What Do Community Schools in Maryland look like in practice? A Report from Our Case Study Project [1]

Introduction

Through the Blueprint legislation, Maryland has made a substantial investment in community schools, which has transformed public education statewide. Community schools take a whole-child approach, leveraging local partnerships to respond to the needs of students, staff, families, and the community. One central idea of community schools is that by meeting the outside-of-school needs that students and families have, like food insecurity, schools can mitigate barriers to learning and will be better able to educate students. By partnering with families and the greater community, community schools aim to transform the educational model into a place of belonging, collaboration, and thriving (Oaks et al., 2017). To what degree has the investment in the community school strategy changed schools in practice?

First, we need to consider our current context, where support for families outside of school is more important than ever. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, child poverty in the U.S. has almost tripled from 5% in 2021 to 13% in 2024 (Annie E. Casey, 2025). Moreover, the United Way of Lower Eastern Shore indicates that 35% of that region's children live in households classified as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). Combined with those in poverty, 47% of Maryland children live in households facing financial hardship.

In this environment, community schools play a vital role, connecting with partners to supplement the needs of families and young people to provide essential services for families and students who might not otherwise have access to meet their basic needs. Supplying food, clothing, medical care, laundry, and other basic services to families and students inevitably helps students attend and perform better in school (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Through partnership-building and service delivery, community schools can also cultivate belonging and trust among families, students, and communities. Consequently, community schools can contribute to the positive school climate necessary for student success. We know that schools characterized by high levels of relational trust are much more likely to experience sustained improvement in student academic achievement, and teachers and administrators in these schools are likely to be more committed to student learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Therefore, the combination of providing services to mediate the impact of poverty on learning combined with the act of coordinating services and relationships means community schools can create the conditions for student success inside and outside of the classroom.

Background

Community schools provide services to low-income families, like mental and physical health care, free meals, food pantry and laundry services, before and after school care, classes for parents, and assistance with housing. By addressing these needs and others, research has shown gains in school attendance and

---

[1] Dr. Jessica Shiller, MCCS director, and Dr. Liz Obara Piedramartel contributed to the writing of this document.

What Do Community Schools in Maryland look like in practice? A Report from Our Case Study Project

academic performance (Ferrara & Jacobson, 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2020). Suporting that body of work, a new study from the Learning Policy Institute examined the performance of students attending community schools and found stronger academic gains among those attending community schools compared with those attending non-community schools, (Swain et al., 2025).

How does this happen? Community schools are grounded in a framework which lays out a series of *enabling conditions* from which make community school transformational (Germain et al, 2023). One of those enabling conditions is relational trust. Relational trust has long been shown to be essential in school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). By approaching schooling strategically, community schools can set the stage for student outcome improvements.

The relational work of community schools positions them as a "critical nexus" between the school, partners, and parents (Sanders et al, 2019, p. 94). Through the time and effort of building connections, community schools (and the coordinators in particular) are on the pulse of community needs, constantly interacting with families (Sanders et al., 2019). Trust is built through this process which contributes to the overall social health of young people and their communities, as well as to powerful partnerships developed among stakeholders.

Community schools not only connect families to the school and to much-needed resources, but they also support neighborhoods and communities more broadly. As Bierbaum et al. (2022) write,

> In addition to being sites of learning and development, community schools often connect youth and families to a broad range of health and social services, [and] serve as centers for

older adult learning, recreation, and other cradle-to-career programming, (Bierbaum et al., p. 3).

Moreover, Butler et al (2022) studied community Schools across Baltimore and found that there was

> The potential for community schools to serve as catalysts for community development when schools and their partners have a clear vision for community-facing work, (Butler et al, 2022, p. 10).

This community-facing work especially expands the scope and transformational power of the community school. Community schools engaged in the work at this level are laying the groundwork for increasing social capital, building collective power, leadership, as well as collective efficacy (Galindo et al, 2017; Mayger & Hochbein, 2021; Sampson, 1997).

Method

To understand what this looks like in practice, the research team at MCCS conducted a case study project to understand some of the ways in which community schools are taking shape across the state. Data collection took place in two school districts during the 2024-2025 academic school year, from January 2025 to May 2025. This study employed a qualitative approach and utilized a multi-methodological design (i.e., interviews, focus groups, and field observations) to achieve its research objectives: Understanding how community schools operated within the district, how they were defined by students, parents, and community partners, as well as the value assigned to community schools by these groups.

What Do Community Schools in Maryland look like in practice? A Report from Our Case Study Project

The sample included three schools from each of two distinct districts (counties). The districts were in suburban parts of the state where 20-30% of their schools are Community Schools. Their overall populations are reflected below.
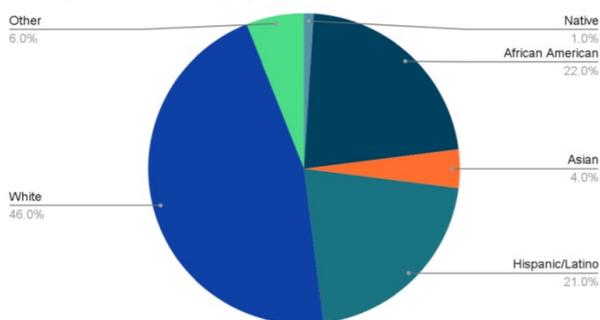
COUNTY A

County A Racial Demographics

Other 6.0%
Native 1.0%
African American 15.0%
Asian 8.0%
White 49.0%
Hispanic/Latino 21.0%
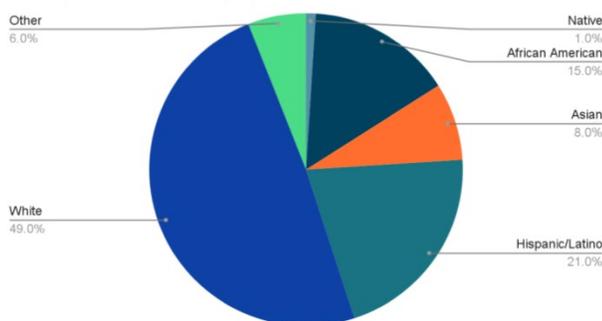
COUNTY B

County B Racial Demographics

Other 6.0%
Native 1.0%
African American 22.0%
Asian 4.0%
White 46.0%
Hispanic/Latino 21.0%

Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with district representatives, principals, and community school coordinators. The team conducted twelve interviews at the school level, with individual interviews conducted with the principal and community school coordinator at each community school. After the interviews, the audio was transcribed using professional transcription software for analysis.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with students and families at each school. The goal was to conduct at least one focus group with students and one with their families from each of the schools sampled in each county to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences with community schools. The protocol used for the focus groups included eight questions, which aimed to understand how these groups defined community schools, the perceived benefits of community schools, their interactions within the school as they relate to staff and activities, and recommendations they have for enhancing the community school experience. The protocol used during the focus groups was also available in Spanish for Spanish-speaking participants, and focus groups were conducted in the language of choice for participants.

Field Observations

Data collection also included observing events hosted by each of the community schools, most of which occurred after school. Each community school provided a list of events hosted for students and families. From this list, the 10-member research team indicated their availability and selected programs that best suited their schedule. Overall, 20 events were observed in County A (n = 11) and County B (n = 9). The research team observed and took notes on school events using a rubric the team

developed using the literature on community schools.[2]

Data from interviews, focus groups, and observations were analyzed using a traditional qualitative thematic coding approach. All transcripts and field notes were reviewed in full to ensure familiarity with the data, after which an initial round of open coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts and patterns, then grouped, resulting in the development of overarching themes that captured key insights relevant to the research questions.

Table 1: **Data collection in two districts**

	Interviews	Focus groups	Observations
County A	6	6	11
County B	6	6	9
Total	**12**	**12**	**20**

Findings

There were key themes that emerged from the data, supporting the idea that community schools are setting the conditions for student success. Findings included evidence of engagement in strategic supports and relational trust between families, students, and schools.

Strategic support for families and students

Interviews with principals and community school coordinators, independently demonstrated cohesion between community school coordinators (CSC) and principals. They had a strong working relationship evidenced by descriptions of how they felt supported by one another; pairs expressed being on the same page on the goals of improving attendance and connection with families, and meeting students' out of school needs. As one principal shared, the vision was for intentionality and collaboration: "We want to open up a network of resources to families." The principal and community school coordinator built a team which included a pupil personnel worker, psychologist, community liaisons, and community school coordinator, to work in tandem to support families. There was a sense of excitement around having an infusion of funds to hire personnel and provide programs like never before to support their vision of supporting families and students living in poverty. A community school coordinator in another school described the strategy as "a game changer for families to come in and to be able to be supported in the moment directly." Strategically providing essential services for families mitigates the impact of poverty on learning, by giving students the scaffolding they need to attend regularly and participate fully in school.

Powerful family engagement

Students and families appreciated the community schools with which they were connected. And described the community school as "a place where everyone's voices are heard, a place for everyone to come together to create something." Families mentioned having their needs met, "Everyone has been so wonderful. We really appreciate all the support, and everybody's been so welcoming, and you're always willing to help provide any service. You know to meet our needs." Another parent added, "It is more than just simply the place where you send your kids. It becomes a center for the community and that's the goal behind a community school."

---

[2] The observation rubric can be found here: http://bit.ly/4reky7Y

This buy-in extended to parents' ability to have a voice in the school. The research team observed in both districts the intentional use of family get-togethers to foster inclusivity and democratic participation. These sessions functioned as supportive groups for families. These spaces provided a vehicle for two-way communication, shared decision-making, and collective input, positioning each school to reflect its families thoughts and ideas.

Trusting relationships

In observations, the team found that partners and parents were routinely greeted warmly; in one school, students receive high-5s as they entered in the morning, and in others, hugs and smiles were exchanged among students and staff. Students reported feeling a sense of connection to their schools and feeling supported. Families reported a sense of being known, and that their needs were understood. Such practices echo Sanders and Galindo's (2022) study of sommunity Schools in which a teacher noted, "It's all about the relationships, and how you leverage those real relationships to ensure that kids are learning," (p. 15). Relational culture was evident at many family events, where staff chatted casually with parents, and parents socialized amongst themselves comfortably, even exchanging contacts at one event. The research team also witnessed many multi-generational interactions where babies and younger siblings, as well as grandparents and students' "special someones" were welcomed and engaged during school events.

Asset-based approaches

The research team observed culturally responsive approaches to connect with the cultural wealth of families and students. Family and community engagement included meetings specifically for Hispanic parents in Spanish, refreshments or meals

provided at all events, interpreters and Spanish-speaking staff at nearly all parent-facing events and engaging events to share academic information with families to bring them in as learning partners.

Daniel et al.'s 2020, "A Step Closer to Racial Equity: Towards a Culturally Sustaining Model for Community Schools" explains that "cultural and linguistic diversity are strengths that are rooted in the lives of students and their communities and honored as assets in the classroom" (p. 9). Our team observed many examples of this asset-based approach. The team saw multilingual teachers encouraging youth to support other students when reading their writing, engaging in call and response for getting attention, and affirming the identities of students in their classrooms.

That same intentionality was noted in the planning of culturally relevant instruction and family engagement. Hip-hop literacy events, multicultural fairs with student and family projects, African drumming, and authentic language interpretation were seen across the schools, demonstrating a culturally responsive approach to engaging families and students.

Promising practice: Cafecito

One practice we observed that had a high level of engagement was the *Cafecito*. This was a monthly coffee hour where families were invited without a specific agenda. Breakfast was provided, younger siblings were welcomed with toys and play areas,

and there was time for families to connect with one another in their language and about topics in which they were interested. As one of the coordinators explained,

"I have had some success with getting families to know each other, so that they have a built-in community, and they kind of tap into each other's assets, right? When I was a young mom, if I was sick or I couldn't get to my kid, I had people I could call to, like, pick up the kid, or my car broke down. Who am I gonna go to? So, they have assets among them. Some of them speak English more than others, so they can support each other that way. And then also, just by getting to know them, they ask questions or ...are curious, and then that helps me know, like, Oh, that's a thing you would like. So the English classes, oh, they would like to learn more about English. They were asking about reading and writing strategies to support young kids. They bring young students. So they bring younger siblings...So that also helps us to, like, get to know who's coming in those sorts of things."

By organizing this monthly gathering, the community school coordinator got to know families, and they get to know one another. They build their network of support at the school and outside the school. Moreover, their culture is reflected by the school's providing a culturally sustaining space for them at the school, which historically may not have been a welcoming space.

Room to grow

Of course, with any initiative, there is room for improvement. In our research, we found that given the success that community schools have had in engaging families and students, there is a clear next step in getting them further involved in shared

vision and decision-making (Germain et al, 2023). This collaborative voice is critical to transformation in the community school model. Students, in particular, expressed interest in participating in mechanisms for shared power at their schools.

Secondly, schools should continue to lean into providing access to services for families who do not speak English, as well as for those who are undocumented, given the continued need for this. The larger context of anti-immigrant policies implemented across the nation are cause for concern, and community schools will have to work together with partners to protect and support their families.

Conclusion

Based on our research, the investment that Maryland is making in community schools is paying off. The case studies demonstrate that students and families are feeling more connected to schools, and they are creating community. Community schools may be key in providing spaces of trust and connection which are critical for improved outcomes for children.

Key Findings:

- **Strategic support is being offered to families and students**
- **Families and students feel connected to their school community**
- **Community schools are building trusting relationships and engage in asset-based practices**
- **Community schools have the potential to further engage stakeholders in inclusive decision-making**
- **Schools are connecting with community-based resources and can offer support to families in an anti-immigrant context**

What Do Community Schools in Maryland look like in practice? A Report from Our Case Study Project

The importance of the community school rooted in the local neighborhood, grounded in whole child approaches and cultural responsiveness represents a strategy for schooling that has incredible promise to engage and support thriving children and families.

References

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2025). Measuring access to opportunity in the United States: A 10-year update. https://www.aecf.org/resources/measuring-access-to-opportunity-a-10-year-update

Butler, A., Bierbaum, A., & O'Keefe, E. (2022). Leveraging Community Schools for Community Development: Lessons from Baltimore's 21st Century School Buildings Program. *Urban Education*, DOI 00420859221107615.

Bierbaum, A., Butler, A. & O'Keefe, E. (2022): School-centered community development: Lessons from Baltimore's 21st century school buildings program, *Community Development,* 1-23 DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2022.2123015.

Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation

Daniel, J., Malone, H.-L. S., & Kirkland, D. E. (2023). A step closer to racial equity: Towards a culturally sustaining model for community schools. *Urban Education, 58*(9), 2058-2088. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920954906

Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. (2018). Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support Student Success. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/145.655

Durham, R. E., & Connolly, F. (2016, June). *Baltimore community schools: Promise & progress.* Baltimore Education Research Consortium. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED567805.pdf

Ferrara, J. & Jacobson, R. (Eds.) (2019), *Community schools: People and places transforming education and communities.* Lanham.

Galindo, C., Sanders, M., & Abel, Y. (2017). Transforming educational experiences in low-income communities: A qualitative case study of social capital in a full-service community school. *American Educational Research Journal,* 54(1_suppl), 140S-163S.

Germain, E., Oakes, J., & Maier, A. (2023). Theory of action for community school transformation. Community Schools Forward Project Series. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward

Johnston, W., Engberg, J., Opper, I., Sontag-Padilla, L. & Xenakis, L. (2020) Illustrating the promise of community schools: An assessment of the impact of the New York City community schools initiative. RAND Corporation.

McLaughlin, M., Fehrer, K., & Leos-Urbel, J. (2020). *The Way We Do School: The Making of Oakland's Full-Service Community School District.* Harvard Education Press.

Mayger, L. & Hochbein, C. (2021) Growing Connected: Relational Trust and Social Capital in Community Schools, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 26:3, 210-235, DOI: 10.1080/10824669.2020.1824676

Oakes, J., Dryfoos, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). Community schools: An evidence-based

strategy for equitable school improvement. Learning Policy Institute.

Sampson, Robert J. 2012. "What Community Supplies." In *The Community Development Reader*, edited by James DeFilippis and Susan Saegert, 2nd ed., 308–18. New York: Routledge.

Sanders, M., Galindo, C., & DeTablan, D. (2019). Leadership for collaboration: Exploring how community school coordinators advance the goals of full-service community schools. *Children & Schools, 41*(2), 89–100. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdz006

Sanders, M., & Galindo, C. (2022). A whole child approach: Amplifying students' voices in a full-service community high school. *The High School Journal*, *105*(2), 91-107.

Swain, W., Leung-Gagné, M., Maier, A., & Rubinstein, C. (2025). *Community schools impact on student outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/541.498