



## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

### AN EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

*Jeannie Oakes*

Learning Policy  
Institute  
National Education  
Policy Center

*Anna Maier*

Learning Policy  
Institute

*Julia Daniel*

National Education  
Policy Center

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#### National Education Policy Center

School of Education,  
University of Colorado Boulder  
Boulder, CO 80309-0249  
(802) 383-0058  
[nepc.colorado.edu](http://nepc.colorado.edu)

#### Learning Policy Institute

1530 Page Mill Road, Suite 200  
Palo Alto, CA 94304  
(p) 650.332.9797  
1301 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036  
(p) 202.830.0079  
[learningpolicyinstitute.org](http://learningpolicyinstitute.org)



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# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: AN EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

*Jeannie Oakes, Learning Policy Institute & National Education Policy Center*  
*Anna Maier, Learning Policy Institute*  
*Julia Daniel, National Education Policy Center*

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## Executive Summary

This brief examines the research on community schools, with two primary emphases. First, it explores whether the 2015 federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) opens the possibility of investing in well-designed community schools to meet the educational needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools. And second, it provides support to school, district, and state leaders as they consider, propose, or implement a community school intervention in school targeted for comprehensive support. The brief is drawn from a larger research review, available at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/comm-schools-equitable-brief>.

Community schools represent a place-based school improvement strategy in which “schools partner with community agencies and local government to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.”<sup>1</sup> Many operate year-round, from morning to evening, and serve both children and adults. Although the approach is appropriate for students of all backgrounds, many community schools serve neighborhoods where poverty and racism erect barriers to learning, and where families have few resources to supplement what typical schools provide.

Community schools vary in the programs they offer and the way they operate, depending on their local context. However, four features—or pillars—appear in most community schools:

- 1) Integrated student supports
- 2) Expanded learning time and opportunities
- 3) Family and community engagement
- 4) Collaborative leadership and practices

Because ESSA requires that federally funded interventions be “evidence-based,” we reviewed both research on community schools as a comprehensive strategy and research on each of the four individual pillars of the strategy. We summarized the findings and evaluated the studies against ESSA’s criteria for “evidence-based” interventions, which define different tiers of evidence based on research methodology.

We conclude from our review that the evidence base on well-implemented community schools and their component features provides a strong warrant for their potential contribution to school improvement. Sufficient evidence meeting ESSA’s criteria for “evidence-based” ap-

proaches exists to justify including community schools as part of targeted and comprehensive interventions in high-poverty schools. This evidence also supports community schools as an approach appropriate for broader use.

Policymakers who want to incorporate a community schools strategy into their ESSA state plans—as well as other plans for state and local school improvements—can benefit from the following research-based lessons. To achieve well-implemented programs and successful results, it is recommended that they:

- Take a comprehensive approach to community schools: All four pillars—integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices—matter; moreover, they appear to reinforce each other. To ensure a good outcome, pay attention to both the technical and the cultural dimensions of a community school. For example, plan not simply for a longer school day, but also for effective use of time gained. Certified teachers are best positioned to provide additional academic instruction, while community partners can engage students in experiential learning opportunities that connect to the community and foster significant relationships with adults. The work is best accomplished when school and community representatives plan and work together, building a school culture that is collaborative and collegial.
- Recognize that successful community schools do not all look alike. Develop a plan that operationalizes the four pillars in ways that address local assets and needs, keeping in mind that the context of schools and communities may change over time. Therefore, as events unfold, be prepared to modify the original implementation rather than avoiding programmatic change. As ESSA suggests, use data in an ongoing process of continuous program evaluation and improvement.
- Provide sufficient planning time to build trusting relationships between the school and an array of service providers as well as parents and staff, being mindful that such collaboration is key to full implementation.
- Involve the community, parents, and young people as part of the needs assessment, design, planning and implementation processes. ESSA requires it, and, in the case of community schools, such collaborative relationships are part of what will make the strategy successful.
- Use evaluation strategies that provide information not only about progress toward hoped-for outcomes, but also about implementation and exposure to services. Be aware that outcomes are likely to span multiple domains—achievement, attendance, behavior, relationships, and attitudes—and are likely to take time to be fully realized. Certain outcomes, such as attendance, are likely to be achieved before other outcomes, such as achievement. Use data for continuous program refinement, while allowing sufficient time for the strategy to fully mature.
- Encourage and support researchers, allowing them to conduct more rigorous studies using methods that will enable a stronger understanding of community schools' effectiveness, and yield greater insight into the conditions under which they work

well. Because this approach is frequently adopted as a turnaround strategy in underperforming schools, current evidence consists largely of program evaluations that assess student- and school-level progress. Additional research should seek to guide implementation and refinement.

Find this brief:

On the NEPC website at:

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/equitable-community-schools>

On the LPI website at:

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/comm-schools-equitable-brief>

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: AN EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

## Introduction

Good schools prepare all children for full and productive lives. They are central community institutions, with resources, opportunities, and supports that contribute to children's academic achievement; social, emotional, and physical development; and preparation to participate in the arts and civic life. Regrettably, many U.S. children are locked out of good schools—a result of persistent inequalities that have led to neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, racial isolation, and uneven education spending.

More than half of the nation's school children—approximately 25 million—live in low-income households, the highest proportion since this statistic became available.<sup>2</sup> These children face society's neglect of their most basic needs. Many suffer adverse experiences such as food insecurity, homelessness, violence, or persistent hardship, resulting in chronic stress or trauma that impacts behavior, learning readiness and academic success.<sup>3</sup>

In communities where larger societal and economic factors disadvantage children, community schools intentionally provide advantages enjoyed by students in more favored contexts. They create strong instructional programs that support children's learning and development. In addition, they build an infrastructure of community partnerships with higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations that support well-rounded learning and healthy development. Such partnerships also connect children and families to resources, opportunities and supports that can mitigate the harms of poverty and build community resilience and strengths.

With inequality and child poverty on the rise, community schools have garnered increased attention as a school improvement strategy in high-poverty neighborhoods. But, while community schools may be especially valuable in high-poverty neighborhoods, the approach can strengthen all schools, whatever the background of the students who attend them.

## ESSA Brings New Opportunities

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), community schools can be implemented as a targeted or comprehensive intervention for improving student and school outcomes. However, state and local policymakers and advocates who seek to incorporate community schools as part of their state ESSA plans must demonstrate that the strategy satisfies the requirement for an evidence-based intervention. ESSA specifies four tiers of evidence, each defined by research methodology (see Table 1).

**Table 1: ESSA Evidence Tiers**

<b>Tier 1</b>	<b>Tier 2</b>	<b>Tier 3</b>	<b>Tier 4</b>
<b>Strong Evidence</b>	<b>Moderate Evidence</b>	<b>Promising Evidence</b>	<b>Emerging Evidence</b>
At least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study	At least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study	At least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias	Demonstrates a rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that the intervention is likely to improve student outcomes  Includes ongoing evaluation efforts

**Source: Every Student Succeeds Act<sup>4</sup>**

ESSA requires that Title I, Part A funded interventions for low-performing schools (as well as competitive grant programs with priority status) employ strategies supported by evidence from studies that fall into Tiers 1-3.<sup>5</sup> However, the U.S. Department of Education has issued non-regulatory guidance encouraging stakeholders to “consider the entire body of relevant evidence.”<sup>6</sup> And, the broader standard of evidence from studies in all four tiers applies to initiatives beyond those mentioned here (Title I, Part A school improvement and also priority competitive grants).

To assist state and local policymakers and advocates in developing ESSA plans, and to solicit state, local and philanthropic support, our team evaluated the research on community schools against ESSA’s “evidence-based” criteria. We examined research from all four tiers of the ESSA evidence standards, including thoughtfully-designed case studies and comprehensive syntheses. We considered carefully-constructed program evaluations as well as traditional peer-reviewed studies.

### **What are Community Schools?**

The Coalition for Community Schools defines community schools as “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources, [with an] integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement.”<sup>7</sup> Many operate year-round, from morning to evening, and serve both children and adults.

Because students’ needs, community assets, and school system capacities all differ, community schools adapt to local context and vary in the programs they offer and the way they operate and collaborate with other organizations.

## The Four Pillars

Even though there are some differences among community schools, four features—or pillars—appear in different forms in most community schools:

- 1) Integrated student supports
- 2) Expanded learning time and opportunities
- 3) Family and community engagement
- 4) Collaborative leadership and practices

These four pillars emerged from a comprehensive review of community schools research. Integrated student supports, or wraparound services, such as dental care or counseling for children and families, are often considered foundational to this approach. Expanded learning time and family engagement are also common programmatic elements. Collaborative leadership can be viewed as both a programmatic element and an implementation strategy. The synergy among these elements—which are often organized by a full-time community schools coordinator—makes these schools “hubs of the community where educators, families, nonprofits, community members, and others unite to create conditions where all children learn and thrive.”<sup>8</sup> In March 2017, the Coalition for Community Schools, the field’s leading advocacy group, released a framework brief and set of “Community School Standards” that reflect many of the research findings contained in this report.<sup>9</sup> The standards specify structures and functions of community schools and address their typical core program elements.

The four community school pillars align closely with evidence-based features of good schools (see Table 2), derived from decades of research identifying school characteristics that foster students’ intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development.<sup>10</sup>



**Table 2: Community Schools Enable the Features of Good Schools**

Community School Pillars	Associated “Good School” Characteristics
<p><b>Integrated student supports</b> address out-of-school barriers to learning through partnerships with social and health service agencies and providers, usually coordinated by a dedicated professional staff member. Some employ social-emotional learning, conflict resolution training, and restorative justice practices to support mental health and lessen conflict, bullying, and punitive disciplinary actions, such as suspensions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Attention to all aspects</li> <li>● of child development: academic, social, emotional, physical, psychological, and moral</li> <li>● Extra academic, social, and health and wellness supports for students, as needed</li> <li>● Climate of safety and trusting relationships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expanded learning time and opportunities</b>, including afterschool, weekend, and summer programs, provide additional academic instruction, individualized academic support, enrichment activities, and learning opportunities that emphasize real-world learning and community problem solving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning is the top priority</li> <li>● High expectations and strong instruction for all students</li> <li>● Sufficient resources and opportunities for meaningful learning</li> </ul>
<p><b>Active parent and community engagement</b> bring parents/community into the school as partners in children’s education and make the school a neighborhood hub providing adults with educational opportunities they want, such as English as a Second Language classes, green card or citizenship preparation, computer skills, art, STEM, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strong school, family and community ties, including opportunities for shared leadership</li> <li>● Climate of safety and trusting relationships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collaborative leadership and practices</b> build a culture of professional learning, collective trust and shared responsibility using such strategies as site-based leadership/governance teams, teacher learning communities, and a community-school coordinator who manages the multiple, complex joint work of school and community organizations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture of teacher collaboration &amp; professional learning</li> <li>● Assessment as a tool for improvement and shared accountability</li> </ul>

In good schools, learning and healthy development are top priorities.<sup>11</sup> Success is considered normal, and educators understand that children learn to be smart, rather than being born that way.<sup>12</sup> The curriculum engages all students in rich opportunities for meaningful learning.<sup>13</sup> Classes are small and classrooms well-equipped.<sup>14</sup> Teachers have enough time to teach and children to learn.<sup>15</sup> Students get support to address their academic, social, and health-related needs. Well-trained, experienced teachers are essential,<sup>16</sup> but so are teacher collaboration and learning.<sup>17</sup> Adults share responsibility for all children’s learning.<sup>18</sup> Teachers use data to pinpoint where students are struggling and to identify where they may need to improve.<sup>19</sup>

Relationships also matter greatly.<sup>20</sup> Teachers and students trust and respect one another.<sup>21</sup> Every student is well known and feels cared about.<sup>22</sup> Adults set high expectations and encourage students to realize them. The school climate is safe from violence and bullying; discipline feels fair and respectful; and diversity is embraced.<sup>23</sup> Ties among parents, the community, and the school are strong and respectful, enabling both young people and their families to build social and cultural capital and preparing students to be constructive citizens.<sup>24</sup> Parents and community are a vital resource, and school leaders share authority.<sup>25</sup>

Community schools seek to create these characteristics in communities where poverty and racism erect barriers to learning, and where families have few resources to supplement what typical schools provide. The four pillars provide an infrastructure to embed the characteristics of more advantaged schools in community schools' structures and practices.

## Support for Community Schools

Community schools can be traced back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to make urban schools “social centers” serving multiple social and civic needs.<sup>26</sup> Today, many districts have turned to them as part of community-wide investment initiatives and, in some districts, as community members have demanded alternatives to closing struggling schools.

Over the past decade, Congress has dedicated funding for several programs that support community schools, and ESSA provides more funding than did NCLB. These programs include ESSA-authorized Full-Service Community Schools, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers that use community-school partnerships to address out-of-school learning barriers and improve schools, and Promise Neighborhoods. Moreover, with state and local funding championed by state legislators and mayors, as well as philanthropic support, localities around the country have launched large-scale community school projects in conjunction with local government and nonprofit agencies. These include New York City, Philadelphia, Newark, Austin, Salt Lake City, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Las Vegas.

## Review of the Literature: The Community Schools Strategy and Its Four Pillars

We began our review with studies of the effectiveness of community schools as a comprehensive strategy. We then considered studies of the effectiveness of each of the four pillars of community schools: a) integrated student supports; b) expanded learning time and opportunities; c) family and community engagement; and d) collaborative leadership and practices. Altogether, we reviewed 125 studies of the impact of community school programs or pillars, including 49 reviews of research. Because of their high-quality design and methods, these studies were selected from a much larger pool of studies retrieved through searches of electronic databases, recommendations from researchers and practitioners, and references in the published literature. We focused our review on studies published within the past 10

to 15 years.<sup>27</sup> Together, this research provides the evidence base to assess the effectiveness of community schools and judge whether the strategy meets the ESSA evidence standard.<sup>28</sup>

A consistent research finding that emerged across these studies is that both the substance of the intervention and the quality of its implementation are key to producing positive outcomes, as is true for any approach to school improvement. Studies over the past four decades have demonstrated the importance of systemic supports, structures, and processes in yielding positive results for program participants.<sup>29</sup>

This certainly holds true for community school programs, where the strategy itself is complex and multifaceted. The community school pillars reinforce each other—and together create the characteristics of good schools. The better implemented and more comprehensive the community school program, the more likely it is to yield positive results for students and families. For this reason, many evaluations analyze results separately for the more mature or better-implemented community schools within the overall sample. Relatedly, some studies also find that results become more positive as schools implement community school programs more completely or for longer periods of time.<sup>30</sup> Studies of the pillars yield similar findings. Students who participated in a broader range of programs or who received more services also typically showed better outcomes.<sup>31</sup>

## **Community Schools as a Comprehensive Strategy**

This section reviews the research on how comprehensive community schools affect student achievement, attendance and behavior. This research includes well-designed experimental studies (ESSA Tier 1) and quasi-experimental (ESSA Tier 2) studies; they indicate that community schools with good implementation and a sufficient amount of services can positively impact a range of student outcomes.

As one example, the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) used a holistic community schools model including all four pillars described earlier.<sup>32</sup> Participating schools offered a comprehensive set of services to students, families and communities, and they offered the communities and families a voice in governance. Researchers compared outcomes in TACSI schools to outcomes in carefully selected non-community comparison schools. They found that fully implemented community schools produced significantly greater benefits for students. In schools that didn't do a good job of implementing the model, the effects were less impressive. By the third and fourth years, students at fully implemented community schools scored significantly higher than their peers in other schools on standardized math and reading tests. A climate of trust among students, teachers, and parents was a strong school-level predictor of achievement. Because the study used a quasi-experimental design to compare pre- and post-intervention outcomes in comparison schools and controlled for demographics and prior test score performance using sophisticated statistical methods, it meets ESSA Tier 2 evidence criteria.

Other comprehensive evaluations provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of community school supports. For example, a study examined the effectiveness of the Harlem

Children’s Zone (HCZ) charter schools, which provide expanded learning time, integrated student supports, and active parent engagement.<sup>33</sup> The authors compared the academic outcomes of lottery winners attending the HCZ with those not selected in the lottery. They found HCZ students scored significantly higher on math and reading tests than students who attended other schools, in both third and eighth grades. Because the study employed a post-hoc random admissions lottery analysis with sophisticated statistical controls, it satisfies ESSA Tier 1 or 2 requirements. A follow-up study showed a range of long-term benefits for HCZ students, including higher on-time high school graduation rates, better performance on 12<sup>th</sup>-grade exit exams, and lower teen pregnancy and incarceration rates.<sup>34</sup>

Tier 3 correlational research also shows significant relationships between the community schools approach and student outcomes. In Iowa and Pennsylvania, middle school students participating in community school services significantly improved their math and reading performance, compared to peers who did not participate.<sup>35</sup> In Baltimore, a comparison of 42 community schools to other public schools found that community schools operating for at least three to five years had significantly higher attendance rates and lower chronic absenteeism rates.<sup>36</sup> Because these analyses controlled for pre-existing differences such as student demographics and prior school attendance rates, they satisfy Tier 3 ESSA requirements.

## Evidence Supports Each of the Four Pillars

Research syntheses and individual studies demonstrate that community school pillars also meet the ESSA evidence standard on their own.

### Integrated Student Supports (ISS)

Often called wraparound services, ISS is the practice of linking schools to a range of academic, health, and social services. ISS programs address the reality that children whose families are struggling with poverty—and the housing, health and safety concerns that often go with it—cannot focus on learning unless their nonacademic needs are also met. The goal is to remove barriers to school success by connecting students and families to service providers in the community, or bringing those services into the school.<sup>37</sup>

For examples, the national School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (21C) program based in New Haven, Connecticut, the Children’s Aid Society in New York City, and the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps all bring social services to schools through community partnerships; in addition, the Communities in Schools program, which has been operating for over 30 years and now serves schools in 25 states, also provides such services. These and newer models typically provide on-site child care and early childhood development; job training, transportation, and housing assistance for parents; health care and mental health services; and, child nutrition and food assistance programs. A community school coordinator typically conducts needs assessments, partners with agencies outside the school, and tracks program data.<sup>38</sup>

## Integrated Student Supports Meets the ESSA Evidence Standards

Research over the past two decades provides ample evidence that this community school pillar meets ESSA's tiered criteria for evidence-based approaches. For example, a synthesis examined 11 studies of ISS models that met rigorous standards, including four intent-to-treat randomized controlled trials (Tier 1) and seven quasi-experimental studies (Tier 2).<sup>39</sup> These studies found ISS to have statistically significant positive effects on student progress in school (three Tier 2 studies), attendance (one Tier 1 and three Tier 2 studies), mathematics achievement (one Tier 1 and four Tier 2 studies), reading achievement (four Tier 2 studies) and overall grade point average (two Tier 2 studies). Also promising were studies showing a positive effect on school attachment (one Tier 2 study) and school behavior (two Tier 2 studies).<sup>40</sup>

One example of a well-designed study meeting ESSA's Tier 1 evidence criteria included three randomized control trials of the widely implemented Communities in Schools (CIS) case-management model over the course of two years, accompanied by a follow-up randomized control study.<sup>41</sup> Although no differences were found on achievement measures between students receiving CIS case management and those who did not, significant positive effects were found on student attendance (in some trials), as well as on students' reports about adult and peer relationships, personal responsibility, good behavior, and family relationships—all precursors of achievement and healthy development. A recent quasi-experimental interrupted time series evaluation (Tier 2) of CIS found that, after three years of implementation, high schools significantly increased their graduation rates, and elementary schools significantly increased their attendance rates relative to comparison schools.<sup>42</sup>

Several other studies of ISS meet ESSA Tier 2 criteria and show student achievement benefits. For example, a study of City Connects services used difference-in-difference regression analysis and hierarchical linear modeling with propensity score matching. Researchers found that after three years, City Connects elementary school students significantly outperformed their peers in mathematics. Middle school students in City Connects significantly outperformed students at control schools on standardized mathematics and language arts tests and GPA.<sup>43</sup>

The American Institute for Research conducted a comparative interrupted time series study of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Wraparound Zones (WAZ) program, which set up partnerships with community groups and businesses to improve school climate and address students' non-academic needs.<sup>44</sup> Student outcomes on state English language arts and math assessments in WAZ schools were significantly better than those in matched schools.<sup>45</sup>

## Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities (ELT/O)

Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities (ELT/O) take place before and after the typical school day and during summer to augment traditional learning opportunities during the school day and year. Some programs provide additional academic instruction and mento-

ring; others offer informal, out-of-school learning experiences, emphasizing student-centered, hands-on, engaging learning experiences, in such areas as music, art, and athletics.<sup>46</sup>

Research on ELT/O has examined the impact of time added to the school day or year, and of voluntary learning opportunities beyond the regular school schedule. These include activities designed by community partners that connect students with art and cultural institutions; offer learning modules with community members leading students in hands-on projects related to their work or interests (e.g., photography, robotics; journalism); or that engage students in service-learning opportunities.

### Expanded Learning Time/Opportunity Meets the ESSA Evidence Standards

Hundreds of studies have examined the impact of ELT/O. Researchers have conducted rigorous reviews of this research, scrutinizing the quality of studies, conducting quantitative meta-analyses of the highest-quality studies and summarizing the most trustworthy findings, and drawing conclusions about what the evidence supports.

For example, a synthesis analyzed 15 empirical studies conducted since 1985 that examined the impact of extended school days and/or school years.<sup>47</sup> The 15 were selected (out of a field of more than ten times that number) for the quality of their methods. They included one experimental design with random assignment of students (ESSA Tier 1), several quasi-experimental studies (ESSA Tier 2) and correlational studies (ESSA Tier 3), and one narrative description (ESSA Tier 4). Although the findings were mixed, 14 of the 15 studies found evidence of a positive relationship between longer days and years on achievement in math or English Language Arts for at least one group of students. Notably, the researchers concluded that the quality of instruction was an important mediator of these achievement benefits.

Other reviews have assessed studies of voluntary “out-of-school” time and summer programs on a range of student outcomes. These reviews also reach positive conclusions about the evidence from well-designed studies. Out-of-school time programs with traditional instruction taught by certified teachers are found to have positive effects on students’ reading and math achievement; programs featuring experiential learning activities are found to have positive effects on social-emotional development.<sup>48</sup> Students attending summer programs have better outcomes than similar non-attending peers, but high-quality programming and maximizing student attendance are critical to achieving these benefits.<sup>49</sup> Taken together, these reviews provide solid evidence for policymakers and practitioners considering ELT/O strategies. An important takeaway, however, is that schools must do more than simply add time to the school day/year: How the time is used matters.

Tier 2 and 3 studies of community schools as a comprehensive approach provide evidence supporting ELT/O in the community school context. For example, multi-level modeling of longitudinal data from six low-income primarily Latino schools in Redwood City, CA found that youth who participated in the extended learning programs (which included enrichment activities such as art and sports, along with leadership activities such as student council) exhibited higher attendance and achievement in math and English Language Arts than their

peers did.<sup>50</sup> Students participating in out-of-school time (OST) programming supporting daytime academic instruction through the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative achieved higher scores on state-mandated standardized exams.<sup>51</sup>

A study of Elev8 OST programs ranging from intensive one-on-one student interventions to traditional afterschool programming demonstrated the importance of adequate exposure to out-of-school time services, as students with higher participation levels had, on average, higher GPAs in reading, math, science, and social science.<sup>52</sup> Students who participated in all three years of middle school afterschool programming that focused on academic support and enrichment at Children's Aid Society community schools experienced greater academic gains on mathematics and reading test scores than their peers who did not participate in afterschool program. Students who participated more frequently and over a longer period had greater gains than their peers who participated in afterschool programming less frequently.<sup>53</sup>

## Family and Community Engagement

Family engagement strategies include school support for better parenting, communication between school and home, family volunteering, parents helping with learning at home, parents involved in school decision-making, and community organizing for school and district reform. Community schools often engage parents in a variety of activities focused on their own needs as well as those of students.

Community schools connect families and the surrounding community based on the belief that building and deepening trust through partnerships is essential to promoting student success. This increased trust and engagement helps produce other conditions that are associated with good schools by supporting an improved learning environment for students and helping to repair long-standing disconnects between urban schools, children, and families. Additionally, as teachers understand the communities in which their students live, they are better able to provide relevant instruction and support.

## Family and Community Engagement Meets the ESSA Evidence Standards

Researchers have, for decades, examined the role that family and community engagement plays in student success. Rigorous reviews of this vast literature provide helpful insights into the quality of the research and the trustworthiness of its reported outcomes. For example, a review included 51 studies of parent and community engagement. Among these, five studies meet the ESSA methodological criteria for Tier 1, employing experimental designs using random assignment to treatment and control groups, three are quasi-experimental designs with well-matched comparison groups (Tier 2), 24 use correlational methods or pre-experimental approaches with controls (Tier 3), and 19 are qualitative studies using sound theory and objective observation (Tier 4).<sup>54</sup> Based on this body of research, the authors found:

a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits

for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages. Although there is less research on the effects of community involvement, it also suggests benefits for schools, families, and students, including improved achievement and behavior.<sup>55</sup>

A series of statistical meta-analyses also found significant relationships between parental involvement and better outcomes for students across racial backgrounds, with effect sizes ranging from 0.2 to 0.75 standard deviations. For example, a 2017 meta-analysis which found that overall parental involvement was associated with better school outcomes by 0.52 standard deviation units for Latino students is of particular interest in that it included only studies using sophisticated controls. One study of longitudinal survey and academic data found mixed results from different forms of parent engagement, concluding that regular and consistent communication about the importance of education is the best way for parents to improve their children's academic trajectory.<sup>56</sup>

Comprehensive studies of family engagement in the context of community schools have also found positive effects. In a study of Redwood City community schools, researchers used statistical controls for student characteristics to estimate effects of participation on student success over multiple years. Accounting for different starting points between participants and nonparticipants, and controlling for school-level effects and students' preexisting attitudes about school or learning (Tier 3), the study found significantly larger gains on state-mandated mathematics tests for students whose parents participated in family engagement programs for two to three years.<sup>57</sup> They also found links between family engagement and gains in English Language Development scores for English Language Learners.<sup>58</sup> Students whose families participated in support services improved their attendance by 40%. Furthermore, participating students were significantly more likely to report a high sense of care when compared to non-participating students.<sup>59</sup> Those whose families were engaged were more likely to report that their school provided a supportive environment.

*There is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement.*

Similarly, engagement of community members and organizations appears to be positively associated with improved student attendance and academic outcomes. For example, a Tier 3 study compared student outcomes in three schools implementing the Community for Learning program, a comprehensive school change strategy including deep con-

nections with family and community, to student outcomes in a set of comparison schools and classrooms. The authors found significant positive relationships between the intervention and student achievement, attendance, and student perceptions of the learning environment. Notably, fewer students were in the bottom 20 percent in reading and math standardized test scores, and more scored in the top 20 percent. The researchers conclude that education reforms in communities of concentrated poverty must include broad-based coherent approaches to include family, school, and community resources.<sup>60</sup>



## Collaborative Leadership and Practices

Collaborative leadership results from processes whereby parents, students, teachers, and principals with different areas of expertise work together, sharing decisions and responsibilities toward a shared vision or outcome. While collaboration is important in all schools, it is particularly vital for the many stakeholders contributing to community schools.

Collaborative leadership “emphasizes governance structures and processes that foster shared commitment to achieving school improvement goals, broad participation and collaboration in decision-making, and shared accountability for student learning outcomes.”<sup>61</sup> Key areas for collaborative leadership include meaningful mechanisms for parent and community engagement, teacher participation in decision-making and professional learning communities, a collaborative dynamic between principals and community school directors, partnerships with community organizations, and district-level cooperative goal-setting.

Collaborative decision-making between school leaders and faculty has been found to strengthen school practices and teacher retention, and collaboration among teachers has been found to foster greater learning and effectiveness for teachers and stronger achievement for students.<sup>62</sup> In community schools, collaborative relationships and practices are important at the school, community, and district levels. Many have a staff member dedicated to ensuring coordination and collaboration.

## Collaborative Leadership and Practices Meets the ESSA Evidence Standards

Researchers have studied the impact of collaborative forms of leadership and practices on school improvement and student achievement for decades, with findings suggesting that collaboration in schools improves instruction and student learning. While more rigorous empirical research could strengthen claims about the mechanisms that make collaborative leadership effective, several recent reviews of empirical literature suggest that collaborative leadership impacts growth in student learning by increasing the capacity within a school for academic improvement.<sup>63</sup> One series of longitudinal panel time-series design studies (Tier 2) found that collaborative leadership impacted the school’s capacity for academic improvement significantly, and that, in turn, the capacity for improvement led to significant growth in student learning.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, a synthesis of peer-reviewed empirical research on school leadership found that collaborative school cultures are “central to school improvement, the development of professional learning communities and the improvement of student learning.”<sup>65</sup> A meta-analysis of 22 peer-reviewed cross-sectional studies (Tier 3) looked at the impact of leadership practices on a variety of student outcomes. Nearly all included controls for student background characteristics. They found that collaborative goal setting has indirect effects on students by focusing and coordinating the work of teachers and parents.<sup>66</sup> Many studies demonstrated that relationships among principals and teachers were key to the goal-setting process and expectations, and that staff consensus about goals significantly differentiated high and low-performing schools.<sup>67</sup>

Collaborative and collegial learning environments, particularly those that develop communities of practice, promote school improvement beyond individual school classrooms.<sup>68</sup> A recent review of ESSA Tiers 1 through 4 literature found that teacher satisfaction is related to the amount of voice they have in decision-making about issues related to their job performance.<sup>69</sup> For example, in a survey with more than 2,000 current and former teachers, respondents cited the opportunity to participate in school decision-making and the quality of relationships among the staff as the most important factors influencing why they chose to stay.<sup>70</sup> Overall, the review found that schools received numerous benefits from creating the conditions necessary for productive working relationships, including supporting shared decision-making, expanding roles for teachers, allowing time for teacher collaboration, and nurturing a sense of collective responsibility, trust, and respect. These benefits include improvements in consistency in instruction, willingness to share practices and try new ways of teaching, solving problems of practice, job satisfaction, and student achievement.<sup>71</sup>

Teacher collaborative learning can help improve instruction and is a key characteristic of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).<sup>72</sup> A review of research on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and student learning found that collaborative efforts include strategies that encourage sharing, reflecting, and taking risks, and that effective PLCs included both collaborative activity and transparency of practices.<sup>73</sup> The most comprehensive study reviewed included survey data from 393 schools and interviews from 16 schools (Tier 3), finding a positive impact on teaching practice and morale as a result of participation in collaborative activities.<sup>74</sup> As Andy Hargreaves points out:

Professional learning communities lead to strong and measurable improvements in students' learning. Instead of bringing about 'quick fixes' or superficial change, they create and support sustainable improvements that last over time because they build professional skill and the capacity to keep the school progressing. Teacher leadership has been shown to be centrally important in achieving both school and classroom improvement.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, a study of school improvement supports used longitudinal data from a Chicago reform.<sup>76</sup> The researchers found that shared leadership among teachers and principals can improve relationships and build a professional community in which teachers encourage each other to improve instructional practice, which in turn improves student achievement. Schools that were strong in five essential supports (including leadership, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and ambitious instruction) were at least ten times more likely than schools weak in most of the supports to show substantial gains in both reading and mathematics. This points to the importance of fully implementing all of the pillars in order to see changes in student achievement. Increases in collective trust may help to explain these outcomes. In Tulsa, more complete implementation of a comprehensive community schools strategy was related to students' sense of collective trust in the school, which was in turn associated with improved academic achievement.<sup>77</sup>

Promising case studies also suggest that collaborative relationships in community schools benefit students, families, and communities.<sup>78</sup> For example, a case study highlighted how leaders in community schools influence organizational processes and structures that in turn

influence student outcomes. The author explained that the relationship “between leadership, collaborative partners, and organizational development build on each other over time, producing, in a best-case scenario, a sustainable successful institution.”<sup>79</sup>

## Discussion: Community Schools in ESSA Plans

There is a sufficient research base—studies of community schools as a comprehensive strategy as well as studies of its various components—to satisfy the ESSA evidence-based standard. Although the evidence base about community schools includes relatively few Tier 1 studies, which require random assignment and are difficult to conduct in education, much Tier 2 and Tier 3 research is thoughtfully designed and presents a positive picture, particularly regarding longer term effects. A number of quasi-experimental Tier 2 evaluations have found positive achievement, attendance, behavioral, and attitudinal outcomes, such as more trusting and positive peer and adult relationships, for students participating in community school programs. Others find positive outcomes associated with integrated student supports, expanded learning time/opportunities, active parent and community engagement, and collaborative practices. In sum, under the ESSA evidentiary standards, federal funding could be used to support each of the pillars, alone or in combination, as well as interventions under the “community schools” umbrella.<sup>80</sup>

Of note, community schools hold promise for closing well-documented racial and economic achievement gaps, in that most of these schools are serving students of color and low-income students. Because community schools foster supportive relationships, they may well promote social capital development, which, in turn, may play an important role in community schools’ success in closing gaps. Social capital doesn’t alleviate the harms of poverty directly, but strong relationships with others enable people to access resources they need and can leverage more resources for whole communities. Schools serving low-income areas can help foster increased social capital through genuine community partnerships and a shared sense of responsibility.<sup>81</sup>

*Community schools hold promise for closing well-documented racial and economic achievement gaps.*

community schools strategy appears to play an essential role in achieving these positive outcomes, as does exposure to services. Generally speaking, the longer and more effectively a community school has been operating, and the more services a student receives, the better the outcome.

The evidence shows that a wide variety of community school approaches, ranging from national models focused on case management to comprehensive, community-driven initiatives, can produce positive student outcomes. Importantly, implementation of

Although there is ample evidence to satisfy ESSA’s criteria for “evidence-based” approaches, there is more to be learned about the impact of community schools on students, families, and communities, and the conditions under which the most positive impact can be achieved. The evidence base could be stronger and more useful if additional studies used mixed meth-

ods allowing for causal findings through statistical analysis, paired with qualitative analyses to explain how the results are obtained. The latter approach would illuminate the critical role of implementation processes and exposure to services. The evidence base would also benefit from increased attention to cost-benefit analyses. Initial results from four separate studies indicate a positive return on investment of approximately \$10 to \$15 for every dollar invested. These returns derive from improvements in education, employment, and health outcomes, and reductions in crime and welfare.

## Recommendations

We conclude from our review that the evidence base about well-implemented community schools and their component parts provide a strong warrant about their potential contribution to school improvement. There is sufficient evidence that meets ESSA’s criteria for “evidence-based” approaches to include community schools as part of targeted and comprehensive interventions to support transformation in high-poverty schools. This evidence also supports community schools as an approach that is appropriate for broader use.

Policymakers who want to incorporate a community schools strategy into their ESSA state plans—as well as other plans for state and local school improvements—can benefit from the following research-based lessons. To achieve well-implemented programs and successful results, it is recommended that they:

- Take a comprehensive approach to community schools: All four pillars— integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices—matter; moreover, they appear to reinforce each other. To ensure a good outcome, pay attention to both the technical and the cultural dimensions of a community school. For example, plan not simply for a longer school day, but also for effective use of time gained. Certified teachers are best positioned to provide additional academic instruction, while community partners can engage students in experiential learning opportunities that connect to the community and foster significant relationships with adults. The work is best accomplished when school and community representatives plan and work together, building a school culture that is collaborative and collegial.
- Recognize that successful community schools do not all look alike. Develop a plan that operationalizes the four pillars in ways that address local assets and needs, keeping in mind that the context of schools and communities may change over time. Therefore, as events unfold, be prepared to modify the original implementation rather than avoiding programmatic change. As ESSA suggests, use data in an ongoing process of continuous program evaluation and improvement.
- Provide sufficient planning time to build trusting relationships between the school and an array of service providers as well as parents and staff, being mindful that such collaboration is key to full implementation.

- Involve community, parents, and young people as part of the needs assessment, design, planning and implementation processes. ESSA requires it, and, in the case of community schools, such collaborative relationships are part of what will make the strategy successful.
- Use evaluation strategies that provide information not only about progress toward hoped-for outcomes, but also about implementation and exposure to services. Be aware that outcomes are likely to span multiple domains—achievement, attendance, behavior, relationships, and attitudes—and are likely to take time to be fully realized. Certain outcomes, like attendance, are likely to be achieved before other outcomes, like achievement. Use data for continuous program refinement, while allowing sufficient time for the strategy to fully mature.
- Encourage and support researchers, allowing them to conduct more rigorous studies using methods that will enable a stronger understanding of community schools' effectiveness, and yield greater insight into the conditions under which they work well. Because this approach is frequently adopted as a turnaround strategy in underperforming schools, current evidence consists largely of program evaluations that assess student- and school-level progress. Additional research should seek to guide implementation and refinement.

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