COMMUNITY SCHOOLS FORWARD

Theory of Action for Community School Transformation

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Acknowledgments

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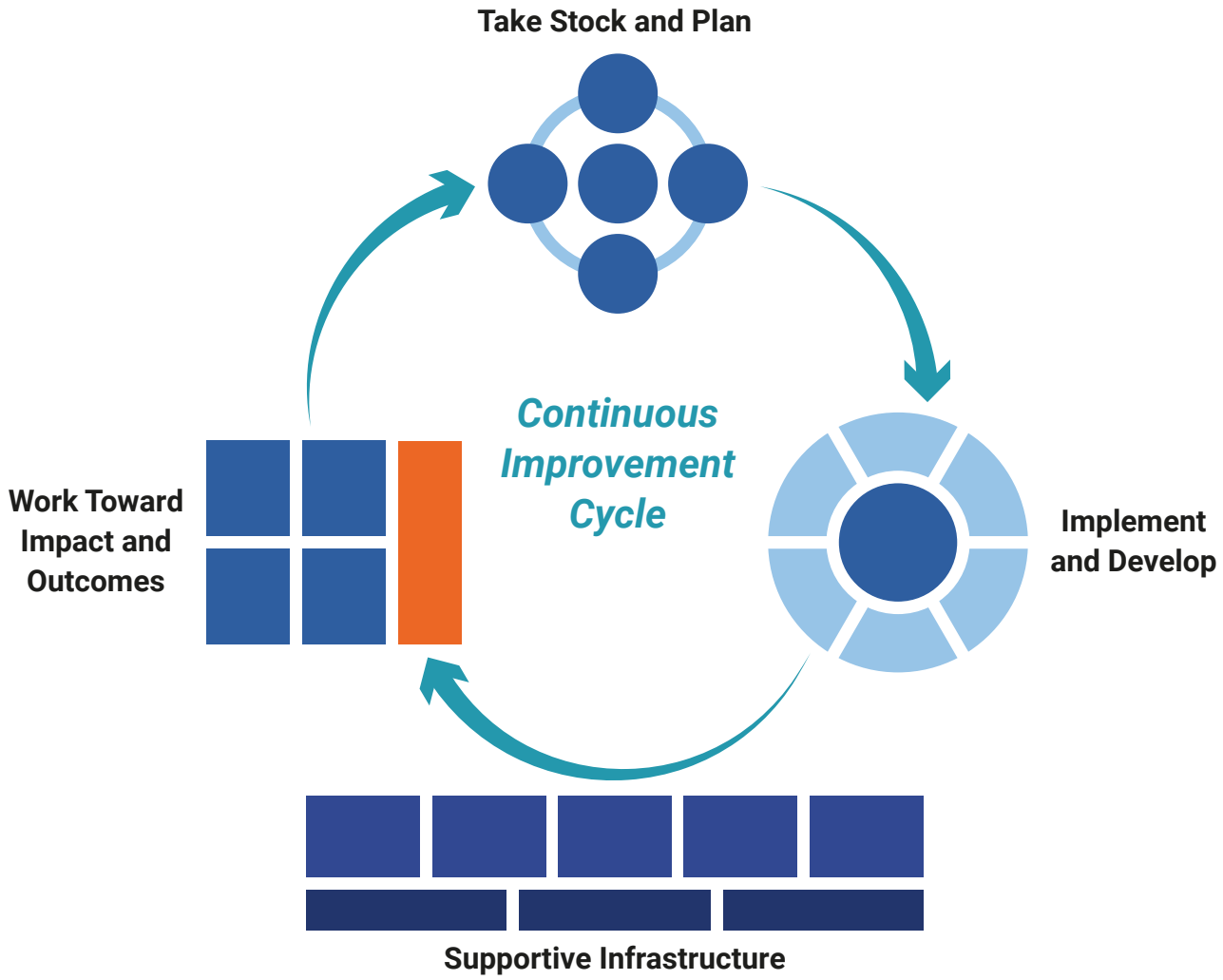
The Community Schools Strategy

The community schools strategy transforms a school into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. As partners, they organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive. This resource is intended to unpack the essentials of community school transformation and show the activities community schools undertake as they move from their initial commitment to the strategy to full implementation. The *Theory of Action for Community School Transformation* (Theory of Action) shows how the strategy revolves around a continuous improvement cycle that includes planning, implementing, working toward impact and outcomes, and monitoring progress, all of which rely on a supportive infrastructure. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Theory of Action for Community School Transformation



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

Take Stock and Plan

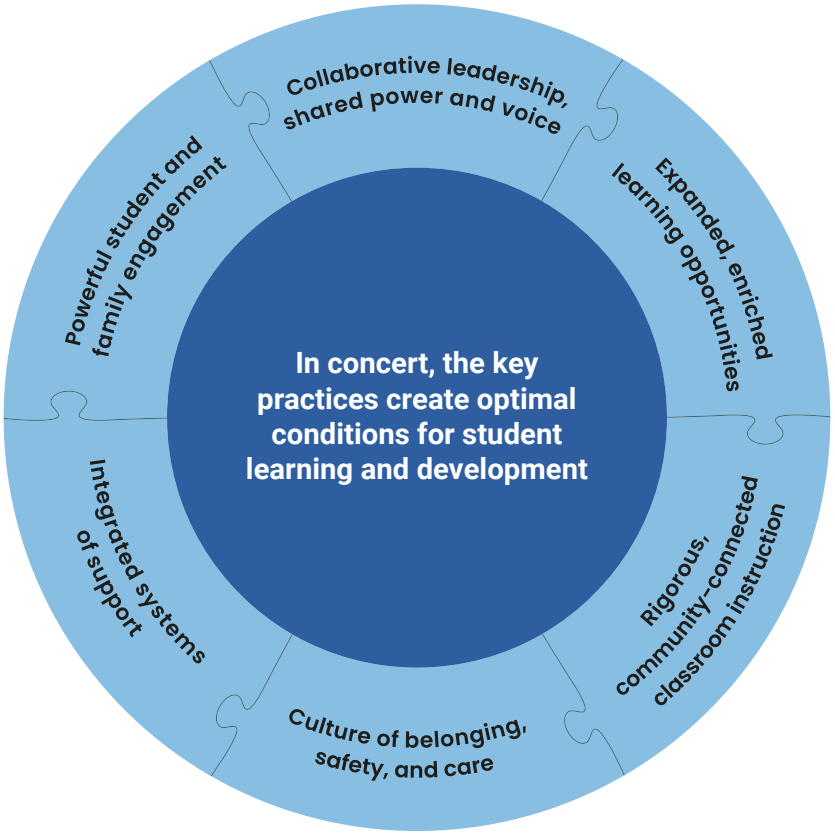
Figure 2. Take Stock and Plan

Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

Each school community contains unique assets and resources, specific needs, vision, and goals. For effective implementation, these are assessed and addressed through trusting relationships, shared accountability, and differentiated responsibility. Community school planning begins by convening youth, families, educators, and community partners to shape the future of their school and strengthen their community. Central to this process is the community school coordinator, who, with the school and key partner leadership, creates a diverse leadership team (sometimes called an advisory committee or community school team) composed of representatives from each group. Under the guidance of the coordinator, the leadership team conducts an assets and needs assessment that includes baseline measures from which to gauge whether the community school is making progress toward its local goals, desired impact areas, and outcomes. Then, through an inclusive decision-making process, the school community develops a shared vision and goals that shape a tailored comprehensive plan. (See Figure 2.)

Implement and Develop

Figure 3. Key Practices for Community School Transformation



Source: Adapted from Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*.

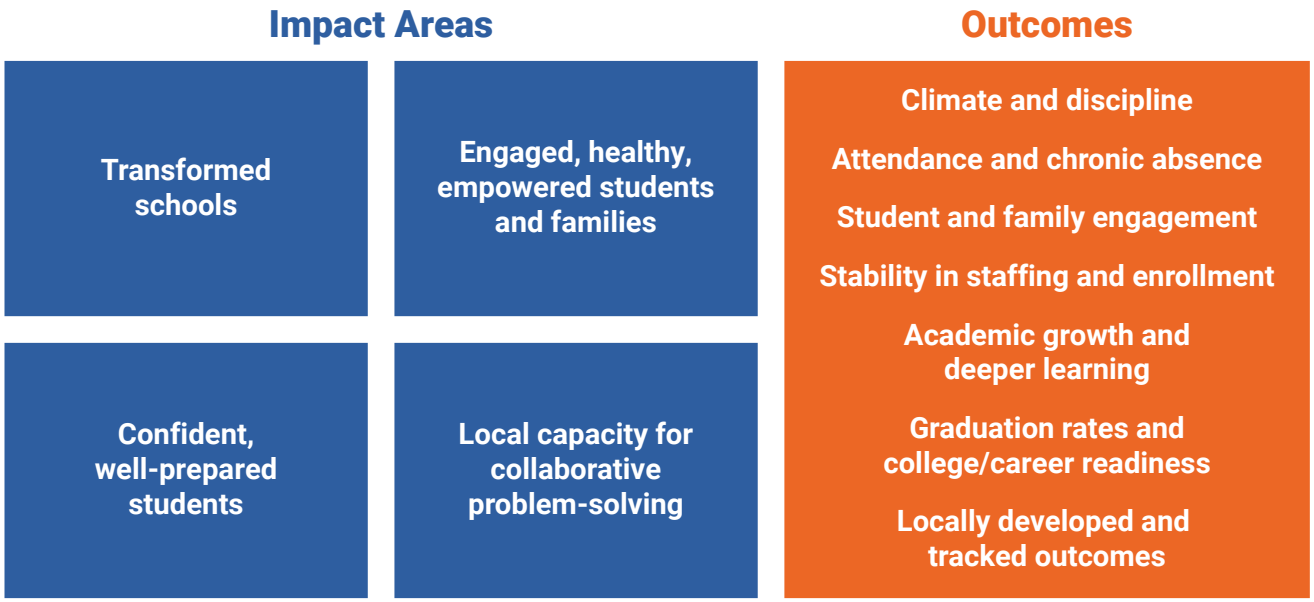
The comprehensive plan is enacted through the integrated implementation of the key community school practices. (See Figure 3.) When implemented in concert, these practices can create the optimal conditions for student learning and development. The leadership team and the community school coordinator use multiple forms of data to drive the implementation and integration in ways that reflect the unique needs of the school community and drive the school toward the desired impacts. This process supports community schools to adapt and refine structures and practices as they develop over time. These key practices are explained below:

- **Powerful student and family engagement.** Families and students actively participate in the school community and are key partners in decision-making, shaping the school's environment, priorities, and partnerships. Families' lived wisdom and experience inform approaches to student success. As a result, schools become hubs providing opportunities for adults as well as young people.

- **Collaborative leadership and shared power and voice.** Families, students, teachers, principals, and community partners co-create a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility as they make decisions together. These decisions are made both through formal structures, such as site-based leadership teams and regularly administered surveys, and through more informal engagement, such as coffee with the coordinator, hallway conversations, and community gatherings.
- **Expanded and enriched learning opportunities.** Before- and after-school, weekend, and summer programs provide expanded time, expanded staffing, and expanded opportunities for learning and engagement. These include academic instruction, enrichment and extracurricular activities, and individualized support. Students have opportunities to explore their passions, dive deeper into the application of academic content, and strengthen their knowledge and skills.
- **Rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction.** Teaching and learning in the school infuses high-level content and skills with real-world learning opportunities. The curriculum is deeply connected to the local community and students' identities, cultures, and experiences, providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful inquiry-based learning and problem-solving.
- **Culture of belonging, safety, and care.** The school climate is welcoming and fosters trust among students, families, partners, and staff. Each person in the school community is valued for their rich diversity of experiences and is encouraged to share their views, knowledge, and culture. The school becomes a place grounded in healthy relationships, in which members feel safe and comfortable navigating conflicts and taking risks. Students feel connected to and are active participants in the school community.
- **Integrated systems of support.** To promote healthy learning and development, a dedicated team composed primarily of school staff and community partners intentionally and systematically coordinates services, supports, and opportunities that foster individual and collective well-being, using an assets-based approach to nurture the strengths and address the needs of students and families.

Work Toward Impact and Outcomes

Figure 4. Community School Impact Areas and Outcomes



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

As communities and educators work toward desired impact and outcomes, it can be helpful for them to think in terms of key areas of impact and specific, measurable outcomes. (See Figure 4.)

Impacts. Quality implementation of the community schools strategy is expected to transform the school; attend to the well-being of students and families; and provide students the opportunity to excel in their learning, pursue their in- and out-of-school passions, and have the resources and skills to reach their goals. More specifically, implementing the strategy with fidelity impacts four key areas:

1. **Transformed schools.** Schools transform into community hubs—developed by and for students, educators, families, and neighbors—that cultivate "whole child" learning environments, spaces for civic engagement, and access to resources and services.
2. **Engaged, healthy, empowered students and families.** Avenues for voice and shared decision-making, a supportive school community, and access to resources such as physical and mental health care all prioritize the well-being of students and families.
3. **Confident, well-prepared students.** All students excel academically, confidently navigate their in- and out-of-school pursuits, and have the resources and skills to pursue their postsecondary goals.

4. **Local capacity for collaborative problem-solving.** Members of the school community collaboratively identify, track, and make progress toward local goals and outcomes for both the school and larger community.

Outcomes. Progress in the four domains listed above can be tracked through both short- and medium-term outcomes and assessed through analysis of multiple forms of collected data, such as focus groups, surveys, administrative data sets, and observations. Ultimately, however, a community school seeks to advance student thriving, meaning that throughout their time in school and into adulthood, each student will have a life filled with opportunities, joy, and strong relationships. Progress toward this goal can be assessed by tracking the following:

- **Climate and discipline.** Community schools strive to offer a safe and welcoming climate for students, families, and educators that promotes collective well-being and replaces exclusionary discipline policies with restorative approaches. In doing so, the school creates the conditions for students to feel safe and empowered and to become confident and engaged learners and peers. Examples of outcomes to track include trusting relationships, reductions in discipline referrals, and perceptions of safety and belonging.
- **Attendance and chronic absence.** For students to take advantage of what is offered at school, they need to be present. Community schools foster a sense of belonging and increase engagement, identify barriers to attendance, and develop systems of support to attend to the varied needs of students and families. As a result, these schools should see average daily attendance stabilize and/or increase and rates of chronic absence decrease.
- **Student and family engagement.** When community schools enlist families and students as key partners in shaping the environment, priorities, and programs, the school becomes a place of learning, sharing, leadership, and participatory dialogue and decision-making for both adults and students. Such engagement can be captured by looking at participation rates; opportunities for youth and family voice; and perceptions and experiences of connectedness, trusting relationships, and a welcoming atmosphere.
- **Stability in staffing and enrollment.** To build a strong and supportive community and create an optimal learning environment, a school needs to retain both its teachers and students. Community schools' focus on climate and student attendance, as well as engaging and supporting the entire school community, should make the school a place where students, families, and educators want to be. This can be assessed by tracking enrollment patterns and rates of teacher turnover and retention.

- **Academic growth and deeper learning.** Alongside attending to students' well-being and creating a positive school climate, community schools provide curriculum and instruction that is rigorous, community connected, and meaningful to students. Students are expected to show growth in their academics and develop the habits and skills that will enable them to navigate different learning contexts. This growth can be assessed through test scores, work portfolios, grades, and students' enthusiasm for learning, among other measures.
- **Graduation rates and college/career readiness.** Students in a community school are expected to graduate on time and be prepared for whatever postsecondary path they choose. Increased graduation rates; participation in advanced courses, career and technical education courses, and/or dual enrollment courses; and AP and IB exam scores are among the ways to assess these outcomes.
- **Locally developed and tracked outcomes.** A community school brings together members of the school community to consider the needs, strengths, and resources of the community and establish local goals. This process of data gathering and shared decision-making results in services and goals that are unique and responsive to the school. A continuous improvement approach will result in ongoing adaptations and updated goals for the school.

Supportive Infrastructure

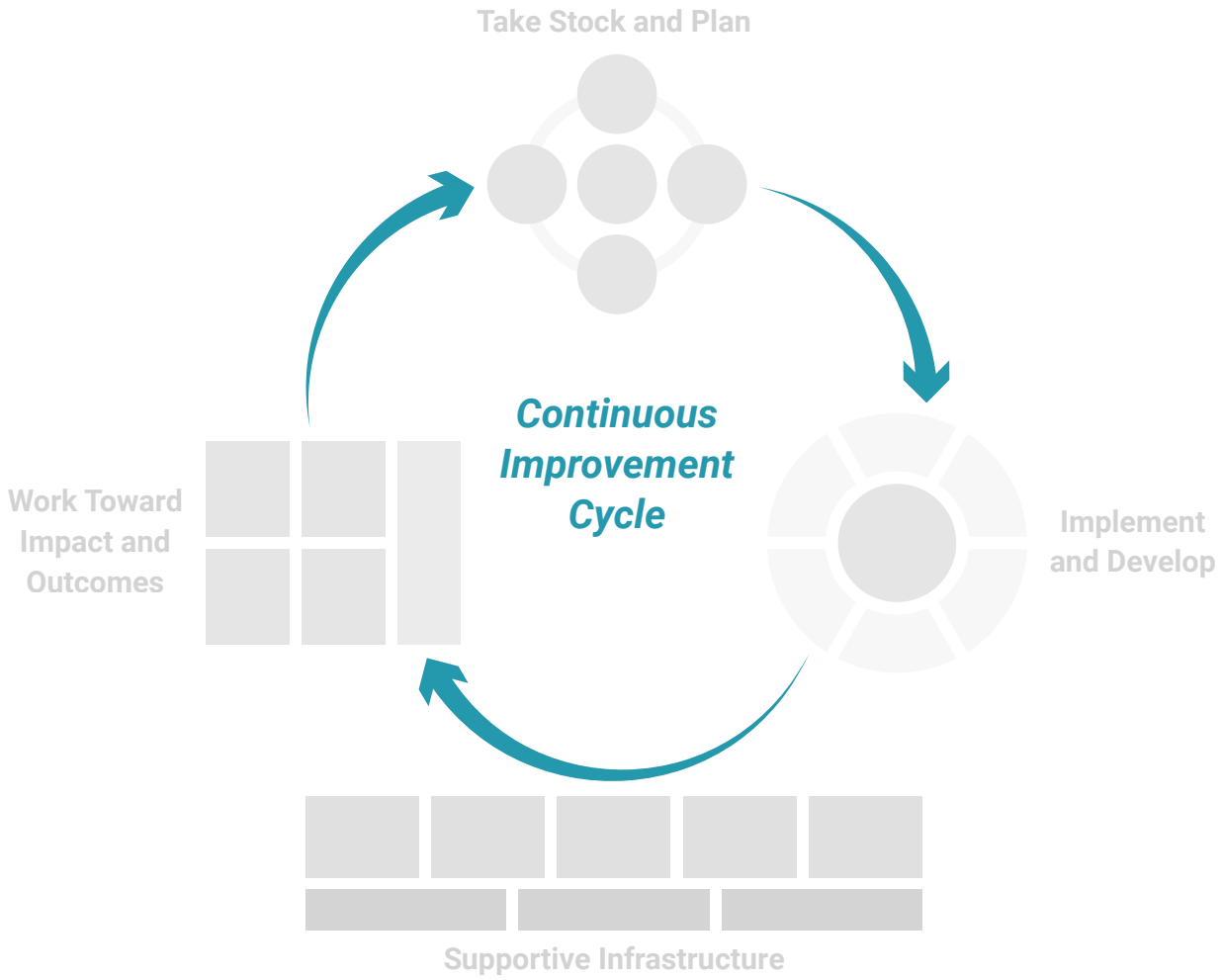
Figure 5. Supportive Infrastructure

Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

For this strategy to be effective and sustainable, a supportive infrastructure needs to be in place. This includes, but is not limited to, the development of shared governance structures, strategic community partnerships, sustainable resources, professional learning opportunities, and data systems. (See Figure 5.) These can be supported in part by local, state, and federal policies; ongoing technical assistance; and private and public investments, and they can be provided at the system level, school level, or both.

The Continuous Improvement Cycle

Figure 6. The Continuous Improvement Cycle



Source: Community Schools Forward. (2023).

The community schools strategy involves an ongoing cycle of reflection, analysis, revision, and improvement (e.g., a Plan–Do–Study–Act cycle). As part of this cycle, each of the phases—**Take Stock and Plan**, **Implement and Develop**, and **Work Toward Impact and Outcomes**—are routinely revisited through the collective work of the school community. (See Figure 6.) In partnership, school staff, community partners, families, and students leverage resources, access technical support, and collect and use data to sustain and improve the strategy over time. Together they track progress toward full implementation of the key practices and shared outcomes recommended in this Theory of Action, along with locally established goals and outcomes. These are the mechanisms by which community schools refine their structures and practices to progress through stages of development—from emerging to maturing to excelling.

About the Authors

Emily Germain serves as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), working on LPI's Whole Child Education team, with a focus on community schools. As a researcher she has employed qualitative and multimethod approaches to study implications of urban education reforms for historically marginalized communities, the relationship between schools and communities, and how policy and politics shape both the labor markets and practice of education leaders and teachers. Germain holds a PhD in Education Leadership and Policy from the University of Texas at Austin. She earned an MAT from Teachers College and a BA in American Studies from Barnard College.

Jeannie Oakes is Presidential Professor Emeritus in Educational Equity at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and a Senior Policy Fellow at LPI. Her more than 100 scholarly books and articles examine the impact of social policies on the educational opportunities and outcomes of low-income students of color. One book, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* has been honored as one of the 20th century's most influential books on education, and a second, *Becoming Good American Schools: The Struggle for Civic Virtue in Education Reform* (with Karen Hunter Quartz, Steve Ryan, and Martin Lipton), won the American Educational Research Association's Outstanding Book Award. Oakes is a member of the National Academy of Education, a Fellow of AERA, and was AERA's president during its 2016 Centennial Year.

Anna Maier co-leads the LPI Whole Child Education team, with a focus on community schools. She is the lead author of *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence* and *Technical Assistance for Community Schools: Enabling Strong Implementation*. Her policy work and research focuses on federal, state, and local investments in community schools, with a particular focus on California. Maier has experience with a variety of roles in k–12 education. She began her career managing an after-school program for elementary school students in Oakland and went on to teach 2nd and 3rd grades in the Oakland Unified School District and Aspire Public Schools. She was also a member of the research and evaluation team at Coaching Corps, a youth sports nonprofit in Oakland. As a graduate student fellow with the Center for Cities & Schools at the University of California, Berkeley, she worked with West Contra Costa Unified School District on implementing a full-service community schools initiative. Maier received an MPP from the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, a Multiple Subjects CLAD teaching credential from the New College of California, and a BA in Psychology and Education Studies from Carleton College.