Community Schools
A COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

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Community school strategies have emerged as a promising approach to mitigate the social and learning impacts of COVID-19. This brief draws on how the crisis-motivated responses of educators and school leaders might serve as integral investments in successful and sustainable community schools. Schools and districts interested in such an approach need to examine and reform the underlying classroom, school, and district behaviors and systems that get in the way of student-centered collaboration, partnership, and teaching. Specifically, the focus must be on: (a) the centrality of family and student relationships, (b) integrated teacher and student supports, (c) collaborative leadership and practice, and (d) student-centered learning. Especially now, all schools can—and should—be community schools.

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Introduction

Across California, the protracted disruptions to education because of COVID-19 have forced schools and communities to confront the inextricably basic link between health and education. As the weeks progress, the economic and racial disparities of the disease become more pronounced: economic, housing, and food security are even more precarious as jobs disappear and family incomes rapidly decline. Community school strategies have emerged as a promising approach[1] to mitigate the social and learning impacts of COVID-19. Advocates describe community schools as a strategy to organize the resources of a community to address and eliminate barriers to learning:[2] "a place-based strategy in which schools partner with community agencies and allocate resources to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement."[3] Sometimes explained in terms of four evidence-informed programmatic features—integrated student support; expanded learning time; family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership and practice[4]—community schools recognize that successful teaching and learning is influenced by contexts, histories, and relationships inside and outside of the classroom.

The service-based components of community schools are much needed in times like these, but the COVID-19 crisis also presents an important opportunity to elevate the fundamentals of powerful teaching and learning. To that end, **community schools should be understood not as a "wrap-around" or co-location strategy but as a lever for transforming the core instructional practices and relationships within each classroom and school**.

This brief draws on what educators and school leaders have identified as challenges amid the COVID-19 crisis, and explores how their crisis-motivated responses might also serve as integral investments in a successful and sustainable community school. Especially now, all schools can—and should—be community schools.

Districts interested in a community schools approach need to examine and reform the underlying classroom, school, and district behaviors and systems that get in the way of student-centered collaboration, partnership, and teaching. **We encourage district and school leaders to focus on: (a) centrality of family and student relationships, (b) integrated teacher and student supports, (c) collaborative leadership and practice, and (d) student-centered learning.**

Centrality of Family and Student Relationships

The importance of engaging families to support student learning is not new; it is substantiated by decades of research.[5] For instance, Bryk et al. (2010) found that in schools with strong family involvement, students were 10 times more likely to improve in math and 4 times more likely to improve their reading performance.[6] Yet most schools have historically treated parent engagement as an extraneous service or communications task, not one that is immediately relevant to the main task of teaching and learning.

With the closure of schools, families are now widely regarded as essential partners in continuing their children's education. The internet is teeming with resources[7] on how families can set learning schedules, create interactive lesson plans, and support the social-emotional growth of their children. Families have reached out to teachers, schools, and districts for guidance on how to teach the Common Core, access technology, respond to behavioral challenges, and ensure that their children do not fall behind.[8] For nearly all families, this pivot has been jarring.[9] And for those families that are simultaneously dealing with single parenting, unemployment, and compounding basic needs, the task of "home-schooling" has been even more daunting.

In response, schools have been challenged to work quickly and holistically to support families in creating safe learning spaces for students. Some are working with community-based organizations to check in with families; others are deploying large-scale technology interventions[10] to address the lack of access to devices or internet. In some schools, staff are trained to reach out individually to students and families, not only to offer instructional content but also to maintain personal relationships as allies and caring supporters.[11] There is early anecdotal evidence from the Parent Teacher Home Visit program demonstrating that schools where teachers were supported to develop strong and trusting learning partnerships with individual families resulted in effective responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Teachers and school staff were quickly able to establish connections to families, assess their learning and basic service needs, and provide necessary guidance and resources to support distance learning.[12]

Successful community schools prioritize family engagement and recognize that building long-term, trusting relationships with families is essential to supporting student learning. For community schools, engagement does not focus narrowly on parent–teacher conferences, family resource centers, or parent-focused skill-building workshops. Instead, families feel seen and valued (not just welcomed) and are treated as partners who know their children best. Families are not blamed for students' behaviors or challenges, and instead school staff and partners are trained and explicitly supported to disrupt habits and patterns of racism and inequality as they appear in classrooms and schools. Districts allocate resources—staffing, training, programs, and data—to strengthen school–family partnerships.

To prioritize family and student relationships, schools and districts can:

- Establish 1:1 relationships among teachers, families, and students. This takes time and resources that should be part of school staff working hours and explicit professional development. See resources from Parent Teacher Home Visits[13] and the Oklahoma State Department of Education[14] for guidance and ideas.

- Connect with local community organizations and leaders;[15] learn about how they are supporting the community and what they see as short- and long-term challenges. Local community resources may be helpful for students, families, and schools as they anticipate the next steps in response to the disease.

- Use reentry (in whatever form it takes) as a way to understand how students and families have experienced the pandemic. Acknowledge and celebrate the work of families in supporting informal and formal learning, including recognizing the importance of students feeling cared for and safe.

Integrated Student and Teacher Supports

Community schools are often recognized for their work in providing additional noninstructional services to students most in need. The impact of COVID-19 certainly emphasizes the need for increased services[16] for students, especially in California where there are fewer health services in schools than in almost any other state.[17] Counselors, social workers, school nurses, and even food banks are part of a support infrastructure designed to provide each student with what they need to succeed. It is said that with these supports, teachers can "focus on teaching." A comprehensive community school strategy, however, contextualizes student support as an embedded function of teaching and learning—not as outside of it. Accordingly, teachers also need integrated support and learning opportunities to strengthen and refine their instructional practice, so they can actively reduce obstacles to access, participation, and learning for all students.[18]

Educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of responding to the needs of students and teachers (e.g., Maslow's hierarchy of needs) before achieving successful learning (e.g., Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive processes).[19] While some might simplify this to meeting the basic needs of food, shelter, sleep, and safety, it is important to consider the entirety of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including belonging and connection, respect and self-esteem, and the desire to become the best one can be. It is not enough to remove the "basic needs" barriers to learning; students and teachers must also be supported to feel they belong, are valued, and have a network of caring peers to rely on.[20]

Plowing forward with typical schooling practices without making room for the psycho-social realities facing all students and teachers not only is unrealistic but also will not result in meaningful teaching and learning. To that end, many teachers and school staff have been attuned and responsive to the basic social-emotional needs of students and have recommended "check-in" practices[21] to add a sense of belonging and community connection for students and teachers. Similarly, some schools and districts—such as San Juan Unified School District—have been paying explicit, proactive attention to the professional and personal needs of their staff.[22]

Beyond interpersonal practices, a strong culture of wellness- and relationship-centered connection is reinforced by consistent systems and practices in both districts and schools. Teachers, students, and families should know that there are protocols in place: ways to ask for help, professional partners, and degrees of support—including physical, mental, behavioral, and emotional services. Community schools prioritize integration, alignment, and coherence through interdisciplinary Coordination of Services Teams (COST)—or comprehensive implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)[23]—and include families and community partners.

An effective system of integrated support, however, does not translate into unilateral "outsourcing" of expertise or the assumption that students with more acute needs are unable to learn in "normal" classrooms. Practitioners at Seneca Family of Agencies—a nonprofit organization that partners with schools specifically around mental and behavioral health support and intervention—warn of the temptation to just refer students out of the classroom to receive specialized attention. Though referrals for intervention can be perceived as a resource, such practices, in addition to having inequitable impacts for students of color,[24] can contribute to feelings of inefficacy for both teachers and students as well as an erosion of the trust between the two. Instead, Seneca mental health experts offer that:

> Rather than sending students to higher levels of care … This same level of care and resources [should] be embedded within the school environment, with specialists entering classrooms where teachers can observe and learn from the specialists' expertise. This approach provides relational stability for students while simultaneously making an investment in the skill and efficacy of teachers and the capacity of the entire school community.[25]

This "push-in" version of student support demands explicit teacher capacity building. Schools and districts must create and maintain strong systems for identifying student and teacher needs as well as for developing the human capital resources (including expertise from partner organizations, agencies, and community institutions) needed to create a comprehensive and effective system of support and care.

To build and strengthen integrated student and teacher supports, schools and districts can:

- Integrate collective, individual student, and educator wellness check-ins to understand well-being[26] as a regular part of distance and in-person learning, with an awareness of basic needs, feelings of anxiety and fear, stress, isolation, depression, and disengagement, as well as insufficient access to social-emotional support and mental health resources.[27]

- Establish partnerships with mental health resources and providers to support teachers and students[28] experiencing anxiety and stress with strategies and tools that support effective Tier 1 practices around individual and community care.

- Ensure there is a clear system for accessing student and teacher support that is collaboratively designed and implemented by students, teachers, families, and community partners.

- Create a robust and proactive school-based referral and professional learning/coaching system led by interdisciplinary school-based response teams, including experienced classroom teachers (general and special education), administrators, student support specialists, and family and community partners.

- Consider how distance learning may require more effective allocation of student support staff (e.g., school psychologists and specialists) to meet specific student and school needs across school campuses. Working across schools requires consistent and aligned interventions along with professional learning expectations and practices.

Collaborative Leadership and Practice

In the sixth year of Local Control Funding Formula implementation, the COVID-19 crisis and the need for rapid-response decision-making has demonstrated the lack of consistency and commitment on the part of some districts to practices of engagement and inclusive governance. However, for those districts and communities that had already invested in a distributed, community approach to ownership of schools and student support, the crisis helped to mobilize a collective sense of action and responsibility. District and community leaders were quick to tap existing networks and working coalitions to convene multisector task forces and respond with immediacy. Strong civic capacity and political will—strengthened through earlier efforts to work together to support a whole-child approach to thriving communities—were invaluable to assessing needs and responding to them.[29]

An effective community school recognizes that student success does not rely solely on the expertise of instructional professionals but is also the result of shared accountability

among students, educators, families, and community partners. Students and families are active and engaged participants in the decisions that affect their experiences. Teachers are seen as holding the closest and most consistent school-based connection to students, and are essential to designing, implementing, and evaluating the success of school processes, programs, and policies. Community partners—for example, afterschool program providers and student support services—are trusted as integral and formal partners who help ensure student success and share accountability for both successes and shortcomings.

These collaborative efforts materialize not only from the innovative ideas and good intentions of school leaders and partners but also via dedicated systems, practices, and a foundation of relational trust. A community school must be supported with dedicated staffing and resources, such as a community school coordinator. As the "organizing backbone" of cross-sector work,[30] the coordinator role is to develop, support, and sustain the relational and systems infrastructure to connect and coordinate educators, families, community partners, and students. When a crisis hits, the strength and reliability of this infrastructure allows for quick mobilization of resources and communication with those most in need.

To build collaborative leadership and practice, schools and districts can:

- Actively engage stakeholders and sustain meaningful, distributed facilitative leadership opportunities throughout the school to ensure a shared vision and reciprocal accountability to achieve it. The perspectives and ideas of students and families, in particular, are invaluable for creating and refining community school programs, partnerships, and policies that can meet student needs.

- Address questions that are meaningful across varied teaching modalities (e.g., distance and in-person learning), like: What kind of learning environments and experiences can best serve students?

- Specify a dedicated administrator for each school site to serve as a resource manager or "chief of staff" whose focus is to ensure alignment and coordination, and to be a key administrative partner with the principal. This administrator's work would include supporting a COST approach, reviewing student- and school-level data, and creating and strengthening interdisciplinary approaches to meeting student, family, and teacher needs. In a distance-learning setting, this might mean retooling the role of existing school leaders (e.g., assistant principals) or deploying central office staff.

- Use Local Control Accountability Plans as formal opportunities for community conversations around meeting the needs of students and families as well as for reviewing student-outcomes data to support a process of continuous improvement.

Student-Centered Learning

The purpose of community schools is first and foremost to support students' academic success by offering ambitious instruction, a student-centered learning climate, and a comprehensive whole-child and "science of learning and development"[31] design approach. Community schools have often been heralded for their work in expanding the school day and offering academic support and enrichment before and after school as part of "letting teachers teach." Fundamentally, however, a transformative community school requires a reformulation and redesign of student-centered teaching, and must also include support for the teachers and leaders charged with ensuring equitable student outcomes.

Over the past few weeks, districts have ramped up their distance-learning strategies, with many recognizing that the loss in learning for students could contribute to an already stressful and chaotic reality. To that end, educators are relying on both innovative strategies and basic learning tools to reframe teaching and to connect meaningfully with their students. Lesson plans are built around students' real-life contexts; project-based learning strategies are a means for students to work independently, empowering them to identify topics that are readily accessible and compelling. Teachers are employing basic youth development principles[32] by acknowledging the strengths and positive outcomes of their students—rather than taking a deficit-based approach—to help develop valuable skills, competencies, and connections students need for life. Students are encouraged to explore and practice activities and skills—music, arts, cooking—that are seldom part of traditional coursework but are valuable learning experiences. Families are asked to use daily experiences and relationships as "teaching moments" and as a means to connect with their child, support them through their stress, and help facilitate their engagement and learning.

These strategies are not born from COVID-19 necessity; they are examples of student-centered teaching and deeper learning.[33] They reflect that people learn best when they feel known, understood, supported, and represented in what and how they are being taught. By building from the knowledge and assets of students and their families, community schools prioritize relationships and collaboration across a community to provide students with high-quality, nurturing, and equitable learning environments.

Beyond "voice and choice," student-centered teaching must provide the feedback and differentiation necessary to meet the unique learning needs of each student. Given the extreme variability in how students and families have been affected by COVID-19, educators must be made aware that educational disparities will be inevitably exacerbated.[34] This means that seemingly established practices of teaching—for example, assessments and grading—must be reexamined, not to prioritize standardized efficiency but to understand meaningfully the learning goals and success criteria for each student. The most responsive community schools develop "individualized learning plans" or "personalized learning plans" for each of their students[35]—

borrowing from the standard requirements for students qualifying for special education services—to identify specific learning goals with students and their families, and to use the plan to guide instruction, specialized support, partnerships, and evaluation of progress.

To prioritize student-centered learning, schools and districts can:

- Promote and support teaching that reflects the four key principles of student-centered, deeper learning:[36] personalized learning, student-owned learning, competency-based learning, and anytime, anywhere learning.

- Develop individualized learning plans for all students, to include academic, social-emotional, and behavioral health assets and goals.

- Elevate student voice and choice in their learning[37] and how they demonstrate content and skill mastery, reflecting trust and value in their interests, backgrounds, and learning pathways.

- Encourage and support regular opportunities for student-led feedback on instruction, student-led conferencing, and student-led training for educators and other school staff.

- Work with school staff to better understand and address their support and professional learning needs so that they can refine and improve their student-centered pedagogy.

- Collaborate with enrichment and youth development partners to support and strengthen social-emotional learning opportunities as part of the school day so that partners can be flexibly deployed to support specific teachers and classrooms to ensure that students are actively engaged and connected to a caring adult.

Next Steps for School and District Leaders

Strong, sustainable community schools require a clear, shared purpose along with committed support and leadership at the school and district level—all of which are essential in the midst of instability and uncertainty. As leaders examine how these community school elements are part of their COVID-19 response strategy, they should ask: (a) WHAT is needed to support powerful teaching and learning, (b) WHO is needed to actualize a responsive and effective community school strategy to support student success, and (c) HOW will system and organizational structures be reorganized to create a strong foundation for community school implementation?

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Author Biography

Hayin Kimner is an educational practitioner, researcher and evaluator, and policy advocate with a focus on community schools systems and partnerships. Hayin served as a Senior Program Director for The Opportunity and has led the development of districtwide and citywide community school strategies for San Francisco Unified and Emery Unified School Districts. She currently works with organizations focused on advancing whole-child, equity research, policies, and practices.

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Related Publications

Borman, G. D. *What Can Be Done to Address Learning Losses Due to School Closures?* Policy Analysis for California Education. June 2020.

Cottingham, B., Gallagher, A., Gee, K., Myung, J., Gong, A., Kimner, H., Witte, J., & Hough, H. *Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context: Research to Guide Distance and Blended Instruction*. Policy Analysis for California Education. July 2020.

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