



*A Union of Professionals*

# Successful and Sustainable Community Schools

The Union as an Essential Ingredient





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### **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.

Community schools create the conditions for districts to address the four pillars of strong and purposeful public education: supporting children’s well-being; providing powerful learning; developing teacher and staff capacity; and fostering collaboration among educators, administrators, families and communities. Visit [www.aft.org/fourpillars](http://www.aft.org/fourpillars).

The community schools strategy organizes and engages a variety of stakeholders and resources to provide an array of opportunities and pathways to life success for students and their families alike. And, not least, community schools address equity, excellence and engagement—all key to educational success. Visit [tiny.cc/teachers-perspective](http://tiny.cc/teachers-perspective) to learn what educators are saying about community schools.

This brief aims to offer a lens through which local and state unions can define their roles in advancing the community schools strategy in their school districts and states, as well as the crucial role members can play in advocacy, planning and implementation by:

### Advocacy Strategies

- Advocating for supportive policies and pro-community school elected officials; and
- Leveraging labor-management relations to drive and sustain the strategy.

### Organizing Strategies

- Building relationships and ensuring transparency;
- Convening conversations; and
- Educating and engaging teachers, school staff, families, community members and policymakers.

### School Site Strategies

- Deepening and supporting instructional components; and
- Ensuring fidelity to the community school strategy.

# ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

## Advocating for supportive policies and electing officials who support community schools

*Unions play a critical role, collaborating with community and parent organizing groups, in getting the community schools strategy onto education platforms for elected/appointed officials—from mayors and city council members to school district leaders, school board members, governors and U.S. presidential candidates.*

- Unions can encourage and educate governors, state legislators and administrators from their state education agencies to implement community schools as the preferred reform strategy for schools undergoing district or state intervention; a good way to do this is by taking them on school site visits.
- Unions can leverage their local and state networks to create supportive policy at the local, state and federal levels.
- Unions can organize campaigns in collaboration with their members, parents and community members to:
  - » Provide testimony in support of community schools at local school board and city council hearings.
  - » Host rallies and walk-ins in support of community schools. Visit [www.reclaimourschools.org](http://www.reclaimourschools.org) for examples.

## Leveraging labor-management relations to drive and sustain community schools

*Union-management collaboration is a key driver in community school efforts across the country. It is a unique advocacy lever that only the union has access to, even in states that don't have collective bargaining.*

*Across the nation, union and school district leaders are collaborating to:*

- Utilize collective bargaining agreements, memoranda of understanding and/or consultation agreements to introduce language supporting community schools to ensure that both the community school coordinator position and the local site-level decision-making team are in place at each school.

**AFT's annual Center for School Improvement Leadership Institute** is a space where teams can gain labor-management skills and useful tools on the fundamentals of collaboration.



# ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

## Building trust and ensuring transparency

*Building relationships is the key to building trust. An environment of distrust among teachers, families, students, administrators and the community takes years to root and can't be undone overnight. If the community schools strategy is to be successful and endure, we must work to rebuild the trust.*

- Building trust and communicating with the community school coordinator is essential. Among other tasks, they:
  - » Help organize the resources to meet the needs of teachers, school staff, students and families.
  - » Communicate with the faculty regarding the status of selected interventions and the ways staff can support these interventions in the classroom.
  - » For more information on their role, visit: [www.communityschools.org/about/community\\_school\\_coordinators\\_network.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/about/community_school_coordinators_network.aspx).
- Teachers and other school staff need to work with the principal and community school coordinator to ensure that all school employees are informed about the school's resources, supports and community partners.
- Building relationships with students' families is also key to students' academic and life success. The Parent Teacher Home Visit model, along with other family engagement strategies, is another way union members can contribute to the implementation of community schools. For further details, visit: [www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org).

A communitywide leadership table is made up of public and private partners (e.g., school districts, government entities, United Way chapters, businesses, community- and faith-based organizations). This table is responsible for overall vision, policy and resource alignment. It creates the context and capacity for expansion. It serves as a networking vehicle for policy development and communications in which several leaders of community initiatives decide why and how to align their resources to build and sustain a system of community schools.

## Playing the Role of Convener—Starting the Conversation

*Union leaders, at the local and state levels, interact with a wide array of educational and non-educational allies. They are often perfectly poised to bring the community school strategy to the forefront, leveraging these relationships for the common good of all students and families. For example:*

- Through their strong ties to a variety of stakeholders in their communities, union leaders can convene communitywide leadership tables (see definition in the sidebar) to build a common vision and aligned community school system.
- Union leaders often have access to and relationships with community leaders, city leaders, the school district, public agencies, foundations, chambers of commerce, faith-based organizations, higher education institutions, municipal governments, etc.
- They can build local and state-level grass-roots coalitions, including community organizers, labor groups and community-based service providers, to assess and help create a common vision for public schools—community schools—based on the communities' needs, so that schools do not simply add on services that don't meet locally determined needs. A great example of this can be found in the local AROS ([Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools](#)) coalitions.



House meetings are conversations that take place at people's homes and/ or public spaces to discuss community schools. For example, participants would have conversations about what is working in their schools and what they would like to see in their schools for themselves and their children.

## **Union Members and Community: Educating and Engaging Teachers, School Staff, Families, Community Members and Policymakers**

*Unions across the nation are educating their members, as well as the community, families and policymakers, about community schools. Specifically:*

- Union leaders are creating internal activist taskforces, thereby creating space for members who are interested in advocating for and helping establish community schools. These taskforces serve to:
  - » Advocate for local policies and encouraging elected officials who support the strategy to be advocates as well.
  - » Educate and engage their peers on the strategy and share how they can become involved in the planning and implementation process.
- Unions are training building representatives/site stewards to:
  - » Get the message out and foster understanding of community schools by creating a one-on-one conversation sheet, for members, grounded in their local contexts.
  - » Maintain a communications feedback loop between the school staff and the communitywide leadership table.
  - » Facilitate transparency between teachers/school staff and site leadership team.
- Unions are training activists on the Parent Teacher Home Visit [www.pthvp.org](http://www.pthvp.org) model to help build authentic relationships and to connect the school day to home life. (See page 3 for more information.)
- Unions, along with their community coalitions, are educating families and community residents about the “what” and “how” of community schools, supporting them in becoming advocates for this strategy and, in the long term, for public education as a whole.
- In partnership with community allies, unions are hosting community conversations and “house meetings” (see definition in the sidebar) to dig deeper into what they want to see in their schools and how they want to be engaged.



# SCHOOL SITE STRATEGIES

## Deepening and supporting instructional components

*A strong core instructional program is key to a successful community school.*

- Through effective union-management partnerships, unions can strengthen their districts' professional development programming and systems. AFT's national trainers can work with local affiliates to offer needs-based professional learning. For more details, email: [Edissues@aft.org](mailto:Edissues@aft.org), and check out "[On the Same Page 2.0](#)," a relevant publication that offers a road map for unions and school district administrators to implement a collaborative system that includes curriculum planning and professional learning.
- Teachers in community schools can engage their students in curricula that are connected to the real world, because they are given the time and access to collaborate with community partners.
  - » Strong ties with the community can lead to more partnerships and programs outside the classroom that directly support classroom instruction and empower students to learn.
- Project-based learning and service learning are examples of the kind of instruction a community school can help incorporate into classrooms. The community school coordinator acts as a liaison between community partners and businesses that complement teachers' instructional goals.
- A supportive principal creates time for teachers to collaborate with community partners and engage in deep and meaningful professional development.

## Ensuring fidelity to the community school model

*Union members can help ensure that the structural and process elements found in most successful community schools are optimally functioning, such as:*

- Most community schools have a **community schools coordinator** (the on-site person who strategically organizes the partnerships and resources) to effectively support the needs identified by the school community.
  - » The building representative/steward (or other union activist) should work with the community school coordinator, along with teachers and school staff, to consistently evaluate the effectiveness of each resource and bring in new partners to meet the needs and priorities.
- A **school-site leadership team** is responsible for creating a **shared vision for the school**. This team ensures that the community school strategy is meeting the needs of students and families.
  - » Teachers and school staff, including union building representatives/site stewards, should participate on the leadership team and communicate information to their peers, thereby ensuring smooth implementation and transparency throughout the process.
  - » Representatives from lead agencies and community partners also should be on this leadership team.



- **Teacher and school staff input** is essential in identifying and prioritizing the types of supports and services that are brought into each individual school, along with assets from their communities.
  - » Teachers and school staff have a deep understanding of their students' academic and non-academic needs.
  - » They can conduct needs and asset mapping with their colleagues, students and families to help determine (in partnership with the community school coordinator) the supports and services for their school.
  - » Teachers and school staff should be involved in helping select the community partners that are focusing on academics.
- **All community schools stakeholders share responsibility for attaining success for both academic and non-academic outcomes.** Stakeholders can include (but are not limited to): families, students, teachers and school staff, principals, local education agency leaders, community members, community partners (those that are working with the school), unions, etc.
  - » Local-level union leaders can be instrumental in creating formal agreements among themselves, school administrators (school and district level) and stakeholders to create shared accountability and ensure transparency on what is or is not working in the community schools.
  - » State-level union leaders can support this strategy by introducing state-level resolutions. For an example, view [Resolution No. 27 - Support of Community Schools](http://tiny.cc/resolution27). (<http://tiny.cc/resolution27>)





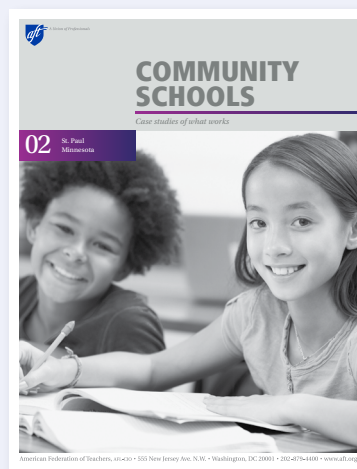
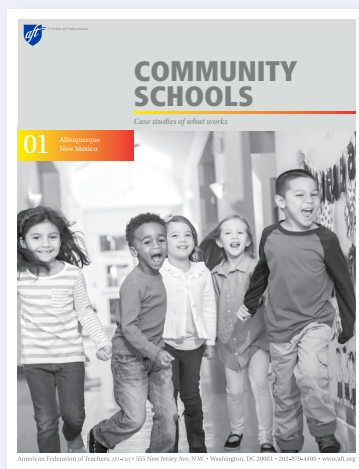
# TAKING ACTION

Teachers and school staff 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—people who understand the role of the union in this effort**—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/or state to help ensure that all students have access to the opportunities and supports they need to succeed. Here are some ways to get involved:

- Share your story with the AFT. If you work in a community school, let us know about your experience through pictures, videos and written stories. Send them to [edissues@aft.org](mailto:edissues@aft.org). We will make sure to spread far and wide!
- Attend a school board meeting to share stories about how a community schools approach can strengthen your school and your practice.
- Present the community schools strategy to your site-level and district-level school improvement team.
- Work with your local and state union leaders to convene a coalition of community organizers, labor groups, along with other public education advocates 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.
- Advocate for community schools (at the local and state levels) and create policies that can support them. For examples of state policies, visit [www.communityschools.org/policy\\_advocacy/state.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/policy_advocacy/state.aspx). For examples of local policies, visit [www.communityschools.org/policy\\_advocacy/local.aspx](http://www.communityschools.org/policy_advocacy/local.aspx).

## Resources



## Video Library

### National Community Schools Video

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8GaUJEP2h0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8GaUJEP2h0)

### Community Schools—the Teachers Perspective

<https://youtu.be/Bwu00zxAhQ>

### Albuquerque Community Schools

[www.vimeo.com/aftunion/review/135388119/e1b30f3c36](https://www.vimeo.com/aftunion/review/135388119/e1b30f3c36)

### Albuquerque Community Schools—Student Perspective:

<https://youtu.be/vUi7oMOFP1Q>

### Newark Community Schools Advocacy Video

<https://youtu.be/K6lj6z8-CVE>

### Parent Teacher Home Visits—St. Paul, MN

<https://youtu.be/UmU-owyqnxk>

### United Federation of Teachers Community Learning Schools

[www.uft.org/videos/community-learning-schools-new-approach](https://www.uft.org/videos/community-learning-schools-new-approach)

For more information and support, contact the AFT national office (Shital C. Shah, associate director, [Edissues@aft.org](mailto:Edissues@aft.org).)







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