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Community Schools

A brief history for principals

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Featured

What makes a school a community school? Since their earliest days, community schools have been comprehensive neighborhood centers that educate, engage, and serve, not only children but also all members of the community in which the school is located. The school functions as "the hub" for community engagement and civic and democratic development. School-day curricula and after-school programs often focus on community-based learning and on solving local community problems. Today there are over 5,500 community schools in 47 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

A group of children garden on the rooftop of a school at Hull House in 1912. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, LOT 5338 [ITEM]

How Did We Get Here?

The community school idea can be traced to 1889 when Jane Addams established Hull House on Chicago's poverty-stricken West Side. Her program included college extension classes, social clubs, ethnic festivals, art exhibits, recreational activities, kindergarten, visiting nurses, and legal services. Observing that there were very few settlement houses, but very many public schools, Addams and others pioneered the transfer of social, health, cultural, and recreational services to the public schools of major U.S. cities at the turn of the 20th century.

It was through his close association with Addams that John Dewey came to understand that public schools could help develop participatory democratic communities. In his 1902 address, "The School as Social Center," which became the founding manifesto of the community schools movement, Dewey emphasized that existing education was not effectively responding to society's "changed conditions." Dewey concluded by "demand[ing] that the school shall become a social center."

Dewey's idea first took form in Rochester, NY, where, from 1907 to 1910, educational administrator Edward J. Ward operated social centers in 18 schools. Though short-lived, 71 cities had social centers by 1913, and 17 states had enacted legislation for the "wider use of schools" by 1914. Following World War I, however, these centers abandoned their broad civic and social reform agendas and increasingly became community recreation centers.

In 1912, Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute, and Julius Rosenwald, a successful Chicago businessman and philanthropist, formed a partnership to construct public schools in and with Black communities throughout the South. Rosenwald was a Hull House board member, as well as donor, whose social views were shaped by Addams. Over 5,000 Rosenwald Schools in 15 states were built between 1913 and 1932. Their emphasis on community participation and civic development had much in common with three community school models that emerged during the 1930s.

From 1929 to 1936, Dewey disciple Elsie Clapp developed two experimental schools in rural communities—one near Louisville, KY, the other in Arthurdale, WV, where the Roosevelt Administration created a "federal subsistence homestead" to relocate and uplift impoverished coal-mining families. The Arthurdale curriculum connected with community development

activities such as road building, house construction, and agricultural operations. In effect, the community served as a "text and test" for teaching and learning.

By 1936, this subsistence homestead was losing outside support and Clapp left. Because of Jim Crow segregation, the homestead experiment, including its community school, was flawed from the outset.

From 1934 to 1956, Leonard Covello served as the founding principal of Benjamin Franklin High School—an ethnically diverse, primarily Italian American, all-male school—in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Assisted by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), Franklin school became the largest and longest-standing community school of the 20th century. Covello and his staff developed a vigorous community center program focused on democratic participation that included citizen action projects, community and ethnic-group research bureaus, citizenship programs, a WPA adult school, and a school-based community newspaper.

When WPA support ended around 1943, the high school lacked the resources to sustain many of its community programs. The war years and social upheaval in the late 1940s also took a heavy toll, and Franklin's era as a community school officially ended with Covello's retirement in 1956.

A third Depression-era community school approach had deep historical roots. As early as 1912, Charles Stewart Mott advocated opening schools to the wider public when not being used for student instruction. Beginning in 1935, Flint, MI, district educator Frank Manley enlisted Mott—the former mayor of Flint, and a leading businessman and philanthropist—to support the development of public schools as centers of community education, emphasizing youth recreation, adult education, and school-linked health and social services.

Expanding these efforts, the Mott Foundation supported major Flint community school construction from 1951 to 1960. Continuing support from the Mott Foundation provided the additional resources required to operate the programs.

After World War II, the community schooling movement abandoned its school-based focus, blending into community education. Centered on recreation and adult education outside schools, community education was supported by state-funded programs and the federal

Community Schools Act of 1974. In the 1990s, funding priorities shifted, from community education to specialized health and social services for schoolchildren.

Summer community school programming at Andrew Hamilton Elementary School in Philadelphia, PA, engages rising first through eighth graders in six weeks of academic remediation and enrichment, fitness and health programming, social and emotional learning, arts activity, and field trips. The program is a collaboration between the Netter Center, the School District of Philadelphia, and the City of Philadelphia Office of Children and Families Out-of-School Time. PHOTOS BY ERIC SUCAR

New models of community schools appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including university-assisted community schools in West Philadelphia through the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, the community schools of Children's Aid Society in New York City, and the Beacon Program of the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York. Each of these was based on additional resources provided to the school through a local partner. While the Beacon Program focused on keeping schools open into the evening for students and the broader community, both university-assisted community schools and Children's Aid connected neighborhood and institutional resources to the school, and services for students and families were often connected to the school's core instructional program.

By 1997, the three models described above, along with the United Way's Bridges to Success, were supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to adapt their models nationally. In the same year, leaders of a burgeoning new community schools movement formed the Emerging Coalition for Community Schools.

Housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), the Emerging Coalition became the Coalition for Community Schools in 1998, recognizing its status as an organization engaging national, state, and local partners across PreK–12 education, higher education, youth development, human services, health and mental health, and neighborhood development. From 1998 on, the coalition helped advance community-based learning and the idea that community schools could serve as catalysts for neighborhood improvement, democratic engagement, and community change.

University of Pennsylvania students and ninth graders from William L. Sayre High School in Philadelphia wade in Cobbs Creek and document signs of human impact on the natural environment. As part of their coursework, the students meet Wednesday mornings at Cobbs Creek

Community Environmental Center in West Philadelphia, about one mile from the high school, and develop recommendations for how to preserve the creek and surrounding park given accelerated climate change and flooding.

How Can Principals Help?

Community schools require resources beyond those available to traditional schools. They typically "blend and braid" funding from city, state and federal departments such as agriculture, education, environment, health, justice, and labor, as well as from corporations, foundations, and private philanthropy. State investments have been particularly noteworthy, as have Full-Service Community Schools grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. The American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the National Education Association Foundation have also provided substantial resources, as well as advocacy.

In December 2025, the Trump administration rescinded 19 of the approximately 70 ongoing Full-Service Community Schools grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. One was restored in December, and two were partially restored in February, and the number of partial or full restorations may continue to change. While funding is important, partnerships, as history shows, are the basis of a community school.

The history traced above points to three crucial areas where principals and school district officials can lead and act. They can build mutually beneficial partnerships with universities, nonprofits, health agencies, and community organizations— providing resources and relationships that a community school needs. They can also connect curriculum to community engagement and solving real-world community problems, so that every aspect of the community school can contribute to student learning and civic and personal development.

Most important, they can champion a shared mission and collective commitment to the community school so that teachers and staff, students, families, and community partners work together to advance learning, strengthen the community, and actively contribute to a common democratic purpose.

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