



# Technical Assistance for Community Schools

## *Enabling Strong Implementation*

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### Abstract

A growing number of states are launching community school initiatives to ensure family and community engagement, provide enriched and expanded learning, and offer integrated supports for students. Several states are providing technical assistance to support the high-quality implementation of community schools, either through the state education agency or regional and local partners. This brief offers examples from the National Center for Community Schools and from New York, New Mexico, and California showing how technical assistance can build capacity through consultation, training, coaching, and knowledge building.

These examples indicate the ways that states are designing technical assistance (TA) systems to support practitioners, the value of providing differentiated TA supports, and the impact of cross-sector partnerships on TA provision.

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Across the United States, a number of states have invested in community schools as a strategy to address long-standing social inequities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Community schools<sup>2</sup> are intended to repair the fragmented, bureaucratic, social services gauntlet that families in need must often navigate with a student-focused approach that organizes resources from community partners where they can be most easily accessed: in school. In community schools, students and families are engaged as partners in the educational process. Among the states that have funded community schools, Illinois set aside \$100 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding support, while Vermont used \$3.4 million in American Rescue Plan Act ESSER funds to establish a community schools pilot grant program.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the California Community Schools Partnership Program offers more than \$4 billion in funding and support for planning and implementation grants.<sup>4</sup> Other states invested in community schools prior to the pandemic through competitive grant programs (e.g., New Mexico), school funding formula additions (e.g., Maryland and New York), or certification programs for community schools (e.g., Georgia).<sup>5</sup>

An important element for states to consider when investing in community schools is the provision of technical assistance (TA), which can play a key role in supporting high-quality implementation at the local education agency and school levels.<sup>6</sup> This brief documents insights from a national TA provider with expertise in community schools as well as lessons learned from state-funded TA for community schools in New York, New Mexico, and California. Based on interviews with leaders from the featured organizations and initiatives—as well as a review of public presentation materials and relevant documents—the brief concludes with a discussion of implications for states and other entities interested in providing TA when investing in community schools.

## National Center for Community Schools: A Multistate Perspective

The National Center for Community Schools (NCCS), housed at Children’s Aid in New York City, is one of the longest-standing TA providers for community schools in the country.<sup>7</sup> Children’s Aid has supported young people and families as a nonprofit service provider for over a century and co-operates 19 well-established community schools in New York City. NCCS was founded in 1994 to distill lessons learned and work with initiatives in many states to build capacity to start up, sustain, and scale community schools.

NCCS sees capacity building through TA as an important lever for helping community schools to achieve the desired outcomes for students’ academic and life success. NCCS uses a definition of TA that draws on prior work in the field—building local capacities to organize communities of action, facilitating connections to power, and providing tools and skills for advancing effective strategies.<sup>8</sup> According to this definition, the most effective approach to TA is one that is learner-centered; honors the local context; and includes learning opportunities that are frequent, accessible, and practice-based. In other words, TA is more than just knowledge transfer.

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According to NCCS, community school implementation is a developmental process that requires multiple types of support. For example, NCCS offers:

- **Consultation:** This includes conducting an initial assessment and developing a plan that is fluid and can shift over time in response to changes in local context. For example, consultation might involve meeting with community school stakeholders and helping them to develop an implementation plan for their initiative, which then is refined over time in response to data and community feedback.
- **Training and tools:** This includes opportunities for skill building and knowledge transfer, such as how to conduct an inclusive assets and needs assessment or what the role of a community school coordinator involves. This also includes providing templates to assist with implementing these strategies.
- **Coaching:** This includes direct support on implementation challenges, such as one-on-one meetings with initiative and school leaders to help them more effectively partner with students, families, school staff, and community members.
- **Knowledge building for the field:** This includes learning opportunities such as conferences, communities of practice that span different locales, publications, and study visits to school sites. These learning opportunities are often differentiated by level of experience. For example, a team that is just starting out might visit a well-established community school to see what is possible, while a team that is further along might join a community of practice to talk with colleagues who are at a similar stage of implementation.

Many of these strategies are reflected in the specific state examples that follow—both through direct collaboration between NCCS and the featured states and through general philosophical alignment.

## New York: State Funding for Regional TA Centers

New York state has developed a robust infrastructure to support the development and sustainability of community school initiatives, in part through dollars set aside in the state's school funding formula dating back to 2017.<sup>9</sup> These dollars can be used to transform school buildings into community hubs to deliver co-located or school-linked academic, health, mental health, and other services to students and families; hire a community school site coordinator; and provide opportunities such as after-school or dual language programming.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, New York appropriated \$250 million to support high-need districts through community schools, with another \$250 million appropriated in 2021 and again in 2022.<sup>11</sup> This funding builds on a prior state investment in competitive 3-year grants for community schools.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, through a 5-year contract starting in 2018 (approximately \$5 million in total), the state has funded three regional Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (CSTACs).<sup>13</sup> These centers were created for the sole purpose of supporting community schools in the state, and they report directly to the New York State Education Department.

In November 2017, New York state issued a request for proposals for CSTACs covering three regions in the state: (1) New York City (serving over 1 million students in conjunction with the New York City Department of Education Community Schools Office), (2) the Eastern Region (serving over 980,000 students), and (3) the Central/Western Region (serving over 620,000 students).<sup>14</sup> Eligibility was limited to nonprofit entities with expertise in implementing community school strategies and providing TA. The contract period was 5 years, with funding of up to \$400,000 available per year for each regional center. Each CSTAC was required to have a full-time director and one to two full-time professional program staff, with a work plan that included:

- ongoing TA to schools via phone, email, videoconference, and in-person site visits;
- relevant, research-based professional development for school district personnel and community partners (at least four full-day, in-person sessions in each region, plus at least four community of practice meetings and at least two webinars in each region);
- a statewide website and e-newsletter collaboratively maintained by the three CSTACs; and
- regular collaboration (monthly conference calls and quarterly in-person meetings) with the New York State Education Department to ensure that CSTAC activities are complementary and aligned with state goals.

For example, the Central/Western CSTAC is based at Binghamton University and serves a region with over 300 school districts. This includes large urban districts like Buffalo and Rochester as well as smaller suburban and rural districts. The Central/Western CSTAC supports all districts within the region upon request, regardless of whether the district receives state funding for community schools. The mission is to develop and support sustainable approaches to community school implementation by meeting every district where they are. Similar to the multilayered strategy employed by NCCS, the Central/Western CSTAC offers support at several different levels:

- **“50,000-foot” level:** This foundational tier of TA includes virtual support through the collaborative website operated by all three CSTACs, such as “on demand” virtual professional learning recordings as well as a monthly e-newsletter highlighting promising practices and new resources for districts.

- **“30,000-foot” level:** This includes active participation in regional advisory groups as well as targeted presentations for interested stakeholders on topics such as family engagement, strengthening cross-sector partnerships, and university-assisted community schools. This also includes regional gatherings to help districts connect and build capacity around key priority areas related to community school implementation, accompanied by a weekly email follow-up. Support at this level may also involve working with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, which are regional education agencies that partner with groups of districts to provide support. These boards can work with the New York State Education Department to create cooperative services agreements that provide regional support around specific topics or initiatives, such as community schools. For example, the Rockland Board of Cooperative Educational Services has established a community schools agreement that helps to organize academic, social, emotional, medical, and dental resources for districts and schools within the region it supports.<sup>15</sup> These resources include a family resource and referral center (supported by Rockland 21C, a nonprofit organization that also serves as the Eastern CSTAC), a medical director to support implementation of school health services, mental and behavioral health services to strengthen students’ social and emotional health, and early literacy supports for children and families.
- **“Boots on the ground” level:** This is targeted TA that is relational in nature and ties into existing district priorities and initiatives, such as trauma-informed practices, family engagement, or integrated student supports. This TA is responsive to the context of each district and focuses on identifying current strengths and areas for growth. The goal is to help districts become more effective and efficient with what they are already doing, which can include conducting an initiative inventory to assess student and family access to tiered services (using an expanded multi-tiered systems of support framework), along with community and county partnerships, as well as celebrating areas of success. A focus on systems, data practices, and strategic planning is central to this work.

## **New Mexico: Tiered Support From the State Education Agency and Local Providers**

The New Mexico state government has funded community schools since 2019, when the legislature appropriated \$2 million for grants to be administered by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED) per the Community Schools Act.<sup>16</sup> Since then, NM PED has leveraged state and federal funding to provide 50 grants—totaling \$6.6 million in funding for the 2021–22 school year.<sup>17</sup> The 2022 legislative session brought another increase, with \$8 million appropriated to support community schools across the state.<sup>18</sup> There are currently 101 community schools across New Mexico, 54 of which receive NM PED grant funding. Some of these state investments are bolstered by local joint powers agreements established just between cities, counties, and districts (or just cities and districts) to support community schools, such as in Albuquerque and Las Cruces.

The NM PED has rolled out the state grant funding with support from its Community Schools and Extended Learning Bureau, as well as the New Mexico Coalition for Community Schools—a statewide partnership that includes local community content experts, culturally responsive content experts, and tribal leaders, among others.

New Mexico’s community school framework includes four evidence-based features, or pillars, of community schools: (1) integrated student supports, (2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, (3) active family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership and practices.<sup>19</sup> Less than a year after the community schools funding was enacted, schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, NM PED worked with the WestEd Region 13 Comprehensive Center to administer a grantee survey about supports needed to sustain the grantees’ work. In response to the survey, NM PED worked with the New Mexico Coalition for Community Schools to develop a system of supports that included convening community school leaders through a community of practice and providing “just-in-time” supports for individual sites or groups of sites.

Similar to the different levels, or “altitudes,” of support available in New York, New Mexico has established a tiered approach to supporting all community school practitioners in the state upon request (regardless of whether they receive NM PED grant funding):

- **Tier 1 supports:** These baseline supports are widely available and include relevant activities and resources that support the growth and promotion of New Mexico’s community school strategy, such as a statewide newsletter and research studies and briefs. This tier also includes learning opportunities, such as meetings with community school coordinators, and collaboration with other organizations that support community school implementation within the state, such as the National Education Association, Communities In Schools, and the ABC Community Schools Partnership.
- **Tier 2 supports:** These supports include convenings and a community of practice. The community of practice is based on the Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) model, which is inspired by the way clinicians learn from medical rounds during residencies and can be applied across different disciplines, including education.<sup>20</sup> The model brings together a virtual community through which participants can learn by presenting real (anonymized) “cases” to specialists—and each other—for discussion and recommendations. This can create a continuous loop of learning, mentoring, and peer support. In the New Mexico ECHO for Community Schools model, participation in the community of practice is required of all community school grantees, while other community school practitioners can choose to opt in. At these sessions, community school coordinators, principals, teachers, and community members come together to form virtual leadership teams. The teams seek to increase their expertise on collaborative leadership and practices. In addition, all community school practitioners have access to a virtual resource library that contains the recorded ECHO sessions, tools, and reference materials.
- **Tier 3 supports:** This is the most intensive level of support, available to planning or first-year implementation grantees and those that have unique or new challenges. The support is responsive to the specific context of each grantee and involves individualized training and coaching for school sites (individual or multi-role school-level teams) provided by NM PED as well as other partner organizations (e.g., ABC Community Schools Partnership, NEA Community School Institute).

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In the future, NM PED staff would like to add individualized coaching and technical assistance that includes on-site visits and targeted problem-solving; support for sustainability strategies, resources, and partnerships; micro-credentials for community school leaders (e.g., principals and community school coordinators); and coaching on continuous improvement cycles using a results-based accountability framework to improve the effectiveness of the community school strategy in New Mexico. An evaluation component is also an important element of this work. For example, in November 2021, NM PED was a recipient of the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative, which supports U.S. state and local leaders in using randomized evaluations to generate new and widely applicable lessons about which programs work, which work best, and why. New Mexico's evaluation will take place as part of the state's community schools initiative.

In addition to the tiered system of support offered by NM PED, local community school initiatives add an additional layer of TA. For example, the ABC Community Schools Partnership (ABC) in Albuquerque predates the state grant program and supports a network of 56 community schools.<sup>21</sup> ABC is a local quasi-governmental organization created through a 2007 joint powers agreement to remove barriers and broker funding in support of schools. (See "How Joint Powers Agreements Can Support Community Schools.") ABC started funding community schools in 2010. Currently, 13 of the 56 community schools in the ABC network have state planning or implementation grants.

### **How Joint Powers Agreements Can Support Community Schools**

The ABC Community School Partnership (ABC) was created through a joint powers agreement (JPA) in 2007. The JPA includes the city of Albuquerque, Bernalillo County, and Albuquerque Public Schools. Other board members include representatives from the University of New Mexico, the Hispano Chamber of Commerce, United Way of Central New Mexico, the Albuquerque Teachers Federation, and the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions. This agreement makes ABC a quasi-governmental organization, meaning that it is housed with the county (with the executive director jointly funded by the city, county, and district) and follows all county rules. ABC uses a foundation as a fiscal sponsor, dating back to a time before it was formally housed with the county.

There are several advantages to this JPA structure, according to the leaders of ABC. First, the JPA enables easier decision-making, as ABC and its board have some autonomy to pass resolutions that allow for quicker action than might be possible for a single department within a government agency. More importantly though, is having the city, county, and school district formally agree to work together through the JPA. This commitment makes it hard for any one entity to walk away (for example, if there are leadership changes) and keeps a balance of power between the three entities. The JPA also brings six elected officials and three agency heads to the table with a formal commitment to "developing community schools," allowing for coordinated decision-making to remove barriers and realign funding in support of community schools in Bernalillo County.

An example of the innovative work that ABC has taken up—in addition to the TA efforts described here—is a return-on-investment case study of a community school coordinator. This research was a collaboration between ABC and Apex (an evaluation partner) that examined retrospective data from a 5-year period. The research team closely tracked the costs (e.g., salary, benefits, professional development, and stipends) and benefits (e.g., grant dollars, volunteer hours, professional time, in-kind programs and services, and physical donations of materials and supplies) accrued by a community school coordinator on behalf of an ABC elementary school during this period. For every dollar invested in this coordinator, the research team found a return of approximately \$7 in net benefits.

Source: Bloodworth, M., & Horner, A. (2019). *Return on investment of a community school coordinator: A case study*. Apex. [https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI\\_Coordinator.pdf](https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf) (accessed 05/31/22).

Since 2014, ABC has provided formal TA to help onboard new community school coordinators. These supports included weeklong institutes and in-person boot camps pre-pandemic, when there were 15 community schools in the network. As the network grew, ABC found a need to offer differentiated levels of support—similar to the state-funded examples from New Mexico and New York. ABC has established tiered cohorts based on years of experience with community school implementation.

The least experienced schools (with principals and community school coordinators who are new to the work) receive the most intensive coaching and support. Currently, there are 18 schools in this cohort. The community school coordinators from this cohort meet weekly in a virtual format for 1.5 hours of professional development, leadership guidance, and book studies. ABC also created a “Coordinator Legal Academy” that brings lawyers and law professors together with coordinators to discuss topics such as landlord–tenant laws, special education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Indian law (especially the New Mexico Indian Family Protection Act), and kinship guardianship. The coordinators can also access support through a Google site and one-on-one check-ins with ABC staff, available upon request.

The full network also comes together for a monthly virtual convening focused on best practices, such as using results-based accountability, facilitating community school council meetings, and gathering and reviewing data—as well as topics nominated by coordinators. ABC schools also have access to the state supports described above. Regardless of the funding source, all ABC schools go through the same planning process in which they identify existing and potential partners and form a site-based leadership team, design and carry out a comprehensive needs and assets assessment, and create an implementation plan grounded in needs assessment and administrative data. For the 2022–23 school year, ABC plans to conduct intensive training and support on measuring the outcomes and impact of the implementation plan. Coordinators will learn how to measure effort and effect using a results-based accountability framework.

## **California: An Emerging “Hub and Spoke” Approach to TA**

California has recently invested over \$4 billion in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), which supports both planning and implementation grants for local education agencies (LEAs).<sup>22</sup> Planning grants of up to \$200,000 per LEA are awarded for a 1- to 2-year period, while implementation grants ranging from \$150,000 to \$500,000 per school are awarded on an annual basis for 5 years. Implementation funding depends on the size of each school, with high-poverty schools (those with greater than 80% high-need students) prioritized for support.<sup>23</sup>

As part of this investment, the legislation provides a \$141.8 million set-aside for regional TA centers that will be awarded to LEAs, with prioritization for those that partner with nonprofit community-based organizations or institutions of higher education.<sup>24</sup> These TA centers will support grant recipients seeking to establish or expand community schools. The support offered will address a variety of topics, including comprehensive school and community needs and assets assessments, authentic family and community engagement, community partnerships, sustainable funding sources (including accessing and combining funding from multiple revenue sources), and coordinated services across child-serving agencies and schools.

As this brief goes to publication, TA is just getting underway in California. The California Department of Education has selected a statewide lead TA center to design content, develop delivery models, and

organize the regional TA centers throughout the state. Specifically, the lead TA center will be responsible for building an overarching methodology for CCSPP TA that aligns with the existing statewide system of support, creating a developmental rubric to articulate community school implementation benchmarks, facilitating a community of practice among the regional TA centers, coordinating and maximizing the areas of expertise among the regional TA centers, and supporting the state to collect data and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the CCSPP.<sup>25</sup> The Alameda County Office of Education will partner with the UCLA Center for Community Schooling and UCLA Center X, Californians for Justice, and the National Education Association on this effort. Regional TA centers will soon be selected, and they will be responsible for providing professional development, models of practice, coaching, and related supports to LEAs and schools.<sup>26</sup>

The California Department of Education has developed a framework to support implementation of the CCSPP, including the provision of TA.<sup>27</sup> California’s framework emphasizes the importance of addressing teaching and learning in community school TA efforts as well as social and emotional learning, strong relationships, and restorative practices. It also describes the importance of integrating and aligning community school implementation with other relevant state investments, including multi-tiered systems of support. As CCSPP implementation progresses, it will be interesting to see how this framework is used across the state.

## Implications

Lessons learned from NCCS, as well as states like New York, New Mexico, and California that are building infrastructure for TA, can help to inform the efforts of states or other entities that are interested in providing TA to enable the strong implementation of community school investments.

**Community school implementation is a complex undertaking, and in response, states are designing TA systems to support practitioners.** Each of the states highlighted in this brief (New York, New Mexico, and California) is addressing the importance of TA as a strategy to build capacity and support strong implementation of state funding for community schools. In terms of delivery mechanisms, some states (including New York and New Mexico) have provided broad access to TA so that it is not restricted to grantees. Doing so can widen the reach of existing TA efforts. California has designated a lead TA provider (the “hub”) that is tasked with coordinating and supporting regional TA centers (the “spokes”) to provide direct on-the-ground TA to state-funded grantees. This capacity to help align efforts and to “train the trainers” could prove useful for offering high-quality TA that leverages the different areas of expertise that local providers contribute and is tailored to the local context. In terms of content, the TA providers identified common topics for support (e.g., conducting an inclusive assets and needs assessment, strengthening cross-sector partnerships, and establishing effective data practices). The TA providers also emphasized the need to draw from promising practices documented in research and observed in practice, as well as tailoring content to the specific contexts and requests of community school coordinators. Importantly, the TA efforts highlighted in this brief

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are still in the early stages. As implementation progresses, it will be necessary to gather feedback on the user experience to help identify the most relevant content and refine existing support structures.

**TA can be structured to provide differentiated supports depending on schools' needs and stages of development.** All the TA providers with existing efforts underway (NCCS, New York, and New Mexico) spoke to the value of providing tiered and/or differentiated supports to community school practitioners. Tiered supports may be available to all (e.g., virtual events that are free and open to anyone interested), some (e.g., invitation-only regional convenings), or just a few (e.g., intensive on-site and/or virtual coaching). Differentiation for practitioners may depend on their level of experience with community schools (e.g., new implementers vs. experienced implementers), their position within the school or district (e.g., community school coordinator, principal, district superintendent), and their local context (e.g., urban, suburban, or rural; tribal partnerships; high proportion of specific student populations). Providing this differentiated support can result in a satisfying experience for TA participants and improved implementation.

**Cross-sector partnerships strengthen TA provision by bringing different assets to the work.** The TA providers described in this brief represent several key stakeholder groups, including institutions of higher education, state education agencies, nonprofit organizations that offer TA, a local entity created through a joint powers agreement, and labor unions. TA efforts are strongest when they are collaborative in nature and allow different types of organizations to leverage their strengths and unique contexts. For example, nonprofits can sometimes function more nimbly than government agencies and have more flexibility to appropriate private funds. (A joint powers agreement, like in Albuquerque, may help to accomplish this.) In addition, community-based organizations can play an important role in building the capacity of districts to engage students, families, and community members. Institutions of higher education can access a wide range of institutional resources to support districts and schools. State education agencies have tremendous reach as well as the ability to connect with other relevant government agencies and initiatives. Regional service providers (like the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services in New York) can play an important role in connecting and supporting LEAs, as well as supporting cross-agency collaboration at the regional level. LEAs can also play an important role in supporting networks of community schools at the county and district levels. California's selection process for TA providers incentivizes partnerships between LEAs, nonprofit community-based organizations, and institutions of higher education.

## Conclusion

As the examples in this brief demonstrate, there are many ways in which states can provide TA—both directly and in collaboration with regional and local partners—to strengthen community school implementation and maximize state investments in community schools. Given the complex nature of this education intervention, states can and should think of TA as an essential element of funding community schools. As COVID-19 and recovery efforts continue to stress the public education system, it is more important than ever to support students, families, educators, and community members in working together to build high-quality community schools that are well equipped to educate and support the whole child.

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