Community Schools Certification

An Approach for Implementation

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Executive Summary

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 goals and needs of students and families. They also offer community-connected, student-centered instruction and cultivate a culture of safety, belonging, and care. This strategy brings educators, local community members, families, and students together to make collaborative decisions; prioritize student learning, well-being, and engagement; and turn schools into community hubs. A growing number of states are investing in community schools as a strategy to address long-standing social inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, greatly expanding the landscape of community schools. As community schools increasingly operate at scale, systems are seeking ways to support quality implementation across multiple school sites. This report describes one such approach: certification.

Research on Community Schools Implementation and the Systemic Conditions That Support It

A growing body of research finds that well-implemented community schools can improve school climate and culture, as well as a range of student outcomes, including academic achievement and attendance. Studies have found that the strength of implementation is related to the magnitude of outcomes. Accordingly, community schools initiatives and school sites are likely to see the greatest impact if they invest in effective implementation by developing structured supports for capacity-building and sustained continuous improvement.

Prior research suggests that system-level (e.g., district, county, state) conditions can help build the capacity of schools in a way that is effective, efficient, and aligned. The conditions—as applied to community schools—include:

- **a shared understanding** of the strategy with coherent policies, structures, standards, and reporting requirements that balance the tight–loose nature of community schools (i.e., naming what is essential and expected for effective implementation while allowing communities to set priorities and determine "the how" of implementation);

- **a framework for indicators and outcomes** that establishes milestones for gauging progress, draws on accessible data that can be used to develop strategic plans customized to local assets and needs, and encourages communication among states, districts (including superintendents and school boards), and sites about progress and opportunities;

- **intentional staffing to support continuous improvement and implementation**, including clear roles and community schools–specific supports (e.g., state and district personnel whose main job is to provide customized, targeted technical assistance, feedback, and coaching to community school sites);

- **common tools, resources, and professional learning** designed around community schools implementation;

- **processes and structures that identify and respond to systemic implementation challenges** faced by multiple schools (e.g., aligning state reporting requirements for complementary funding streams and providing district permits for after-hours school building use by community partners); and

- **support for sustainable implementation of the strategy**, including state and district commitments to the community schools strategy through ongoing funding, adoption of statutes and/or formal policies, and resource and human capital investments.

Certification Systems

In many fields, a strategy used to help guide learning and develop quality implementation around shared features is the process of certification. Certification is a form of external review that attests to the fact that a person or organization has met certain standards or demonstrates certain features determined to be important to the status they are seeking. Certification can be designed to support an organizational learning process and to increase commonalities across a field of endeavor.

This report profiles three organizational certification systems that might inform such a process for community schools. The first two are specific to community schools: the University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools (UCF Center) and the Office of Whole Child Supports at the Georgia Department of Education. Each has set up certification as a route to bring structure, consistency, and capacity-building to the implementation of community schools in their respective states and to offer validation of quality implementation. Additionally, in an approach similar to that for community schools, the Linked Learning Alliance has established a process to aid in the quality implementation of schools designed for a particular educational strategy that combines rigorous academics, career technical education, work-based learning, and comprehensive student support services all tied to the local community.

We studied these systems by interviewing certification specialists, evaluators, and district and site-level practitioners to gain insight into their experiences both designing the process and participating in it. Additionally, we gathered and analyzed certification documents such as standards and rubrics and looked at independent evaluations of the certification systems where they existed. We sought to understand the benefits and challenges of different approaches to certification as some states investing in community schools have begun to seek methods to support quality implementation. We found different strengths and challenges associated with each system described in this report.

The **University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools** provides an example of a well-established, state-funded certification system designed specifically for community schools and operated by an institute of higher education. The process is based on 12 standards, each with several substandards. Schools apply to enter the certification pathway once they have demonstrated that certain key partnerships and positions are filled. Over the next 3 years, they self-assess against the rubric; gather artifacts; and receive technical assistance, coaching, and peer-to-peer mentoring in preparation for their readiness assessment. From this process, schools receive official feedback on strengths and areas for growth to focus on as they approach their certification assessment year and continue to receive developmental support in those areas. Through this continuous improvement process, schools are well prepared to go through certification, which entails official submission of evidence for the various components on the standards rubric; focus group interviews conducted by UCF staff and peer evaluations;

and observations. Achieving certification signifies that community schools have implemented UCF Center's community schools partnership model with fidelity. The process was perceived by practitioners as one that prizes continuous improvement and offers clear guidelines for implementation. At the same time, some participants felt that the standards were too rigid or difficult to achieve in their particular context and that the data collection process was cumbersome.

From 2021 to 2023, the **Georgia Department of Education** piloted a certification and recognition process for community schools implementing a whole child education model. Ultimately, the process was designed to recognize and celebrate schools as they progressed from one stage of implementation to the next, characterized by the acronym LEAD (Learning, Emerging, Achieving, Distinguished). Each stage had associated benchmarks that set expectations for structures and processes. Later stages (Achieving and Distinguished) expected evidence of integration with the schoolwide improvement plan, impact, and outcomes. Although the finalized second set of standards—developed in collaboration with the practitioners in the pilot—and accompanying coaching were praised by educators, the pilot faced challenges throughout due to capacity issues within the Department of Education and a rush to begin before certification materials, including consensus-defined standards and a rubric, were completed. Ultimately, the process was shut down for consolidation and reorganization within the Office of Whole Child Supports.

The **Linked Learning Alliance** (LLA), a nonprofit organization based in California, supports a two-tiered certification process for Linked Learning pathways in secondary schools that is designed to recognize implementation fidelity and excellence. Several hundred schools are supported through this process, which offers multiple opportunities for collaboration among evaluators and pathway staff. It also employs an easily accessible platform for artifact collection and self-study as ways to ensure the process prioritizes learning. Participants receive regular feedback on the materials they submit and even codevelop goals for improvement after the formal certification process concludes. An interviewee noted that this individualized process helps schools build on their strengths and learn from their growth opportunities. This long-standing system has costs, both direct costs for applying and costs at the school and district levels to support required and recommended staffing.

Key Takeaways: What States and Districts Should Consider

As funding and support for community schools continue to increase, interest in strategies to support effective implementation—including certification—will likely grow as well. The examples highlighted in this report offer several key takeaways that can help inform states, districts, and other entities interested in community schools certification:

- **Well-designed community schools certification systems can offer schools a set of goals and a structured process that build their local capacity for effective implementation and aid them in assessing and making progress toward their goals.** Certification can enhance effective implementation by establishing common indicators, benchmarks, and standards—and an accompanying data system—that allow those within and outside the school to assess the quality of their work and make strategic adjustments related to implementation and programming.

Schools pursuing certification can gain access to guidance and professional learning that support implementation. Further, attaining certification can affirm and validate schools' transformation efforts and signal their impact.

- **Collaboratively developed, appropriately focused yet flexible standards are a key element of community schools certification that can help increase buy-in and foster consistency and quality.** Standards can be beneficial to community schools implementation, as they establish clear guardrails and guidelines and create a common language around the community schools strategy. Standards also establish and clarify the benchmarks for achieving certification. In the certification systems studied, standards were best received when they were lean and focused—capturing the essential elements of implementation with clearly defined nonnegotiables and sufficient flexibility to allow for different contexts. In these systems, standards were created and/or revised through a collaborative and consensus-building process involving multiple stakeholders, both to model continuous improvement and to increase ease of use and buy-in.

- **The certifying entity and participating schools must have sufficient resources and time to create and engage in a well-designed review and feedback process that supports effective implementation.** To build capacity for effective implementation, the agency sponsoring the certification process must invest sufficient resources to support onboarding and ongoing coaching of district and school personnel (namely coordinators and principals), staff the evaluation process, expand as more schools apply for certification, and, in some cases, provide technical assistance. The amount of time allotted for schools to attain certification should be long enough for participants to engage meaningfully in the process and deepen implementation year over year.

- **Certification processes are viewed as offering the most value when they are organized to focus on continuous improvement rather than compliance and accountability.** All three certification systems we examined were designed to center on continuous improvement. Promising strategies included offering general and targeted technical assistance; creating peer and mentor networks for community schools coordinators; having an assigned coach; building in check-ins and feedback sessions, including peer reviewers in the certification process; and maintaining a resource library for participants. By leaving program implementation open to examination and adjustments, certification may be seen as formative—allowing for growth—rather than promoting a compliance-oriented or even punitive system, though this tension remains. One way to accomplish this and provide a useful road map for schools is through establishing phases or tiers with clearly defined thresholds for implementation, as did the certification systems highlighted in this report. This allows schools to achieve baseline implementation, celebrate growth, and strive for excellence. Further, structuring the certification process in this way validates the improvement efforts of each site and reiterates the centrality of learning and development in the process.

- **Data can helpfully inform the community schools certification process when focused judiciously on the most essential elements of the community schools strategy.** For certification to support and contribute to continuous improvement in community schools, it should be informed by data collection and monitoring of progress toward achieving shared implementation standards. Certification agencies should work to ensure that the data requested for certification are accessible, collectible, and not overly duplicative of other required reporting processes so that the process does

not become overwhelming or unduly burdensome. Data and monitoring are most useful when they yield information about both implementation and student experiences, capture a range of "whole child" factors, and reflect realistic expectations based on the maturity of a community school.

- **Options for where to house a certifying entity include institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and state education agencies.** Choosing the certifiying entity is a key decision that includes whether a potential certifying entity has a sufficient number of staff members with the right expertise and resources available to develop and run the certification system. Another key consideration is whether the potential certifying entity has a commitment at the highest institutional level to develop and sustain such a complex, multilayered process.

- **Couching the certification process within structures and policies that promote alignment, buy-in, and capacity-building will help foster sustainability and can improve the experience and outcomes.** Certification will be most successful when it is part of a larger system of structures and policies that promote coherence and sustainability. State and district accountability and reporting mechanisms, for example, may need to be reconsidered or revised to avoid common implementation barriers. In addition, because certification is a multiyear intensive process, ensuring schools have adequate and sustained funding is important. Stable funding allows schools to fully focus on implementation and meeting the needs of students and families.

Introduction

Support and funding for community schools have increased in recent years at both the state and federal levels, in part due to schools' responses to local needs during the pandemic.[1] Several states—including California, Illinois, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont—are offering community schools grants. Maryland and New York are providing sustained formula funding for community schools.[2] At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education's Full-Service Community Schools grant program budget increased from $75 million to $150 million from 2023 to 2024.[3] Federal pandemic relief funds also enabled many states and districts to launch or expand community schools initiatives. As community schools continue to expand—with a recent estimate from the Institute of Education Sciences at 23,000 schools nationwide as of 2024[4]—districts, community-based organizations, counties, and states are focusing on how to scale and support the work of implementing community schools effectively and efficiently while allowing them to remain true to their local contexts.

Although no two community schools are exactly alike, they do share common features. To establish alignment around these essential elements and promote effective implementation, Community Schools Forward—a partnership among the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution (CUE), the Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools (NCCS), the Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) at Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI)—convened a national task force with leaders from 45 organizations and consulted with hundreds of practitioners and researchers over the course of 2 years. This collaborative effort to develop tools and resources based on existing models of community schools, the latest research on how children learn and develop, and decades of practitioner experience in community schools resulted in a definition, framework (see Figure 1), theory of action, and resource on indicators and outcomes for community schools.[5]

At their core, 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. These resources are tailored to the needs and goals of students and families while creating a community-connected, learner-centered focus on student and family assets and needs. This strategy brings educators, community partners, 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, the six key site-level practices are: (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 and shared power and voice. These whole child practices are best implemented when there is a shared vision and purpose, trusting relationships are formed among members of the school community, and decision-making is both data-informed and inclusive. Research shows that well-implemented community schools can improve students' attendance, behavior, engagement, and academic outcomes, including test scores and graduation rates.[6]

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Figure 1. Essentials for Community Schools 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*.

The growing number of community schools raises the question of how to consistently develop and support a system of well-implemented community schools. Some states have offered technical assistance to accompany community schools funding opportunities and support high-quality implementation.[7] Other states and initiatives have combined technical assistance with a certification process or a similarly designed system of validation for community schools. Typically, certification (in both educational and noneducational settings) is an external review and recognition process that attests to the presence of a set of features and accomplishments deemed essential to quality practice or a quality product.

This report focuses on community schools certification efforts. The topic emerged because some locales are currently considering a certification process to support the growing number of community schools. To inform these efforts, LPI explored what community schools certification looked like in areas that had already begun this process.

This report profiles three certification processes designed to support effective implementation of the community schools strategy and Linked Learning pathways program. Each of these approaches—in California, Florida, and Georgia—sought to provide system-level support, offer a road map for implementation, and promote learning and continuous improvement. Each profile includes a description of the certification process, themes drawn from document analysis and interview data, and a discussion of promising practices and challenges in developing and maintaining a certification process. The data collection process was not designed to evaluate these systems but rather to offer an overview of how several places are currently approaching certification. The report concludes with key considerations for states and districts interested in crafting a certification, recognition, or validation process as they implement community schools at scale.

Research on Implementation

We begin this report by outlining research on why implementation matters and how to best support effective implementation of the community schools strategy. Research finds that well-implemented community schools can improve school climate and culture, as well as a range of student outcomes. The growing body of evidence on the impacts of community schools finds a wide range of benefits associated with community schools, including increased attendance rates; reductions in disciplinary incidents (particularly in elementary/middle-grade spans); improvements in students' self-reported engagement, sense of connectedness to adults and peers, and attitudes toward school; and improvements in school climate (e.g., student, family, and teacher perceptions of the level of support available at the school) and student achievement (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, and career and college readiness).[8]

Recent research provides additional insight into the relationship between community schools implementation and outcomes, finding that longer and more sustained implementation is associated with more significant outcomes.[9] Impacts that are sometimes found early in community schools implementation, such as improved daily attendance, can grow over time (see Table 1). And impacts that take longer to achieve, such as changes in academic measures, may emerge after implementation takes hold.[10] Researchers examining community schools initiatives have noted, "In the first 3 to 4 years, schools generally achieve only partial implementation of complex change efforts, with full implementation taking upwards of five to 10 years."[11]

Table 1. Examples of Staged (Tiered) Student Indicators in Community Schools

Planning (Year 0)	Emerging (Years 1–2)	Maturing (Years 3–4)	Transforming (Years 5–7)
Baseline levels of key student outcomes are collected and/or analyzed.	Feeling welcome, safe, and happy at school; having trusting relationships with adults and peers; disciplinary incidents; chronic absence; physical health needs addressed (vision, dental, etc.)		
		Course enrollment and completion; grade advancement; grades; on track for graduation; attendance; basic needs addressed (hunger and housing insecurity, etc.); mental health needs addressed (trauma, interpersonal conflict)	
			Steady or stabilized enrollment, academic growth, test scores, graduation rates, and postsecondary acceptance and enrollment; physical and mental well-being

Source: Adapted from Oakes, J., Germain, E., & Maier, A. (2023). *Outcomes and indicators for community schools: A guide for implementers and evaluators* [Community Schools Forward Project Series]. Learning Policy Institute.

However, sustained implementation and positive results cannot be taken for granted. A recent study examining the impact of a network of community schools a decade after they were established finds that the failure to sustain an emphasis on effective implementation undermined earlier gains.[12] The regression among these schools is attributed to shifting priorities and centralization in the district that sidelined the long-standing, effective theory of action for implementation and ended funding for key positions, such as the community school coordinator. Neither the schools nor the district was tied to a codified set of expectations for implementation, meaning that as the district changed its priorities, key elements of community schools were set aside.

Research shows that continuous improvement, a central feature of community schools, can help maintain a focus on effective implementation and ensure the strategy remains tied to the needs and goals of the school community. The process pulls together a team of educators, parents, students, and community partners who evaluate the implementation of practices, services, and interventions by regularly collecting data, reflecting on progress and impact, and suggesting necessary adjustments to how the strategy is implemented.[13] Community school initiatives and school sites are most likely to sustain implementation and build on an initial period of success through a commitment to the practice of continuous improvement.[14]

Systemic Conditions for Effective Implementation

There have been recent changes to the landscape of community schools. Historically, community schools have been initiated and implemented one school at a time, with little state or district involvement.[15] However, the increased policy interest and federal and state funding for community schools have spurred a proliferation of community schools systems. These networks of community schools are overseen and supported by one or more of the following: states, regional entities (e.g., counties), districts, and community-based organizations.

Crafting Coherence

Scaling and supporting systems of community schools will require intentional planning and coordination across multiple entities to facilitate effective school-level implementation. Schools face an enormous number of demands on all aspects of education stemming from federal and state governments, district leadership, local school boards, unions, the local community, parents, and students. In research, the barrage of competing priorities and programs is sometimes referred to as "policy incoherence" and can hinder school improvement efforts.[16] Therefore, it takes intentional efforts to "craft coherence." In other words, schools, districts, and even states must work together to continually negotiate the fit between a school's own goals and strategies with local- and state-level goals and demands.[17] In fact, improving school performance, especially when implementing a new strategy or model (like community schools), can be "bolstered or stalled by the system in which it operates" based on how well the goals are aligned. The locally driven nature of community schools further heightens this tension.

We lean on school improvement and turnaround research to consider how to best implement community schools systems. Efforts highlight that when state education agencies (SEAs), districts, and schools coordinate efforts among staff, they can more effectively harness resources and implementation efforts toward a shared vision of success.[18] This coordination is particularly important to consider when thinking through how to support wider-scale implementation of community schools because community schools personnel sit in different departments at the state and district levels.

Community schools also introduce new actors into the system, whether it is a lead agency (e.g., nonprofit or university) or key partners. Thus, collective action and impact can be most effectively achieved when these entities are in alignment, working with a shared understanding and toward common goals. Further, research on school turnaround finds that successful school improvement is a phased process in which practices and structures are "routinized and sustained" over time.[19] This existing knowledge suggests that implementing a certification process oriented toward continuous improvement can help in crafting coherence around the community schools strategy.

Building System-Level Capacity

Across the country, policymakers and educators are thinking about how to consistently and effectively build the capacity of community schools. Systems seeking to support and develop community schools must coherently and consistently provide guidance on expectations for implementation while honoring the unique local needs and goals of each school. These guidelines or standards cannot simply be drawn up and imposed. Research has shown that compliance-oriented mandates are, by themselves, ineffective for supporting school improvement strategies, as they are apt to lead to performative rather than substantive implementation.[20] At the same time, clear standards and learning opportunities are necessary to support practitioners as they adopt and adapt to new strategies and practices,[21] but are not enough on their own.[22]

Thoughtfully developed and codified materials (e.g., guidelines, standards, rubrics) can support consistent implementation, but they are only truly effective when integrated into existing structures and supported through aligned capacity-building. As Mehta and Fine noted when they analyzed two schools aiming to implement more consistent instructional practices, "Only if the infrastructure is part of a coherent, designed, and integrated structure will it achieve its effects."[23] Doing this work involves communication and coordination that is generated both from the ground up (schools to districts and local government) and from the top levels of the community schools system down to schools. It also requires the entities involved to discuss the specific supports needed for high-quality implementation and to define roles and coconstruct processes (e.g., the frequency and goals of meetings, how decisions will be made, and how to assess progress) to ensure they are all working together toward common goals.[24]

How states and districts have succeeded and struggled to support schools in implementing improvement strategies, including community-driven and partnership-based ones, can inform how community schools systems might best support their implementation through a certification process. For example, research on school turnaround and school improvement highlights the key challenge of balancing how to hold districts and/or schools accountable while also supporting them to meet improvement goals. Efforts are most effective when the overseeing agency takes on a capacity-building role and shifts away from its traditional role as regulator and compliance monitor. Taking on this role also means that the agency provides technical assistance that is more than a dissemination of knowledge and skills. Instead, the aim of technical assistance is to develop the school's ability and capacity to think critically, solve problems, apply new knowledge and skills, activate networks, and leverage resources to pursue strategic goals.[25]

As districts consider how to support community schools implementation through a certification process, they are also likely to be most effective if they can shift away from their regulatory capacity. In part, this shift looks like creating policy and supports based on school communities' goals, needs, and experiences and using that information to guide central office policies, roles, and structures to enable local autonomy and build tailored capacity.[26]

Summary of Research Implications for Community Schools Certification

Quality implementation of whole school improvement strategies, like community schools, are best positioned for success when the work is aligned and supported at both the state and district levels. The research reviewed in this section suggests system-level conditions that can help build the capacity of schools in a way that is effective, efficient, and aligned.[27] Explicit conditions—as applied to community schools—include:

- **a shared understanding** of the strategy with coherent policies, structures, standards, and reporting requirements that balance the tight–loose nature of community schools (i.e., naming what is essential and expected for effective implementation while allowing communities to set priorities and determine "the how" of implementation);

- **a framework for indicators and outcomes** that establishes milestones for gauging progress, draws on accessible data that can be used to develop strategic plans customized to local assets and needs, and encourages communication among states, districts (including superintendents and school boards), and sites about progress and opportunities;

- **intentional staffing to support continuous improvement and implementation**, including clear roles and community schools–specific supports (e.g., state and district personnel whose main job is to provide customized, targeted technical assistance, feedback, and coaching to community schools sites);

- **common tools, resources, and professional learning** designed around community schools implementation;

- **processes and structures that identify and respond to systemic implementation challenges** faced by multiple schools (e.g., aligning state reporting requirements for complementary funding streams and/or providing district permits for after-hours school building use by community partners); and

- **support for sustainable implementation of the strategy**, including state and district commitments to the community schools strategy through ongoing funding, adoption of statutes and/or formal policies, and resource and human capital investments.

Based on these conditions, the types of certification processes likely to support effective implementation at scale will not simply assess whether schools meet particular standards. Instead, they will allow for growth and deepening of implementation through prioritizing and helping to integrate continuous improvement into daily practice and providing targeted support. The next section of this report explores community schools certification in more depth, including a description of certification processes in California, Florida, and Georgia.

Certification and Community Schools

As described in the examples in this section, certification combines self-reflection and data reporting on a set of standards or criteria with an external review and recognition process. To illustrate what community schools certification can look like in practice, this section of the report examines two certification systems developed specifically for community schools in Florida and Georgia and one system developed for Linked Learning, an education initiative developed in California and used in several states that shares many features with community schools. We chose to highlight these systems because of their commitment to certification as a tool for deepening implementation and supporting continuous improvement. At the same time, each system has unique characteristics and goals that allow us to illustrate different approaches to the certification process (see Appendix A).

While these programs are quite small in scale, their experiences are instructive on both the promise and challenges of certification for community schools. What we find is that when designed as a learning process for community schools with an emphasis on capacity-building and continuous improvement, certification may support effective implementation. Important elements of the certification process include the collection and use of data, the design and delivery of professional learning, and the development of shared standards and benchmarks of progress.

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Certification offers one way to validate schools' efforts and to establish common, evidence-based indicators, benchmarks, and guardrails for those within and outside the school to assess and drive quality implementation. For states and districts, certification might also provide the opportunity to develop consensus around staged implementation and outcome indicators for community schools. It is important to note that because community schools are designed around local assets and needs, a certification process cannot be overly prescriptive. Instead, it should strike a balance between identifying common essential elements of implementation and related outcomes and allowing for flexibility in how those elements manifest and are reported. Emphasis on the process as a learning problem allows for growth and moves certification away from a compliance-oriented system.

Certification can also provide a structure for continuous improvement in community schools. Continuous improvement can focus on many different facets of implementation, including processes around coordination, collaborative leadership, needs assessment, relationship building with families and the community, as well as around service quality at the point of service.[28] Depending on how it is structured, continuous improvement can be an unwieldy undertaking given the sheer volume of data available. However, certification has the potential to more clearly define the scope of these improvement efforts by focusing on key components of implementation, signaling which types of data and indicators should be collected and analyzed, and providing an expected time frame and benchmarks for implementation.

The remainder of this report outlines how the three systems selected—in Florida, in Georgia, and for Linked Learning—developed certification processes, noting both successes and challenges. Data collection for the report was designed to obtain input from key actors within each of these certification systems, including key leaders of the certification program at each site as well as district-level personnel. In Florida, we also interviewed several community schools coordinators. This data collection took place between fall 2022 and fall 2023. Additionally, the Learning Policy Institute gathered and analyzed documents, standards, and rubrics and looked at independent evaluations of certification systems where they existed.

University of Central Florida: A Well-Established Certification Process With State Financial Support

The University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools (UCF Center) provides an example of a well-established, state-funded certification system designed specifically for community schools and operated by an institute of higher education.

Certification Process Overview

UCF Center houses the certification process for the Community Partnership Schools (CPS) model throughout the state of Florida.[29] Certification signals that community schools are implementing the well-defined CPS model with fidelity. This model, initially developed in 2010 at Evans High School in Orlando, FL, is considered highly successful.[30] It is based on a combination of the Children's Aid Society community schools approach—emphasizing a strong academic program, out-of-school activities for students and the community, health services, and strong family engagement—and the university-assisted community schools approach led by the University of Pennsylvania.[31] Beginning in 2014, UCF Center was established to support high-quality replication and sustainability of the CPS model.

Of the systems reviewed in this report, only UCF Center's was designed around a highly specified model of the community schools strategy, requiring certain staffing and features to be in place to be certified as a CPS school. These requirements allow for replicating their proven approach but also can limit who and how many schools can participate in certification. Though certain expectations were rigid, several standards also encourage innovation and adaptability so each school could tailor its model to the school community, similar to the other systems reviewed in this report.

The CPS approach to community schools is grounded in well-defined structures and fundamental practices captured in 12 standards outlined in UCF-Certified Community Partnership Schools Fundamental Practices 3.0.[32] At the core of the model is a partnership among four entities (a nonprofit, a university or college, a school district, and a health care provider). Those entities collaborate to understand the needs of the community and design a school around four pillars: (1) collaborative leadership, (2) expanded learning, (3) wellness supports, and (4) family and community engagement. Each of these pillars has dedicated personnel—the community schools director, who is a staff member of the nonprofit partner organization and is responsible for implementing collaborative leadership practices, and a coordinator for each of the other pillars to help implement programs and opportunities related to expanded learning, wellness supports, and family and community engagement.

UCF Center manages a certification process for schools seeking to be part of the initiative, provides technical assistance, and administers a state-funded grant program for participating schools. State funding of around $1 million first became available for this work in 2014. The Florida legislature codified the grant program in 2019 and substantially increased the available funding.[33] In fiscal year 2024, $20.1 million in state funding was appropriated to UCF Center for operating the certification process, providing technical assistance, and paying out planning and implementation grants.[34] This is a recurring line item in the state education budget, although the amount has varied by year, with it more than doubling between 2022 and 2024. UCF Center currently serves 43 schools and hopes to expand the number of schools entering the certification process each year through future state funding increases.

UCF Center distributes planning and implementation grants to schools seeking certification. The grants, awarded to the lead nonprofit agency partnered with the school, are intended to be used primarily for staffing core positions at the community school and for administrative costs. It can also be used for ancillary positions at a school; operational costs for programs and services that directly address student, family, and community needs; or project support—including positions that support more than one school. There are several types of grants. Planning grants are awarded for up to $80,000 and require a 25% match from community contributions (either cash or in-kind). Typically, the implementation grants range from $150,00 to $200,000 per year for the first 5 years. After certification, there is a gradual step-down in grant money, as schools are expected to have sustainability plans in place as they increasingly blend and braid funding to cover costs.

Nonprofits, which are responsible for staffing the community school director position, are encouraged to take the lead on the application and data collection process for certification, including submitting the initial planning grant application. Schools are encouraged to apply for what is known as the "planning track" once they have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in place (preferably signed) with each of the four required core partners (nonprofit agency, university/college, school district, and health care provider); have the director position in place; and can demonstrate that existing programming is aligned with the needs of the community.

Certification Structure

Schools on the planning track receive a 1-year grant, and as long as they are on track and keeping up with deliverables, they are eligible to enter the certification track and receive 3 to 5 years of implementation funding as they prepare for and complete the certification process. Throughout this time, schools are required to submit quarterly progress reports to UCF Center. In the certification year, schools complete a self-study that mirrors the quarterly progress reports. The self-study is intended to be driven by a diagnostic tool that is completed by the core partners. For each standard and substandard or indicator, the partners craft a narrative and provide evidence and documentation that illustrate the ways in which they are trying to implement, have implemented, or have innovated in that particular area. Describing how the data are collected, one coordinator shared:

> Within each standard there are indicators that speak really specifically to the work in that standard. ... So for example, if the standard is volunteerism and the indicator says, "you recognize volunteers," we say yes, we do. We send Christmas cards, and we have a banquet. At the end of the year, and you know we have personal relationships, we thank them informally.

The evidence would then look like a printout of the invitation. A picture from the ceremony ... a copy of the card. It could even be something as informal as text messages, right? So, I have utilized screenshots of text messages. ... So really trying to cover that for each indicator in every standard the full breadth of how we're executing that indicator, but also being mindful that we don't want to dump 60 documents or pictures or evidence items because for a review that is overwhelming. You kind of get lost in too much data. So we are intentional, trying to pick what paints the right picture.

Led by the director, and with the key partners, participating schools enter this information in a data portal (utilizing a shared drive) offered by UCF Center. Once this step is completed, a team of four to six external reviewers (involving both peer reviewers—for instance, a community schools director from another site always participates in the process—and reviewers from UCF Center) conduct their own assessment using the same tool. Some of these reviewers then visit the campus to conduct observations, interviews, and focus groups.

The 12 standards are the basis for the assessment tool (see Certification Standards for the Center for Community Schools at University of Central Florida). Each standard is broken down into several substandards with attached descriptions. Those substandards are further separated into two categories: (1) fundamental practices and (2) overall assessment. All fundamental practices are nonnegotiable and must be implemented to be eligible for certification. They are reported as either "implemented" or "not in use." The overall assessment section's substandards are evaluated based on a four-point rubric: not using, developing, implementing, and innovating. In the overall assessment section, for each standard, schools must earn 50% of the total possible points under "implementing" (three points per substandard) to be eligible for certification (see Table B1 for an example).

The initial certification process takes up to 5 years, with the possibility of early certification after a third-year readiness assessment. The review process itself occurs over 3 days, though the finalized report is not shared for about 4 weeks. Preparation leading up to the review can take 2 to 6 months, depending on the school site. Once schools are certified, they have an affirmation assessment after 3 years and a recertification assessment after 5 years. CPS model schools must maintain all fundamental practices to keep their certification status. If they do not have those in place, they will lose their status and funding eligibility; however, they can reapply after 2 years. If, in the subsequent recertification checks, the fundamentals are in place, but the school does not pass the overall assessment (i.e., meeting the point requirements for each standard), the school is granted a 1-year probationary period and has 60 days after notification to create an action plan.

Certification Standards for the Center for Community Schools at University of Central Florida

Certification standards in the assessment used at the Center for Community Schools at University of Central Florida include the following:

- Partnership: The Community Partnership School establishes and maintains a strong and committed partnership.

- Collaborative Leadership, Governance, and Organizational Structure: The Community Partnership School operates effectively under a shared collaborative leadership.

- Foundational Principles: The partnership is dedicated to maintaining the foundation of Community Partnership School principles.

- Staffing: The Community Partnership School core staff works effectively by maintaining a high standard of service to the school.

- Integrated Community Partnership School Framework: Our Community Partnership School staff, programs, and services are fully integrated into the school.

- Expanded Learning Opportunities: The Community Partnership School delivers high-quality expanded learning opportunity programs and services that align with the collective vision of the Community Partnership School and the needs of the students, families, and community.

- Comprehensive Wellness Supports: The Community Partnership School offers quality comprehensive wellness support services to students.

- Family and Community Engagement: Active family and community engagement is strong at our school.

- Volunteering: Volunteer opportunities support the purpose and direction of the Community Partnership School.

- University Assistance: The university/college partner activates and connects institutional assets to support and sustain the Community Partnership School.

- Evaluation: A comprehensive evaluation system is in place, offering a range of data that is used to guide continuous improvement.

- Sustainability: A strong continuing sustainability plan/process is evident, which ensures the long-term continuance of key Community Partnership School programs, services, and positions.

Source: University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools. (2022). *UCF-Certified Community Partnership Schools™ standards and certification processes.* University of Central Florida.

Successes and Challenges

Overall, both site directors and UCF staff emphasized that the certification process was grounded in learning and improving upon a foundation of clear practices. UCF Center staff were keenly aware of the "delicate balance between compliance and practice." Accordingly, they were transparent and intentional

in communicating the purpose of "the rating system and what the points really represent and where to put emphasis." As another UCF Center interviewee described, certification is truly meant to be a continuous learning process that is supported through technical assistance, regular check-ins with the UCF team, and other growth opportunities offered by UCF Center. The interviewee said:

> We want them to become certified, and so we're looking for them to tell us we don't have a deficit mindset. Everything that is in this is an asset-based approach, and so it's all about, "How can we elevate you? How can we look for the good things that are happening here? How can we certify you?"

In other words, the certification process was designed to be "strengths-based ... to ensure that the standards of the [CPS model] are consistently implemented and maintained across all [CPS model schools]."

One participant, a community schools director, noted that the certification process had informed her work and helped her understand what she and her partners were doing well and where they needed to change or improve. This was not a compliance activity, but rather, the interviewee was working with core partners to try to determine the following:

> [Were we] meeting the standards as they were spelled out, and how were we meeting them? Not just are we meeting them? Check. But okay, how are we meeting them? What evidence do we have that we're meeting them? Do we have minutes for meetings? Do we have data? Do we have student-improved outcomes? What are our grades telling us? What is our attendance telling us? What are our behavior numbers telling us? So, really looking at that data from a broad picture and also utilizing that data to tell us what programs needed to stop, what programs needed to improve, or what programs we were missing and needed to add.

Another director interviewee noted a similar experience with the process:

> It's not yes and no. It's not a check in the box. It's much more progress monitoring and a continuous improvement plan, so to speak. So, for some of our funders, it's 80% of kids need to attend school, right? Or 60% need to achieve [proficiency] in math. But for certification, it looks a lot more like, are there systems created? Are you collecting data, analyzing it, and taking action? And so, it's not just did you give out surveys or, you know, is there a nurse on-site? It's [asking,] have you evaluated these things and then taken action? And so, I think the intention in that is to ensure that there is strategy, that there's continuous improvement, that it's not just saying we served and check a box, but are we adequately serving?

Interviewees appreciated the mentorship opportunities, networking across positions and schools, targeted technical assistance, one-on-one support for directors and coordinators, and the peer review component of the assessment. Importantly, this process was received by users in the way it was intended: to help committed partners achieve their community schools goals with direction and guardrails, to become knowledgeable consumers and users of data, and to develop facility with acting based on community need while knowing their areas of strength and areas of growth. Participants also felt that the certification process being housed at the university provided credibility and neutrality and allowed for the process to be much more about growth and capacity-building versus accountability.

While certification overall was viewed by participants as positive and helpful, there were some areas for improvement. The length and detail of the standards and certification process were seen as a heavy lift that could eat into other priorities at the school, including staff cutting back on programming they might otherwise be implementing during the data collection phase. Additionally, the standards could be inflexible, making the process more challenging when local needs, resources, and context did not align well. For example, a rural director noted that the expectation that a school would have an on-site health center was very difficult to fulfill based on the availability of partners and resources. Finally, while the small number of schools that are certified each year (ranging from 0 to 12) due to capacity and allotted funding allows for quality control, it also limits the growth of the model in places that may be ready to participate.

Key Takeaways on the Process

As described in the previous section, participants highlighted particular features of UCF Center's process that were especially helpful. These features are consistent with an evaluation of UCF's CPS model that elevated a number of strengths in their certification system. Researchers from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that "the process of certification and attention to the 12 standards provides an implementation road map and can keep schools from losing their focus over time on the shared vision and goals of the school."[35] The report outlined other elements connected to certification that were particularly effective:

- **Technical Assistance From UCF Center.** The most frequently noted form of technical assistance was one-on-one support for community schools directors in which they received help navigating the requirements of the certification process, identifying artifacts and data, and aligning reporting with the standards and indicators. UCF Center also provided learning communities for directors.

- **School-to-School Mentorship.** Though not formalized, peer networks were available and used by precertified schools to gain advice and insight from their more experienced peers.

- **Participation in the Peer Review Process.** Participating in the certification process as a peer reviewer was particularly meaningful for community school directors, as it allowed them to develop a deep understanding of the certification process, learn how other schools structure their work, and gain professional development through participation, including how to support their own school through certification.

- **Resource Library.** UCF Center developed a certification handbook and a variety of other resources for directors.

UCF Center's certification process elevated a few other key points to consider, including the following:

- There is a delicate balance between having explicit standards and expectations and having too many. While participants appreciated having the road map to success, they also sometimes felt overwhelmed by it.

- Even though schools were not expected to meet every single substandard, having them listed with points attached caused participants to feel pressure to do everything. However, UCF Center staff were cognizant of this issue and tried through coaching and feedback to highlight strengths and areas for schools to focus on in their efforts.

- Nonnegotiables helped set a baseline expectation and a foundation to build upon.

- Making certification evaluations low stakes and turning in data and self-evaluations quarterly allowed schools to see the value in the process and work toward improving areas of growth.

- Housing certification at a university provided certain benefits, including resources, research, staffing, and a detachment from the stresses attached to state and district accountability requirements. A drawback was that there was an added layer of work for school staff and the community schools director that may not coincide with those same accountability requirements.

From Certification to Recognition: A Georgia Department of Education Pilot for Whole Child Education Model Schools

From 2021 to 2023, the Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE) piloted a certification and recognition process for community schools implementing a whole child education model.

Certification Process Overview

In 2016, GA DOE created the Office of Whole Child Supports (OWCS) to help districts and schools identify and address nonacademic barriers to success while expanding learning opportunities. In 2021, OWCS received $10 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding to support its work, including the development of an online Whole Child Toolkit and a pilot certification process for community schools, known as *whole child model schools*.

OWCS drew on two education frameworks to define its whole child education model. The model included four pillars of community schools:

1. Integrated student supports
2. Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities
3. Active family and community engagement
4. Collaborative leadership and practices[36]

It also included five whole child tenets for students from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

1. Healthy (e.g., enter school healthy and practice a healthy lifestyle)
2. Safe (e.g., learn in a physically and emotionally safe environment for students and adults)
3. Engaged (e.g., actively engage in learning and connect to the school and broader community)
4. Supported (e.g., access personalized learning and be supported by qualified, caring adults)
5. Challenged (e.g., be challenged academically and prepared for career pursuits to be critical thinkers in a global environment)[37]

The overarching goal of the certification process was to help schools develop and independently sustain a whole child education model by building their capacity to implement an inclusive and data-driven approach aligned with community input and needs.

Certification Structure

In its initial conception, participation in the certification process was designed to be voluntary and to unfold in two phases: (1) pre-assessment and (2) certification. The pre-assessment phase was designed as a yearlong process that aimed to guide schools in developing and implementing a community school strategy with fidelity to the whole child education model. In the pre-assessment phase, schools were required to employ a whole child, or community schools, coordinator who was tasked with establishing a collaborative leadership team and creating a school improvement plan based on a needs and asset assessment. Districts with multiple pilot sites were required to employ a systems-level coordinator to facilitate collaboration and support between the pilot schools and GA DOE. The pre-assessment process was grounded in "certification benchmarks," which served as both a playbook and a timeline to guide the leadership team through the planning and implementation stages of the school's improvement plan (see Table 2).

Table 2. Year 1 Benchmarks for Community Schools Implementation in Georgia

Benchmarks and standards	Examples of aligned work
Self-Assessment: Complete Self-Assessment. School Climate, School Data, and Impact Data	Analyze collected data and create goals for school improvement.
Benchmark 1: Get Started and Grounded in Whole Child Model School Best Practices	Conduct self-identity reflection and identify the "why" for this work. Understand and align with the goals and outcomes of the School Improvement Plan.
Benchmark 2: Map School and Community	Attend meetings to learn what stakeholders (students, school staff, families, and community members) are working on and create a resource guide.
Benchmark 3: Develop a School Community Team	Form a school community team with key leaders, including teachers, students, parents, partners, etc.
Benchmark 4: Work on Continuous Team Building	Build relationships and learn the strengths and talents of your school community team.
Benchmark 5: Create Pillar Teams and Develop a Plan for Engagement	Create a needs/assets assessment plan and analyze existing data.
Benchmark 6: Execute Engagement Plan (With 75% Engagement)	Implement the needs/assets assessment with 75%–100% engagement of the school community.
Benchmark 7: Determine Priorities Using Patterns, Trends, and Data Analysis	Analyze needs/assets assessment data and identify 2–3 key issues.
Focus on Quality and Continuous Improvement	Engage in the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of documents from the Office of Whole Child Supports at the Georgia Department of Education. (2025).

After completing the pre-assessment process, schools would move into the certification phase. During this period, the plan was for a cross-disciplinary team of GA DOE staff to conduct a site visit, interview district and school leaders, and review relevant school documents and data, with the aim to assess both the implementation and impact of the community schools strategy at the school. Once achieved, certification status would last for 3 years, with recertification contingent on showing growth in at least one area of the whole child education model. Achieving certification would come with public recognition and acknowledgment as a Whole Child Model School (e.g., a banner, press coverage) and priority status if state funding became available.

In fall 2022, OWCS piloted its initial version of certification with a cohort of 10 urban schools. The pilot included state-developed certification benchmarks for implementation and expected outcomes, which were revised at a later point (described in this section). The pilot surfaced a number of concerns among practitioners. One major concern was that schools doing good work and making implementation progress might drop the strategy if they did not think they would hit outcome targets. Ongoing feedback collected during the pilot—through formal professional learning sessions and coaching—revealed that participants felt the process was overly top-down and focused on data submission and hitting targets, as opposed to telling the story of impact and transformation. These attributes made certification feel like more of a compliance exercise, ending with a discrete determination of whether schools hit the benchmark and outcomes, rather than a means to harness learning and capacity-building opportunities.

As a result, the focus shifted from official endorsement to recognition, supported by a multilevel coaching model and a consistent set of benchmarks that emphasized year-over-year progress in implementing the strategy. In describing the reasoning for the change, an interviewee explained:

> When you approach someone with a certification program, that means you're certified. They succeed at something and are certified. With this [the community schools strategy], it is too robust. It's not a checklist. It becomes way more compliance driven than transformation driven. And when doing something new like this and being in this trailblazer role, because it's new, and it's a paradigm shift for a lot, I would rather them reach toward this next phase. All the phases are extremely important … when you're doing it with fidelity, [rather] than trying to keep checking boxes.

OWCS anticipated that the shift to recognition, while still tied to standards of implementation and impacts and outcomes, would allow for a celebration of schools' developmental progress while targeting areas for growth over time. It was designed to be a process that allowed for immediate feedback and recognized the movement toward transformation each year. A district-level official overseeing community schools in the pilot explained why the shift to recognition was so beneficial:

> [Recognition] boosted the morale of the team. It gave pride to the schools, knowing that opening their doors to this strategy was impacting their kids. So if you talk about the recognition on that level, I think [it] was very helpful not only for that, but because we were also able to go to the board meeting, which opened the opportunity for the board to see and hear about the work, to understand the work, and ask questions and be more familiar with the strategy or be more familiar with what was happening on the ground.

The recognition process was tied to a rubric with criteria focused on implementation fidelity. These were assessed by providing evidence that community schools were meeting the state-developed certification benchmarks for early stages of implementation, deepening the development of structures and practices, and achieving growth in impact. The rubric was redesigned in summer 2023 through a process that

modeled collaborative leadership and decision-making based on feedback from community school coordinators, principals, and district managers from the first pilot cohort. The co-construction of the rubric from all these actors increased buy-in from educators and the community because it accounted for the unique needs of schools and made the overall process more integrated into the work of and requirements placed on schools, like aligning whole child model goals and data collection with those in their strategic/ school improvement plan. The updated rubric, called the LEAD Continuum (see Table 3 for an overview and Table B2 for more detail), included four stages of implementation: learning, emerging, achieving, and distinguished. This was intentionally designed to align with and directly speak to each school's strategic plan, district reporting requirements, and improvement goals. Turning to recognition shifted the focus from seeking official endorsement to a multilevel coaching model (described in more detail in the next section) tied to a consistent set of benchmarks for implementation.

Table 3. LEAD Continuum Rubric Overview

Learning	Emerging	Achieving	Distinguished
Whole Child Model School conducts a pre-assessment to identify strategic goals, current impact, and measures for success. Whole Child Model School identifies needs and priorities of students, parents, educators, and parents through engagement led by the school community team.	Whole Child Model School identifies Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement programs and partners to fulfill the needs and priorities of all interest holders. Whole Child Model School embeds the School Community Team's strategic plan into the school improvement plan. Whole Child Model School implements quality programs, services, and supports to impact the whole child as an additional solution to accomplish school improvement plan goals. Embeds the whole child model school into daily operations.	Whole Child Model School identifies the impact of the quality programs, services, and supports through the pillars. Whole Child Model School identifies growth and accomplishments in the school improvement plan. Whole Child Model School continues to add Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement to impact the whole child.	Whole Child Model School completed 2 school years of the Achieving phase and has embodied the Whole Child Model School framework as a model to improve the overall quality of school for all interest holders. Whole Child Model School continues to identify growth and success in the school improvement plan. Whole Child Model School continues to add Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement to impact the whole child.

Note: LEAD = Learning, Emerging, Achieving, Distinguished.

Source: Based on Learning Policy Institute analysis of documents from the Office of Whole Child Supports at the Georgia Department of Education. (2025).

Successes and Challenges

A key success of the OWCS pilot was that it focused on intentional capacity-building and professional learning structures at the district and school levels. A representative from OWCS met with district leaders individually biweekly to review the certification benchmarks, share best practices, provide coaching, and solve problems related to specific implementation challenges. This was a "train the trainer" model in which district leaders, or managers, in turn supported the principals and coordinators at participating schools. These district managers were trained to provide coaching, collect data, and conduct school observations. All principals were required to participate in an initial training to ensure they understood and were on board with the strategy; they were then offered access to monthly professional development along with school coordinators. Quarterly, all district managers, principals, and coordinators came together for professional learning and reflection time. Interview participants praised the professional development and coaching model as highly effective in developing staff capacity.

> A key success of the OWCS pilot was that it focused on intentional capacity-building and professional learning structures at the district and school levels.

However, OWCS and its pilot participants experienced several implementation challenges, in addition to revamping the process partway through the pilot. The initial certification process was rushed, leaving the certification goals and materials unfinished prior to the launch of the pilot. Implementation challenges were further exacerbated by a lack of capacity within OWCS. The entire certification process was managed by one person who also held other responsibilities.

Because the pilot was both rushed and underresourced, its implementation was uneven and did not get fully off the ground before being terminated. The experience in Georgia highlights the importance of taking time to ensure that sufficient staffing and an intentional, collaborative process of developing certification and materials are in place before testing them with schools and districts. Interviewees suggested that bringing this process to scale in Georgia would require expanding the GA DOE team and potentially relying on regional (county-level) service agencies—which are already responsible for supporting districts—and central office staff in large districts to support schools.

Funding was another challenge identified by interviewees. The main cost of GA DOE certification came from the requirement that participating schools hire a whole child (or community schools) coordinator. Because the state did not fund this position, there were concerns among pilot participants about how to sustain this work after district ESSER funds ran out. An interviewee also noted that rural schools in Georgia may have a much harder time accessing funds and establishing partnerships to offer whole child supports.

Key Takeaways on the Process

Although the recognition pilot program was short-lived, several lessons can be drawn from the Georgia experience. They include the following:

- A certification or recognition process can help define the role of the district and shape the ways in which it can and should support implementation. Additionally, district participation can help align the tracking of community schools implementation and impact with existing district priorities and requirements.

- A pilot program and an intentional collection of data and feedback facilitate an iterative process and can improve buy-in.

- A system of coaching for both district-level and school-level personnel helps build buy-in, creates alignment and consistent expectations, and encourages growth and learning as part of implementation.

- To be effective and sustainable, certification requires investments in personnel at the certifying entity, both for administration of the process and to support capacity building.

- It is essential to establish a realistic timeline that allows sufficient time to develop materials in consultation with practitioners.

- Expecting schools to do the work without committing resources to aid them in the process can deter participation and make it more difficult for schools to achieve implementation benchmarks.

- Certification that feels compliance-oriented to participants may be too rigid for community schools. A community schools certification system that is grounded in standards and benchmarks should find ways to recognize growth and development year-to-year. Waiting several years to recognize growth and impact can increase the stakes and run the risk of focusing more on accountability than continuous improvement.

Linked Learning Alliance in California: A Tiered Certification System at the Secondary Level

The Linked Learning Alliance (LLA), a nonprofit organization based in California, supports a tiered certification process for Linked Learning pathways in secondary schools that is well aligned with the community schools approach.

Certification Process Overview

Linked Learning is a program of study, or pathway, that integrates a college preparatory curriculum with career and technical education and student supports; this program is implemented through the creation of industry-themed pathways (e.g., business, science, engineering, architecture) at the high school and middle school levels. Linked Learning's model shares key features of community schools, including an emphasis on rigorous academics, real-world learning opportunities, engagement with community partners, and provision of integrated student supports, such as "contextualized and proactive acceleration strategies in literacy and mathematics, social-emotional learning, and counseling services."[38]

The Linked Learning certification process, with more than 600 registered pathways, is instructive because of its successful track record. An SRI evaluation of Linked Learning provides promising evidence of certification as a means to support effective implementation that can lead to positive outcomes.[39] The top-line implication of its study was that quality matters, with pathways certified to meet Linked Learning's standards exhibiting more positive results than noncertified pathways.[40] At the same time, there were smaller and less consistent positive effects when comparing students in noncertified pathways with those in traditional high schools. The authors attributed this, in part, to the level of implementation quality resulting from participation in the LLA certification process.

The Linked Learning experience is also relevant to understanding certification processes for community schools because, like community schools, this strategy requires structural shifts to the school to improve student engagement, achievement, and attainment. LLA established this certification process with the aim of leveraging research on high-quality pathways to promote consistent implementation of best practices and measure growth in student and pathway outcomes. There is no formal funding tied to certification. However, California, which has the largest number of Linked Learning pathways, has offered multiple grants since 2013 for schools and districts interested in implementing Linked Learning and related career and technical education pathways.[41] These Golden State Pathways grants can provide resources to assist with implementation and district infrastructure, even if they do not directly support certification costs. Districts can also direct extra funding or resources to certified pathways if desired.

The development of LLA's certification standards and processes was iterative, collaborative, and inclusive. The organization drew on the experiences of practitioners who had been operating Linked Learning pathways for many years when developing its initial certification standards. As part of the development process, LLA looked to incorporate the strengths and growth areas exhibited by other existing certification processes. They also learned from programs like those operated by ConnectED, a nonprofit organization that partners with schools, districts, and community leaders to codesign college and career pathways, and by the National Academy Foundation, a nonprofit organization connecting businesses and schools to develop career pathways.

Work on LLA certification began with a pilot process in 2017, the results of which were refined into the preliminary standards—the Silver Certification tier—and released in 2018. Silver Certification indicates that all core components of Linked Learning are in place (i.e., equitable admission policies, integrated program of study, work-based learning opportunities, and integrated student supports; see Table 4), and basic data about the pathway are used to inform program design.

Then, in late 2018 and early 2019, the second tier of the certification process was established—Gold Certification (see Table B3 for an example). This part of the process began with a series of focus groups to lay out the design and emphasis for Gold Certification standards. This feedback led to prioritizing implementation of best practices, as well as providing equitable opportunities for all students. Just as important was building a process that drew on existing work in schools and districts while targeting areas for improvement. Input also stressed the importance of avoiding certification as a compliance exercise or a "gotcha" process. Similar to community schools implementation, this aspect meant that the essential elements defined in the Gold Certification standards needed to be flexible.

The Gold Certification standards include elements that are nonnegotiable for a Linked Learning pathway (e.g., work-based learning plans integrated with the program of study), although how schools achieve those standards varies depending on the local context. After conducting focus groups to develop the Gold Certification standards, LLA engaged educators and district staff representing 11 Linked Learning pathways—including in Los Angeles Unified, Long Beach Unified, and Oakland Unified School Districts—in a pilot process that helped further refine the standards.

Table 4. Linked Learning Silver Certification Standards Rubric

Standard	Standard description	Domain (substandard)	Meeting the standard
Equitable admissions policy	Providing all students equitable access to high-quality college and career preparation	Admission Policy	The pathway has an equitable, open admission policy based on student interest that provides all students access to high-quality college and career preparation. The emphasis on equity is made explicit in pathway, school, and/or district admission policies, demonstrating that students of all socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and academic ability levels can access a Linked Learning pathway experience. The pathway employs strategies to ensure it serves a student population that reflects the makeup of the school, district, and/or community in which it resides.
Integrated program of study	Student-centered learning connected to postsecondary and industry expectations	Complete Program of Study	The pathway provides students with an integrated program of study that includes all courses necessary for a student to meet the qualifications for entrance to the state public university system. The program of study also includes a career and technical education (CTE)/career-themed sequence of three courses. Core academic courses have some career content and vice versa (e.g., through thematic units, projects, or fully integrated courses).
Work-based learning	Student-centered learning connected to postsecondary and industry expectations	Work-Based Learning Plan	The pathway adopts a worked-based learning continuum that provides a strategic sequence of experiences for students to gain awareness of a broad range of careers within the industry theme, explore specific careers of interest, and participate in work-based learning opportunities.
Integrated student supports	A continuum of meaningful experiences with work and real-world applications of learning	Individual Student Supports	Individual needs of all students, including those with special designations (ELL, SPED, foster youth, etc.), are addressed through a diverse set of strategies that include differentiated classroom instruction, direct instructional supports (tutoring, supplemental curriculum), social-emotional learning, and counseling services. These supports are provided by a combination of pathway, school and district resources, and/or through community partnerships. A priority is placed on parental inclusion where appropriate.

Source: Adapted from Linked Learning Alliance. (2020). *Silver Certification standards*.

Certification Structure

Within the tiered certification process, attaining Silver Certification is a less intensive process than attaining Gold Certification.[42] To attain Silver Certification, pathway educators submit evidence through a virtual platform, including narrative descriptions and artifacts that illustrate alignment with the Silver Certification standards. An external evaluator provides feedback through the virtual platform to promote learning and improvement, with the whole process taking about a month from submission to final award. Silver Certification is good for 2 years, after which schools can recertify under the Silver Certification standards or submit for Gold Certification. The fee for participating in the Silver Certification evaluation process is $749 per pathway. In 2024, 45 schools earned Silver Certification for a total of 79 certified pathways.[43]

The Gold Certification tier adds a site visit component. The site visit provides an opportunity for an external evaluator to validate the Linked Learning pathway's quality and to provide both the district and the pathway team with feedback. A typical site visit takes a full school day and includes an opening presentation, multiple classroom visits, interviews, focus groups, and other meetings. Alongside the site visit, pathways are required to submit a range of data on pathway participant experiences and outcomes, as well as data for a comparison group of students. The full Gold Certification process takes approximately 10 to 13 weeks from submission to certification, although pathways may spend many months preparing to submit their materials. For example, one district we spoke with developed an internal review process to support pathways that intend to pursue Gold Certification. This process includes a mock site visit and mock interviews with families. District reviewers aim to provide the level of scrutiny that school staff can expect from the formal certification process and, in doing so, ensure schools are ready to be certified when they apply. Gold Certification is valid for 4 years, with a 2-year interim reporting requirement to assess progress on areas of growth identified in the initial certification. In 2024, there were 30 Gold-Certified pathways.[44] The fee for participating in Gold Certification is $2,395 per pathway.

Successes and Challenges

The current LLA certification process has been in place since 2019, and many benefits have emerged. Interviewees shared their appreciation for the emphasis on and commitment to continuous improvement. As one interviewee described, this certification process is meant to be a "valuable learning experience—not just a stamp of approval. An assessment should be a learning experience for everyone involved." LLA promotes certification as a learning experience by making the virtual certification platform, in which pathways submit artifacts and documentation, available prior to the start of the formal process. In this way, the platform becomes a self-study tool in which educators can submit initial evidence, review standards, and refine their school transformation vision guided by best practices. These materials are also available after the certification process concludes so that pathways can continue to use them to improve implementation. As an LLA staff member noted, this is one of the ways to show certification "isn't a one-way street." The platform is built to support continuous improvement, not just to facilitate evaluation.

Another way the certification process promotes continuous improvement is by providing multiple opportunities for active collaboration among external evaluators and pathway staff pursuing certification. Participants receive regular feedback on the materials they submit and even codevelop goals for improvement after the formal certification process concludes. An interviewee noted that this individualized process, grounded in the work already happening in a school or district, is another way that LLA demonstrates that the certification process exists to benefit schools. It provides schools with

a structured space for reflection, helping them build on their strengths and learn from their growth opportunities. The structured process and coaching support also serve to push back on general perceptions of certification as an external evaluative process. One LLA staff member shared that this view can be an ongoing challenge, so addressing it "always has to be part of the dialogue."

Further, certification is designed so that a broad range of interest holders must be actively engaged to achieve success. As one district leader noted, "It's not supposed to be a one-person thing. Transformation is not one person sitting in a room figuring it out. [The certification coordinator's] job is to bring people together to figure out a vision and implement collectively. … You've got to figure out how to leverage all your stakeholders in this process."

> Certification is designed so that a broad range of interest holders must be actively engaged to achieve success.

While all interviewees were quick to note the many benefits associated with the LLA certification process, they also shared several challenges. One district official noted that certification is expensive and requires a significant commitment of time and resources. They explained that "it takes human resources to do that reflection and learning. They [participants] need time. Typically, if you want teachers to engage, they need paid time to engage in all of that stuff." Other costs may include an investment in district personnel to establish Linked Learning pathways. For example, one district we spoke with funded a full-time teacher on special assignment for each comprehensive high school to serve as the pathway coordinator, as well as central office staff to provide coaching and professional development.

Other interviewees noted that while the LLA certification process engages many members of the school community, it can also overlap with other required reporting, such as state requirements for high school accreditation. For example, while requirements vary by state, the accreditation status for California high schools is reviewed on a 6-year cycle, with mid-cycle reviews typically happening in the third year. One interviewee noted that this can be a double-edged sword:

> The [LLA certification] process is very valuable, but it can also be duplicative for the teams of WASC [Western Association of Schools and Colleges]. It can be a real challenge depending on how cycles line up. It's taken us years to get teams to see the way that they should write WASC goals to interlock with their Linked Learning goals, that they should be complementary. … If you think about those … rotating cycles for a team trying to achieve Linked Learning and then there are [mid-cycle reviews for] WASC, and whether or not they properly line up can be [challenging]. Even if they properly line up, that's both a benefit and a negative. And if they don't line up, you're certifying [almost] every year, and that's just really, really challenging.

Another interviewee noted added struggles when a pathway falls short of certification. They said, "We did have two pathways back in the day go through certification and not get it. At those sites, [not getting certification] killed Linked Learning as an effort for years. It took us years to get those pathways to try to reengage because they felt like they had worked so hard to put everything in place, and they didn't meet the metric." LLA has made changes to the process to better support pathways that do not meet certification standards, yet falling short can still risk a reduction in staff morale.

A final, and perhaps most critical, challenge concerns the underlying value proposition of certification. A central tension that interviewees noted is that unlike WASC accreditation—which is required—there are not always concrete benefits from earning LLA certification. For many practitioners, improving their practice and better serving students were sufficient motivations to engage in certification. However, one district official shared, "We are always answering the question of, 'Hey, we get why we're trying to hit this metric. We hear you, but the certification is time-consuming and expensive on a lot of levels.'... It's unclear to our teams other than the intrinsic value and the value placed on it by our system what the benefit of the actual certification is." This interviewee was quick to note that the process and the standards have clear value in strengthening implementation, but certification does not result in, for example, a workforce accreditation validated by employers.

Another interviewee who helped develop and lead the certification process shared, "The value proposition was never very clear without money being attached"—money that could, for example, pay for a pathway coordinator or materials. Alternatively, one interviewee felt that Gold Certification should hold currency with regional employers. However, for some districts, the person noted, it "just gets a little tougher to answer that question other than there's an expectation [to get certified]. ... At the systemic level, we have to engage in that conversation, and we've always fallen back on 'This really is the metric. This is how we've built our system. This is the best way for us to go and verify quality across multiple sites.' But there is always the question."

As of 2024, of the more than 600 registered Linked Learning pathways, 109 had received certification. Those 109 were clustered in a relatively small subset of districts: The 79 Silver Certifications for 45 schools were embedded in 13 districts, and only 7 districts housed the 30 Gold-certified pathways. This clustering indicates that district investment in and support for certification may play an important role in helping schools successfully achieve certification. The large number of registrants compared with the number of certified pathways also suggests schools are gaining access to the Linked Learning standards and resources to assist them in implementation but may move into or through the certification process at a slower pace or choose not to participate in certification at all. Understanding these processes and decisions is beyond the scope of this report but may highlight that there continues to be a need for ongoing supports for Linked Learning pathways aiming to be fully certified.

Key Takeaways on the Process

Linked Learning's certification system has a number of promising features as well as areas for further development.

- The standards were developed and revised over time through a consensus-building process that included practitioners and is conducive to continuous improvement.

- Linked Learning's tiered approach allows for differentiated engagement and support and offers a well-defined path to strive for excellence.

- Linked Learning provides regular feedback on the materials submitted up to and through certification. The coaches help codevelop goals for improvement, emphasizing both the development and capacity-building component of the process and signaling to schools that certification exists to benefit them and their programs.

- Achieving certification has been linked in research to stronger outcomes for students in Linked Learning pathways, signaling a process that may be capturing important features of quality.

- Many schools and districts recognize and take pride in achieving certification because it signals implementation of a highly impactful program and makes the school an attractive place to enroll. However, some note that tying formal incentives to certification would make the benefits more commensurate with the investment and hard work.

- Although California has pathways grants that lend financial support to developing Linked Learning pathways, resources to fund all the necessary personnel can be a challenge.

- Linked Learning's process exists in addition to other requirements and accountability measures schools are responsible for. While the organization has worked to align certification data reporting with existing accountability measures, the extensive data collection and subsequent evaluations can be burdensome on top of managing ongoing external evaluations by different entities.

Successes and Challenges Across Certification Efforts

Using certification or recognition as a mechanism for building the capacity of community schools to effectively implement the strategy is a fairly new idea, and there is still much to learn. However, the examples highlighted in this report lend valuable insights into the structures within these certification systems that promoted learning and development, built consensus around implementation, allowed for consistency with room for flexibility, and aligned technical assistance and coaching, all of which are key to a successful certification process. These include the following:

- Setting consistent and clear expectations for effective implementation that are more than a compliance checklist. Participants in all three systems appreciated having a mix of essential benchmarks and standards that could be met in multiple ways and demonstrated through different forms of evidence.

- Offering nonnegotiables or specific benchmarks that serve as a baseline for certification paired with flexible standards, which allowed each school to tailor implementation to their local needs and goals, a central tenet of the community schools strategy.

- Providing coaching and technical assistance to guide sites through the continuous improvement process, which is both central to the community schools strategy and a certification process that prizes growth and improvement.

- Building in space and time for growth and reflection, which allows the deepening of implementation over time. Buy-in and sustained effort were bolstered by the perception that reaching certification targets was both feasible and supported through continuous improvement cycles of feedback and coaching. Each system approached this differently, via tiered systems, readiness assessments, and a system of recognition in which growth was tracked and celebrated each year.

- Creating peer-to-peer networks and mentoring. Offering opportunities to learn from others, see implementation in action, and have a community of like practitioners encouraged sharing of best practices and aided in emphasizing that learning and growth are central to the certification process.

- Offering access to a library of tools and resources to support implementation. Easy and centralized access to research, standards, templates, tools, and other resources reduces the burden on those seeking certification and provides a set of shared tools and understanding around expectations.

At the same time, all three certification processes experienced implementation challenges. Each of the profiled efforts is relatively small, and even with the limited number of schools or pathways being certified each year, capacity and staffing were emphasized as ongoing issues. This challenge leaves unanswered the cost and human capital investments required to scale certification. Another area of concern is the added time and effort placed on schools to fulfill the certification requirements. At present, none of the three systems has found a way to streamline the data collection process or fully align it with other reporting requirements at the state, district, and federal levels, although Georgia had begun that process before the pilot ended.

In each example, continuous improvement and learning were intended to be central to the certification experience—feeding intrinsic motivation to strengthen implementation to benefit students and the school community. However, the extent to which participants experienced certification as a learning process varied across initiatives. For example, the Georgia pilot, in its first iteration, experienced challenges with the balance between continuous improvement and accountability.

Participants in the two initiatives that did not receive funding through the certification process (Georgia and California Linked Learning) noted that the external benefits of certification were murky, and they expressed a desire for clear incentives tied to certification. Additionally, while both UCF Center in Florida and LLA in California have a structure that limits the chance that schools will not achieve certification, the high number of schools or pathways that have yet to be certified suggests that these systems should continue identifying how to keep schools invested as they work toward certification and support them when they do not initially meet certification requirements. Finally, it remains to be seen to what extent a certification process can and should strike a balance between evaluation, recognition, and coaching on common standards and benchmarks to best support community schools implementation.

Despite these challenges and unanswered questions, a well-designed certification system is one way that states and districts can support effective implementation of community schools. Certification is an increasingly important issue to consider as funding and support for systems of community schools increase at both the federal and state levels. The final section of this report includes key takeaways for state and district leaders interested in community schools certification.

Key Takeaways: What States and Districts Should Consider

As funding and support for community schools continue to increase, interest in strategies to support effective implementation—including certification—will likely grow as well. In New Mexico, for example, which offers state-funded grants to more than 90 community schools, a legislative task force has been formed to explore community schools certification. Specifically, the task force will "study the issue of sustainable funding for community schools in New Mexico, develop criteria for certifying community schools, recommend funding based on certification, and develop a community schools strategic plan."[45] The examples outlined in this report demonstrate several key takeaways that can help inform the efforts of states, districts, and other entities interested in community schools certification.

- **Well-designed community schools certification systems can offer schools a structured process that builds capacity for effective implementation and aids them in assessing and making progress toward their goals.** Certification can enhance effective implementation by establishing common indicators, benchmarks, and standards—and an accompanying data system—that allow those within and outside the school to assess the quality of their work and make strategic adjustments related to implementation and programming. Schools pursuing certification can access guidance and professional learning that support implementation. Further, attaining certification can affirm and validate schools' transformation efforts and signal their impact.

  Participants from the two established certification systems profiled in this report—the University of Central Florida's (UCF's) Community Partnership Schools (CPS) Model and Linked Learning pathways—reported many benefits from their experiences. Benefits included coaching and technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, thoughtful feedback from document reviews and site visits, and the use of data to bolster their internal capacity to engage in continuous improvement. Other research on the Linked Learning certification process and Community Partnership Schools—some of which were completing the UCF certification process—showed improved attendance; decreased disciplinary incidents; and gains in test scores, graduation rates, and 21st-century skills (e.g., collaboration, communication, and information literacy) compared to similar schools or pathways.[46]

- **Collaboratively developed, appropriately focused yet flexible standards are a key element of community schools certification that can help increase buy-in and foster consistency and quality.** The two established certification systems in Florida and California rely on a detailed set of implementation standards. Standards benefit community schools implementation, as they establish clear guidelines and create a common language around the community school strategy. Standards can also establish and clarify the benchmarks for achieving certification. Although a certifying entity might be inclined to try to develop standards for every possible component of the strategy, certification participants reported that standards were most helpful when they were lean and focused—capturing the essential elements of implementation with clearly defined nonnegotiables and sufficient flexibility to allow for different contexts. As highlighted in the Florida and California examples, standards also need to be flexible enough to be attained in multiple contexts (e.g., urban and rural). In all three examples in this report, standards were created and/or revised through

a collaborative and consensus-building process involving multiple stakeholders, both to model continuous improvement and to increase ease of use and buy-in. In this sense, the standards are living documents that are subject to iteration over time.

- **The certifying entity and participating schools must have sufficient resources and time to create and engage in a well-designed certification process that supports effective implementation.** To build capacity for effective implementation, the agency sponsoring the certification process must invest sufficient resources to support onboarding and ongoing coaching of district and school personnel (namely coordinators and principals), staff the evaluation process, expand as more schools apply for certification, and, in some cases, provide technical assistance. Resources may also need to be invested at the district and school levels to ensure there are personnel dedicated to shepherding a school through the process and whose time and job responsibilities include aiding with and tracking the progress of implementation. In addition, the time allotted for sites to attain certification should be long enough for participants to engage meaningfully in the process and deepen implementation year over year.

Without these resources and adequate time set aside for both designing and participating in certification, implementation challenges can arise. Indeed, as the sites in this report make clear, there is no easy or straightforward path to developing a certification process that supports constructive, scaled implementation. The Georgia pilot, for example, encountered several implementation challenges related to a lack of personnel and funding, as well as insufficient planning time. All three processes required substantial time and effort from participants, and in California and Georgia—where funding did not accompany certification—the value proposition of participating (beyond intrinsic motivation to improve practice) was not clear to all schools.

- **Certification processes are viewed as offering the most value when they are organized to focus on continuous improvement rather than compliance and accountability.** All three certification systems we examined were designed to center on continuous improvement. Leaders of the Florida and California systems emphasized the importance of an asset-based process that provides a learning experience for participants, while in Georgia the focus was on recognizing and supporting ongoing progress. Promising strategies included offering general and targeted technical assistance, creating peer and mentor networks for community schools coordinators, having an assigned coach, building in check-ins and feedback sessions, including peer reviewers in the certification process, and maintaining a resource library for participants.

Leaders of all three certification processes talked about the challenge of avoiding a compliance mentality for participants. By leaving program implementation open to examination and adjustments, certification may be seen as formative—allowing for growth—rather than promoting a compliance-oriented or even punitive system, though this tension remains. One way to avoid a compliance mentality and provide a useful road map for schools is through establishing phases or tiers with clearly defined thresholds for implementation, as did the certification systems in California, Florida, and Georgia. This approach allows schools to achieve baseline implementation, celebrate growth, and strive for excellence. Further, structuring the certification process in this way validates the improvement efforts of each site and reiterates the centrality of learning and development in the process. Some of the key practices that allowed for this type of process include offering

both structured and informal feedback, providing windows of time for adjustments and targeted improvement, and allowing appropriate amounts of time for implementation before schools needed to be officially evaluated for certification. How this goal was accomplished varied among sites. For example, Linked Learning allowed schools to choose when to apply for certification, while UCF Center for Community Schools (UCF Center) gave a long runway (i.e., 5 years) before a school needed to be evaluated.

- **Data can helpfully inform the community schools certification process when it focuses judiciously on the most essential elements of the community schools strategy.** For certification to support and contribute to continuous improvement in community schools, it should be informed by data collection and monitoring of progress toward achieving shared implementation standards. According to our interviews, data collection and reporting, while a stimulus for reflection and change, could be overwhelming when there were a large number of standards and indicators and, in some cases, could create an undue burden, particularly on community schools coordinators. This finding suggests the importance of working with district and school personnel to be sure that the data requested for certification are accessible, collectible, and not overly duplicative of other required reporting processes.

- **Options for where to house a certifying entity include institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and state education agencies.** Choosing the certifiying entity is a key decision that requires consideration of institutional purpose, resources, and staffing capacity. Participants viewed both the university and nonprofit in this report as neutral entities that were well positioned to provide learning opportunities and support continuous improvement. UCF Center in Florida and the Linked Learning Alliance in California institutions had dedicated staffing and resources to establish and sustain the certification process.

  Having certification housed in state education agencies had its own strengths and challenges. On one hand, the Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE) had the authority to build supportive infrastructure from top to bottom, including aligning certification with district reporting requirements and school improvement goals. The Office of Whole Child Supports also had easier access to data than external partners such as nonprofits and universities. At the same time, GA DOE has a long-standing historical relationship with districts and schools that had to be intentionally combated to separate certification from traditional state accountability policies (e.g., the codevelopment of standards after the first year of the pilot entrusted the experience of educators and moved certification away from being measured through traditional accountability outcome measures).

  Ultimately, the most important factors for choosing a certifying entity are institutional commitment, resources, and staffing capacity. Are there enough people, with the right expertise and resources, available to develop and run the system? Is there commitment at the highest institutional levels to develop and sustain such a complex, multilayered process?

- **Couching the certification process within structures and policies that promote alignment, buy-in, and capacity-building will help foster sustainability and can improve the experience and outcomes.** Certification will be most successful when it is part of a larger system of structures and policies that promote coherence and sustainability. State and district accountability and reporting mechanisms,

for example, may need to be reconsidered or revised to avoid common implementation barriers. California Linked Learning participants identified one such barrier: a state-mandated accreditation process for high schools that sometimes overlaps with the pathway certification. One solution is to design and integrate the certification process for community schools with the regional accreditation processes schools must normally undertake so that they link with one another as much as possible.

Another example comes from Georgia, which devised a multilevel system of support and professional learning for its pilot that promoted coherence flowing from the state level down to district managers, school leaders, and coordinators through a common onboarding, strategic planning, and training experience. Ensuring that all entities, including districts, were well-informed on the strategy and productive collaborators helped alleviate the burden of the work but remained a challenge in all three systems. In addition, because certification is a multiyear intensive process, ensuring schools have adequate and sustained funding is important. Stable funding allows schools to fully focus on implementation and meeting the needs of students and families. As with the state funding provided in Florida, community schools are increasingly able to blend and braid funding sources as they gain experience and solidify partnerships over time.

As these takeaways demonstrate, developing and implementing a well-designed certification process for community schools that builds capacity for effective implementation and supports continuous improvement is a complex endeavor. The benefits can be substantial for participating schools, with access to professional learning opportunities; strategic data supports; and improved outcomes for students, families, and school communities. With a growing number of community schools networks and systems across the United States, it will be important for states, districts, and community partners to attend to and support capacity-building strategies such as certification.

Appendix A: Summary of Certification Features for Community Schools

Table A1. Summary of Certification Features for Community Schools

Feature	Center for Community Schools, University of Central Florida	Georgia Department of Education	Linked Learning Alliance
Description	Certification process to recognize the Community Partnership Schools model: community schools designed around the four pillars, four core partners, and four dedicated staff	Developmental process housed in the Office of Whole Child Supports (OWCS) to recognize Georgia's Whole Child model: community schools that are designed around the four pillars and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model	Certification process to recognize Linked Learning pathways: industry-themed pathways that integrate a college preparatory curriculum with career and technical education, with an emphasis on equity and comprehensive support services
Number of schools served	44 total (2–11 per year)	Piloted with 10 schools (2022)	~125 certified pathways within schools
Costs and funding for schools	There are no direct costs to schools for participating in the certification process. Since 2019, the University of Central Florida (UCF) has received yearly appropriations in state funding to provide planning and implementation grants to schools participating in the certification process. In 2023, UCF received $7.1 million.	There is no cost to participating schools; however, districts or schools are expected to pay for a coordinator salary at each school. No state funding is provided to participating or certified schools.	Fees of $749 (Silver) and $2,395 (Gold) are paid by the school to the Linked Learning Alliance. Since 2013, state funding through competitive grants to local education agencies has been available to support college and career pathways, including the Linked Learning approach.
Role of state department of education	The state department of education has no formal role in the certification process.	The state department of education piloted the process with designated staff within the OWCS.	While there has been some state competitive grant funding available to support Linked Learning schools, the state department of education has no formal role in the certification process.
Certifying agency	University	State agency	Nonprofit
Certification process/types	Single certification track that includes a planning year, readiness checks, and affirmations or recertifications	Developmental, with a benchmark-based rubric and a non-time-based progression; schools recognized each time they move to the next phase	Two-tiered (Silver and Gold)
Certification timeline	5 years to initial certification, 1 planning year, readiness check at Year 3	Developmental; however, initial stages expected to occur in the first 2 years	Unspecified, but typically happens in 3–4 years.

Feature	Center for Community Schools, University of Central Florida	Georgia Department of Education	Linked Learning Alliance
Data and monitoring	Data and evidence are collected in support of self-ratings. These data are collected yearly for progress monitoring and officially in the third (readiness check) and fifth (certification) years. Center assistance is available throughout the process. Observations and focus groups conducted by the UCF team of reviewers, along with the self-review, provide the data evaluated for certification.	Schools collected data on benchmarks, impact, local goals, and eventually outcomes via the rubric and associated tools. Data were submitted first to the district manager, who then shared the data with the state. Observations were conducted by the district manager to assess impact and quality of services using guidelines from OWCS.	For both Silver Certification and Gold Certification, evidence is submitted through a virtual platform, and feedback is provided to promote learning and set goals. Gold Certification requires a site visit that includes a presentation, observations, and focus groups from a Linked Learning lead evaluator and district staff.
Technical assistance/ continuous improvement	Technical assistance was provided by the UCF Center TA teams. Each school also has received support and coaching from program managers who review the self-assessments and readiness assessment. The feedback and coaching process was structured around the standards and followed a continuous improvement approach.	OWCS established a coaching model in which the lead coached the district coordinator, who was then responsible for coaching school leaders and coordinators. OWCS also offered professional learning for coordinators and principals at a regular cadence. The shift to a recognition system that validated improvements in implementation over time grounded the process in continuous improvement.	Linked Learning engages with the pathway throughout their implementation. Using the online platform as a place for self-assessment and artifact collection provides an avenue for evaluators to offer participants regular feedback on the materials they submit and work with them to codevelop goals for improvement after the formal certification process concludes.

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2025).

Appendix B: Example Community Schools Certification Standards and Rubrics

Table B1. University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools Example Certification Standard

Standard 2: Collaborative leadership, governance, and structure. Community Partnership Schools (CPS) operates effectively under a shared collaborative leadership, governance, and structure model.				
Fundamental Practices - *Must be in place (i.e., "implementing") to be considered CPS certification eligible.*	**Not Using (0)**		**Implementing (2)**	
We have developed and maintain core partnerships with a school district, a not-for-profit/community-based provider, a university/college, a health care provider (may include others).				
We have a written agreement (memorandum of understanding) outlining how we work together.				
Overall Assessment - *Required 5 out of 10 total possible points.*	**Not Using (0)**	**Developing (1)**	**Implementing (2)**	**Innovating Bonus (3)**
We have a structured, shared decision-making process among core partners.				
Our core partnership is balanced, with all partners engaged and sharing responsibility for Community Partnership School success.				
We promote and support each partner's contribution of activities, programs, and services.				
We participate in CPS networks and stay connected to regional and national efforts.				
The health of our core partnership is effectively maintained.				
Total Points Earned for Standard 2				

Source: University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools. (2022). *UCF-Certified Community Partnership Schools™ standards and certification processes*. University of Central Florida.

Table B2. Georgia Department of Education LEAD Continuum Rubric

Overview of LEAD Continuum			
Learning	**Emerging**	**Achieving**	**Distinguished**
The school: • Conducts a pre-assessment to identify strategic goals, current impact, and measures for success. • Identifies needs and priorities of students, parents, educators, and parents through engagement led by the school community team.	The school: • Identifies Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement programs and partners to fulfill the needs and priorities of all interest holders. • Embeds the school community team's strategic plan into the school improvement plan. • Implements quality programs, services, and supports to impact the whole child as an additional solution to accomplish school improvement plan goals. • Embeds the Whole Child Model School into daily operations.	The school: • Identifies the impact of the quality programs, services, and supports through the pillars. • Identifies growth and accomplishments in the school improvement plan. • Continues to add Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement to impact the whole child.	The school: • Completed 2 school years of the Achieving phase and has embodied the Whole Child Model School framework as a model to improve the overall quality of the school for all interest holders. • Continues to identify growth and success in the school improvement plan. • Continues to add Integrated Student Support, Expanded Learning and Opportunities, and Family and Community Engagement to impact the whole child.

Learning (expected timeline, first year of implementation)	
Benchmarks and standards	**Examples of aligned work**
Self-Assessment: Complete Self-Assessment. School Climate, School Data, and Impact Data	Analyze collected data and create goals for school improvement.
Benchmark 1: Get Started and Grounded in Whole Child Model School Best Practices	Conduct self-identity reflection and identify the "why" for this work. Understand and align with the goals and outcomes of the School Improvement Plan.
Benchmark 2: Map School and Community	Attend meetings to learn what stakeholders (students, school staff, families, and community members) are working on and create a resource guide.
Benchmark 3: Develop School Community Team	Form a school community team with key leaders, including teachers, students, parents, partners, etc.
Benchmark 4: Work on Continuous Team Building	Build relationships and learn strengths and talents of your school community team.
Benchmark 5: Create Pillar Teams and Develop a Plan for Engagement	Create a needs/assets assessment plan and analyze existing data.
Benchmark 6: Execute Engagement Plan (With 75% Engagement)	Implement the needs/assets assessment with 75%–100% engagement of school community.
Benchmark 7: Determine Priorities Using Patterns, Trends, and Data Analysis	Analyze needs/assets assessment data and identify 2–3 key issues.
Focus on Quality and Continuous Improvement	Engage in the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle.

Note: LEAD = Learning, Emerging, Achieving, Distinguished.

Source: Based on Learning Policy Institute analysis of documents from the Office of Whole Child Supports at the Georgia Department of Education. (2025).

Table B3. Linked Learning Alliance Gold Certification
Example Standard and Rubric

Standard 3: Integrated Student Supports		
Domain	**Meeting the Standard**	**Example Data Requirements**
College and Career Preparation and Support	The pathway is successfully preparing students for college and career transitions and promoting a college and career culture by, for example: • Expecting students to pursue postsecondary education or training; • Exposing students to a variety of postsecondary options; • Providing targeted student support for postsecondary options (i.e., preparation for PSAT, SAT, and ASVAB exams; guidance for college applications; help completing FAFSA and other financial aid applications; etc.); • Providing academic, social-emotional, and career counseling services aligned with pathway and graduate outcomes, and helping students develop and realize their college and career readiness goals; • Helping students develop job application skills and make connections to apprenticeship and certification programs.	Provide at least 2 years of data describing potential impact of college and career preparation for pathway students and comparison group; show data overall and with breakdown by demographic subgroup: • Number and percentage of graduates enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institution • Number and percentage of graduates entering a pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship program
Social-Emotional Skill Development	The pathway program includes embedded learning opportunities that emphasize the development of social awareness, self-management, and a mindset of growth and self-efficacy for all students.	

Standard 3: Integrated Student Supports		
Domain	**Meeting the Standard**	**Example Data Requirements**
Individual Student Supports	The pathway team monitors student academic, personal, and social-emotional needs and provides culturally responsive and timely interventions as necessary. The pathway adopts and implements a systematic plan of assessment and referral for students needing academic or social-emotional interventions. Interventions are personalized and engage students' families as appropriate in order to serve each individual student.	Provide at least 2 years of data describing potential impact of student supports for pathway students and comparison group; show data overall and with breakdown by demographic subgroup: • Number and percentage of students formally receiving individual support services and mean/median GPA of pathway students at each grade level • Number and percentage of students chronically absent • Number and percentage of students suspended • Number and percentage of students who report a positive response by domain on a social-emotional learning and/or school climate and culture survey (if available) • Number and percentage of students at beginning of sophomore and senior years who are credit deficient, defined as lacking the number of credits a student should have completed upon entering each respective school year to remain on track for graduation with a standard diploma in 4 years.
Student Input and Validation	The pathway seeks and documents student voice and leadership in articulating the pathway theme and making connections between academic studies, work-based learning opportunities, and college and career preparation.	

Source: Adapted from Linked Learning Alliance. (2020). *Gold Certification standards*.

Endnotes

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2. For more detailed information on how states support community schools through investments see: Maier, A., & Rivera-Rodriguez, A. (2023). *State strategies for investing in community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/612.402

3. U.S. Department of Education. *Full-Service Community Schools Program (FSCS)*. https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-birth-grade-12/school-community-improvement/full-service-community-schools-program-fscs

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The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.