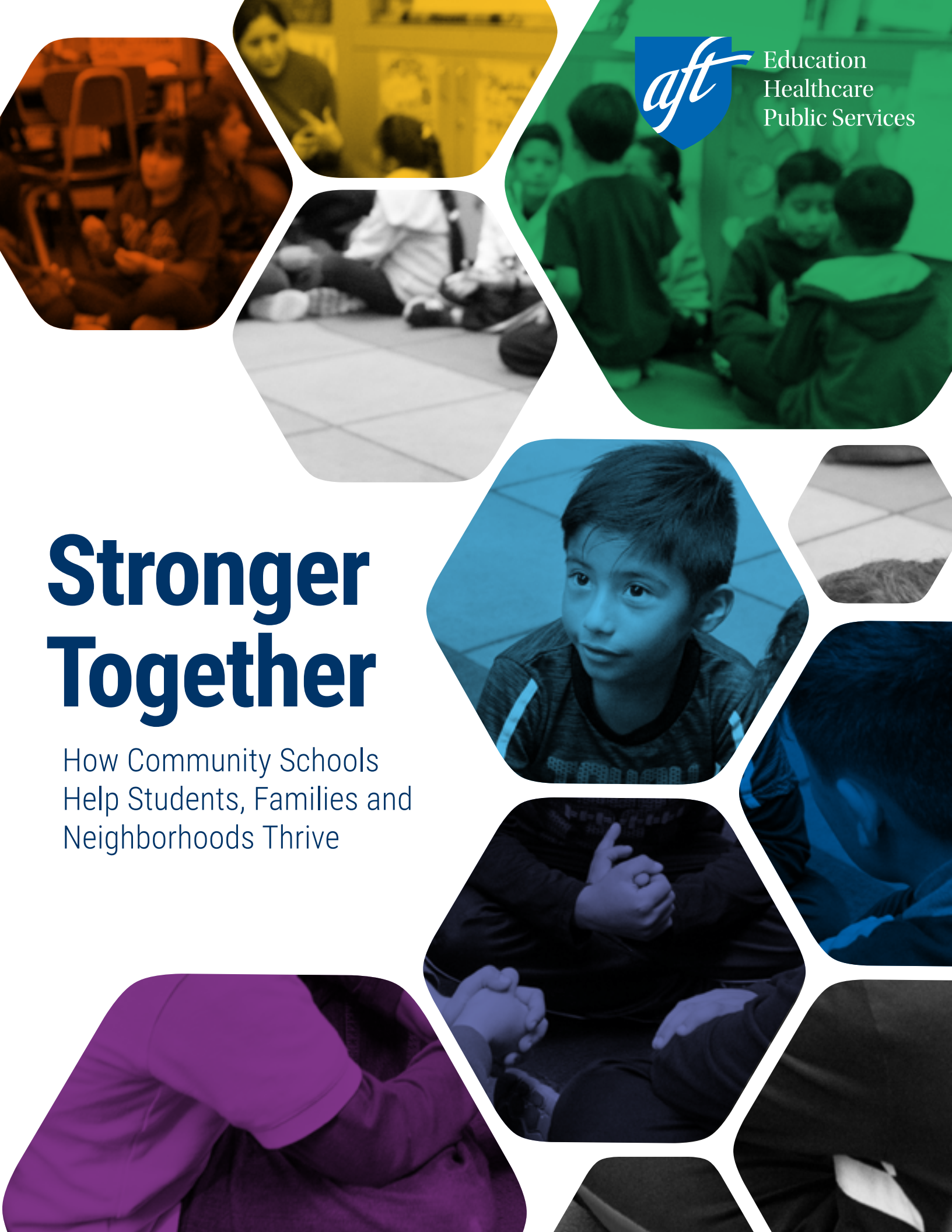




Education
Healthcare
Public Services

Stronger Together

How Community Schools Help Students, Families and Neighborhoods Thrive





Education
Healthcare
Public Services

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

Our Mission

The **AFT** 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.

Copyright © AFT, AFL-CIO (AFT 2026). Permission is hereby granted to AFT state and local affiliates to reproduce and distribute copies of the work for nonprofit education purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that the author, source, and copyright notice are included on each copy. Any distribution of such materials to third parties who are outside of the AFT or its affiliates is prohibited without first receiving the express written permission of the AFT.



I've been a huge champion of community schools for decades because I've witnessed first-hand their power to transform the lives of students and families. From services for immigrant and refugee families in Kansas City, Mo., to financial literacy classes and adult education in Cincinnati, to clothes closets with everything from winter coats to prom dresses in Boston, community schools help children, families and neighborhoods thrive.

Community schools are public schools that forge deep partnerships among educators, students, families, community members and service providers to meet the unique needs of their neighborhoods and communities. Community schools address barriers to student success—from hunger to hopelessness. They lessen life's hardships by connecting students and families with supports like physical and mental healthcare, legal services, English classes and housing. Community schools create meaningful partnerships with families, engage and empower students, and deepen community connections. They create welcoming environments so that students and families want to be there. That's what anchors these schools' power and potential. Community schools are driven by the needs of the community and create pathways to what is already the center of the community—our public schools.

The beauty of this educational strategy is that any public school can become a community school. It requires dedication and collaboration and a community coordinator to turn community aspiration into reality. Community schools work in big cities and small towns, from Appalachia to Albuquerque.

The AFT is committed to strengthening and growing community schools across our nation. In my first speech as president of the AFT in 2008, I called for a vast expansion of community schools. Since then, the AFT has invested in more than 1,000 community schools, and we have advocated for the federal funding and focus to make community schools the norm in America.

We are here to support your journey to becoming a community school and hope that this guide provides you with what you need to jump-start your community school transformation.

In unity,

Randi Weingarten
AFT President



Community schools are driven by the **needs of community** and build connections around what is already the center of community—our **public schools.**



What Is a Community School?



Community schools are public schools where educators, families and community partners come together around a shared vision of supports and resources to help students and families thrive. These schools are based on an evidence-backed strategy that has been proven to improve student and educator well-being and power academic achievement.

Every community school looks different and reflects the unique needs of individual communities, but all community schools focus on integrating services from healthcare and after-school programs to adult education and family enrichment into their local neighborhood public schools. They are developed in partnership with local communities and through deep family engagement, and they are managed through a collaborative decision-making process. As a result, these schools become the heart of communities, meeting student and family needs while promoting vibrant and healthy neighborhoods.

By partnering with students, families and community organizations, community schools set students up for academic success, build positive school cultures and climates, and increase public trust and confidence in local public schools.

Community schools are the antithesis of private school and voucher initiatives that abandon public schools in favor of costly taxpayer-funded voucher programs. Such programs have been shown to discriminate against children with special needs and LGBTQIA+ students, and they lack taxpayer and community transparency and accountability. Vouchers blow up state and local budgets, and primarily serve students from wealthy families who were already attending private schools. On the other hand, community schools strengthen existing public schools and reflect the shared values of the educators, families and communities they serve.

Any school can become a community school by adapting a common set of strategies to meet the wants and needs of their local neighborhoods. The journey to becoming a community school begins by engaging families and other local stakeholders, including businesses, community organizations and service providers. This engagement leads to partnerships through which each school can determine the services and programming that makes sense for it, and then collaborate with partners to turn that vision into reality. Successful community schools also have a site resource coordinator who works with educators, community partners and families to build relationships, coordinate resources and ensure successful program implementation. The return on investment for site coordinators cannot be underestimated. Research shows that every dollar spent on coordinators brings in \$7. They are the glue and anchor for community schools. Many community schools pay for their coordinators through Title I funding, but there are a multitude of other options.





Any school
can become a
**community
school.**

Community School Strategies

Community schools form partnerships that reflect the unique culture, strengths and challenges of their communities, while following a common set of strategies:

- **Powerful student, family, and community engagement.** The school is designed around the unique needs of the community, and services are developed in partnership with families and community providers.
- **Expanded, enriched learning opportunities.** Programming varies by school and community but could include before- and after-school programs; tutoring; family enrichment; language and adult education classes; mental health services; and vision, dental and nutritional services.
- **Deeply engaging, real-world learning opportunities that connect with the community.** Teaching and learning are connected to the local cultures and experiences of students and their families. There is a focus on deeply engaging students through real-world, project-based learning and opportunities to connect with the community.
- **Coordinated and purposeful partnerships.** 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. A dedicated team of school staff and community partners coordinates services, supports and community engagement and makes adjustments based on student and community needs.
- **Safe and welcoming environments that foster a culture of belonging.** The school creates a safe and welcoming climate and fosters trust among students, families, partners and staff. All students, families, educators and staff feel valued for who they are, and students feel deeply connected to their school.
- **Collaboration at all levels.** Effective community schools are governed through a collaborative model that allows educators, school leaders, families and community partners to engage in shared leadership and decision-making.

Any school can become a community school by tailoring these strategies to the needs and aspirations of its students, families and neighborhoods.



Community School Impacts

Community schools improve student and school outcomes, increase family engagement, support health and well-being, and build collaborative school systems.

- **Improved attendance.** Community schools often see increased attendance rates and declines in chronic absenteeism.
- **A positive impact on academic achievement.** Community schools experience fewer dropouts, increased graduation rates, and improvements in academic outcomes.
- **Creating a positive school climate that leads to stronger relationships and more engagement.** Community schools foster safe and welcoming environments that lead to stronger relationships between students and educators and between educators and communities, increased student engagement, improved school safety, and fewer disciplinary actions and suspensions.
- **Increased health and well-being.** Many community schools embed health, mental health and dental services in schools; provide meals to students and families; and provide family supports to ensure both home and school are safe and welcoming spaces.
- **Stronger family engagement.** Community schools offer classes for parents and adults, family nights and activities, family services, before- and after-school programs, and truly make the school the hub of the community.
- **Community investment.** Community schools produce an average \$7 to \$15 return on investment for every \$1 spent.
- **A powerful anti-poverty strategy.** More than 11 million children live in poverty in the United States. Community schools address out-of-school barriers to student success and confront the impacts of poverty by providing crucial services for children and families in school.





LOCAL AND STATE IMPACT EXAMPLES

- **California:** Schools in California's Community Schools Partnership Program have reduced chronic absenteeism rates by 30 percent, improved attendance, lowered suspension rates by 15 percent, and increased academic achievement.
- **New York:** A RAND Corp. study showed that New York City's community schools had lower chronic absenteeism rates, improved discipline rates, and improved on-time grade progression and graduation rates compared with similar non-community schools. A follow-up study also showed improved math and language arts test scores after three years of implementation.
- **Ohio:** All public schools in Cincinnati were transformed into Community Learning Centers, with research showing a reduction in the achievement gap between Black and white students, with significant progress in third-grade reading. Cincinnati has also experienced an increase in high school graduation rates since becoming community schools.
- **New Mexico:** Following a massive statewide investment in community schools, research has shown that community schools have seen higher attendance rates, test scores, graduation rates, student engagement, school climate, healthcare access, and family engagement.

(https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4718/download?inline&file=Community_Schools_Improve_Outcomes_FACTSHEET.pdf, <https://progressive.org/public-schools-advocate/a-quiet-revolution-is-improving-schools-bryant-20251203/>)



Community schools
produce an average
\$7 to \$15 return
for every \$1 spent.



Community School Profiles

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES IN RURAL NEW YORK

The community schools initiative in Rome, N.Y., was created to respond to urgent basic needs facing students and families, particularly food insecurity and housing instability. Now serving 53 schools across 13 districts in seven counties, the work reaches communities where 1 in 3 students is impacted by food insecurity and there is widespread poverty. The idea was originally driven by the union and supported by an AFT Innovation Fund grant. From the start, Rome's approach emphasized collaboration, ensuring educators, families, unions and community partners all had a voice at the table.

Early outreach revealed students were missing school because they were hungry, homeless, or lacked basic supplies. Educators were spending their own money and hours each day trying to get students supplies or connect them with services. So Rome's community school approach led to the creation of resource hubs in schools, providing food, clothing, hygiene items and supplies, and the launch of LINK—a single point of access connecting families to services quickly and holistically.

The model expanded rapidly, supported by grants and strong community partnerships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the network pivoted to distribute 1.2 million pounds of food and later served as a trusted response hub during floods and tornadoes, delivering tens of thousands of meals within hours of disasters. Today, these community schools partner with more than 500 organizations and return an estimated \$17 for every dollar invested through in-kind services. Although funding requires constant fundraising and grant writing, the growth has been substantial, building lasting infrastructure that maximizes resources efficiently.

Educators describe the impact as transformative. Having dedicated community school staff lifts an enormous burden from teachers and counselors, ensuring student and family needs are addressed by experts rather than falling solely on school staff. Services that once existed without a bridge to schools are now integrated into daily practice. Rooted in trust, collaboration and a solution-focused mindset, the work continues through strong collaboration and a shared belief that supporting families is essential to supporting learning.



**Supporting families
is essential to supporting
learning.**

Boston's community school strategy is about **equity** and **access**.



EMBEDDING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN THE BOSTON TEACHERS UNION CONTRACT

Community schools in Boston were built through sustained advocacy during contract negotiations over the past decade. This first started when the Boston Teachers Union pushed for district funding to support community schools, beginning with six hub schools. Through successive contracts, the initiative expanded to 14 schools and then to 20. Although union-led, the work has always been a joint effort of the union, district and community partners, reflecting a shared commitment to long-term sustainability.

Each hub school operates under a flexible model that recognizes no one-size-fits-all approach. What every school does have in common is a dedicated hub school coordinator and a process of annually mapping assets to identify community strengths and needs. Schools tailor supports based on their communities, offering programs such as community toddler play groups, food pantries open to families and neighbors, ESL classes, parent groups for new families, and culturally responsive programming, including dual-language schools. A citywide coordinator supports and connects all hub schools, helping align efforts and scale effective practices.

Strong community partnerships are central to Boston's model. Schools collaborate with organizations such as the YMCA, UMass Boston, and local groups like Taekwondo studios to provide before- and after-school programs, swimming, reading nights and enrichment opportunities. These partnerships have allowed school leaders to focus more fully on instruction while addressing barriers to learning. Hub schools report improved attendance and engagement; and at a time when many immigrant families may not feel safe elsewhere, schools remain trusted and welcoming spaces.

At its core, Boston's community school strategy is about equity and access. The model ensures that resources across the city are not limited to wealthier schools, helping level the playing field so all students can benefit from what Boston has to offer. With deep partnerships among schools, the union, the district and community organizations—and a superintendent who has expressed a vision for every school to become a hub—the work continues to grow as a sustainable, collaborative approach to supporting students, families and educators.

EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO FORM A STRONG COMMUNITY SCHOOL FOUNDATION IN NEW MEXICO

In Albuquerque, the local union's community school approach is focused on both getting services into schools and supporting educators. The union and district leaders identified that teachers and school staff needed time, space and energy to understand what it truly means to teach in a community school. Through after-school "lead and learn" modules, educators (who received stipends for participating) were invited to reflect on their roles, and view teaching through a broader, community-centered lens. While maintaining academic standards, teachers were encouraged to identify the assets of their classrooms and communities and to give themselves permission to teach differently.

Professional learning emphasized interdisciplinary, place-based approaches grounded in real community contexts. Educators collected data, shared practice and explored how local assets—such as environmental features or neighborhood history—could shape learning experiences. As teams working across feeder patterns, teachers designed and tested projects in their schools and then aligned their work vertically. This effort was strengthened through an AFT Innovation Fund grant, and will continue with an additional "lead and learn" series this year.

Today, this work reflects a vision of what teaching in a community school should look like: educators focusing on instruction because strong wraparound supports are in place. Across 67 community schools, structures such as hub coordinators, family liaisons, family rooms, community school resource teachers, and integrated instructional councils ensure that student and family needs are addressed holistically. Root-cause analysis and alignment across feeder patterns guide decision-making, contributing to early indicators such as slight upward trends in attendance and increased family engagement.

A key lesson has been the value of moving intentionally. Teachers' time is respected through stipends, collaboration is prioritized, and learning is not rushed. The result is a transformative professional learning model that includes all educators—from classroom teachers to librarians—and centers the goal of supporting the whole child through strong community schools.

Strong community schools **support** the **whole child.**



Community School Resources

WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOUR COMMUNITY SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

If you are an educator looking to begin your school's community school journey or a policymaker seeking to champion community schools at the local or state level, we want to support you!

The AFT is committed to expanded community schools across America. You can learn more about starting a community school at aft.org/realsolutions/community-schools, or contact Giselle Lundy-Ponce at glundypo@aft.org.





Education | Healthcare | Public Services

AFT, AFL-CIO | 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. | Washington, DC 20001 | www.aft.org



aft.org



[@aft.org](https://twitter.com/aft.org)



[AFTunion](https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion)



[@AFTunion](https://www.instagram.com/AFTunion)



[@AFTunion](https://www.instagram.com/AFTunion)