community school managers to plan, implement and assess partnerships with community agencies. Addressing the impact of the Covid pandemic on education, Curtiss Sarikey, chief of staff at the Oakland Unified School District, said, “Our schools were made for this.” He noted that the suite of schoolwide practices already in place enabled the district's community schools to know their students, families and community resources so well that the school teams could respond immediately to changed circumstances.

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The City Connects initiative works with urban schools in Boston and other cities across the country, teaching districts how to use its evidence-based methodology. Walsh's team trains student support staffers to become City Connects coordinators, who work with teachers and families to identify each student's strengths and needs, and then to connect each student with targeted supports, services and extra learning opportunities.

City Connects offers a proven solution to a well-known problem: how to get the right supports and services to the right students at the right time. Implemented correctly, the community-school strategy can help public schools fulfill the multifaceted role we expect them to play in the lives of America's children and families.

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