



# Building an Equitable School System for All Students and Educators

*Section 8*

*Full-Service Community Schools*



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# The Full Service Community Schools Team

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**Alex Kuehn** is a social studies teacher for 7th-12th grade students at Headway Academy North, an alternative school within Intermediate District 287. There, he teaches students who are receiving treatment for mental health conditions. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in secondary social studies education. Alex facilitates the school improvement plan for the 11 care and treatment programs within Intermediate District 287 and works on a team supporting the district's strategic plan. Outside of teaching, Alex enjoys traveling, reading, cooking, and exploring the outdoors.



**Jessica Peterson** is a high school English and social studies teacher at the Community Learning Center in South Saint Paul Public Schools. She holds a B.A. from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in English and a M.A. in teaching and learning from Bethel University. Currently, she is pursuing an educational specialist degree in educational leadership at Concordia University. Jessica is on her district's blended learning cohort, creating personalized, technological learning. In her free time, she loves traveling near and far, going to dirt track races, and spending time with her kids, friends, and family.



# Introduction

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**Community schools recognize that many factors influence the education of our children. This is why they work to mobilize the assets of the school and the entire community to improve educational, health, social, family, economic, and related results.**

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The full-service community school strategy is an educational equity-focused model that places the needs of students at the center of analysis and decision-making in school improvement. The community school comprehensive needs assessment examines opportunity gaps and looks at systematic disparities affecting student achievement. By addressing disparities at the community level, community schools target the root causes of inequities affecting the public school system. Communities in Minnesota, including Brooklyn Center, Rochester, and Duluth, are successfully using this model as a strategy to tackle the achievement gap, and they are seeing results.

Minnesota needs to provide ongoing support—not just one-time grant money—for our community schools, and we need to invest in opportunities for more schools to adopt this model for equitable schools that can prepare students for success. A \$75 million state investment would allow every school currently identified in need of improvement under federal law to adopt the full-service community school model. As opposed to funding unproven, or even detrimental education reforms, Minnesota would make real progress in closing opportunity gaps by instead funding full-service community schools.

The goal of the community school model “is to improve population-level outcomes across the cradle-to-career continuum through smarter data access and use, resource alignment, practice sharing, shared ownership and accountability, and policy changes” (Coalition for Community Schools, Strategic, 2018). Community schools do this by identifying the specific needs of students in the school and the needs of their families and others in the community. Then they bring together partners and people to meet those needs, so together, they can reduce barriers to student growth and achievement.

## The Components of Full-Service Community Schools

Full-service community schools are foundational hubs for the entire community. Community school partners work toward ensuring “children are ready to enter school; students attend school consistently; students are actively involved in learning and their community; families are increasingly involved with their children’s education; schools are engaged with families and communities; students succeed academically, students are healthy—physically, socially, and emotionally; students live and learn in a safe, supportive, and stable environment; and communities are desirable places to live” (Coalition for Community Schools, Strategic, 2018).

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**Becoming a community school is not simply a matter of receiving additional funds, though these schools do need initial and ongoing investment in order to be successful. It is necessary that the staff at the school—administrators, licensed teachers, and paraprofessionals—are willing to reorganize, often in dramatic fashion.**

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Becoming a community school is not simply a matter of receiving additional funds, though these schools do need initial and ongoing investment in order to be successful. It is necessary that the staff at the school—administrators, licensed teachers, and paraprofessionals—are willing to reorganize, often in dramatic fashion. It is also necessary to have buy-in from all of the stakeholders—the school board, the community, the superintendent, the staff unions, the parents, the students, and the educators. It is not an add-on to a traditional school model. It requires re-envisioning every aspect of the school, including building usage, communication structures, school governance, school committees, and more. In addition, it requires a commitment to ongoing assessment of needs and the willingness and ability to continually adapt to those needs. A community needs assessment might point to a critical need for mental health services one year, while five years later, that need might be diminished and replaced or eclipsed by new problems that the school can adapt to address, such as housing

or immigration insecurity, domestic violence, food insecurity, and/or a growing need for vision and dental services.

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Community schools are all different, because they are built and constantly adapted to meet the needs of their specific communities, and needs in one community are obviously different than those in another. Work begins with a community-wide, comprehensive needs assessment. This needs assessment is for schools to use “to determine their level of engagement with community partners and to evaluate where they can increase and diversify relationships. It points to ways they can better serve students and families through engagement with community organizations” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). The Minnesota Department of Education includes a template needs assessment on their website, one that identifies ways in which a particular school could redesign itself to become a community center that does more than just educate students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). By identifying community needs and adapting the school to meet those needs, community schools “function as active agents of change in the lives of students, families, and their communities” (Coalition for Community Schools, Community, 2018, p. 5).

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**In some cases, community schools are providing easier access to services that families know about but can’t access because of time or transportation shortages, and in others, they are providing access to services that families don’t even know exist.**

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Once a needs assessment is completed, a community school identifies and recruits partner organizations that serve that school’s students and families. This allows the school and its partners to better address the community’s needs, harness its strengths, and coordinate program and service delivery. Typically, many of the partners will co-locate services at the school, which facilitates access to their services.

The importance of hosting critically needed family and community services on site in a school building should not be ignored. In some cases, community schools are providing easier access to services that families know about but can’t access because of time or transportation shortages, and in others, they are providing access to services that families don’t even know

exist. Educators across Minnesota echo the same refrain: we can't do our work effectively by ourselves when children bring unmet needs with them to school.

Minnesota's existing full-service community schools offer examples of the differences outlined above. Brooklyn Center Community Schools, for example, exist as a response to a community needs assessment and to a constant cycle of re-assessment and adaptation. Instead of a traditional school model that offers two types of involvement for adults not on staff at the school, parent-teacher associations (PTA) and parent-teacher conferences, in Brooklyn Center, the following committees all serve a critical role:

- The Parent Advisory Committee
- The Parent Teacher Organization
- The Parent-Ambassador/Affinity Group
- The Community Education Advisory Council
- The District Wellness Committee

In addition to the more deeply engrained community involvement, the full-service community school model has made the following opportunities available for families in the community at its Community Corner and in the school buildings themselves:

- Small clothing closet.
- Panera bread on Friday mornings.
- Onsite, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Pre-K classes.
- Renters rights and responsibilities training.
- EmpowHer, a free life coaching and support group for moms.
- Hennepin County Multi-Cultural Services, which can assist with needs assessments, health insurance, and navigating county systems.
- Toys for Tots.
- Family Connection Nights – regularly scheduled evening events at which families can enjoy a meal and monthly topic.
- Immigration and refugee services.
- Children's dental services.
- A health resource center that includes medical, sexual health education, vision, dental, mental health services and assistance with health insurance access, to youth of Brooklyn Center Schools and the surrounding community.
- Adult education.

In addition to many of the services offered in Brooklyn Center, Duluth's full-service community schools also offer support for homeless families through their Families in Transition program, school facility use to promote civic engagement, mentoring and other youth development opportunities, service learning opportunities, job training and career counseling, and programs that promote family financial stability.

Rochester community schools, again, in a response to data collected in their comprehensive needs assessment, offer adult learning, citizenship services, English language learning (ELL) services, and general education development (GED) services.

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**Student families play a critical role in both the development of a community school and the ongoing operation, evaluation, and adaptation of the school.**

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Student families play a critical role in both the development of a community school and the ongoing operation, evaluation, and adaptation of the school. Educators who work in community schools report that the deeper parental involvement at the core of a community school helps them become better educators. Parental involvement is one of the aspects of a community school that most stands out to Duluth teacher, Stacey Achteroff: “It is a way for parents to contribute ideas in a new and different way. Schools can be intimidating places for families” (Duluth Community Schools Collaborative, 2018). As Deb Showalter, another teacher in a Duluth community school, explains, “parents are the ones who spend the most time with their kids, and they know their kids the best, so they need to give us information that can help their children learn better and want to come to school” (Duluth Community Schools Collaborative, 2018). Yet another community school educator explains, “we benefit as educators by learning more about the families. And so as educators, we grow tremendously” (Duluth Community Schools Collaborative, 2018).

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**Equity is at the core of a community school model.**

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Equity is at the core of a community school model. Because the model builds a school and maintains a school that is designed to meet the specific needs of its students, even as those needs change over time, it is a model that offers a far more equitable experience for students than traditional schools. Aaron O’Leary, a teacher in a community school in Duluth, explains, “the question for schools is, what are we doing for some of our kids who have greater needs? What are we doing for our kids who struggle? Are we doing something that is lifting them up, or are we responding reactively? I have found since we have begun the community school model that there is a place for kids who struggle, and it is a place for success and growth and achievement, and for school to be something positive” (Duluth Community Schools Collaborative, 2018). For students and families to receive the greatest benefit from the model, several key groups must work together to examine needs and disparities, and work together to close opportunity gaps hindering academic achievement.

# Evidence That Full-Service Community Services Work

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**More recently, a review of nine different community school programs found when implemented with fidelity to an evidence-based model, such approaches helped to narrow the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers (Child Trends, 2014).**

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Studies that examine the results from community schools are highly encouraging. A 2010 report found improvements in dropout and graduation rates, attendance, and academic achievement (Communities in Schools, 2010, p. 7). It is important to note that effects are greater for schools that follow the community school model with fidelity, that follow through with the continual process of assessment and adaptation to community needs, than they are for schools that follow the model with lower degrees of fidelity. More recently, a review of nine different community school programs found when implemented with fidelity to an evidence-based model, such approaches helped to narrow the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers (Child Trends, 2014). The models in the study focused on reducing barriers to learning, increasing chances for success in school and expanding positive student development opportunities. As the National Coalition for Community Schools pointed out, multiple independent studies have shown that at-risk students can thrive when their learning and developmental needs are addressed individually and they have the opportunities they deserve (Communities in Schools, Community, 2010).

A representative from one of the community partners in the Duluth Community School Collaborative described the reasons they remain committed partners:

The program and the model work. We see that the kids are doing better academically, behaviors are good, the students are reporting that they like school, they are learning, and they have a better connection with the school. The parents are talking about how the kids enjoy school, want to go to school, and behave better at home. (Duluth Community Schools Collaborative, 2018)

The Coalition for Community Schools identifies necessary criteria for a thriving community school. A community school's strategy creates the structure and culture needed to ensure fulfillment of the following six conditions:

1. Early childhood programs are available to nurture growth and development.
2. The school offers a core instructional program delivered by licensed teachers.
3. Students are motivated and engaged in learning—in both school and community settings—before, during, and after school and during the summer.
4. The basic physical, mental, and emotional health needs of young people and their families are recognized and addressed.
5. Parents, families, and school staff demonstrate mutual respect and engage in effective collaboration.
6. Community engagement, together with school efforts, promotes a school climate that is safe, supportive, and respectful and connects students to a broader learning community. (Coalition for Community Schools, Strategic, 2018).

As Melaville, Jacobson, and Blank (2011) explained, “public schools cannot create all of these conditions alone. But experience shows that vision-driven, results-based partnerships can. Such partnerships build relationships among schools and other sectors of the community with a vested interest in the well-being of children and families. Local government, United Ways, community-based youth development organizations, business, higher education, public and private health and social service agencies, neighborhood groups, civic and faith-based organizations, families, and residents are all involved” (Melaville, 2011).

*FULL-SERVICE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS DIFFER FROM TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS IN THREE FUNDAMENTALS WAYS.*

<i>STRATEGIES</i>	<i>FULL-SERVICE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS</i>	<i>TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS</i>
Academics	Provide their students with a rich, rigorous curriculum that is culturally relevant, supports them in developing critical thinking skills, and offers them the opportunity for all students to explore a variety of subjects, far beyond those covered by standardized tests. Academic support and enrichment activities are offered after school hours for all students.	Curriculum during the school day and after school is shaped by the content of standardized tests, which often carry high stakes for students, teachers, and schools. Non-tested subjects like art, music, and sports, are diminished. There may be few after-school enrichment activities for all students.
Community Engagement	Parents and community members are empowered to make decisions about how the community school will be run every step of the way. Partnerships between school leaders and community leaders are what make community schools work.	Real community engagement varies wildly in traditional schools, from not existing at all to some levels of parental involvement. Apart from parent/teacher conferences and the PTA, community members are excluded from school decision making.
Social Services	Community schools provide a variety of services, from health care, to child care, to adult education, to arts and music. These programs are for the benefit of all. The school is the hub or center of its neighborhood.	The school building is closed mid-afternoon and is not used for other programs. Families may have to travel to access all of the social services they need, or those services may not be available at all.

# The Stages of Development: How to Grow a Full-Service Community School

There are four critical stages of community school development, the last of which is regular assessment and adaptation, so that a school is always in the process of re-evaluating its success and changing or adapting when and as needed.

## 1. EARLY ENGAGEMENT AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The first major step in adopting the community schools framework is examining opportunity gaps and assets of the school's community by way of a needs assessment. This includes gathering data and information about the many factors—health, housing, family employment, in-school services, curriculum—that can affect students' ability and willingness to learn in the classroom (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2018). Community engagement is vital at this stage, and each school must be proactive and creative in reaching out to families and community leaders who have previously faced barriers to engaging with the school. The assessment should also examine the school itself, considering factors such as school climate, discipline practices, academic enrichment opportunities, and cultural relevance of the curriculum.

When making sense of this information, participants should also look at the effects on different groups of students. This includes, for example, disaggregating data by race rather than only considering averages for the whole student population. Understanding the differences between student populations is critical to tailoring the appropriate strategy for the school.

## 2. IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Many communities in Minnesota already include organizations providing necessary services and building on existing strengths. These organizations can be either public or private. Many are often looking for new ways to reach the people they want to serve and work with. Partnering with schools provides these organizations a direct way to work with students and families. Community schools recruit and welcome groups whose work lines up with the priorities revealed by the initial community assessment.

Sometimes this takes the form of creating a permanent facility for a community partner within the school, for example, converting existing space into a mental health clinic, and at other times, it means bringing community partners in regularly to provide their services (Melaville, 2011). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that the school's work with its community partners improves the ability of both to address the factors that interfere with student learning.

### 3. SITE COORDINATORS

The role of site coordinator is vital to the success of the framework at each school (Coalition for Community Schools, Strategic, 2018). Community schools often develop relationships with dozens of partner organizations, collect and analyze data from several sources, improve the provision of services the school already offers, and coordinate many staff members' activities. The site coordinator is the facilitator and overseer of this work, and as a result, the process of overseeing the community school's effort is a full-time job. Given the critical nature of the role of site coordinator, districts need to be aware of the skill set necessary for this work. An effective site coordinator is deeply familiar with both the school culture and its surrounding community.

### 4. REGULAR EVALUATION AND ADAPTATION

Also vital to the success of a full-service community school is the regular collection of data and information about the factors identified during the initial assessment, to track progress, and make appropriate changes (Melaville, Jacobson & Blank, 2011). Again, this information should be disaggregated wherever possible to gauge progress for students of color and students in poverty in the school. Adaptations, too, should reflect the needs of targeted student groups to ensure that the school is on a path to provide equity for all.

The full-service community school approach recognizes that achieving a universal goal may require the use of several different approaches and resources targeted to specific populations, such as ensuring translation services are available for families still learning English. Evaluating and adapting the programs and partnerships the school offers provides the highest level of effectiveness for all students.

Policy research and the experiences of educators, parents, and students in our own community schools in places like Brooklyn Center, Rochester, and Duluth point the way toward decreasing our achievement gap and increasing opportunities for our students across the state. Minnesota should be providing ongoing support for our existing community schools, and we should be investing in opportunities for more schools to adopt this effective model for schools.

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