

Building Better Learning Environments: The Positive Impact of Community Schools on School Climate¹

What is School Climate?

The National Center on School Climate (NCSC) defines school climate as “the quality and character of school life based on patterns of students, ‘parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (NCSC, 2021). NCSC contends that a feeling of safety as indicated by lower disciplinary rates, risky behavior, feelings of connectedness at school, and strong interpersonal relationships are some of the key indicators of a positive school climate. It is important that students have a positive school climate because children learn best when they feel safe and supported (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Positive school climate can mitigate other factors impacting young people by cultivating strong relationships among students, teachers, and families, promoting inclusivity, and providing resources to help students navigate challenges from both home and school. Moreover, research shows that a positive school climate affects students’ self-esteem, frequency of substance abuse and is overall predictive of a better state of wellbeing (Thapa et al., 2013). Therefore, fostering a nurturing and supportive school environment can have a profound impact on students’ overall development, helping them build healthier lifestyles for all areas of life.

While NCSC has **14 dimensions of school climate** to comprehensively evaluate and enhance the environment within a school, and the Maryland school climate survey assesses schools on most of these dimensions, this research brief has zeroed in on 5 subdimensions particularly important to monitor because of their tight link to the CS strategy. These dimensions include:

- Participation and Engagement
- Academic and Behavioral Supports
- Staff-Student Relationships
- Emotional Safety
- Respect for Diversity

Participation and Engagement reflects how inviting the school is for families and community members and how often they participate in school decision making.

Academic and Behavioral Supports encompasses the myriad ways that schools meet student needs, both academic and holistic. **Staff-Student Relationships**

capture the extent of positive connections between students and adults in the building. **Emotional Safety** focuses on how secure a student feels taking academic risks and interacting with others. Lastly, **Respect for Diversity** reflects on whether individuals of different demographic or social backgrounds and perspectives are represented throughout all school activities.

Community Schools and School Climate

Community schools are especially poised to impact school climate. Community schools, grounded in four pillars (Oakes et al, 2017), work to develop a positive school climate through a deliberate strategy to engage families, community members, and students. The dimensions of school climate align closely with the community school strategy, as both prioritize creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment that fosters academic success and well-being. Lubin Woods (2023) sums up school climate in community schools by saying that the goal is to create a holistic and responsive

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educational environment that addresses the diverse needs of students.

Addressing these needs is complex and can involve everything from providing access to healthy foods, offering social supports, extending learning opportunities and establishing secure partnerships that support students and their families. This strategy is parallel to the “Whole Child Approach to Education” which works to ensure that all “aspects of children’s well-being are supported to ensure that learning happens in deep, meaningful, and lasting ways” (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Similarly, the community school approach prioritizes collaboration among educators, families, and community resources to create a supportive environment that fosters holistic development and removes barriers to learning.

Community schools, a positive school climate, and the whole child approach are ultimately interconnected in their shared goal of supporting students holistically by addressing their academic, social, emotional, and physical needs within a safe and inclusive environment.

With the passage of the landmark “Blueprint for Maryland’s Future” legislation (hereafter ‘Blueprint’), Maryland is now one of only two states in the U.S. scaling up community schools statewide. With an initial allocation of \$250,000 for personnel funding, community schools in Maryland now have the resources to focus on the critical work of building relationships with families and establishing partnerships.

Research suggests that the community school strategy supports positive school climate outcomes. A study by Fantigrossi (2020) found that the community schools approach led to significant improvements in several key categories regarding the well-being of our young people.

This study builds on earlier research from Durham and Connolly (2017), finding that community schools have higher student attendance and more positive school climate than peer community schools.

In 2024-2025, Maryland had a total of 621 community schools. As community schools continue to grow, research should focus on evaluating their long-term impact on academic outcomes, equity, and community well-being to guide their development and scalability. This research brief aims to answer the question: In Maryland, what impact do community schools have on school climate? Using publicly available data, we examined school climate survey results at 327 community schools and compared it to the climate in non-community schools.

Research Methods

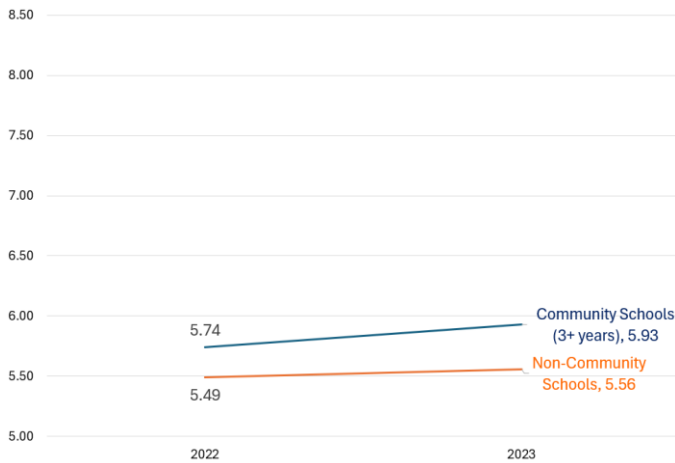
Data for the 5 climate domains were collected as part of the Maryland School Survey that was given to elementary and middle school students in the spring of 2022 and 2023. Our analysis² accounted for the factors that distinguish community schools from others, including their poverty rate, size, and student mobility. All differences shown between community schools and non-community schools are statistically significant.

² Using linear regression analysis, the school climate scores featured in the figures were predicted based on community school status (i.e., never a community school versus having been a community school for three or more years as of 2022-23, n=327), and several school factors known to impact climate. These factors included school enrollment size, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals

(FARMS), and student mobility rate. The climate score comparisons thus represent the scores expected if all schools had the same average enrollment, FARMS, and mobility rates as the non-community schools had in those two years. All the comparisons presented represent statistically significant differences.

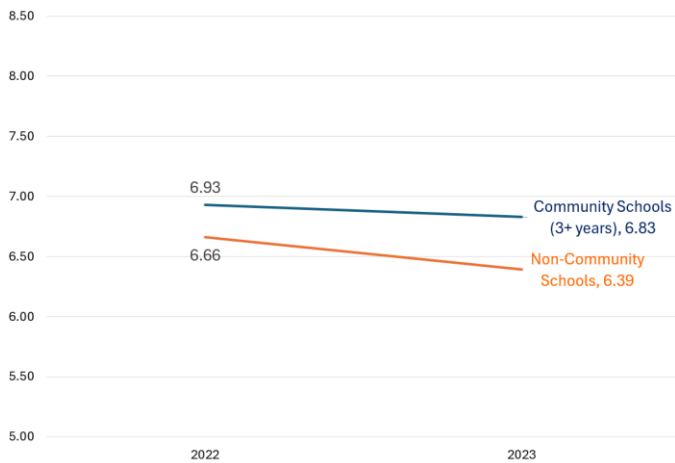
Key Findings

Figure 1. Participation & Engagement 2022-2023



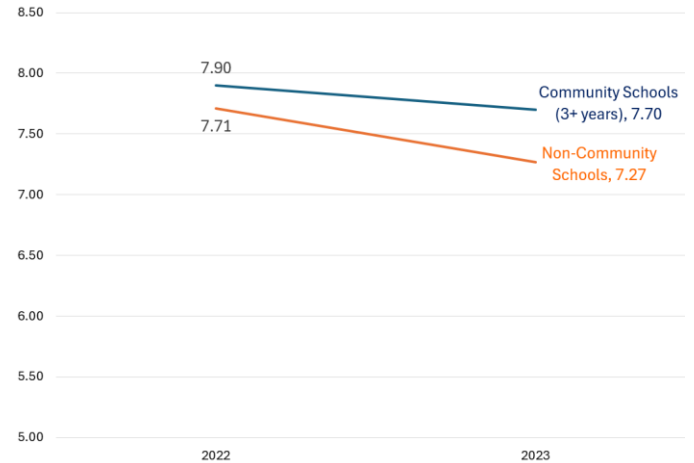
Results showed that there was an increase from the 2022 to 2023 academic school year in participation and engagement in both community schools and non-community schools. However, families and students were more likely to participate and engage in community schools ($\hat{Y} = 5.93$) compared to families and students at non-community schools ($\hat{Y} = 5.56$).

Figure 2. Academic and Behavioral Supports



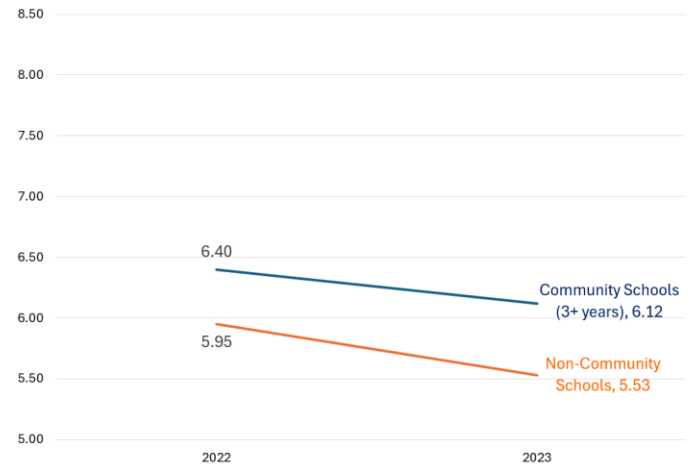
When examining the academic and behavioral support environment between community schools and non-community schools, students reported feeling more supported in community schools ($\hat{Y} = 6.83$) compared to non-community schools ($\hat{Y} = 6.39$).

Figure 3. Staff-Student Relationships



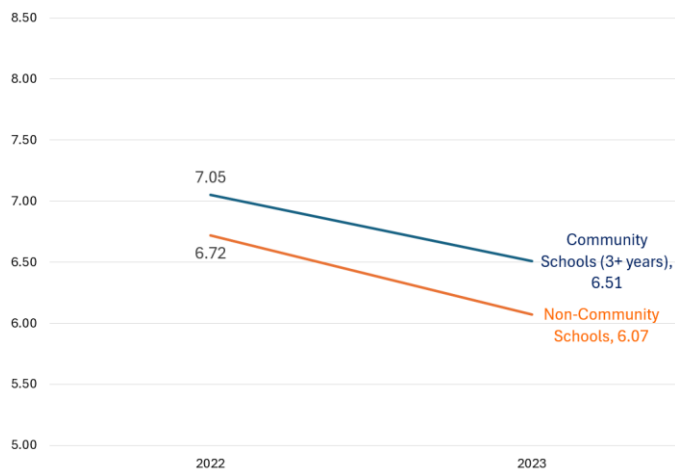
While assessing staff student relationships, results showed that students in a community school had stronger relationships with staff ($\hat{Y} = 7.70$) in comparison to student-staff relationships in non-community schools ($\hat{Y} = 7.27$).

Figure 4. Emotional Safety



Concerning feeling emotionally safe at their schools, schools are still struggling with this post-pandemic, which explains the declining numbers. However, students in community schools had a stronger feeling of safety ($\hat{Y} = 6.12$) than their peers in non-community schools ($\hat{Y} = 5.53$).

Figure 5. Respect for Diversity



When examining respect for diversity, schools are still struggling with this post-pandemic, but community school respondents felt more included and represented ($\hat{Y} = 6.51$) than students attending a non-community school ($\hat{Y} = 6.07$).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the positive influence of community schools on several aspects of school climate, emphasizing their role in fostering supportive, inclusive, and engaging educational environments. After accounting for differences between community and non-community schools known to influence school climate, students in community schools rated their climate significantly higher than students in non-community schools. Specifically, perceptions about participation and engagement increased in both community schools and non-community schools, but the increase was higher in community schools. Further, the integrated student support approach used by community schools may encourage greater involvement in school activities and learning opportunities compared to the methods used in non-community schools. Indeed, student perceptions about academic and behavioral support were notably higher in community schools than in non-community schools. This suggests that community schools may provide better resources and systems to address students' academic and behavioral needs, creating an environment where students feel valued and guided. At the same time, relationships between students and staff were perceived more positively in community schools, with students reporting a higher average experience score than their peers in non-community schools. This finding emphasizes the importance of community schools fostering meaningful interactions between students and staff, which can

contribute to trust, engagement, and a sense of belonging.

Emotional safety is also a crucial factor in supporting student well-being and fostering their willingness to fully engage in learning. The difference in predicted scores for emotional safety highlights the emphasis that community schools place on fostering emotionally secure environments. Respect for diversity, which is vital in schools as it promotes inclusivity and a sense of belonging for everyone, was higher in community schools than non-community schools. One of the guiding principles of community schools' work is to promote equity and celebrate their students' differences through events that ensure that all students feel seen. For educators, policymakers, and stakeholders, these results highlight the potential of community schools to create a more inclusive, supportive, and effective educational experience for all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a positive school climate is foundational for fostering student success, emotional well-being, and overall development. By emphasizing dimensions such as participation and engagement, academic and behavioral supports, staff-student relationships, emotional safety, and respect for diversity, schools can create inclusive environments where students feel safe, supported, and valued. The results of this study underscore the significant role community schools play in fostering a positive school climate. Students in community schools reported higher levels of participation, stronger relationships with staff, and a greater sense of emotional safety and respect for diversity compared to their peers in non-community schools. As community schools continue to expand across Maryland, this research demonstrates their potential to improve student well-being and academic outcomes by addressing the diverse needs of students holistically.

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