

OK, but who is going to staff this?

The glue that holds the community school together is the site resource coordinator, or RC. Generally coming from a background in education or social work, the RC will work full time to build local partnerships capable of meeting the needs and goals of the community, as well as craft strategies that simultaneously overcome boundaries and create opportunities for students and educators.

The RC is also responsible for organizing and facilitating an oversight committee that is representative of all stakeholders—including parents, teachers other school staff, community partners and local leaders—to consistently evaluate the effectiveness of each resource and to bring in new partners to meet changing community needs. The RCs are not case managers; rather, they serve as point-persons for these resources, developing relationships with faculty and administration that foster trust and partnership. The RCs encourage referrals to these resources when necessary. They will also communicate with faculty to let them know the status of selected interventions and ways they can support these in the classroom.

This sounds great, but what makes community schools sustainable?

Sometimes it feels like the “reform du jour” has come and gone in a flash without ever making real progress. Community schools aren’t a one-time program; they’re a paradigm shift in how we think about schools. With community schools at their center, neighborhoods can grow and develop in ways that mitigate a variety of out-of-school factors by partnering with the appropriate local resources.

For example, in Cincinnati, community schools have become an indispensable way of life in every neighborhood, with students and families receiving both academic and nonacademic supports. As a result, Cincinnati is rated the highest-performing urban school district in the state, graduation rates have risen exponentially, and middle-class families are moving back into the city.

I’m sold! What can I do?

Community schools are solution-driven unionism at its finest. Using your union as a tool for progress, you can advocate for the resources your school needs to become a full-service community school. Teachers are on the frontlines of schools every day, and we need you on the frontlines of the fight to make our schools stronger. The more allies we have in this push, the stronger the movement and the more likely we are to secure the resources our schools need. We know we must support our students academically, socially, emotionally and physically. We also know that we can’t do it alone.

Advocate for community schools in your district and help give students the tools they need to succeed. Here are some ways to get involved:

- **Share your story!** If you work in a community school, let us know about your experience through pictures, videos and written stories. Send your stories to edissues@aft.org.
- **Attend a school board meeting to share your story** about how a community schools approach can strengthen your school and your practice.
- **Present the community schools strategy** to your school improvement team.
- **Work with your local union leaders** to convene a coalition of community organizers and labor groups to create and advocate for a common vision for public schools. Contact potential community partners, public officials, elected leaders, faith-based organizations, and others, to get them on board with the community schools strategy, and encourage them to lobby your school district to implement this approach.
- **Learn more about The Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project** and share this information with your local union leader.
- **Contact the AFT national office** (Shital C. Shah, associate director, sshah@aft.org) for more information and for support on how to get community schools started in your school and community.

OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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What is a community school?

Community learning centers. Full-service schools. Community hubs. Whatever you call them, community schools make a difference in the lives of children, families, educators, and their communities each and every day. By moving beyond the normal confines of the school and partnering with local stakeholders, community schools provide real solutions to the unique problems of the students and families they serve, and are another major step forward in reclaiming the promise of public education.

Community schools aren't just centers of education; they're the new heart of the community itself that help create better conditions for both teaching and learning. They're a place where teachers, families, community members and service providers can come together in coordinated, purposeful and results-focused partnerships. They become the center of their communities by providing services to students, families and neighbors that best serve their needs, while at the same time promoting stable, healthy neighborhoods. This isn't just another program: It's a paradigm shift in the way we think about schools that goes well beyond just providing supports and services for students.

Across the country, community schools have been shown to:

- **Reduce health-related obstacles that cost students instructional time.** Students miss fewer days of school for treatable illnesses and are less distracted by medical issues.
- **Decrease student mobility rates.** When schools serve as hubs of the community, families can establish roots rather than moving around to receive necessary services.
- **Help parents support the work that teachers are doing in the classroom.** When utilizing the services, they are more likely to gain skills to help with homework and reinforce the lessons taught at school.
- **Reduce the rates of chronic absenteeism.** Community schools use this measure to uncover barriers to students' learning and families' needs.

IN FOCUS

With barriers removed and the playing field leveled, students are better focused, parents are more engaged, and teachers are empowered to concentrate on what's most important: teaching.

Learn more about community schools results at www.communityschools.org.

What does this strategy look like?

Community schools are meant to serve the unique needs of individual communities. There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, a panacea, or a single answer to address these needs. **There are, however, some fundamentals:**

- 1. Community schools provide more than one type of service to students and the community.** Better yet, the services are unique to each school and community, and will most likely change over time as the needs of your student and family population changes. **Examples of these services could include:**
 - Academic services like tutoring, community-based learning and other enrichment activities;
 - Medical services like primary, vision, dental, mental health and nutritional services;
 - Adult education classes;
 - Early childhood education;
 - Career and technical education; and,
 - Restorative practices.

- 2. Community schools better support and enable a strong, academic curriculum.** Strong ties with the community lead to more partnerships and programs outside the classroom, which in turn can be utilized to directly support instruction and empower students to learn.

It is important to note that in addition to providing services to students, community partners also can contribute to the high-quality instruction provided by teachers at the school. This will prove especially useful with the transition to the state standards, where partnerships may be invaluable to teaching the critical-thinking and analytical skills at the heart of the new standards.

Instructional strategies could include project based and service learning. For example, a local manufacturing plant can team up with a high school math department to show students the practical applications of geometry in designing packaging; meanwhile, a senior-living facility works with fifth-graders learning about the history of immigration to conduct an oral history project. The inclusion of community partners in schools can help students at all levels to see the real-life applications of classroom content and to develop a lifelong love of learning.

- 3. Partnerships are coordinated and purposeful.** We've all seen well-intentioned programs come into schools only to provide insulated, temporary services that fail to support the real, sustainable progress our students and schools need. We also know that sometimes we don't know the partners who are working with our students, or to what end. The community school infrastructure enables the coordination and integration of programs that enrich and support learning and instruction while meeting the needs of students, families and the community.

- 4. Community schools share a vision and mission and are results-driven.** Everyone involved—community partners, families, school staff and administration—shares responsibility for accountability and continuous improvement. The results are not just focused on academics, but also include the non-school-related outcomes.

If we work from the premise that all children should be able to achieve academic success regardless of their neighborhood or circumstances, then there needs to be shared accountability for these outcomes by all who are involved in students' lives.

- 5. A site resource coordinator makes sure that all of the service and community providers are working together, focusing on the same set of results to ensure that students are getting the service most attuned to their social and emotional needs and building on your classroom instruction.** The coordinators are the anchor for the community school. They have strong relationships with school staff, parents, administrators and the community. It is through the coordinators that community schools are able to leverage resources to meet the needs of students and families.

- 6. Community schools work with students but also engage families and communities.** Not only are families and communities the recipients of programs and supports in these schools, they also must be a part of the decision-making process in this strategy. When families and community members are a part of the process of planning and implementing a community school, they begin to have a deeper investment and ownership in the success of their own children and the school community.

IN TOUCH

One of many examples of family engagement is a strategy that union members are taking part in: **The Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project.** This voluntary project is jointly governed by union, district and community members. Another great example of solution-driven unionism, results from this program show that home visits lead to increased parent involvement, reduced disciplinary problems, improved attendance and increased student achievement. Additionally, the visits have led to trusting, respectful relationships between parents and teachers, creating the foundation for understanding and cooperation between home and school that is crucial to every student's success. If this is an area you are interested in, reach out to your union leaders and share this link for more info: www.spft.org.

- 7. Effective community schools are governed at the local level, and decisions are made by consulting with all stakeholders, including teachers.** Teachers are often the best acquainted with students and their particular needs, so your input on the local site decision-making team (local governing team, etc.) is invaluable. For example, teachers can let others know the barriers that students face and need support with, in terms of helping prepare them for classroom learning. A community school strategy is exactly what schools need to meet and exceed standards, and to achieve the sort of high-quality instruction we know teachers want to provide for their students.

Why is my union advocating for this?

Students' academic success is based on much more than just their teacher. Linda Darling-Hammond, Professor of Education at Stanford and architect of the School Redesign Network, argues that individual teachers may account for only about 7-10 percent of overall achievement. Socioeconomic status usually accounts for 50-60 percent. Other school and home factors can account for as much as 10-20 percent. These factors can include challenges related to housing, nutrition, violence and gang-related activity, transportation, and a host of other obstacles that communities across the country are striving to overcome.

Data consistently show that students who attend community schools and who receive services, supports and enrichments have improved academic performance as well as increased motivation and engagement in learning. This makes teaching a more pleasurable and enriching experience for AFT members by removing some of the burden that often distracts from your responsibilities as educators. By addressing the barriers to learning that affect student achievement, the national AFT, your local union and community partners are dedicated to **reclaiming the promise of public education.** This means working to level the playing field, and giving students in struggling schools the resources and supports they need to be successful.

INVOLVED

We believe in our members and in your dedication to achieving educational equity and justice for all students; the community schools strategy is the vehicle for achieving this goal. See why other teachers think the strategy is important at go.aft.org/3teachers.