

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

## THE PROBLEM

In 2013, 51 percent of students in our nation's public schools were low income and in 40 states, low income students comprised no less than 40 percent of all public schoolchildren.<sup>1</sup> In some states the percentage of low-income students is even higher— in Mississippi, for example, 71 percent of public school students qualify for free or reduced lunch. This statistic is particularly concerning because of the correlation between socioeconomic class and academic success. Most of the states with a majority of low income students are in the south and Midwest. Low-income students are more likely to be absent (due to caring for a sibling or earning money to supplement the household income), fall behind or drop out, not to mention struggling with food insecurity and perhaps unreliable housing. Unfortunately, the students who need extra educational resources are least likely to receive them: high-poverty schools (meaning schools with a student body that is 76% – 100% low-income) spend less per student than any other schools. This further diminishes potential academic success and perpetuates the existing cycle of poverty. It is imperative that we increase the quantity and quality of our investments in public schools.

## THE SOLUTION

Community schools partner with service providers, health providers, after-school programs, youth centers, and other community organizations or providers to ensure holistic attention, education, and service provision for students. There are a number of different models of community schools, depending on the attending student body and their specific needs. However, the most successful community school programs use a consistent set of research-based strategies that allow for greater student-centered learning, community investment and engagement, and school environments squarely focused on teaching and learning: curricula that is engaging, culturally relevant,

and challenging; (2) emphasis on high teacher quality, not high-stakes testing; (3) wrap-around supports; (4) positive discipline practices; (5) authentic parent and community engagement and (6) inclusive school leadership.<sup>2</sup>

**CURRICULUM:** Schools may offer a robust selection of classes, after-school programs, Advanced Placement (AP) courses and honors options.

**HIGH TEACHER QUALITY:** Community schools must have an emphasis on high-quality teacher, not high-stakes testing. In the last fifteen years, standardized testing has fostered a high-stress and toxic environment for teachers and students as well as administrators and parents. In addition, they have served to pseudo-scientifically validate the “failure” and subsequent closing and or privatizing of high numbers of schools nationwide – especially in urban centers with high populations of poor students and students of color. Authentic and multidimensional assessment (such as performance or portfolio-based and teacher-developed), when properly administered, help inform teachers so they can better meet the needs of their students. Professional development should accompany this approach, be ongoing and high-quality. Students, parents and community members and leaders can be incorporated into such formats as exhibitions and demonstrations to further local assessment in a community context.

**WRAP-AROUND SUPPORTS:** As one of the six pillars in a school, they help meet students' health needs, from eye and dental care to social and emotional services. These services, available to parents, families and often the broader community, can often be housed within the school building and be supported by community and partners who are culturally aware and responsive.

**POSITIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES:** Discipline practices such as restorative justice and social emotional learning supports are critical as they help students grow and

develop as contributing members to the school community. Restorative practices contribute to positive school climate and culture overall, ensuring students feel safe and supported in their learning environment. Expulsions and punishments are greatly reduced, helping students stay in the classroom, reducing absenteeism, increasing learning time and helping to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

**PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:** Authentic parent and community engagement is critical as it helps to create a link between the success of students, their school and the development of a community as a whole. Parents and the full community should actively be part of planning and decision-making for the school. Parent leadership development can create agency out of despair and can result in policy, economic development and other real changes to communities.

The community school strategy **necessitates inclusive school leadership** where all levels of the staff and leadership team are aligned and become committed to the strategy. All levels of leadership should be part of the planning and implementation as members of a Community school committee, which includes parents, school staff, youth and other stakeholders. Finally, the community school coordinator should be a part of the leadership team.

## RESULTS

The results for community schools are significant, and include both academic and non-academic outcomes. In one of the most high-poverty areas of **Los Angeles**, there is a high school where 99 percent of graduates go to college; the city of **Cincinnati** was able to shrink its racial and socioeconomic achievement gap from 14.5 percent to 4.5 percent; in Texas, two schools located in **Austin's** most high-poverty neighborhood went from the brink of closure to becoming two of the highest performing schools in their city; a school in **Baltimore** went from being ranked 77th in the city to 2nd; and in Kentucky, the state went from being consistently ranked one of the worst in education in the nation to outperforming half of all states and reducing their socioeconomic achievement gap to the smallest in the nation<sup>3</sup>

A recent report on the Community School initiative in **Baltimore**, finds drops in absenteeism, chronic absenteeism as well as a drop in student/family mobility. It also finds high ratings on school climate, overall, including parents -- especially immigrant and poor parents -- feeling welcome and engaged in school -- and drops in suspension and expulsion rates. Students and families want to come to community schools. These findings are consistent with findings in districts

all over the country.

School boards should pass resolutions to support pilot community schools and commit to their expansion as a strategy to support all students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The model Community School strategies outlined in the CPD report can and should be used in every public school across the United States to achieve transformational results. The new federal education legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), sends much of the decision-making power to create mechanisms for student success to the state level. The report recommends that schools:

**EMBRACE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL EDUCATION SOLUTION:** State and local policy makers, using the opportunity created by this new law and in collaboration with their education constituencies including parents, school staff, students and community members, tap the power of community to grow the number of effective Community Schools in every state and municipality in the country.

**CODIFY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN POLICY:** Community organizing and education advocacy groups, unions, and Community School practitioners join lawmakers to use the policy templates included in this report to pass legislation that will enable a dramatic increase in the number of Community Schools.

For more information on this issue, please check out the **Coalition of Community Schools** at [www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org), the **Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS)** at [www.reclaimourschools.org](http://www.reclaimourschools.org), and **Center for Popular Democracy** at [www.populardemocracy.org](http://www.populardemocracy.org).

## NOTES

- 1 Suits, Steve. *A New Majority Research Bulletin: Low Income Students Now a Majority in the Nation's Public Schools*. Southern Education Foundation. (2015). < <http://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/New-Majority-Diverse-Majority-Report-Series/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now> >
- 2 Frankl, Evie et al. Center for Popular Democracy. *Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools*. February 2016. <https://populardemocracy.org/news/publications/community-schools-transforming-struggling-schools-thriving-schools>
- 3 Ibid.