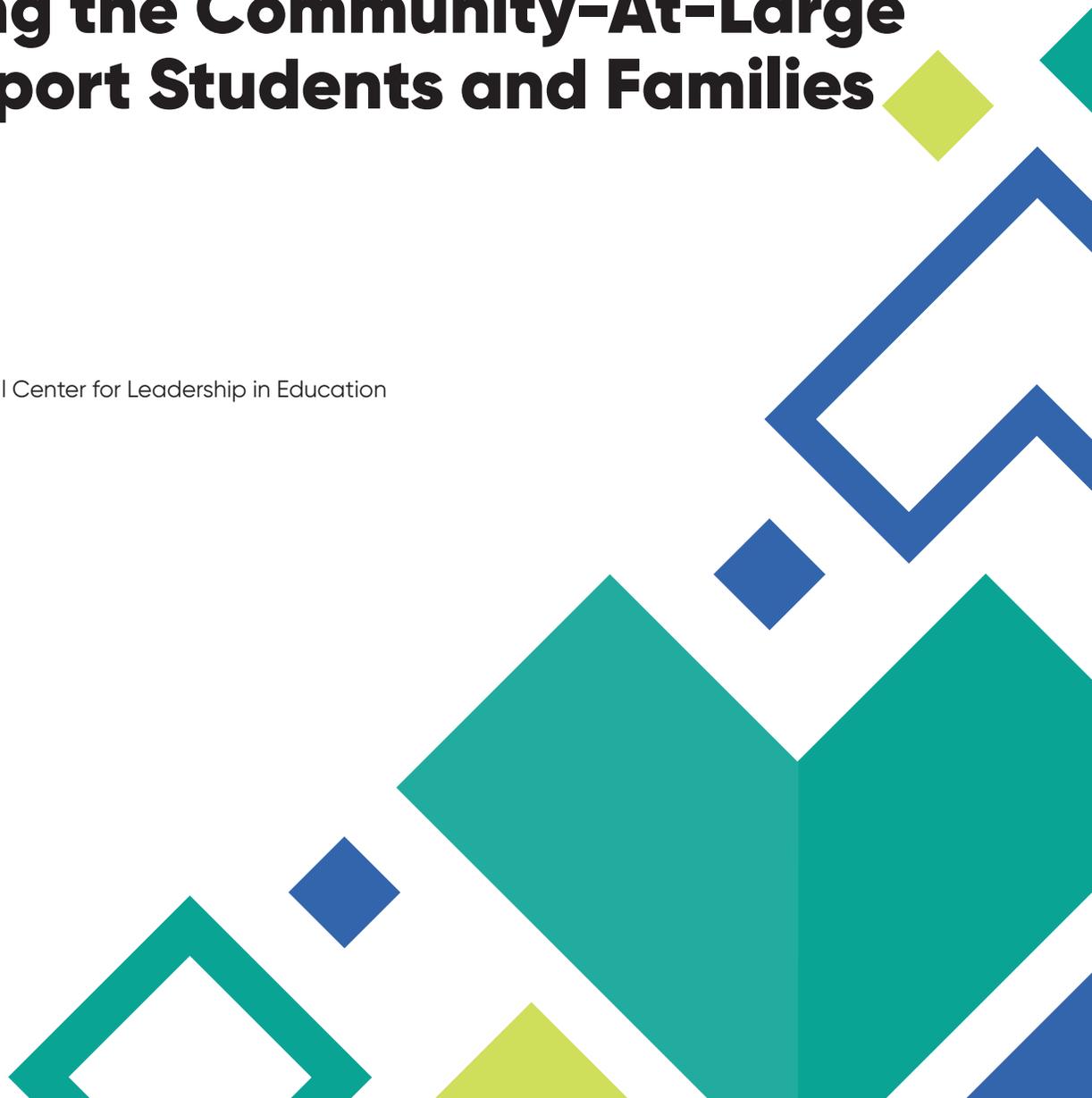


COMMUNITY SCHOOLS:

Unifying the Community-At-Large to Support Students and Families

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What Are Community Schools?

For ten years, I had the honor of serving as superintendent to the Hillsborough County Public Schools district in Tampa, Florida. As the eighth largest school district in the United States, it matriculates approximately 214,000 students each year, 57 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch and live at or below the poverty line. During my tenure, we conceived and operationalized a community schools program; that is, an initiative to find and make use of resources available within the larger community that could help us better meet our students' academic, physical health, and mental health needs, as well as support family engagement.

"Community schools" can be both a specific and general term. That is, in some cities and states, the community schools program is called "Community Schools." In other cities and states, a formal program might have another name ("Hub Schools" is also common), but its essence and goals are in line with the term community schools.

For our purposes, we'll use "community schools" as a general term that refers to a school's strategic engagement of the community-at-large for the ultimate benefit of students and families.

The goal of a community school is to expand or create services that support students' academic achievement, address students' physical and mental health, and offer broader and more convenient ways for families to interact with the school. The strategy used to achieve this goal is to discover and leverage untapped or underutilized resources within the community, such as those available through local and state government

agencies and services, non-profit service providers, higher education institutions, philanthropic organizations, and businesses.

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In Hillsborough, we achieved this through a breadth of partnerships and programs. As an example of just one, we were aware that all of our students needed stronger literacy skills. Internally, we were developing a mindset that all teachers are literacy teachers (particularly at the elementary level), and we were training every last one of them in literacy instruction.

As a community school, our focus did not stop with the classroom. We considered who else could support our students' literacy development beyond our doors. Many of our students participated in after school programs, such as the Boys Club or YMCA. We saw an opportunity; we trained their staffs with literacy instructional skills and provided reading materials. A large percentage of our students lived in government housing, which was regulated to have a computer lab and a social worker available during certain hours. We trained the social workers with literacy instruction skills and downloaded specific literacy software on all the computers in the labs. As a result, multiple adults who interacted with students at various hours were all united in a common goal: help the children of our

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community develop the literacy skills they deserve and need to thrive.

My position in Florida made me intimately familiar with what works and does not work in a community schools program. When I accepted the role of New York State Education Commissioner in 2015, there were several community schools already in operation in the state. One of my objectives was to leverage my expertise to enhance and expand the community schools programs throughout New York. This afforded me the opportunity to visit dozens of community schools across the state, each of which found unique and interesting ways to involve the community in full-service support of students and families.

If you've ever been on a community schools campus, you can feel it. While the particulars of a community program will differ from school to school, there is a certain kinetic and exhilarating energy consistent in each.

To students, it's the joy of feeling genuinely cared for, not only by the school but the community at large. It's the freedom that students feel when impediments to their ability to attend and engage in school are lifted. It's the enthusiasm about school that students discover when their physical and mental health needs are met such that they can focus and grow in their learning. It's the motivation educators feel when their leaders leverage community resources so that they can be more effective and their students more engaged in the classroom. It's the rewarding nature of working for or partnering with a school that has found ways to support all families and make them feel welcome

and wanted on campus. And it's the pride, care, and sense of ownership that everyone—from educators, to students, families, and community members—feels for the school.

“...community schools are about meeting student needs—more of them and more often—to optimize their capacity to learn.

A Design for Success Hub & Spoke Model

For community schools to operate at their best, the school must be the hub and the participating community stakeholders the spokes for three primary reasons: First, the success of a community school is largely a function of not only knowledge but also the centralization of it. Community schools are about connecting dots. The more “dots” you know and the more centralized this knowledge is, the more you can connect to create new solutions. The most robust community schools are those where the program team is highly knowledgeable about the various resources within a community and that knowledge is concentrated so that it can be leveraged most holistically, used most effectively, and coordinated most efficiently.

Second, that schools operate as the hub just makes good sense. When the day is done, community schools are about meeting student needs—more of them and more often—to optimize their capacity to learn. Relative to other institutions or services for children, children spend most of their time at school. While students interact with

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other adults offering services outside of school, those adults tend to get a limited view of their needs. It is the adults at school who get a broader and more whole-child view of students' needs. The school, then, can coalesce all the adults that students interact with around meeting student needs more holistically and productively. Furthermore, educators have—we hope—close and trusting relationships with students and their families. Schools also tend to be trusted institutions with a high profile within a community. In terms of launching a community schools program with the trust they require, schools are best positioned within a community.

Third, when the school is the hub to a community schools program, the program that develops will naturally be customized to their students' specific needs. Herein lies what is most powerful about community schools—it is not an off-the-shelf program. It is an idea, an approach, a creative solution. When a community school has strong, coherent organizational leadership support and certain best practices are followed, community schools are organically tailored to the needs of the students in the school.¹

Engendering a Sense of School Ownership by Everyone in the Community

We all know that we care more about things over which we feel some ownership. Community schools bring entire communities into the school. When the school coordinates partnerships and makes it easier and more intentional for community members to get involved with the school, community members naturally begin to feel they have a personal commitment to and stake in

the success of the school, its students, and their families. For example, when a school partners with a health organization to offer healthcare to students, that organization feels responsible for students' health.

Research has long since shown that a school is able to achieve the best outcomes when the entire community supports its success. Community schools are the strongest lever to encourage a sense of community-wide ownership of the school.²

The Benefits for Students, Families, Schools, and Communities

When a community school is at its most creative and resourceful, it can contribute to a student's overall wellbeing and broaden her access to ongoing learning and support throughout an entire day, every day. That is, it can influence, to varying degrees, all the inputs on a student's total health and, thereby, capacity to engage fully in her learning: balanced nutrition; access to medical care; access to mental health care; access to rigorous and relevant academic opportunities during and after school hours; a good night's sleep; clean clothes; and supports for parents such that they can, in turn, engage more in their children's learning.³

When it comes to how community schools influence the conditions of optimal student wellbeing for optimal learning, the sky is the limit. A selection of some of the ways community schools optimize learning conditions follows.

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Community Schools See Opportunities to Reinforce Learning Outside of School

The community schools team at Hillsborough County Public Schools was thrilled when staff in after-school programs were reinforcing literacy learning. They began to wonder, though, how the same reinforcement could be achieved in the evenings, over weekends, and over summers. We solicited multiple sources of funding from various community organizations to create an online platform rich with quality reading materials that students could access at no cost, from any device, and at any time. Not only were students never without the option of vetted reading materials, but they also gained more opportunities to practice self-directed learning and to experience the gift of reading for pure pleasure.

Community Schools Can Bring Physical and Mental Health Care to Campus

When educators take the accurate view that the school building and its resources do not disappear with the three o'clock release bell, more needs can be met more often. There was a school in Yonkers, New York that devoted space on the campus for a health clinic for students and their families. The school partnered with a local hospital, which recruited a small team of doctors, nurse practitioners, a psychologist, and a dentist to run the health clinic on the weekends. The hospital paid the providers per usual, and patients using the clinic could use Medicaid to cover their expenses.

What was so powerful about this arrangement is that by operating during the weekends, students' families were able to get care (including mental healthcare) they often had to forgo due to working

multiple jobs. I've seen other schools run similar programs on different schedules—one weekday and weeknight plus one weekend day, and so on, based on the particular needs of the community.

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I've also seen schools partner with state mental health agencies. Sometimes, one of the state psychologists will spend one day every couple of weeks at the school to counsel students. In other cases, where geography is an impediment, a psychologist might Skype with students (in groups or alone) in need of mental healthcare. Medicaid also applies in these situations, ensuring an economic benefit to them as well.

Community Schools Can Identify Opportunities to Support Families & Encourage Engagement

The research on parental involvement in a child's education is unambiguous; children learn more and view themselves as learners when their parents are engaged in their education.⁴ Unfortunately, several impediments block too many parents from school engagement. They can range from inconvenient time and location of school meetings, to language barriers, to things more basic, like embarrassment over a lack of clean clothes.

I've seen community schools partner with various organizations that lend space to educators,

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including on weekends, to host meetings that might be more convenient to more families. For example, instead of doing parent teacher conferences only at the school and during weeknights, when many parents are working, they might also offer meeting times at a local recreation center, community center (e.g., community spaces in public housing where students live), or the conference room of a partner business during the weekends. Many schools will also bring in various translators to school meetings to remove language barriers.

It's ever more common for community schools to solicit donated washing machines and dryers and install them in the school. This is more common in middle and high schools, when students are old enough to operate them and often do during or after the school day. Families are also given access to machines during certain hours so that they can meet the basic need of having clean clothing. Sometimes schools will invite families and the larger community to donate clothes children have outgrown or adults no longer need. Donations, which are stored in the "clothes closet," are available to families in need. Such clothes closets tend to be more common in elementary schools, when students are outgrowing clothes rapidly.

As a creative solution to hunger, some schools run a food pantry of sorts right on campus. In a particular school, students volunteer to run the program, providing a neat opportunity to learn practical business skills. They receive food donations from school families and community members. They organize the inventory and pack boxes to satisfy nutritional balance. And they staff the "market" in rotating shifts during certain hours that families are

welcome to come and claim a food box at no cost to them.

Beyond helping families live with more dignity, health, and comfort, such programs also benefit engagement in two key ways: First, they engender positive feelings around the school; they cause families to see schools as places that not only tend to children's learning but also to the overall wellbeing of children and their families. Second, it's not uncommon for families to feel apprehensive coming to a school for a host of reasons. **When schools offer practical services to meet basic family needs, families grow more comfortable coming to the campus at any time and feel more at home in it.** Over time, this almost always motivates parents to engage in school and their children's educations in other, more direct ways.

Community Schools Nurture Future Community Members and Workforce

In most communities, the students being educated in it will remain in the community or return to it after postsecondary education. The future of any community, then, depends on the quality and relevance of the education students receive in that community. Businesses do better when the local talent pool consists of people whose schools equipped them with critical thinking and career-relevant skills.

Communities thrive when its citizens feel like valued members of society and take ownership in cultivating and contributing to a strong community.

When businesses partner with a community school, they can co-create programs that intentionally teach the career skills local businesses value and,

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thereby, positively influence the future workforce for the community. They can find creative ways to offer career opportunities for students; a business partner can suggest and oversee a project-based learning opportunity in a class. Or a business can design an internship program for students. Students, in turn, are able to practice applying career skills and develop relationships with businesspeople, which they might leverage in a future job search.

By simply attending a community school, students see the power of community when it functions at its best, and they begin to feel connected to it. Model citizenship is put directly in front of them, and students learn the value of being an engaged citizen who gives back to the greater community. Students who benefit from the time and attention of community members will be more likely to return the favor when they are adults. In short, students are the future stewards of their communities—but only if they learn the value of the community.

Preparing for Greatest Impact

Community schools can manifest in any number of ways. They are dependent on the unique needs of students and families and how they can be met by the resources available in a community. Aware of their power and potential, more and more states are looking for ways to support community school development. In some cases, this comes with required protocols.

While the specifics of a community school will vary from school to school, city to city, and state to state, there are certain best practices that will increase their success and impact.

“Communities thrive when its citizens feel like valued members of society and take ownership in cultivating and contributing to a strong community.”

In my experience, three best practices are core to the success of community schools:

1) Appoint or hire a coordinator. A common mistake is for the superintendent or a principal to believe he or she can run a community schools program. Inevitably, this person will confront the reality that doing so is a full-time job. It takes broad and centralized knowledge to a degree that no superintendent nor principal will have time to learn and maintain. Successfully managing a community schools program demands dedicated focus and coordination.

2) Clarify superintendent and principal roles. While neither the superintendent nor principal should run community schools, its success is dependent upon their express support. How they will lead the program from a high level, what they will be responsible for, and how they are accountable to its success must be clearly delineated from the outset. As a best practice, every superintendent and principal must know it is their job to increase the visibility of all community school efforts. Additionally, they must constantly make the connection between community schools and traditional school so that teachers understand how it benefits them directly in their classrooms and become invested in the community school model. When leaders educate the school and

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larger community, the value and importance of community schools becomes unquestionable.

3) Identify program goals in advance and track progress and outcomes. Prior to launching a community schools program, a school should do a needs assessment. Community schools that don't set out to meet specific needs methodically run the risk of operating in a scattershot, disorganized fashion with little impact. Identify needs, identify the goals that will address those needs, and then identify the ways in which you will meet those goals. Track progress throughout; where initiatives are failing to meet goals, they must be revisited and recalibrated accordingly.

Organizational Leadership at Its Best

In a high functioning school, the entire organization—organizational leadership, instructional leadership, and teaching—is oriented around optimizing instruction and learning in the classroom with equity. A transactional model of instruction—where teachers deliver content and students memorize and digest it—is no longer sufficient for optimal learning. Not when the world around this instruction is radically different, and not when our students are also facing increasing mental health issues. Nor is it equipped to instruct with equity.

Optimal—which by definition must address equity—can only happen if students: attend school; are in the right frame of mind to learn; have energy and nutritional sustenance; are in good health; are not weighed down by unsupported mental health issues or unresolved traumas; access rigorous and relevant instruction in school daily; have

opportunities to maintain learning beyond school hours; and if their families are involved in their education.

“ If we want truly optimized learning conditions, organization leaders must broaden their views of what a school can be within the larger community...

While these truths are changing how everyone in education must consider what schools must be to students and their families, organizational leadership is the component of education that must spearhead these changes. If we want truly optimized learning conditions, organization leaders must broaden their views of what a school can be within the larger community and how it can leverage and expand services. Leaders must consider how to encompass students' basic needs, physical health, mental health, and family life. And leaders must commit to finding resources within the community that can help the school meet all of these needs.

Community schools are not just a collection of services. They are a mindset first and a set of coordinated, concerted changes aimed at meeting both the human and academic needs of students second. In my experience, community schools are the most effective way to address students' social and emotional needs and development and increase instructional effectiveness for all—which, ultimately, work together to optimize learning.

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Community schools are a vision of the future school, and one our students and their families need and deserve. They are a holistic approach to a holistic education.

Achieving the vision of a community school is best served by a holistic leadership model. Those familiar with ICLE might also be familiar with DSEI, the [Daggett System for Effective Instruction](#). DSEI is a proprietary approach to facilitating a coherent focus across the whole organization—organizational leadership, instructional leadership, and teaching—around effective instruction and improved student learning and achievement. Districts and schools use DSEI to establish a clear vision, build a specific and positive culture, and orient every decision and behavior around goals to optimize teaching and learning.

When leaders use the DSEI model with a community schools mindset, those truly optimal conditions of teaching and learning are methodically achieved.

Furthermore, the best practice that leaders routinely elevate the purpose and importance of the community school and make direct ties to instruction becomes natural and built-in. In time, the results begin to speak for themselves, in large part due to that positive, kinetic energy that all community schools emit.

Because of community schools' potential to positively influence everything that goes into the optimal conditions of teaching and learning, they represent organizational leadership at its best. ■

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Elia brings nearly five decades of experience as an educator to her role at ICLE. Prior to this appointment, she served as the first female New York State Commissioner of Education and as President of the University of the State of New York (USNY). In this capacity, she oversaw the work of more than 700 school districts with 3.2 million students; 7,000 libraries; 900 museums; and more than 50 professions encompassing nearly 900,000 licensees.

Previously, she served for ten years as superintendent of schools in Hillsborough County, Florida, where she successfully implemented higher learning standards, partnered with teachers to develop a comprehensive evaluation system, and earned national recognition for gains in student achievement. In 2015, she was named Florida's Superintendent of the Year, received the AASA Women in School Leadership Award from the School Superintendents Association, and was one of four finalists for the National Superintendent of the Year award.

Elia holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Daeman College (formerly Rosary Hill College) in Buffalo, a Master of Education from the University of Buffalo, and a Master of Professional Studies from SUNY Buffalo. In 1970, she began her career in education as a social studies teacher in the Sweet Home Central School District (in Western New York) and taught for 19 years before moving on to positions as a school and district administrator.

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