California Community Schools Framework

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Community Schools: A California Definition

A community school is any school serving pre-Kindergarten through high school students using a "whole-child" approach, with "an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement."[1] As a school improvement strategy, community school initiatives enable the local education agency (LEA) and school to work closely with educators, students, and families to understand and address the unique needs, assets, and aspirations of the school community.

Community schools then design their own curricula and programs to support the whole child and partner with community-based organizations (CBO) and local government agencies to align community resources to realize a shared vision for success. They improve student outcomes by addressing students' academic, cognitive, physical, mental, and social-emotional needs. In addition to orchestrating governmental and community resources, community schools meet the needs of children and youth by building a positive school climate and trusting relationships, along with rich learning opportunities that prepare all students to succeed in college, career, and life.

[1] Coalition for Community Schools

In order to address student, family and community needs, some community schools are open beyond the hours of the traditional school day for after school activities which often include tutoring and enrichment activities for children, as well as workshops and community services. Many community schools operate year-round to serve both children and their families. Community schools are designed to intentionally and collaboratively address the economic and social barriers that are the underlying cause of the opportunity and achievement gaps.[2]

Recent events, such as the COVID-19 emergency, have forced districts and schools to rethink the direct connection between schools and families, and to examine the link between school and community services, including ways in which these links can be strengthened. Community school strategies can be an effective approach to mitigate the academic and social impacts of current events, improve school responsiveness to student and family needs, and to organize school and community resources to address barriers to learning.[3]

The California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) is an important opportunity for California to build a cohesive statewide approach that mitigates the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on student learning, cognitive and social development, and emotional well-being. This initiative is designed to accelerate efforts across the state to reimagine schools in ways that are aligned with the equity goals that support the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of California's families.
To meet the current moment, it is important not to view community schools as one initiative among many that are currently being funded in California districts, but rather as an equity-enhancing strategy that aligns with and can help coordinate and extend a wide range of state, school, and district initiatives. This includes large state investments in youth-focused behavioral health, nutrition, universal preschool, and expanded learning, as well as ongoing efforts involving Multi-Tiered System of Supports, social-emotional learning, college and career readiness, and ultimately, the Statewide System of Support for school improvement.

[2] Learning Policy Institute, Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement. June 2017
[3] Policy Analysis for California Education: Community Schools, A COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

The Four Pillars of Community Schools

In order to achieve these transformational outcomes, The CCSPP Framework leans heavily on the four established pillars of the community schools movement. Current statute regarding the CCSPP aligns well with the research. Specifically, community schools are defined in statute as public schools with "strong and intentional community partnerships ensuring pupil learning and whole child and family development," including the following features:

Integrated student supports, which can support student success by meeting their academic, physical, social-emotional, and mental health needs. Statute defines this as including the "coordination of trauma-informed health, mental health, and social services." Effectively supporting students also requires that students be well known so that they can be well served.

Family and community engagement, which involves actively tapping the expertise and knowledge of family and community members to serve as true partners in supporting and educating students. Statute defines this as including "home visits, home-school collaboration, [and] culturally responsive community partnerships." Learning opportunities for family members as well as structures and opportunities for shared leadership are other important elements of authentic family engagement.

Collaborative leadership and practices for educators and administrators that establish a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility for outcomes in a manner that includes students, families, and community members. Statute defines This as including "professional development to transform school culture and climate that centers on pupil learning and supports mental and behavioral health, trauma-informed care, Social Emotional Learning [and] restorative justice."

Extended learning time and opportunities that include academic support, enrichment, and real-world learning opportunities (e.g., internships, project-based learning). Statute refers to these opportunities as both "extended learning" and "expanded learning" and defines them as including "before and after school care and summer programs." Expanded learning opportunities can also include tutoring and other learning supports during school hours.

These four pillars have served as the basis for California's community schools investments in 2020 and 2021. As a comprehensive transformation strategy California's community schools will implement authentically developed and community driven strategies in all four pillar areas. Moreover, while direct services are critical, the California community schools model is far more than the delivery of integrated student and family supports. The CCSPP Framework also expands these definitional elements to specific strategies that will guide community schools' implementation. Every district and every school is different, and there will therefore be variation in design and practice, but to be a California Community School, each of the four pillars must be evidenced in implementation and practice.

The Four Key Conditions for Learning

As a critical part of the evolution of community schools, today's community schools are taking to heart an essential lesson learned—a good student support system cannot compensate for a weak core instructional program[4] that is not responsive to individual student development and learning needs (including social, emotional, and cognitive).

To strengthen their core instructional programs and achieve school transformation, today's community schools are guided by the emerging consensus on the 'science of learning and development' (SoLD) which synthesizes a wide range of educational research findings regarding well-vetted strategies that support the kinds of relationships and learning opportunities needed to promote children's well-being, healthy development, and transferable learning into a developmental systems framework.[5] These key conditions for learning provide the foundation for the four pillars described above.

[4] New York University: Twenty Years, Ten Lessons: Community Schools as an Equitable School Improvement Strategy, 2021

[5] Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa Flook, Channa Cook-Harvey, Brigid Barron & David Osher (2020) Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, Applied Developmental Science, 24:2, 97-140

The SoLD framework posits that the following are necessary for student learning and development:

Supportive environmental conditions that foster strong relationships and community. These include positive sustained relationships that foster attachment and emotional connections; physical, emotional, and identity safety; and a sense of belonging and purpose.

Productive instructional strategies that support motivation, competence, and self-directed learning. These curriculum, teaching, and assessment strategies feature well-scaffolded instruction and ongoing formative assessment that support conceptual understanding, take students' prior knowledge and experiences into account, and provide the right amount of challenge and support on relevant and engaging learning tasks.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) that fosters skills, habits, and mindsets that enable academic progress, efficacy, and productive behavior. These include self-regulation, executive function, intrapersonal awareness and interpersonal skills, a growth mindset, and a sense of agency that supports resilience and productive action.

System of supports that enable healthy development, respond to student needs, and address learning barriers. These include a multi-tiered system of academic, health, and social supports that provide personalized resources within and beyond the classroom to address and prevent developmental detours, including conditions of trauma and adversity.

Critical among these strategies are relationship-centered student, family, and community engagement, as foundational to community school development and all its other elements and strategies as well as a related commitment to building positive, nurturing school environments that build in restorative practices, opportunities for SEL and the professional development and coaching required to deliver these.

The Four Cornerstone Commitments

While recognizing and appreciating the vast diversity of our state in every way, the CCSPP is an explicitly equity driven initiative in statute, principle, and practice. As such this Framework also identifies the following four commitments as essential components to all California community schools. These commitments are aligned with consistent themes expressed in the initial phase of our community engagement process.

A Commitment to Assets-Driven and Strength-Based Practice: California's community schools view students, their families and their community through the lens of their assets and strengths and value the collective wisdom derived from experience, family, history and culture. California community schools view the language of students and family members as a vital asset to be uplifted. California's community schools understand language to be family, history, culture, and community. Community schools focus on building an embracing culture of individual and communal wellness. An essential component to this assets-based lens towards sustaining wellness is ensuring that healing-centered physical, emotional and mental health supports are integrated into the school community in ways that are accessible, destigmatized and culturally fluent.

A Commitment to Racially Just and Restorative School Climates: California's community schools commit to creating, nourishing and sustaining school climates that are centered in the embrace of and support for all students in the totality of school interactions. This commitment extends not only onto the playground and cafeteria but into every classroom and office. The commitment explicitly expects the presence of restorative practice rather than punitive, exclusionary discipline that detaches students from school and from needed supports, too often activating a school to prison pipeline. Such punitive disciplinary practices are inconsistent with this commitment and run counter to the spirit and intent of the CCSPP Framework.

The Four Cornerstone Commitments

A Commitment to Powerful, Culturally Proficient and Relevant Instruction: California's community schools commit to be driven by teaching and learning that relevant to, inclusive of and centered in the wisdom, history, culture and experience of students, families and communities. This culturally rooted instructional practice should be inspiring, inquiry-oriented, project-based, multi-modal, collaborative, interactive and informed by the ideals of co-learning. Community schools prioritize experiential learning that deepens connection to and engagement with the community. By expanding learning beyond the school walls and the school day, Community schools redefine traditional constructs who teaches, where we learn and how we build understanding.

A Commitment to Shared Decision Making and Participatory Practices: California's community schools all share a commitment to authentic and dynamic shared leadership in all aspects of school governance and operations. All school interest holders including students, families, staff, and community members must have genuine engagement in decision making about school climate, curriculum, and services. Shared decision-making practices must also prioritize transparency and shared accountability to ensuring information is both available and accessible, so that all interest holders can fully participate. This commitment to authentic power sharing at both the school site and within the LEA should also be evidenced through demonstrated support from all interest holders at each step of a school's community school implementation plan.

The Four
Proven Practices

As school districts and school sites have implemented versions of community school approaches across the nation, there are an array of approaches and practices that have been successful in diverse communities and school sites[6]. California community schools should both attend to research and listen to interest holder voices to confirm appropriate best practices rooted in the ethos of the specific school community. There are a small set of proven practices that all California community schools should adopt and adapt to meet the needs of their school:

Community Asset Mapping and Gap Analysis:
An essential element for successful community school efforts are strategies to engage school and community interest holders in a coherent process of identifying and curating assets and wisdoms throughout the community. This process should also allow
for school and community members to identify gaps in programs, services and resources that inhibit student achievement and community coherence.

The Community School Coordinator:
There are many models for staffing community schools for success. All of these models include a coordinator who is responsible for the overall implementation of community school processes, programs, partnerships and strategies at the school site. While districts and schools will approach budgeting and staffing differently, the essential practice is that a discreet position is a threshold for community school success.

[6]Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Site-Based and LEA-Based Advisory Councils:
Authentic shared decision making is a hallmark of the California community schools approach. Similar to the school coordinator position, LEA's and school sites may design shared decision-making models differently in terms of their composition and scope, but both school site-based and LEA-based shared decision-making councils is also a threshold mechanism for implementing the California community schools model. The threshold practice will engage interest holders including students, staff, families, and community members in determining the focus and direction of the community school effort.

Integrating and Aligning with other relevant Programs:
The community schools movement in California is intentionally situated in a suite of initiatives that stand to transform public education at schools throughout the State. Specifically, the work to expand restorative practices and racially just schools, multi-tiered systems of support, statewide systems of support, mental health services for students and families, expanded learning time, universal TK, and the state-wide literacy initiative are all initiatives that can be aligned to and integrated with the community schools movement. Proven positive practice will also align, integrate and cross stitch with other education justice and equity initiatives at the district and school site level.

Key Roles

While community school grants are typically made for 'eligible' school sites, LEAs have a critical role to play in building a community-wide community schools initiative. Individual community schools are more likely to be successful and sustained when there is strong support and infrastructure in place for collaboration at the district and/or county level.

In addition, to ensure that community school development in California is transformational, technical assistance will play a critical role and include a wide range of capacity building support, from professional development and coaching to support for strategic planning and community engagement, as well as partnership development that brings meaningful resources to schools (e.g., direct staffing, service provision, and funding). Technical assistance will be provided at the school site, district and/or county level.

LEA

The LEA has a key role to play in building a coherent, comprehensive, and sustainable community school effort across the district / community. To ensure the approach is responsive and focuses on serving high need populations, the LEA can establish a collaborative LEA team that is representative of all interested voices (including students and families, as well as community partners, educators, and administrators) to share in making decisions about how to implement the community schools initiative across multiple sites. To ensure capacity building, LEAs can put staff members in place to provide training and technical assistance to community school sites (e.g., onboarding community school coordinators, training school staff, and convening a learning community to share best practices and address common problems across school sites).
The LEA has a key role to play in organizing resources to ensure that supports and services are efficiently and effectively provided. Rather than each school trying to coordinate all of the elements on its own, the LEA should help to vet and formalize partnerships with community-based organizations and local government agencies on behalf of their schools. The LEA can also assist in aligning initiatives and building systems to support continuous improvement. County offices of education (COE) may best play this role in leading and managing a full community-wide initiative in rural settings and on behalf of small school districts.

COEs as Service Coordinators

Even when they are not applying for funding on behalf of their schools, COEs can play an important role in convening local government service agencies to support community school initiatives on behalf of all the school districts in the county. COEs playing this role could support more efficient programs, systems, and resource allocation changes as it would avoid the complication of each school district negotiating its own partnership with county agencies. For example, county-level staff can also play an important role in helping to make county health department or social services resources available.

Regional Technical Assistance Centers

A state-wide central Technical Assistance Center (TAC) Hub will be selected to design technical assistance content, develop technical assistance delivery models and organize a set of Regional TACs. These Regional TACs will be tasked with providing professional development, models of practice, coaching, and related supports to LEAs and schools for the following functions:

- Conducting comprehensive school and community needs and asset assessments
- Improving and empowering authentic family and community engagement in the languages spoken in the community
- Developing designs and strategies for relationship-centered schools that can sustain a positive climate and inclusive, restorative practices;
- Strengthening instruction so that it provides inclusive, engaging, and effective learning experiences designed to meet students' needs
- Developing expanded learning models that use school and community resources to enrich students' learning opportunities and remove obstacles to learning
- Establishing shared decision-making structures, processes and protocols that ensure students, families, educators and community members collaborate on the decisions that most affect the conditions for powerful teaching and learning.

Key Roles

- Developing models of service provision that integrate MTSS systems with health, mental health, social service, and expanded learning resources to efficiently and effectively serve the needs of children and youth;
- Collecting data about student experiences and outcomes that inform a process of continuous improvement.
- Creating community partnerships
- Developing sustainable funding sources by accessing and combining funding for services from multiple revenue sources
- Coordinating services across child-serving agencies and schools

California Department of Education (CDE)

The CDE's role is critical to setting up a coherent and effective statewide community schools initiative. Areas of essential state leadership include:

- Gathering program evaluation data and reporting annually.
- Building a robust community input and feedback process and infrastructure.
- Utilizing the community input process to build a central framework (California's Community School Framework). This framework will guide grantee visioning, planning, and implementation processes (via RFA development) and provide a foundation for the technical assistance content and infrastructure.
- Building an effective technical assistance infrastructure. Given the complexities of community schools planning, implementation, and sustainability, and the intention to build an initiative that delivers on school transformation, it will be important to consider the capacity of technical assistance providers to support schools across this broad developmental arc and will likely need to involve LEAs partnering with CBOs, institutions of higher education, and other technical assistance providers.
- Monitoring the work of the central and regional technical assistance centers and ensuring continuous improvement and responsiveness in the technical assistance infrastructure.
- Engaging in statewide initiatives to increase or improve services for youth, to support improvement efforts and ensure alignment with the community schools initiative.