

Community Schools: An Overview

Community Schools have existed in some form for over 50 years. A national association, the Coalition for Community Schools, serves as a national advocate, thought leader, and organizer of community schools initiatives across the country. They receive funding primarily from Annie E. Casey, Kellogg and Atlantic Philanthropies. There are community schools throughout the country, but the largest and highest-profile initiatives are in Kentucky, New York City, Oakland and Baltimore.

Baltimore has been affiliated with the national Community Schools movement for about 12 years, although many of its Community Schools were established much more recently. In Baltimore, schools apply to be community schools through the nonprofit Family League of Baltimore, which is the head intermediary organization in charge of capacity-building and broad-based strategy for all the schools. Currently, there are 51 schools in Baltimore with the Community Schools designation.

A core tenet of the Community Schools approach is that there is no one "Community Schools" model. Instead, school leadership teams work with an oversight and capacity-building agency to identify the partnerships and strategies that will be most useful to them. Baltimore City Community Schools operate in the following way:

- A Community Schools Steering Committee consisting of representatives from the Mayor's Office, the LEA, a school principal, a student, funders, and partner agencies governs the work
- Schools are invited to apply to the Community Schools Steering Committee
- The Family League serves as the head intermediary organization, although not all community schools run through the Family League. They:
 - Conduct a needs assessment in partnership with the school leadership team figure out an effective strategy for addressing their needs based on the community resources near the school
 - Provide funding to schools to hire a Community Schools Coordinator, who is ideally an experienced administrator who can plan strategically and organize and manage community partners
 - Offer ongoing support with strategic planning to the community schools coordinator
 - Provide site-based training to all school staff
- In response to the needs assessment, each school picks a handful of community partners in geographic proximity to the school who can help them address the needs they have identified
- No two schools will identify the same needs or pursue the same strategies, much less work with the same community partners. That said, some strategies are more common than others, and in general, all community schools are expected to engage in partnerships that enable them to pursue the following broad strategies:

- Physical and mental health and wellness
- Family and community engagement
- Extended learning time and tutoring services for the neediest students in the school
- In the case of elementary schools, early childhood development, with linkages to Judy Centers serving families of children 0-5 who will go on to attend the school
- A separate independent nonprofit organization, called Baltimore's Promise, serves as a library and clearinghouse of all of the strategies attempted. Their responsibilities include:
 - Mapping out who all of the community partners are, where they have worked and to what intensity
 - Wherever possible, collecting data on impacts and conduct small-scale evaluations of effectiveness, using a range of medium-term indicators such as attendance, behavior, teacher self-efficacy and student well-being, and recognizing that establishing a direct causal link between this work and student achievement is difficult or impossible
 - Designing proofs of concept and helping schools and the district make the pitch to funders for this work
- Each community school requires \$80,000 to \$110,000 annually in funding, varying slightly depending on annual funding authorization
 - This covers the salary and benefits of a Community Schools Coordinator , plus about \$10,000 for professional development for teachers and staff, run by the Family League of Baltimore, and other overhead costs
 - Community partners rely on Medicaid reimbursement, charitable donations, and funding from the Family League's operating budget to cover the cost of their services, and schools do not pay them directly
 - In total, about \$5.7 million goes to schools annually, the operating budget of the Family League of Baltimore is about \$13.6 million, and the operating budget for Baltimore's Promise is about \$600,000, for an estimated total cost of approximately \$20 million for Baltimore Community Schools annually
 - Community schools rely on very little external private funding: the city mayor's office covers 50%, the school district covers 25% and schools themselves are responsible for covering 25% out of their own budget.
 - On average, individual schools contribute about \$20,000 annually, although some schools raise sufficient funds via grants to contribute \$0. Schools that do not secure Family League funding and proceed to implement a community schools strategy must fund the full cost of the coordinator.

Outside of these key characteristics, Community Schools can look very different. Among the most popular partnerships for schools are dental clinics and vision screening services, because the need for free health care transcends neighborhood boundaries. Middle schools and high schools frequently partner with an organization called Elev8 Baltimore

that focuses on helping eighth and ninth graders to envision what they want their college experience to be, tour HBCUs, and "action plan" their academic paths to get to college, all as part of a strategy for stemming dropouts by the 10th grade. Partnerships with medical professionals who can make expert referrals to outside medical agencies - for both physical and mental health - are also prevalent. One high school found through a small-scale study the Family League conducted that the top cause of their dropouts was teen motherhood. In response, they partnered with a nearby childcare agency to open a day care within the school, allowing their teen mothers to bring their babies to school and attend classes full-time. Obviously, such a resource intensive strategy would not be particularly effective at a school where incidents of pregnancy were lower, or at a middle school.

Expanding Community Schools Statewide

All school systems in Maryland, through the compensatory education funding formula, receive substantial funds to support wraparound and other services to economically disadvantaged students. The Commission, however, after studying high performing systems around the world, recognized that these systems provide additional resources to students that are at the highest risk. The Commission's preliminary recommendations, therefore, included establishing a concentrated poverty weight in recognition of the need to provide more intensive services to a greater number of students in schools with very high degrees of poverty so that they have the resources they need to help students succeed. One potential use of a concentrated poverty weight is to support the expansion of Community Schools statewide in schools with a high degree of poverty. In order to do that, the Working Group needs to decide on eligibility criteria for expansion in order to maximize the impact of the State's limited resources, and an accountability system that ensures funds are well-spent but does not try to establish a faulty causal link between wraparound services and student performance on standardized tests. In general, while all schools could benefit from the Community Schools approach, concentration of poverty is an indicator that the State should prioritize providing additional resources to schools. Some things to consider include:

- The threshold for concentrated poverty weight applicability.
 - The Working Group could consider setting the threshold for State funding at 60 or 75 percent eligible for free and reduced price meals (free eligibility is tied to 100% poverty while reduced meal eligibility is capped at 185% of poverty), with a phasing in to 60% and some kind of trigger that would allow a school that falls below the threshold to remain in the program for 1 or 2 years.
 - Schools with a lower poverty threshold could still organize Community School programming but could do so with their 97% weight for compensatory funding.
 - Local districts and schools could be expected to each contribute about 25% of the funding, as they currently are in Baltimore, in order to give them an incentive to take the work seriously.

- The State could institute experience requirements and rigorous hiring processes for community school coordinators. The coordinators should be experienced professional partnerships managers with deep connections to local communities and social service agencies – not first-year AmeriCorps volunteers or the like.
- Community Schools would commit to partnering with local agencies to provide the necessary health and wellness strategies identified by their needs assessment, as well as providing extended learning time opportunities to eligible students within the school.
- There could be a State coordinating board that oversees this work and serves an accountability function. Government, philanthropy, state commissioners of health and education, and partner agencies should all participate at the state level and require their local agencies to participate with Community School programs.
- Capacity-building would ideally be a local responsibility, with each county responsible for designating an organization who can be responsible for this work. The existing professional development conducted by the Family League can serve as a resource to other county partners, but in general, as a locally focused organization the Family League is not well positioned to serve as the lead agent throughout the state. New agencies will need to be identified.
- The State may want to offer additional funds for schools that have a population of students who have experienced trauma associated with conditions of extreme poverty who may need much more intensive health and mental health services. This additional funding would be used to support medically-trained staff to diagnose and case manage these high-need students.
- Accountability would need to be established for schools who receive concentrated poverty funding.
 - Schools would be responsible for putting out a plan for establishing community schools that meet the criteria outlined above, including hiring an experienced and qualified coordinator at the administrator level as well as a ½ time social worker.
 - The plan would be subject to review by the state governing agency and the agency would be authorized to request revisions from the schools.
 - Annually, schools would be required to undergo program review to determine if there is a good faith effort to implement the plan. The program review process is also an opportunity for the state to gather lessons learned, disseminate them to other schools, and build school networks.
 - Schools would also be required to track data on a range of metrics that include: successful implementation of the plan, number of students served, time to receive services, attendance, reduction in disciplinary actions, teacher self-efficacy, student and principal satisfaction. Metrics should not include student performance, as it is difficult or impossible to establish a linkage between these kinds of services and student growth on standardized tests.