

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Case studies of what works

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Baltimore
Maryland



BALTIMORE CITY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Community schools, out-of-school-time programs (learning opportunities that take place outside the typical school day), and wraparound services have long existed, separately, in order to meet the needs of Baltimore youth and families. In the early 2000s, these various efforts were uncoordinated, which limited their impact. In 2012, the mayor's office and Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) adopted the Family League of Baltimore's Community and School Engagement strategy to align the resources and goals of the schools and community. The strategy engaged community-based organizations, such as Elev8 Baltimore and the Y in Central Maryland, to coordinate community school and out-of-school-time efforts. Today, BCPS has approximately 50 community schools engaging with a variety of community partners. The Family League (<http://familyleague.org/>), a Baltimore-based nonprofit organization, currently manages funding, partnerships and development, as well as convenes the community school initiative coordinating community partners at the city level. Marietta English, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) (<http://www.baltimoreteachers.org/>), and her members play a key role at school sites as well as at the district and city levels, helping serve the whole child and helping achieve the city's community school vision.

Baltimore's public school needs and assets are as diverse as their population of 82,000 students, creating a rich set of opportunities and challenges. Twenty-four percent of Baltimore residents with children live in poverty, which is above the state and national averages, 8 and 15 percent respectively.¹ Sixty-five percent of students qualify as low-income and 5.6 percent are English language learners (ELL).² Larger percentages of these two types of populations attend community schools.³ While 77 percent of kindergarten students are at grade level "ready to learn," only 55 percent of students are reading at "proficient or advanced" levels by eighth grade.⁴ Educators, administrators and community partners are countering poverty's impact, such as hunger and poor health, by creating meaningful partnerships to leverage the resources and to help students be ready to learn. Demaune Millard, interim president and CEO of the Family League, notes that each community school addresses students' academic and nonacademic needs, but also emphasizes that "there is no cookie-cutter method" in

achieving this, because each school tailors its strategy to the specific needs of the school.

Role of the Union: Working Smart with the Community and District

BTU seeks "to ensure that every student in the city is guaranteed a program of quality education."⁵ For BCPS community schools, this means ensuring that effective systems and funding are in place to provide necessary supports both at school and out of school.

Ensuring Sustainability Through Advocacy

One of the ways in which BTU sustains high-quality education programs is by advocating for resource equity. BTU's partnership with the Community Schools Initiative deepened when the initiative was experiencing funding difficulties. BTU not only helped push for increased funding but also leveraged the union's organizing assets to advocate for expanding the initiative. In this effort, they collaborated with a coalition of allies from the

Education Roundtable that included community school staff, families and students, as well as politicians, local community leaders, and community organizations such as Maryland's Communities United and the Center for Popular Democracy.⁶ The Education Roundtable was established by President English as a strategy to respond to AFT President Randi Weingarten's call to action: Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education. The Roundtable has played a crucial role in reclaiming Baltimore's promise by addressing education opportunities and challenges, while increasing collaboration among diverse stakeholders and groups representing parents, educators and community members, notes Chandra Carriere, BTU field representative and community schools liaison.

Creating Deep Roots Through Policy

BTU's partnership with BCPS and the community helped drive the enactment of Maryland House Bill 1139 (<http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2016RS/bills/hb/hb1139T.pdf>) and community school board policy. H.B. 1139

defines community schools and the funding that schools could receive; it also requires the state to notify districts about the possibility of creating community schools and support them through the development process.⁷ BTU helped shape the school board and Maryland state policy language, and the union provided testimony at local and state hearings.

Additionally, BTU mobilized union members and the community to increase support for the policy.

The school board policy created the community schools advisory board and the steering committee, which guides the partnerships, funding, strategies, and evaluation of the Community Schools Initiative. The co-chairs of this advisory board, representing out-of-school-time and lead agencies (i.e., the lead coordinating partner at a community school), have appointed positions on the steering committee along with Family League, city and district officials. BTU is represented on the steering committee⁸ and continues to encourage the initiative's priorities within its membership and with other allies.

Creating Innovative Partnerships

Partnerships, both public and private, are essential in community schools. BTU helps leverage resources from its relevant partners to assist community schools, says Carriere. One such partner is First Book (<https://www.firstbook.org/>). Through this partnership, BTU is able to assist students and families in creating home libraries, thereby extending the focus on literacy well beyond the school day. This partnership also supplies schools with “care closets” to support student basic needs and personal hygiene.

BTU's partnerships with food banks are another important collaboration, which helps ensure that students and families have access to healthy foods at schools. BTU also provides its members with community school information

and resources that are available in their respective schools, as well as professional development in areas such as team-leadership skills.

School-Based Health Centers: Caring for the Whole Child and Family

In addition to a culturally responsive and engaging curriculum, other key components of community schools are comprehensive services, community engagement, and a welcoming culture to support students' nonacademic needs.

The Baltimore Community School Initiative has a strong focus on strengthening student health. Ensuring that children are healthy—both physically and mentally—is crucial to their success outcomes, skills achievement and academic growth. A student who comes to school hungry, sick or stressed will be unable to focus on learning. Students in poverty can be ready to learn if school-based health centers are available to mitigate students' health and hunger needs.

Baltimore Medical System, one of the city's community school health partners, operates eight school-based health centers (SBHC) in the school district. Judi Lockett, SBHC project manager at Baltimore Medical System, notes that SBHCs offer a way to provide breadth of services, including well-child exams, common illness treatment, sports physicals, medication delivery, vaccinations, health education and reproductive health services. “This piece of education is huge,” emphasizes Lockett. With reproductive education and access to birth control options, teen pregnancy rates have decreased 36 percent across the city.⁹

The B'More for Healthy Babies initiative, another partner in the Baltimore Community School Initiative, is also playing a crucial role through its focus on awareness and access to health supports.

Medical Services in Baltimore Schools

At Collington Square Elementary/Middle School, along with daily basic health services, this community school offers vision, dental and social services for students provided by SBHC partners. In the 2015-16 school year, more than 400 students and families visited the school-based health center. Collington Square Assistant Principal Nicholas Brown says that having so many health resources and information in one place is powerful because “when we recognize a need, we are able to address it immediately. If you get a prescription from a doctor, you can have it filled right there, ensuring that you will get it.”

Teachers also attest to the positive effects of SBHCs. Jenna Gifford, a preschool teacher at Tench Tilghman Elementary/Middle School recognizes that the care expands beyond her classroom and into the community. For example, some of her students need frequent bloodwork in order to receive medication; Tilghman's SBHC completes the whole process on school premises, so students don't miss class. The SBHC also provides start-of-school vaccinations for students and provides care during after-school and summer hours for students' siblings who are too young for school. By serving students, siblings and parents, the SBHC has created an even greater connection between families, the school and the community.

Promising Results: Improving Student Attendance and Outcomes

SBHCs are contributing to positive results for students in Baltimore community schools that have been in operation for more than five years. Elementary and middle school student attendance has increased by 41 percent and 48 percent, respectively.¹⁰ These community schools have also decreased chronic absenteeism from 27.4 percent to

19.3 percent for elementary school students and from 23.8 percent to 17 percent for middle school students. This success is a result of schools identifying the underlying causes of absenteeism and putting in place relevant supports.

Health and Attendance

How are health and attendance linked? Studies show that school-based health centers can improve student outcomes in a variety of ways, such as improving academic expectations, school engagement and school climate. Students who receive counseling and care from SBHCs have decreased absenteeism and tardiness rates.¹¹

Lockett reflects that SBHCs have reduced absenteeism by mitigating the impact of chronic disease in Baltimore, where the children's chronic disease rate is 20 percent—double the national average. Asthma is one such prevalent disease in the city's schools. To combat asthma (which contributes to absenteeism), SBHC nurses educate families on the proper way to use inhalers and ensure that students have their inhalers on hand.

At Collington Square, students were having persistent and threatening asthma attacks. Through teacher, administrator and SBHC staff collaboration, the school determined that unclean classroom vents were a cause of the asthma attacks, which subsided significantly after the vents were cleaned.¹² Similarly, three years after opening the SBHC at Tench Tilghman, the chronic absenteeism rate there dropped from 17 percent to 11 percent.¹³

Out of School Time and Attendance

In addition to the SBHCs, out-of-school-time (OST) programs have played an integral role in addressing the problem of absenteeism. OST services are “formal and structured opportunities for school-aged youth that complement the

regular school day. Most programs engage youth and provide learning, enrichment, and leadership opportunities designed to support [students'] academic success and overall development.”¹⁴ OST programs often require students to be in school that day to attend the after-school portion, so by making OST programs engaging and exciting for students, they are more motivated to attend school.

Many of Baltimore community schools' OST programs also provide students with hot meals; this helps increase student participation in the program and in school. Elementary students who attended OST programs were 32 percent less likely to be chronically absent, while middle school students in OST programs were 77 percent less likely to be chronically absent, than students who did not participate in OST programs.¹⁵ Through nurturing the whole child, resources and programs are having a real impact, and students are able to deepen their relationships and connections to the school community.

Union Fights to Sustain Promising Results¹⁶

With powerful results such as better health outcomes and improved attendance, it is clear to BTU that the community school strategy must be expanded and sustained. During a fall 2017 event with the Maryland Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, BTU, along with partners in the Coalition for Community Schools (www.communityschools.org), gave a presentation on the effectiveness of the community school strategy for improving education outcomes.¹⁷ President English also advocated for the strategy and wraparound services to be a part of compulsory education funding.¹⁸ While community schools have created positive results, continued funding is essential for expanding and sustaining improved student outcomes.

Challenges and Opportunities

Communication between Stakeholders

Communication is critical to building trust and collaboration. One of the strengths of the community school strategy is the involvement of a variety of stakeholders. However, this can also cause confusion, especially when communicating about the variety and depth of resources that are available for school staff, students, families and communities. For example, if teachers do not know which partners are providing services and supports in their schools, how can the educators share them with students and families?

Coordinated communication and information sharing become especially important between stakeholders and school-based health centers. For example, in order to be seen by SBHC nurses and doctors, students need to have their parents sign a permission waiver. Although SBHCs are available to all students, only about 48 percent of students use them. Some parents, especially those new to community schools, are not aware of all the benefits of the SBHCs. This communication link needs to be consistent and continuous so that supports and services can be modified based on feedback as well as the needs of students and parents.

Data, Research and Resource Dissemination

Another challenge lies in collecting and communicating data. With limited resources, schools must identify which students to place in programs that would be most beneficial to their needs. Khalilah Slater Harrington, who is the director of youth initiatives for the Family League, notes that student data management identifies the students who miss the most school. This data is used to inform specific action plans to encourage student participation in OST programs and school.

The Baltimore Community Schools Initiative works with research partners along with lead agencies to address communication and data challenges. The Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC) has provided data analysis and research to the Family League comparing parent engagement, school climate, and attendance outcomes in community and non-community schools to inform the initiative on its progress and areas for improvement. BERC found that more than 85 percent of community school parents believe that community schools help connect them to community resources, such as food pantries; that teachers care about their children; and that school staff works with parents to meet students' needs.¹⁹ This belief is due in part to the communication between lead agencies and parents. For example, Elev8 plays an active role in reaching out to parents with information and paperwork to allow students to use SBHCs.

The Union as a Link

Community school special education teacher and BTU member Katrina Kickbush told members of Congress that coordination is the key to the community schools initiative.²⁰ BTU staff members at the schools and at the main union office serve as an important link in the communication and coordination chain of community school planning and implementation. BTU has been assisting in increasing dialogue among teachers, community partners and site coordinators. For example, BTU staff inform members about available resources and partnership opportunities through weekly emails and monthly meetings with the union's building representatives. These resources are available to students and families, such as the meals that Elev8 provided in schools even when the schools were closed due to storms. As the initiative has developed, partnerships and

communication have strengthened, which provides a strong foundation for continuous improvement.

Annually, BTU hosts training for union building representatives to learn about community schools and to better understand their possible roles. Workshops are incorporated into the program to educate members on community schools. In 2017, BTU offered a community schools strategy workshop at its Quality Educational Standards in Teaching conference.

Advice from the Field: The Necessity of Teacher Voice and Action

Community schools' nonacademic services are "critically important resources because they allow teachers to focus on teaching" rather than on issues such as healthcare, in which they are not trained experts, says Carriere. As a community schools liaison for BTU, she stresses the necessity of teacher and school staff voices in crafting strategies and supports within the community schools, to best fit the needs of the educators, students, families and the community.

Along with caring for children's academic well-being, teachers play a vital role in connecting the students to the resources, says Harrington. Teachers and school staff are essential in supporting and advocating for community schools. They are indispensable within the schools, but their voices are also crucial in advocacy efforts within the community. BTU members testify in front of the school board, at the Statehouse in Annapolis and on Capitol Hill²¹ touting the opportunities and successes of community schools.

By engaging the voices of the community, supporting a deep focus on academics, and providing resources for the specific needs of students, families and schools, the BCPS community school initiative is strengthening the community—student by student. With partners and resources continuing to align

in new ways, the future of the initiative is promising for Baltimore. BTU will continue as an ardent community schools advocate. As President English affirms, "The work of the union is to follow the action of community and to address its needs accordingly."

For more about community schools, visit the AFT website (www.aft.org/position/community-schools) or the AFT YouTube channel on Community Schools (<https://bit.ly/2EjRpjV>).

Endnotes

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