

Philadelphia's Community Schools Let's Make Them the Schools Our Children Deserve



A national movement for educational justice is embracing community schools as a strategy for addressing the problems in our schools that are rooted in systemic racism and economic inequality. It aims at empowering parents, students, educators and marginalized black and brown communities that have been victimized by budget austerity, school closures and privatization.

An important element of community schools as they have developed over the last 20 years is bringing together a range of services that can be housed and coordinated in neighborhood schools to maximize their impact. However, for us, that is the beginning, not the end point, of a community schools strategy. If community schools are going to transform urban schools, they need to embody the values and vision that present public education as a force for democracy and equality.

Working Principles

Community schools are public, democratic institutions where students, parents, school workers and the community have a real voice.

This means, first of all, that these schools are accountable and operate transparently.

At the school level, community schools must vest their power in students, parents, school staff, and members of the surrounding community who will partner with the administration to shape the school's program and policies. We believe that the changes our schools need will only come about if all members of the school community are talking and listening to each other and fashioning solutions that draw on the funds of knowledge each group brings to the table.

Each school should have a Local School Council (LSC) in which each constituency selects leaders to represent it, with parents and community members making up the majority. Students should also be represented on these bodies. The LSC's powers should be substantive, not simply advisory, including budget oversight and the selection of school leadership. This move has precedent in other cities that have seen success with community schools.

As a District-wide initiative that will involve partnerships with other public agencies and non-profits, governance could take a number of forms as it has in other cities. Coordination could be provided by a District office, a City Department, a non-profit with experience and capacity in this area, or a new intermediary created specifically for developing or sustaining community schools.

Deciding what form this should take here should involve careful deliberation, study and negotiation. For us, it is vital that parents, students, school workers and community organizations are well represented in this process. Further, it is essential that all key decisions affecting community schools implementation must be reserved for public bodies, and must be made with adequate opportunity for public engagement and debate.

“What we’ve found is that whenever you have parents that are at the decision-making table that are knowledgeable about the complete and accurate status of their school, they can help make good decisions...Nobody knows the school like the parents, the teachers and the community”

Valencia Rias-Winstead Local School Council member in Chicago.

“We're interested in who's going to be making decisions with the students in mind. Too long teachers have been out of the policy aspect of education. We've been receiving the orders. We'd like to be part of the conversation ...”

Jose Navarro, teacher and principal at Humanitas Social Justice Academy

Chicago has a system of elected school councils that hire principals, oversee budgets and monitor school improvement plans.

In Cincinnati Local School Decision Making Councils of 12 parents, community members and school staff develop the plan and play an active role in school decision making

In Oakland, a 25 member task force drawn from the community met bi-weekly for a year to develop their strategic plan for community schools.

Community schools increase accessibility to services and supports that students and families need – without replacing certified professionals.

Students, particularly in high-poverty communities, come to school facing many obstacles that impact learning. Students who are homeless, hungry, sick or traumatized by violence are not likely to experience success without additional support. The school as a neighborhood hub is a natural setting to locate services close to the people who need them.

To make this happen requires the commitment of service agencies, both in the government and non-profit sectors. A citywide plan must be developed for integrating services within schools, as well as for the mechanisms for their strategic implementation.

At the school level, having a Community School Coordinator is essential to develop the relationships with the school partners and ensure the community is informed and involved in planning and utilizing these services, as well as engaging the community in an ongoing process of needs assessment. An agency needs to be identified to establish standards, provide training, and offer ongoing professional development for coordinators, school staff and partners.

Community schools, consistent with the idea of the school as a hub for community life, also can and should serve as places that extend and enhance education, providing afterschool programs, adult education, and venues for art, music and drama activity (again, as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, arts education provided by certified teachers). The school should also be available as a meeting place for community based organizations.

Community partnerships cannot be a substitute for full time, professional staff including school nurses, counselors and certified librarians. These positions need to be mandated at every school, and earlier cuts need to be restored at all schools. Contracting out these positions cuts against the community school mission of improving services and bringing about school and community collaboration.

We also need to be clear that partnerships must exclude provision of services for profit or to promote commercial aims.

In New York City, a Children's Aid Society study documented academic gains, improved school climate, and cost savings in community schools. Five health centers in schools that serve 5,000 children and family members each year avoided an estimated 249 emergency room visits a year.

Cincinnati requires that all community school partners be financially self-sustaining and pay for any capital costs for locating services in schools. Local school councils can revoke partnership agreements based on performance.

Comprehensive after school programs, like the Beacon centers in New York City, provide a broad range of activities like recreation, ESOL classes and adult education, music, dance, art, and community-building potluck dinners. Centers are open in the evenings until 10pm, and on Saturdays.

Community schools promote learning with an engaging, culturally relevant curriculum that develops critical thinking, creativity and respect for diversity.

Three years ago PCAPS, in our Community Plan for Excellent Schools For All Children, made the following call for a dramatic shift in teaching and learning, a call that is no less needed today:

“Unsuccessful schools expect students to adapt to their curriculum, and they fail to respond if students are not engaged by it. Successful schools recognize that while all students must be taught certain essential skills and knowledge, their curriculum must adapt to their students’ interests and needs. Too many of our schools have adopted the first approach, and the result has been widespread student disengagement.”

Our students require the basic building blocks of learning, but they also need:

- Course content that builds on their pre-existing interests, experiences, knowledge and understanding;
- Curricula that make them active learners, including project-based learning that establishes real-world connections to their lives, and group work that supports collaborative learning and problem solving;
- Curricular diversity that provides students with the opportunity to explore a wide variety of subject matter in an interdisciplinary manner;
- Instruction in areas that have been deemphasized in the post-No Child Left Behind era, such as the social sciences, art, music, and other creative and engaging subjects;
- Connections to their communities and their futures through community service, internships, field-based learning and academically rigorous Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs accessible to all students;
- Curricula that address their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and celebrate their culture, history and community;
- Access to high-level courses, such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs;
- ESOL curricula that connect language instruction to high-quality content instruction;
- Access to physical, health and nutrition education and mandated daily recess.
- An emphasis on diverse communities of learners rather than grouping by ability;
- The support necessary to ensure all students can be successful, including tutoring, mentoring and afterschool activities; and
- Professional development that includes studying student work and teachers developing supportive and critical relationships.

Need and Deed is a group in Philadelphia that supports real-life learning in a community setting. Service based learning, where teachers and students venture beyond the classroom to study solutions to real problems, is a natural fit for community schools.

In 2005 African American history was mandated for all students in the District. This was a good start, but much more needs to be done to break down Eurocentric bias in the curriculum. Our city has many organizations and resources that could help students to explore what kind of a society we want and how we get there.

The Humanitas Social Justice Academy in the San Fernando Valley of California is a community school that focuses on close teacher-student relationships, including Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for all students and an adoption policy with teachers and community partners working with students individually to develop and implement these plans.

Community Schools promote positive school discipline, mutual respect and a safe environment.

Putting an end to the school-to-prison pipeline, where students are pushed out of school or criminalized by harsh zero-tolerance policies, is a key element of a transformative community schools vision.

Schools need to be places where we practice and model respect for each other and where behavior that supports learning is reinforced. A good school climate is one where teachers and students know each other, where dialogue is encouraged, and students, parents and staff play a role in setting and maintaining norms. Violating these norms should be addressed with a sense of proportion, employing restorative practices and conflict mediation rather than relying on suspensions, expulsions and arrests. Prison-like conditions don't create safe schools. Parents, teachers, students and the community working together do.

Discipline needs to be something schools do **with** students rather than **to** them, an approach that underlines the importance of youth being involved in shaping policy.

Standards for behavior, including the consequences for violating rules and expectations, are developed and reinforced throughout the school year through regular discussion among the entire school community. When students and educators take real ownership of these standards, the focus can shift from classroom management to learning. We believe that this level of school-wide engagement and dialogue is an essential part of the community schools vision.

The District Student Code of Conduct laid out in August 2012, which reduces the reliance on suspensions and expulsions in favor of other, more productive alternatives, needs to be aggressively implemented. Community schools, with more supports and greater engagement, can do this more effectively.

Oakland, as part of its community schools initiative, has developed a comprehensive restorative justice program that has dramatically reduced suspensions and expulsions while making schools safer.

The Institute for Restorative Practices in Bethlehem partnered with West Philadelphia High School in 2009, bringing about a significant reduction of violent incidents and a much-improved school climate.

Community schools need full and equitable funding

Community schools are not a substitute for fully resourced schools. Schools in high-poverty communities need more, not less, in the way of resources than schools in affluent neighborhoods. As we have argued over the last three years, money that could be used for public education is not lacking. The problem is the political will to win robust and equitable funding, including demanding corporations, the rich, and mega non-profits pay their fair share. Without stable, dedicated funding from the federal, state and municipal governments, any community schools initiative will remain limited and likely ineffectual.

The core idea of a community school—the creation of a network of partnerships that support students and their families—is not expensive, and typically is achieved without significant new costs. To pay for a coordinator and, ideally, an organizer concentrating on parent and community engagement, a funding stream distinct from the regular school budget is needed. Partnerships that provide services should pay their own way.

Research demonstrates that community schools can produce savings by achieving maximum collective impact in the delivery of social services. If more people have access to the help they need to be happier, healthier, and more productive, then that is a net gain for our city.

If community schools are to be sustained long-term, dedicated funding will have to be found. This will take a coordinated push at the local, state and federal levels. While some seed money might come from foundations, this is no substitute for public dollars, particularly if there are strings attached that cut against our collective, community-driven goals.

Because of the work of thousands of people who have stood up for public education, we have a governor who supports full funding and a secretary of education who, as a superintendent, developed a community schools initiative. We have a mayor and a city council president who favor community schools and investment in public education. This is a favorable context for moving forward in the fight for funding. But major challenges remain in the form of a state legislature that refuses to support equitable funding and new revenue. We need to build the political power to win these critical objectives.

What's Needed For Full and Fair Funding for Philadelphia Schools?

- An equitable state funding formula that takes into account poverty, special needs populations and ability to pay
- New state revenue from closing corporate loopholes and taxing shale
- End local tax abatements on school property taxes
- PILOTS (payments in lieu of taxes) from mega non-profits
- Fully fund Federal Title I to increase aid to high-poverty schools

Funding Streams for Community Schools

- Title I funding can be used for community school programs.
- Title IV under “Community Support for School Success,” authorizes \$1 billion annually for grants for community schools, out-of-school time activities, and after school programs.
- Title II provides professional development funds to prepare educators to more effectively engage families and build community partnerships

Community schools mean we need a new metric for measuring success.

Today, schools are judged by one measure, standardized test scores. Schools in high-poverty, black and brown communities are found wanting based on these scores and are subjected to closing or privatization. Meanwhile, nothing is done to address the underlying inequalities that are mirrored in these test results. The community schools strategy recognizes that progress in education is inseparable from the need to address the deficits caused by poverty, and seeks to empower school communities to act on their own behalf.

Any measure of progress needs to include traditional metrics like graduation rates and academic proficiency in key subjects. But it also should include assessment of school climate, including suspensions, arrests and data on counseling and mediation, enrollment in afterschool programs, treatment in onsite health and social service programs and parental involvement as gauged by meeting and conference attendance. These evaluations should be qualitative as well as data-based and should include extensive interviews with staff, parents, and students. The aim should be to get a true picture of the impact of the school’s program that could aid the administration and school council in improving the school.

Most community schools, as part of their accountability plans, have regular meetings hosted by the local school governing body to report back these evaluations to the broader community.

An evaluation process that seeks out and values the views of all constituents of the school community will not only get a fuller picture of the school, but will also strengthen engagement and collaboration.

“We must move away from our current obsession with measuring and sanctioning and move toward an approach of supporting and working together to meet the needs of the whole child...our nation is fed up with the overemphasis and high stakes consequences of standardized tests.”

AFT President Randi Weingarten

Next steps: bringing the community to the table for community schools

In Philadelphia, the idea of community schools has in the last year emerged with considerable support in the corridors of power, with both the incoming mayor and the City Council president endorsing the idea. This presents challenges as well as opportunities. There will inevitably be pressures to limit the scope of a community schools initiative to the politically safest elements, and to vest responsibility for the development of the plan in people who share that view. We must press for a transformative version of community schools, and for a broad development process that ensures that the parent, student, and teacher voices represented by our coalition, and the broad education justice movement throughout Philadelphia, are represented at the table.

Along with the content of a community schools initiative, there are critical decisions that must be made, including the number of schools, the criteria for selecting them, and how rapidly the program should be implemented. The community needs to be a part of those conversations. Deep engagement will not only strengthen the plan, but will provide the support necessary to bring about a successful implementation.

Mayor Kenney, Council President Clarke and Superintendent Hite should:

- Create a broad **community schools task force** that includes parents, students, and community members that will be charged with developing a plan within a specific time frame.
- Provide this task force with the resources to investigate best practices and engage in related research.
- Charge the task force with organizing a process of community engagement that would include town meetings, surveys and, in conjunction with the SRC and City Council, public hearings.

PCAPS is committed to working with the District and the city government to develop a successful community schools program here. We have been working for several years to popularize this idea, and most recently we have begun the process of bringing together people in schools to develop their own community schools initiative. We also are part of the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, a national labor-community coalition that is focused on promoting community schools as a means of realizing the promise of the historic Brown decision that said our schools must serve all children equally.

The PCAPS task force on community schools is open to any and all individuals who want to help build this movement. For more information, go to our web site: www.WeArePCAPS.org or email us at pcaps201@gmail.com.