

Transforming Education: How Community Schools Foster Student and Community Success

What are Community Schools?

Since the passage of Maryland’s Blueprint legislation in 2021, the number of community schools in the state has soared. There are currently 621 community schools across the state (Fig 1). A community school “is a public school that serves as the hub of its neighborhood by leveraging the assets of families, educators, community partners and other local support to mediate the impact of poverty on learning” (MCCS, 2022, as cited in Shiller, 2024, para. 5). Community schools act as a resource center for many communities, providing wraparound services that target emotional, social and physical health. This enhances the environment students learn in and improves conditions for their families as well. By design, not every community school is the same, but they all work toward the same goal of improving students’ overall success by addressing the challenges that might hinder them inside and outside the classroom.

Community Schools prioritize their work under four pillars to ensure progress. These pillars include integrated student support; expanded learning time and opportunities; active family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership practices.

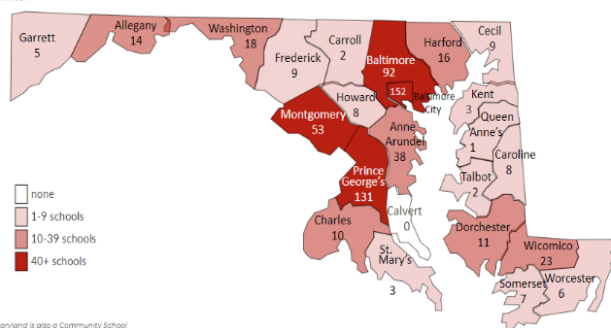
Integrating student support creates a cohesive system of resources and services that target emotional, social and physical needs of students and their families. **Expanded learning time and opportunities** give students a personalized experience to enhance their education outside of the traditional school hours. **Active family and community engagement** includes involving

families in decision-making, solidifying meaningful partnerships with surrounding community organizations, and making resources available for families and their students. This pillar is important as it helps to create open communication with families and a safe welcoming environment for students to learn and grow.

By intentionally hearing everyone’s voice through **collaborative leadership**, the community school can create a strong, comprehensive network of teachers, parents, community partners, and other stakeholders to work towards the common goal of addressing the complex needs of students and families.

Figure 1. FY 2025 Map of 621 Maryland Community Schools

In FY 2025, 621 community schools across 23 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) receive Concentration of Poverty Grants.



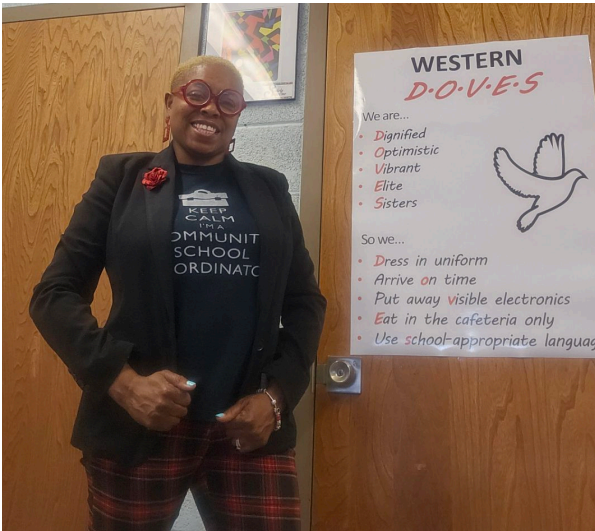
Note: The SEDD School of Maryland is also a Community School

The community school coordinator plays a key role overseeing the work of a community school. They identify needs, stay in contact with families and students, and build community partnerships. They are critical to catalyzing the community school strategy for community transformation outside the school.

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Community School Coordinators (CSCs)

Figure 2. CSC at Western High School



Every community school has a coordinator. Coordinators are central in building and maintaining relationships and leveraging their potential for “social bonding and collective power,” (Shaia & Finnigan-Carr, 2018, p. 16). Coordinators create conditions for systemic change as well as help students and families prosper socially and emotionally (Shiller, 2024). Coordinators plan events such as holiday food drives, free haircuts, walks for fundraising, and cultural heritage celebrations, which not only provide resources for students and their families, but collaborative partnerships become a social network for the school community.

Collaborative partnerships are vital to community schools because they provide collective resources, expertise, and support to address the needs of

students and families. Partnerships benefit not only students' learning but also support the community school coordinator in making sure that the necessary services are available to students in need. Partnerships at the district level can “help school districts reexamine their policies and structures, with the goal of building more equitable and healthy learning environments” (Sepanik & Brown, 2021, p.7). Research shows that “greater access to coordinated services for families relates to lower family stress, and increased family engagement in children’s education” (Galindo & Sanders, 2019, p. 519).

Effectiveness

The New York City Community School initiative is a telling example of community schools’ impact, and specifically the impact of partnerships on student success. A recent study found “a decrease in absences across multiple grade levels, on time grade progression, and higher graduation rates for high school students” (Johnston et al., 2020, p. 46). The study identified collaborative partnerships, a key pillar of community schools, as a lever for this change, showing that the community schools' strategy is effective in making improvements in the academic success of students.

At a local level, a Baltimore research study found that community schools positively impact attendance: “77% of community school students in grades 6 to 8 were less likely to be chronically absent than students not in community schools” (Jacobsen et al., 2018, para. 15). Community schools have an especially strong impact on

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attendance because their goal is to examine and address the myriad factors a family might be experiencing that cause an attendance problem.

Community schools often focus on creating a positive school culture and making the school a place where students feel valued and connected. Having this inviting, warm learning environment ultimately leads to improvements in chronic absenteeism; high school graduation rates as it encourages students to come to school (Lubin Woods, 2023). For example, research shows that “school–community collaboration was effective for providing high-quality OST (out of school time) programs through community resources, which motivated students to attend school regularly” (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, as cited by Kim & Gentle-Genitty, 2020, p. 4).

Figure 3. Dr. Shiller and Dr. Flores- Koulish visiting a CS in Somerset County



Student-Family-Community

Community schools are especially impactful in communities that have been adversely affected by decades of divestment and systemic racism, which hamstringing the quality and quantity of resources and opportunities families and students might receive. We know that communities that have “the most segregated schools tend to be also ones with concentrated poverty, scarce resources, and limited learning opportunities” (Malone, 2020, p. 488). Community schools can be a vehicle to add some of those resources and learning opportunities back into communities.

Conclusion

Overall, community schools engage and support their families and students by placing relationships at the center of the work. They become community hubs that integrate academic support with essential services for students and their families. Funding these schools is crucial because it ensures all students receive the holistic support needed to thrive academically and personally, fostering a more equitable and effective educational environment and larger community. The collective impact approach that community schools use allows community members and organizations to take actions towards achieving equity.

- Community schools are effective because they provide resources to students and families. Such services are truly transformative.
- Community schools center the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being of young people and their families.

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They positively influence students' attendance, academic achievement, school culture, and overall engagement in school and community-based programming.

- When students and families feel heard and supported, they are empowered to fully engage and work to impact the school and their community in positive ways.
- Community schools combat absenteeism by providing on-site resources to address various factors that contribute to absenteeism.
- With open lines of communication between school and home, community schools offer a more personalized approach of support and interventions to address specific reasons for a student being absent.
- Community school coordinators are at the center. While it takes many stakeholders to run a successful community school, the coordinators examine and harness the needs and assets of the entire school community.

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