Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports

"I think what makes us a community school is … acknowledging that the things that happen outside of our doors will also happen inside of our doors. … We have a responsibility to interact with the world outside of the campus, being not only a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but also looking to them as a resource, because we know that the best knowledge and the best practices that will help a community solve its issues are probably also in the community."

—Staff member at Social Justice Humanitas Academy[140]

What Students Need

The COVID-19 crisis only exacerbated the dramatic and growing economic inequality in our nation. More than half of public school students now live in low-income households, and these young people are living with the consequences of long-term disinvestment not only in our public schools but also in the social safety net, which used to provide more robust supports for struggling families. The more we know about brain development, the more we understand how much human beings need safe and nurturing environments and multiple supports for health and well-being to support development and learning. Unfortunately, with high levels of poverty, food and housing insecurity, lack of health care, and social violence, all too many young people today experience adverse conditions for development. These conditions produce high levels of continuous stress that undermine their ability to learn and grow in a healthy manner. If this stress is not addressed, and the situation causing the stress is not mitigated, it is much harder for students to succeed academically.

Schools cannot educate students effectively without attending to their other needs as well—including access to stable housing, healthy food, mental and physical health services, and the technology required for 21st-century learning. One important way to do this is by working in partnership with others in the community. Through trusting relationships and well-coordinated support, schools can ensure that students receive the health, social service, and learning opportunities they need to be successful. Evidence shows such structures can lead to improvements in students' attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation rates and to reduced racial and economic achievement gaps.[141]

> Through trusting relationships and well-coordinated support, schools can ensure that students receive the health, social service, and learning opportunities they need to be successful.

For a school to work with the community, its staff must know the community it serves—its multiple cultures; its families, youth-serving and other organizations, and social patterns; and the cultural and other strengths that exist and could be assets for the school. Connecting deeply with the community is only possible when school staff have developed relationships with community leaders that are rooted in mutual trust and accountability. When such relationships take root, the school can truly become a center of the community.

Key Practices

Knowledge of the Community

Building strong community relationships can take years. Retaining teachers and principals matters a great deal, as does recruiting educators from the community and actively seeking out leaders and organizations with whom to partner. Teachers and school leaders who come from the community are well positioned to build the necessary connections, and parents or extended family members of students can also be key bridge-builders in this process. Educators who come from other communities or backgrounds need to listen and learn with humility. Schools can then become places for the community to celebrate its strengths, both through cultural programs and partnerships with local community initiatives.

In Practice: Learning About and From the Community

Oakland International High School, a part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which serves immigrant students, has a long history of connections with the communities it serves. To ensure those ties keep growing, the school engages in annual **community walks**. These learning walks take most of a day and are led by students and parents from each of the community's major cultural and linguistic groups; the school's staff are the learners. Community walks often include a discussion of families' immigration experiences, followed by visits to key locations in the community (which could range from a corner where day laborers look for work to a cultural center or faith institution), and finishing with a meal either prepared by families or in a local restaurant. Students, parents, and community leaders share about their lives and cultures and educate the staff about what they need and want from the school.

Another example of learning from the community is the Native American Community Academy (NACA), a K–12 public school in Albuquerque, NM. Over 70% of NACA's students are Native American, and the school partners with local community leaders and groups to offer programs in which the academic classroom curriculum is combined with youth service to strengthen the community for the common good. The Cultural Service Learning Program, for example, is grounded in important **cultural practices** such as Horno oven building and repair, sheep shearing and wool preparation, weaving, drum making, pow wow instruction, and traditional clothing/regalia. And because language is so connected to culture, NACA teaches five Native American languages—Keres, Lakota, Navajo, Tiwa, and Zuni. Several of these languages are currently spoken by very few people, mostly older adults, and NACA's students, with the support of the school, play an important role in preserving the cultural wealth of their communities.

Sources: Safir, S. (2017, March 23). Community walks create bonds of understanding [Blog]. *Edutopia*; Bajaj, M. (2016). *Community walks: A day of learning for schools*. Learning for Justice; Native American Community Academy.

Community Schools

Community schools are rooted in our understanding of how people learn. In such schools, a community school coordinator works to orchestrate multiple community resources; community leaders and families become close partners of the school; and the staff is organized to ensure that students get access to resources they need.

The community schools framework was developed to describe such schools that serve as community hubs and partner with community organizations to educate the whole child. The framework builds on a synthesis of more than 140 studies that found that effective community schools that boost attendance, achievement, and attainment are guided by four key pillars: integrated student supports; family and community engagement; collaborative leadership and practices; and expanded learning time and opportunities.[142] Since the publication of the original research, two more dimensions have been added to communicate the ways that school climate and instruction should reinforce the goals of student support: culture of belonging , safety, and care and rigorous community-connected classroom instruction. (See Figure 11.)
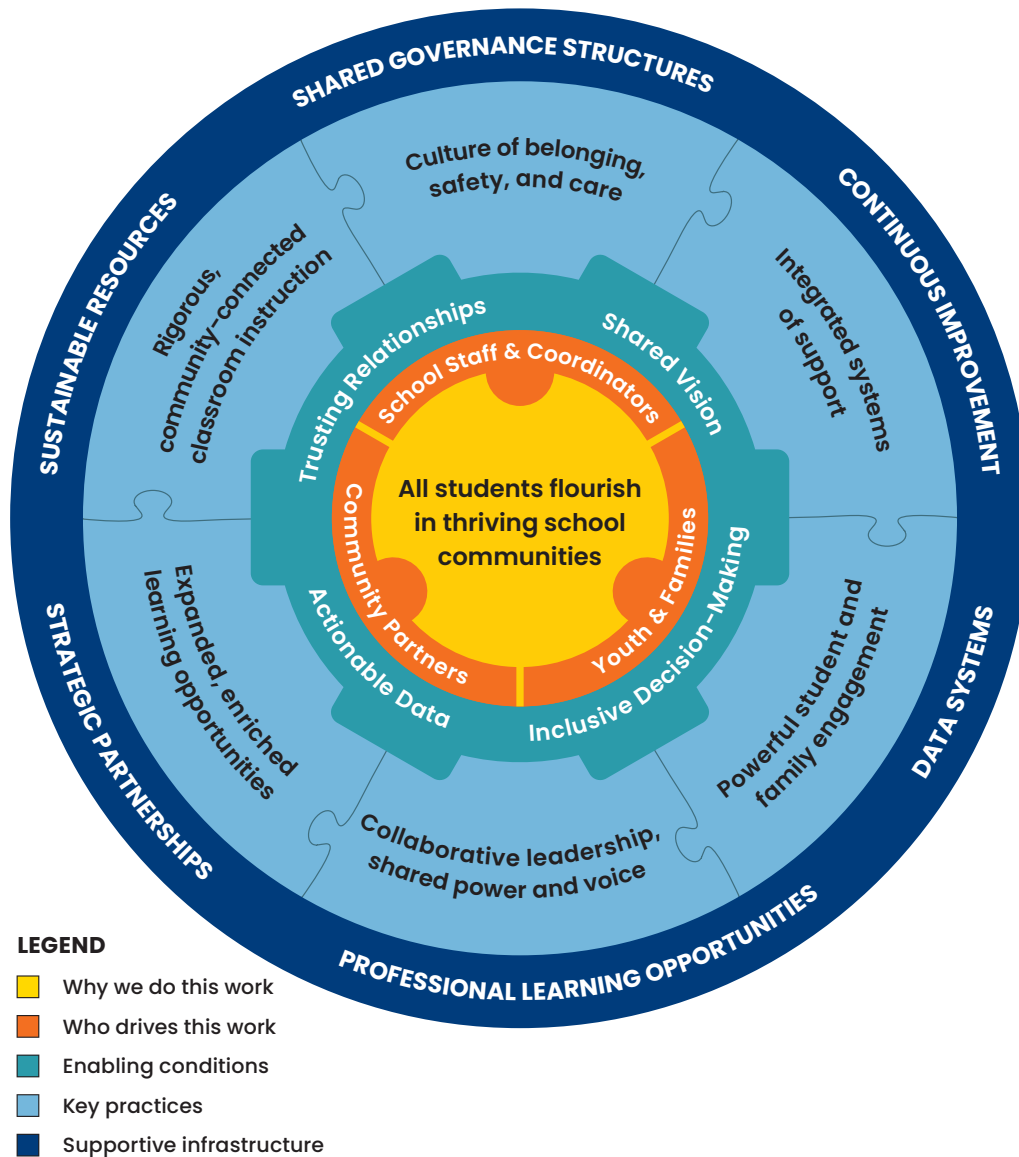
These elements can take different forms across community schools because each school designs its program to meet the needs of its students and families, using the community's assets as a starting point. In effective community schools, families, students, community leaders, and school staff collaborate on a comprehensive needs assessment, on design and planning of the program, and on its implementation.

A culture of belonging, **safety, and care** is developed in the ways we have described in this volume, through the use of structures for relationships, such as advisories and looping; explicit attention to social and emotional learning and restorative approaches; and a focus on culturally responsive and sustaining practices.

Integrated student supports, or wraparound services, bring together school-based and community-based resources to ensure that students receive the support they need to be able to learn, whether they need mental health services, physical health services, housing or food assistance for their family, or other supports. While many of these services are not provided by the school itself, the school becomes the resource hub, which allows students and families to receive services more efficiently (rather than navigating multiple bureaucracies on their own) and ensures that service providers and school staff can collaborate to support children, using a holistic, assets-based approach.

The supports provided in each community vary. When the Native American Community Academy in Albuquerque heard from its community that there was a need for wellness services provided through an Indigenous lens, the school developed a "Wellness Wheel" that students and staff could use to reflect on their own wellness practices in four areas—intellectual, physical, social-emotional, and community/relationship wellness—and then access services based on their needs. One of the school's most popular supports is the Eagle Room, a culturally based space where students, staff, or family members can engage in self-reflection, meditation, or prayer, either during or after school. The school also partners with the First Nations School-Based Health Center—which specializes in culturally competent health care for the Native American community—to offer on-campus physical health, mental health, and dental services to students, families, and staff, free of charge and with no copayment.[143]

Figure 11. Essentials for Community School Transformation

LEGEND
- 🟨 Why we do this work
- 🟧 Who drives this work
- 🟦 Enabling conditions
- 🟦 Key practices
- 🟦 Supportive infrastructure

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

In the Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, the RFK Community Schools campus houses six schools on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel, where Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1968. Because the schools serve many immigrant families, the UCLA School of Law runs a comprehensive immigration legal clinic on the campus, providing "know your rights" training and materials, legal consultations, and full legal representation. Leyda Garcia, principal of the UCLA Community School, explains that the presence of the legal clinic complements the school's curricular and other efforts to make students and families feel safe by honoring students' immigrant origins: "Our families know that we are looking out for them."[144] **Powerful student and family engagement** is accomplished through these kinds of focused services as well as the strategies for communication, involvement, and decision-making described in Feature 8: Authentic Family Engagement and Feature 10: Shared Decision-Making and Leadership.

Collaborative decision-making is a key aspect of successful partnerships. When these community partnerships are implemented effectively, people and organizations from across the community come together and learn together how best to support students and families so that students are healthier and learn more and the school feels like the heart of the community. UCLA Community School founding lead teacher Rosa Jimenez explains how the community schools approach dovetails with a student-centered pedagogy and other features of effective secondary schools, including shared decision-making:

> When these community partnerships are implemented effectively, people and organizations from across the community come together and learn together how best to support students and families so that students are healthier and learn more and the school feels like the heart of the community.

> The fundamental difference [between a traditional school and a community school] is a commitment to democratic practices. We are constantly trying to figure out how to make decisions and problem-solve in a way that includes as many voices as possible. We've tried to flip the school hierarchy on its head and move away from traditional ideas of how a student learns and how teachers should think about their work. It allows for a lot of collaboration and a lot of decision-making and problem-solving using real data. … We get to know our students and community and try to be responsive to those needs.[145]

Expanded and enriched learning time allows for students to pursue their academic interests on a deeper level or to receive additional academic support where they need it. Some schools collaborate with volunteer programs to secure tutors who can assist students with reading, writing, and math skills. Others use peer tutoring or faculty assistance to provide additional help to struggling students. Enrichment opportunities can include independent study or small group projects; activities like robotics or music or art; cultural clubs; college and career preparation activities; or community service and internships. All of these can be led by, or conducted in partnership with, community leaders and organizations. Some of the best mentors for young people do not work in schools, and the opportunity to learn from a community-based professional or nonprofit leader may be one of the most important experiences a young person has during high school.

Community schools not only address social-emotional and socioeconomic barriers to learning; they also build in time for accelerating and differentiating learning to meet individual students' needs. This can happen through one-on-one or small group tutoring or mentoring, or through supported homework time. This kind of expanded and enriched learning can happen in many configurations—elective periods during the school day, after-school programs, and summer programs, among others. Along with supports for engaging approaches to literacy and math learning, many community schools offer robust elective programs where students are encouraged to pursue different interests, from cooking to coding, from Dungeons and Dragons to disc golf. Rather than leaving such pursuits solely in the realm of student clubs, where only some students may access them, community schools create opportunities and expectations for all students to participate.

Community-connected learning is one outcome of this collaborative approach. This can take the form of projects in the community that support inquiry into community conditions and needs or that beautify or contribute to the community's assets. It can also take the form of experiential learning in the community, through internships, civic engagement, or service learning. When students see how the math, science, and social studies content they are learning connects to their community—and when their efforts can help improve the welfare of others—they both see the relevance of schoolwork and develop their own sense of personal and social responsibility.

In Practice: Community Schools and Linked Learning

As one way to be responsive to the needs of students and their communities, Oakland Unified School District adopted Linked Learning in all high schools as part of its districtwide community schools initiative. This resulted in the number of Oakland high school students in Linked Learning pathways going from 49% in 2014 to 88% in 2020.

Though the Linked Learning and community schools approaches are separate district initiatives, they share similar aims. Both prioritize incorporating authentic, community-based learning strategies; using integrated supports to mitigate out-of-school barriers to learning and to increase the relevance and rigor of curriculum and instruction; and leveraging the expertise of community interest holders to improve learning and workplace environments for students (see Feature 4: Deeper Learning Curriculum). Because of their shared aims, the Linked Learning and community school approaches can be implemented in integrative ways so that each approach supports and reinforces the other. For example, the development of Linked Learning pathways at Oakland High School restructured the school from a large, comprehensive high school into a group of small learning communities, each organized around a different career theme enacted with local industry and community partners. In-school curriculum and out-of-school internships are linked to these themes and settings, making learning more meaningful for students and more connected to the community. Furthermore, each of these small learning communities is directed by its own leadership team that includes a case manager and a counselor. These teams meet regularly to identify students who are facing challenges, making it difficult for students to fall through the cracks.

In this way, the Linked Learning pathways support the community schools approach by enabling staff to more effectively identify students in need of support and connect those students with school resources. Similarly, the infrastructure that supports the community schools approach in place at Oakland High School reinforces the success of the Linked Learning pathways. Since Oakland Unified School District began its districtwide community schools effort in 2011, suspension rates have dropped by more than half; graduation rates have increased significantly, especially for Black and Latino/a students; and performance on state tests has increased as well, including during the pandemic years, when most districts were experiencing declines. (See Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching for a description of the community-connected curriculum in Oakland High School's Environmental Science Linked Learning Pathway.)

Source: Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland's districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

In sum, community school designs augment efforts to design relationship-centered schools that support deeper learning with connections to community organizations and assets that can further engage families and community organizations, creating the village that is needed to raise each young person.

School Profile: Connecting With the Community at Mendez High School

Photo by Pablo Aguilar.

Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles serves more than 1,000 students, 97% Latino/a and 94% from low-income families. The school was founded in 2009 through a community organizing effort in response to overcrowding at nearby schools and has deep ties to the Boyle Heights neighborhood. Community leaders proposed naming the school after the Mendez family, the plaintiffs in a landmark 1946 school desegregation case in Southern California that helped pave the way for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision a decade later.

Mendez staff connect the school's history and name to its current vision of being a **community school**. Mendez's educational program is based around high expectations (including AP for all and computer science for all); an engaging, culturally relevant curriculum; smaller class sizes (27 students on average, versus 41—the average in nearby Los Angeles Unified School District schools); an emphasis on relationships; and support for high-quality educators (many of whom have also been Mendez parents). Mendez staff understand that they cannot prepare students effectively alone, and so the school works with more than 30 community partners in four priority areas: (1) health and wellness, (2) academic support and case management, (3) arts and enrichment, and
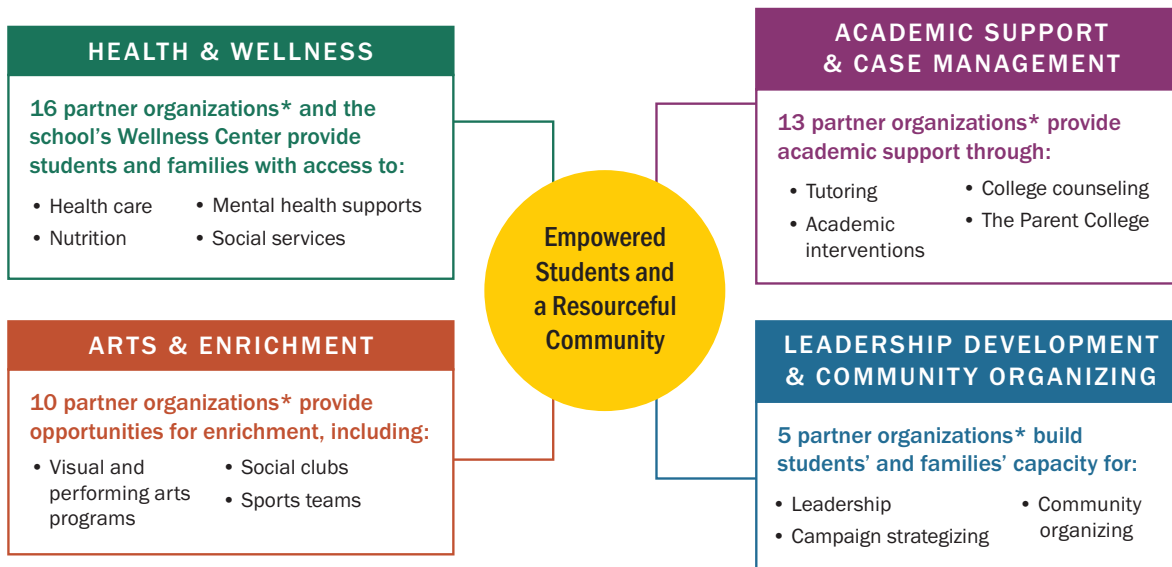
(4) leadership development and community organizing. Among the many organizations working with Mendez (see Figure 12), four are core partners whose staff work closely with the school's staff to support students and families:

- **Promesa Boyle Heights** is a collaborative of neighborhood organizations that provide Mendez students with academic case management, tutoring, and extracurricular clubs and classes ranging from Southeast Asian culture to fashion design and many others. Promesa also runs a *promatora* program through which community members learn health advocacy skills and do outreach to connect families with needed resources.

- The **Partnership for Los Angeles Schools** builds the capacity of Mendez staff through instructional coaching, strategic planning, and other leadership skills. The Partnership also supports Mendez's Parent Center and Parent College program, in which parents can learn to support their students and develop leadership skills. Finally, the Partnership helps Mendez conduct an annual needs assessment so staff can prioritize and ensure that both school- and community-based resources are meeting the needs of students and families.

- **Inner City Struggle** grew out of the Schools Not Jails youth movement in the 1990s in East Los Angeles and led the community organizing effort that resulted in the founding of Mendez. Now Inner City Struggle runs a leadership development program for students, and it still trains families and community members in community organizing—resulting recently in a successful campaign to build a neighborhood health and wellness center on the Mendez campus.

- **Communities In Schools of Los Angeles** provides case management for students and families by a licensed social worker, who identifies needs and provides referrals to services such as academic tutoring, counseling, and health and dental care. Sometimes individual interventions lead to changes in schoolwide practices: For example, Communities In Schools of Los Angeles staff began doing one-on-one check-ins with their 9th-grade clients near the end of the fall semester to see who needed academic support and suggested to Mendez staff that the practice be expanded so all students could access extra help quickly. Now every Mendez 9th-grader has three academic check-ins during the year with either a Mendez staff member or staff from a partner organization.

As the school's principal explains, these partnerships are reciprocal: "What happens in the school impacts the community, and what happens in the community impacts the school." Thus, the fact that Mendez has graduation and college-going rates of approximately 90%, and zero expulsions in the last decade, means that the surrounding Boyle Heights community is also a stronger place.

Figure 12. Partnerships and Priorities at Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School

Mendez cultivates deep and lasting relationships with its partners as part of its community school model. School staff leverage these partnerships to serve the school's goal to empower its students and support a resourceful community.

HEALTH & WELLNESS

16 partner organizations* and the school's Wellness Center provide students and families with access to:

- Health care
- Nutrition
- Mental health supports
- Social services

ARTS & ENRICHMENT

10 partner organizations* provide opportunities for enrichment, including:

- Visual and performing arts programs
- Social clubs
- Sports teams

Empowered Students and a Resourceful Community

ACADEMIC SUPPORT & CASE MANAGEMENT

13 partner organizations* provide academic support through:

- Tutoring
- Academic interventions
- College counseling
- The Parent College

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

5 partner organizations* build students' and families' capacity for:

- Leadership
- Campaign strategizing
- Community organizing

* Many partners provide services in multiple categories.

Source: Thompson, C. (2021). *Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School: A community school that honors its neighborhood's legacy of educational justice*. Learning Policy Institute.

Additional Resources

- A School Year Like No Other Demands a New Learning Day: A Blueprint for How Afterschool Programs & Community Partners Can Help, Afterschool Alliance: This blueprint offers building blocks for school–community partnerships to address equity and coconstruct the learning day in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action, National Center for Community Schools: This guide provides information on several topics related to implementing and sustaining community schools, including key elements of community schools, models of community schools across the country, and case studies.

- Coalition for Community Schools: This is an alliance of national, state, and local organizations in K–12 education, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government, and philanthropy. It offers a range of tools and resources that can help educational leaders to build and sustain community school models and initiatives in their area, including opportunities to connect with technical assistance providers that can help communities improve their planning and management.

- Community Schools Playbook, Partnership for the Future of Learning: This playbook provides model legislation, real-world examples, and many additional resources for state and local leaders who want to support community schools.

- The Community Schools Revolution, Martin Blank, Ira Harkavy, Jane Quinn, Lisa Villarreal, and David Goodman, Collaborative Communications Group: This free online book outlines the case for community schools, profiles six community schools and districts, and offers key lessons for community school efforts.

- Community Schools Toolkit, Partnership for the Future of Learning: This resource provides tools, curricula, and step-by-step guides for practitioners, community members, students, and families to use and adapt to co-create community schools in their unique settings.

- Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability, Partnership for the Future of Learning: This finance brief discusses community schools funding in depth. It provides a framework for financing community schools and examples of how community schools at varying stages of development can identify and implement financing strategies.

- Getting to Work on Summer Learning: Recommended Practices for Success, 2nd Edition, Heather L. Schwartz, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Catherine H. Augustine, Jennifer T. Leschitz, RAND Corporation: Based on thousands of hours of observations, interviews, and surveys, this report provides guidance for district leaders and their partners for launching, improving, and sustaining effective summer learning programs.

- Healthy Schools Campaign: The Healthy Schools Campaign aims to support schools in providing students with healthy environments, nutritious food, health services, and physical activity. HSC's resource center provides several tools that enable school districts, educators, and families to engage in this work, including advocacy guides and resources to incorporate health and wellness into schools.

- Leading With Purpose and Passion: A Guide for Community School Directors, National Center for Community Schools: This printed guide provides practical advice and concrete resources for community school directors, with an emphasis on their leadership role in schools.

- Rural Health Information Hub: The website contains a database of resources that can support practitioners who work in rural schools. Specifically, its resources can help leaders, educators, and other school-based personnel to build schools and systems that integrate services in ways that acknowledge and address the unique needs and infrastructure of rural communities.

- Scale a Community School: A System-Wide Strategy, Coalition for Community Schools: This interactive guide is intended to support communities in planning, implementing, and sustaining a community schools strategy.

- SEL in Communities, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: This web page provides a list of resources for starting, supporting, and strengthening family–school partnerships, from accessible blogs and videos to interviews with veteran researchers.

- Start a Community School, Coalition for Community Schools: This toolkit provides information on how to implement a community schools initiative and focuses on several topics, including vision and strategic planning, building a leadership team, needs and capacity assessments, sharing space and facilities, financing your community school, and research and evaluation.

- What Are Community Schools?, Partnership for the Future of Learning: This video describes the four key features of community schools, the importance of community school coordinators, and strategies for funding community schools.