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# Community schools: bridging educational change through partnerships

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## Abstract

As we look ahead to the next 20 years of educational change, I argue that broader community contexts interplay with students' in-school learning, and thus, we, as an educational change field, ought to examine more deeply the role school–family–community partnerships play in the students' holistic development. This consideration is particularly relevant in the environments where inequities in the access to resources and opportunities for many students persist. Through an examination of community schools strategy, I offer considerations school–family–community partnerships have in facilitating positive conditions for learning. I close with a call for broadening the educational change discourse to be inclusive of community partnerships.

**Keywords** Community schools · Educational change · Equity · Families · Whole child · Teaching and learning

The *Journal of Educational Change* has made a significant impact in the global discourse on the factors that play a role in student achievement and school- and system-level improvements. Equity has been a part of this dialogue, particularly in how educational change and social movements interplay to support increased opportunities for learning and student success in schools (see illustrative *Journal* article contributions by Ainscow 2012; Burns 2008; Oakes and Lipton 2002; Oakes and Rogers 2007; Rincón-Gallardo 2016; Shirley 2009; Skerrett 2008). The Journal's global footprint has made research accessible and sparked knowledge transfer in ways that have advanced the field, invited collaboration, and pushed our collective thinking on the future possibilities in education.

As we look ahead to the next 20 years, the Journal has a unique opportunity to further a holistic view of educational change that is inclusive of an examination that equity has in the change process, and within, the importance of

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school–family–community partnerships as a vehicle to promote conditions for learning (Lynch and Baker 2005). Multidisciplinary literature, namely from adolescent development, out-of-school time learning, family engagement, community development, and integrated services, has for decades pointed to the importance of local actors as key partners in student development and learning (i.e. whole child). Literature cited in the reference section offers an introduction to this body of scholarship, which has informed the school-external partnership practices, specifically, the optimization of conditions and equitable opportunities for learning through partnerships.

In this article, I offer an introduction to the importance of local learning environments on students and focus attention on the community schools strategy, a long-standing approach to educational change, equity, and youth development that intentionally incorporates community partnerships and local contexts as core design principles of what role schools play in supporting students. First, I discuss the importance of external [outside-of-classroom] contexts to student learning. Then, I offer an overview of the general design and historical evolution of community schools, and close with a discussion of this strategy as an example of a holistic approach to educational change. I thank my colleagues of this Journal for creating the space to share a strategy that furthers our collective dialogue on ways to advance educational change scholarship and field at large.

## Student learning in context

As Ainscow's (2013) 'ecology of equity' theory posits "demographic, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic components" play a role in student learning (p. 59). Schools operate in the context of the broader environment around them, interacting with families and communities, as well as structures and systems that could either expand or contract students' opportunities to learn (Henig et al. 2012). Within the U.S., far too many students face multiple barriers to learning. The increasing poverty, neighborhood segregation, and limited access to resources, to name three most widespread examples, have an effect on both the conditions and opportunities to learn (Ladson-Billings 2013; Maier et al. 2017; Melaville et al. n.d.; Rothstein 2014; Southern Education Foundation 2015).

A majority of students in America's public schools live in low-income households (Southern Education Foundation 2015, drawing on the National Center for Education Statistics data). This has created an increasing need to design supports inside and outside of the schools for students and families. At the same time, we have seen another trend in various geographies across the country, that of more concentrated segregation. The Civil Rights Project, tracking school segregation, notes that from 1991 to 2007, "intensely segregated nonwhite schools with zero to 10% white enrollment have more than tripled in the most recent 25-year period" (citing years range of 1991–2007) (Orfield et al. 2016, p. 1). As Darling-Hammond (2013) finds, the highest segregated minority schools tend to be also ones with concentrated poverty, scarce resources, and limited learning opportunities (see also e.g., Schmidt and McKnight 2012; Halpern 2013; Oakes and Rogers 2007; Rubin 2008). The equity issues connected to housing, allocation of education budgets, and public and

social policies show up inside schools, from the physical infrastructure and resource availability to access to support services and enrichment programs. As Ainscow (2013) reminds us:

> Equity issues inside and outside schools need to be addressed through multi-dimensional strategies. Specifically, school improvement processes have to be nested within locally led efforts to make school systems more equitable. This means that the work of schools should be linked with area strategies tackling wider inequities that can ultimately connect with national policies aimed at creating a fairer society. (p. 62)

Given the rising inequities in our society, many schools are building meaningful partnerships with families and communities as essential actors that support positive student outcomes.

From Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, long-standing scholarship underscores that individuals benefit when their physiological needs are met, when they feel a sense of safety, belonging, and self-actualization, and that this development happens in relationship as home, community, institutions, systems, societies, and histories. Youth development frameworks have for decades pointed to the importance of an assets-based approach to learning, agency, competences development, illustrating that young person's development is shaped by both internal and external environments and furthermore, that young people benefit from nurturing settings with accessible opportunities to learn and thrive [see Nagaoka 2015; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018; National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development 2019; Search Institute (n.d.)]. Research on integrated services indicates that when education is intentionally linked and aligned with key community institutions, students thrive because the conditions for learning and positive development are met (see Crowson and Boyd 1993; Kliminski and Smith 2004; see also e.g., Schmidt and McKnight 2012; Halpern 2013; Oakes and Rogers 2007; Rubin 2008).[1] Below I briefly note the growing scholarship on both family and community engagement.

School practices on family engagement have evolved in recent decades, moving from the transactional approaches to parental involvement toward more authentic school–family engagement that values families in the school community and builds capacity of both to effectively engage with each other (Henderson et al. 2007).

[1] Malone has written on this issue in various publications, including: Malone, H. J. (2017). Broadening professional communities through collaborative partnerships. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community,* 2(4), 190–199, https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-08-2017-0019; Malone, H. J. (2013). From the periphery to the center: Broadening the educational change discourse. In H. J. Malone (Ed.) *Leading educational change: Global issues, challenges, and lessons on whole-system reform* (pp. 25–32). New York: Teachers College Press; Malone, H. J., & Jacobson, R. (2015). Supporting and empowering teachers: The role of school-community partnerships. In J. Evers & R. Kneyber (Eds.), *Flip the system: Changing education from the ground up* (pp. 261–276). London: Routledge.

Schools and districts across the U.S. and globally are reexamining their role and relationships with families to facilitate meaningful connections.[2] The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships (see http://www.sedl.org/pubs/framework/FE-Cap-Building.pdf) examines core aspects for building 'collective capacity' of both schools and families to engage with each other as allies and outlines conditions that support student learning. In particular, the dual-capacity framework outlines 'essential conditions,' process and organizational conditions that lead to capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence (SEDL 2013). The framework adds to decades of research on home visits, strengths-based approaches, social capital, and relational trust (Bryk et al. 2010; Epstein et al. 2019; Gomez 2019; Hester and Capers 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.; Weiss et al. 2009), and has reshaped how schools and school districts are creating inclusive and welcoming environments for families and supporting learning at home.[3]

Community partners are another key actor that can facilitate both conditions and opportunities to learn (Blank et al. 2003; see Ladson-Billings 2013). Communities play a critical role in identity formation, peer and adult relationships, and learning. Communities are active spaces where students live and develop, and where they observe the interplay of schools and broader social structures and systems. Community organizations within communities have an important role in the development of a whole child. Afterschool programs, summer programs/camps, museums, recreation centers, and libraries, are some of key local partners that offer an opportunity to students to build on the community histories, traditions, and assets of young people and community members (Fredericks and Eccles 2006; Halpern 2003; Hill and Vance 2019). This is particularly important in spaces where voice and power have been marginalized by the dominant cultures and systems (see Berry 2016; Chatmon and Watons 2018; Moll et al. 1992).

Such partnerships have been shown in research to complement the learning day, create spaces for students to explore interests, and build trusting peer relationships (see Eccles and Gootman 2002; Fredericks and Simpkins 2013; Maxwell-Jolly 2011). Together, the growing body of literature and practice improvement in both family and community engagement represents a significant expansion of how we view schools in the context of the community, but also what it takes to move educational change to support broader and holistic learning opportunities. In the next section I offer a general summary of the community schools strategy as one approach to educational change that leverages such family and community partnerships and creates support systems to expand learning opportunities of students.

[2] The International Network of Scholars on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, INET, has long-standing knowledge exchanges through research convenings and associated publications.

[3] For a global example, recommend Cámara (2013) and Rincón-Gallardo (2016).

## Community schools overview

The community schools strategy reimagines the role schools, families, and communities play in facilitating conditions for student learning and success (Coalition for Community Schools 2014; Melaville et al. 1993). Over the past two decades, there were in the United States, according to Henig et al. (2016), 182 examples of school-community collaborations, illustrating a growing interest in the whole-child/whole-community approach to educational change, whereby students are supported both within the classroom and through experiential learning experiences. Community school initiatives are growing across the U.S., led by various leaders, from district superintendents, city mayors, regional collaboratives and non-profits, and stand-alone schools. Globally, there is an interest in exploring the role community schools play as neighborhood anchor institutions, particularly for populations with decreased access to resources and support structures.

The Institute for Educational Leadership's Coalition for Community Schools [author's place of work] defines community schools as "the hub of its neighborhood, uniting families, educators and community partners to provide all students with top-quality academics, enrichment, health and social services, and opportunities to succeed in school and in life" (Coalition for Community Schools n.d.a; see http://www.communityschools.org). Community schools are schools that change how they operate in relationship to students' broader needs and community interests by staying open outside of core academic hours, providing a variety of services for students and their families (Coalition for Community Schools n.d.a). To facilitate a range of external partnerships, such schools have a community school coordinator, a school–family–community liaison who forms various partnerships in support of student- and community-driven needs and interests (Coalition for Community Schools n.d.a). Community schools take a shared governance approach, a school-site leadership team, by which various voices are at the table informing direction and strategy, from teachers, students, families, to a wider set of community partners and service providers (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.a). By design, community schools engage in diverse, intentional partnerships, family and community engagement, and collaborative governance and leadership structures (Bryk et al. 1999; Maier et al. 2017). In this approach, educational change and equity are interwoven into the fabric of schools.

The institutional and governance structure of community schools underscores a shared belief that to support students, inclusive of academic and developmental dimensions, schools in partnership *with* the community ought to first facilitate *conditions* for learning. The Coalition for Community Schools defines the conditions for learning as: high-quality early childhood development, high standards and expectations within the instructional core, engagement of students in learning both in and out of school, support of students' and families' basic physiological and psychosocial needs, effective family engagement, and community engagement that promotes a safe, supportive, and respectful school climate (see http://www.communityschools.org). The strategy proposes that such conditions are necessary to lead. The Coalition's community schools guiding principles, derived in partnership with

vast national network of partners, identify equity, whole-child approach, building on community strengths, use of data and community wisdom to guide partnerships/programs/progress, shared accountability, trusting relationships, and a learning organization approach as foundational to community school standards of practice (Coalition for Community Schools 2017).

The community schools strategy is over a century old, building upon John Dewey's applied learning philosophy, community education of mid-20th century, to Promise Neighborhoods, collective impact, and full-service schools of today (see Decker 1978; Melaville et al., n.d.; Minzey and LeTarte 1979; Rogers 1998). As Rogers (1998) posits, community schools have gone through various stages over the past century. Each time, practice and research have informed aspects of this strategy, including the importance of relational trust, shared governance structures, ongoing partnership and community development, resource sustainability, focus on quality, and integration of services (Kliminski and Smith 2004).

Maier et al. (2017) publication, *Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of the Evidence,* offers a recent examination of the research base for community schools. They find sufficient evidence within each of the four critical components of community schools—integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice (Maier et al., see p. 9). Among 12 findings, the authors note that the community schools strategy offers a "return on investment of up to $15 in social value and economic benefits for every dollar spent on school-based wraparound services" (Maier, Daniel, Oakes, and Lam, p. vii). A significant return on the community schools investment has also been found in the evaluation of the Children's Aid Society community schools implementation, which serves over 70,000 students and families in 45 locations across New York City each year, noting a 3-year period ROI to be between $10.30 and $14.80 (The Finance Project 2013). And, a recent study on the New York City community school initiative shows promising links between this strategy and learning outcomes (Johnson et al. 2020).

Although the U.S. has the most sustained concentration of this strategy, community schools are also present internationally (though they go by various names including: all day schools in Germany, extended schools in England, or community-focused schools in Wales), and offer cross-cutting features similar in emphasis to those in the U.S., such as the importance of family and community engagement, attention to conditions for learning through external partnerships, and focus on underserved student populations. In the UK, for instance, there have been several pilots in the 2000s, including the 2004 Every Child Matters, which ushered in full-service extended schools aimed to provide comprehensive child and adult services in 138 participating schools (Cummings et al. 2007). The final evaluation of the initiative found that extended schools were associated with improved school performance, created positive learning environment, and increased family and community engagement (Cummings et al. 2007).

## Community schools research: considerations

In 2018, community school standards (see http://www.communityschools.org/resources/community_schools_standards_.aspx) were introduced on core tenants of the strategy. They codify the common program elements and structures and functions necessary to implement high-quality community schools, designed, as noted in the standards to "more effectively develop and implement community school plans… strengthen quality of their practice and document outcomes… provide a consistent language and framework for advocacy, technical assistance, research, funding, and policy efforts" (ibid.). This represents the next step in the movement building and growth of community schools as an equity-driven educational change strategy.

As the number of community schools and initiatives grow, the demand for ongoing evaluation and research grow alongside, including the need to examine the effectiveness of individual community school initiatives, the impact multiple coordinated interventions have within community schools, and the longitudinal effects of the various school-based interventions on the individual students, the schools, and their communities (see Heers et al. 2014, 2016; Valli et al. 2014). Using traditional methods that do not engage schools or communities as co-partners, as well as study designs that focus on the effects of one support feature on an array of academic outcomes have proven insufficient in capturing the entire strategy, due to the role context plays at an individual school level and the presence of multiple simultaneous interventions. As Dyson and Todd (2006) suggest, building on Weiss (1995), approaching inquiry from a theory of change perspective on whether the strategy meets intended outcomes is perhaps more aligned with nature of the community schools strategy. And, designing studies through authentic research-practice partnerships and participatory action research practices have gained interest in the community schools field. Researchers are increasingly incorporating mixed methods, intentionally including the voices of practitioners and community members, and drawing on multidisciplinary approach to examine community schools, approaches that can inform not only this strategy but educational change field at large.

## Community schools: a shared approach to educational change

Tichy (1983) in *Managing Strategic Change*, expresses that change has technical, political, and cultural dynamics. In educational change, much attention has been given to the political and technical aspects of change (see Sahlberg's commentary on the Global Educational Reform Movement 2015). However, the cultural considerations play an important part in facilitating in-school learning and student supports in- and out-of-school. It requires us to think more deeply about the intersection of change, community and family partnerships, and youth development, and to approach the process of educational change from lens that there is connection between school and community partners, so that students' learning and development environments are linked, relevant, and positively contribute to the development of whole self as a learner.

As we think of the Journal's ongoing contribution to the educational change field, one consideration is to continue to examine the connections schools have to the students' broader environmental contexts, at home, in community, and society at large. The community schools strategy offers an illustrative example of such an approach (O'Day and Smith 2016). With rising calls to reexamine traditional reform efforts, address inequity in education, and the resurgence of the whole child framework in the educational change space, we stand to benefit from further examining educational change from a microsystem perspective, to deeply understand local context and leverage community partners to support and complement student learning. As Michael Fullan notes (2016), educational change ought to be considered from the "shared meaning" perspective, which "involves simultaneously individual and social change" (p. 11).

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