Messaging: How to Communicate Effectively for Community Schools

Thanks to high-quality public opinion research like the 2017 PDK Poll, we know that there is strong support for key elements of community schools, such as medical and mental health services and after-school programs.

However, as in any public policy debate, there will be a need for you to describe your position and to persuade others to support it with you. The first step in effective persuasion is to begin from a point of agreement with the person you are communicating with, be it a colleague or a constituent. You should always speak in your own authentic voice, bolstered by your own experiences, but the content should be something like this:

> Every child should have the opportunity to achieve his or her dreams and contribute to the well-being of society. That's the central purpose of public education. Every neighborhood deserves a public school, and every community a public school system that truly delivers on that promise.

Once you've established that you're on the same side as your listener(s), explain the problem that you're proposing to solve:

> Every neighborhood and community is different. Not all families have access to the same level and breadth of resources. In well-resourced communities, regular access to vision care and dental health services are commonplace. These services are far less available to families in less advantaged communities, however. And children often pay the highest cost for these inequities. For example, without access to affordable vision care, a student in need of glasses can't read what the teacher is writing on the board. A nagging toothache makes it impossible to concentrate during lessons. Hunger, homelessness, or neighborhood violence also interfere with studies and attendance.
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> These same children have boundless talents and dreams that go unexplored and undeveloped because they don't have access to enriching opportunities outside of school, which are also more available in well-resourced communities. One child may strive to be a novelist; another a pediatric surgeon; and another an architect. But they are less likely to have access to programs that explore these interests and talents. Some don't have anywhere to go to get help with homework. In such communities, children face overlapping real-world problems, and they can't do their best in school if their out-of-school issues go unaddressed.

Again, use your own knowledge and manner of speaking. The key, though, is providing examples that resonate with listeners. The more specific the examples, the more obvious the solution—community schools:

> Community schools work with partners (like local government agencies and nonprofits) to provide comprehensive supports and opportunities that are carefully selected to meet the unique needs and interests of students and families, and that are rooted in the existing resources and knowledge of their particular neighborhoods.
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> In community schools, explicit attention to challenges children face—such as lack of stable housing, inadequate medical and dental care, hunger, trauma, and exposure to violence—helps students to attend school and be ready to learn, setting them up for academic and life success. Deep engagement with families and community members helps to enrich curriculum and learning opportunities, which in turn reinforces community pride and a commitment to shared goals, all while strengthening the school. This approach is simple common sense and, in thousands of community schools, it works.

Community Schools are Built on Four "Pillars"

One way to describe the importance of the four key features of community schools and their interdependence is to use the metaphor of four pillars. Obviously, a structure that loses one of its pillars will crumble. Consider language like this:

> A community school has four "pillars": (1) integrated student supports, such as health care, behavioral health, and dental services; (2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, including lengthening the school day/year, offering after-school and summer programs and/or broadening the curriculum to include enrichment and community-based learning; (3) family and community engagement; and (4) collaborative leadership and practices, such as shared goal setting and decision making, among students, families, teachers, school staff, school/district administrators, and staff from community-based partner organizations.
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> These four pillars reinforce each other. Together, they ensure that students are engaged and that everyone in the school community feels welcome and supported. They also promote a culture of trust, respect, and collaboration between teachers and administrators and among all school staff, parents, and the broader community.
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> What makes the community schools strategy particularly effective is the integration of these four features (or pillars); the customization of services, supports, and practices based on the unique assets, needs, and collective vision of each school community; and a focus on advancing shared goals for student learning and success.

Talking Points

Choose from among the following talking points to support your outreach and communications efforts:

- Student success is impacted both by factors outside of school and by what happens in school. Schools need to address inequities in such areas as access to health care, stable housing, and affordable and healthy food, which are foundational to students' ability to learn.

- Community schools are a vital component of an equity strategy. They create the conditions necessary for students to thrive by focusing attention, time, and resources on a shared vision for student and school success. They also help make society more fair by investing in communities that have been marginalized by historical disinvestment.

- In community schools, educators work with local companies, nonprofits, and higher education institutions to offer students real-world projects that make learning more relevant and engaging. They build connections that can open the door to future opportunities.

- Because each community is unique, people seeking to implement a community schools strategy start by conducting a local assessment of needs and assets with staff, families, students, and community members. They then tailor the combination of programs and services to the needs, strengths, and priorities of their school and community. This collaborative approach builds support and sustainability for community schools and creates rich local opportunities for learning that draw on the strengths and knowledge of the surrounding communities.

- Community schools are efficient and cost-effective. They coordinate the delivery of services to avoid duplication and maximize student supports. Studies find that every $1 invested in a community schools strategy results in up to a $15 return to the community.

- Community schools provide students and families in low-income communities with the mix of services, supports, and opportunities that are already available to middle-class and affluent communities.

- To some, the fourth pillar of collaborative leadership and practices is a nice-sounding extra; in fact, it is absolutely essential. Only by working and leading together can families, school staff, and community partners identify and meet the unique needs of their students.

- Community schools are centers of flourishing communities where everyone belongs, works together, and thrives. They become hubs of their neighborhoods and communities, uniting families, educators, and community partners.

- Community schools are a time-tested, century-old strategy for connecting students to the services and supports they need to thrive. They are not a fad. What is new is the focus on this approach as a proven school improvement strategy.

- Community schools qualify as an evidence-based approach to improving chronically low-performing schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Many states have identified community schools as an intervention strategy in their ESSA state plans.

Pillar-Specific Messages

Use these messages to reinforce the role of each of the four pillars in creating successful community schools:

Integrated student supports

- Millions of children face tremendous challenges outside of school, such as lack of stable housing, inadequate medical and dental care, food insecurity, and exposure to violence. These challenges have an adverse impact on their ability to attend school and be "ready to learn" every day.

- The impact of these challenges doesn't stop when students step onto school property. Students can't do their best inside the classroom if their basic needs aren't met outside the classroom. If a child needs glasses, has a toothache, or is hungry, for example, he or she won't put forth the best effort in class.

- By coordinating critical supports at the school site, community schools ensure the needs of students and families are met with minimal disruption to the school day. This, in turn, enables teachers to focus on instruction, knowing that there are other professionals attending to the nonacademic needs of their students.

Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities

- Community schools are built on a foundation of powerful instruction that includes challenging academic content and supports students' mastery of 21st century skills and competencies.

- Community schools provide opportunities for expanded and enriched learning time so students—particularly those who are struggling academically—have access to

tutors and other resources to support their academic success. These in-school programs—often delivered by nonprofit partner organizations—help level the playing field for students who don't readily have access to community-based or costly enrichment programs or personalized tutors.

- After-school, weekend, or summer programs offer children in less-advantaged communities the kinds of enriching experiences that are readily available in higher-income communities. Such opportunities can include community-based lessons and activities, in which students learn from people in their local areas and address real-world issues. These lessons provide rich, engaging, and meaningful opportunities for personal and community development.

Family and community engagement

- Trust is foundational to student and school success. Community schools build trust and partnership by attending to relationships among all school staff, students, families, and community partners. Students do better academically and socially when families and educators are working in partnership to improve learning opportunities and relationships at the schools.

- Community schools put special focus on reaching out to families who face barriers to engagement, such as those for whom English is not their first language. By providing translation services and multilingual staff, for example, community schools help these families feel more welcome and included.

- Community schools help to foster a shared vision for student success and then thoughtfully engage the community in making this vision a reality. Working in partnership with local organizations, community schools can tailor programs and practices to align with families' needs, from providing trainings in areas parents have identified as priorities to being open during evenings and/or weekends.

Collaborative leadership and practices

- Collaborative leadership provides the relational "glue" critical to the success of the other three pillars. By developing a shared vision, identifying collective goals, and creating participatory practices for distributing responsibilities, a community school leverages the expertise of all of its stakeholders.

- A shared commitment to collaborative leadership and practices creates opportunities for deeper, more trusting relationships between families and school staff and between teachers and administrators. These relationships strengthen the school's ability to work with family and community members to create meaningful learning opportunities for students by bringing the local knowledge of the community into the school. These relationships also can help make sure that the

supports and services address local needs. Deeper collaboration supports improved implementation of the entire strategy.

- Opportunities for collaboration and professional learning are key to supporting and retaining teachers. These and other elements of community schools can substantially increase teacher recruitment and retention, as well as improve the quality of instruction.[40]

Useful Facts and Statistics

The following facts and statistics shed light on the serious societal problems that community schools seek to address, as well as the potential promise of this approach.

Many children in our country are experiencing economic and housing insecurity.

- One in five children in the U.S. lives in a family with an income below the federal poverty level—$24,339 a year for a family of four in 2016—and in 2013 more than half of students in the U.S. qualified for free or reduced-price lunch at school.

- In 2015, 27% of African American and 24% of Latinx children were living in households where they could not count on having enough food for everyone in the family to lead an active, healthy life.

- In 2016, twenty-seven percent of children 18 and younger were living with a single parent, and 4% were living with neither parent. Also in 2016, roughly 437,000 children lived in foster care on a daily basis, with a total of 687,000 children in the foster care system that year. In 2015, 2.9 million children were being raised by grandparents.

- In 2017, nearly 115,000 children experienced homelessness, and 2.5% of elementary and secondary students were identified as homeless in 2015.

Americans support the involvement of public schools in addressing these challenges. Furthermore, the community schools approach offers an effective and fiscally responsible way to do so.

- According to a 2017 national poll, Americans strongly support “providing health services” and “mental health services in school” to students who don’t have access to them elsewhere. There is also strong support for “after-school services.”

- In a study of efforts to improve 12 Chicago elementary schools, researchers found that schools with strong “relational trust” were more likely to demonstrate marked gains in student learning.

- Community schools provide a social return on investment. According to one study of community schools in New York, every dollar invested in an elementary school delivered over $10 in social value, and every dollar invested in a middle school delivered nearly $15 in social value.

Answering Tough Questions

Q: Schools have enough work just providing students with academic instruction. Why should they also have to provide nonacademic services?

A: Students can only do their best in school if they have support for their basic needs. Community schools make it possible for families to access vital services that students need to thrive academically. Often such services and supports are not located nearby, or they are financially out of reach. Community schools don't shift responsibility to schools; they recognize challenges and provide a coordinated, close-to-home solution that minimizes disruptions to important class time. They work with community partners to add human and financial resources to schools so that teachers and students can make the most of important class time.

Q: Given limited financial resources, how can public schools take on the additional burden of financing community schools?

A: In an era of tight resources, community schools are a good investment. Many of the additional services provided already exist elsewhere, but they are not used as efficiently. When school and community resources are organized around student success, they are more efficient and effective at boosting educational outcomes and often don't use additional resources.

Q. How have community schools improved academic outcomes?

A. Research shows that community schools improve a range of student outcomes, including
academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and reduced racial and economic achievement gaps. They also increase attendance and students' engagement, reduce student behavior problems, and create more positive school climates—all of which are leading indicators of better student outcomes. This positive impact is not surprising, since community schools provide the opportunities, resources, and supports found in high-performing schools across the nation.

Q: If community schools are so effective, why aren't more schools and districts implementing this approach?

A: Actually, there are community schools in all regions of the United States and their numbers are growing fast. Thirteen states identified community schools as an

“evidence-based” improvement strategy for low-performing schools, and several large school districts, including Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia, are advancing community school strategies. United Way chapters, higher education institutions, local public and private agencies, and community- and faith-based organizations are all stepping up to be part of community schools.

Q: What about *Communities in Schools*? Is that the same as a community school?

A: *Communities in Schools* is a national, nonprofit organization that partners with hundreds of schools to provide the integrated student supports pillar in schools. It can therefore exist harmoniously as part of a community school.

Q: What about *StriveTogether*? Is that the same as community schools?

A: *StriveTogether* is a national, nonprofit network of nearly 70 communities using a “collective impact” strategy to improve childhood outcomes from cradle to career. It creates local partnerships of nonprofits, schools, and businesses that work together by sharing data, aligning resources, and shaping policy. Although its focus is on whole communities, rather than individual schools, *Strive* networks can help create and support community schools.

Q: Can this strategy work in rural areas?

A: There are excellent examples of community schools in rural areas in several parts of the country. In New York State, for example, community schools in Massena and in Broome County have hosted visits from other states to serve as exemplars of how the community schools strategy can be adapted in rural areas. Many of Kentucky’s Family Resource and Youth Services Centers are located in rural communities throughout the state. The Rural and Community Trust is an active advocate for expanding community schools in rural areas and can offer many other examples.

Implementation Resources

Chapter 2—Policies that Advance Community Schools

- Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action, National Center for Community Schools
- Community School Standards, Coalition for Community Schools
- Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence, Learning Policy Institute
- Community Schools: A Whole-Child Framework for School Improvement, Coalition for Community Schools
- Community Schools: Problem Solving Machines, Roosevelt Middle School Case Study, Center for Popular Democracy
- Community Schools: Resources, American Federation of Teachers
- Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools, Center for Popular Democracy
- ESSA Resources, Coalition for Community Schools
- Leading with Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors, National Center for Community Schools
- Partnerships, Not Pushouts—A Guide for School Board Members: Community Partnerships for Student Success
- Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships, Coalition for Community Schools
- The Six Pillars of Community Schools Toolkit, National Education Association
- Transforming Schools Revitalizing Neighborhoods: A Guide for Resource Coordinators, Cincinnati Public Schools Community Learning Centers
- What the Four Pillars of Community Schools Look Like in Action (Infographic), Learning Policy Institute

Chapter 3—First Pillar: Integrated Student Supports

- Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action, National Center for Community Schools
- Community School Standards, Coalition for Community Schools
- Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence, Learning Policy Institute
- Leading with Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors, National Center for Community Schools
- Making the Grade: A Progress Report and Next Steps for Integrated Student Supports, Child Trends
- National Evaluation: Five-Year Summary Report, Communities in Schools
- Policy Brief: Principles of Effective Practice for Integrated Student Support, City Connects, City Connects
- Wraparound Replication Cookbook, School and Main Institute

Chapter 4—Second Pillar: Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities

- Continuous Quality Improvement in Afterschool Settings: Impact Findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention Study (Executive Summary), David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality
- Expanded Learning Time: Expectations for Implementation, Mass 2020 and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Financing Expanded Learning Time in Schools: A Look at Five District Expanded-Time Schools, National Center on Time & Learning and The Wallace Foundation
- Governance Structures for City Afterschool Systems: Three Models, The Wallace Foundation
- Growing Together, Learning Together: What Cities Have Discovered About Building Afterschool Systems, The Wallace Foundation
- Quality Standards for Expanded Learning, California Department of Education, Afterschool Division, and the California Afterschool Network
- Time Well Spent, Partnership for Children and Youth

Chapter 5—Third Pillar: Active Family and Community Engagement

- A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, Partners in Education
- Best Practices in Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) Implementation: Developing a Culture of Authentic Parent Engagement and Shared Decision Making, Californians for Justice
- Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools, Center for Popular Democracy
- Early Childhood Community School Linkages: Advancing a Theory of Change, John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities and Institute for Educational Leadership
- Effective Family and Community Engagement Strategies, Hanover Research for LEAD Connecticut
- Engaging Families and Community Partners for Equity and Excellence: 2015–2020 Action Plan, Hartford Public Schools
- Family Engagement Toolkit, Oakland Unified School District
- Handbook on Family and Community Engagement, School Community Network
- Keeping Students at the Heart of LCFF: Student Engagement in Year One of LCFF, Californians for Justice
- Patterns of Practice: Case Studies of Early Childhood Education & Family Engagement in Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership
- The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework; Promoting Family Engagement and School Readiness from Prenatal to Age 8, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start
- Tools and Resources for Schools, Albuquerque Public Schools
- Transforming Schools Revitalizing Neighborhoods: A Guide for Resource Coordinators, Cincinnati Public Schools Community Learning Centers

Chapter 6—Fourth Pillar: Collaborative Leadership and Practices

- Building a Leadership Team, Coalition for Community Schools
- Community School Standards, Coalition for Community Schools
- Family Leadership, Governance and Site Planning Toolkit, San Francisco Unified School District
- National Standards for Family School Partnerships, National PTA
- Partnership Effectiveness Continuum: A research-based tool for developing, assessing, and improving partnerships, Education Development Center
- Principles of Effective Partnerships, Center for Community Schools
- Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships: The Community Schools Strategy, Coalition for Community Schools
- School Leadership Teams Overview, New York City Department of Education
- Shared Use for Schools (Multiple Resources), Safe Routes to School National Partnership

About The Partnership for the Future of Learning

The **Partnership for the Future of Learning** is a national network dedicated to an affirmative, equitable, evidence-based vision of a racially-just remodeled public education system. This playbook makes available research and tools to create a future of learning together, for all of us.

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[6] Child Trends describes integrated student supports this way: "Integrated student supports (ISS) are a school-based approach to promoting students' academic success by developing or securing and coordinating supports that target academic and nonacademic barriers to achievement. These resources range from traditional tutoring and mentoring to provision of a broader set of supports, such as linking students to physical and mental health care and connecting their families to parent education, family counseling, food banks, or employment assistance. While ISS programs take many forms, integration is key to the model—both integration of supports to meet individual students' needs and integration of the ISS program into the life of a school." Moore, K. A., & Emig, C. (2014). *Integrated student supports: A summary of the evidence base for policymakers* (white paper) Bethesda, Maryland: Child Trends.
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