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## SUSTAINING AND SCALING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: SEVEN QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER



With the nation's economy and its families facing a host of crises, the **community schools model** may soon become even more relevant than it is today. That's because this research-based reform transcends the classroom, seeking to provide students and their families with critical services they may be unable to otherwise afford—including “medical, dental, and mental health care services; tutoring and other academic supports; and resources for families, such as parent education classes, job training and placement services, housing assistance, and nutrition programs.” Three other **pillars**, in addition to such integrated services, are key aspects of the model: active family and community engagement and empowerment, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, and collaborative leadership. Yet a **recent study** co-authored by NEPC Fellow Jennifer Jellison Holme, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, raises questions about how well school districts are planning for the model.

The study was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Education Policy*, and it takes a magnifying glass to 32 proposals funded by the federal Full Service Community Schools grant program between 2010 and 2014. The plans are a rich source of information on how the reforms have been operationalized throughout the U.S., so the study provides insights about practices, sustainability, and how these community schools might fulfill the promise of the reform. If, indeed, the model expands from its **current base of approximately 5,000 schools** nationwide, how might educators and policymakers scale up and sustain a reform that has **already been associated** with improved student and school outcomes for low-achieving students in high-poverty schools?

Before presenting the seven crucial questions framed by the study, we should note the study's

limitations. Because community schools are, by definition, unique approaches tailored to their home bases, it is difficult to use a broad brush to describe the reforms. In addition, the grant-funded programs are, at least according to technical criteria of the competition, among the stronger plans. (Just 5% of proposals were funded in 2010, the study authors report.) So the proposals are not necessarily representative of community schools as a whole. Nor can a plan on paper speak to the realities of on-the-ground implementation. With those cautions, let's turn to the insights from Professor Jellison Holme and her five co-authors.

- 1. Should classroom learning play a larger role?** Most proposals aimed to improve student learning by delivering services outside of class time. In fact, nearly one in three proposals only provided academic enrichment after school. While such extracurricular services are important components of the model, enrichment should also take place through changes to classroom learning.
- 2. How can community schools build more on community strengths?** Although a few proposals highlighted neighborhood assets such as effective policy and advocacy work, most paid limited attention to the resources already present in the communities. The study authors note that it was natural for the applicants to emphasize challenges since they were seeking funding to address these challenges. However, they wondered if more applicants could also have highlighted community strengths. "If the leadership of these efforts is, at best, viewing families as blank slates or, at worst, viewing them as incapable and insufficient, this can diminish the collaborative elements of community school reform," the authors write. Again, two of the four pillars of the community schools model concern collaborative leadership and the active engagement and empowerment of families and communities.
- 3. How can community schools effectively coordinate with and among their many partners?** The number of partner organizations in the proposals reviewed ranged from three to more than 80, with an average of 12. Keeping up with all these partnerships is almost certainly a full-time job—and the grant did require schools to hire a coordinator. However, the study authors note that this job is complex and challenging, especially in schools where teachers and principals are already facing challenges related to capacity.
- 4. What is the right balance between grassroots efforts and top-down reforms?** Community schools were originally conceived as grassroots efforts to create change while empowering communities. Yet just seven of the 32 proposals grew entirely or almost entirely out of grassroots efforts to transform schools. The remainder were either top-down, ambiguous in origin, or a combination of grassroots and top-down. Further, the proposals tended to grant less decision-making power to parents or small grassroots organizations than larger, well-resourced and/or well-established organizations such as school districts, the United Way, or the Boys and Girls Club. A natural outgrowth of scaling up reforms is that larger organizations such as school districts or national nonprofits may increasingly be involved. Yet if individual families and grassroots organizers end up getting pushed to the side, this could pose problems down the road. This is because research suggests that top-down reforms may be less stable and, as a result, less sustainable due to challenges related to buy-in and implementation.

- 5. What resources are necessary to sustain the reforms and where will they come from?** The study authors found that even the most detailed proposals provided limited detail on how they planned to sustain the reforms after the grant period ended. Plans also frequently noted that the applicants had the support of local leaders such as superintendents or school boards. Yet reliance on such leaders can be a double-edged sword if key positions turnover and newcomers are not champions. “Indeed, when we looked at the websites of the programs funded in 2010, we found that only about 50% of the schools from the 2010 grant cycle remain full-service community schools according to the website descriptions,” the study authors write. “Although we do not know the reasons why these schools appeared to move away from the model, it could be due to a failure to adequately plan for long-term sustainability.” This observation at the very least raises questions about how community schools might tap into sustainable, recurring funding sources without overly relying on one-time grants. In this regard, it is important to note that the Partnership for the Future of Learning published a valuable resource in early 2020 (just as this new study was also being published), titled *Financing Community Schools: A Framework for Growth and Sustainability*.
- 6. How can the community schools movement more emphatically address broader structural inequities?** The study authors write:

[C]ommunity schools policies are arguably one of the few efforts within education policy that directly acknowledge, and seek to address, the structural inequities that affect schools, in an era where other policy initiatives gloss over local contextual factors, or treat them as irrelevant.

Yet grant applicants faced obstacles created by the very inequities they were attempting to address. For example, one applicant received less than half the amount of per-pupil funding than the average school district in its state. Most applicants were also from racially isolated communities experiencing low tax bases and challenges related to housing, jobs, and transportation. The authors conclude:

Community schools themselves can be one prong in a policy strategy to address these problems, but they likely will not succeed in isolation from efforts to address these broader issues. Indeed, failure to tackle structural inequality alongside community schools may leave this reform within a neoliberal paradigm where private entities step in to bring aid to schools, but which does not force the government and society to deal with the larger problem of inequality. In sum, although we applaud the community school approach as a promising solution to massive disinvestment in urban communities, it may not translate into longer term improvements in outcomes for low-income students and their families without coupling it to building capacity and agency within communities, or addressing larger structures of segregation and finance inequity.

- 7. Could more rural areas benefit from community schools?** The study found that 31 of the 32 proposals involved urban or urban-adjacent areas such as small cities or inner-ring suburbs. Although they note that later grant competitions prioritized rural applicants, there may still be opportunities to consider how the reform might benefit

rural and remote areas of the country.

## NEPC Resources on Community Schools

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