Developing a Healthy School Climate in Community Schools

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted long-standing educational and social inequities and exposed the deep relationship between education, health, and community. Community schools are uniquely poised to address these inequities by organizing in- and out-of-school resources tailored to the needs and goals of students and families to create positive learning environments, prioritize student well-being and engagement, and turn schools into community hubs. As a result, community schools were able to respond to the needs of their community effectively and efficiently during the pandemic, which drew heightened attention toward the strategy. Researchers and policymakers are also increasingly recognizing community schools as an evidence-based strategy for improving a range of student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, engagement, and academic achievement.

Community schools are, in part, designed to provide services and resources to students and families as a means of mitigating or reducing external barriers to learning. However, without an intentional focus on a healthy, positive school climate, the strategy will not transform schools into places where all students flourish. A growing body of evidence indicates that the conditions within schools are vital and equally as important as external barriers to student learning and development.

To have the greatest impact on student outcomes, then, community schools must focus on mitigating both external barriers to learning (e.g., hunger, homelessness, and health challenges) and internal ones, especially those related to school climate. School climate is a term that captures the sense of belonging and the degree to which there is a healthy environment in a school. Students are best served by a school climate in which each and every child is known, seen, and supported by a healthy and interconnected web of students, teachers, families, and community members who are working toward a common vision and shared set of goals. To accomplish this, high-quality, transformational community schools must be structured to promote nurturing relationships among and between educators, community partners, families, and students who work together to foster the school conditions in which students are affirmed, feel a sense of belonging, and can be successful.

This report highlights areas that can help to develop a healthy climate in community schools. First, it defines healthy school climate and outlines five key dimensions: (1) safety, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (4) physical and social environment, and (5) school improvement process. Second, it describes why a healthy climate is key for promoting whole child education strategies like community schools. Third, it draws on research about community schools and the science of learning and development to highlight structures and practices that help promote a healthy climate. It also includes concrete illustrations of climate-oriented, high-leverage practices being implemented in existing community schools.

Community Schools

Community schools organize in- and out-of-school resources and supports such as mental health services, meals, health care, tutoring, internships, and other learning and career opportunities that are tailored to the needs and goals of students and families. This strategy brings educators, local community members, families, and students together to create positive learning environments, prioritize student well-being and engagement, and turn schools into community hubs. While programs and services vary according to local context, key site-level practices include: (1) expanded, enriched learning opportunities; (2) rigorous,

community-connected classroom instruction; (3) a culture of belonging, safety, and care; (4) integrated systems of support; (5) powerful student and family engagement; and (6) collaborative leadership, shared power and voice. A growing number of states are investing in community schools as a strategy to address long-standing social inequities that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, changing the landscape of community schools.

As community schools expand across the country, sustained attention should be paid to policies and practices that support effective implementation. That means schools should interrogate and reform practices that hinder students from reaching their full potential, such as harsh zero-tolerance discipline policies and teaching and learning that are disconnected from students' backgrounds and identities. Rather, schools should embrace structures and supports that are relationship centered, culturally sustaining, and community engaged. Because community schools aim to serve the whole child, the evidence from school climate and the science of learning and development research is deeply important to their implementation. Both elucidate the ways in which community schools can draw on a number of evidence-based structures and practices that build a healthy climate and align with the community schools strategy.

School Climate: What It Is and Why It Matters

Healthy school climates develop when there is shared responsibility for, and commitment to, ensuring everyone is safe, engaged, supported, and empowered. Healthy climates promote greater attachment to school and cultivate strong conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning. Research shows that healthy climates can increase school connectedness, academic achievement, social and emotional learning, and graduation rates, and reduce bullying. This is the case because, as new advances in the science of learning and development demonstrate, students' relationships, environments, and experiences are the primary determinants of learning and development. As more schools and districts adopt community schools as an improvement strategy, maintaining attention on a healthy climate is paramount.

Dimensions of School Climate and Related Structures and Practices

This report outlines five key dimensions that are part of healthy school climates and describes how they are aligned with community schools and can be implemented in that context.

1. **Safety.** A stable school environment in which all students feel physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe, cared for, and valued. Examples of structures and practices that promote school safety are codeveloped mission statements, classroom and schoolwide agreements, routines, consistent norms and expectations, community circles, and restorative practices.

2. **Interpersonal Relationships.** The school is designed to foster personalized, trusting relationships among and between students, educators, parents, and community members. Examples of structures and practices that promote strong relationships are affirmation walls, advisories, peer mentoring programs, empathy building, home visits and two-way communication with families, and culturally sustaining family engagement.

3. **Teaching and Learning.** The school develops educators to be coleaders who use their professional expertise to collaborate, plan, and implement high-quality cross-curricular instruction that includes authentic, collaborative, deeper learning opportunities and fosters students' curiosity, creativity, and willingness to take risks. Examples of structures and practices that support high-quality teaching and learning are teacher-led inquiry and professional learning, cross-grade and cross-subject collaboration and planning time, culturally sustaining pedagogy and curriculum, inquiry-based learning and performance-based assessments, and community-connected learning opportunities.

4. **Physical and Social Environment.** The physical space, surroundings, and resources of the school and the atmosphere of the building create a strong sense of community and signal that all members of the school community are valued and belong. Examples of structures and practices that support a welcoming physical and social environment are student and community initiatives (e.g., murals and community gardens), parent-led events and programs, student-led initiatives and projects, and shared decision-making.

5. **School Improvement Process.** School improvement is a communitywide effort in which students, parents, school personnel, and community partners work together, take on a shared responsibility for the operations of the school, and participate in collaborative decision-making in service of a codeveloped vision and goals for the school. Examples of structures and practices that support developing a quality school improvement process are collaborative, inclusive decision-making structures; assets and needs assessments; ongoing collection and analysis of actionable data; and processes for all stakeholders to participate in continuous improvement.

Introduction: Community Schools

Researchers and policymakers increasingly recognize community schools as an evidence-based strategy for improving a range of student outcomes.[1] Community schools are a whole child and whole school strategy that aims to transform schools into a place where educators, local community members, families, and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development.[2] In a well-functioning community school, these groups work together to leverage and organize in- and out-of-school resources, supports, and opportunities so that young people thrive.[3] Recent research finds that fully implemented community schools can improve a number of student outcomes.[4] Studies of community school initiatives in New York City and Chicago, for example, have found that community schools improve student attendance and feelings of connectedness, reduce exclusionary discipline practices, and improve academic achievement over the long term.[5]

A growing body of evidence indicates that the conditions within schools are equally—and vitally—important to student learning and development.

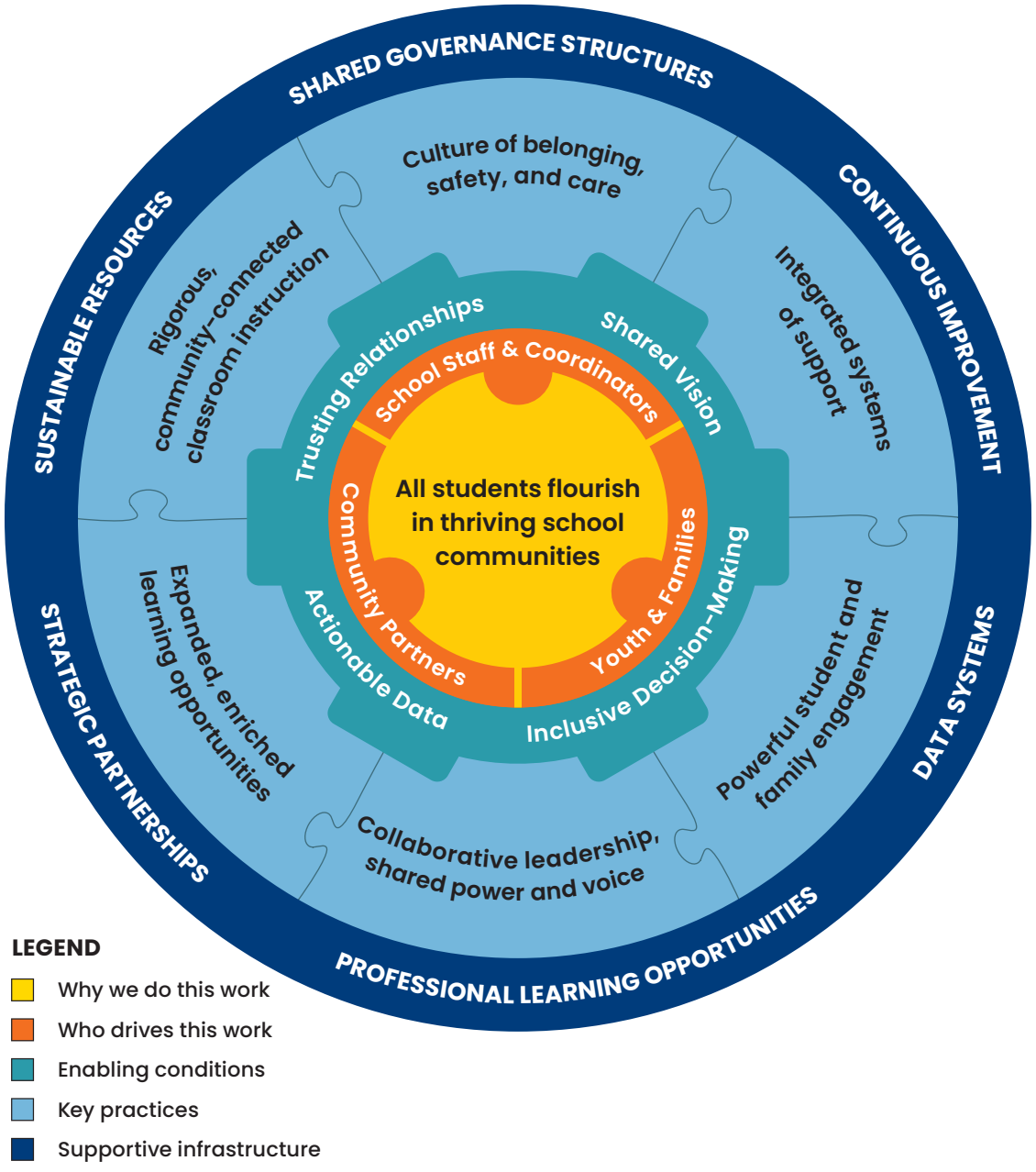
While community schools are, in part, designed to provide services and resources to students and families as a means of mitigating or reducing barriers to learning, without an intentional focus on a healthy, positive school climate the community schools strategy will not reach its ultimate goal of transforming schools into places where all students flourish. In this report, we highlight examples of several schools that are doing this well. Historically, community schools have tended to place their focus on reducing external barriers to learning, primarily through providing supports and services to students and their families.[6] However, a growing body of evidence indicates that the conditions within schools are equally—and vitally—important to student learning and development.[7] This body of research finds that school should be an educational space in which every child is known, seen, and supported by a healthy and interconnected web of students, teachers, families, and community members.

To have the greatest impact on student outcomes, then, community schools must focus on mitigating both external barriers to learning (e.g., hunger, homelessness, and health challenges) and internal ones, especially those related to school climate. In this report, we focus on five specific dimensions of school climate: (1) safety, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) teaching and learning, (4) physical and social environment, and (5) school improvement process. To be truly effective and transformational, community schools must cultivate a healthy climate that is grounded in nurturing relationships among and between educators, community partners, families, and students working together to create a school community in which students are affirmed, feel a sense of belonging, and have the opportunity to thrive.

Over the past 2 years, Community Schools Forward[8]—with support and input from a national taskforce—synthesized research, existing community school models, and experience and knowledge collected from practitioners across the country to create a comprehensive community schools framework that attends to the needs of the whole child and promotes optimal conditions for learning and development. This framework, *Essentials for Community School Transformation*,[9] draws from the latest research on the science of learning development (SoLD) to expand on the four evidence-based pillars identified in the Learning Policy Institute's 2017 research review: (1) integrated student supports, (2) expanded and enriched learning time, (3) active family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership.[10] The result is an

evolved framework that includes six key integrated practices that promote student flourishing in thriving school communities (see Figure 1). The addition of a culture of belonging, safety, and care and rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction reflects the increased attention community schools are giving to climate and instruction. The comprehensive implementation of these key practices requires a foundation of trusting relationships and a shared vision built around collaborative partnerships and inclusive decision-making among school staff and coordinators, youth and families, and community organizations. Importantly, community schools, when implemented well, nurture the key dimensions of positive climate.[11]

Figure 1. Community Schools Forward Framework



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

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled community schools into the spotlight, as it highlighted long-standing educational and social inequities and exposed the deep relationship between education, health, and community. Accordingly, districts, states, and the federal government championed the strategy through policy and funding. The federal government's Full-Service Community Schools grant program, for example, invested $150 million for fiscal year 2023, double the historic investment in 2022.[12] Additionally, California made an unprecedented $4.1 billion investment in the California Community Schools Partnership program.[13] Other states, like Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont, are investing as well.[14] The expansion of funding at multiple levels forecasts an increase in community schools implementation across the country, making this a pivotal moment to ensure high-quality adoption and implementation.

As funding and policy grow in California and across the nation in support of community schools, more schools will begin the process of transforming their culture and climate to serve the needs of the whole child. As expansion occurs, attention needs to be paid to take care not to water down the effective practices and orientation of community schools. That means schools must interrogate and reform practices that hinder students from reaching their full potential, such as harsh zero-tolerance discipline policies and teaching and learning that are disconnected from students' backgrounds and identities. Rather, community schools are most effective when they embrace structures and supports that are relationship centered, culturally sustaining, and community engaged.

This report highlights areas that can help to develop a healthy climate in schools. First, it defines healthy school climate and outlines five key dimensions. Second, it describes why a healthy climate is essential for promoting whole child education strategies like community schools. Third, it draws on community schools and SoLD research to highlight practices that help promote a healthy climate. Finally, this report provides concrete illustrations of climate-oriented, high-leverage practices being implemented in existing community schools.

Positive School Climate: What It Is and Why It Matters

The importance of school climate has become more widely recognized over the past several decades, with increasing consensus that "school climate reform is a viable, data-evidenced school improvement strategy."[15] A healthy climate has the potential to increase school connectedness, academic achievement, social and emotional learning, and graduation rates and reduce bullying.[16] But what is a healthy school climate? What specific elements or features contribute to a healthy school climate?

According to the National School Climate Center (NSCC), a nationally recognized organization that has elevated research, policy, and practice on safe, supportive learning environments:

> A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment.[17]

In other words, a healthy climate exists in schools in which there is shared responsibility to ensure everyone is safe, engaged, supported, and empowered. Along with this definition, NSCC explains that healthy environments are created and sustained by interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, and organizational resources. Research reviews on climate also note the importance of shared vision and consensus building through a school improvement process as critical to creating a healthy school climate. For this report, we highlight five key dimensions of a healthy school climate and describe how they are aligned with and can be implemented in a community schools context: safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, physical and social environment, and school improvement process (see Table 1 for definitions of each).[18]

Healthy school climates can promote a greater attachment to school and cultivate strong conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning.[19] Advances over the past several years in the science of how young people learn, develop, grow, and master complex skills—commonly referred to as the science of learning and development (SoLD)—help explain the positive effects of a healthy school climate and culture.[20]

Healthy school climates can promote a greater attachment to school and cultivate strong conditions for social, emotional, and academic learning.

This body of research finds that context—the relationships, environments, and experiences in students' lives—is the primary determinant of learning and development.[21] More specifically, SoLD suggests that a well-designed, culturally sustaining, supportive environment provides the best opportunity for children to reach their full potential and thrive in school and beyond.[22] This is the case because children and young people need to feel emotionally and psychologically safe to maximize their ability to learn and be comfortable taking

risks. Environments that are stressful and pose emotional, physical, and/or psychological threats undermine students' capacity for learning and development.[23] Additionally, positive, healthy school climates can mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences that come with exposure to systemic racism, homelessness, and food insecurity, among other challenges.[24] As a result, it is incumbent upon schools to focus on climate and culture if they are to foster opportunities for young people to learn and grow.

Because community schools aim to serve the whole child, the evidence from school climate and SoLD research is deeply important to their implementation. As more schools and districts adopt community schools as an improvement strategy, it is paramount to maintain focus on a healthy climate. More practically, community schools can draw on a number of evidence-based structures and practices that both build a healthy climate and align with the community schools strategy. We know that some community schools are not yet doing this, some are striving to, and some are excelling. The rest of this report is organized around the five key dimensions of a healthy climate and offers examples of structures and practices that build healthy climates. The dimensions are then illustrated in action through vignettes drawn from the Learning Policy Institute's published case studies of schools that effectively integrate strong, evidence-based practices into their community schools strategy.

Table 1. 5 Key Dimensions of Healthy School Climate

Dimension	How this looks in healthy school climates
Safety	The school fosters a stable environment in which all children and adults feel physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe, cared for, and valued.
Interpersonal relationships	The school is designed to foster personalized, trusting relationships among and between students, educators, parents, and community members.
Teaching and learning	The school develops educators to be coleaders who use their professional expertise to collaborate, plan, and implement high-quality cross-curricular instruction that includes authentic, collaborative, deeper learning opportunities and fosters students' curiosity, creativity, and willingness to take risks.
Physical and social environment	The physical space, surroundings, and resources of the school and the atmosphere of the building create a strong sense of community and signal that all members of the school community are valued and belong.
School improvement process	School improvement is a communitywide effort in which students, parents, school personnel, and community partners work together, take on a shared responsibility for the operations of the school, and participate in collaborative decision-making in service of a codeveloped vision and goals for the school.

Note: Adapted from the National School Climate Center and related papers on school climate to highlight the five dimensions most central to community schools. Also includes language that aligns with the science of learning and development.

Sources: Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate research: Policy, practice, and teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, *111*(1), 180–213; National School Climate Center. (2020). *The 14 dimensions of school climate measured by the CSCI*; Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, *83*(3), 357–385.

Dimensions of a Healthy School Climate in Practice

A sustainable, healthy school climate helps foster youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society.[25] This climate is driven by personalized, caring, trusting relationships. Thus far, we have defined five dimensions of positive school climate. In the sections that follow, we elaborate on these dimensions, connecting research from the science of learning and development to specific structures and practices that help cultivate a healthy climate and culture. We also provide a vignette of practice for each dimension from existing community schools to paint a clear picture of how these practices can be implemented.

It is important to note that the dimensions of positive climate are all connected, overlapping and building off one another, so while we have delineated practices that are most clearly connected to a single dimension, in reality, many of these practices foster positive climate across multiple dimensions. When woven together, these dimensions enable a vibrant, healthy environment in which students are best positioned to learn and thrive (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Elements of a Healthy School Climate

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2025).

Dimension 1: Safety

Definition

A stable school environment in which all students feel physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually safe, cared for, and valued.

Highlighted structures and practices

- Codeveloped mission statements, classroom and schoolwide agreements
- Routines and consistent norms and expectations
- Community circles
- Restorative practices

Safety is a basic need. A learning environment that provides a sense of safety and belonging is essential, as students who feel unsafe in school have diminished opportunities for learning and development.[26] Promoting social, emotional, physical, and intellectual safety can have a protective effect against the impacts of stress and adversity and allow students to take risks, explore their sense of self, and navigate challenging experiences.[27] This also means schools should be intentional in interrupting unsafe practices (e.g., bullying) and finding ways to help support mental health and positive interactions. Safety, then, is a primary feature of a positive school climate that requires deliberate planning and attention.

Promoting social, emotional, physical, and intellectual safety can have a protective effect against the impacts of stress and adversity and allow students to take risks, explore their sense of self, and navigate challenging experiences.

Stability and consistency are key components of a safe school climate. In practice, this means ensuring that students know what to expect and believe that rules and consequences are fairly developed and enforced. This can be accomplished through cocreating and adopting shared norms, expectations, and values that nurture a sense of belonging and guide behavior as well as nonexclusionary ways of responding to misbehavior.

Collaborative classroom agreements are one example of how to establish norms that enable safety and belonging. Giving students the opportunity to establish norms and values around how they want to treat each other, how the classroom learning environment should feel, and how they want to be held accountable is a powerful way to promote safety via a sense of belonging and ownership of the classroom community. For example, 9th-grade students at Bronxdale High School, a community school in New York City, created a list of shared norms that included: be encouraging, be motivational and not negative, don't be selfish, don't give up, be accountable, be specific, take time to celebrate others, embrace the struggle, and leave no teammate behind.[28]

Consistent routines are another way to build a safe and stable school environment, as they reduce stress by providing a sense of order and control (students and adults know what to expect) and allow more space for positive interactions between students and school staff. Routines may include daily greetings by school leaders and teachers, shared classroom practices and work habits, office hours, and regular community

meetings or circles. Community circles are daily or weekly small group meetings in which students reflect on their lives and school; play games; engage with new ideas and current events; and, over time, build a trusting and supportive community space to share feelings, excitement, fears, accomplishments, and goals. Community circles build spaces of belonging and safety in addition to peer-to-peer and teacher–student relationships.[29]

Community circles are often just one part of a school's comprehensive restorative approach that propagates safety. Restorative practices are a relationship-centered alternative to authoritarian, punitive, and exclusionary practices that can hinder students' long-term growth.[30] They help students and staff develop strategies for resolving conflicts and preventing and addressing wrongdoing by prompting students to reflect on mistakes, repair damage, and get counseling or other supports when needed. Further, a central tenet of restorative practices is that all people have worth and value and that it is important to build, maintain, and repair relationships within a community.[31] By reducing the threat of punishment and creating a sense of belonging and safety, restorative approaches are a vital component of generating a safe school climate. The vignette below describes what these practices are and what they look like at Bronxdale High School.

In Practice: Advisories and Peer Mentoring Enable Restorative Practices at Bronxdale High School

At Bronxdale High School, a community school serving 445 students in New York City, restorative approaches are not a behavior management system but rather a whole school approach for supporting students to use prosocial ways of interacting with others in their school community. The school uses a two-tiered approach to implementing restorative practices; tier 1 is dedicated to proactively building a positive school culture, and tier 2 is focused on practices that respond to harm.

Staff at Bronxdale understand that responding to misbehavior requires a strong foundation of caring relationships that students and staff are invested in, which is where tier 1 practices come in; restorative practices can only be used effectively when there is something to restore. Bronxdale has several programs in place that are designed to build and sustain strong in-school relationships.

As an example of a tier 1 restorative practice, every student has an advisory class, which meets several times per week. Advisories provide consistent opportunities for social and emotional learning as well as community and relationship building. Every student has an advisor, a go-to adult they can approach for support when needed. As one advisor described, "[Students] build a relationship with that teacher who is the advisor. The advisor is the go-between regarding problems in and out of the building."

Bronxdale also has implemented a peer mentoring program called Peer Group Connections, in which 12th graders, in teams of two, facilitate advisories for 9th graders. Student mentors are supported by a class they take with the guidance counselor, during which upper-grade students plan their advisory curriculum and share strategies for meeting the needs of their younger students. Rather than introducing students to school norms and expectations through lectures and teaching a set of rules, these peer-led advisories initiate incoming Bronxdale students into the school's community through activities that help them build relationships by reflecting on their similarities and differences and developing empathy toward others. In addition to these programs, Bronxdale provides other tier 1 restorative practices such as mindfulness and meditation classes, a youth court program, counseling and other proactive social and emotional student supports, and peer mediation.

Tier 2 practices are grounded in the idea that while behavior may be a problem, students are not, and that situations in which student behavior does not meet school norms and expectations present opportunities for learning. Bronxdale almost never uses punitive approaches to respond to student misbehavior; instead, restorative processes used at Bronxdale help students understand that their actions have consequences that impact individuals in their community who they care about. In this way, restorative approaches at Bronxdale are mediative, in that they are aimed at repairing harm to the school community, and educative, in that they are intended to teach students useful skills for interacting with their peers and strategies for handling conflict.

Typically, when a harmful incident has occurred, the restorative deans will facilitate a restorative circle. This foundational practice brings together those in conflict and others from the school community who were affected by the incident. As a group, they participate in a facilitated process intended to move students from a place of disconnection to a place of connection. Skilled facilitators accomplish this by supporting those involved to acknowledge feelings and agree upon a means of repairing harm to relationships and the broader school community.

At Bronxdale, restorative approaches are supported by five full-time positions: a guidance counselor, two social workers, and two restorative deans. The counselor and social worker provide counseling and crisis intervention support. The restorative deans provide professional development and coaching for teachers on using restorative practices and support students in engaging in restorative processes after a harmful incident has occurred. Through the two-tiered approach, Bronxdale aims to create a school climate in which students feel safe and connected.

Source: Adapted from Ancess, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute.

Dimension 2: Interpersonal Relationships

Definition

The school is designed to foster personalized, trusting relationships among and between students, educators, parents, and community members.

Highlighted structures and practices

- Affirmation walls
- Empathy building
- Advisories
- Peer mentoring programs
- Home visits and ongoing communication with families
- Culturally sustaining family engagement practices

The extent to which students have a positive and healthy experience in school is directly related to whether adults and students listen to, respect, affirm, and trust one another.[32] In a positive school climate, students have a friend group they can rely on, at least one adult who they believe cares about them, and an expectation that both the people and the structures in the school exist to support their learning and personal development.[33] Students and families should be engaged as partners who bring with them community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge.[34]

Student–adult relationships matter deeply. Students learn best from teachers they have authentic relationships with; who treat them as whole persons, not just students; and who both celebrate their strengths and invest in building their capacity.[35] At Bronxdale High School, teachers utilize the practice of "affirmation stations," in which they share encouraging notes with students, such as "I believe in you," "Thanks for your leadership," and "Way to go for the challenge." These types of encouraging messages and affirmations are also displayed throughout classroom hallways and other public spaces. These stations communicate the many ways teachers and staff authentically value their students and pave the way for developing relationships grounded in care and mutual respect.

Educators can deepen their relationships with students by engaging in empathy-building practices. Developing empathy means intentionally seeking to understand and respect others' experiences, to strengthen interpersonal connection and trust. These types of relationships are more likely to remain strong and positive even when challenges arise.[36]

Educators and students can participate in highly structured forms of empathy building, like empathy interviews, and less formal methods, like "Getting to Know You" surveys that allow students and teachers to identify commonalities.[37] Empathy interviews are an exercise in deep listening intended to cultivate care, interest, and a sense of shared humanity between those engaged in conversation. Through the use of a small set of open-ended questions, these one-on-one conversations elicit stories about specific experiences and allow both parties to share their perspectives and understand the point of view of the other. Students at Lakewood High School in Long Beach, CA, for example, introduced empathy interviews in a youth-led professional development day to begin the work of power sharing and developing meaningful relationships to support learning, well-being, and academic success.[38]

In addition to creating a culture in which positive and affirming interactions take place, schools can develop collaborative structures that help build productive relationships. Developing a deep relationship with one adult in school is equally as important for students as having peers they connect with.[39] Advisories, when well developed and implemented, are one way to build these relationships. Advisories, in which small groups of students meet with an advisor (e.g., a teacher, a staff person, or, in some cases, a student leader) multiple times throughout the week, can create in-school "families" in which every student can build close relationships with peers and a school adult. They also provide opportunities to teach students the prosocial skills they need to embrace school norms and expectations.[40]

Developing a deep relationship with one adult in school is equally as important for students as having peers they connect with.

Advisories are central in two of the high schools featured in this report, Bronxdale and Social Justice Humanitas Academy (Humanitas), a community school in the San Fernando Valley near Los Angeles, CA. At Bronxdale, advisories—and the peer-to-peer and teacher–student relationships they develop—enable restorative practices. At Humanitas, advisories are a foundational structure of the school, providing a personalized space to engage in social and emotional learning and build community. By deepening relationships between adults and students, advisories help to ensure students are well known and tended to.

Similar to advisories, mentorship programs create opportunities for one-on-one relationship building while simultaneously reinforcing school norms and expectations, contributing to a safe climate. Mentorship programs typically pair students with an adult or an upper-grade mentor. At Humanitas, students from 10th, 11th, and 12th grades can be nominated to participate in a peer mentorship program, where they are then matched with mentees based on survey and other data and undergo leadership development training.[41]

Teachers' work environment, peer relationships, and feelings of inclusion and respect are important aspects of positive school climate. How well adults communicate and collaborate with one another influences the school culture and atmosphere. Students' perception of adult–adult relationships can profoundly affect their expectations for appropriate behavior and the quality of their school experience.[42] (See also Dimension 3: Teaching and Learning.)

A healthy school climate also ensures that parents are integral to the school community and have relationships with each other and the school staff. This can be accomplished in part by providing opportunities for students' families to visit the school and participate in school events and activities. A school environment in which family members are welcome and visible is one in which students *literally* see themselves, their identities, and their backgrounds as valued.

For example, at Bridges Academy at Melrose, an elementary-level community school in Oakland, CA, family members are invited to an annual multicultural festival in which families share and celebrate their cultural backgrounds. Families are invited to set up tables to display information and artifacts about their home countries, and students receive stamps in their festival passports each time they visit a table and learn something new about a country. Local musicians and dancers from students' home countries are invited to perform at the event. Other types of opportunities for collaborating with family members include curriculum nights; classes and workshops for family members; and a dedicated space on campus for family members to congregate, connect with school staff, and address family needs, such as a family resource center.

While families should feel welcome and a part of the school, it is also important to forge relationships with families in their communities and to learn about their histories, cultural assets, and hopes and dreams, in addition to possible stressors in their lives. Home visits, in which teachers schedule and make time outside of the school day to meet with willing families in their homes, are one approach to actively seeking relationships with families. Another approach to building deeper, more empathetic relationships is community walks, which are described in detail in the following vignette.

In Practice: Breaking Down Barriers Between Schools and Families With Community Walks at Oakland International High School

Every year, Oakland International High School (OIHS) organizes community walks. Students and families lead educators and staff through their neighborhood, explaining the significance of particular places and/or cultural institutions as well as sharing their lived experience. Because the school serves newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth from more than 35 countries, learning about students' lives and their communities is believed to be essential for educators and staff.

Lauren Markham, OIHS Community School Program Manager, describes the walks:

> [Community walks are] professional development sessions [that] educate teachers about students' backgrounds, challenges, community, and cultural assets, and the educational concerns of OIHS's diverse students and families. They also serve to immerse teachers in the home environments of their students and give students and family members the opportunity to serve as leaders, inverting roles such that our teachers become the students, and our students and families become the teachers.

One community walk focused on the Guatemalan community, a sizable student population at the school. For the first hour, educators and staff on the walk gathered to discuss intentions and goals for the day before the students and families joined in. After the introduction, four students led a session in which they had the room of 15 or so participants read and discuss a one-page excerpt from Rigoberta Menchú's book about Guatemala's civil war (1960–1996). They shared information about the different Indigenous groups in Guatemala and which ones they belong to and showed on a map the regions where they are from. The students selected three short videos to show more about their home country: one about teen pregnancy (one student talked about her sister having to drop out of school back home after getting pregnant), another about political reforms, and a third with scenes from different regions of the country. Each student also talked a bit about their family and migration story.

Next, everyone loaded into cars and headed to the parada, the corner where day laborers gather to be hired. Juan (pseudonym), a senior at OIHS, shared what it is like to work as a day laborer: how to get picked out from the crowd for jobs, how to avoid getting cheated, and how scary it is to operate heavy machinery. Juan worked as a day laborer for a year after arriving in the United States before enrolling in high school. He still goes to look for work on days he is not in school or when money for rent is tight.

Afterward, Amalia, one of the leaders of the walk, led the group to a Mam-language church that serves the local Guatemalan immigrant community. Amalia's father is the pastor at the church. He described how the church welcomes newly arrived immigrants and organizes donations to send back to parishioners' home villages. He also explained the history of the church and the Guatemalan community in this part of Oakland.

Everyone then headed to a local restaurant, where several other students and their families joined the staff to eat and get to know one another better. After lunch, the group headed back to the high school to debrief and share reflections from the day. One of the teachers mentioned that this was her third OIHS community walk and that it is one of her favorite parts of the year, saying, "It's really good for us to know [about our students' lives]."

Most schools do not have as diverse a student population as OIHS does, but diversity still exists among students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, and there is often a knowledge gap about students' social and cultural realities. Any school can engage in community walks through neighborhoods, meet with local community leaders, and provide forums for families to share their insights and concerns outside of the traditional parent–teacher conference format.

Source: Adapted from Bajaj, M. (2016). *Community walks: A day of learning for schools*. Learning for Justice.

Dimension 3: Teaching and Learning

Definition

The school develops educators to be coleaders who use their professional expertise to collaborate, plan, and implement high-quality cross-curricular instruction that includes authentic, collaborative, deeper learning opportunities and fosters students' curiosity, creativity, and willingness to take risks.

Highlighted structures and practices

- Teacher-led inquiry and professional learning
- Cross-grade and cross-subject collaboration and planning time
- Culturally sustaining pedagogy and curriculum
- Inquiry-based learning and performance-based assessments
- Community-connected learning opportunities

There is a common phrase in education that says a teacher's workplace is a student's learning space. The ways in which educators experience and participate in the school can profoundly affect the student experience. A school in which educators are regarded as professionals with deep expertise and, as a result, are given opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and decision-making builds adult-to-adult trusting relationships and cooperation that help drive positive culture within the school. Teacher collaboration also promotes curricular coherence and fosters classrooms that encourage curiosity, risk-taking, questioning, and deeper learning.[43] When teachers have collaborative planning time, for example, they can design cross-disciplinary inquiry-based lessons and projects, allowing students to connect content across courses, which is shown to enhance students' meaning in their work.

Schools can be places where educators are coleaders, treated as professionals, who model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefit and satisfaction gained from learning by instituting a variety of practices (e.g., teacher collaboration time, teacher autonomy over curriculum, teacher-driven learning/professional development). Schools such as Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez), a community school in Los Angeles, leverage teachers' expertise, support their growth, and encourage work-life balance, fostering a positive work environment that retains teachers and allows for a strong school culture to grow.[44]

At Mendez, the principal encourages and actively works with teachers on their professional growth through collaboratively building courses and programs for the school. For example, one teacher wanted to begin an AP Computer Science for All program and ensure that all 9th-grade students took computer science. The principal then worked with the teacher to plan it out and find the resources through community partners. Similarly, a different teacher at the school expressed interest in bringing restorative practices to the school. She received support to get professional development and propose restorative-based structures, many of which have been implemented. Shortly thereafter, she was named the restorative justice coordinator for the entire school.

The following vignette highlights another school that intentionally cultivates teacher leadership and collaboration and values staff expertise.

In Practice: Cultivating Teacher Leadership, Collaboration, and a Culture of Learning at Social Justice Humanitas High School

Social Justice Humanitas Academy (Humanitas), a community school located in California's San Fernando Valley, was brought into existence by a group of educators and designed to be a teacher-led school. This means that administrators and teachers at Humanitas work together to make school decisions and to develop the school's curriculum and instructional approach. Teachers at Humanitas are treated as professionals with expertise and deep knowledge of how to meet the needs of their students. This is reflected in school structures at Humanitas that support teacher leadership. As a Los Angeles Unified School District pilot school, Humanitas was granted autonomy over its curriculum, and teachers make the key decisions that shape the school's instructional program. This is made possible by structured collaboration time and grade-level team meetings during which teachers can plan interdisciplinary project-based work. Importantly, teachers noted that these structures fostered the development of professional and supportive relationships.

Grade-level team collaboration is protected time that is built into the schedule at Humanitas. This time is used for interdisciplinary lesson planning across the same grade level and to discuss and collectively respond to the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of specific students. These collaborative spaces also serve as key sites of support for teachers. When asked about grade-level team collaboration, a first-year teacher noted:

> Having emotional support is very reassuring. … Having that level of camaraderie brings lots of support, and knowing that we're not in this alone … and being able to offer each other more direct solutions … I feel like that has been one of the most crucial supports of this entire school year.

Teachers at Humanitas consistently reported feeling supported by their colleagues and administrators. They valued the focus on adult relationships, as it helped them confidently approach and engage in the work of nurturing student progress and well-being, echoing the idea that staff culture greatly informs school culture.

The advisory program, which is a foundational structure of the school and its approach to social and emotional learning, is another opportunity for teacher leadership and cooperation. The school has designated teacher leads for advisories. Advisory leads design the advisory curriculum and collaborate with other leads from each grade level to manage and improve the content. Specifically, they support the implementation of the social-emotional program at Humanitas as well as family engagement efforts, including parent nights and student-led conferencing.

As one advisory lead shared, the leads identify topics that will strengthen the school community and student learning—from social and emotional learning to networking opportunities to college and career preparation to discussion of important cultural events. These practices exemplify how teachers can share their knowledge about students in planning curriculum to meet student needs and can create continuity in practices and norms that can support students emotionally and cognitively.

An additional way that teacher leadership is formalized is through the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), composed of teachers elected from each grade level and core department (e.g., history, language arts, science, math). The ILT serves in an advisory capacity, guiding the school in areas focused on student and family needs. The ILT meets bimonthly to identify challenges and propose solutions on issues ranging from operations to instruction, using collective agenda setting, consensus-based decision-making, and a continuous improvement process. The ILT is also responsible for planning the school's professional learning opportunities, based on input from the rest of the staff. Because educators at Humanitas are recognized for their curricular, pedagogical, and youth development expertise, professional learning topics are mostly provided in-house by peers.

Source: Adapted from Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute.

Structured cross-grade and cross-subject collaboration and planning, as described in the previous vignette, provides protected time and sets expectations that educators plan inquiry-based instruction together and coordinate in ways that promote student motivation. Structures promoting teacher-led inquiry, professional learning, and shared leadership allow teachers to model the behaviors and learning habits they want to develop in students and nurture a school climate that prizes learning, learning together, and taking ownership over learning. Well-supported teachers have the capacity to implement rich pedagogical practices that propel learning and promote a climate of care, voice, and agency.

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Inquiry-based learning, including project-based learning and performance assessments, puts students in the driver seat as they work to solve a problem or explore a question of interest through inference, investigation, and analysis. These forms of learning allow students to develop a number of skills simultaneously and demonstrate understanding in multiple forms. They also encourage teachers and students to have meaningful conversations about learning through multiple rounds of feedback and rubrics. For example, the UCLA Community School in Los Angeles incorporates an AP Capstone Program, a seminar class that centers student-directed research projects. Mentors recruited through the school's community school partnerships guide and support students to complete their research projects. Recently, two students worked with a UCLA graduate student in sociology to study the effects of a K–12 span school on student well-being and achievement.[45]

Community-connected instruction is a type of inquiry-based learning in which curriculum and instruction are deeply connected to the local community and students' identities, cultures, and experiences.[46] It is a powerful way to build cognitive and academic skills while also strengthening a sense of community and engagement.[47] This is the case because, as the science of learning and development underscores, students learn best when they can connect what they are learning to their own lived experience and to topics that are culturally and personally relevant.[48] The following vignette provides an in-depth account of a school that incorporates community-connected learning opportunities into teachers' daily instruction.

In Practice: Community-Connected Learning at Oakland High School

Oakland High School, a large, comprehensive high school in Oakland, CA, utilizes Linked Learning pathways, designed to "prepare students for success in college, career, and community," to create small learning communities. The school offers six pathways, and students rank them by preference based on their interests. The school administration then assigns students to pathways using a process that ensures that the pathways are representative of the school's overall demographics and academic performance.

One of the school's Linked Learning pathways, the Environmental Science Academy (ESA), offers hands-on experience in scientific fields such as marine biology, engineering, medicine, and environmental science while also examining the human impact on and relationship with the environment. The ESA pathway curriculum is designed around project-based learning that incorporates real-world experiences. By creating learning opportunities in which students can explore issues of interest to them in school and community settings, Oakland High provides a curriculum that draws on the students' prior experiences and knowledge. As one teacher in the ESA described:

> A lot of our curriculum is focused on student-centered problems and student-centered leadership opportunities to solve those problems. I think that's one of the big things that makes Oakland High a community school. … In many cases, the curriculum at Oakland High is almost written as we go, in order to address problems that are cropping up throughout the year. … We'll address environmental problems that crop up in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

A strong example of this is the ESA "Lake Class," which is designed around the ecology of Lake Merritt, a short walk from Oakland High's campus. Made possible through a partnership with the Lake Merritt Boathouse, the class allows students to embark on pontoon boats once per week to survey different areas of the lake for various water quality factors and to collect samples for testing. Students then study the samples to determine the likely causes of water pollution and contaminants. After determining the pollution sources, students study potential policy interventions to address the health of the lake. At the culmination of the class, students develop their own interventions to address water quality, which they present to a mock city board, made up of local scientists, advocates, and other industry professionals. The teacher of the class describes one student's final project:

> He proposed and built a three-dimensional map which identified that the golf course above the cemetery was a likely source of nitrogen phosphate pollution due to the amount of fertilizer that they use, and he pinpointed this by testing the tributaries that come through that area. Below the golf course is a big, open cemetery that has lot of grass everywhere … so the student proposed a replanting plan for the cemetery that included a native plant shrub forest that could soak up and absorb the nitrates and phosphates before they got to the lake.

The lake class represents an example of a hands-on, community-connected project, and it demonstrates how ESA teachers make environmental science relevant by focusing on the environment as the space in which we all live, work, and play. The teachers emphasize the point that the environment is not just the melting of the Arctic shelf or the extinction of rare birds; it is also Lake Merritt, a stone's throw away from the school campus.

Source: Adapted from 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.

Dimension 4: Physical and Social Environment

Definition

The physical space, surroundings, and resources of the school and the atmosphere of the building create a strong sense of community and signal that all members of the school community are valued and belong.

Highlighted structures and practices

- Student and community initiatives (e.g., murals and community gardens)
- Parent-led events and programs in which parents and community members contribute their funds of knowledge and cultural wealth
- Student-led initiatives and projects
- Shared decision-making

The institutional environment—both the physical space, surroundings, and resources of the school and the atmosphere of the building—sets the tone for how students and families interact with and feel about the school. The school's physical environment, when well resourced and tended to by the school community, communicates that the school is a valued community space and the people inside are important.[49] Healthy schools also intentionally build a sense of community in which students, staff, and families feel welcomed, connected, and engaged and are enthusiastic participants in various aspects of the school. The institutional environment can profoundly influence conditions for learning by making students feel safe or unsafe, valued or unimportant, a part of the community or othered.[50]

While the possibilities for improving the physical environment are plentiful, a few common student- or community-led practices are murals and artwork on the outside and inside of the school; community gardens; and pictures of and quotes from local leaders, writers, poets, organizers, and families. Investments in infrastructure also communicate value and build community.[51]

Schools can attend to and strengthen their institutional environment through a variety of strategies and practices. When walking into school, students and families should see themselves and feel a sense of belonging and pride. Providing opportunities for students and families to contribute to the school through art, gardening, cleanup days, decorating, and special projects that derive from the local community are all ways that help personalize the grounds and build tangible connections to and co-ownership of the school. For example, the UCLA Community School, located on the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools campus,

has public art (26 murals) spread across the campus depicting community, civil rights, multiculturalism, and student power and engagement. As much as possible, the school leverages resources and partnerships to provide opportunities and programming tailored to students and families.

Schools can engage families and the community by offering programming, learning opportunities, and a space to connect and network. A school that prizes caregivers' funds of knowledge and culture might create a parent center such as the one at Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School in Los Angeles (highlighted in the following vignette), which serves as a hub for families to take and teach classes, sign up to volunteer, and connect with other members of the school community.

In Practice: Creating a Welcoming Environment Through Parent Engagement at Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School

"It's always been a community hub … and that is what makes Mendez really stand out, that it's open to the community," notes Emily Grijalva, Restorative Justice and Community School Coordinator. Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez), a community school located in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, has intentionally created strong community partnerships that are integrated into the school community—so much so that the principal has given up his office for a community partner to use. The school hangs banners with its partners' names and ensures that students, families, and community members can take advantage of the school space and the programming and services provided by partners by keeping the school open as late as 9 p.m. during the week and on the weekends.

The parent center at Mendez is a testament to the school's commitment to powerful family engagement. The school always has a "full calendar for our parents," notes Grijalva, and it seeks to provide robust programming. The parent center is a hub for families, giving parents and community members the opportunity to take and teach classes, find volunteer opportunities at the school, and connect with members of the Mendez community through shared interest groups and informal events. Parents can join book clubs, partake in Zumba classes, and teach *manualidades* (crafts). The school really tries to tap into parents' interests and assets. For example, some parents who are excellent at sewing were eager to share their skills. The school found sewing machines to borrow, and the parents offered free lessons a couple of days per week to anyone interested. Other parents shared their love of cooking by teaching a cooking class each week. Beyond offering the venue and opportunity to share skills and passions, the programming at Mendez can also lead to employment opportunities. For example, *promotoras* (health advocates) come to campus and hold classes on diabetes and nutrition. After these classes, parents are frequently hired by the clinic and go on to teach at other school sites.

The parent center also tracks volunteer time. One parent, who works as the volunteer coordinator, remarked, "Going to Mendez every day is not like going to work. … Because I am in the parent center and I'm the volunteer coordinator as well, it's like going to hang out with friends." Importantly, parents are recognized and celebrated for volunteering, earning different types of roles and responsibilities depending on how many hours they give. Mendez also hosts events just to gather and celebrate, like Christmas dinner and Mother's Day luncheons, during which the school's staff and parents mingle, eat, and listen to mariachi or folklórico, building a school culture and community

that is grounded in relationship- and community-building. In all of these ways, Mendez offers the school's resources to foster and serve the community, while also improving the social atmosphere of the building by opening it as a place for the community to connect and learn together.

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

Students and families should also be actively involved in the life of the school, particularly outside of academics. One way to do this is by offering opportunities for student-led initiatives and leadership opportunities. At Social Justice Humanitas Academy, student voice and authentic leadership are built into school structures. For example, the biannual Student Steering Committee meeting makes space for every student to share their feelings and opinions about their learning and the learning environment, and to participate in educational planning and decision-making.

In addition to these practices, schools can engage multiple actors in school-level decision-making. Besides being an authentic way to encourage a communitywide sense of ownership and shared responsibility, inclusive decision-making structures promote agency and voice for students and parents alike and offer an additional avenue to enhance the social environment. Below, we describe a strategy that Urban Promise Academy in Oakland, CA, has used to include staff, community members, family members, and students in school-site decisions.

In Practice: The Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Council at Urban Promise Academy

The Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Council at Urban Promise Academy (UPA) in Oakland Unified School District is a school decision-making body that includes students, family, community members, and school staff (the community school manager, the restorative justice coordinator, and the assistant principal). To ensure that multiple student perspectives are included, the Council recruited student representatives from various affinity groups at the school, including the Gay Straight Alliance and newcomer student groups.

Part of the stated mission of the JEDI Council is "to make sure that all student and family voices are present when making decisions that impact the whole school community. We want all students and families to feel respected and like leaders at UPA." To better understand the school issues that are important to their peers, JEDI students conducted an open-ended student survey, soliciting ideas on what students would like to see changed or improved. With this information, the JEDI Council selected four areas of immediate focus: soliciting input from students and families in meaningful ways, changing the bathroom policy to be more equitable, adjusting the school uniform policy/dress code so that it is welcoming to all students and families, and investigating what changes can be made to improve the quality of school lunches.

The JEDI Council, launched in 2019, is a somewhat new school committee. School staff hope to have smaller roles on the Council over time so that student and community member voices drive the Council's work. Administrators hope that in the future, JEDI will function independently from the school staff in making recommendations. As the assistant principal explained:

> The idea is we're going to help them get running, and then they [become] the leaders of this space. So they're working for us so much as they're coming to tell us what they need and what they want. … But the goal is for it [the JEDI Council] to function outside of any UPA leadership group, because we need it to be family- and student-run and led.

With the JEDI Council, UPA aims to make school decision-making more democratic and to increase opportunities for multiple kinds of school actors to take part in creating a learning environment that reflects their priorities and needs.

Source: Adapted from 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.

Dimension 5: School Improvement Process

Definition

School improvement is a communitywide effort in which students, parents, school personnel, and community partners work together, take on a shared responsibility for the operations of the school, and participate in collaborative decision-making in service of a codeveloped vision and goals for the school.

Highlighted structures and practices

- Collaborative, inclusive decision-making structures
- Assets and needs assessments
- Ongoing collection and analysis of actionable data
- All stakeholders working on continuous improvement for the school and surrounding community

Schools with a healthy climate foster shared responsibility for maintaining and advancing the school's vision and goals. In simple terms, this means that all stakeholders at a school should have opportunities to participate in creating the school that they want. Community schools are particularly well suited to incorporate practices that support this feature of positive school climate because active family and community engagement and collaborative leadership are foundational elements of the community schools approach. Schools can utilize several strategies to engage school actors in developing and sustaining a school vision, including conducting assets and needs assessments with the entire school community and employing collaborative, inclusive leadership and decision-making structures to develop, refine, and review a comprehensive plan for the school.

Assets and needs assessments are a practice that community schools use to launch a continuous improvement process that brings together multiple stakeholders in the school community. Through listening panels, surveys, and community forums, schools create a shared action plan that identifies key

priorities, programs, goals, and strategies for measuring progress. When conducted in a way that includes family members, school staff, and community partners, the assets and needs assessment contributes to a shared school vision and sense of accountability for school outcomes.[52]

Strong community schools implementation over time also requires a commitment to continuous improvement.[53] According to research, the school improvement process can be used to foster a strong climate and culture:

> The goals for school climate improvement efforts are to support students, parents/guardians, school personnel, and even community members learning and working together in a democratically informed manner to foster safe, supportive, engaging, and flourishing schools that support school—and life—success.[54]

The continuous improvement process is often used in school communities to shift and adapt policies, structures, and practices based on intentionally collected, actionable data and the insights generated through shared decision-making forums.[55] Working together, the school community participates in an ongoing cycle of reflection, analysis, revision, and implementation that includes students, families, educators, and community partners. By drawing on the support of the entire community to build and maintain a responsive school, the continuous improvement process reinforces a healthy culture and climate by creating common expectations and codeveloped goals of what quality learning and a welcoming school environment look like.[56] In the example below, we show how a community school used the culture of shared responsibility and a commitment to continuous improvement to assess the needs and desires of its students and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and respond with a thoughtful and tailored plan.

Working together, the school community participates in an ongoing cycle of reflection, analysis, revision, and implementation that includes students, families, educators, and community partners.

In Practice: UCLA Community School's Annual Report Focuses on Continuous Improvement

The UCLA Community School has a Research and Accountability Committee composed of faculty, staff, students, parents, and UCLA partners. Chief among the committee's responsibilities is to collect and analyze data that can inform practice and ensure accountability. The committee reports to its Shared Governing Council, which is also made up of university partners, parents, and students, each month.

One core responsibility of the committee is to produce an annual report each fall that captures the collective learning and progress of the previous year. The report has five sections: (1) History, Context, and Community; (2) School Vision and Core Practices; (3) Quantitative Indicators and Dashboard; (4) Professional Learning and Partnerships; and (5) Engaging Beyond the School. Following a brief overview of the school context, history, and demographics, the report describes the school's vision and core practices and provides measurable indicators of the school's progress,

framed as four dashboards—each focused on one of the school's core competencies. The annual report also focuses on adult learning and development, providing an opportunity to reflect on the quality of professional learning at the school, including teacher satisfaction and retention indicators.

Emphasizing continuous improvement, the school's leadership team takes a deeper dive into these data at the end of the school year and again in early August to inform their planning of the back-to-school professional development. The UCLA partnership data is used by the university to monitor its engagement at the site and ensure UCLA students, staff, and faculty are contributing to the school's vision as well as the university's mission of teaching, research, and service. The last section of the annual report shares the research–practice partnerships and publications produced at the school the previous year.

The data collected and reflected in the annual report are the school's attempt to embrace its responsibility to be publicly accountable for its progress. Some measures were chosen to provide local, state, and national comparisons, while others are unique to the school and are tracked over time. Data collected by the school include annual educator and student surveys; independent reading levels in English and Spanish; and college plans, persistence, and completion. These data are used to strengthen practice and professional development. For example, teacher satisfaction and retention indicators guide professional development and opportunities for shared leadership the next year. Reading data from 2019 helped the school community identify that teachers were the only ones using students' reading data. As a result, teachers and researchers partnered to pilot and design a community-based self-assessment system, classroom routines (e.g., instructional practices that promote self-assessment skills) across grade levels (grades 2–12), and accompanying curriculum and instruction. (For more information, visit https://communityschooling.gseis.ucla.edu/the-power-of-self-assessment.)

The annual report is an opportunity to stand back, reflect, and celebrate the school's work and learning. The principal prints the dashboards onto chart paper and hangs them in the multipurpose room during Coffee With the Principal—engaging parents in discussing the year's progress and core competencies. Each year, the leadership team begins by reviewing the first draft of the report and offering input and edits. Then, during back-to-school professional development in August, the entire faculty spends a full morning session reading and discussing the previous year's learning and key themes. This is an affirming process, as many teachers express gratitude for the opportunity to celebrate their hard work. Founding lead teacher Io McNaughton shared with the staff in August 2022 that she looks forward every year to sharing the report with the parents of her students.

Source: Adapted from a vignette provided by Karen Hunter Quartz, Director of the UCLA Center for Community Schooling.

Conclusion: Community Schools Have the Tools

This report urges community school practitioners to think beyond the added support services of community schools and embrace the relationships, trust, and sense of community throughout the school environment that undergird effective and impactful implementation. Research on school climate and the science of learning and development makes clear that young people are most likely to thrive in caring, safe, intellectually challenging school environments. Accordingly, community schools that make concerted efforts to foster a positive, welcoming, and inclusive school climate are best positioned to foster whole child development and strong academic outcomes. For this very reason, the Community Schools Forward *Essentials of Community Schools Transformation Framework* includes a culture of belonging, safety, and care as a key practice and highlights the importance of trusting relationships.

The design of community schools—including their local, inclusive nature—allows for the development of strong relationships and a community-driven culture, key features of a healthy climate. Further, an effective school climate improvement process asks the same questions community schools ask, both in their initial planning phase and throughout the continuous improvement process:

- What kind of school do we want ours to be?
- What are our current strengths and needs?
- Given this "vision" and our current reality, what are the most important schoolwide and/or instructional and/or one-on-one goals that we can and need to work on together?[57]

This report offers concrete examples of five dimensions of a healthy school climate that are well aligned with the essential elements of the community schools strategy. For example, to facilitate safety (Dimension 1), community schools can adopt restorative practices. Relationships and building trust are central to the community schools strategy (Dimension 2) and can be fostered in formal (e.g., advisories, mentoring) and informal (offering support and being an advocate for families) ways. Rigorous, community-connected instruction that prioritizes student inquiry and agency is also central to teaching and learning (Dimension 3) in community schools. Community schools are the hubs of their communities, and the physical space becomes shared and co-owned by families and partners. In this way, community schools alter the social and physical environment (Dimension 4). Lastly, community schools can use the assets and needs assessments to learn more about students, families, and the community surrounding the school. Truly listening to the goals, dreams, and needs of the school community—and devising an inclusive process to work toward them—is essential to a continuous improvement process (Dimension 5) and is a natural way to build relationships and trust.

Community schools are well equipped to foster positive climate using the tools and structures that are integral to implementation. The integrated key practices from the *Essentials of Community School Transformation Framework* weave together the multiple dimensions of positive climate. For example, community-connected classroom instruction brings the experiences, values, and expertise of students and families into the classroom, affirming their identities and providing the opportunity for real-world problem-solving. Similarly, powerful family and student engagement invites their voices, ideas, skills, and resources into the school community, creating partnerships and making the school an open and welcoming space.

Community schools are unique as a school improvement strategy because they harness the resources and opportunities of the local community, and through partnership and relationship building, customize whole child education to support students' well-being and academic success. Well-implemented community schools ground the work and prioritize relationships by intentionally developing a strong and healthy culture and climate. The examples in this report provide a place to begin this work and deepen the effectiveness of community schools.

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