

Twenty Years, Ten Lessons: Community Schools as An Equitable School Improvement Strategy

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This article features two leaders of the contemporary community school movement who share their reflections on key lessons learned by community school practitioners and advocates over the past two decades and outline ideas about the challenges facing the field in the years ahead. They offer a brief history of community schools in the United States and provide an update on the evidence of the strategy’s effectiveness, particularly in high-poverty urban schools. They also explain how the current “generation” of community schools has addressed two specific shortcomings of earlier iterations of this holistic approach to education. Acknowledging that today’s political climate creates both opportunities and obstacles for education reformers, the authors argue that the community school strategy is increasingly recognized as a compelling alternative to the neoliberal dream of public-school privatization.

In a 1902 speech to the National Education Association, John Dewey outlined a comprehensive approach to American schooling that encompassed adults as well as children, fostered holistic development and brought community resources into strong partnerships with schools. More than 100 years later, even in a challenging educational environment dominated by marked economic inequality and technical solutions (such as test-based accountability and privatization of public education), Dewey’s vision is being enacted across America through the community school strategy. As two of the leaders of this modern-day movement, we want to reflect here on recent progress in realizing Dewey’s vision of every school a community school, with a focus on how this strategy is being adapted to contemporary economic and societal conditions.

We served as directors respectively of the Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools and the Coalition for Community Schools, working together over the past 20-plus years to advance the community schools agenda across the country. The Coalition led national advocacy efforts, building a broad alliance of education, youth development, human services, higher education, and community organizing, and creating tools to support the field. The National Center focused on capacity building at the school, district, and community levels, assisting most of the country’s major community school initiatives through training, consultation, and on-site coaching. Throughout our collaboration, we witnessed both encouraging successes and formidable challenges. Our intent in this article is to outline key lessons learned by community school practitioners and advocates over the past two decades and to consider the challenges ahead as we hand over the reins to the next generation of capable community school leaders. We begin with a brief history of community schools

in American education, then move to our reflections on the role of this strategy in contemporary reform efforts.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: A BRIEF HISTORY

In an incisive history of the field, UCLA Professor John Rogers described the current era of community schools, starting in the early 1990s, as constituting the fourth generation of such work (Rogers, 1998). Rogers cited the earlier “generations” as including, first, the innovations during the Progressive Era, summarized by John Dewey as the “school as social center” (Dewey, 1902); followed during the 1930s by the second phase, in response to the problems generated by the Great Depression; and then, a third wave in the 1960s, during the period of great social unrest and social reform that included battles over community control of public education. Rogers concluded that, despite the very appealing and sensible nature of the community school approach, the earlier generations of reform did not gain permanent traction in American education because of two factors: first, earlier reforms tended to frame discussions of community schooling’s purposes in a narrow way, thereby failing to convey the comprehensive nature of the intended approach; and, second, previous community school advocates did not adopt an adequate political strategy. Leaders in the current era have taken these analyses to heart, making sure to articulate the multifaceted goals and elements of the community school strategy and to create strategic political alliances and robust advocacy campaigns.

Rogers also observed that community schools gain prominence as a strategic intervention during periods of socio-political upheaval and disequilibrium. Specifically, he noted that there are three kinds of societal pressure that have contributed historically to the rise of

community schools in the United States: (1) when existing social institutions cannot meet the demands of society; (2) when the public challenges the validity of existing solutions and knowledge; and (3) when the public questions the capacity or intent of the professionals charged with educating children. The socio-political environment of the past two decades reflects these factors, thereby creating receptivity to the many advantages of community schools.

The current generation of community schools in America began in earnest during the early 1990s, with the development of the Beacon schools and the Children’s Aid community schools in New York City, the Netter Center’s university-assisted community schools in Philadelphia, and the United Way’s Bridges to Success model in Indianapolis. All these initiatives started around the same time, each with a slightly different emphasis. What the models had in common, however, were strong partnerships between schools and community resources that could build on the strengths and respond to the needs of students and their families. Researcher Joy Dryfoos observed these developments and began writing about them, first in articles and monographs, then in a pioneering book entitled *Full-Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families* (1994). Shortly thereafter, Dryfoos joined forces with colleagues from Children’s Aid and the Netter Center (then called the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania) to create a unified networking and advocacy organization, which became the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership. Marty Blank was selected to lead the group, which received initial funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. Jane Quinn, then the Program Director at Wallace,

moved to Children’s Aid in early 2000 to direct its National Center for Community Schools.

KEY LESSONS FROM OUR TWENTY YEARS OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS LEADERSHIP

Lesson One: Community schools is a strategy for supporting student learning and development, not a specific program model. Although community schools do offer extended hours and services during and beyond the school day, what distinguishes a community school is its deliberate responsiveness to the strengths and needs of its constituents—primarily its students and their families—and its alignment of the assets of educators and community partners. A leading urban superintendent, Patricia Harvey (former head of St. Paul, Minnesota public schools), gave voice to this idea when she observed: “As we implemented the Achievement Plus initiative in St. Paul, I came to see community schools as *a strategy for organizing the resources of the school and community around student success.*” The effectiveness of the strategy depends, in no small measure, on conducting a thorough needs and assets assessment at the building level—and responding to that assessment’s findings. We have seen too many traditional schools with community partners that operate in silos, without a coherent plan for achieving results. We have observed good programs being implemented in isolation, lacking any influence on the school’s culture or demonstrable contribution to the school’s stated goals. Many schools, for example, do not bring together educators and existing community partners offering after-school programs, health and mental health services, or parent leadership supports to examine how they can coordinate and integrate their resources and expertise. The community school strategy uses joint planning teams and related mechanisms

to align the many moving parts and multiple programs of the school around an agreed-upon set of results.

Lesson Two: The field has developed a consensus about the core elements that need to be included and adapted in a community school. People asked us for many years: Just what is a community school and how does it work? A recent (2017) study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center (LPI-NEPC) provides a solid answer. These researchers found considerable consensus on the structures and programs within community schools across the country, noting that their comprehensive review of 143 evaluations identified common features found in different types of community schools. The four community school “pillars” include: (1) integrated student supports; (2) expanded learning time and opportunities; (3) family and community engagement; and (4) collaborative leadership and practice. The LPI-NEPC research team went on to observe:

The four pillars are fundamental to the success of community schools. Individually and collectively, they serve as scaffolds (or structures, practices, or processes) that support schools to instantiate the conditions and practices that enhance their effectiveness and help them surmount the barriers to providing high-quality learning opportunities in low-income communities. (Maier, Daniel, Oakes & Lam, 2017, p. 13).

We were heartened but not surprised that rigorous research identified this consensus; in fact, we both observed and advocated for these very structural and programmatic elements over the past two decades. A similar consensus emerged when the Coalition for Community Schools convened leaders

in 2015-6 to develop school-level and systems-level quality standards. The site-level standards help new community schools more effectively develop and implement their reform plans, assist existing community schools to strengthen the quality of their practice, document outcomes, and provide a consistent language and a framework for advocacy, technical assistance, research, funding, and policy efforts. Similarly, the systems-level standards identify specific actions that school systems and community partners—families, community- and faith-based organizations, local government, higher education, public agencies, law enforcement, United Ways, and others—must take, together and individually, to create the conditions that enable a network of community schools to thrive across an entire district (Coalition for Community Schools, 2017).

Lesson Three: Community schools represent a long-term strategy, not a quick fix. America's recent history of school reform revolves around the search for panaceas and quick fixes—despite no available evidence that such solutions exist or are appropriate. The highly influential federal policy known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which undergirded American education from 2001 through the end of 2015, exemplified the search for a quick fix. This 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act emphasized a narrow approach to student achievement, one that relied on standardized tests and grades as the principal measures of student learning. Furthermore, it called for a series of sanctions to be applied to schools that failed to make what was designated as Adequate Yearly Progress. The NCLB strategy—of accelerating desired outcomes without supporting additional inputs—is now deemed a failure for having fostered an environment in which the real-life challenges faced by students and families could be ignored.

NCLB's successor, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), takes a broader view of success factors and requires states to name at least one additional indicator of school quality or student success, other than student test scores and grades, that they will use as a school accountability measure. In crafting ESSA state plans for submission to the United States Department of Education, many states have struggled to determine such results, and more than 35 states have named reducing chronic absence as their indicator of choice. As states tackle the underlying causes of chronic absence, they are discovering the salience of the community school strategy—a strategy designed to address the range of factors that affect attendance, including physical and mental health issues, family challenges, and a lack of student engagement. Building the capacity to address these difficult and complex issues is not amenable to a quick fix. But we have seen that when educators work together with families and community partners, by using the community school strategy, they can make significant inroads in reducing chronic absence and addressing its underlying causes. For example, New York City Department of Education data released during the Fall of 2019 indicates that over the five-year period covering the academic years 2013-14 through 2018-19, New York City community schools decreased chronic absenteeism by 9.6%, nearly 20 times the citywide decrease of 0.5%.

Lesson Four: Solid theoretical and empirical research undergirds the community school strategy. The underlying theory of community schools draws on decades of solid research into the conditions and ingredients that foster healthy human development—including Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and Werner's resilience theory. As leaders in the community school field, both our organizations articulated that strong theoretical case in several early publications (Coalition for Community

Schools, 2003; Children’s Aid Society, 2001). Since then, the empirical evidence has mounted, demonstrating that the community school strategy works. The most thorough analysis to date about the processes and results of community schools—the Learning Policy Institute and National Education Policy Center study cited above—concluded that community schools represent an evidence-based practice consistent with standards established by ESSA. Specifically, this review concluded that “well-implemented community schools lead to an improvement in student and school outcomes and contribute to meeting the educational needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools” (Maier *et al.*, 2017, p. v). The LPI-NEPC research team marshaled evidence about the effectiveness of each of the four pillars of community schools as well as of the comprehensive implementation strategy, noting that these normative supports provide the conditions for learning that all young people require.

Lesson Five: Community schools take an asset-based approach and build on the strengths of communities, schools, and individuals. Unlike many prominent school reform approaches that characterize low-income students as at-risk and low-income schools as “failing,” community schools root their efforts in the premise that all students and schools can succeed if they have access to needed financial and human resources. The principles of asset-based community development first articulated by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), which demonstrate how to mobilize the strengths of neighborhoods and their residents and institutions, animate community schools. Enrichment rather than remediation is a hallmark of after-school and summer programs in community schools; families are key informants, resources, employees and leaders rather than recipients of services; neighborhood institutions

are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, community school offerings; and instruction is culturally responsive and engages students in the real world. When schools actively listen to what their students and families want from them, they find that both constituencies often describe the features of a community school—schools that are safe, challenging, welcoming, and engaging. Several of the country’s largest community school initiatives—including those being implemented in Cincinnati, New York City, and Oakland—emanated from authentic community engagement processes that gave voice to the hopes and expectations of students and their families. To cite one example, the Oakland community schools year-long strategic planning process engaged more than 5,000 stakeholders—including parents, students, educators, civic and non-profit leaders, and other community residents.

Lesson Six: A good student support system cannot compensate for a weak core instructional program. In another recent landmark study, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the Consortium for Chicago School Research provided a rigorous and compelling analysis of the ongoing work required to improve low-income urban schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010). Without using the term “community schools,” Bryk and his team outlined five key ingredients of school improvement: strong principal leadership committed to an inclusive approach; authentic family and community engagement; coherent curriculum; student-centered school climate; and ongoing capacity-building. This research team emphasized the importance of the interaction among these five ingredients, using the analogy of cake-baking—the ingredients support and reinforce one another to create something greater than the sum

of its parts. Bryk and colleagues also focused on the ongoing nature of school improvement, noting that the long-term combination of these five ingredients was associated with the effects they observed in successful schools.

For those of us in the community school field, this study helped to undergird an argument we had been making since the inception of the current “generation” of efforts—strong student supports and additional opportunities cannot compensate for weak instructional programs. Too often we observed that schools would recruit partners to provide health services, offer student and family counseling, and expand after-school programs without doing anything to improve their core instructional programs. Frequently the term “community school” came to be viewed as the provision of additional student supports rather than the combination and integration of the academic core with expanded learning opportunities and services designed to remove barriers to learning. The LPI-NEPC report corroborates the message of the Bryk *et al.* (2010) school improvement study—the ability to generate positive results from the community school strategy requires a solid instructional core and responsive student supports. These researchers observe that “community schools would benefit from maintaining a strong academic improvement focus to support students’ educational outcomes” (Maier et al., 2017, p. 112). From a community school perspective, that academic improvement would incorporate learning that engages students with issues in their lives, their communities, and our society, as the Coalition argued in its paper, *Community Based Learning: Engaging Students for Success and Citizenship* (Melaville, Berg & Blank, 2006).

Lesson Seven: Practitioners (educators and their community partners) benefit from consultation, coaching, and other forms of professional development as

they shift their practice in the direction of community schools. This same LPI-NEPC study made an explicit connection between high-quality implementation and the achievement of results. The research team observed that effective implementation yields more positive results for students and schools (Maier *et al.*, 2017). Both the Coalition for Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS) have supported high-quality implementation over the past two-plus decades, regularly providing an array of publications, planning tools, networking opportunities, and national conferences. Also, NCCS developed a fee-for-service technical assistance practice, based on Children’s Aid’s implementation of 22 community schools in New York City. We have seen that community schools benefit from the kinds of intensive, often on-site, capacity-building work that NCCS and other groups offer. Such assistance ideally involves working with colleagues to understand each site’s strengths and challenges, including their political and economic circumstances to customize the implementation advice. Key services include: consultation (initial assessment and development of a technical assistance plan, followed by additional on- and off-site consultation as the plan is implemented); training at various levels, from educators and staff of community partners to city and district leadership; facilitation of strategic planning processes; application of planning tools for needs and asset assessments, partnership development, analysis of progress, sustainability and other issues that are central to the work of building a community schools initiative and system; and study visits to successful implementation sites. While there have been some successes in integrating community schools into the pre-service preparation of principals, teachers, and other educators, much work remains to be done. For example, most higher education institutions have not yet adopted this broader view of

what it takes to educate our increasingly diverse student population.

Lesson Eight: Committed, collaborative local leadership is fundamental to the growth, sustainability, and effectiveness of community schools. Roughly 8,000 to 10,000 American schools now identify as community schools, and more than 100 districts and cities have tackled implementation at multiple sites. The level of scale ranges from small districts like West Chicago, IL with all eight of their schools, to medium-sized cities like Lincoln, NE with 23, to New York City where 258 out of the district's 1,800 schools are community schools. In communities from Boise, ID to Fairfax County, VA, from Salt Lake City, UT to Vancouver, WA, from Knoxville, TN to Austin, TX, leaders are supporting community schools. Because most of the implementing districts and municipalities have adopted community schools as a long-term strategy, the numbers in these sites continue to grow each year. For example, Multnomah County's SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) initiative in the Portland, OR metropolitan area grew from eight sites in 2001 to 90 schools in 2019.

The LPI-NEPC study and the new community school standards affirmed what these and other initiatives learned, as they applied collaborative leadership practices that were effective in scaling pilot efforts. Key practices include community leadership structures that engage multiple stakeholders; similar shared-leadership structures at the school site; the engagement of community school directors or site coordinators who can mobilize community resources and integrate them into the life of the school; a focus on results that matter for students, families, and schools; and mechanisms to engage teacher unions and education organizers.

Local leadership is the heartbeat of community schools, at both the school district/community and school levels.

Mayors have played critical leadership roles in Newark, Philadelphia, New York, and San Pablo, CA; county governments have led the charge in Multnomah County, OR and Kent County, MI; superintendents in places as diverse as Chicago, Nashville, and Vancouver have developed city-wide initiatives; and United Ways and higher education institutions have led and contributed to initiatives in Asheville, Binghamton, Indianapolis, Miami, and Orlando, among other places. Leadership has also proved vital at the school level, where principals function as facilitators who share leadership with parents, students, and community partners. A key role, one that is unique to community schools, is that of the community school director/coordinator, hired by a community partner or the district. This leadership role involves mobilizing community resources and integrating them into the life of the school, communicating with parents and teachers, and enabling principals to focus on their responsibilities as instructional leaders (Children's Aid, 2018).

Lesson Nine: Advocacy is necessary at all levels—federal, state, and local—and requires strategic organizing, consistent attention, and a multi-faceted approach. The kind of political strategy envisioned by John Rogers in his historical analysis, one that would overcome the shortcomings of past community school efforts, demanded that this generation's leaders create strong organizational partnerships--ones that share a commitment to the community school vision. Not all this could happen at the same time, of course. As the designated leader of the field's advocacy work, the Coalition for Community Schools started with a two-pronged organizing strategy: engage national organizations with substantial reach through their memberships and allies; and ensure that these partner organizations represented all the constituencies working in community schools—educators, health

and mental health providers, education organizers, teacher unions, youth-serving organizations, parent groups, and others. This work began with a two-year process to build an early vision and shared language for the Coalition and its partners and proceeded in an evolutionary way. Today, the Coalition's member organizations number nearly 200.

Over the past 20 years, this initial and ongoing organizing effort has resulted in many successes. A National Policy Work Group of partners successfully advocated that the Full-Service Community School Program become part of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act/ESSA in late 2015. Other provisions of the law reflect the principles of community schools: community engagement, broader measures of accountability, and a focus on issues related to the whole child. Specific partners are now actively engaged in organizing community schools. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association currently employ staff devoted to community school development. Community organizing groups such as Journey for Justice, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, and Coalition for Educational Justice build grassroots support for sustainable community schools.

The Coalition also collaborates with other advocacy alliances in the field—Communities in Schools, Beacons Network, and Strive Together—which have slightly different approaches to the broad community school vision. These relationships work because the Coalition has never prescribed a specific model of community schools but has rather sought partners willing to work toward a broad vision of what the strategy entails.

As local community school initiatives emerged, the Coalition organized leaders of these efforts into the Community Schools Leadership Network, a learning

and advocacy affinity group, in 2005. The community school collaboratives developed by these leaders advocated for local school board and city policies in Baltimore, Cincinnati, Hartford, Pittsburgh, and other communities. These local network leaders worked on national issues and, over time, became the backbone of the 20 state community school networks, started in 2012, which operate in alliance with state-based affiliates of national partners. State networks, with little if any funding, have influenced state policy and gained resources for community schools in New York, Maryland, Minnesota, and California, among others.

Lesson Ten: The community school strategy is all about equity. In our work as leaders in this field over the past two decades, we have witnessed the passion and commitment that drive the work in cities and districts around the country—passion and commitment that are based on a deep understanding of the inequities that characterize contemporary American life. The early adopters of the community school strategy in this latest generation of the work used language in the 1990s like *leveling the playing field*, *removing barriers to learning*, and *enriching the learning environment* as a way to convey their understanding that large groups of American students have been marginalized by long-standing systemic policies of underinvestment and discrimination in low-income and minority neighborhoods. At the city or neighborhood level, these policies have included housing and employment discrimination as well as severely regressive taxation and resource allocation decisions. Consistent with political decisions made in the broader operating context, discriminatory education policies have included inequitable school financing mechanisms and persistent patterns of school segregation and within-school tracking. While recognizing the wide-ranging underpinnings of these

and other oppressive policies, these leaders saw opportunities to begin ameliorating the policies' effects by taking concerted action to organize school and community resources around student success through the community school strategy. This implicit emphasis on equity gradually evolved into a more explicit focus as community school proponents joined forces with civil rights leaders, such as Policy Link, to involve community schools in the emerging national conversation on equity. A key development in connecting these two movements was the Coalition's 2014 publication of a monograph entitled *Community Schools are an Essential Equity Strategy*.

The relationship between community schools and equity has been recognized by several national studies in recent years. For example, the 2013 final report prepared by the Congressionally-appointed Equity and Excellence Commission outlined a set of strategies designed to meet the needs of students in high-poverty communities. These strategies included the development of partnerships between schools and community resources that support at-risk children, encouragement of family engagement, and provision of health care, health education, and expanded learning time. As an example of such partnerships, the Commission cited the Cincinnati Community Learning Centers Initiative—a community school model. The Commission recommended including an annual needs assessment process at each high-poverty school as an essential element of this approach (Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). Similarly, the 2017 landmark community schools study cited earlier called attention to the equity orientation of the work its researchers observed, noting:

Today's community schools build partnerships between the school and other local entities...These partnerships intentionally create structures,

strategies, and relationships to provide the learning conditions and opportunities—both in school and out—that are enjoyed by students in better-resourced schools, where the schools' work is supplemented by high-capacity communities and families...Community schools cannot overcome all problems facing poor neighborhoods—that would require substantial investments in job training, housing and social safety net infrastructures, and other poverty alleviation measures. However, they have a long history of connecting children and families to resources, opportunities, and supports that foster healthy development and help offset the harms of poverty (Maier et al., 2017, p. 5-6).

In an October 2019 interview with *Chalkbeat*, Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza described New York City's approach to educational excellence and equity, one that is completely consistent with the vision and strategy of community schools across the country: "We have a high bar of achievement for every student--this is excellence. And we are prepared to deliver the support that each of them needs to meet that bar. This is equity."

CONCLUSION

Today's turbulent political climate creates both challenges and opportunities for education reformers. The key challenge is how to rise above the constant noise and rampant cynicism that characterize much of our public discourse. The opportunity resides in providing an alternative vision—one of hope, thoughtfulness, feasibility, and fairness. The community school strategy is increasingly recognized as offering such an alternative. It returns the public school to its rightful place as a vital center of community life—where the

community's many assets are mobilized in support of students, families, and neighborhoods. This alternative involves public schools that listen to, belong to, and are responsible to the communities in which they operate.

With students facing increasingly difficult challenges every day--violent shooter drills, immigration raids, serious mental health problems, family crises emerging from opioid addiction, inadequate housing, racial injustice, and a deeply unequal society, among others--our schools and communities must stand up for young people. Only then will we overcome the emphasis on test scores as the single measure of student success, the drive toward privatization, and the relentless criticism of public schools that has dominated recent education debates. The growth and effectiveness of community schools over the past two decades demonstrate the viability of this strategy as a solid response to such formidable challenges. Through strategic partnerships that do the grinding work of social change, we can create the kind of schools that our students and families deserve.

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