

OPINION

## OPINION: Community schools promote equity: We need more of them

*Additional education funding is a step in the right direction, but there is far more that must be done*

by **EMILY WOODS** August 15, 2022

A student gets a dental check-up at a school in West Virginia. Leaders are increasingly aware of the power of community schools as an equity strategy.  
Credit: Jackie Mader/The Hechinger Report

For those of us in the trenches of the community school movement, an increased federal focus on community schools couldn't come at a better time.

City leaders and others are increasingly aware of the power of community schools as an equity strategy. And equity is needed now more than ever as schools face hardships exacerbated by the pandemic.

No wonder local calls for community schools are growing louder and more frequent. Community schools become hubs for students and communities. Often open evenings and over weekends and summers, they bring together families, students, teachers and local organizations to identify and provide health, social and out-of-school-time support.

Headlines promoting the effectiveness of community schools sit atop research studies, op-eds and other forms of media.

In recent weeks, the U.S. Department of Education has invited applications for \$68 million in grants for community schools, representing almost four times more money than was made available in 2018. And the Biden administration said it aims to dedicate as much as \$468 million to community schools in 2023.

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The more school systems that apply for these grants, the greater the benefit to our nation's education as a whole.

The ultimate goal of community schools is to ensure open pathways to academic success. Research from the RAND Corporation and the Learning Policy Institute and National Education Policy Center (LPI-NEPC) show that community schools are a good investment and an effective change strategy.

Some community school proponents say that our current predominant school design is akin to a traditional telephone: a simple two-way system of delivery wherein teachers teach and students learn.

Community schools are more like smartphones. They have collaborative leadership structures that help educators connect, pool resources and think more expansively. Ultimately, they help kids succeed in school and beyond.

And if community schools are like smartphones, promoting them citywide is like an upgrade to a stronger, more powerful operating system.

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As a former public school teacher in Boston and an advocate of community schools, I've seen positive results when school systems adopt this holistic approach.

Consider these examples from different parts of the country: Education and community leaders in Cincinnati have worked together over the past 20 years to build a system of community learning centers that now supports all the schools in the district. New York City houses the nation's largest community school initiative, with 317 of its schools working in long-term partnership with public and private community resources. Oakland is close to finalizing its vision of becoming the nation's first community school district.

All three districts have developed strong and sustained community engagement and systems of support at the district level with the help of university or nonprofit "backbone" partners (including, for example, the United Way and Children's Aid for New York City; the Community Learning Center Institute and United Way for Cincinnati; and the Urban Strategies Council and Alameda County Public Health Department for Oakland) to help build capacity, manage shared data and help maximize funding.

What the three districts also have in common is a shared community-wide vision of what their schools should look like — and success in improving outcomes for students and families.

Three elements are vital to achieving such community-wide visions, according to a [study](#) I conducted.

The first is the sharing of data with local leaders to build political will and clarify goals, including [studies showing](#) that strong community schools can lead to better student and school outcomes. This data, in combination with pressure from community leaders, generates momentum.

The second element, clear communication strategies shaped by multiple stakeholders, ensures that everyone understands those goals. Public testimony in school committee meetings, for example, is one great way to spread the message.

Finally, a local steering committee helps drive political will and spread that clear communication. A committee that gathers key stakeholders around the same table can also fill service gaps and establish policy. Members may include the superintendent, school leaders and community advisers, as well as the heads of the housing, public safety and health services departments.

Such committees are vital to ensuring coordination among traditional governmental entities in service of education. The coordination gives schools more time to do what matters, including time to build and foster relationships with families and nonprofit partners. In fact, one subcategory of the federal grant program asks states to discuss how they will use a steering committee to govern, and to outline how they will scale community school districts.

Developing these larger visions in pursuit of the community school grants will amplify positive outcomes for students, their families and their communities.

Paul Reville, a Harvard professor who formerly served as the Massachusetts secretary of education, recently noted that “the community school philosophy is absolutely what we need in this moment. The challenge is . . . to systematize this approach rather than work it one school at a time.”

I could not agree more.

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