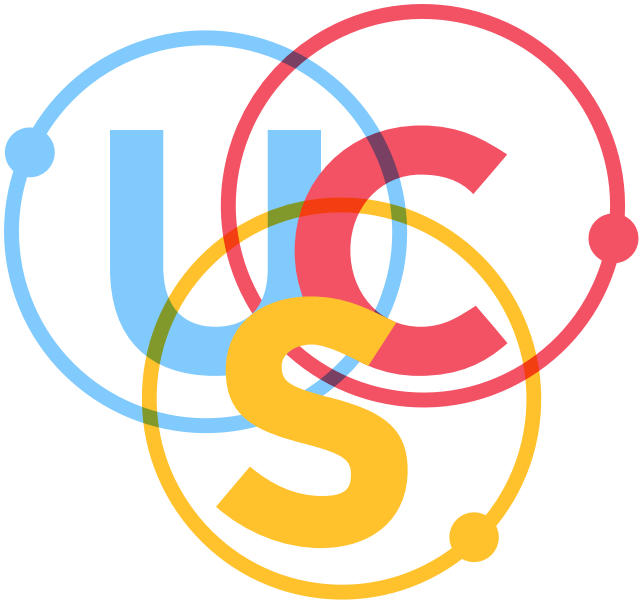
Volume 12, Number 1 | Winter 2026

UNIVERSITIES COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Universities and Community Schools



A Publication of the

Netter Center for Community Partnerships
University of Pennsylvania

UNIVERSITIES
COMMUNITIES
SCHOOLS

Since its founding in 1989, *Universities and Community Schools'* purpose has been to help build an informal international network of academics and practitioners working, in different places and ways, to increase the contributions universities make to the development and effectiveness of community schools. In our judgment, developing and sustaining a systematic sustained network is necessary if schools, communities, and universities are to function effectively and significantly contribute to the public good.[1]

Universities and Community Schools is designed to help spark a worldwide informal movement that aims to overcome major community and societal problems (particularly educational inequities) by developing innovative, place-based, mutually-beneficial transformative partnerships between universities and schools.

There is no subscription price for receiving *Universities and Community Schools.* We would like all those interested in the focus and purpose of this journal to have open access. Please feel free to reach out to us at the email below.

Rita A. Hodges, EdD
Associate Director
Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships
University of Pennsylvania
ritaa@upenn.edu

For additional information about the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, please visit our web site at: www.nettercenter.upenn.edu

Previous issues of the UCS Journal can be found here: www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/about-center/publications-resources/universities-and-community-schools-journal

More information on the UACS National Network can be found here: www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/UACSnetwork

[1]University" is broadly conceived, i.e., all institutions of higher education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the Issue – Winter 2026 – Updates from the Field

I am pleased to share the latest edition of *Universities and Community Schools* featuring "Updates from the Field." The articles in this issue help demonstrate the growing movement for democratic partnerships between universities and their local schools—a movement that has been underway with the journal's inception in 1989, particularly picking up steam over the last decade.

Given the current state of the world, universities have an increased and pressing responsibility to contribute to their founding public purposes—that is, the education of informed democratic citizens and the creation and advancement of knowledge for the common good. Though they have too often lost their way, universities can, indeed must, renew their democratic and civic missions in order to preserve and strengthen democracy in the face of accelerating authoritarianism and autocracy. Doing so through local democratic partnerships, among other approaches, is essential for regaining trust and public support as well as fulfilling higher education's democratic purpose (Harkavy & Hodges, 2025).

University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) exemplify what universities can and should do to make positive contributions to their local communities, society, and democracy. UACS engage the university as the lead partner in providing broadly based, comprehensive and sustained support through local community schools. Like community schools in general, UACS function as hubs for democratic community engagement and development, educating, engaging, activating, and serving all members of the community in which the school is located (Harkavy et al., 2025).

For forty years, the leadership team of what is now the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at Penn has developed the UACS model with its school and community partners in West Philadelphia, as well as learned with and from sites that have adapted the model across the country. One of the Netter Center's core objectives, in fact, has been to cultivate regional, national and international networks of academics, practitioners, and institutions of higher education that are committed to democratic engagement with their communities. This has included, for example, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND); the University-Assisted Community School (UACS) National Network and UACS Regional Training Centers; the Anchor Institutions Task Force; and the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy.

From the early 1990s, a number of institutions began to express interest in the model of university–community–school collaboration being developed by the Netter Center and its local partners, what was then known as the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC). The WEPIC Replication Project hosted a series of visitors and conferences as well as provided seed grants across the country for what became known as university-assisted community schools. With the 2007 naming gift to our Center from Edward and Barbara Netter, a Penn alumnus and his spouse, the strategy for adaptation shifted from funding individual UACS partnerships to creating regional training centers on UACS, based at higher educational institutions with demonstrated experience and commitment to the work. (We are pleased that three regional training centers—UCLA, Binghamton University, and the Southeast Regional Coalition for UACS [SRCUACS]—contributed to this issue). The vision and generous endowment from the Netters focused on developing UACS across the country. The long-term goal was, and remains, to create a national network of UACS encompassing institutions, communities, cities, and regions across the United States (Harkavy et al., 2013).

Thanks to the success of the regional training centers and the work of the UACS National Network, this goal is being realized. Ten years after the formation of the UACS National Network, the group has grown to engage over 1,400 individuals representing nearly 300 higher education institutions and other partners across 44 states. The momentum of the Network was visible at the national conference hosted in November 2024 on Penn's campus: "Community Schools and University-Assisted Community Schools: Partnerships that Change Schools, Communities, and Universities for the Better." The event was co-hosted with the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership. It gathered over 400 attendees from 54 higher education institutions, as well as leaders from school districts, teachers' unions, community organizations, and elected officials.

This issue of *Universities and Community Schools* highlights the work of UACS across the country, as well as the important learning that is occurring through local implementation and across the UACS National Network. The articles were written by 37 individuals representing 14 institutions actively participating in the network. Their stories showcase local, regional, and state-wide efforts across institution types and geographic regions. They discuss UACS partnerships with individual schools,

entire districts, and statewide agencies in rural, suburban, and urban settings. They also involve various types of higher education institutions, including public and private universities, HBCUs, R1 universities, four-year colleges, and community colleges. Some are in beginning stages of establishing partnerships, while others are building upon many years of engagement.

Local context has always been critical for UACS. Each higher education institution, public school, and community has distinct needs, strengths and resources. These UACS stories indeed represent unique histories, strategies, and lessons. But they all have a common focus on advancing UACS through developing trusted relationships, supporting collaborative learning, mobilizing significant university resources, and focusing on sustained placed-based partnerships. They serve as powerful on-the-ground examples of the mutual benefit that can occur from democratic partnerships between universities and their local schools.

The issue begins with articles from the West Coast. Karen Hunter Quartz discusses the nation's largest community schools initiative to date—a seven-year $4.1B California Community Schools Partnership Program established in 2021—as well as how UCLA's deep experience developing and sustaining local community schools laid the groundwork for her institution to provide statewide technical assistance. Quartz discusses how the UACS movement is gaining momentum in California as both a sustainability strategy for the state's investment in community schools and as part of higher education civic engagement reform. Illustrating this momentum, the next article comes from Symone Gyles, Adam Lara, and Andrew Bustamante at UC Irvine's School of Education, who share the origin story and lessons learned through their first year in a UACS partnership with Monroe Elementary School. They highlight the importance of aligning with district priorities, learning from prior UACS models, and pacing growth deliberately to ensure long-term sustainability.

The next article takes us to the East Coast where Bernice R. Garnett and colleagues discuss the Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC), which emerges from a longstanding research-policy-practice partnership between the University of Vermont, the Vermont Agency of Education, and rural community school partners. The authors discuss how sustained, intentional partnerships between institutions of higher education, state education agencies, and local school systems can help support comprehensive state-level policy and equitable learning outcomes. They also discuss their efforts to institutionalize CCSC within the broader fabric of the university.

Heading to the South, Eileen M. Glavey and Heather McClellan of the University of Central Florida's Center for Community Schools describe their trajectory from a single statewide center to a network of regional university anchors supporting UACS across Florida. They analyze early implementation efforts of the Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI), which launched in 2024 and includes the University of Central Florida, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Florida International University, and the University of South Florida. The article explores how partner universities are facilitating inclusive needs-and-assets analyses, mobilizing institutional resources, co-developing programs, and building structures for long-term UACS sustainability.

The issue then takes us to New York, where Naorah Rimkunas and Laura Bronstein discuss the evolution of Binghamton University's Community Schools Program into a statewide and regional leader of UACS, with a particular emphasis on advancing UACS in rural communities. They highlight how Binghamton's infrastructure, with dedicated community schools faculty, a focus on community-engaged research and local implementation, and robust technical assistance, has helped launch a network of UACS across the State University of New York (SUNY) system. Also within the SUNY system, but with a different genesis, faculty from University at Buffalo have co-authored a piece with partners from Research Lab High School that discusses their learnings from developing a new UACS. Through a participatory case study approach, Chris Proctor et. al describe the trust, shared understanding, personal and organizational relationships strengthened through their yearlong collaborative design process.

The volume then turns to North Carolina. Colleagues from the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS)—North Carolina Central University, East Carolina University, and Duke University—and the Durham Public Schools Foundation chronicle the evolution of community schools across North Carolina. Yolanda Dunston et al. highlight the historical legacies and purposeful collaborations that have shaped SRCUACS' work both in distinct regions of NC and statewide. They also showcase examples of UACS partnerships in action that illustrate the core foundations of trust and relationship building, family engagement, professional development, expanded learning opportunities, and justice-oriented curricula. Next, we have a piece from Tarsha Rogers and colleagues at Elizabeth City State University, whose work represents an outgrowth of the statewide North Carolina efforts. ECSU's developing UACS partnerships aim to foster access to learning and

holistic supports for local students, while integrating the institution's teaching, research, and service capacities into responsive, community-centered practices. The authors describe the successes of their first year, including creating an advisory board and undergraduate research collective, professional development for K-12 staff, and STEM enrichment opportunities.

Finally, faculty and doctoral students from University of Massachusetts Boston present early learnings from their UACS partnership with Ruth Batson Academy. Tara Parker and colleagues describe the local context that shaped their approach and notable first-year milestones. Their early lessons suggest the importance of beginning with relationships and small wins; centering school community expertise through shared governance; aligning university systems to sustain equitable access; and designing with, not for, multilingual learners and families. As Massachusetts' first UACS, this partnership offers early lessons on how universities can operationalize equity through co-leadership, reciprocity, and sustained investment.

The nine articles clearly indicate that there are many different starting points and pathways for UACS, providing a powerful reminder to start wherever you are. Nonetheless, the authors consistently demonstrate that relationships built on genuine respect and trust are key to sustained, mutually beneficial partnerships. These articles also illustrate the connections between *local* UACS partnerships, *statewide* collaborations, and a *national* movement supporting UACS. Ongoing sharing and learning across UACS efforts will help us continue to advance this work together.

I hope that you enjoy this issue and welcome your feedback and ideas for democratically transforming universities, schools, and communities for the better.

Rita A. Hodges

Rita A. Hodges, EdD, is associate director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. She also serves as editor of Universities and Community Schools *and as executive secretary of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy.*

References

Harkavy, I., Balfanz, A., & Sun, F. (2025). Realizing higher education's democratic promise through university-assisted community schools. In Dresden, J., Ferrara J., Neapolitan, J., and Yendol-Hoppey, D. (eds.) *Cambridge handbook of school-university partnerships* (pp. 467-482). Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., Hodges, R. A., & Weeks, J. (2013) The promise of university-assisted community schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012, *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525-540, DOI: 10.1080/0161956X.2013.834789.

Harkavy, I. & Hodges. R. A. (October 2025). Rebuilding trust in higher education: Renewal of the democratic and civic mission. *IAU Horizons 30*(2), 51-52.

Advancing University-Assisted Community Schools in California

Karen Hunter Quartz

Karen Hunter Quartz, Ph.D. directs the UCLA Center for Community Schooling and is faculty in the Department of Education and affiliated faculty in the UCLA Center for Community Engagement, University of California, Los Angeles. Her scholarship examines community school development, teacher autonomy and retention, and educational reform. Professor Quartz led the design team in 2007 to create the UCLA Community School and served in 2017 on the design team for a second site, the Mann UCLA Community School. She oversees a portfolio of research-practice-policy partnerships at both schools designed to advance democracy, justice, and education.

Abstract

In 2021, the California Legislature passed the nation's largest community schools initiative to date. The seven-year $4.1B California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) investment was designed to reimagine all high-poverty schools in the state as empowering, racially-just, relationship-centered spaces where all students thrive. Importantly, the program was also designed to align with several other massive public investments in an effort to "build a cohesive statewide approach that mitigates the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on student learning, cognitive and social development, and emotional well-being" (California Department of Education, 2022, p. 2). In this report from the field, I share a progress update on the state's effort and suggest that universities as anchor institutions are well-positioned to address the concern on everyone's mind—how to sustain community schools in California when the funds run out. UCLA's experience designing and sustaining two university-assisted community schools (UACS) in Los Angeles along with similar efforts at other universities set the stage, I argue, for advancing the UACS movement statewide.

California's Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP)

Community organizing during the pandemic paved the way for California's community schools initiative. In 2020, the California Partnership for the Future of Learning collaborated with over 20 grassroots and racial-justice organizations on a listening campaign that engaged more than 600 students and families from low-income communities of color across 20 school districts. This campaign and many similar activities helped frame the state's effort to support nearly 2,500 schools to become community schools. The state's "four-by-four" framework includes four sets of ideas to guide implementation, including: (1) four community school pillars (e.g., collaborative leadership) (Oakes, Maier & Daniel, 2017); (2) a set of four cornerstone commitments (e.g., racially-just and restorative school climates); (3) four proven practices (e.g., community asset mapping); and four key conditions for learning (e.g., productive instructional strategies) (California Department of Education, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This comprehensive framework helps center teaching and learning as a core focus of the community schools movement, in contrast to initiatives that center wrap-around services.

Supporting schools to embrace the state's framework is a collective effort, facilitated by state and regional technical assistance centers as well as county offices of education and local education agencies (Maier, 2022). To guide and monitor implementation, this collective effort identified five capacity-building strategies structured by three phases of growth and development: visioning, engaging, and transforming. The first strategy is developing a shared commitment, understanding, and priorities for each community school to help ensure the change process is democratic and grounded in the assets and needs of particular communities. Second, schools are supported to center community-based teaching and learning to ensure a focus on instruction and student engagement. Collaborative leadership is the third and a familiar strategy, affirming the local and democratic nature of community schooling. The fourth capacity building strategy focuses on staffing and sustainability and the fifth on developing strategic community partnerships (State Transformational Assistance Center, 2024a). A set of overarching values further affirm that becoming a community school is not a technical pursuit, but one that requires a strong commitment to equity, inquiry, and relationships (State Transformational Assistance Center, 2024b).

To date, four cohorts of community schools have received funding, either planning and/or implementation grants. The first cohort launched in 2021-22 and the fourth and final cohort began implementation in 2025-26. At the school level, funds provide support for community school coordinators, strategic partnerships, and other activities aligned with the community school's whole child vision. At the LEA, county, regional and state levels, funds are being used to coordinate supports in an ambitious effort to ensure reform coherence across the state. For example, CCSPP leaders worked with the state's Community Engagement Initiative to develop resources on collaborative leadership. State level reports and convenings signal the need for "breaking barriers" to de-silo a set of allied whole-child reforms, including for example, the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (Breaking Barriers, 2023), Universal Pre-Kindergarten (Gallagher, 2023), and many others. The need for sustainability is a consistent message, with reform leaders working to braid and blend funding sources that will extend beyond the COVID recovery investments.

Sustainability through Higher Education Partnerships

Colleges and universities are well-positioned to engage as long-term K-12 school partners and help address issues of sustainability of community schooling (Benson et al., 2017). The growing movement in higher education to support civic and community engagement signals a strong commitment to these partnerships—framed not as outreach initiatives but as a fundamental shift in what it means to advance teaching, research, and service (e.g., Sandmann & Jones, 2023). Recognizing the wisdom and power embedded in communities surrounding their institutions, colleges and universities are building infrastructure to learn, generate knowledge, and take action through a variety of partnerships, including university-assisted community schools. These schools are a mutually beneficial approach to improving the conditions for learning and living, particularly in communities that experience poverty, racism, and other structural inequities (Benson et al., 2017). Realizing their promise, however, requires building a robust infrastructure to create and sustain university-

assisted community schools. This essay describes UCLA's recent history to create the political will and infrastructure to create, expand, and sustain these schools in California.

Our Roots: UC Network of College-Going Schools

Our journey to create this statewide infrastructure began almost 20 years ago when sociologist Hugh Megan convened four campuses of the University of California (UC) who were establishing "college-going" K-12 schools embedded within the state's highest need urban districts and communities: San Diego, Oakland/Berkeley/Richmond, West Sacramento, and central Los Angeles. UC San Diego had led the way by creating the Preuss School in 1999 in response to the University of California Regent's 1995 ban on affirmative action in undergraduate admissions and subsequent call for each campus to develop plans to achieve a diverse student body without taking students' race and gender into account. This call was supported by the California legislature, which had added $33.5M to the university's outreach budget in 1998. UC San Diego used its increased funding to establish the Center for Research on Educational Equity, Access, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE), providing essential infrastructure for the Preuss School as well as other K-12 partnership sites to prepare underrepresented minority students for UC admission (Mehan, 2015). This infrastructure has helped the Preuss School become one of the top transformative public schools in the nation, preparing more than 90% of its graduates for four-year institutions.

When UCLA met with the three other UC campuses in 2006, we talked about the work of building partnership infrastructure—what it takes to challenge norms and structures within the university and K-12 system. Our aim was to build robust public school communities that were deeply connected to teacher education, faculty research, undergraduate coursework, service-learning programs, student services, pipeline programs, research centers, doctoral dissertations, and much more. We compared our school partnerships to the agricultural field stations created by the University of California in 1862—"a model in which the research and teaching missions of the university both inform and are informed by the practical challenges women and men confront working in applied settings" (Mehan et al., 2010, p. 175). We established ourselves as the "UC Network of College-Going Schools" and worked to spread the word about our work, presenting at conferences, P-20 outreach meetings, as well as to the UC Regents.

Based on a decade of work together, we documented how university-partnered schools are fertile ground for Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) and can provide an "alternative gold standard to the large-scale research consortia RPP" (Quartz et al., 2017, p. 3). As promising contexts for marrying research and practice, we argued that university-partnered schools have the potential to bring about fundamental change in schools, districts, and universities. With support from the UC Office of the President in 2020, we convened high school counselors from our UC Network to share their experience creating and maintaining strong college-going cultures. We had initial conversations about the potential of performance assessments and portfolios as alternative college admissions criteria, but the weight of educating students during the pandemic cut our efforts short. We are currently working to revive this performance assessment work by supporting K-12 and higher education partners engaged in high school redesign and holistic, equity-oriented approaches to college admissions.

Looking back at the early work of the "UC Network of College Going Schools," it's clear that our alliance helped bolster the work of each campus to secure funding and resources to develop our schools. Each partnership relied on different local autonomy arrangements (e.g., charters, Pilot schools, MOUs) to advance innovative instructional practices, but many of these practices were shared across campuses. For example, we were all driven to "detrack" our high school programs to provide a common college-prep curriculum along with necessary learning supports to ensure the success of all students (e.g., Weinstein & Worrell, 2016).

New Schools: Developing the UCLA Community Schools

With support from the UC Network, the first UCLA Community School was designed in 2006, from the ground up, as an innovative site of teaching, research, and service for the university and a vibrant neighborhood school for the port-of-

entry immigrant communities of Pico Union and Koreatown in central Los Angeles. The school is run by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), currently serves approximately 900 TK-12 students, and is one of six RFK Community Schools co-located on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel—which has a rich cultural and historic legacy, including the tragic assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. UCLA Community School belongs to the progressive traditions of both university-based lab schools (such as UCLA Lab School) and the national community schools movement. These traditions honor the role of students in constructing their own learning and developing their knowledge, skills, and passions—facilitated by caring adults, other students, and engaging educational experiences within and beyond the classroom. They also honor the role public education plays in our democracy and seek to instill in students a commitment to justice and the common good.

On most indicators, the UCLA Community School is an enormous success. The percentage of graduates who meet the sequence of course requirements (called the A–G courses) for admission to the University of California or California State University systems has steadily climbed over the years, rising from 10% in 2012 to 84% in 2024. This is higher than both the district (70%) and state (52%) average for all students. The four-year cohort graduation rate mirrors this trend, growing from 69% in 2012 to 94% in 2024, now higher than both the state (86%) and district (89%) averages (California Department of Education, 2025).

Based on the UCLA Community School's early track record, LAUSD approached UCLA in 2015 to partner with a second school in South Central Los Angeles and the university embraced the opportunity to engage with another urban community to help solve pressing social problems. In the case of South Central, one of the pressing problems is the community's divestment from neighborhood public schools. Declining enrollment in this neighborhood is fueled by the growth of charter schools, leaving historic public school buildings, including Horace Mann Middle School, struggling to remain open (Hicks and Lens, 2022). Founded in 1926, this school used to be the pillar in its community, serving over 1,500 students. By 2015, enrollment had plummeted to just over 300 students, with more than a third receiving special education services and many in foster care. Similar to many urban neighborhood schools, the educational marketplace had skewed enrollment in Mann—dealing them an unfair share of challenges (Quartz, Geller & Stuart, 2020). In 2017, in an attempt to level the playing field and reimagine the school as a 6-12 community school, the school added an inaugural 9th grade class, reversing a 16-year trend of declining enrollment. In 2018 and 2019 this growth continued with the addition of a 10th and 11th grade, and in 2020 with the addition of a 12th grade. The first inaugural class of 50 students graduated in June 2024—the fourth and largest cohort of students to walk the stage at graduation, almost three quarters with a plan to attend college, including 57% to four-year institutions. While the partnership is making steady progress, enrollment and underachievement on standardized tests continue to be a challenge.

New Allies: Joining the UACS National Network

Complementing our work with the UC Network, UCLA has engaged since 2016 with the University-Assisted Community Schools National Network, convened by the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2017, with funding from the Netter Center to become one of their regional UACS training centers, we established the UCLA Center for Community Schooling as the university's core infrastructure to engage the campus in the life of the UCLA Community School and the Mann UCLA Community School. UCLA has strategically marshaled its resources to provide broad-based and comprehensive support—including putting its name on the school buildings—to ensure the longevity of university-assisted community schools in Los Angeles and share widely the knowledge these schools generate.

As articulated in our original 2009 Memorandum of Understanding for the UCLA Community School, "LAUSD and UCLA expect the school to develop innovative structures and practices for school governance, staffing, budgeting, assessment, and professional development that will inform school improvement efforts across the district, state, and nation." Ongoing support from UCLA for core staff funding along with philanthropic support, including the Netter

Center's regional training center grant, has helped us meet this expectation. Our center hosts regular Community School Study Tours and has organized convenings to support the expansion of university-assisted community schools on the west coast. Joining the UACS National Network has also afforded opportunities to learn from colleagues across the country and develop a shared understanding and vision to propel the movement.

At its heart, the UACS movement lifts up the power of reciprocal learning—when K-12 and higher education partners engage in ways that allow them to grow together and advance social change. The two UCLA Community Schools have engaged hundreds of UCLA students, staff, and faculty as novice teachers, artists, social workers, tutors, researchers, librarians, and many other roles, contributing about 20,000 engagement hours per year per school. This engagement is central to UCLA's mission of teaching, research, and service. For example, in 2023-24, 14 UCLA law students and three undergraduate interns learned in the context of the school's Immigrant Family Legal Clinic, under the supervision of expert faculty, providing essential legal services to immigrant clients.

Statewide Partners: A Historic Opportunity

The success of the UCLA Community Schools laid the groundwork in 2022 for UCLA to join with the National Education Association, Californians for Justice, and the Alameda County Office of Education to become the State Transformational Assistance Center for its historic $4.1B community schools initiative. Within this context, our Center for Community Schooling team has had a new opportunity to join with higher education partners to advance community schooling. In addition to providing statewide support for data collection and analysis on community school implementation, UCLA convened, in May 2024, five teams of K-12 and higher education leaders in Southern California to help build the movement to create and sustain university-assisted community schools. The program included a study tour at the UCLA Community School, a panel on the national UACS movement, and a workshop for team planning. The five UACS teams included educators from San Diego, Riverside/San Bernardino, Pomona, Anaheim, and Los Angeles. Representatives from 12 universities worked alongside district, county, and community partners to articulate existing K-12/university partnerships and strengthen the systems that support these anchor institution partnerships.

To support learning in these contexts, we aligned our goals for California UACS with the overarching values of California's community school initiative—the latter which includes racially-just, relationship-centered spaces, shared power, classroom-community connections, and a focus on continuous improvement.

Building on these aligned values, the California UACS teams explored three strands of work. First, we lifted up community schools as teaching schools for colleges and universities and examined the work it takes to create a human resource pipeline, a strong culture of professional learning, and positive working conditions for a range of community school professionals, including teachers, administrators, social workers, school psychologists, librarians, researchers, lawyers and more. Second, we examined the role that universities can play in providing direct supports and services to students and families as part of their public service mission. These supports include after-school and summer enrichment, tutoring, legal services, college counseling, arts programs, and much more. The third strand explored research-practice partnerships—long-term collaborations between school and university partners to study topics of local interest and concern for the purpose of possibility thinking and continuous improvement. For example, the UCLA Community School is in the 15th year of a research-practice partnership designed to study and strengthen its multilingual community language program.

The infrastructure needed to keep these three strands of work afloat involves creating systems at both the school and university. For example, to sustain productive research-practice partnerships, the UCLA Community Schools created a multi-stakeholder research committee that reports to the School Governing Council and manages the district's external review process—giving the school local authority to review research proposals—in collaboration with LAUSD. From the university's end, these RPPs require funding to support undergraduate and graduate student researchers, a research

director, and engagement with UCLA faculty through partnership retreats, dissertation committees, and other structures. In addition, student researchers enroll in a variety of courses to support their engagement at the schools.

There are positive signs that the UACS movement is gaining steam in California as both a sustainability strategy for the state's investment in community schools and as part of higher education civic engagement reform. For example, in August 2024, the Santa Ana Unified School District Board of Education approved a formal, three-year memorandum of understanding with UC Irvine to partner at James Monroe Elementary School, a CCSPP grantee. At UC Irvine, the effort is led by School of Education researchers to help advance the school's current work to integrate student support efforts, expand learning opportunities, and promote active family and community engagement. (See article by Symone Gyles, Adam Lara, and Andrew Bustamante, this issue.) Moving forward, our UCLA center is hosting a statewide community of practice for UACS teams to continue to grow and learn from each other.

Looking Ahead: Possibility Thinking

California has the largest higher education system in the nation, with almost 500 public and private colleges and universities (Cook 2025). In 2021, these schools enrolled 2.3 million undergraduates. This landscape is ripe with opportunities to create and sustain university-assisted community schools that benefit both K-12 and higher education communities. In particular, the UACS movement's commitment to advancing equity and democracy is foundational to California's 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, which established the state's three public segments: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC)—guided by the "philosophy of a successful democracy premised upon an educated citizenry" (California State Department of Education, 1960, p. 230). These campuses educate almost 80% of college students in the state and represent the enormous potential of colleges and universities to serve as powerful anchor institutions for K-12 community schools. Moreover, doing so would advance the mission of the California Community Schools Partnership Program to "accelerate efforts across the state to reimagine schools in ways that are aligned with the equity goals that support the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of California's families." It is with much hope and optimism that I conclude this report from the field, confident that university-assisted community schools will expand across California to meet this moment.

References

Benson, L., Harkavy, I., Puckett, J., Hartley, M., Hodges, R., Johnston, F., & Weeks, J. (2017). *Knowledge for social change: Bacon, Dewey, and the revolutionary transformation of research universities in the twenty-first century.* Temple University Press.

Breaking Barriers (2023). A Working Paper on California's Children & Youth Behavioral Health Ecosystem https://www.chhs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Ecosystem-Working-Paper-_-ADA.pdf

California State Department of Education. (1960). A master plan for higher education in California, 1960–1975. Sacramento, CA.

California Department of Education (2022). California Community Schools Framework (SBE-003 (REV. 11/2017)). California Department of Education.

California Department of Education (2025), Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, retrieved from DataQuest on June 18, 2025.

Cook, K. (2025). California's higher education system. Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-higher-education-system/

Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B. & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97-140.

Gallagher, H.A. (2023). California's major investment in universal transitional kindergarten. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/pb_gallagher_may2023.pdf

Hicks, B., & Lens, M. C. (2022). Incoming! Spatial enrollment competition between charter schools and traditional public schools. Education and Urban Society, 57(2), 100-127. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245221106708

Maier, A. (2022). Technical assistance for community schools: Enabling strong implementation. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/222.688

Mehan, H., Kaufman, G., Lytle, C., Quartz, K.H., Weinstein, R.S. (2010). Building educational field stations to promote diversity and access in higher education. In E. Grodsky & M. Kurlaender (eds.) *Equal Opportunity in Higher Education.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mehan, H. (2015). *In the front door: Creating a college-going culture of learning*. Routledge.

Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Quartz, K. H., Weinstein, R. S., Kaufman, G., Levine, H., Mehan, H., Pollock, M., Priselac, J. Z. & Worrell, F. C. (2017). University-partnered new school designs: Fertile ground for research–practice partnerships. *Educational Researcher*, 46(3), 143-146.

Quartz, K. H., Geller, R. C., & McQueen, S. S. (2020). A beautiful struggle: Reimagining neighborhood schools in urban communities. *Teachers College Record*, 122(2), 1-46.

Sandmann, L. R., & Jones, D. O. (Eds.). (2023). *Building the field of higher education engagement: Foundational ideas and future directions.* Taylor & Francis.

State Transformational Assistance Center for Community Schools (2024a). Capacity-Building strategies: A developmental rubric (Version 2.1). California Community Schools Partnership Program. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1enPndjBIb1U8qE2I-pbOOxhw0n5Robgm/view

State Transformational Assistance Center for Community Schools (2024b). Diving deep into the California community schools framework: Identifying overarching values (Version 1.1). California Community Schools Partnership Program. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PUMBV5JhDco66V0b7uOu8krQlf282J4M/view?usp=sharing

Weinstein, R. S., & Worrell, F. C. (2016). *Achieving college dreams: How a university-charter district partnership created an early college high school.* Oxford University Press.

From The Ground Up: The Journey of the Monroe UC Irvine Community School Partnership

Symone Gyles, Adam Lara, and Andres Bustamante

Symone Gyles, Ph.D, is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California, Irvine, Associate Faculty Director of the Organizing Collaborations for Educational Advancement Network (OCEAN), and the co-director of the Monroe UCI Community School Partnership. Her research investigates the co-design, implementation and impact of community-based, justice-centered science curriculum and instruction.

Adam Lara, Ph.D, serves as the Associate Director of Research-Practice Partnerships at the University of California, Irvine School of Education, where he helps lead the Organizing Collaborations for Educational Advancement Network (OCEAN), and the Monroe UCI Community School Partnership. In this role, Dr. Lara brokers partnerships between faculty, school districts, community organizations, philanthropy, and public agencies, and leads the development and implementation of programming, policies, and procedures for efficiency and sustainability.

Andres Bustamante, Ph.D, is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of California, Irvine, Faculty Director of the of the Organizing Collaborations for Educational Advancement Network (OCEAN), and the co-director of the Monroe UCI Community School Partnership. His research expertise is in early childhood development, community partnerships, and Latine children's STEM learning.

Abstract

Building on John Dewey's vision of schools as democratic community hubs, and scholarship on university-assisted community schools (UACS) as centers for educational innovation and community thriving, this paper examines the development of the Monroe UC Irvine Community School. Deriving from the long-standing Santa Ana Research-Practice Partnership (RPP) between the UC Irvine School of Education, the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD), and the Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative (SAELI), we tell the origin story of Monroe Elementary School's journey to becoming a UACS, the development of our pilot collaborative research project around integrating community-based science and dual-language learning, and lessons learned throughout our first year in a UACS partnership. We highlight three key principles—aligning with district priorities, learning from prior UACS models, and pacing growth deliberately to ensure long-term sustainability—as essential elements that have supported our work thus far. Through this paper, we seek to demonstrate how the Monroe UC Irvine Community School illustrates the potential of UACS partnerships to advance equity, strengthen communities, and reimagine innovations in public education as a collaborative endeavor between researchers, schools, and communities.

Introduction

Since 2021, the state of California has invested over $4 billion in the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), the nation's largest community school initiative serving over 2,500 schools across the state. This landmark investment in community school strategies is grounded on the belief that highly functioning and productive community partnerships can improve student outcomes by increasing school responsiveness to student and family needs, and by organizing school and community resources to address barriers to learning (California Department of Education, 2025). Conceptually, the foundational belief underlying the increasing investments in community school strategies is based on John Dewey's theory that neighborhood schools can and should function as core institutions. He argues that not only should schools provide comprehensive resources and services to students, their families, and neighbors, but they should also integrate other organizations and institutions to work collaboratively to address the needs and priorities of the broader school community (Dewey, 1990; Harkavy et al., 2013). In short, because public schools "belong" to all members of the community, they should serve all members of the community (Harkavy et al., 2013).

Building on this idea, Harkavy and colleagues (2013) argue that universities are uniquely well-positioned to provide strategic, comprehensive, and sustained support for community schools to create and foster healthy urban environments and democratically engaged communities. For community schools to successfully integrate community institutions, local public and private agencies need to be effectively coordinated, and more importantly, the assets and resources of local universities need to be strategically leveraged for the community school to play the expanded role envisioned (Harkavy et al., 2013). Thus, in recent years, there has been growing interest and investments in university-assisted community schools (UACS), in which universities serve as key partners providing broadly-based, sustained support to improve student and community outcomes (Netter Center, n.d.). In this paper, we start by telling the story of one elementary school's journey in Southern California toward becoming a UACS. We then describe our pilot research project to support the school in using innovative research practices to meet their instructional goals, and end by illustrating our lessons learned through our first year of the partnership.

The Beginning: Santa Ana Unified School District, the UC Irvine School of Education and Monroe Elementary

In 2018, the UCI School of Education, through its Organizing Collaboration for Educational Advancement Network (UCI OCEAN), established the Santa Ana Research-Practice Partnership (RPP). This partnership consisted of the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD), the City of Santa Ana, and the Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative (SAELI), and was grounded on a shared commitment to promote and strengthen the early learning and well-being of children and their families across the City of Santa Ana, CA. Over the last seven years, the Santa Ana RPP has generated over $15 million in grant funding for a variety of successful research projects. For example, in the "Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL)" project, SAELI parents and UC Irvine School of Education researchers co-designed a series of installations in public spaces to encourage engagement in STEM learning in the City of Santa Ana (Bermudez et al., 2024; Bermudez et al., 2023). Through learning from SAELI families' stories and experiences in participatory design sessions, and integrating their cultural funds of knowledge with the latest insights from developmental science and early education, the project has developed seven PLL installations across the city. These installations included a giant abacus at a bus stop, educational signage inside the Northgate Gonzalez Grocery Market, a life-sized board game for STEM learning, and a giant STEM version of the classic game *Loteria* (Figure 1).

To honor this collaborative work in the Santa Ana RPP, UCI OCEAN, SAELI, SAUSD, and the City of Santa Ana hosted a block party and ribbon cutting ceremony on May 10th, 2025 (Mother's Day in Latin America) to celebrate the transformative impact of SAELI families and the installations developed through the Santa Ana RPP (Figure 1). At this event, as a show of their commitment to this work, the City of Santa Ana made an official proclamation that May would be *"Early Childhood Education Month"* and the city, SAUSD, SAELI, and UCI OCEAN made a collective commitment to creating a *Master Plan* for early education in Santa Ana for coordinated and intentional early learning systems.

Figure 1: Photos of the Playful Learning Landscapes installations in Santa Ana, CA, and the ribbon cutting ceremony with UCI, SAUSD, SAELI, and city leadership.

While this impact of the PLL project through the Santa Ana RPP demonstrates the outcome of community commitment to partnership work, it is only one of several projects that have emerged from the collective work. "Fraction Ball" (Figure 2), is an innovative and accessible math game co-designed with SAUSD teachers and students and UC Irvine researchers to promote fraction learning while playing basketball. This project began with a small participatory design study in 2018 and has now been scaled and proven effective through five large randomized controlled trials with thousands of students across 27 SAUSD elementary schools. Findings have shown strong positive impacts on students' fraction knowledge and math identity (Begolli et al., 2024; Bustamante et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2024). This project was foundational in building strong relational trust through sustained collaboration between SAUSD and UCI OCEAN.

Figure 2. Fraction Ball playful math learning program, co-designed with SAUSD teachers.

Most recently, SAUSD and UCI OCEAN have collaborated on a preschool coaching and professional development model called the Readiness through Integrative Science and Engineering (RISE) project. This project supports teachers to build relationships with the families in their classroom, learn about their everyday practices, and integrate their cultural funds of knowledge into early STEM classroom activities (McWayne et al., 2022). As part of the RISE model, researchers have been working with SAELI parents to create a parent empowerment model that orients SAUSD parents to the RISE approach and supports them in engaging with their children's teachers as equal partners. SAELI serves as a third space for parent empowerment to affirm the powerful STEM ideas and learning opportunities that exist in their everyday routines and lived experiences. For example, one SAELI mother who recently immigrated from Guatemala shared that her responsibility growing up was to milk the family cow, an experience that she did not initially consider scientific. Through the RISE program, this mother discovered the many rich STEM learning opportunities she had to offer to her child and his classroom; she decided to build a 3D diorama of a cow, including a medical glove to simulate the udders, and brought it in to her son's classroom for a demonstration (Figure 3).

Figure 3. SAELI mother demonstrating how to milk a cow in her son's classroom.

The sustained engagement and impact of the Santa Ana RPP demonstrated to SAUSD the commitment of the UCI School of Education to the students and families of SAUSD, paving the way to a university-assisted community school (UACS) partnership. Over recent years, SAUSD leaders have raised nearly $40 million to build a state-of-the-art lab school in their district. Based on the success of the Santa Ana RPP, SAUSD leadership approached UCI OCEAN with the opportunity to collaborate on designing a new school that would expand upon the work already being conducted in SAUSD and serve as a model for innovation and partnership between researchers and practitioners. Over a series of meetings between leaders in SAUSD and UCI School of Education leadership, the group decided that instead of designing a new school, they would invest the funds into rebuilding an existing SAUSD school, Monroe Elementary, that serves students and families in one of the city's lowest-income neighborhoods.

Subsequently, conversations shifted away from the designation of "lab school," a title for schools that often exist on university campuses and serve professors' children. Collectively, the group decided that this title did not reflect the population in which this school would serve, or the future direction in which the school was aiming toward. Instead, the team chose to pursue the formation of a UACS, centering the commitment of UC Irvine toward providing sustained resources and support to help Monroe Elementary serve as a community hub of learning and life. The UCI School of Education considered the invitation as an opportunity to share faculty expertise in research in ways that could help inform school practices in the local context. SAUSD emphasized the partnership as an opportunity to expand their in-and-out of classroom practices to better support their students and educators. Together, both the district and UC Irvine saw this partnership as a mutually beneficial opportunity for collaboratively conducting community-engaged research that would have direct effects on teaching practice and students' experiences in learning.

In short, the successful efforts and trust built between SAUSD and UCI OCEAN through the Santa Ana RPP led SAUSD to establish a deeper, long-term partnership with the UCI School of Education, resulting in the development and implementation of a UACS model at Monroe Elementary. This landmark partnership is the next step in a long-term collaborative

process with the district, demonstrating the power that sustained research-practice partnerships can have to generate innovation, impact, and resources. The Monroe UC Irvine Community School is a symbol of partnership institutionalized.

Monroe UC Irvine Community School

History of Monroe Elementary

On August 13, 2024, the UCI School of Education officially entered its first university-assisted community school partnership with the SAUSD's James Monroe Elementary School after a formal, three-year memorandum of understanding was approved by the SAUSD Board of Education. Monroe Elementary has served as a school in the Delhi neighborhood of Santa Ana for many years, serving approximately 240 K-5th grade students, with roughly 85 percent of students from socio-economically disadvantaged families, 98 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 59 percent English Learners. Monroe Elementary has a Dual Language Immersion program that aims to develop bilingual and biliterate students in both English and Spanish, and a mission to prepare students to excel in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) fields and to become 21st century leaders. Designated as one of SAUSD's newest "community schools" in 2024, the Monroe UC Irvine Community School[1] reflects a shared commitment to educational equity and innovation. By embedding university research, expertise and resources directly into the school community, we seek to strengthen teaching, support the community, and improve student academic achievement. More specifically, this partnership is working to catalyze research centered on the needs and priorities of the school community, and leverage resources and relationships to create a learning environment where children, educators, and families are supported every step of the way.

At present, Monroe Elementary School is undergoing a full reconstruction, which includes a new two-story classroom building and a reimagined version of the original structure to support the deep history and legacy of the current school structure while also building a new space for imagination and innovation. The updated campus is expected to be completed by Fall 2027 and is being designed in alignment with the goals of the UC Irvine partnership and community school model. The new building will be constructed on the historic site of the former Delhi School, one of three segregated schools for Mexican children in Orange County. This site carries significant historical importance as the Delhi School was among those named in the landmark Mendez v. Westminster case—a decision that ended de jure segregation in California and paved the way for the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. Delhi Elementary was originally located at 402 E. Delhi Street, which was later renamed Warner Avenue. In 1948, the site became Monroe Elementary, and by 1971, the school was documented in the Orange County Register at 522 E. Warner Avenue—the same location where Monroe's new building will rise. Scholarly work, including research by Professor Gilbert Gonzalez, has highlighted the role of Delhi School in leading education for Mexican children in Santa Ana and throughout Orange County, making the site one of critical educational and civil rights history. This project represents more than a building—it is a bridge between our past and future. By honoring the history of Delhi School, we reaffirm our commitment to equity, inclusion, and opportunity for every student. As a UACS, Monroe Elementary will be uniquely positioned to build on this legacy, not only honoring the struggles and progress of the past, but also serving as a hub for innovation, bilingual education, and community engagement—ensuring that students are prepared to become leaders of the future.

Reciprocal Goals and Outcomes of the University-Assisted Community School Partnership

The Monroe UC Irvine Community School Partnership was established based on a common goal of strengthening and transforming Monroe Elementary in ways that align with the broader SAUSD community schools model, as well as the aims and priorities of the Monroe UC Irvine Community Schools Leadership Council. While the leadership council, comprised of students, families, teachers, administrators, UCI representatives, community partners, and district leaders, will identify the specific aims and priorities of the partnership based upon a needs assessment of the Monroe community, five

[1] SAUSD has 15 community schools as of November 2025. Monroe Elementary is the district's only university-assisted community school.

high-level goals have been collaboratively identified to define the overall work of the UACS partnership. These goals include: a) strengthening and transforming Monroe Elementary into a collaborative learning community and a model of excellence; b) assessing the effectiveness of classroom pedagogy and student and family programming to improve student outcomes; c) creating collaborative processes for developing and approving research projects for UCI faculty and graduate students to ensure that the projects jointly support research advancement while also aligning with and attend to Monroe's academic and community goals; d) creating professional development opportunities for teachers, as well as internship and career pathways for UCI students and graduates; and e) serving as a model for other district-university partnerships in the future.

Through this innovative partnership, teachers and staff will have opportunities for professional development through UCI programs like the UCI Teacher Academy and UCI Writing Project; access to new tools, research, and resources to enhance classroom practices; and new opportunities to collaborate with researchers to pilot innovations tailored to improve student outcomes. UCI undergraduates and graduate students will also gain hands-on experience through teaching internships and field placements, community-engaged research opportunities, and direct career pathways into local schools. For example, the partnership hopes to create a throughline for pre-service teacher education candidates who conduct their field placements at Monroe to teaching opportunities in SAUSD upon graduation. More importantly, this partnership aims to create a holistic and community-driven approach to education, where students of all ages will experience an enriched educational environment with access to innovative programs and resources that integrate STEAM, Spanish-English biliteracy, and real-world learning experiences. The collaboration will extend beyond the classroom to actively involve and engage families and community members in the design of culturally responsive and sustaining curricula, drawing on the strengths, values, and experiences of students and their families. In the next section we describe our pilot collaborative research project, demonstrating the partnership's first effort to engage in a research study to inform teaching and learning at Monroe.

Community Schooling in Action

The California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP), which funds the Santa Ana Unified Community School grant, sees community schools as a mechanism "to accelerate efforts across the state to reimagine schools in ways that are aligned with equity goals that support the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of California's families" (California Department of Education, 2025 p. 2). To support this effort, the CCSPP developed four core values that represent the "why" of community schools work, and guide grantees in operationalizing the pillars, commitments and practices of the California Community Schools Framework. These core values include: a) racially-just, relationship-centered spaces, b) shared power, c) classroom-community connections, and d) continuous improvement (Santa Ana Unified School District, n.d.).

For SAUSD, generally, and Monroe Elementary School, specifically, developing classroom-community connections has become an essential foundation to the work of the community schools initiative. Classroom-community connections seek to link classroom instruction to students' communities and lived experiences to create more engaged, real-world learning opportunities. Rooted in the assets of students, families, and the local community, classroom-community connections also work to create learning experiences that are responsive to the values, knowledge, language, histories and culture of the local community (State Transformational Assistance Center for Community Schools, 2024). Putting this value into practice, however, is often easier said than done. While many educators feel confident in their abilities to get to know their students and value the knowledge and experiences they bring with them to the classroom, integrating these experiences into curricular and pedagogical practice is often not as straightforward. As such, integrating community-based learning practices, specifically into science learning, has become a foundational pilot research effort of the Monroe UC Irvine Community School initiative.

Defining Community-Based Learning

Community-based learning (CBL) is a mechanism for educators to move away from abstract concepts of learning that are disengaged from students' everyday lives and experiences, and toward connecting to and building upon the rich and diverse knowledge and learning opportunities that are found in students' own families and communities (Daniel et al., 2019). Supporting

students not only in building connections to their communities and lives, but also acquiring, practicing, and applying disciplinary knowledge and skills to identify and act upon challenges faced by their local community (Clark et al., 2024; Gyles, 2024; Gyles & Clark, 2024), CBL seeks to cultivate classrooms that foster student belonging, agency, and engagement.

Theoretically, community-based learning comes largely from education research and practice in and with Indigenous communities. Indigenous community-based learning works to situate students as cultural experts to first support community-ways of knowing and then understandings of Western conceptualizations of disciplinary concepts (Bang & Medin, 2010). Within this approach to educational praxis, Indigenous scholars situate curriculum and instruction as a tool that should "empower and build from the ontological heterogeneity reflective of peoples' lived lives, particularly those historically dispossessed and dominated" (Bang & Marin, 2015, p. 542). It has only been within the last decade or so, however, that research has begun to investigate the role of community-based learning in other contexts, specifically, with students of color that live and grow up in complex urban environments (Bellino & Adams, 2017).

One notable discipline that has begun to take up such approaches to learning is science education. Community-based learning approaches in science have come about as a means to use students' everyday lived experiences as tools to understand and explore curricular concepts (Silseth & Erstad, 2018). Such approaches position students as active members of the learning process who can use science as a tool to address community injustices (Morales-Doyle, 2024). Scholars have defined community-based science (CBS) as "science instruction anchored in locally and socially relevant phenomena, where community extends beyond the geographical boundaries of a local area to include the cultural epistemologies, historical ontologies and social structures of a space and the individuals within that space" (Gyles & Clark, 2024, p. 3). More specifically, such an approach to instruction seeks to broaden our understanding of what counts as science (NASEM, 2021) by accounting for the historical, political, and social dimensions of scientific enterprise that influence how students understand phenomena (Patterson & Gray, 2019). With this, educators begin to recognize and utilize the varied heterogeneous expertise that emerges from students' diverse perspectives to support a more expansive approach to science teaching and learning (Vossoughi & Shea, 2019).

Conceptually, community-based science is grounded in three principles: 1) CBS engages students in authentic and meaningful science experiences through real-world, community-relevant investigations; 2) CBS develops students' critical science agency (Schenkel & Calabrese Barton, 2020) to utilize science concepts and practices to understand, make decisions, and take action to address community injustices; and 3) CBS empowers students as social, political, and academic beings by creating space for student voice and reflection toward shared authority in learning (Dimick, 2012). Through this framing of science education, teachers can refocus science learning toward students utilizing science concepts, knowledge, and practice to serve as agents of change in their communities (Morales-Doyle, 2017; Clark et al. 2024). This would also align with Lee & Grapin's (2022) proposed future approaches to science education that "emphasize explaining and solving pressing societal challenges that directly impact students' lives, communities, and society" (p. 1304). While research has explored critical, community-based, and justice-centered approaches to science education in middle and secondary settings, there has been significantly less of a focus on such an approach in elementary settings (see Davis & Schaeffer, 2019), specifically in ways that position elementary students to use science content to investigate and address challenges in their community. The context of Monroe Elementary presents a space to examine how community-based approaches to science can be integrated to simultaneously support science learning and dual-language instruction, while also engaging students in meaningful learning opportunities that position them as community change agents. Our charge at Monroe in our pilot research is to investigate this effort.

Integrating Community-Based Science and Dual-Language Learning at Monroe

As stated earlier, Monroe Elementary has a dual-language immersion STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) program that has a stated mission to support students' language development in both English and Spanish while also building their STEAM practices and knowledge. Through a curriculum called Project Lead the Way (PLTW), Monroe educators have worked over the last couple years to integrate biliteracy in their science learning. Since becoming a community school, teachers

have faced struggles with innovating this science curriculum toward more critical, justice-centered, and community-based learning approaches. Through our UACS partnership, we identified this as an area our research team could support.

Initially, Symone Gyles, an assistant professor at UC Irvine, Monroe's PLTW coach, Jesus Silva, and Monroe's principal, Dr. Fernando Duran, met to discuss the current PLTW curriculum and lessons, their goals for science learning at Monroe, and how Gyles' research and expertise could support their stated goals. Together, we created a preliminary plan of action to push the research project forward. Soon after putting together the research plan, the UCI-Monroe team realized that Gyles' time capacity as a professor would not be enough to fully support the goals of this work. Together, we discussed having a graduate student who could serve as a long-term researcher in the school, collaborating with teachers to co-design curriculum and instructional practices that support the integration of dual-language learning (DLL) and community-based STEAM, and be able to support sustained research-practice efforts at the school. To identify this individual, the Monroe-UCI team co-developed a "Monroe-UCI Graduate Student Role and Responsibilities" guide to ensure that both stakeholder groups had a voice in identifying the requirements and expectations of the graduate student researcher. From this outline, Gyles identified an incoming graduate student, Diana Romano, who she believed could meet these requirements, including a commitment to long-term relationship building and collaborative work with Monroe educators. Romano brought with her prior RPP and co-design experience, having served as a researcher across several Santa Ana RPP projects. Together, Romano, Gyles, Mr. Silva and Dr. Duran met on multiple occasions to develop a foundational understanding of their shared practice, research goals and values, commitment expectations for Romano's role, and preliminary conversations about what a pilot project could look like.

Grounded in our collaborative ideation, Romano and Gyles put together a preliminary Year 1 research proposal centered around the integration of DLL and community-based science practices. Their proposal included re-designing a 3rd grade PLTW unit around "Variation of Traits" with Mr. Silva and 3rd grade families, co-designing lessons to integrate family, community, and cultural knowledge to promote more meaningful and engaged community-based STEAM learning experiences. In their proposal, Romano and Gyles identified a three-step research process with both practice and research outcomes and deliverables, as well as identified the benefits of the research project to the literature around community-based science in elementary settings, generally, as well as to Monroe, specifically.

While Dr. Duran was excited about this proposal, he was also eager to involve more Monroe educators in this work. This led to a series of conversations around Romano and Gyles' capacity as a small research team, as well as expectations for research in Year 1 of a long-term partnership. Through ongoing discussion and compromise, the team reached a consensus that Year 1 would consist of a pilot study with just one teacher and a small number of families, with Romano and Gyles also providing a series of professional development sessions to all the Monroe teachers to introduce the foundations of community-based science, outline key design principles for connecting instruction to students' cultural knowledge and community contexts, and guide teachers through a redesign of a lesson using these principles. After further refinement of this proposal, the larger team was able to come to an agreement that met the research needs of UCI, and the practice needs of Monroe.

Collectively, this process demonstrates the value of relationship building, trust building, collaboration and compromise when developing a pilot project in the early stages of a UACS partnership. In documenting the development of our first research project, we seek to illustrate three principles of partnership work: 1) sustainable relationships must be grounded in a commitment by all stakeholders to long-term collaborative work; 2) partnership work requires consistent communication and compromise to ensure that all partners needs are met within context and capacity; and 3) relational development and trust can be built by partners, specifically researchers, extending their time, energy, and resources (in this case a professional development series), beyond the original scope of the work. These principles provide a foundation from which future partnership work will be built. Overall, the Monroe UC Irvine UACS partnership seeks to move beyond specific projects, and toward a sustained, democratic partnership that requires ongoing and deeply collaborative effort. As such, we specifically emphasize principle three to shed light to the necessity of relationality as the center of partnership work. Such relationality

requires transparency, openness, accountability, shared values and a common vision that allows for the partnerships, and the work within those partnerships, to thrive. In demonstrating our process, we hope to provide an example of how one of the pillars of community schools, community-based learning, can be met through a collaborative UACS partnership, and illustrate how the principles of partnership work described show up in everyday collaborative practice.

Lessons Learned

The journey toward becoming a university-assisted community school is unique. Each partnership has its own origin story, goals, struggles, and aspirations. Although the Monroe UC Irvine Community School is only one year into its partnership, we have made great strides toward developing systemic processes and structures to support ongoing research, continued to build relational trust, and have diligently worked to build this partnership from the ground up. In telling our origin story and first efforts at a pilot research project, we seek to provide an example of one UACS partnership journey toward creating a collaborative space for research and practice.

In bringing our story together, we seek to provide three "lessons learned" that have surfaced through Year 1. First, we found that centering the district's priorities as we built out the partnership served to alleviate possible pitfalls in our initial planning process. For example, as Monroe is designated as an SAUSD community school through the CCSPP grant, separate from its UACS designation, we found it important to align with SAUSD's community school framework in developing our partnership goals, systems, and structures. Doing so from the beginning allowed us to avoid engaging in duplicating processes, created practices and structures that were able to meet the goals and requirements of the community schools grant alongside our collaborative on-the-ground work, and minimized confusion as to the direction of the work.

Second, we found significant value in taking time to learn from UACS partnerships that came before us. While there is no "right" way to engage in a UACS partnership, there are many models for such partnerships that have paved the way for our work that we were able to learn from. Campus visits to the UCLA Horace Mann Community School, UCLA RFK Community School, and UC San Diego Preuss School provided an opportunity for our larger team to explore and learn from different UACS models across Southern California, providing foundational knowledge toward developing our systems and structures within the first year.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, we found that not only acknowledging but also centering the long-term and collaborative nature of this endeavor required us to take slow, deliberate steps. Regardless of excitement to get the work started and jump into research projects, we realized that making sure structures are in place to support the partnerships long-term sustainability, and starting small with a singular research project, was a good pace for stakeholders from both the university and school to feel like progress was moving forward while also making sure that our relationships are strong and foundational systems are set in place. We encourage readers to consider how our lessons learned can serve as a jumping point for those in the very beginning stages of developing a new UACS.

Overall, the Monroe UC Irvine Community School partnership serves as a tremendous opportunity for UCI School of Education to collaborate in community-engaged research and strengthen the existing and long-term partnership between UCI OCEAN, SAUSD, and SAELI by supporting Monroe Elementary's effort to engage in equitable, innovative educational practices. By combining the cutting-edge research and academic excellence of the UC Irvine School of Education with the commitment and educational expertise of SAUSD and Monroe Elementary, and the deep community ties and capacity for sustainable leadership of SAELI, this UACS will create a collaborative model that will not only benefit students and teachers, but also inspire similar initiatives across the state within existing institutional systems and budgets. We strongly believe that universities can play a pivotal role in educational and community revitalization, and are excited for the future of our partnership to continue to integrate and innovate the university-assisted community school model to support student, family, and community thriving in Santa Ana.

References

Bang, M., & Marin, A. (2015). Nature–culture constructs in science learning: Human/non-human agency and intentionality. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 52*(4), 530-544. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21204

Bang, M., & Medin, D. (2010). Cultural processes in science education: Supporting the navigation of multiple epistemologies. *Science Education*, 94(6), 1008–1026. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.20392

Begolli, K. N., Bermudez, V. N., Lawrence, L., Acevedo-Farag, L. M., Valdez, S. V., Santana, E., Alvarez-Vargas, D., Ahn, J., Bailey, D., Rhodes, K., Richland, L., & Bustamante, A. S. (2024). Incorporating design based implementation research with a randomized controlled trial to develop and evaluate the efficacy of playful rational number learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 78*, 102296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2024.102296

Bellino, M., & Adams, J. (2017). A critical urban environmental pedagogy: Relevant urban environmental education for and by youth. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 48*(4), 270–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2017.1336976

Bermudez, V. N., Salazar, J., Garcia, L., Ochoa, K. D., Pesch, A., Roldan, W., Soto-Lara, S., Gomez, W., Rodriguez, R., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Ahn, J., & Bustamante, A. S. (2023). Designing culturally situated playful environments for early STEM learning with a Latine community. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 65*, 205-216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.06.003

Bermudez, V. N., Lara, A., Ochoa, K., Garcia, L., Pesch, A., Anderson, M. J., Salazar, Hirsh-Pasek, K., Ahn, J., Bustamante, A. S., Gomez, W., & Rodriguez, R. (2024). Engaging parents as co-designers and researchers in research-practice partnerships. *NNERPP Extra, 6*(4), 2-10. https://doi.org/10.25613/BJXD-X784

Bustamante, A. S., Begolli, K. N., Alvarez-Vargas, D., Bailey, D. H., & Richland, L. E. (2022). Fraction ball: Playful and physically active fraction and decimal learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 114(6), 1307.

California Department of Education. (2025, September 5). *California community schools framework*. California Community Schools Partnership Program. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/ccspp.asp

Clark, H., Gyles, S., Tieu, D., Venkatesh, D., & Sandoval, W. (2024). Exploring science teachers efforts to frame phenomenon in the community. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 61*(9), 2104-2132. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21945

Daniel, J., Quartz, K. H., & Oakes, J. (2019). Teaching in community schools: Creating conditions for deeper learning. *Review of Research in Education, 43*(1), 453-480. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821126

Davis, N. R., & Schaeffer, J. (2019). Troubling troubled waters in elementary science education: Politics, ethics & black children's conceptions of water [justice] in the era of Flint. *Cognition and Instruction, 37*(3), 367–389. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2019.1624548

Dewey, J. (1990a). Democracy and education. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *The middle works of John Dewey, 1899–1924.* (Vol. 9, p. 222). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1916).

Dimick, A. S. (2012). Student empowerment in an environmental science classroom: Toward a framework for social justice science education. *Science Education, 96*(6), 990–1012. https://doi.org/ 10.1002/sce.21035

Guo, S., Bailey, D. H., Rhodes, K., Begolli, K. N., Bermudez, V. N., Lawrence, L., Alvarez-Vargas, D., Acevedo-Farag, L., Ahn, J., Bustamante, A., & Richland, L. E. (2024). Buckets of fun: Impacts of fraction ball activities on students' math-related emotions. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 92*, 101645. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2024.101645

Gyles, S. A. (2024). Designing for critical science agency in a community-based science curriculum. E*ducation Sciences, 14*(8), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080883.

Gyles, S. & Clark, H. (2024). Re(defining) expert in science instruction: A community-based science approach to teaching. *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 19*(1), 117-140. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-023-10202-2.

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., Axelroth Hodges, R., & Weeks, J. (2013). The Promise of university-assisted community schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525–540.

Lee, O., & Grapin, S. E. (2022). The role of phenomena and problems in science and STEM education: Traditional, contemporary, and future approaches. *Journal of research in science teaching, 59*(7), 1301-1309.

McWayne, C. M., Zan, B., Ochoa, W., Greenfield, D., & Mistry, J. (2022). Head start teachers act their way into new ways of thinking: Science and engineering practices in preschool classrooms. *Science Education, 106*(4), 956-979. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21714

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). (2021). *Science and engineering in preschool through elementary grades: The brilliance of children and the strengths of educators.* Washington, DC: National Academies Press

Netter Center for Community Partnerships (n.d.). *University-Assisted Community Schools*. https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/what-we-do/university-assisted-community-schools

Patterson, A., & Gray, S. (2019). Teaching to transform: (W) holistic science pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 58*(4), 328–337. https:// doi.org/10.1080/ 00405841.2019.1626616

Santa Ana Unified School District. (n.d.). *Community Schools Strategic Initiative Overview*. https://www.sausd.us/Page/53816

Schenkel, K., & Calabrese Barton, A. (2020). Critical science agency and power hierarchies: Restructuring power within groups to address injustice beyond them. *Science Education, 104*(3), 500-529. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21564

Silseth, K., & Erstad, O. (2018). Connecting to the outside: Cultural resources teachers use when contextualizing instruction. Learning, *Culture and Social Interaction, 17*, 56-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2017.12.002

State Transformational Assistance Center for Community Schools. (2024). *Overarching Values*. https://cadigitalcommons.org/home-2/about-us/overarching-values/

Vossoughi, S., & Shea, M. (2019). Studying the development of agency and political consciousness in science education. *Cultural Studies of Science Education, 14*, 327–334. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-019-09915-0

University-Assisted Community Schools meets Research-Practice-Policy-Partnerships: Introducing the Catamount Community Schools Collaborative

Bernice Raveche Garnett, Peter Knox, Colby T. Kervick, Jessica DeCarolis, and Johannes Haensch

Bernice Raviche Garnett, Sc.D. is the Adam and Abigail Burack Green and Gold Associate Professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont. Her areas of research include Community Schools, Research-Practice Partnerships, School Health, Positive Youth Development and Restorative Practices, leveraging community-based participatory and mixed methods approaches.

Peter Knox, Ph.D. is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Vermont. His areas of research include Community Schools, family-school-community partnerships, and education policy, with a particular focus on rural schools and communities.

Colby T. Kervick, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor of Special Education in the Department of Education at the University of Vermont. Her areas of research include Community Schools, Family Professional Partnership, Special Education Teacher Preparation, and Restorative Practices.

Jess DeCarolis is a Ph.D. Student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont. Her areas of research include education policy and policy-making practices, community schools, rural community health, and their intersection in community schools.

Johannes Haensch is a proud public servant working every day to improve the lives of the young people of Vermont.

Abstract

This article shares the story of a unique University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) initiative in the College of Education and Social Services (CESS) at the University of Vermont (UVM)—how it was created, evolved, and where it aims to grow in the future to support community schools (CS) development and sustainability. The Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC) emerges from a dynamic and longstanding research-policy-practice-partnership (RP^3) between the University of Vermont, the Vermont Agency of Education, and rural CS partners with the goal of developing and sustaining an ecosystem of community schools across Vermont. The genesis of this innovative collaboration began with the passing of Vermont Act 67—The Community Schools Act—in 2021. This act allocated Federal ARP-ESSER funding to support schools in academic recovery and learning loss mitigation among five less-resourced rural schools. Through cultivating long-term and mutually beneficial relationships, the CCSC aims to facilitate technical assistance, applied faculty research, service-learning, student placements, and community outreach in partnership with CS across our state. By leveraging the synergy across UACS and research-practice partnerships, this article offers procedural and methodological lessons learned to support rural community school implementation within a UACS framework through applied policy implementation research.

The Catamount Community Schools Collaborative

The Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC) is the culmination of several years of partnership, collaborative leadership, and community engagement, in support of the Community Schools (CS) approach in the State of Vermont. The genesis of this interdisciplinary University-State Education Agency (SEA)-CS partnership occurred with the passing of VT Act 67, the Community Schools Act (2021), which provided a competitive funding structure for the development and implementation of CS catered to high-need, rural schools in Vermont. Following the passage of VT Act 67, the Vermont Community Schools Research-Practice Partnership (VT CS RPP) was organically established by faculty from the College of Education and Social Services (CESS) at the University of Vermont (UVM) and CS leaders at the Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE). In this paper, we describe the origin story of the CCSC and its co-evolution (Reigeluth, 2023) by threading the methodological underpinnings and attributes of a Research-Practice-Partnership (RPP) with the values and operational principles of a University-Assisted Community School (UACS). We highlight the evolution and efforts to sustain the CCSC by discussing the main strategies, key lessons learned, and opportunities for future growth, all while centering the unique opportunities of rural UACS and CS partnerships.

Origin

The VT CS RPP, Vermont Community Schools Research-Practice Partnership, was born out of a shared commitment by the Vermont Agency of Education (VT AOE) and the University of Vermont's College of Education and Social Services (UVM CESS) to support rural CS through place-based, trust-centered, and mutually beneficial partnerships, grounded in UACS values (Harkavy et al., 2013; Harkavy, 2022). Drawing on the principles of RPPs, the collaboration was designed to align with both local needs and broader educational goals fostered through a supportive accountability structure guided by the VT AOE (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Upon the passage of VT Act 67 in 2021, the VT AOE was tasked with developing a competitive grant program to support rural CS implementation. This grant program, derived from Vermont's appropriation of ARP-ESSER funding to mitigate post-pandemic learning loss and academic recovery, supported five rural schools' CS implementation for three years (2021–2024). Concurrently, UVM researchers recognized an opportunity to support Act 67 CS policy implementation through participatory evaluation and improvement science grounded in local data (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Lewis, 2015; Fetterman et al., 2017). Through slow, intentional relationship and trust building, UVM faculty worked closely with AOE leadership to establish a collaborative working relationship centered on using community-based, participatory research to support CS implementation and sustainability by leveraging the unique expertise of policymakers (AOE), applied researchers (UVM-CESS), and practitioners (CS partners).

We gravitated towards the RPP structure as a long-term collaborative approach to research that helps address persistent challenges and systemic inequities in schools through a sustainable participatory partnership (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Our collaborative efforts are oriented within RPP principles and values of moving slowly to go fast, focusing on relational trust, participatory mixed methods (Creswell & Clark, 2017), and a focus on process implementation (Farrell et al., 2021). Such an approach allowed for collaboratively tackling "persistent problems of practice" (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 48) with CS partners and guided our intentional resistance to narrowly and prematurely focusing on outcomes of early CS implementation (Farrell et al., 2021).

Over the course of a year, the VT CS RPP was formalized through the co-creation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and data-sharing agreement, outlining goals to:

1. Study early implementation of CS under Act 67 (2021–2024);
2. Describe CS core features and models;
3. Examine the role of CS coordinators in rural contexts;
4. Evaluate implementation effectiveness using developmental benchmarks.

To build trust and social capital with VT AOE and CS colleagues, UVM faculty remained silent and somewhat invisible partners during the first year of CS implementation (2021–22), mainly supporting the work in the background rather than elevating UVM as "experts." We included explicit language in the MOU stating, "This RPP does not assume that UVM researchers have solutions or that there is information lacking in practical contexts. Instead, the promise of this RPP is that by bringing practitioners into the research, research questions will be more relevant to practitioners and the results from this research are more likely to be implemented in real-world contexts" (Garnett & DeCarolis, 2022, p. 8). This language embodies RPP and UACS values, in that our partnership is based on democratic and mutually beneficial relationships that democratize the knowledge production process, (London et al., 2022; Fine, 2018) and recognizes the valuable and diverse expertise of all stakeholders. This approach was especially important amid ongoing pandemic pressures and recovery efforts. It also allowed trust to build organically and emphasized that researchers were not bringing solutions but purposefully collaborating to ensure research questions and findings were relevant and actionable.

Thus, the VT CS RPP laid the groundwork for an evolving organizational structure for the implementation and sustained support of Vermont community schools aimed at the ultimate establishment of a UACS model at UVM. The intention behind the design of our UACS was to seamlessly incorporate the existing VT CS RPP within a larger higher education system and act as an ongoing bridge between the VT AOE and the broader education community across Vermont. Through intentional design, cultural humility, and shared purpose, the VT CS RPP is helping to reimagine how universities can authentically support educational equity in rural communities.

Centering Policy in our RPP: Additional "P" of RP^3

Building on a successful first year, the VT CS RPP expanded in both scope and personnel, adding dedicated roles at the VT AOE and UVM. Through participatory evaluation processes—such as site visits and empathy interviews (Hernández & Rivero, 2024) with key community school stakeholders centering their lived experiences implementing the CS approach through asset-based inquiry—CS partners began to view UVM as a trusted and inclusive collaborator. By the second year (2022–2023), UVM's deeper involvement enabled more timely use of local data for continuous improvement and advocacy, shaping long-term sustainability strategies (e.g. local school board support, and stronger connections with state leaders, and stakeholders).

UVM's engagement also brought new resources, including grants, student internships, and faculty involvement, helping CS partners meet locally defined goals. Additionally, UVM helped share Vermont's CS story through national networks (e.g. Netter Center's UACS National Network, the Institute for Educational Leadership Coalition for Community Schools, National Network on Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), and National Community Schools and Family Engagement (CSxFE) Conferences).

As the partnership matured, its scope expanded. With ESSER funding set to expire in 2024, the VT CS RPP took on a stronger advocacy role, presenting real-time data and testimonies during the 2022–2024 legislative sessions to push for sustained funding. We co-testified numerous times during the '22–'23 (DeCarolis & Garnett, 2023) and '23–'24 (DeCarolis & Garnett, 2024; Garnett, 2024a; Garnett, 2024b) state legislative sessions, updating our state legislature on Act 67 implementation and preliminary outcomes of CS implementation and bringing forward the authentic voices of our CS partners through the creation of digital stories by a local ethnographic documentarian. Recognizing this shift toward policy engagement, the partnership rebranded in 2024 as the VT CS RP^3—the Vermont Community Schools Research-Policy-Practice Partnership, marking a new chapter in the collaborative work between UVM, AOE, and Vermont's CS communities (Knox et al., 2024).

Culminating in a Collaborative: CCSC is Named

A tension point for our group was referencing and learning from the established UACS structures nationally. UACS have been traditionally developed, sustained, and cultivated in large metropolitan areas where the institution of higher education (IHE) partner is geographically proximate to the local school communities (Harkavy, 2023). Given the distance between many rural communities and IHE partners, the core operational structures of UACS, academically based service-learning courses, university student involvement, faculty research, and community engagement can be challenging to organize and sustain (Bronstein, et al., 2020; Kronick, 2020; Rimkunas, et al., 2023). While we are energized and inspired by established UACS, the rurality of Vermont and our central identity as a RP^3 with the VT AOE complicated our ability to imagine a UACS structure that aligned with our operating principles, organizational identities and geographic realities. Although there is no litmus test for labeling IHE activities and programs as squarely "UACS," we found that confidently leaning into and naming our work as a UACS structure and rebranding our RP^3 was one that was overlaid with various relational and political realities that needed to be negotiated with care. For example, we (UVM partners) did not want the codification of our work as a UACS to sidestep or undermine our long-term RP^3 with the VT AOE.

We spent significant energy considering the name of our UACS, eventually landing on the Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC). By centering the catamount (UVM's mascot and storied local animal) in our identity, we emphasize UVM's integral role within Vermont's CS ecosystem and affirm that the CCSC is being developed in authentic partnership with state agencies and local CS communities—designed not just for them, but with and by them. Figure 1 provides an overview of the timeline described above for the formation of the CCSC.

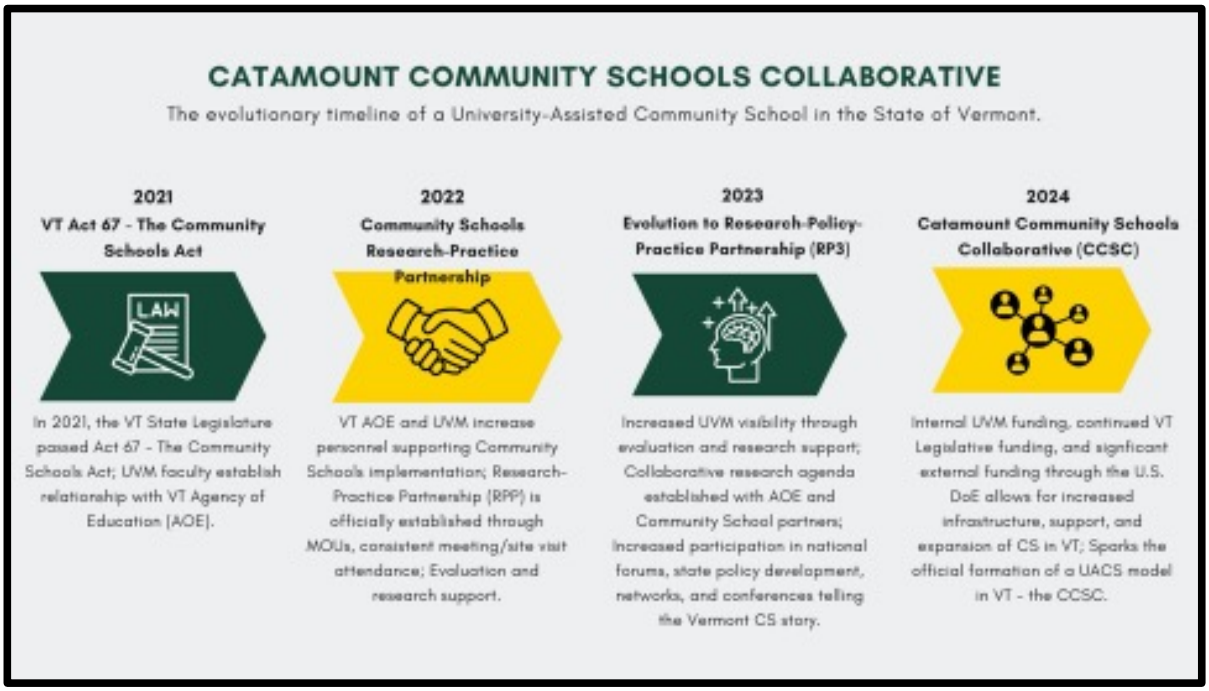


Figure 1. Catamount Community Schools Collaborative Evolutionary Timeline

Catalytic Braided and Blended Funding: Building Momentum for CS & UACS

Throughout the final year (2023–24) of the VT Act 67 Community Schools AOE-led grant program, UVM faculty remained focused on evolving into a context-specific UACS structure to support CS sustainability and growth in Vermont. CCSC faculty began to garner additional internal and external funds to extend CS programs and initiatives underway, as well as support the actualization of a UACS operational structure at UVM through increased student internships and clinical

placements in CS, as well as applied, collaborative research agendas. These concerted efforts led the CCSC to seek aligned funding opportunities both within UVM and with external funding agencies. Subsequently, in 2024, the CCSC was awarded an inaugural UVM Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships seed grant to extend the ongoing CS activity through strategic initiatives aligned with VT Act 67 school partners beyond the Act 67 timeline (September 2024). This grant opportunity leveraged unique resources at UVM to focus on key areas of support needed by Act 67 CS and their communities including (a) increasing student mental health support; (b) improving access to healthcare for students and families through school-based health centers (SBHC) and student wellness efforts; (c) exploring the ways in which CS can address food insecurity through food access and food systems work; and (d) bolstering existing place-based educational opportunities focusing on outdoor education. These key support areas and goals have facilitated new connections with UVM faculty, students, and staff in areas such as counseling, food systems, public health, place-based education, community development, and applied economics, as well as partnerships with the Larner College of Medicine's Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP) and the statewide school-based health center community of practice.

Ultimately, while embracing imposter syndrome and our negotiated dance of wondering if we were "officially a UACS," the receipt of the initial Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships seed grant funding in support of the CCSC provided the spark that allowed us permission to dive into the UACS waters with measured confidence and a unique approach to the UACS model. We leveraged the opportunity to increase our visibility and formulate a more concrete identity across Vermont and nationally, which provided traction for the CCSC to pursue larger and more competitive external funding sources. With support from Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the CCSC engaged in a comprehensive application process with the Congressionally Funded Community Projects (CFCP) program and in 2024 was awarded a portion of Vermont-allocated federal earmarked funds. With this high-profile external funding, the CCSC solidified its place as a contributor to shaping the educational landscape of Vermont, as well as a national leader in CS implementation in rural contexts. To date, this CFCP funding has provided vital structural support and financial stability needed to bolster and sustain the CCSC, while also expanding implementation across Vermont with the ultimate goal of creating and sustaining a vibrant CS ecosystem across the state.

CCSC: How We Do the Work

As represented in Figure 2, the CCSC is organized around the principles of the purpose of our work: to promote student, family, school and community prosperity, as articulated by Vermont's commitment to public education. Within this conceptual model, the orange concentric circle represents the five pillars of CS as described in Vermont's CS legislation passed in 2021 (Act 67, Community Schools Act).

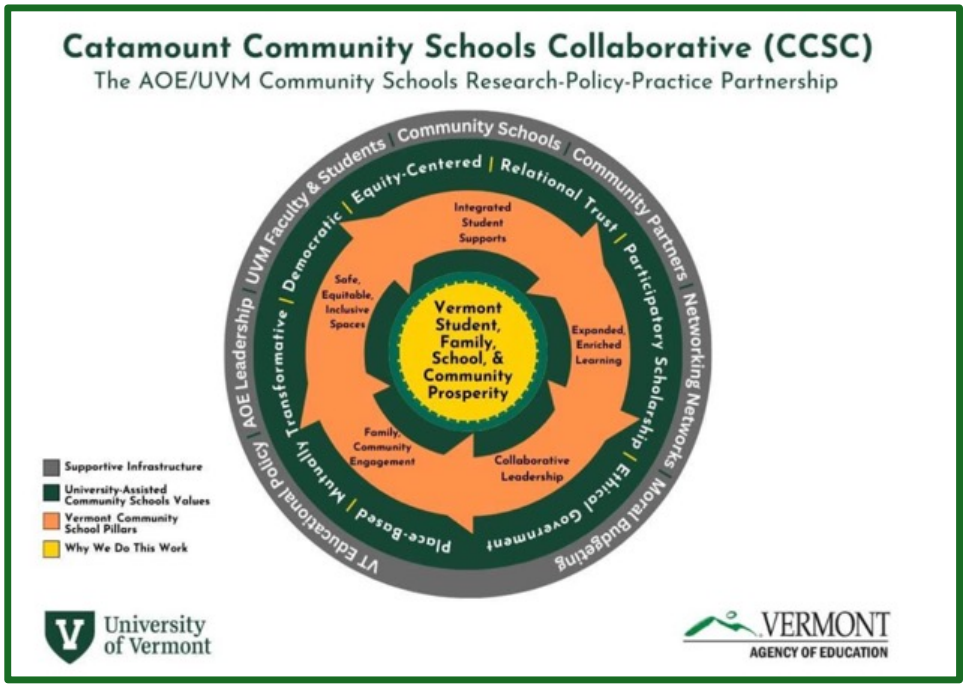


Figure 2. CCSC Operating Values and Structure

The green ring of "University-Assisted Community School Values" were collaboratively generated by members of the CCSC with intentional reference to the seminal writings and leaders of the UACS movement, most notably the work of Dr. Ira Harkavy and colleagues at the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. We incorporated the core values of UACS including **place-based, democratic, mutually transformative, and equity-centered partnerships**, as well as a focus on anti-racist, and sustained collaborations between universities and schools articulated by the Netter Center (Harkavy et al., 2020; Harkavy, 2023) and other UACS leaders (Bronstein et al., 2020; Quartz, 2020). The CCSC has embraced and advanced distinct UACS values of **relational trust, participatory scholarship and ethical government** to align with the unique University-SEA-CS RP^3 underpinnings of the CCSC (Britt et al., 2022; Harkavy et al., 2013; Harkavy, 2023).

The CCSC is further grounded in tenets of community-based participatory research (Israel et al., 2018), resulting in a flattened hierarchy of communication and engagement between partnering schools, the AOE, and UVM, as well as the equal participation of community partners in the evaluation and development of CS programs, policy shifts, and future planning. This structure and relationship-based partnership allows CS to equally access the tools and resources made available through a partnership with a local university, alongside the leadership, support, and oversight functions of the AOE in the management of the CS grant and funding structure, leveraging the CCSC UACS values of **participatory scholarship and place-based partnerships**. Within the CCSC, UVM research expertise blends seamlessly with the VT AOE's practical insights and policy orientations, creating a dynamic, community-based, and participatory framework that provides locally informed, applicable research for schools working to implement the CS approach. The unique collaborative makeup of the CCSC provides a ready-made research structure by which study findings, best practices in CS policy implementation, and unique features of rural school communities can be disseminated, applied, and tested. The CCSC, through its structure of **participatory evaluation** of a state educational policy (Act 67) within the confines of supportive accountability, embodies **ethical government** as CS and UACS are implicated in local, state, and federal policies.

Equity-centered not only refers to the explicit focus on "safe, equitable and inclusive learning environments" articulated by VT's state CS educational policy but also speaks to the value-based structure of our RP^3. As education and public health researchers and state practitioners, we deeply understand the critical role that schools play in the health and well-being of students, families, and communities, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Osher et al., 2019). Moreover, UACS bake equity into the partnership and accordingly produce knowledge for social change to realize the goals of democratic civic universities establishing long-term mutually transformative relationships with local schools (Harkavy, 2023). We are committed to engaging in equitable research collaborations to produce hyperlocal data on CS implementation so that rural CS implementation in VT supports and elevates the health, well-being, and development of all students and families.

Finally, the outer ring of our CCSC conceptual model (grey ring) details the supportive infrastructure across organizational contexts (UVM, VT AOE, and CS) that sustain, bolster, and actualize our RP^3. While most of the supportive infrastructure policy and partnerships may not be unique to the CCSC, **moral budgeting and networking** networks are systems-level innovations generated from the collective learning and efforts of our RP^3 (Farrell et al., 2022). To this day, the CCSC RP^3 structure operates both inside and outside of the organizational boundaries of each individual stakeholder group. This allows for the creation of a 'third space' in which the sum is greater than the individual parts. For example, within the past year, the CCSC RP^3 has been involved in advocating for the inclusion of a CS coordinator-related question on the upcoming administration of the 2024 VT Principal School Health Profiles questionnaire, administered by the Vermont Department of Health in partnership with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This information will provide the CCSC RP^3 a statewide, predictable surveillance indicator regarding the landscape of CS in VT, enabling the CCSC RP^3 to better provide technical assistance, support, resources, and contribute to the cultivation of an ecosystem of high-functioning rural CS.

Efforts to Institutionalize: How We Sustain the Work

The CCSC is in its fourth year of partnership, with plans for long-term collaboration to sustain and support existing CS and foster a vibrant CS ecosystem statewide. Within the university, it's essential for the CCSC to strategically engage institutional support to expand its impact. As we develop our UACS model and consider the CCSC's role in the university, we aim to connect with academic units and centers whose work, resources, and partnerships can advance CS pillars through research, service learning, grants, and internships.

As Vermont's land-grant institution, UVM holds a unique responsibility to foster civic engagement and community well-being. John Dewey, a UVM alumnus, argued that higher education should serve democratic life by engaging directly with communities (Dewey, 1902; Harkavy, 2023). This vision is foundational to the UACS model, particularly for land-grant universities to re-examine their civic mission. The CCSC operationalizes this mission by supporting CS implementation and sustainability through four key strategies: (a) applied, interdisciplinary faculty research on CS policy and practice; (b) community-engaged student learning via internships, capstones, service learning, and clinical placements; (c) professional development, outreach, and capacity building; and (d) grant funding and resource provision. The following section outlines CCSC's current work in these areas, identifies next steps, and shares lessons learned for advancing rural-serving UACS and CS.

Applied Community Schools Research

The CCSC engages in applied participatory research for social transformation, drawing on diverse methodologies—particularly mixed methods, implementation science, educational policy research, and community-based participatory research. This foundation is reflected in our research agenda and related outputs in which we center policy and community dissemination (e.g., conference presentations and state-level testimonies) over academic publications.

Following the conclusion of the original pilot grant program (2021–2024) connected to VT Act 67, the CCSC has shifted toward direct, school-level implementation research in collaboration with our CS coordinators and local school administrators. Together, we co-design research projects that address site-specific needs and assets. For example, through the seed grant from the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, CCSC faculty have launched new partnerships with a rural CS exploring the impact of intergenerational meals on elder isolation and food security, as well as assessing community interest in expanding early childhood care and education opportunities within rural community schools. As we expand, we continue to navigate challenges related to capacity. To meet this growing demand, the CCSC has increased support for applied research through graduate and undergraduate interdisciplinary internships funded by the CCSC. Our evolving community-based research agenda includes several priority areas:

1. CS implementation and sustainability across diverse rural contexts, leveraging implementation science frameworks focusing on enabling conditions, effective implementation methods, and socially significant outcomes (Fixsen, 2019).
2. The critical role and impact of rural CS coordinators on CS implementation and visibility, highlighting key responsibilities and role differentiation.
3. Leadership competencies and practices through the lens of a "Community Schools Mindset," focusing on values-based implementation and collaborative leadership.
4. Exploring the enabling conditions and outcomes of CCSC facilitated interdisciplinary student internships and field placements in rural CS, focusing on student and CS partner experiences and impacts.
5. The viability of School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) within the CS framework, focusing on the operational models and teaming structures of rural SBHCs nested within CS. In partnership with the UVM Larner College of Medicine's Vermont Child Health Improvement Program, we are exploring how rural SBHCs can improve access and reduce care barriers in rural CS and reduce chronic absenteeism.

6. The return on investment of a rural CS coordinator, leveraging new partnerships with Apex consulting and colleagues who conducted a pioneering return on investment study of CS coordinators in New Mexico. We are currently piloting a return on investment app with three seasoned CS coordinators to assess the feasibility of a standardized data collection system to help partners articulate the value and importance of the CS coordinator role in implementation and sustainability.

7. The procedural elements of creating an intergenerational community meal serving community dwelling elders and elementary students embedded in a rural community school in partnership with UVM. Furthermore, investigating the impact of intergenerational meal programming on elder isolation, social connection, food security and student social emotional development, civic engagement, and attitudes towards aging.

Concurrently, we aim to further enable the growth of this work and CS advocacy efforts through the inclusion of doctoral student support (PhD funding) that will attract and retain a CS-oriented graduate student equipped to aid in RP^3-situated advocacy and research of rural CS implementation.

Community Engaged Learning

Dewey's emphasis on service-learning as a foundation for place-based education and community-engaged research (Dewey, 1938) aligns closely with UVM's strategic priority to expand faculty and student engagement in research and service statewide. The formation of the CCSC builds on this vision by reimagining the role of schools in rural communities and creating new, mutually beneficial partnerships between the university and rural-serving UACS by engaging undergraduate and graduate students from a wide range of disciplines in meaningful, place-based service and learning opportunities that align with the needs of community schools across the state.

Inaugural Cohort of CCSC-Funded Interdisciplinary Student Interns (2024–2025)

In 2024–25, through support from the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships seed grant, the CCSC funded 10 undergraduate and graduate interns from diverse disciplines—counseling, public health, food systems, and more—across five rural CS sites (see Figure 3). Two critical areas identified by our CS partners—school-based mental health services and food security—guided internship placement and design. For example, in collaboration with UVM's graduate counseling program, the CCSC placed two graduate interns in rural schools to provide mental health counseling to students, families, and staff. Another example includes a year-long internship pairing a doctoral student focused on social, emotional, and behavioral health with an undergraduate food systems major to launch an intergenerational community meals program at a rural elementary school—bringing seniors and children together to promote connection and food security. Internships were supported with stipends, supervision, and travel funding, with some students commuting over two hours to their sites. To mark the year's end, the CCSC hosted its first Celebration of Community Engaged Learning, where interns reflected on their experiences and the relevance to their professional goals. This event served as both a showcase and a catalyst for sustaining and expanding future placements and was recently highlighted by UVM's Career Center.[1]

In Summer 2025, the CCSC launched its first residential CS internship program in partnership with the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships and White River Valley Middle School. This innovative 10-week program supported 12 interdisciplinary undergraduate students in a paid, residential experience designed to integrate university resources into a rural school operating as a true community hub. The students were provided free housing funded by the Leahy Institute and worked with a wide range of community partners including the public library, school district, food pantry, local newspaper, community gardens, and trails organizations. The CCSC conducted applied research to explore the impact of this place-based, interdisciplinary internship model on both students and community partners. Emerging findings suggest that the students who participated drew from majors that included public health, English, engineering and food systems, and were curious about the opportunity to engage in authentic, applied learning in a rural community. They reported

[1] For more details on the intern celebration, see: https://www.uvm.edu/career/news/celebrating-uvms-community-schools-pilot-interns.

being unfamiliar with community schools prior to participating in the experience and a significant factor in choosing to participate was the fact that they would receive funding for their internship hours and free housing. Students reflected on the appreciation they developed for rural communities, the new and innovative ways they made connections between theory and practice, and, importantly, their emerging understanding of how the disciplines they were studying connected to the goals for the CS strategy. Most poignantly, students expressed how significant it was to see how their work contributed to making a measurable impact within the community.

Our long-term vision is for CS to become a consistent and predictable option for student placements across disciplines, with the CCSC acting as a coordinating hub and liaison to ensure that placements are school-driven and community-responsive. Therefore, we continue to work on integrating CS placements into existing UVM curricular structures such as capstones, undergraduate theses, service-learning courses, practicums, and applied research.

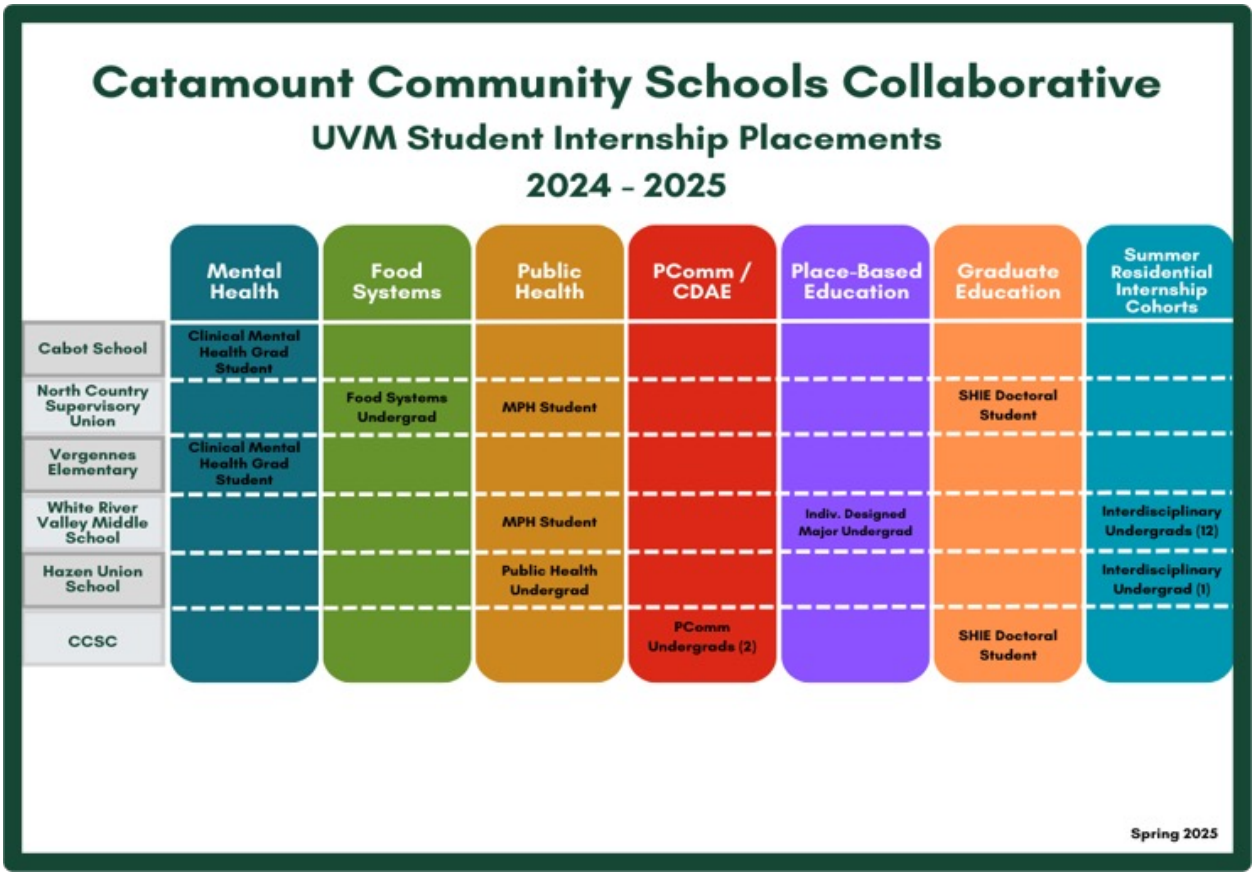


Figure 3. Interdisciplinary CCSC Community Engaged Learning

Professional Development and Capacity Building

The CCSC is currently engaged in the expansion of CS graduate course offerings and micro-credentialing opportunities for educators interested in CS and educational RP[3]. The CCSC taught a new Summer 2025 graduate course in CS as part of the micro-certificate in Community Schools anchored within an existing graduate certificate in Resiliency-based Approaches. Leveraging the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships seed grant, the CCSC offered 10 scholarships for the summer course to help increase access and enable CS coordinators within the new VT rural CS sites to participate. The course examined the core structural elements that define the CS strategy as well as best practices, evidence-based approaches, and funding sources that may vary across contexts, including a focus on rural CS implementation. The facilitation and growth of CS-centered coursework leveraged through the CCSC also contributes to ongoing and evolving efforts to develop a CS licensure and/or endorsement pathway in VT, therefore increasing AOE and systems-level capacity to sustain CS coordinators.

Additionally, the CCSC, in partnership with the VT AOE and CS partners, recently launched a statewide CS community of practice (CoPra) to create a predictable and welcoming space to connect and sustain VT CS. This space allows current and new CS leaders to share with and learn from one another, engage in collaborative problem solving, celebrate successes, communicate needs and recommendations, coordinate and promote opportunities, and surface resources to develop, expand, and sustain VT CS. Concurrently, CCSC faculty are key players in an emergent CS community of policy (CoPol) which aims to create a network focused on coordinated and coherent CS policy advocacy. Modeling the values of the CCSC, both the CoPra and the CoPol are co-facilitated by CCSC and RP^3 members.

Grant Funding and Resource Provision

Given the influx of funding to support CS at the state-level and within the CCSC flowing through the university, the CCSC is at an inflection point, facing new external pressures related to the various funding sources going out to the field—from the VT AOE and from the newly garnered Congressional Directed Spending stewarded by Senator Sanders. Vermont is small and thus we are hoping to avoid fracturing the field by allowing the diverse funding sources and organizational "homes" of the funding to influence our established collaborative processes. The CCSC, in partnership with the AOE, is supporting a new cohort of six VT CS identified and resourced through braided funding across a three-year time span (2024–2027). Figure 4 showcases the landscape of CS across Vermont, with the yellow stars representing "Cohort 1" school districts supported by the original Act 67 pilot grant program (2021–2024) and orange stars representing "Cohort 2" CS being funded by a blend of state appropriated funds and CCSC funds (AOE funds 2024–2025 and CCSC funds 2025–2027). The red crosses depict place-based intersection points between CS implementation and school-based health centers (Dunfee, 2020). Through our growing partnership with the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program, the CCSC offers technical assistance and support for community schools that are interested in bolstering or expanding school health services through various modalities often nested within school-based health center operational structures.

Figure 4. Funded Community Schools in Vermont, 2021–2027

Lessons Learned

To date, we are motivated and encouraged by the interdisciplinary and multi-level nature of CS, which aligns well with existing and emerging UVM initiatives, centers, and research efforts. To further engage interdisciplinary faculty and students, we must connect CCSC to existing curricular strengths and faculty expertise—helping people see themselves in the work. This alignment invites both human and financial resources to flow through and from the CCSC. Further, as a new UACS, we recognize the need to create a "hub and spoke" structure that builds awareness, fosters cross-departmental engagement, and coordinates opportunities for faculty and students.

One key lesson for the CCSC has centered on the importance of conducting university-wide needs and assets assessments. This process ensures we are leveraging existing resources effectively and avoiding duplication that could burden community partners and create tensions with university colleagues. While this mapping process is ongoing, we are encouraged by new cross-disciplinary collaborations emerging from our outreach—supporting both campus engagement and our CS partner sites. For example, the CCSC has continued to foster meaningful, effective partnerships with UVM's Office of Engagement and the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships.

The growth and success of the CCSC are motivating, but not without challenges. Perhaps the most readily apparent challenge is centered on funding and the influx of resources to a multi-organizational, collaborative structure like the CCSC RP^3. With multiple large and complex organizations participating in the management and dissemination of diverse funding, logistics, timing, and organizational cultures/processes come into play. For example, while UVM and the CCSC were receiving Congressionally Directed Community Project funding, the Vermont State Legislature simultaneously provided extended financial support for VT Act 67 in the form of a one-million-dollar appropriation for the continued implementation of the CS approach in VT. Consequently, CCSC and AOE partners have had to navigate and coordinate two significant funding sources with varying regulatory structures in such a way that is streamlined, accessible, and equitably supported for interested and eligible VT public schools. Through ongoing, collaborative discussions and teamwork, an integrated and cohesive structure for funding support, technical assistance, and implementation guidance is being established. Leading with CS and UACS values and goals aid in this complex navigation, while acknowledging and maintaining space for various organizational identities and operational environments.

We have also learned that with increased visibility and funding comes the need for a clear vision and intentional communication—both internally at UVM and externally among broader state and national networks. As a complex, interdisciplinary, university-based structure, CCSC must engage university and state leadership early and often—building relationships, mapping stakeholders, and clarifying advocacy priorities. Developing systems to track connections, resources, and overlapping research strengthens alignment and minimizes conflict with other university initiatives. Grounding this work in UACS values—long-term, mutually beneficial place-based partnerships—supports a cohesive identity and a more coordinated response to opportunities. As the CCSC continues to grow, we are embracing the overlap with service-learning, internships, and faculty research as avenues to strengthen our identity, impact, and relevance. This helps both current and potential partners understand the purpose and value of the CCSC, as well as the role that their disciplines, students, and scholarship agenda can play within education systems. Finally, our team identity and sense of belonging within CS and higher education continues to evolve. Through mentorship and partnerships with colleagues from the UACS National Network, we have learned to lead with our values—centering relationships, equity, and active listening. De-emphasizing hierarchical structure and funding in favor of trust-building fosters partnerships that are inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. This values-led approach takes time and courage, especially within entrenched institutional systems that are often resistant or slow to change. However, this work has also given us the confidence to claim our identity as a UACS. Without standardized benchmarks and overly-prescriptive processes, we have found freedom in defining our own path—and with it, a renewed vision for public education in Vermont.

Next Steps

Going forward, the CCSC will continue to actively involve the Vermont AOE and community stakeholders in the implementation and evaluation of UACS through participatory, place-based, research-policy-practice partnerships. The CCSC is well poised to advance University-Assisted Rural Community Schools, capitalizing on a distinctive research area of UVM faculty embodying the land grant mission of UVM. Moreover, by aligning CS implementation with Vermont's progressive educational policies—such as Act 77 on personalized learning—the CCSC has the opportunity to distinguish itself nationally. Through sustained, intentional partnerships between institutions of higher education, state education agencies, and local school systems, the CCSC could serve as a model for how comprehensive state-level policy can support equitable CS outcomes.

Academic productivity, measured through a variety of metrics including academic peer-reviewed articles and diverse grant funding, will be critical to sustain and validate the work of the CCSC for UVM leadership, particularly in the early days of our existence. We plan to develop and validate CS mindset and CS leadership competencies instruments, in collaboration with existing CS and UACS colleagues, to provide applicable and consistent measurement. As most national CS implementation guides focus on large urban school districts, the CCSC is also well-positioned to contribute interdisciplinary applied research on CS in rural contexts. Thus, in addition to academic dissemination outlets, we remain steadfast in our desire to produce equitable and applicable research that is timely and relevant to practitioners in the form of needs/asset assessments, co-developed CS implementation tools, and CS integrated matrices that demonstrate the braided nature of CS implementation at local and state levels.

To strengthen campus relevance and ensure long-term sustainability, it is essential to mobilize a broad coalition of UVM partners. This includes interdisciplinary faculty and outreach-focused entities such as the Institute for Agroecology, the Larner College of Medicine's Cancer Center, the Food Systems Research Center, the Osher Center for Integrative Health, the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program, UVM Extension, and interdisciplinary academic units spanning graduate and undergraduate degrees. These partners bring rich, place-based expertise, research capacity, connections to national networks, and established community relationships that directly enhance the CCSC's ability to support rural PK–12 schools across Vermont. By integrating the strengths of these centers into the CCSC's vision and work, we continue to expand our collective capacity to address complex challenges facing students, families, and communities. Moreover, engaging these partners helps institutionalize the CCSC within the broader fabric of the university—making it not just a disciplinary specific collaborative, but a university-wide commitment to public education, equity, and rural vitality. As we continue outreach across campus, we are actively cultivating these cross-disciplinary collaborations to fuel additional human and financial resources, drive innovation, and deepen the CCSC's impact within and beyond UVM.

Conclusion

Universities play a crucial role as lead partners in fostering transformative, place-based partnerships with local schools and state agencies, particularly in the context of holistic child development and community resilience. By embracing UACS models, these institutions can leverage their resources, research capabilities, and expertise to support rural CS and address pervasive, local challenges in innovative ways. Such partnerships not only enhance educational outcomes across the PK–20 spectrum but also promote social, emotional, and economic well-being, creating a supportive ecosystem that nurtures both children and their communities. By aligning educational initiatives with community needs, universities can help cultivate resilient, responsive environments that empower families and strengthen local bonds. The unique and sustained partnership between rural VT CS, the VT AOE, and UVM provides supportive accountability structures and leverages expertise, assets, and networks of each entity in equitable ways that are led by the needs and goals of students, families, and rural schools. It is the role and responsibility of both government and higher education institutions to take on logistics and systems navigation in support of schools and educators doing the work. Ultimately, the CCSC has embraced Dewey's

seminal call to action undergirding the CS and UACS movements in 1902: "The pressing thing, the significant thing, is really to make the school a social centre; that is a matter of practice, not of theory. Just what to do in order to make the schoolhouse a centre of full and adequate social service to bring it completely into the current of social life—such are the matters, I am sure, which really deserve the attention of the public and that occupy your own minds" (Dewey, 1902, p. 73). The CCSC is excited to embark on this journey and is buoyed by the values and structures of UACS and RP^3 to advance CS implementation in service to both our rural state and the national CS and UACS movement to raise healthy resilient communities, carrying out Dewey's legacy.

Acknowledgements

The CCSC is funded through several braided federal, state, professional and university funding mechanisms including the following: (a) a contract with the Vermont Agency of Education funded by Federal ARP-ESSER funds connected to Act 67 Community Schools Evaluation; (b) a seed grant from the University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships (LIRP) to support Community Schools Extension Activities with interdisciplinary UVM faculty and students; (c) a Congressionally Funded Community Project (CFCP) administered by the Office of Postsecondary Education, US Department of Education supported by a congressional direct spending request through Senator Sanders to expand the Community Schools model in Vermont leveraging CCSC resources, partnerships, applied faculty research and service-learning courses in partnership with the Vermont Agency of Education; and (d) a small grant from the National Education of Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) to bolster youth voice in our Community Schools implementation and evaluation work.

References

Bronstein, L. R., Kida, L., Garton, M, & Simpson, A. (2020). Binghamton University Community Schools: Building University-Assisted Community Schools In Small Cities, Towns and Rural Communities. *Universities and Community Schools, 10*(1), 18-33.

Britt, N., Bates, S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Edwards, R., Noteman, N., Brady, C., ... & Childs, T. M. (2023). University-assisted community schools as partners in neighborhood revitalization efforts. *Children and Schools, 45*(1), 35-45.

Coburn, C. E., & Penuel, W. R. (2016). Research–practice partnerships in education: Outcomes, dynamics, and open questions. *Educational Researcher, 45*(1), 48-54.

Cousins, J. B., & Chouinard, J. A. (2012). *Participatory evaluation up close: An integration of research-based knowledge.* IAP.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research.* Sage publications.

DeCarolis, J., & Garnett, B.R. (2023, March 1). Vermont House Education Committee, Expert Witness Testimony on Act 67, Community Schools. Montpelier, VT.

DeCarolis, J. & Garnett, B.R. (2024, Jan. 12). Vermont House and Senate Education Committee, Expert Witness Testimony on Act 67, Community Schools. Montpelier, VT.

Dewey, J. (1902). The school as social center. *The Elementary School Teacher, 3*(2), 73-86.

Dewey, J. (1938/1997). Experience and Education. New York: Touchstone.

Dunfee, M. N. (2020). School-based health centers in the United States: Roots, reality, and potential. Journal of School Health, 90(8), 665-670.

Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Allen, A., Anderson, E. R., Bohannon, A. X., Coburn, C. E., & Brown, S. L. (2022). Learning at the Boundaries of Research and Practice: A Framework for Understanding Research–Practice Partnerships. *Educational Researcher, 5*1(3), 197-208. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211069073 (Original work published 2022)

Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Coburn, C. E., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field. William T. Grant Foundation.

Fetterman, D. M., Rodríguez-Campos, L., & Zukoski, A. P. (2017). *Collaborative, participatory, and empowerment evaluation: Stakeholder involvement approaches*. Guilford Publications.

Fixsen, D. L., Van Dyke, M., & Blase, K. A. (2019). Implementation science: Fidelity predictions and outcomes. *Chapel Hill, NC: Active Implementation Research Network*.

Fine, M. (2018). Just research in contentious times: Widening the methodological imagination. Teachers College Press.

Garnett, B.R. (2024a, Feb. 9). Vermont House Education Committee, Expert Witness Testimony on Act 67 Community Schools. Montpelier, VT.

Garnett, B.R. (2024b, April 11). Vermont Senate Education Committee, Expert Witness Testimony on H.874 Miscellaneous Education Bill, Montpelier, VT.

Garnett, B.R., & DeCarolis (2022). Agreement Between the Vermont Agency of Education and University of Vermont Regarding Research Utilizing Education Data. Memorandum of Understanding.

Knox, P. N., Garnett, B., DeCarolis, J., & Haensch, J. (2024). Community School Implementation in Rural Vermont. Educational Policy, 08959048241239893.

Knox, P., Garnett, B.R., Kervick, C., DeCarolis, J., & Haensch, J. (2024, April). Community School Implementation and Sustainability in Rural Contexts [Conference session]. American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

Kronick, R. F. (2020). University-assisted community schools in rural America. *Universities and Community Schools, 10*, 100-109.

London, R. A., Glass, R. D., Chang, E., Sabati, S., & Nojan, S. (2022). "We Are About Life Changing Research": Community Partner Perspectives on Community-Engaged Research Collaborations. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 26*(1).

Harkavy, I. (2023). Dewey, implementation, and creating a democratic civic university. *The Pluralist, 18*(1), 49-75.

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., & Hodges, R. A., & Weeks, J. (2013). The promise of university-assisted Community Schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525-540.

Harkavy, I., Hodges, R. A., & Weeks, J. (2022). Transforming Schools, Communities, and Universities: University-Assisted Community Schools as a Case Study. In *Research Anthology on Service Learning and Community Engagement Teaching Practices* (pp. 544-561). IGI Global.

Harkavy, I., Puckett, J.L., & Hodges, R. A. (2020) University-assisted community schools as democratic, anti-racist, justice-and equity-seeking institutions: A growing movement for democracy and social change. *Universities and Community Schools 10*(1): 2-4.

Hernández, L. E., & Rivero, E. (2024). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign* [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute.

Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., Becker, A. B., Allen, A. J., Guzman, J. R., & Lichtenstein, R. (2017). Critical issues in developing and following CBPR principles. Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity, 3, 32-35.

Lewis, C. (2015). What is improvement science? Do we need it in education?. *Educational Researcher, 44*(1), 54-61.

Osher, D., Mayer, M. J., Jagers, R. J., Kendziora, K., & Wood, L. (Eds.). (2019). *Keeping Students Safe and Helping Them Thrive: A Collaborative Handbook on School Safety, Mental Health, and Wellness [2 volumes]*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Quartz, K. H. (2020). Democracy, justice, and education: Framing the impact of university-assisted Community Schools. *Universities and Community Schools, 10*(1), 5-17.

Reigeluth, C. M. (2023). Chaos theory and the sciences of complexity: Foundations for transforming educational systems. In J.M. Spector, B. B. Lockee, & M. D. Childress (Eds.) *Learning, design, and technology: An international compendium of theory, research, practice, and policy* (pp. 1797-1808). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Rimkunas, N., Bronstein, L., & Anderson, E. (2023). University-Assisted Community Schools. *Children and Schools, 45*(1), 3-5.

Vermont Agency of Education. (2021). The Vermont community schools act (Act 67 of 2021). Vermont Agency of Education. https://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/flexible-pathways/Act-67-Community-Schools-Grant-Summaries

Appendix A: Abbreviations and Acronyms

CCSC: Catamount Community Schools Collaborative

VT CS RPP: Vermont Community Schools Research-Practice Partnership

VT-AOE: Vermont Agency of Education

UACS: University-Assisted Community Schools

CS: Community Schools

IHE: Institutions of Higher Education

RPP: Research-Practice-Partnerships

RP^3 : Research-Practice-Policy Partnerships

UVM: University of Vermont

CESS: College of Education and Social Services, University of Vermont

SEA: State Education Agency

LEA: Local Education Agency

ARP-ESSER: American Recovery Plan, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief

The Unlimited Potential Initiative: Reimagining University Partnership in Florida's Community Schools

Eileen M. Glavey and Heather McClellan

Eileen "Missy" Glavey, Ph.D., serves as an Assistant Director at the Center for Community Schools at the University of Central Florida, where she oversees the Unlimited Potential Initiative.

Heather McClellan, MPA, serves as an Assistant Director at the Center for Community Schools at the University of Central Florida, where she oversees Business Operations, Contracts, and Grants.

Abstract

This article examines the Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI) in Florida, a statewide effort led by the University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools to advance the University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) model. . We trace the trajectory from a single statewide center to a network of regional university anchors, representing the next stage in Florida's community school evolution. We also examine how the four public universities in this network—the University of Central Florida (UCF), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), Florida International University (FIU), and the University of South Florida (USF)—are serving as regional centers with their respective school districts to support local implementation of the UACS model. t Drawing on multiple sources, the article explores how partner universities are facilitating inclusive needs-and-assets analyses, mobilizing institutional resources, co-developing programs, and building structures for long-term sustainability. In doing so, UPI both honors the historical roots of community schools and advances the role of universities as enduring anchor institutions committed to educational equity and community well-being.

The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Full-Service Community Schools Program, Project Director Dr. Amy Ellis, Principal Investigator. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.

Introduction

Public education in the United States confronts layered challenges including chronic underfunding, workforce shortages, poverty, growing mental-health needs, and persistent disparities that disproportionately affect students in under resourced communities. These conditions create barriers that schools alone cannot overcome, as student learning and well-being are deeply tied to access to healthcare, stable housing, food security, and broader community resources (Provinzano et al., 2018).

In response, community schools represent a transformative strategy in public education, reimagining schools not merely as places of academic instruction, but as neighborhood hubs that foster comprehensive partnerships and deliver integrated services to meet the holistic needs of students, families, and the wider community (In The Public Interest, 2024; Provinzano et al., 2018).

The rationale behind community schools stems from the understanding that student learning and overall well-being are deeply interconnected with a wide array of social, emotional, and physical needs (Provinzano et al., 2018). They are particularly vital in low-income communities, which often face significant challenges such as poverty, inadequate healthcare, food and housing insecurity, and limited access to high-quality educational and social resources (In The Public Interest, 2024; Provinzano et al., 2018). By addressing these out-of-school barriers to learning, community schools aim to remove obstacles that prevent students from thriving academically and socially (Provinzano et al., 2018). They function as democratic, community-based responses to rapidly changing community problems, engaging young people through action-oriented, collaborative, real-world activities (Daniels et al., 2019; Harkavy et al., 2025).

The effectiveness of community schools is typically built upon four core pillars (Holme et al., 2022; Maier et al., 2017; National Education Association, 2019):

1. **Integrated Student and Family Supports:** Providing on-site or easily accessible health and social services, such as medical, dental, behavioral health, and basic needs like food and clothing (In the Public Interest, 2024; National Education Association, 2019; Provinzano et al., 2018).

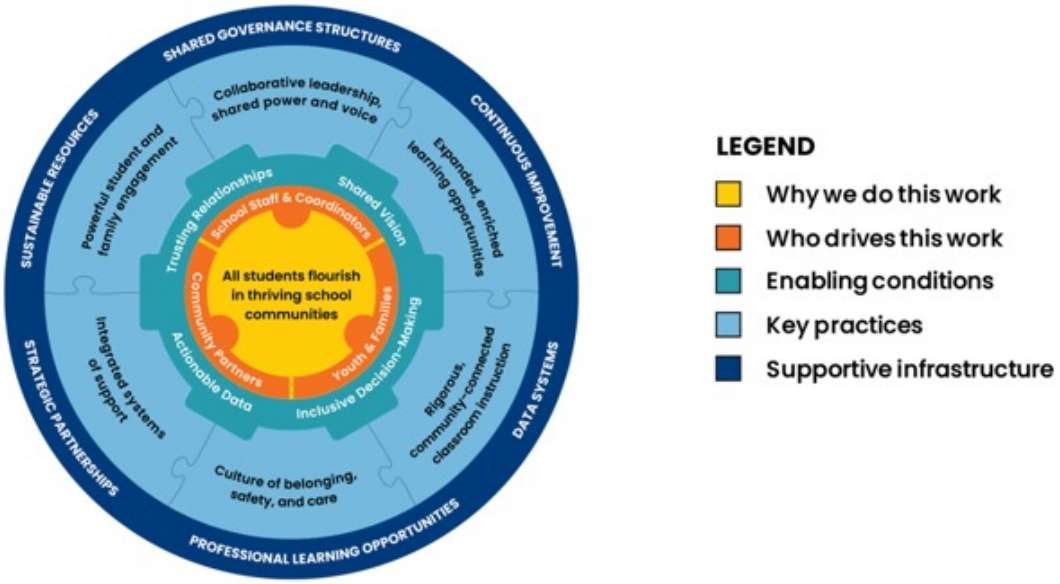
2. **Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities:** Offering additional academic instruction, individualized support, and enrichment activities before, during, and after school hours, as well as on weekends and during summer breaks (National Education Association, 2019; Provinzano et al., 2018).

3. **Family and Community Engagement:** Bringing parents, caregivers, and community members into the school as partners with shared decision-making power, often transforming the school into a center for adult education, recreation, and cultural events (National Education Association, 2019).

4. **Collaborative Leadership and Practices:** Fostering a culture of shared responsibility and collective trust among all stakeholders, including school staff, community organizations, and families, to collectively set goals and make decisions (Mayger & Hochbein, 2021; National Education Association, 2019; Officer et al., 2013).

While the pillars describe the core components of community schools, their success also depends on the processes and conditions that make these pillars sustainable in practice. To this end, the Essentials for Community School Transformation framework (Community Schools Forward, 2023) identifies six interdependent areas of practice necessary for systemic change: (1) a shared vision and shared leadership, (2) intentional opportunities and supports for learning, (3) robust family and community engagement, (4) continuous improvement through data and reflection, (5) an inclusive culture of belonging, and (6) sufficient resources and sustainability structures. Together, the four pillars and six essentials establish the foundations for scaling and sustaining community schools over time.

Figure 1 *Community Schools Forward Essentials for Community Schools Transformation*

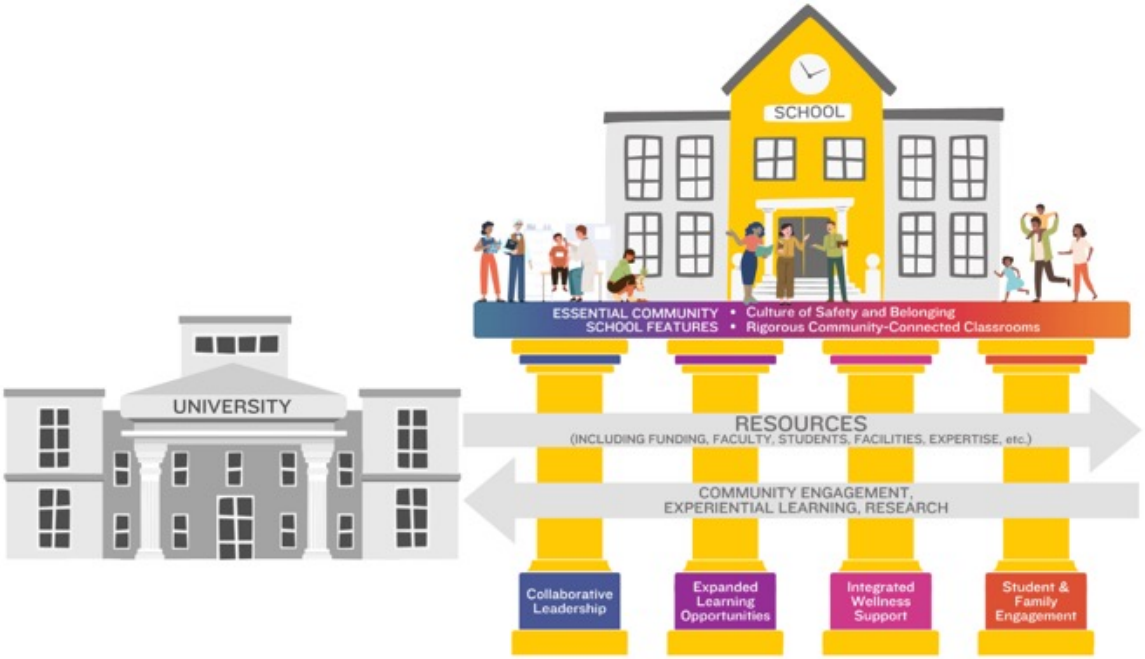


Note. Community Schools Forward (2023)

Within this broader framework, various models of community schools have emerged, each with distinct features and lead partners. One particularly impactful model is the University-Assisted Community School (UACS) (Harkavy et al., 2025; Harkavy et al., 2013). The distinguishing feature of a UACS is its engagement of a university or college as the lead partner, committing broadly based, comprehensive, and sustained support to the school. This partnership is designed not only for mutual transformation—improving both the school and the university—but also for enhancing learning and democratic development within higher education itself (Harkavy et al., 2025; Harkavy et al., 2013). By leveraging their extensive resources—including academic expertise, research capabilities, human capital (faculty, staff, and students), and evaluation methodologies—universities can anchor community schools in the long term, systematically addressing poverty, poor health, and educational disparities (Harkavy et al., 2025; Officer et al., 2013). Florida's Unlimited Potential Initiative illustrates this capacity in practice. Now in its second year, UPI has engaged 24 Title I schools—16 enhancement sites, which are existing community schools (including Community Partnership Schools™) where services are being expanded and aligned with the university-assisted model, and eight new UACS—where more than 100 programs and services are in various stages of development and implementation, with the potential to reach nearly 25,000 students statewide. The alignment of the four pillars, the six essentials, and the University-Assisted Community Schools model is depicted in Figure 2.

This article presents a descriptive case study of Florida's Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI), a statewide effort led by the University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools (UCF CCS), that organizes four public universities into regional centers supporting University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) in partnership with districts and schools. The initiative did not emerge in isolation. It builds on more than a decade of Florida's experience with the Community Partnership Schools™ (CPS) model, which first established universities as core partners in long-term, place-based strategies for educational equity and student success. By tracing this trajectory—from CPS to the current UACS framework—we examine how universities are aligning their resources with community-defined needs and co-leading the development of sustainable community school infrastructure across the state.

Figure 2 *Framework for UPI University-Assisted Community Schools.*



Note. Figure created by the UCF Center for Community Schools, based on concepts from Oakes, Maier, & Daniel (2017); Community Schools Forward (2023); and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania (2025).

Florida's Pathway

Community Partnership Schools

The University of Central Florida (UCF) was a founding partner in advancing the community school strategy to promote educational equity and community well-being. In Florida, the Community Partnership Schools (CPS) model emerged to provide comprehensive supports for students and families in under-resourced communities (Blank et al., 2023; Ellis, 2023). A seminal 2009 visit by Florida leaders to the Children's Aid Society in New York City catalyzed the state's adaptation of the model, integrating Children's Aid practices with the University-Assisted Community School (UACS) approach pioneered at the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center. Participants included Dave Bundy, Chief Executive Officer of the Children's Home Society of Florida; Dr. Mike Frumkin, Dean of UCF's College of Health and Public Affairs; Dr. Sandra Robinson, Dean of UCF's College of Education; and Dr. Nancy Ellis, Director of UCF's Center for Community Partnerships. During their visit with Pete Moses, Chief Executive Officer of the Children's Aid Society, the group examined how New York City's community schools operationalized integrated supports and achieved measurable outcomes for students and families. This experience, rooted in a growing partnership between CHS and UCF, laid the foundation for Florida's Community Partnership Schools initiative—one grounded in collaboration, shared vision, and trust.

Evans High School became the pilot site, formalizing a structure that brought together four core partners—a school district, a lead nonprofit social service agency, a healthcare provider, and a university—through a long-term memorandum of understanding (Blank et al., 2023; Ellis, 2023). Prior to the formal establishment of the UCF Center for Community Schools (UCF CCS) in 2014, the university's College of Health and Public Affairs (COHPA) served as the university partner in the early 2000s, collaborating with the Children's Home Society of Florida and Orange County Public Schools to support Evans High School—Florida's first officially recognized Community Partnership School. UCF CCS later assumed responsibility for administering the statewide Community Partnership Schools grant and providing infrastructure to support model implementation across Florida.

Figure 3 *Four Core Partners of Community Partnership Schools*

Note. University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools

COHPA's Center for Community Partnerships played a pivotal role in connecting UCF's academic departments and resources with the evolving needs of Evans students, families, and the broader Pine Hills community. Faculty, staff, and students contributed through internships, volunteerism, afterschool programming, and faculty-led initiatives, embedding the university in the school's growth and development.

In the spring of 2010, graduate students enrolled in the University of Central Florida's School of Public Administration *Cross-Sectoral Governance* course participated in a community-engaged research project led by Dr. Thomas A. Bryer. The project's purpose was to conduct a community needs assessment to inform the development of a new community school within an existing low-performing high school in an underserved neighborhood. Graduate students from multiple disciplines partnered with Evans High School students to identify local service gaps and community priorities. Together, they examined needs related to food and clothing access, afterschool programming, employability training for parents, and other wraparound supports. Findings from their collaborative report (Bryer, 2011) directly informed early program design decisions at Evans, such as the creation of a school-based food pantry, expansion of afterschool enrichment opportunities, and establishment of family resource and workforce readiness programs. Importantly, the project elevated the voices of Evans students—many from historically marginalized backgrounds—by engaging them as co-researchers in shaping community solutions. Students reported that it was the first time their perspectives had been actively sought and valued, reinforcing their sense of civic agency and belonging. For graduate students, the experience provided applied learning in cross-sector collaboration and participatory research. This integrated, "joined-up service-learning" model exemplified how higher education can advance both academic learning and community empowerment through reciprocal, place-based engagement.

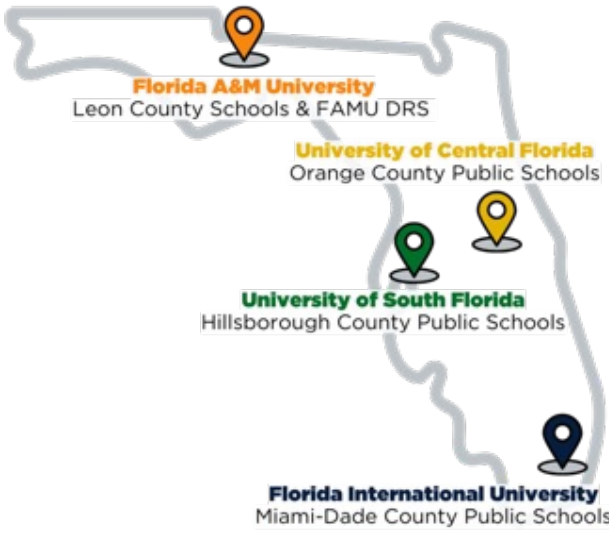
Building on the relationships, research, and community trust established during these early efforts, UCF and its partners formally launched the Evans Community Partnership School—Florida's first of its kind. Following its formal establishment in the 2014–15 school year, the UCF Center for Community Schools (CCS) supported the steady expansion of the CPS model across Florida. What began as a single site grew into a statewide network of fifty CPS schools across more than twenty districts by 2025, with many schools advancing through a structured certification pathway.

In 2018, however, the dissolution of COHPA and the Center for Community Partnerships during a university restructuring disrupted a key function: connecting university expertise directly to school needs. As a large institution with many colleges, programs, and departments, UCF lacked a consistent mechanism for faculty, staff, and students to engage with schools and community partners. Most university–school partnerships emerged from naturally aligned programs such as teacher preparation and school counseling within the UCF College of Community Innovation and Education. While the CPS model continued to grow, the university-assistance component remained inconsistent and underdeveloped for nearly a decade.

Momentum increased in 2019 when the Florida Legislature formally established the Community School Grant Program to bolster UCF CCS's role in allocating funding to support replication and sustainability of the CPS model (Ellis, 2023; Florida Statutes § 1003.64, 2014). Led by the Director, Dr. Amy Ellis, UCF CCS was charged with leading statewide efforts in training, technical assistance, evaluation, and certification. As the financial steward, the center administers state funding, which is awarded to a nonprofit lead partner responsible for coordinating implementation and operations at the school site. The nonprofit hires school-based staff and works closely with the principal and other school personnel to coordinate programs, services, and supports. Together with core partners, they deliver integrated academic, health, and social services tailored to the needs of the school community (Blank et al., 2023; Ellis, 2023).

As the center's internal systems matured, its capacity to extend outward expanded. A critical evolution was the recognition that advancing educational equity required deeper, intentional university partnerships. What began as a natural extension of UCF's role as an anchor institution evolved into a strategic vision: developing a statewide framework to mobilize the full potential of Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in service of community schools. This vision crystallized when UCF CCS leaders posed a transformative question: *What if universities did more than place interns in schools? What if they stood as full partners—alongside families, schools, and communities—in advancing educational equity and community well-being?* That inquiry became the conceptual foundation of the Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI).

A core development of UPI is the establishment of four university-led regional centers coordinated by the UCF Center for Community Schools which serves as the statewide lead. These regional centers are housed at UCF's Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute (TJEEI), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), Florida International University (FIU), and University of South Florida (USF). This decentralized structure allows for robust coverage across Central, North, South, and Central West regions of Florida, including major urban districts like Orlando, Tampa, Miami, and Tallahassee. By distributing leadership across regions, UPI ensures that technical assistance, resources, and partnerships are geographically accessible, regionally responsive, and contextually aligned with the unique needs of each community.



University-Assisted Community Schools

The UACS model approaches school and community improvement through sustained university partnership. The model positions neighborhood schools as core community institutions delivering comprehensive services while galvanizing cross-sector collaboration to address education, health, and economic challenges (Harkavy et al., 2013). Unlike many school-university partnerships, UACS are university-wide, linking teaching, research, and service to community problem-solving and emphasizing democratic development for both K–12 and university students (Harkavy et al., 2025; Holme et al., 2022).

Programmatically, UACS often integrates the four pillars found in effective community schools which include integrated student supports; expanded and enriched learning time; active family and community engagement; and collaborative leadership and practices (Maier et al., 2017; National Education Association, 2019; Provinzano et al., 2018). Operational elements frequently include a coordinating hub on campus; multi-department academic partnerships; a principal who embraces collaborative practice; a school-based UACS coordinator; extended school hours for community use; and Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) that couples learning and research with real-world problem-solving (Harkavy et al., 2025).

The UACS evolution can be traced to West Philadelphia in the mid-1980s through the University of Pennsylvania and community partners; Penn's Netter Center later helped adapt and spread the model nationally (Harkavy et al., 2025; Harkavy et al., 2013). Earlier antecedents include William Rainey Harper's call for universities to serve their cities and Jane Addams's Hull House as a nexus of learning, civic life, and neighborhood improvement (Harkavy, 2025). Research associates community schools, including UACS, with improved attendance, positive behaviors, and academic gains (Britt et al., 2023; In the Public Interest, 2024; Mayger & Hochbein, 2021). UACS have supported cross-disciplinary collaboration on complex public problems and mobilized critical services such as mental health and trauma support (Harkavy et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2022; Britt et al., 2023; Henderson, 2025; Officer et al., 2013).

UACS can also help reduce obstacles to developing democratic civic universities by fostering community-engaged scholarship and collaboration across disciplines to solve complex problems (Harkavy, 2023; Harkavy et al., 2025). By mobilizing university resources, UACS addresses learning barriers both inside and outside the classroom, promoting healthy student development. The effectiveness of UACS lies in its capacity to provide an integrated system of support, making the school a hub for resources that empower students, families, and the wider community (Britt et al., 2023; Henderson, 2025; Officer et al., 2013).

The UACS model has also expanded nationally through the Netter Center's leadership. Since its establishment in 1992, the Netter Center has advanced Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) courses and demonstrated reciprocal, democratic partnerships through programs such as the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative and Moelis Access Science that are a part of a comprehensive UACS approach. Early on, UACS began to be adapted nationally through visits and conferences hosted by the Netter Center, as well as foundation and governmental support to fund 23 adaptation sites. The work grew with Netter's establishment of regional training centers for UACS at institutions including the University of Oklahoma–Tulsa, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, University of California, Los Angeles, Binghamton University, and through the Southeast Regional Coalition for UACS. In 2015, the UACS National Network was formalized, bringing together a professional learning community representing nearly 300 colleges and universities to exchange resources and practices that help advance UACS partnerships. This expansion underscores the growing recognition of universities as crucial partners, indeed powerful lead partners, for community schools.

From CPS to UPI

Launched in 2024, the Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI) was created to restore, strengthen, and expand the university role in Florida's community schools. UPI builds directly on lessons from the past: that universities are essential partners, but their involvement must be sustained through structures that transcend individual colleges, leaders, or projects.

The UCF Center for Community Schools (UCF CCS) continues to serve as the Statewide Technical Assistance Center, leading Florida's community schools' movement through accountability, funding oversight, fidelity, and continuous improvement. Building on this foundation, the Unlimited Potential Initiative (UPI) expands statewide capacity by equipping four regional university anchors—UCF-Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute (TJEEI), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), Florida International University (FIU), and University of South Florida (USF)—to directly support districts and schools in their regions. This structure allows UCF CCS to maintain its leadership

role while multiplying the reach of university engagement, ensuring that higher education remains fully embedded in advancing access and opportunity for students, families, and communities across the state.

By cultivating university partners as regional training and support centers, UPI is broadening the reach of UCF CCS while fostering localized expertise and leadership. Central to this effort is the UCF CCS online Community Schools Training Academy, which provides community school leaders and stakeholders with structured professional development opportunities designed to support grant objectives, onboarding of new personnel, and technical assistance needs. Launched in 2025, the Training Academy is expanding its statewide capacity by providing professional learning and resources that help site level personnel and teams implement the community school strategy across diverse contexts. This approach not only supports schools and communities directly but also strengthens collaboration among universities, creating shared infrastructure to sustain the work with fidelity and impact.

The scope of UPI is twofold: to strengthen the quality and long-term sustainability of existing Community Partnership Schools by deepening university engagement, and to build a scalable infrastructure that enables additional universities, districts, and communities across Florida to adopt and adapt the UACS approach. From its inception, the UCF Center for Community Schools envisioned a model that extended beyond the leadership of a single institution. A central aspiration has been to secure broader buy-in from Florida's universities, recognizing their potential to embed programs, services, and resources within local school districts while amplifying the number of students and families served. In this way, universities fulfill a dual role: advancing educational equity and serving as anchor institutions that foster community development (Taylor & Luter, 2013; Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999).

Sustainability within this framework is multidimensional. Sustainability is not limited to financial viability; it includes institutionalizing practices, cultivating long-term cross-sector partnerships, and aligning university assets with community-identified priorities. As anchor institution theory underscores, universities are uniquely positioned as enduring civic actors, leveraging their stability, resources, and intellectual capital for local benefit (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010; Harkavy et al., 2014). Within the UACS model, this leverage extends across faculty expertise, community-engaged scholarship, student volunteerism, and service learning, embedding mutual benefit into organizational structures.

Research on systems change and civic engagement in higher education underscores the importance of building these practices into the culture, policies, and promotion and tenure systems of universities, ensuring that efforts persist beyond individual champions or episodic funding cycles (Brukardt et al., 2004; Boyer, 1996; Moore McBride & Moreno Sandoval, 2021). UPI's design reflects these insights, emphasizing distributed leadership, where decision-making and accountability are shared among the UCF Center for Community Schools, university, district, and school site partners. The Center serves as the coordinating backbone, providing statewide guidance and convenings, technical assistance, and alignment across regions while empowering each university to lead implementation within its local context. Its durable governance mechanisms, including statewide and regional steering committees, university-led implementation teams, and school-based advisory boards, ensure continuity and shared ownership even as personnel or contexts change. Through reciprocal partnerships between universities and school districts, UPI fosters sustainability at every level—state, university, district, and school site—embedding shared goals, transparent communication, and mutual capacity-building into all aspects of implementation.

The Unlimited Potential Initiative's five-year statewide plan strengthens existing Community Partnership Schools while establishing new University-Assisted Community Schools in Title I schools. Its goals include improving access to integrated services, expanding participation in university pipeline programs, strengthening youth development and learning opportunities, building site coordinator capacity, improving sustainability of new services, and supporting teacher retention, school climate, kindergarten readiness, academic achievement, and attendance.

By moving from a single statewide center to a network of regional university anchors, UPI represents the next stage in Florida's community school evolution. It reclaims the original vision of universities as sustained partners in school

transformation and builds durable structures to keep higher education at the center of advancing equity and opportunity for students, families, and communities. These goals were identified through a collaborative grant development process led by UCF's Center for Community Schools in partnership with faculty from the School of Teacher Education. The team drew from their collective experience and expertise in the field to establish priorities that reflect the evolving needs of schools and communities across Florida.

Operationalizing the University-Assisted Community Schools Model

In this section, we use a descriptive case study approach to examine how the Unlimited Potential Initiative is operationalizing the University-Assisted Community Schools model through a statewide, university-led regional structure in Florida. The objective is to understand how structural shifts in roles, responsibilities, and capacity-building mechanisms can reposition universities as enduring infrastructure for community schools.

The examples below come from the four public universities—UCF-TJEEI, USF, FAMU, and FIU—and their respective school districts, which collectively serve as regional centers supporting local implementation of the UACS model. We look at how university teams within these regional centers are engaged in three early operational areas:

- Facilitating Needs Assessments and Asset Mapping: Exploring the processes and tools used by university teams to identify both challenges and existing strengths within schools and communities, as well as within the university.
- Mobilizing Institutional Resources: Analyzing how universities are beginning to align faculty expertise, student volunteers, and academic programs to support community school priorities.
- Co-developing Priority Programs and Services: Reviewing collaborative processes between university teams, school leaders, and district officials to design and refine programs that address community-identified needs.

To enrich our understanding of these case studies, we examined a diverse but still developing set of data, reflecting the initiative's early stage. They include:

- Grant Documents: The original (2023) proposal to the U.S. Department of Education, outlining UPI's goals and strategies.
- Needs Assessments: Documentation from site-level processes that highlight school and community priorities.
- Quarterly Reports: Submitted by UPI partners, describing implementation progress and preliminary participation data.
- External Evaluation Findings: Early reports from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which is collecting qualitative and quantitative data through interviews, surveys, and case studies.
- Formal Agreements: Drafts and executed MOUs and Data-Sharing Agreements (DSAs) that establish collaborative frameworks between universities, districts, and partners.
- Meeting Notes and Technical Assistance Plans: From UCF CCS, detailing strategy calls, regional meetings, and Communities of Practice.
- Historical Records: From Florida's CPS network (2010–2023), which provides context and a baseline for understanding the evolution of university engagement.

Because UPI is still in its early implementation phase, and many DSAs are not yet fully executed, these sources provide only a partial view. They nonetheless allow for an informed discussion of how universities are beginning to "show up differently" as partners in community change and how they are learning to align their resources with community-identified needs.

Findings and Discussion from UPI's Early Implementation

Facilitating needs assessments and asset mapping

UPI foregrounds community voice and context, emphasizing systematic needs assessments alongside asset mapping to avoid one-size-fits-all programming and deficit framings. Regional university teams convene students, families, educators, and community leaders through surveys, focus groups, and interviews; they also review archival data to identify priorities and strengths. The approach intentionally recognizes communities' "funds of knowledge," (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Heers et al., 2016) balancing needs and assets to foster trust and relevance. Universities leverage research and evaluation expertise, exemplified by USF's Listening Project, which engages doctoral students to plan services aligned with school goals and the four pillars. In practice, priorities such as health access, enrichment, teacher professional learning, and safe spaces translate into tailored strategies (e.g., on-site health navigation, after-school programming, targeted PD).

Mobilizing institutional resources

A hallmark of UACS is university resource mobilization at scale, and early UPI implementation is beginning to reflect this shift. Human capital is central: faculty provide professional learning and problem-solving support, while undergraduate and graduate students contribute through service-learning, internships, federal work-study, and course-embedded fieldwork.

At UCF, Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute (TJEEI) is establishing a structured work-study program that aligns federal student aid employment resources with community school needs. In partnership with UCF Financial Aid and the school district, a joint hiring and onboarding process was created to place undergraduate students in paid roles as tutors, mentors, and family-hub assistants at their UACS sites. Financial Aid staff visited sites to assess conditions and meet principals, and each school is slated to host three to four work-study students who will serve during the academic year, providing consistent, embedded support in literacy, math, and attendance initiatives.

The Professor-in-Residence model at UCF TJEEI deepens the connection between the university and partner schools by placing faculty members on campus each week to work side by side with teachers and students. Professors collaborate with school staff to plan lessons, model effective teaching strategies, and provide coaching that supports classroom practice. They also mentor university students completing coursework or service-learning at those schools, helping them connect what they learn in class with real classroom experience. This shared approach strengthens teaching, supports professional growth, and creates a more seamless bridge between educator preparation and K–12 practice.

At FAMU, enrichment in science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics is being combined with efforts to strengthen health and wellness supports. The schools are working with the university to plan on-site medical, vision, and dental services that address health barriers affecting attendance and academic performance. This partnership model can be adapted in other communities where universities help coordinate access to essential health resources for students and families.

Florida International University demonstrates how universities can link academic programs with community priorities through their partnership model in Miami, The Education Effect. The initiative expands dual-enrollment and experiential learning opportunities and includes an Aquaponics Science Lab, where faculty, teachers, and students collaborate to explore environmental science and sustainability. Students apply biology, chemistry, and water-conservation concepts as they manage a functioning aquaponics system that grows plants and fish. This approach illustrates how universities can co-design hands-on, interdisciplinary learning experiences that make instruction more relevant to local contexts.

At the University of South Florida (USF), research and practice are integrated through two complementary initiatives: the Teacher Leadership Academy and the Listening Project. The Teacher Leadership Academy engages educators from three university-assisted community schools in a cohort-based program focused on teacher growth and leadership. Participants examine the four pillars of community schools, reflect on their influence within school communities, and collaborate on strategies to strengthen

family engagement, peer support, and student success. The Listening Project, led by doctoral students and supported by other graduate researchers, collects and analyzes feedback from teachers, students, and families to inform school improvement. Findings are shared with school leaders to identify priorities and co-develop programs aligned with the UACS model. Both initiatives demonstrate how universities can embed reflection, research, and community voice into continuous improvement processes.

Across all regions, universities are also investing in the systems that sustain this work. Regional UACS centers provide coordination and communication; dedicated staff such as sustainability directors, district coordinators, and program coordinators ensure consistent implementation; and shared data systems like Learning Circle Software are used to monitor progress, document outcomes, and guide continuous improvement.

Co-developing priority programs and services

Shared leadership is embedded in UPI through state, regional, and school-level steering/advisory structures that include students, families, educators, community leaders, and university representatives. This architecture supports joint planning, local autonomy within a common framework, and iterative improvement via quarterly data reviews in collaboration with UCF CCS and UPI independent evaluator, the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

Program examples reflect how responsiveness to local needs drives co-development. FAMU's food pantry initiative, for instance, emerged from family and student surveys identifying food insecurity as a major barrier to learning. In collaboration with school administrators, university staff, and community volunteers, the pantry was designed to meet both immediate needs and long-term sustainability goals. After several months of operation, data showed improved student attendance, higher grades, and fewer disciplinary incidents, prompting the team to expand the program and integrate nutrition education activities.

Similarly, FIU's partnerships with county government and United Way Miami broaden access to social services and family supports, while UCF's Professor-in-Residence model and USF's Teacher Leadership Academy illustrate how universities align their expertise with school and district priorities. Across all regions, programs and services are mapped to the four pillars of the community school framework and refined through ongoing feedback loops that make continuous improvement a regular practice rather than a periodic review.

Institutionalization and Sustainability

Institutionalization of UACS within UPI is advancing through the integration of community school partnerships into each university's broader mission of community engagement, teaching, and research. Faculty, staff, and students across all four universities are increasingly involved in school-based partnerships, ensuring that academic work is meaningfully connected to local needs and long-term community impact.

A critical component of this process at each institution is the development of sustainable systems that support the scalable growth of UACS. While the form of this work varies by university context, it typically involves collaboration among leadership, faculty, and staff to embed UACS practices into the university's existing structures and practices.

This includes creating policies that formalize community engagement expectations, such as requiring faculty to integrate community school partnerships into service-learning courses or recognizing participation in these initiatives in promotion and tenure criteria. Procedures may involve standardized protocols for data sharing with school and district partners, processes for coordinating service-learning projects, or guidelines for co-developing programs with community stakeholders. Governance structures often include advisory councils, steering committees, or interdepartmental working groups that provide oversight, facilitate cross-unit collaboration, and ensure continuity of efforts even as personnel or funding changes. Universities also invest in professional development and capacity-building opportunities to prepare faculty, staff, and students to engage effectively in community schools.

Sustainability is further reinforced through diversified funding streams, collaborative data practices, and co-designed strategies with districts and community-based organizations. Leveraging the U.S. Department of Education grant, UPI is building durable systems that connect university resources directly to schools, including structured engagement protocols, professional learning through the CCS Online Training Academy, and coordinated frameworks for student, staff, and faculty involvement.

The initiative also integrates a robust external evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR). Ongoing data collection, quarterly reviews, and follow-up interviews with university staff create feedback loops that allow for timely adjustments and strengthen the institutional learning process. In this way, sustainability is conceptualized not only as financial viability but also as the institutionalization of practices, the cultivation of cross-sector partnerships, and the alignment of university assets with community-identified priorities.

Universities "Showing Up Differently"

UPI reorients how universities engage in community schools by breaking down silos and organizing multi-disciplinary solutions that address students' holistic needs. Universities step into sustained lead-partner roles with dedicated staff charged with mobilizing and coordinating resources across schools and communities. The work emphasizes mutual transformation: elevating community-engaged scholarship and aligning university missions while expanding opportunities for both K–12 and university students. At the same time, UPI foregrounds democratic practice by working with and for communities, positioning family and youth voice at the center through co-designed programming and shared decision-making processes that counter historic patterns of treating parents as clients rather than co-creators. These commitments are reinforced through formal MOUs, data-sharing agreements, and evaluation routines that build infrastructure for sustainability well beyond the life of a single grant. In practice, these evaluation routines include the co-development of performance indicators with school and community partners, participatory data collection processes that engage students and families as contributors, and continuous feedback loops that translate findings into actionable improvement plans. Regular cross-partner reflection sessions, shared dashboards, and annual progress reviews ensure that data are not only collected but also meaningfully interpreted and used to guide decision-making. Over time, these structures create a culture of shared accountability and learning, embedding evidence-based planning and collective evaluation capacity within schools and partner organizations. By institutionalizing these processes, UPI helps local partnerships sustain collaboration and improvement efforts long after initial funding cycles conclude.

UPI treats university-assisted community schools as core business, not add-ons. Each partner university is establishing a Regional UPI Center to coordinate partnerships, training, and resource alignment; hiring staff to manage integration with schools; and participating in shared data systems to support fidelity and decision-making. University teams from across the state meet regularly to share learning and strategies, while each university also convenes meetings and professional development in its own region to strengthen implementation and ensure alignment across their district. The UCF CCS Training Academy is building statewide capacity around compliance, needs assessment, UACS design, and data use, with micro-credentialing in development. Evaluation led by AIR provides ongoing formative feedback through interviews, surveys, and data analyses that guide adjustments along the way. Sustainability planning is embedded throughout, with the UCF CCS working alongside the Florida Department of Education, local districts, and university leadership to develop financial and policy pathways. Statewide sustainability conferences foster shared language and strategy, while inter-university collaboration is designed to persist and expand—seeding durable university partnerships across districts statewide.

Lessons learned and Recommendations

Several lessons emerge from UPI's design and early implementation and from the broader UACS literature.

1. **Sustained institutional commitment matters.** Long-term agreements and integration into university operations are prerequisites for systemic change; Florida's CPS MOUs exemplify durable partnership structures.

2. **Central coordination with dedicated staffing is essential.** Campus centers and named liaison roles at schools and universities enable alignment across complex organizations and ensure that supports are reliable and continuous (Harkavy et al., 2025).

3. **Authentic shared leadership builds trust and relevance.** Steering and advisory bodies with students, families, educators, community leaders, and university personnel help avoid top-down designs and ground decisions in lived experience.

4. **Rigorous needs-and-assets work prevents one-size-fits-all programming.** University research capacity can strengthen inclusive data collection and analysis while honoring community "funds of knowledge."

5. **Mobilize broadly, integrate deeply.** Sustainability depends on leveraging the full range of university assets—not just one program or office. Faculty expertise, student engagement, academic offerings, health and wellness services, and research functions can be orchestrated to meet the four pillars, address barriers to learning, and strengthen the core academic program (Britt et al., 2023; Maier et al., 2017).

6. **Plan for sustainability from the start.** From the outset, UPI has treated sustainability not as an end-stage concern but as a guiding principle of design. Planning emphasizes multiple dimensions: diversifying funding beyond any single source, aligning university efforts with state and district priorities, formalizing data practices to demonstrate progress and accountability, and cultivating political will through transparent sharing of results. Equally important, these strategies are carried out with fidelity to community voice, ensuring that sustainability is not achieved at the expense of responsiveness or equity. This approach reflects a deliberate effort to embed sustainability into every layer of implementation, rather than addressing it only when external funding sunsets.

7. **Evaluate for learning, not just compliance.** Mixed-methods evaluation supports continuous improvement and helps surface promising practices and implementation challenges for replication or adaptation (Britt et al., 2023; Mayger & Hochbein, 2021).

8. **Name the limits and the larger fight.** University-Assisted Community Schools can make a measurable difference by mitigating the effects of poverty and other out-of-school factors. However, they cannot by themselves resolve deeper structural inequities such as chronic underfunding, deteriorating facilities, or limited regional economic opportunities. For sustainability, universities need to pair site-level engagement with policy advocacy. Doing so helps ensure the model strengthens public systems rather than unintentionally reinforcing narratives that shift governmental responsibility to private institutions.

Recognizing that the long-term sustainability of the UACS model cannot rest on a single institution or funding source, particularly in a time when federal funding remains uncertain, UCF has prioritized building a collective, statewide coalition of higher education partners. Through UPI, UCF CCS works with peer institutions across Florida to establish regional centers that function as training, technical assistance, and research centers.

Together, participating universities are developing shared professional development opportunities, co-designing evaluation and data systems, and aligning research and teaching with the goals of community school partnerships. By coordinating efforts, universities can leverage state and local resources, diversify funding streams, and reduce reliance on federal appropriations as the sole driver of sustainability.

From UCF CCS's perspective, a key lesson has been the importance of balancing vision with flexibility. While a statewide framework provides coherence and consistency, each school and community must be supported in shaping the work to meet their unique needs. Universities can and should serve as anchors in this process, but long-term success depends on empowering schools and communities to lead in ways that reflect their priorities and assets.

Equally critical is securing high-level university leadership buy-in as early as possible. Institutional leaders are uniquely positioned to help navigate complex systems, mobilize cross-college resources, and strategize innovative and sustainable measures that endure

beyond the life of a single grant. Their commitment signals to faculty, staff, and external partners that community engagement is not peripheral but central to the university's mission. Leadership buy-in can take many forms, including:

- Faculty incentives that recognize community-engaged research, teaching, and service as valued contributions in tenure and promotion processes.
- Course buy-outs or workload adjustments that enable faculty to dedicate meaningful time to partnership activities.
- Public advocacy and visible endorsement of the UACS model to build credibility and momentum within the university community.
- Institutional investment in infrastructure, such as staff support, professional development opportunities, and seed funding to pilot innovative approaches.

Statewide sustainability conferences hosted by UCF CCS further reinforce this work by convening university partners, districts, site coordinators, and evaluators to align priorities and share strategies. In addition, UPI fosters inter-university collaboration through a statewide learning exchange and regional steering committees, ensuring that the four partner universities share resources, address challenges collectively, and build capacity together. These collaborative structures create a foundation for scaling the model across Florida and lay the groundwork for bringing additional universities into the network in the future.

Conclusion

Florida's Unlimited Potential Initiative provides an instructive case of universities stepping into sustained, co-creative roles within a statewide community schools strategy. By designing a regional, university-led structure, facilitating rigorous needs and assets analyses, mobilizing institutional resources across departments, and building shared leadership with schools and communities, UPI is working to move universities from episodic support to durable civic infrastructure. This approach is consistent with the UACS tradition, from Dewey's social-center vision to Penn's Netter Center, and demonstrates how higher education can advance democratic learning while responding to community-identified priorities (Harkavy et al., 2025; Harkavy et al., 2013).

Early UPI UACS implementation points to meaningful shifts: universities are coordinating at scale, embedding community-engaged scholarship in their missions, strengthening teacher and student supports, and co-producing solutions with families and community partners. At the same time, the work is unfolding amid funding uncertainty, policy shifts, and longstanding inequities that extend beyond the reach of any single initiative. Continued attention to sustainability, transparent evaluation, and policy context will be essential for deepening and sustaining progress. UPI has invested early in sustainability by convening statewide conferences that brought together more than 100 university, district, and community leaders to align strategies and plan for long-term viability of the work. In this light, UPI represents less a finished blueprint than an evolving framework that highlights both the potential and the constraints of university-assisted strategies within complex educational systems for advancing accessible, community-driven school transformation (Britt et al., 2023; Maier et al., 2017; Provinzano et al., 2018; Harkavy et al., 2013; Harkavy et al., 2025).

References

Blank, M., Harkavy, I., Quinn, J., Villarreal, L., & Goodman, D. (2023). *Community schools revolution: Building partnerships, transforming lives, advancing democracy.* Collaborative Communications Group.

Britt, N., Bates, S., Anderson-Butcher, D., Edwards, R., Noteman, N., Brady, C., DuMond, L., & Childs, T. M. (2023). University-assisted community schools as partners in neighborhood revitalization efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Children & Schools, 45*(1), 35–45. https://academic.oup.com/cs/article/45/1/35/6839843

Bryer, T. A. (2011). *Joined-up service-learning: Graduate-high school partnerships at Evans High School* [PDF]. University of Central Florida. https://ucf-my.sharepoint.com/personal/he940230_ucf_edu/Documents/Evans%20Community%20School/Tom%20Bryer/Joined%20up%20Service%20Learning_Bryer.pdf

Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/community-schools-forward

Ellis, A. (2023). The Community Schools Concept. In: Plante, J.D., Ellis, A. (Eds.) *Community partnership schools. Rethinking university-community policy connections* (pp. 1-20). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16404-0_1

Florida Statute § 1003.64 (2024). Community School Grant Program. https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2024/1003.64

Gonzalez, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.) (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households and classrooms.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.

Harkavy, I. (2023). Dewey, implementation, and creating a democratic civic university. *The Pluralist, 18*(1), 49-75.

Harkavy, I., Balfanz, R., & Sun, M. (2025). Realizing higher education's democratic promise through university-assisted community schools. In J. Dresden, J. Ferrara, J. E. Neapolitan, & D. Yendol-Hoppey (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of school–university partnerships* (pp. 467–482). Cambridge University Press.

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., Hodges, R. A., & Weeks, J. (2013). The promise of university-assisted community schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525–540. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.834789

Heers, M., Van Klaveren, C., Groot, W., & Maassen van den Brink, H. (2016). Community schools: What we know and what we need to know. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 1016–1051. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315627365

Henderson, I. (2025, July 22). How Florida's community partnership schools are transforming lives. *Tampa Bay Times.* https://www.tampabay.com/viewpoints/2025/07/22/how-floridas-community-partnership-schools-are-transforming-lives-column/

Holme, J. J., Castro, A. J., Germain, E., Haynes, M., Sikes, C. L., & Barnes, M. (2022). Community schools as an urban school reform strategy: Examining partnerships, governance, and sustainability through the lens of the full-service community schools grant program. *Educational Policy, 36*(3), 520–549. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820901479

In the Public Interest. (2024). *How Community Schools are Transforming Public Education.* https://inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ITPI_NPE-PFL_CommSchools_2024FINAL.pdf

Lee, Y., Bronstein, L., & Cook, K. (2023). Telemental health for rural university-assisted community schools. *Children & Schools, 45*(1), 46–59. https://academic.oup.com/cs/article/45/1/46/6835767

Maier, A. (2022). Technical assistance for community schools: Enabling strong implementation. *Learning Policy Institute.* https://doi.org/10.54300/222.688

Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence. *Learning Policy Institute.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606765.pdf

Mayger, L. K., & Hochbein, C. D. (2021). Growing connected: Relational trust and social capital in community schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 26*(3), 210–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2020.1824676

National Education Association. (2019, December 11). *What are community schools?* [Video]. National Education Association: Community Schools. https://www.nea.org/student-success/great-public-schools/community-schools/what-are-they

Netter Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania. (2025, September 9). *University-assisted community schools.* https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/what-we-do/university-assisted-community-schools

Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2017). *Community schools: An evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement* (Brief). National Education Policy Center / Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community_Schools_Evidence_Based_Strategy_BRIEF.pdf

Officer, S. D. H., Grim, J., Medina, M. A., Bringle, R. G., & Foreman, A. (2013). Strengthening community schools through university partnerships. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 564–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.835152

Provinzano, K. T., Sondergeld, T., & Knaggs, C. M. (2020). Community Schools as a sustainable comprehensive school reform strategy: A transformative mixed methods perspective. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher, 32*(1). 3-30.

Provinzano, K. T., Riley, R., Levine, B., &Grant, A. (2018). Community schools and the role of university-school-community collaboration, *Metropolitan Universities, 29*(2), 91-103.

University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools. (2023). *Final Proposal FSCS UCF: Unlimited Potential Community Schools (UPCS) Project* [Grant proposal].

University of Central Florida Center for Community Schools. (2025). *Full-Service Community School Annual Performance Report FY2223 Grantee* [Unpublished internal document].

Launching University-Assisted Community Schools Across New York State

Naorah Rimkunas and Laura R. Bronstein

Naorah Rimkunas, PhD is Assistant Professor of Community Schools in the College of Community & Public Affairs and Associate Director of the Couper-Owens Center for Community Schools at Binghamton University – State University of New York (SUNY). She also serves as Associate Director for the University-Assisted Community Schools National Network.

Laura R. Bronstein, PhD is a SUNY Distinguished Professor, founding member of the Binghamton University Department of Social Work, Dean of the College of Community & Public Affairs, and Founding Director of Binghamton University Center for Community Schools, which is now the Couper-Owens Center for Community Schools.

Abstract

This article traces the evolution of Binghamton University's Community Schools Program into a regional and statewide leader of University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS). It examines how the program, with dedicated faculty, a focus on community-engaged research and local implementation, and a robust technical assistance infrastructure, can effectively advance UACS across a region. We discuss the role of UACS in small-town and rural contexts, particularly in addressing school mental health, family engagement, and system collaboration. The article highlights key milestones and funding streams—from early New York State Promise Zone efforts to current federally funded mental health initiatives—and describes how technical assistance has reached over 300 school districts and community organizations. We conclude with an overview of the emerging SUNY-UACS expansion, a statewide initiative led by Binghamton University in partnership with SUNY System Administration and the Netter Center, positioning UACS as a replicable model for university systems working with diverse communities.

Introduction

It has been a 15-year evolution of the University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) model at Binghamton University, led and coordinated by the Couper-Owens Center for Community Schools. Formerly known as the Binghamton University Center for Community Schools, the Center was renamed in 2025 in recognition of a generous gift from Janet Watrous and Robert Kochersberger.[1] In this paper, we describe key milestones in developing and expanding the Community Schools Program as part of the Couper-Owens Center, which leads local UACS implementation through practice and academic partnerships, provides technical assistance, and advances community-engaged research. We also highlight the emerging SUNY-UACS expansion initiative, led by the Couper-Owens Center in partnership with SUNY System Administration and supported by the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at Penn.

By way of context, Binghamton University is a mid-sized premier public research university (R1) and part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system of 64 campuses. Located in New York's Southern Tier,[2] the university has multiple campuses in the greater Binghamton area that span small cities and towns, and neighbors the surrounding rural communities. Binghamton University, a major economic driver in the area, views community partnerships as a way to revitalize the community and to create rich opportunities for learning and research. Our students are a core component of Binghamton University's engagement strategy and the majority of our 18,000+ students take part in credit- and/or non-credit-bearing high-impact educational activities through community-engaged learning (CEL) courses, volunteering, and community-based internship opportunities. To further demonstrate its commitment to community engagement, at the time of this writing, Binghamton University is applying for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, a rigorous, elective classification that demonstrates how the institution reflects community engagement through its mission, identity, and commitments. The application features our University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) work, housed in the College of Community and Public Affairs, and considered the signature civic engagement strategy of the university.

UACS in Small Towns and Rural Communities

While there were important community schools efforts in rural communities[3], significant early activity occurred in urban centers, with their high rates of poverty coupled with better access to services (Bronstein et al., 2020). When linked to universities, some have become UACS, where "institutions of higher education play an intentional role in community schools by connecting needed resources to school districts, community organizations, and community leaders to democratically engage and mobilize resources around youth" (Rimkunas et al., 2023, p.3). The UACS strategy was first developed by the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1980s and has been advanced by the UACS National Network (Benson et al., 2017; Blank et al., 2023). Increasingly, UACS are being adopted in small towns and rural communities, such as in upstate New York, Vermont, and North Carolina, where poverty combined with the lack of service concentration and limited public transportation as compared with urban areas creates unique challenges for youth and families. Indeed, community schools, including UACS in rural areas, present a cost-effective way to mitigate the negative impact of poverty on children's education (Williams, 2010).

Despite receiving less attention than larger districts, more students in the United States attend rural schools than attend the 100 largest U.S. school districts combined (Showalter et al., 2023). Rural areas face a number of unique challenges as compared to large

[1] Janet Watrous and Robert Kochersberger dedicated the Center in honor of Watrous' family, the Coupers, and Kochersberger's mother, Marjorie Mae Owens.

[2] The Southern Tier is a geographic subregion broadly defined as the southernmost counties of the broader upstate region of New York State.

[3] From 1912 to 1932, over 5,000 school-buildings, "Rosenwald Schools," were built through a partnership between Booker T. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute, and Julius Rosenwald, philanthropist and president of Sears Roebuck, in collaboration with rural Black communities across the South. By 1928, approximately one-third of all Black rural schoolchildren in the region attended a Rosenwald School (see Hoffschwelle, 2006). Elsie Clapp, in 1929, began leading rural community schools efforts in Kentucky at the Ballard School, and later in 1934 at the Arthurdale School in West Virginia (see Clapp, 1939 and Stack, 2016). She sought to position these schools as the center of social life, building community trust by attending to the health and recreational needs of youth and families while integrating local culture, art, and music into the curriculum.

cities. For example, rural schools struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers due to lower salaries and the burden of working multiple roles that can sometimes require additional certifications (Bronstein & Mason, 2016). Limited housing, recreational activities, social opportunities, and employment for their partners also make it difficult to recruit teachers (Showalter et al., 2023; Williams, 2013). Moreover, services in rural areas are typically stretched across large geographic areas, making transportation a larger share of school budgets, often disproportionately burdensome relative to instructional costs (Showalter et al., 2023).

There is also a higher prevalence of mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders in rural youth than for children living in cities and suburbs (Robinson et al, 2017), and yet rural schools have the highest ratios of students to mental health providers where one school counselor or psychologist can be tasked to serve hundreds of students alone (Showalter, 2023). Limited access to mental health care can lead to untreated conditions or significant delays in receiving appropriate care. Stigma can also inhibit accessing mental health care in close-knit rural communities (Bronstein & Mason, 2016). In the face of these challenges, partnering with colleges and universities is increasingly an effective way to address the service challenges in small towns and rural communities (Bronstein et al., 2020). In New York State, Binghamton University has led the development of UACS through a regional community schools initiative, effectively linking university resources to local schools across three counties.

Milestones: 2009–present

Local Implementation: School Mental Health through UACS

After implementing smaller school-based initiatives, several faculty in the College of Community and Public Affairs secured a federal Safe Schools-Healthy Students (SS-HS) grant. This grant, in collaboration with Broome-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BT BOCES[4]), laid the foundation for the UACS model at Binghamton. Through this partnership, we worked with 13 school districts and local agencies to advance safe school environments, prevent substance abuse and violence, improve access to mental health services, and advance a child and family centered approach to schooling. Although not officially a community schools model at the time, these beginning years opened a new opportunity to build a county-wide effort over the next decade.

When the SS-HS grant concluded in 2013, the New York State Governor's Office introduced new priorities based on recommendations from the New York State Education Reform Commission. One key initiative recommended expanding community schools. This development aligned with the state's Promise Zone (PZ) initiative, which was designed to bridge gaps between education and mental health. We again partnered with BT BOCES and university officials to advocate for Broome County to become New York's fifth Promise Zone–despite NYS having no plans for additional funding. Our proposal to the state outlined key goals, such as extending the PZ model to smaller cities and rural areas, fostering school-community partnerships with SUNY, improving collaboration across districts, and supporting local economic development. The state approved this request, and Broome County has since been designated and funded annually as a NYS Promise Zone.

Binghamton University led this initiative until 2022. Now Broome-Tioga BOCES oversees the Promise Zone work, with the Couper-Owens Center continuing to collaborate as a critical partner. The Community Schools Regional Advisory, which includes partners from the Couper-Owens Center, BT BOCES, Broome County Mental Health Department, and school districts in Broome and Tioga counties, meets quarterly to guide community schools implementation in the districts through shared resources and expertise.

In 2023 and 2024, the Couper-Owens Center was awarded three large Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration grants from the U.S. Department of Education. These grants address the increasing mental health challenges among youth,

[1] https://www.btboces.org/AboutBOCES.aspx

which have been significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementation builds on 15 years of partnership between the university and school districts and aims to prepare social work students to deliver skill-rich solution-focused mental health services and family engagement practices expanding support for youth and families through a UACS lens.

The grants are being implemented in five rural or small-town school districts in Broome County, one in Tioga County, and two in Chenango County, with schools selected based on their high ratio of students to mental health providers, and also their rurality. Each district is provided a Mental Health Site Supervisor, hired by the university, who collaborate with existing Community School Coordinators (CSCs) or take on the CSC role themselves. They supervise up to four social work students each, who provide mental health and wellness interventions both in schools, at home, and via telehealth services (Lee, Bronstein, & Cook, 2023). The Couper-Owens Center staff and interns offer direct support to students and families and assist them in navigating referrals, addressing practical barriers such as transportation, and helping them advocate for the appropriate services, while also tackling concerns about privacy, shame, and stigma. Through these grants, we have increased the number of mental health providers in the six districts that began this work in 2023 by 270% and expect similar gains in Chenango County.

Family engagement is a core component of these grants, building on the Family Café model developed by Binghamton University Social Work faculty to support rural families facing trauma and toxic stress (Blitz et al., 2013; Bronstein et al., 2020). An initial evaluation of efforts leading up to these grants showed promising results, with 86% of participants feeling more connected to their school and 75% to their children (Sadlon, 2019). Through the school mental health grants, Family Cafés have been expanded to six school districts, with two more set to join in 2025.

Additionally, the Couper-Owens Center piloted the two-year Leadership Institute for Family Engagement in two districts, with plans to expand to additional districts over the next three years. Based on the Dual Capacity Framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) and the Six Types of Involvement Framework (Epstein et al., 2019), the leadership institute is a seven-month, project-based program designed to cultivate Family Engagement Leaders. Participants, including school staff, administrators, family members, Community School staff, students, and community partners, engaged in six professional development workshops aimed at bridging knowledge and skills to enhance family engagement.

The Leadership Institute for Family Engagement has three main goals: to create a network of Family Engagement Leaders, develop a school-wide project focused on equity, and foster sustainable growth through shared outcomes. Schools used needs assessment data to target areas such as pre-kindergarten transitions or enhancing high school belonging. Superintendents and principals selected teams, including teachers and families, who met six times throughout the academic year with Couper-Owens Center staff to become family engagement advocates. Workshop sessions covered topics like building family partnerships, achieving student success, and expanding community connections. By the end of year one, teams design research-based projects promoting equity and collaboration that are implemented in year two. The sessions concluded with a celebration honoring their commitment. Evaluation findings from the pilot were positive, with all participants agreeing that their teams effectively collaborated and the majority felt well prepared to implement their projects. Participants also grew in their understanding of inclusive engagement, equity, and research skills. One participant noted about their team that "we were all receptive to other members' thoughts and critiques," and another said, "everyone was fully engaged in conversations, and all had a voice at the table."

In addition to immediate mental health support, these grants promote wellness in a variety of ways. One upcoming proposed project, for example, includes a partnership with a local theater and Binghamton University's School of the Arts to engage students in creative expression and career exploration. Another proposed project addresses youth climate anxiety, enabling students to track their carbon footprints through a mobile app, encouraging eco-friendly choices and proactive climate action (Isaacs, 2022).

Although these grants were discontinued by the U.S. Department of Education in April 2025 (as they were for other grantees across the nation), we have been able to sustain this initiative at a reduced scale through an innovative new co-

service agreement with our local BOCES. This partnership underscores both the strength of our collaboration and the commitment of participating school districts to maintain vital school-based mental health and family engagement supports. District leaders consistently affirm the value of their partnership with Binghamton University and the UACS approach.

Community Schools Technical Assistance

In tandem with our local implementation, the Couper-Owens Center has advanced the development of community schools across New York and New Jersey through numerous technical assistance initiatives with funding from New York State Department of Education (NYSED) and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania.

NYSED Central/Western Community Schools Technical Assistance Center

Since 2018, the Couper-Owens Center has offered technical assistance to school districts to launch community schools supported by an ongoing grant from NYSED. The New York State Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) aim to "build on the existing strengths of school districts to remove barriers to learning and support the whole child through technical assistance, professional development, and the creation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) that advance the community schools strategy" (NYS Community Schools TAC, 2024). The state is divided into three regions for this initiative: New York City, the Eastern Region, and the Central/Western (C/W) Region. The Couper-Owens Center was awarded funding for the C/W Region for both the first and second five-year terms.

In this role, the C/W TAC, along with Couper-Owens Center faculty and staff, provides support to over 300 school districts in their efforts to establish and sustain community schools. This support is delivered through site visits, webinars, written resources, and convenings. Key activities have included helping districts conduct and analyze needs assessments, assisting with presentations to school boards, and hosting regional roundtables on community schools. Webinars have covered topics such as Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) (PBIS Rewards, 2024) and School-Based Mental Health (NYS OMH, 2024). A major focus of the TAC is building strong networks for Community School Coordinators (CSCs) and supporting those interested in launching community schools through statewide CoPs tailored to regional needs. The TAC also supports community schools seeking to partner with higher education by facilitating connections with local colleges and universities, and where possible, engaging the Couper-Owens Center team for consultations through in-person meetings, webinars, and similar development opportunities.

NYSED Cares for Communities

In 2021, during the pandemic, NYSED introduced the New York State Cares for Communities CARES Act Amendment, providing additional funding to Couper-Owens Center and Fordham University who were implementing Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers. This initiative focused on supporting seven CoPs for community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs), allowing them to learn about the community schools model and share best practices. The effort also included a series of webinars and self-paced courses addressing trauma, social-emotional learning, equity, and leadership. These funds were directed toward nonprofit and faith-based organizations in communities with the highest poverty rates. The Couper-Owens Center developed Requests for Proposals and awarded $450,000 to 20 partners across 18 counties, ultimately serving 114 families and 173 children. Funded projects included efforts such as providing technology to students without access to remote learning, staff training on family engagement to support youth literacy, and expanding staff hours to offer additional services.

One partner, BestSelf Behavioral Health, Inc. at the Buffalo Public Schools, utilized this funding to support the creation of a Middle School Zen Café, a safe space where middle school participants co-created a social "dinner club" where they planned menus and cooked meals together. During dinner, they discussed topics such as mental health and wellness, social emotional learning, stress management, creative expression, and strategies for navigating a confusing world. Although

there were many successes reported for this program, one example stands out. In the aftermath of a racist shooting in a grocery store, food shopping became traumatic for many community members. The Zen Café model provided a space for community members to come together over a meal to process their shared tragedy together.

Another program demonstrated how small grants can lead to lasting, larger-scale funding. The Center for Family Life and Recovery was initially awarded support to provide a Prevention Specialist one day per week in the Adirondack Central School District in rural Booneville, NY. The program's clear positive impact enabled the district to secure funding to expand the role to two days per week. Many partners observed that the model of funding external agencies helped to foster enduring partnerships that continued well beyond the original grants, with many agencies surpassing their initial goals. In addition, the professional development we offered strengthened the ability of CBOs and FBOs to effectively adapt and implement the UACS approach.

NYSED 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) Technical Assistance Resource Center

In 2021, the Couper-Owens Center received another technical assistance grant from NYSED to serve as the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) Technical Assistance Resource Center for all of New York State beyond New York City. Through this initiative, the center supports integrating after-school programs funded by these grants with other school initiatives, particularly through a UACS approach. This approach provides education on community schools for those funded through the 21CCLC grants and highlights the important role after-school programs play in them, while also supporting coordination across various district programs to reduce fragmentation and avoid duplication of services.

A major contribution of the Couper-Owens Center has been developing and sharing a comprehensive toolkit on family engagement (New York 21st Century Community Learning Centers, 2023), which underscores the vital role families play in successful community engagement. Designed for programs operating before and after school, on weekends, and during summer, the toolkit offers guidance, examples, and resources to help staff build strong, inclusive partnerships with families. By centering family involvement, the center continues to align after-school programs with broader educational and community objectives within the UACS framework.

Netter Center UACS Regional Training Center for New York and New Jersey

From 2020 to 2023, the Couper-Owens Center received a grant from the Netter Center to serve as a technical assistance provider for institutions of higher education (IHEs) in New York and New Jersey, helping them introduce and develop University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) in their communities. The Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania selected Binghamton University as the fifth regional training center for UACS in 2020. This initiative focused on six primary goals: building a database of IHEs in NY and NJ, conducting outreach, developing CoPs, performing needs assessments, offering tailored and universal technical assistance to participating IHEs, and hosting annual conferences. As we worked toward the first goal, the database grew to include over 700 IHEs, industry and community partners, and school districts. This expansion was supported by "networking with networks" such as the Coalition for Community Schools, Partners for Campus Community Engagement, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), Network for Youth Success, Finger Lakes Community Schools, and the New Jersey Coalition for Community Schools, among others. It also set the stage for expanding UACS throughout the SUNY system, which now includes 17 campuses who are working with us to implement the approach.

In summary, the Couper-Owens Center has significantly advanced UACS and the community schools model in general across New York and New Jersey by offering comprehensive technical assistance to schools, districts, community partners, and higher education. Through grants from NYSED and the Netter Center, the center continues to support hundreds of school districts and community-based organizations by providing resources, conducting training, and fostering CoPs. This extensive, collaborative technical assistance effort highlights the Couper-Owens Center's commitment to strengthening educational partnerships and expanding the UACS model throughout the region.

Advancing UACS at Binghamton University: The Community Schools Program

As our local implementation and technical assistance work has grown, our focus has expanded so that, in 2024, the College of Community and Public Affairs launched the Community Schools Program as part of the Couper-Owens Center with three primary arms: academics, research and practice. Nested in the academic arm are dedicated community schools faculty, courses, and the Reimagining Schools Research Lab; the research arm supports an array of research and evaluation initiatives by our three community schools faculty and other multidisciplinary scholars across campus; and the practice arm supports local implementation and technical assistance.

Community Schools Faculty

Binghamton University's dedicated academic program in community schools was initially launched in 2022 and quickly grew to include three full-time faculty members: an Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and full Professor. Notably, two of these faculty positions were funded through state resources specifically provided to the university beyond its typical allocation, aimed at hiring "high-profile" faculty with strong grant acquisition skills. This team is highly collaborative and have developed a multi-year research agenda on community schools. A key focus is developing a suite of measurement tools to assess the effectiveness of community schools. They are also exploring the relationship between community schools and community vitality, and recently conducted the largest study of community school coordinators to date to gain a deeper understanding of their roles, embeddedness, and impact in their schools. They have also launched a research-practice partnership with a rural school district that has been a longstanding community schools partner. A major focus of this scholarship is assessing and guiding the Couper-Owens Center's current local implementation efforts. Successes from different school districts include increasing graduation rates up to 10%, increasing ELA scores by up to 30%, and, as noted earlier, substantially increasing mental health supports. Further, assessments of the center's social work interns across two cohorts found that they grew in their confidence in knowledge and skills and reported that the supplemental in-service trainings provided by the center have been effective in supporting their learning.

The addition of community schools faculty marks a significant advancement in expanding UACS across Binghamton University. Binghamton University has championed interdisciplinary research and practice since it embarked on community school efforts. Now, community schools faculty and Couper-Owens Center leadership have launched a campus-wide system to engage faculty in applied community-based research with the UACS model. For instance, faculty from the Community Schools Program and from the department of Teaching, Learning, and Educational Leadership collaborate on simulating family engagement practices with preservice teachers and rural families, fostering applied learning and building a research-practice partnership.

Community schools faculty also lead interdisciplinary research through the *ReImagining Schools* Research Lab, founded in 2022. This lab connects undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students with community schools research and community-engaged research methods. With faculty mentorship, students support various studies, contribute to publications, and earn independent study credits. Currently, students are involved in projects about rural mental health resources in schools, the roles of community school coordinators, and parent-child engagement in STEM activities. Community schools faculty also contribute to a developing initiative addressing climate anxiety through peer-to-peer climate action and leadership development in local community schools. This approach enriches research and offers valuable experiences to students and faculty alike.

Community Schools Coursework

Community schools faculty also lead coursework, including the *ReImagining Schools* undergraduate class and the nation's only online Advanced Certificate in Community Schools. Launched in 2014, the ReImagining Schools class is a designated

community engaged learning course by the university's Center for Civic Engagement and involves significant fieldwork in partnership with local school districts. The class is designed around problem-solving learning, where students grapple with local examples of barriers to education, and use the UACS framework to propose solutions. The service-learning component of the class pairs university students with local high school students enrolled in a community problem-solving course called *Citizens in Action*. Together, they engage in "near-peer" support and mutual learning, collaborating to develop plans that address community challenges identified in both courses.

For advanced training in community schools, Binghamton University developed an online certificate program in partnership with the National Center for Community Schools. Launched in 2019 and updated in the post-pandemic landscape in 2023, the five-course sequence covers whole-child education, community school structures and programs, and culminates in a capstone project. Students use the capstone project to design and implement community schools projects in their own schools. The program has awarded certificates of completion to a variety of students including community schools coordinators, superintendents, and school social workers.

Student Engagement

Binghamton University students engage with community schools in various ways, including coursework and participation in the *ReImagining Schools* Research Lab, as noted above. They also learn about and participate in community schools through internships. Since 2014, the Couper-Owens Center has placed hundreds of social work students in partnering community schools to support school mental health initiatives and workforce preparation.

We also partner with Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE). Dedicated to building community partnerships and fostering engaged citizens, CCE places university students in local schools through its Youth Initiative. In collaboration with the Couper-Owens Center and community school coordinators, CCE matches volunteers and interns with each school's unique needs. Starting with 65 placements in 2014, participation has grown to 582 students in 2023 who contributed over 24 thousand hours of service in community schools. These students come from diverse majors, including Human Development, Biology, Psychology, Political Science, Engineering, and Sociology. Their roles range from tutoring and mentoring to involvement in innovative partnerships focused on family engagement and classroom support. This partnership not only benefits local families and children but also provides college students with hands-on experience that complements their coursework and instills a sense of community responsibility.

SUNY-UACS Expansion

In 2022 and 2023, Binghamton University led the submission of two Full-Service Community School grant proposals through the U.S. Department of Education that aimed to build a statewide network of SUNY campuses launching UACS. Six SUNYs partnered with school districts in each associated region to focus on building UACS through their Education Schools and Departments. Binghamton University partnered with NYSED and BOCES on these proposals and had the strong support of SUNY Chancellor John King, U.S. Senators Gillibrand and Schumer, the United Federation of Teachers, and the New York State Network for Youth Success.

Although these efforts were ultimately not funded, we remain committed to building on the strengths and local reach of the SUNY system to meet the diverse needs of students and families across an extensive geographical area. This vision resulted in a SUNY-wide convening in June 2024 with SUNY Chancellor John King (who previously served as President Obama's Secretary of Education) that brought together 120 attendees including presidents, provosts, deans, faculty, and staff from 24 campuses (representing one third of all SUNYs). The event, titled *The Promise of SUNY-led University-Assisted Community Schools to Transform Education in New York State*, highlighted the diverse ways UACS are developed, launched, and sustained, and emphasized the mutual benefits for students, faculty, and staff in both PK-12 and higher

education. Following the event, we are now engaging in individual and collective conversations with point persons from 17 SUNY campuses to provide guidance on how they can move forward with UACS initiatives.

Our overarching goal is to establish a statewide network of UACS across New York, which can serve as a model for other states, where we can learn with and from each other while serving our local youth, families, and communities. This vision was bolstered by an email sent at the start of the 2024 Fall Semester from the Senior Vice Chancellor for Student Success and the Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Provost at SUNY System to all SUNY Presidents encouraging them to explore and initiate UACS on their campuses.

Teams from seven SUNYs then attended the *Community Schools and University-Assisted Community Schools: Partnerships that Change Schools, Communities, and Universities for the Better* conference hosted by the Netter Center for Community Partnerships and the Coalition for Community Schools in November 2024. A breakout session for SUNYs to network and co-create a learning agenda was led by Binghamton's Community Schools Faculty, Couper-Owens Center leadership, and the Dean of the College of Community and Public Affairs.

Significant progress has been made toward the development of UACS across the SUNY system in 2025. Two four-year campuses are currently launching UACS initiatives, while one community college is exploring how to align its existing partnerships with local community schools within a UACS framework. Updates on these efforts are regularly shared with leadership at SUNY System Administration to identify opportunities for centralized support, sustainable funding strategies, and alignment between SUNY systemwide initiatives and UACS goals.

In October 2025, representatives from five SUNY campuses, including an associate provost, deans, faculty, directors, and staff, convened at SUNY System Administration in Albany, NY, to exchange updates on UACS implementation and to strategize about expanding and sustaining our collective work. The meeting was attended by the Vice Chancellors for Community Colleges and Workforce Development; the Executive Directors of the SUNY Civics and Service Initiatives and the SUNY Impact Foundation; and representatives from the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, including its Associate Director and Emerson Fellow. In a recorded address, Chancellor King emphasized the transformative nature of this work, stating that "the work of launching a [UACS] is the work of helping SUNY live up to its highest values and fulfilling higher education's greatest potential" (King, 2025). Identified next steps include building on existing SUNY initiatives, such as the Empire State Service Corps, to advance UACS efforts, sharing research and evaluation methodologies, and developing shared areas of inquiry for ongoing collaboration across campuses.

We remain convinced that SUNY-led UACS, with a united focus on empowering communities through educational partnerships, mental health initiatives, and family engagement practices, will have important positive outcomes for youth, families, and communities. As the signature civic engagement model of Binghamton University, the Couper-Owens Center, and the UACS approach demonstrate the power of community partnerships to create lasting, meaningful impact. We're thrilled about the next steps, including forging partnerships with SUNY campuses across the state that build vibrant, supportive learning environments throughout New York.

While our primary efforts are centered within the SUNY system, we remain guided by the belief that all schools can be community schools. We are equally committed to the idea that institutions of higher education can and should serve as anchor partners in advancing this vision. In that spirit, we regularly consult with community school and university partners across the country to support UACS as a nationwide movement. We also share lessons from our own regional development of UACS, which began with modest, grassroots efforts. Much of our early work and ongoing efforts has been sustained without dedicated funding as we continue to build the evidence, data, and models needed to attract long-term investment and support. Our vision is for UACS to serve as a strategy that disrupts intergenerational poverty across urban, suburban, and rural communities where all students, families, and communities not only succeed, but thrive.

References

Benson, L., Harkavy, I., Puckett, J., Hartley, M., Hodges, R. A., Johnston, F. E., & Weeks, J. (2017). *Knowledge for social change: Bacon, Dewey, and the revolutionary transformation of research universities in the twenty-first century*. Temple University Press.

Blank, M., Harkavy, I., Quinn, J., & Villarreal, L. & Goodman, D. (2023). *Community schools revolution: Building partnerships, transforming lives, advancing democracy*. Collaborative Communications.

Blitz, L., Kida, L., Gresham, M., & Bronstein, L.R. (2013). Prevention through collaboration: Family engagement with rural schools and families living in poverty. *Families in Society, 94*(3), 157-165.

Bronstein, L.R., Kida, L., Garton, M., & Simpson, A. (2020). Binghamton University Community Schools: Building university-assisted community schools in small cities, towns and rural communities. *Universities and Community Schools, 10*(1), 18-33.

Bronstein, L.R. & Mason, S. (2016). *School-linked services: Promoting equity for children, families and communities.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Clapp, E.R. (1939). *Community schools in action.* The Viking Press.

Hoffschwelle, M. S. (2006). The Rosenwald Schools of the American South. (New Perspectives on the History of the South). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Isaacs, N. (2022). *Right here right now.* Harper Collins Australia.

King, J. B. (2025, October 7). University-assisted community schools convening [Video]. Vimeo. https://vimeo.com/1125290844?fl=pl&fe=sh

Lee, Y., Bronstein, L., & Cook, K. (2023). Telemental health for rural university-assisted community schools. *Children & Schools, 45*(1), 46–53. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdac026

Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC). (2024, October 3). Collaborative action for family engagement. https://maec.org/cafe/

New York State Office of Mental Health (NYS OMH) (2024). https://omh.ny.gov/omhweb/childservice/sbmhc/

PBIS Rewards (2024). https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/what-is-mtss/

Rimkunas, N., Bronstein, L.R., & Anderson, E. (2023). University-assisted community schools. *Special issue of Children & Schools, 45*(1), 3-5.

Robinson, L. R., Holbrook, J. R., Bitsko, R. H., Hartwig, S. A., Kaminski, J. W., Ghandour, R. M., Peacock, G., Heggs, A., & Boyle, C. A. (2017). Differences in health care, family, and community factors associated with mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders among children aged 2–8 years in rural and urban areas - United States, 2011–2012. *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries,* 66(8), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6608a1

Sadlon, R. (2019). An evaluation of community engagement with families in the north side of Binghamton. The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, Department of Prevention and Community Health, Milken Institute School of Public Health, The George Washington University.

Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity.* National Rural Education Association.

Stack, S. F. (2016). Elsie Clapp and the community school. In *The Arthurdale community school: Education and reform in depression era Appalachia* (pp. 43-60). University Press of Kentucky.

Williams, D. (2010). *The rural solution: How community schools can reinvigorate rural education.* Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust; Center for American Progress.

Williams, D. (2013). *Rural students and communities.* Equity and Excellence Commission: Washington, DC.

Designing a University-Assisted Community School: Figuring Organizational Change through Personal Relationships

Chris Proctor, Kate Steilen, Kristin Cipollone, Timothy Monreal, Alexa Schindel,
Angela Cullen, Kira Mioducki, and Sandra Small

Chris Proctor, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Learning and Instruction, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo (SUNY).

Kate Steilen is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo (SUNY).

Kristin Cipollone, Ph.D. is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Learning and Instruction, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo (SUNY).

Timothy Monreal, Ph.D. is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Learning and Instruction, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo (SUNY).

Alexa Schindel, Ph.D. is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Learning and Instruction, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo (SUNY).

Angela Cullen is Principal of Research Lab High School, Buffalo Public Schools.

Kira Mioducki is Program Coordinator at Research Lab High School, Buffalo Public Schools.

Sandra Small, Ph.D. is Senior Manager, Science Education and Outreach, Business and Entrepreneur Partnerships; Research Assistant Professor, Department of Biochemistry, University at Buffalo (SUNY)

Abstract

This article reports on the year-long design process to develop a University Assisted Community School (UACS) through a partnership between Buffalo Public Schools and the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Drawing on prior reports on UACS partnerships, we found it helpful to analyze our process in terms of *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between people*. We were particularly interested in how the organizational logics of the school district and those of the university shaped our identities and interactions within the UACS design committee (composed of public school and university faculty), and how the relationships we formed within our committee created the potential for transformation of the school district and the university. We conceptualize the university and the school district as figured *worlds*, socially- and culturally-constructed conceptual spaces which shape how participants interpret themselves and their roles. Using a participatory case study methodology, we analyze four vignettes from our school design proposal. These vignettes align with the four key strategies identified through our proposal: personal growth and relationships, authentic inquiry and democratic decision-making, computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus, and infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership. Our findings identify several mechanisms by which trusting relationships among committee members are helping to catalyze institutional change.

Introduction

In the Summer of 2024, administrators and faculty from Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) and the University at Buffalo, SUNY (UB) were brought together by both organizations' leaders and charged with designing a new university-assisted high school. Sitting at the table in the initial meeting, Principal Angela Cullen led with, "We are not broken, and we don't need to be fixed." Angela is the Principal of Research Laboratory High School (RLHS), a small high school of 200 students. The school offers a research-oriented science curriculum, boasts an 89 percent graduation rate (compared to 74% citywide), and has, for the past decade, collaborated with UB to provide STEM learning experiences. Angela explains that their school is more than its program or its partners; the adults and students in the school represent a deeply interconnected, thoughtful community where faculty integrate research and data science into everyday routines like gym workouts, students play ping-pong in a community hallway, and teachers organize the after-school clubs. Most of the school's teachers and staff have worked at the school since it was founded in 2016. They worked through COVID schooling together. The building leaders are proud of their students' achievements and the school's reputation. In partnering to become a university-assisted community school, they saw an opportunity to strengthen their academic program and support students' transitions to postsecondary college and career.

UB faculty members joining the committee saw an opportunity to support a school community redesigning itself to provide students an excellent education while working to address chronic issues such as environmental contamination, segregation, and disparities in health and economic opportunity. They saw the potential to contribute their own research expertise to this work: computational literacies (Proctor), community-engaged social studies and digital civics (Monreal), democratic schooling and residency-based teacher preparation (Cipollone), and critical pedagogy and environmental justice in science education (Schindel). However, the UB faculty were also wary of working with a school district often seen as bureaucratic and opaque. They had all been part of prior district collaborations in which all stakeholders were seemingly enthusiastically on board until the project was summarily cancelled. They were also wary about who would benefit: university-community projects have historically been connected with the conversion of Black and immigrant neighborhoods into "chic university neighborhoods" contributing to the knowledge economy (Taylor, Jr. et al., 2018, p. 6).

Together, the Research Lab High School and UB faculty formed the UACS design committee. They met weekly between May 2024 and September 2025, gradually building trusting relationships and a sense of cautious optimism. In January 2025, the Board of Education approved the committee's proposal for a newly imagined University-Assisted Community School. A memorandum of understanding between BPS and UB was signed, and the design team shifted to planning for the first cohort of students.

With this brief background as context, this article reports on designing a University-Assisted Community School (UACS) that from its inception has sought to both (a) develop a praxis that models and strengthens justice-centered democracy within schools and (b) transform both institutions (the public school and the public university) in the process (Harkavy, 1998). We began from the premise that schools are key potential sites of participatory democracy, as conceptualized by Dewey (1916) and later Harkavy (2006), although we are also influenced by critical scholarship that recognizes the power differentials which make participatory democracy in public sphere(s) a complicated ideal and praxis (e.g. Fraser, 1990). We understand the importance of connecting public schools with universities (engines of opportunity to which access remains inequitable), and see UACS as a compelling model.

Decades of work have gone into UACS partnerships (Harkavy et al., 2013), yielding precedents and design lessons which inform our work. The focus has always been on fundamental transformation of both the schools and the university—Harkavy and colleagues make two blunt assertions: "no effective democratic schooling system, no democratic society," and "no radical reform of American higher education, no successful education reform" (2013, p. 525). However, many past UACS partnerships have tended, in practice, to work around the edges of each institution's organizing logic—in schools, UACS work tends to begin with extracurricular or electives instead of the core subjects, and in universities, UACS typically form from committed individuals, not by a structural institutional commitment of faculty time, curriculum, or policy. Lawson (2010) makes clear that the model, by being enacted in and with the local context, is 'dynamic by design' (p. 6) with impacts not immediately measurable. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to aim for this dynamism to engage in structural transformation of the organizations involved.

Our own UACS design process was motivated by recognition of the need for radical transformation of both K-12 and postsecondary education, but it was also informed by our awareness that both systems are resistant to change. The first meeting of faculty from Buffalo Public Schools and UB, described above, underscored the need to understand each other's worlds as a prerequisite to outlining the project. This paper addresses two questions which feel urgent to our ongoing work:

1. How has the organizing logic of the school district and the university shaped the work of the UACS design committee?
2. How has the committee's work created the potential for transformation within our collaboration and, more broadly, of the school district and the university?

In the following sections, we provide context for the project and then develop a theoretical framework which frames the relationship between schools and universities in terms of *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between individuals*. We draw on the concept of figured worlds to help us understand how the worlds of school district and university shaped our interactions on the committee, and also how the relationships we have built within the committee create the possibility for organizational change. As will be further defined below, figured worlds are socially constructed contexts through which individual and organizational roles and meanings are interpreted. We illustrate how these dynamics emerged in our committee by tracing four themes which have become central to our conceptualization of the new school: personal growth and relationships, authentic inquiry and democratic decision-making, computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus, and infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership.

Context

The Research Laboratory High School of Life Sciences and Bioinformatics (RLHS) opened in 2016 as a socio-economic integration model to support pathways for students interested in STEM and respond to a demand for more academically rigorous high schools. Founded out of a BPS math and science high school, the small, science-focused school was supported by a partnership with UB, specifically UB's New York State Center of Excellence Bioinformatics and Life Sciences, to foster inquiry-based learning, science research activity, and real-world problem solving. The program was designed to be both college and career focused, modeled after the success of magnet programs in the city. Enrolling an average of 50 students

per grade, RLHS has maintained high graduation rates and a curriculum centered on science research; however, despite many conversations, a mutually-agreed upon space for co-location on a UB campus was never identified, and supporting student research over the summer proved challenging. Initially co-located in a building with another Buffalo high school, Research Lab now occupies a temporary location on the ground floor of the Tri-Main Center, a multi-purpose building of non-profits and art studios, a mile from the University at Buffalo's South Campus and less than five miles from the University's Downtown Campus. Though students use public transportation to engage in partnership activities on the Downtown Campus, the Research Lab leadership team expressed a desire to re-envision how the school interacts with its community, in particular the university. Principal Cullen explained that, since 2016, their school has evolved to meet the needs of its students and seeks enhancement of the academic program, including through a more transparent, dynamic, and ongoing relationship with its higher education partners.

School leaders describe RLHS as a community school, one in which the small size and inclusive culture allow them to develop strong relationships with their students. Although students choose the school through the citywide lottery (therefore challenging the idea of a community school serving a specific geographic area), leaders build community through a summer bridge program, after school clubs, social-emotional supports, regular school-community events, and legal aid programs for families. Like other BPS schools, Research Lab operates using the shared governance model: a School Based Management Team, including a parent liaison position, and a participatory budgeting process. Though leaders see parents and families as active partners in their community, they acknowledge that parents are not generally able to visit school outside of special events and programs; when RLHS distributes the district's annual school climate survey, they receive few parent responses. One goal of the UACS partnership is to increase family engagement and agentic participation.

Although UB has forged various partnerships with the district (including RLHS), they have often taken the form of stand-alone summer achievement programs or scholarships for high-achieving students (Anzalone, 2009). However, the relationship between BPS and UB's Graduate School of Education began to change in 2019, when together they engaged in an innovative partnership to prepare educators to teach in the district. Known as the University of Buffalo Teacher Residency program (UBTR), this program recruited candidates with bachelors degrees in something other than education who were interested in becoming BPS teachers and provided them a paid opportunity to do so. Selected candidates (residents) completed a masters degree in 18 months while also participating in a year-long placement with an expert teacher. Upon successful completion of the program, residents were hired by the district and required to teach for three years (as part of a service agreement), with the ultimate goal of them completing their careers in Buffalo. Between 2019 and 2025, UBTR prepared more than 100 educators, many of whom remain in the district, and was also the primary pathway through which educators of color became teachers in the district. Program evaluation data shows that UBTR-prepared teachers have better outcomes than their peers, recording fewer disciplinary referrals, better student attendance rate, and higher student GPAs.

The decision to transform Research Lab High School into a UACS emerged from the trust built over those six years of the UBTR program, as well as several years of conversations between Suzanne Rosenblith, Dean of UB's Graduate School of Education, and Will Keresztes, a member of the BPS superintendent's cabinet and later BPS Interim Superintendent, discussing how BPS and UB could more effectively and equitably connect Buffalo's K12 education system to the university. Similar to other large urban research universities, UB operates as a discrete institution from the city; since the 1960s, the University's undergraduate programs have been located in a suburb which feels inaccessible and unwelcoming to many Buffalo youth. District leaders expressed a vision in which cross campus connections are formed during high school, increasing students' access to and active participation in higher education. Early in the process, they sought support from the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. Between fall 2023 and spring 2024, Netter Center leaders made several trips to UB, including a talk by Dr. Ira Harkavy to UB's deans and other university leadership; a conversation was also held over Zoom with Penn's Provost and Vice Provost for Faculty. Groups of UB faculty and leaders from BPS also made two trips to the Netter Center to participate in planning workshops and school

visits. This initial stage culminated in May 2024 with the creation of the UACS Design Committee, made up of faculty members from BPS and UB.

Conceptual Framework

This case study was motivated by our desire to understand the process we have been through over the last year, specifically how we have built trust and shared understandings, despite starting out with different practices, perspectives, and priorities. *How were we able to start building something new, when we are working within two organizations (the school district and the university) which are so set in their ways?* Drawing on Lawson's (2010) analysis of the developing UACS model, we found it helpful to focus on *relationships between organizations* and *relationships between individuals*. We then draw on figured worlds to explain how the relationships we have built within our committee create the possibility of organizational change. Our conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

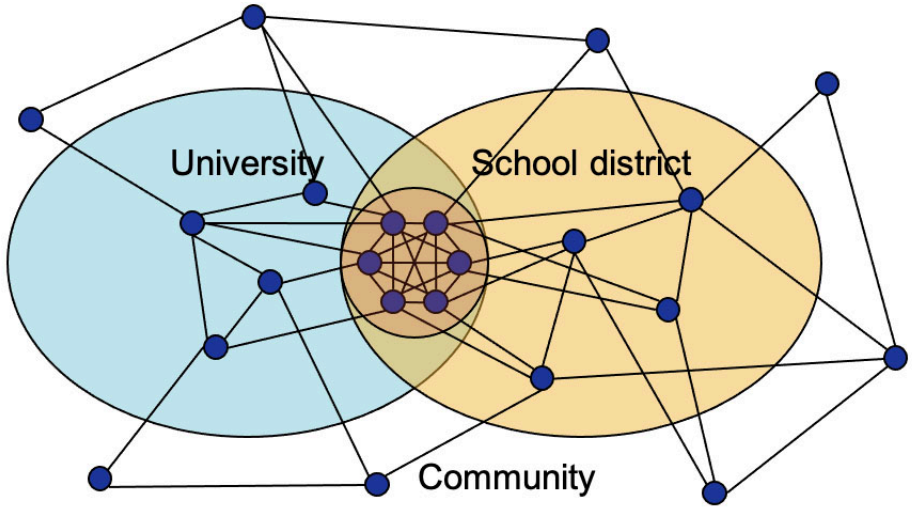


Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing our UACS design committee (center) at the intersection of *relationships between organizations*, and embedded in a network of *relationships between people* spanning both organizations. The committee members at the center simultaneously participate in the worlds of the school district, the university, and their own committee, loading their actions with different meanings in each.

Relationships between organizations

Our design committee was charged with designing a collaborative project which would meet the needs of both organizations. Traditional School-University Partnerships (SUPs) tend to focus on institutionalizing organizational relationships to support clinical experiences in teacher preparation, professional development, and classroom instruction (Dresden, Ferrara, Neapolitan, & Yendol-Hoppey, 2025). Although such partnerships must be institutionalized if they are to be sustainable, they frequently lack this infrastructure (Zeichner, 2010). Another challenge to creating institutionalized partnerships is that the organization's structure and ways of working may be in tension with the project's goals. For example, taking stock of a twelve-year partnership between Ball State teacher education and the Black community of Whitely, members arrived at the "critical conclusion that rectification of the increasingly undemocratic spaces in which children spend their formative years lies in the wisdom located outside of the system" (Cipollone et al., 2022, p. 75). In this context, educators decided to seek different solutions by redirecting their efforts to spaces where children are understood. As we studied UACS partnerships through the Netter Center's UACS National Network, we learned that many focused their work in electives, extracurriculars, and after school—on the margins of the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) imposed by accountability-based assessments and scripted curricula.

SUPs often focus on improving the schools, but our broader goal of justice-centered democracy also requires that the university "abandon its aloof, detached approach to knowledge accumulation and teaching and become engaged in the affairs of its local community" (Taylor & McGlynn, 2008, p. 56). It was important that the design of our UACS be embedded within the infrastructure and priorities of both organizations, requiring us to draw on our expertise with the

distinct "grammars" of the school district and the university. At the same time, if we had foregrounded our organizational identities in this work, we would likely have ended up in an adversarial stance and the design space would have narrowed to the (miniscule) intersection of the two organizations' existing practices.

Relationships between people

As we visited existing UACS sites and spoke with Netter Center staff, one theme was regularly repeated: the importance of individual relationships. This resonated with our own commitment to creating democratic schooling through democratic means. However, Cipollone and colleagues (2022) note that "an individual's right to exert voice and exercise agency in matters affecting the course of their lives, while logically incontestable in a democratic state, seems more and more elusive, particularly in schools and particularly for members of society who have been traditionally marginalized" (p. 62). This has been true in Buffalo: Taylor and colleagues (2013) use the city as a case study for how a "local education regime" controls the schooling process. Structural factors such as school choice[1] (meaning a school's students come from across the city rather than a specific geographic community) and distressed neighborhoods (characterized by structural joblessness and dismantled social infrastructure) have made democratic participation in local educational decision-making more difficult.

While acknowledging the persistence of these structural barriers, the design team sought to connect by exploring how to operate between their respective institutions. Meeting as a committee afforded members a new space, a third space (Zeichner, 2010), in which to work. Third spaces are conceptualized as innovative and collaborative spaces (Bhabha, 1994). The committee provided a regular social encounter; it offered a place for researchers and school leaders to discuss and observe—often in real time as they interfaced with district officials—some of the limitations of their own ideals for the project. It also offered a place for members to be vulnerable and open about the possibilities and obstacles. During the design process, many committee conversations seemed circular, or incomplete, until they were not. The meetings were characterized by layers of talk and questions that members did not have answers for. At times the work was uncomfortable and confusing, and practices such as setting agendas, taking notes, inviting the sharing of emotions, and making space for off-task talk through which we shared other facets of our identities had to be negotiated and made explicit. But in the routine of relating, of bringing their selves, committee members built care and understanding. Encounters that could have easily stalled for lack of clear pathways, instead grew as members expanded their shared geography and built new knowledge. "In the openness of third space, ensuing creative combinations and restructuring of ideas can provide new alternatives to oppositional thinking" (Soja, 1996, as cited in Martin, Snow, & Franklin Torres, 2011, p. 300).

Figured worlds

In the beginning, the committee comprised a loose collaboration of individuals facing a landscape of inaction, except that everyone agreed they wanted change. But envisioning change and planning for change entailed negotiating selves, understanding roles, and learning who, in each organization/world, was connected to particular pathways/levers of making change. Framing change meant newly framing ourselves, as the questions of the task at hand drew on questions of identity, norms, and social capital. In this way, we began to understand this developing space/project as a "figured world." Figured worlds are the conceptual space in which our individual and organizational selves could meet/re-form. Figured worlds are "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). In other words, figured worlds shape which identities and practices are normal, routine, and valued in a given space. We adopted figured worlds as a primary way of thinking about the significance and stake of relationships within the several worlds we navigated as we worked.

[1] For an explanation of the school choice process, see https://www.buffaloschools.org/o/dept-admissions-registration/page/admissions-registration. For more research on how the school system has limited opportunity for marginalized students, see Orfield and colleagues (2015).

We chose to use the figured worlds framework because we found that collaborating across the domains of university, school, and community involved more than just mediating competing priorities from different positions within hierarchies of power and privilege—a substantial but familiar challenge. Additionally, we found that each of these worlds operates quite differently and recognizes different forms of identity and assigns different kinds of meaning to actions. Building relationships with each other involved moving between these worlds and participating in multiple worlds simultaneously.

Results from our UACS Design Process: Learning from Converging

The result of our yearlong design process was a proposal for a restructured UACS school. This proposal that identified four key strategies. Utilizing a participatory case study approach (Reilly, 2010), we present four vignettes below, each grounded in one of the four key strategies, which illustrate how the development of personal relationships created possibilities for change in organizational relationships by refiguring their worlds. Participatory research disrupts traditional research relationships by involving participants and communities in all aspects of the research process (Reilly, 2017; Tolbert et al., 2018). Participants and researchers work to decenter power relations through jointly framing problems, developing shared objectives, sharing expertise, and co-developing knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Our case study documents the lived experiences of university and public school partners who engaged in co-developing a school redesign. Our study documents our participation and efforts and is written in the collaborative "we."

Personal growth and relationships

While the UACS model makes clear that connecting individuals forms the core strength of organizational collaboration, our design committee was built of two respective teams from UB and BPS, joining cohorts who worked extensively together within their own organizations but whose interactions with the other were circumscribed. As a new formation, the design team proceeded with excitement: members shared a vision of school innovation. But the planning was immediately stymied by a lack of familiarity with each others' institutional worlds. In the world of the university, the researchers imagined, even assumed, that procedural documents—vision statement, proposal, memorandum of understanding (MOU)—would drive the agenda. In the world of the district, however, leaders' working identities were more clearly embedded in the bureaucracy, in which steps toward a new curriculum, for example, deferred to the chain of command. In a world in which the school did and did not yet exist, the design team was only an idea. In the world of the university, ideas themselves serve as powerful moves in terms of project planning and research pursuits, ways for faculty to leverage their expertise and career ambitions. School leaders expressed some skepticism at how exciting ideas had previously fallen through. They were careful about describing what commitment and presence entailed in their spaces. For example, to bring new ideas into the district, it was useful to collect champions, use the chosen language of decision makers, and define this project in terms of the Board of Education's priorities. The process would be careful, quiet, and sidestep potential opposition—at least until the Board approved the proposal.

Six months into our process, we earned approval from BPS and our core group of faculties traveled together to Philadelphia to attend a UACS conference, visiting a UACS school, and learning with and from partners and key stakeholders at the Netter Center and others in the UACS National Network. At the conference, our team learned more about the fabric of UACS partnerships—how they are multi-faceted, built through sustained contact over time, and supported by extensive administrative planning and maintenance. That is, the relationships between entities must be given time and space to meet, explore, and merge. The process is not straightforward and is subject to the powers of key visionaries and those who can authorize spending. At Netter, this work is supported by a long-standing administrative structure of the Center itself. In some ways, the details of sharing resources and planning work, teaching, mentoring roles and curricula between entities seems impossible without the sustained development of a formalized intermediary. Yet our team was only in possession of a vision statement and verbal commitments from our respective institutional leaders.

At first, our UACS committee/team expressed a mix of intimidation and frustration with the size of the Netter Center's investment and its institutional innovation. Through the Netter Center, Penn had found a way to embed itself into specific

city neighborhoods and schools, sustaining engagement across decades of seasoned relationships. There was extensive advice about what not to do, descriptions of pitfalls and contextual challenges. It was difficult to imagine our partnership flourishing in the short term or envision what form it might take when confronted with something so established. However, seeing the Netter Center and its influence enabled our committee to open up to each other: together, we could confront the scope of what we might be doing and bond over what seemed difficult to imagine and also what seemed possible—the nerves and the unfamiliar provided us moments to share and reflect about the contours of our own organizations and their shortcomings. We talked about resistance, and the ways in which our own university and district systems were impervious to change. In this space, school leaders Kira and Angela were able to be more open about their frustration with some district procedures. We speculated about how much investment a center would take, materially and figuratively. (e.g., *Which faculty at UB would teach an 'Academically-Based Community Service (ABCS) course'? Would the university actually pay professors to co-teach high school students?*) The UB faculty tried to merge this version of an endowed community-engaged center with its own public institution, whose explicit goals centered around the production of 'world class' research, where the public benefits were more indirect. The school administrators (Angela/Kira), however, recognized the power of learning with a team of college students and faculty inside the K-12 environment, and immediately began to discuss how they could see the innovation of ABCS teaching activate their own students.

Authentic inquiry and democratic decision making

For the first half of our design process, we kept our core design team relatively small and closed until we received the official confirmation that the school could move forward from both of our institutions. This closed process, however, invited discussion and ongoing questioning around whether, when, and how the committee could engage the broader community. What relationships are possible between insiders and the communities for whom they speak? All the committee members were insiders to UB or to BPS, positioning themselves as acting on a sort of public trust. Direct community involvement was not part of the initial design process, because the committee's initial task was to broaden the existing research curriculum, to involve disciplines beyond medicine and bioinformatics. In working together, each member frequently drew on their own relationship to the city, the schools, or the community while trying to imagine what innovative practices or expertise the faculty might contribute. Researchers practiced deference in recognizing district processes. At the same time, Angela called on BPS members' expertise—identifying who else needed to be informed, like the Board president, in order not to feel left out when the proposal actually went up before the Board in January. The school admins also frequently explained how they partnered with their staff to support students and create community. In this way, members of the committee engaged in a specific identity work by performing and practicing representation. This work is in alignment with the values of community schooling and shared decision-making but demonstrates how stakeholders consider who is not at the table, negotiating what we call shouldering: a process of bridging our separate social infrastructures to make the dynamics of power explicit. Aware that the UACS partnership would need to operate within multiple figured worlds, committee members who are central participants in these worlds engaged in shouldering, carrying the weight of designing the partnership for the participants of those worlds, and making this interpretive and design work legible to their colleagues by articulating how their worlds work. While this process posed many risks—the risk of assuming outsider positions and desires, and the risk of protectionism—it also kept the discourse 'honest,' in that no pitch, statement, assumption or contribution was typically expressed without some robust critical reflection and productive speculation: *How would this go over? What would the students/families/stakeholders say, need or require?*

Shouldering involved articulating what the school leaders understood about their school community, speaking on behalf of their career interactions with parents, staff, and district officials. School leaders also shouldered the school's self-image: small and somewhat misunderstood within the district community. They also expressed frustration with how the district's lottery process was confusing to parents and made it more difficult for them to build up their freshman cohort. For the members of the university, faculty negotiated how this work fit into their research, teaching, and service duties with the Dean, while defining their identities within the committee by drawing on their own citizenship, parenthood, or relationship

to the district. (For example, Tim Monreal serves as a parent liaison in his children's elementary school.) Other faculty often consulted and deferred to those with embedded knowledge of the local contexts and how 'convergence' might work.

Shouldering, however, runs risks inherent to any idealized and imperfect social process—misunderstanding stakeholders, keeping them at bay, pursuing paths that ultimately receive pushback or rejection. When we shared a status update at a UB faculty meeting, for example, one colleague challenged us on the lack of parents, students, or community members on the design committee. Although we could explain the pragmatic reasons for this absence, this faculty in particular felt uncomfortable with the situation, since the term equity implies partial ownership. Substantial outreach and education, however, needs to be done to create the conditions for meaningful community participation in a design process, especially when so many hierarchies exist between stakeholders (Cipollone et al., 2022). The school leaders on our committee are more comfortable designing for and on behalf of their constituents, based on strong district cultural norms and their awareness that many of their students' families simply do not have time to participate.

Computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus

During the course of planning Research Lab's curriculum edit in the Winter of 2025, members grappled with how to shift the school toward their vision of an inclusive research program and capitalize on the UB education faculties' expertise. While UB championed the transformative potential of computational literacies (Kafai & Proctor, 2022) to create a responsive interdisciplinary culture of inquiry and prepare students for college computer science coursework, school leaders needed help envisioning what this could look like despite their general enthusiasm. Computer science was not commonly taught in the district, which has just three certified computer science teachers. Moreover, the district views computer science as part of career-technical education (CTE), rather than as part of integrated college-preparatory STEM education. In this scenario, adding a course under the code of computer science was a significant hurdle; Angela was uncertain about the viability of finding a certified teacher in time for Fall 2025. Accepting this, the committee explored ways in which the new course could creatively incorporate the team's design; they also frequently discussed when and how to incorporate the views of the Research Lab teaching staff. Here, Chris shouldered the worlds of high school and university computing education, into which he hoped to invite the school and its students. But higher on school leadership's priority list was securing the approval of the district's curriculum head and getting the right people on board who could help secure the re-design process inside district bureaucracy.

Initially, Angela invited a science teacher to participate in a curriculum meeting. The committee then took steps to begin writing a course syllabus and teaching document, building excitement about the ways each subject area might incorporate and build on an interdisciplinary emphasis on computing. But later, when Angela presented the new computer science course to the full teaching staff, there was immediate suspicion and pushback. While Angela explained it as hesitation about the 'unknowns,' teachers expressed more skepticism about how their students, who often arrive in high school with low reading and math scores, would manage in a course of higher level computer science concepts. Some teachers approached the new computer science course through the overlapping and competing figured world of organized labor, with primary interest in who should be entitled to teach the course and benefit from its attached course release time for curriculum development. Despite the efforts of the committee to shoulder the interests of those outside the room, the reality was that shouldering also presented risks by championing some ideas, intentionally or not, or edging other voices out of the way until better timed to participate. In this event, the vision developed through months of meetings inside the committee was simply not embraced warmly by school staff. In these encounters, the design team was continually confronted with the problem of whose vision was moving forward, how the school community would accept change, and what transformation could happen within the desired timeline?

Infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership

The three themes discussed above (personal growth and relationships; authentic inquiry and democratic decision making; computer science as an interdisciplinary nexus) are oriented inward on designing the curriculum and culture of the school,

and require only passive consent from the university and the school district. The fourth theme, infrastructure supporting the school-university partnership, requires more institutional change. Indeed, building infrastructure within both institutions to ensure sustainability of the partnership and to engage in institutional transformation would help the university and district serve as "democratic anchor institutions" (Benson et al., 2017). The focus here is on our second research question, exploring how our committee's figured world creates the potential for transformation of the school district and the university.

Our mentors at the Netter Center repeatedly emphasized the importance of building relationships, the institutional challenges to such relationships, and the need for infrastructure to sustain them. Liaisons are needed within both institutions who are centrally concerned with the partnership. On the UB side, Dean Rosenblith was able to gain the support of the University's other deans, proposing that an office be created under the Provost to coordinate UACS partnerships across UB. We were aware that community-engaged scholarship may not be familiar, legible, or valued by existing tenure and promotion processes, especially outside the Graduate School of Education. Therefore, this office would help the UB community learn about UACS, recruit faculty partners from across the university, and handle the logistics of onboarding and coordination. This work has been part of Research Lab's partnerships with UB for the last decade; we see the creation of a UB UACS office as an essential step in the future success of this project. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, the funding for this new office is on hold due to budget cuts following the federal government's hostility to international students and its retraction of research grants.

Building infrastructure for sustainability and transformation within the school district has been even more challenging. Those of us who were not district employees quickly learned that overlapping domains of regulation (city, state, and federal mandates, union regulations, oversight from multiple district offices) creates a tendency toward stasis; insiders navigate this system through personal relationships, private conversations, and informal arrangements. As a result, written documents are only powerful to the extent that the existing hierarchy chooses to honor them. Despite a memorandum of understanding signed by the district superintendent charging the school with developing UACS practices such as modifying its own curriculum, district employees do not act if they have the authority or the responsibility to make changes. Despite substantial recruitment efforts, there were no applicants for our initial computer science teacher/UACS coordinator job posting—when such specialized jobs are posted, it is assumed that the candidate has already been selected so there is no reason to apply. These dynamics do not obstruct informal work within the school, but such work is tenuous when it needs to interact with the broader district bureaucracy. Furthermore, university faculty must take care not to expose our colleagues from the school district to career repercussions from perceived insubordination as we push for change.

Our work has clear parallels to the challenges faced by UCLA's community school, whose founders we had the opportunity to meet at the Netter Center's conference on community schools and UACS. We learned how UCLA enacted its commitment to democratic teaching through a memorandum of understanding asserting the school's autonomy from the district. In UCLA's agreement with Los Angeles Unified School District (which informed ours), school autonomy was not about evading accountability; it formed a necessary first step to giving teachers and educators the agency required to become an authentic community school and build community-powered teachers (Quartz, 2023). UCLA's teacher-powered school infuses relationships with trust by removing hierarchies and creating participatory roles where teachers have input over scheduling, curriculum building, and assessments. Instead of adopting a district vision of teachers as implementers (of a system-built curriculum), these teachers use the UACS partnership to practice improving learning together.

Although the UCLA community school's leadership urged us to seek full autonomy from the school district, we decided against this course for several reasons. First, we had several district insiders on the committee; they made it possible to move forward (albeit in a limited way) via existing practices and they felt that seeking autonomy would be a nonstarter. Second, the scale of transformation envisioned by Dean Rosenblith, and the UB resources potentially available to support UACS partnerships, demanded corresponding systemic change on the district side as well. By engaging with the district bureaucracy, we are working toward future UACS partnerships at other district schools, and hopefully also laying the groundwork for districtwide change.

Conclusion: Converging nexuses

If a district and university are to realize their potential as democratic anchor institutions, a shared space of meaning will have to be created across both institutions in which the identities of participants and the meaning of actions are legible within the worlds of the school, the university, and the broader community. In conceptualizing our UACS committee's design work as a figured world, we brought into focus both the challenges of creating institutional change, but also the potential for doing so. A figured world is characterized by and sustained by a "nexus of practice" (Scollon, 2002), a stable pattern of identities and practices expected of participants. However, Peppler and Wohlwend (2018) recognize the disruptive potential of moments when stable nexuses converge: "conflicts and slippages among their disparate expectations have the potential to disrupt stagnant practices that have been at work in a field that might otherwise be impervious or slow to change" (Peppler & Wohlwend, 2018, p. 4). As the design team evolved over the last 18 months, so too have the relationships between the institutions and the relationships between the individuals. We can say that we no longer safely inhabit the world of the university itself or the district alone, but that we have gained a new reverence for how the complexity of change necessarily involves not just educators, or researchers, or officials, but ourselves and our growing experience with this new social infrastructure. We hope that this evolving figured world of the UACS becomes the next Research Lab High School.

References

Anzalone, C. (2009, March 12). UB-Buffalo public schools partnership expands its summer offerings for area middle and high school students. *University at Buffalo News Center.* https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2009/03/9984.html

Benson, L., Harkavy, I., Puckett, J., Hartley, M., Hodges, R., Johnston, F., & Weeks, J. (2017). *Knowledge for social change: Bacon, Dewey, and the revolutionary transformation of research universities in the twenty-first century.* Temple University Press.

Cipollone, K., Zygmunt, E., Robert Scaife, P., & Scaife, M. W. (2022). "Let's create the table": Reengaging democracy in teacher preparation through radical reciprocity. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education, 124*(3), 61–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221086775

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education.* Macmillan.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text, 25*(26), 56–80.

Harkavy, I. (1998, January 8). *School-Community-University partnerships: Effectively integrating community building and education reform.* Connecting Community Building and Education Reform: Effective School, Community, University Partnerships, Washington, D.C.

Harkavy, I. (2006). The role of universities in advancing citizenship and social justice in the 21st century. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 1*(1), 5–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197906060711

Dresden, J., Ferrara J., Neapolitan, J., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (eds.) *Cambridge Handbook of School-University Partnerships.* Cambridge University Press.

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., Axelroth Hodges, R., & Weeks, J. (2013). The promise of university-assisted community schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525–540. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.834789

Holland, D. C., Lachicotte Jr, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds.* Harvard University Press.

Kafai, Y. B., & Proctor, C. (2022). A revaluation of computational thinking in K-12 education: Moving towards computational literacies. *Educational Researcher, 51*(2), 146–151. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211057904

Lawson, H. A. (2010). An appreciation and a selective enhancement of the developing model for university-assisted community schools. *Universities and Community Schools, 8*(1/2), 5–20.

Orfield, G., Ayscue, J., Ee, J., Frankenberg, E., Siegel, G., Woodward, B., & Amlani, N. (2015). *Better choices for Buffalo's students:* The Civil Rights Project.

Peppler, K., & Wohlwend, K. (2018). Theorizing the nexus of STEAM practice. *Arts Education Policy Review, 119*(2), 88–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2017.1316331

Reilly, R. C. (2010). Participatory case study. *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research, 2*, 658–661.

Scollon, R. (2002). *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice.* Routledge.

Taylor, H. L., & McGlynn, L. (2008). Solving the Dewey problem: Where do we go from here? *The Good Society, 17*(2), 56–62.

Taylor, H. L., McGlynn, L., & Luter, D. G. (2013). Neighborhoods matter: The role of universities in the school reform neighborhood development movement. *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.834793

Taylor, Jr., H. L., Luter, D. G., & Miller, C. (2018). The University, neighborhood revitalization, and civic engagement: Toward civic engagement 3.0. *Societies, 8*(4), 106. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8040106

Tyack, D., & Tobin, W. (1994). The "grammar" of schooling: Why has it been so hard to change? *American Educational Research Journal, 31*(3), 453–479.

Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 61*(1–2), 89–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347671

Rooted in the Past, Reemerging Through Partnerships, and Rising Toward Justice: How SRCUACS Promotes the Community Schools Model in the Southeast

Yolanda L. Dunston, Xavier Cason, Shawnda Cherry, Alec Greenwald, Kaylin Hernández, and Jerry Johnson

Yolanda L. Dunston, Ph.D is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education at North Carolina Central University. Her service and scholarship focus on literacy, effective teaching, and community-engaged practice.

Xavier Cason is a Senior Program Manager at the Durham Public Schools Foundation. He also co-chairs the Research-Practice Network for the Institute for Educational Leadership and serves on the Steering Committee of the Coalition for Community Schools.

Shawnda Cherry, Ph.D is the Full-Service Community School Associate Director for Student and Family Support Services in the Rural Education Institute at East Carolina University. She has experience supporting K-12 educators and administrators across all grade levels in North Carolina and is passionate about providing equitable access and opportunity for rural students and staff.

Alec Greenwald is the Director of the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS) and an Associate in Research in Duke University's Department of Education.

Kaylin Hernández is a policy analyst for the City of Martinsville, Virginia. While at Duke University, she participated as a student researcher on the Durham University-Assisted Community Schools Research Collective (DUACSRC) for two years.

Jerry Johnson, Ph.D is the Phoebe Moore Dail Distinguished Professor in Rural Education and Director of the Rural Education Institute at East Carolina University. He studies rural education policy, place-based learning, and community schools.

Abstract

This article chronicles the evolution and implementation of community schools in North Carolina, showing how historical legacies, meaningful partnerships, and purposeful coalitions converged to form the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS). We situate the current movement within the state's educational history, highlighting Rosenwald schools and the resurgence of holistic practices they embodied. We then examine how universities across three regions are partnering with public schools and communities to develop and implement university-assisted community schools by building trust, institutional capacity, and the foundations of a statewide coalition. Our narrative details key organizing and implementation strategies, illustrating how SRCUACS' ideas translate into practice through relationship building, family engagement, professional development, expanded learning opportunities, and K12 and university curricula that engages students in community life. These examples of the implementation of UACS demonstrate both the principles of the community schools model and the practical approaches that allow it to take root, thrive, and scale across different contexts. We conclude with lessons learned to develop the sustained, mutually beneficial partnerships necessary to realize the transformative potential of university-assisted community schools.

Introduction

In an era of tightening budgets, rising accountability pressures, and persistent educational challenges, North Carolina's public schools face ongoing obstacles in meeting the holistic needs of students and communities. Community schools, however, demonstrate how strategic, place-based partnerships can fill gaps, amplify local leadership, and sustain progress where conventional reforms often fail due to over-standardized solutions. From this context emerged our Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS), which creates partnerships between higher education institutions, schools, and communities to translate research, resources, and expertise into locally responsive strategies. These strategies build on historical legacies of civic engagement and community involvement, such as the Rosenwald schools, as well as upon contemporary regional initiatives across eastern, central, and western North Carolina.

This article traces the evolution of North Carolina community schools and examines the varied regional approaches that have taken shape. It highlights specific examples of university-assisted community school (UACS) partnerships in action that illustrate the core foundations of trust-building, family engagement, professional development, expanded learning, and community engaged curricula. We show how universities can—and should—serve as connectors, mobilizing assets to strengthen schools and communities while centering shared leadership and long-term impact.

Historical Roots: The Evolution of Community Schools in North Carolina

North Carolina's community school story reflects generations of struggle, innovation, and renewal. Across eras, community schools have served not only as learning centers but also as civic anchors where people gathered, organized, and built their communities.

Rosenwald Roots

After emancipation, Black North Carolinians mobilized to build and sustain their own schools in the face of systemic exclusion and tax structures that overwhelmingly favored white children. By the early 20th century, disparities were stark: while white children often studied in multi-story brick schools with well-stocked libraries, Black students learned in one-room wooden facilities that were typically "an old abandoned white school, a rotting cabin, or even a corncrib" (Hanchett, 1988, p. 3). With learning conditions considered substandard, half of the Black population reached adulthood without knowing how to read or write (Hanchett, 1988).

The Rosenwald School movement transformed this landscape (Medlin & Putt, 2022). Between 1912 and 1932, Julius Rosenwald partnered with Booker T. Washington and Black communities across the South to build over 5,000 school buildings for Black students. North Carolina constructed 787 Rosenwald schools, 18 teacher residences, and 8 shop buildings—far more than any other state (Hoffschwelle, 2012). These schools became vital centers of community life, hosting public meetings, health campaigns, and adult education alongside formal schooling. This structure not only created durable school buildings but also cultivated traditions of grassroots leadership, civic pride, and collective action that foreshadowed today's community schools (Hoffschwelle, 2012).

The Accountability Era

Unfortunately, the holistic spirit of Rosenwald-era schooling waned under Jim Crow segregation and, later, the rise of standardized accountability. By the 1980s and 1990s, state and federal policy narrowed the meaning of success to test scores in NC and elsewhere, sidelining broader commitments to family and community well-being (Beach, 2021; NCDPI, 2020). Community-centered approaches survived during the accountability era through localized efforts, university partnerships, and grassroots organizing, but lacked formal structural support in most instances (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Persistent inequities and the landmark *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* rulings (1997, 2004) affirmed the constitutional right to a "sound basic education" and renewed interest in holistic approaches. Advocates and educators began to

reintroduce the community schools framework, which emphasized wraparound services, authentic family engagement, and partnerships to address barriers to learning.

Regional Sprouts: Duke, NCCU, and ECU's Involvement in Community Schools

The renewed focus on holistic education led to various community school efforts in regions across the state. The partners of the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS)—Duke, North Carolina Central University, and East Carolina University—specifically arrived to the work in different ways.

In central North Carolina, Durham became an anchor of contemporary community school work when the state threatened low-performing schools with takeover in 2017. Local educators and advocates organized to resist privatization, which led to the Bull City Community Schools Partnership (BCCSP), supported by the Durham Association of Educators and later the Durham Public Schools Foundation (Benton & Anderson, 2022). Beginning in 2018, Durham piloted the community school model in four Title I schools and established an Institutional Support Team, bringing citywide stakeholders together to support the work. Duke University and North Carolina Central University (NCCU), both of which had long partnered with Durham Public Schools (DPS),[1] began to explore ways they could align and maximize institutional resources to better respond to needs identified by the community schools. With funding from the Fortin Bass Foundation at Duke in 2018, Duke and NCCU designed a year-long inter-institutional research course that recruited 15–20 undergraduates and two graduate student project managers each year to conduct research supporting the pilot schools' goals. The team, Durham University-Assisted Community Schools Research Collective (DUACSRC), garnered support from several departments and professional schools on both campuses. The team capitalized on distinct features of both institutions, leveraging Duke's focus on research (students fulfilled research-based course requirements) and NCCU's commitment to service (students earned 80 of the required 120 community service hours and had opportunities to fulfill Honors College requirements). Vignette 1 highlights the experience of one of nearly 100 undergraduates from Duke and NCCU who have since been part of DUACSRC.

Vignette 1

A DUACSRC Student Researcher's Discovery of Community Schools as a Policy Path

My interest in education policy took root my senior year of high school while working on a redlining activity during an AP Statistics class, and an eye-opening transition to Duke cemented it. Coming from a low-income, minority background, I had lived experience in educational inequity, but researching public school funding formulas for a Writing 101 class revealed more alarming, systemic impediments regarding the history and mechanics of how resources are distributed. Turning curiosity (and a growing frustration) into action, I began looking for ways to get more involved within the education space—hungry for answers, and more importantly, solutions. That search led me to the DUACSRC, where I found both a framework and a community that aligned with my passion for education equity in practice.

The community schools model was unlike anything I'd ever encountered. Rather than imposing a standardized blueprint, it functioned as an adaptable framework, responsive to the strengths and needs of each neighborhood school it served. While the model seemed too abstract to initially picture, site visits to the UCLA RFK Community School and the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center solidified its potential. There, I saw a version of education that approached families holistically, distributed leadership horizontally, leveraged strategic partnerships, and

[1] Both Duke and NCCU have established programs (e.g., Duke's Partners for Success, NCCU Center for Science, Math, and Technology Education) that support the local school district's goals for literacy and STEM. Although efforts across the two college campuses have not been formally coordinated, students often volunteer as America Reads (literacy) or America Counts (math) tutors and mentors, engage in service-learning activities, and complete clinical field experiences and student teaching internships within the district.

Kaylin Hernández (back row, third from left) and the Durham University-Assisted Community Schools Research Collective visiting the RFK Community School in 2022.

allowed students to define their learning in and outside of the classroom. No two schools were alike, yet each embodied the same core principle of centering the students and their neighborhood community.

Now, as an analyst with the City of Martinsville, Virginia, I am actively working to apply the principles I first encountered with the DUACSRC to research, propose, and advocate for community-oriented solutions that are both practical and fiscally sound. What began as academic curiosity has evolved into my professional commitment to advance policies that promote an education system deeply rooted in the students, teachers, families, and neighborhoods they serve.

In eastern North Carolina, the East Carolina University (ECU) Rural Education Institute (REI) developed a high-profile UACS partnership at P.W. Moore Elementary (PWMES) in Elizabeth City in 2022. REI, a unit in the ECU College of Education with the mission of *initiating and supporting research-driven innovations and collaborative partnerships that improve educational opportunities and holistic development for PK–16 students and their families in rural communities,* began formally collaborating with PWMES through grant funding that supported research on strategies for mitigating impacts of COVID-19 (in the case of PWMES, a study to explore how UACS implementation impacted family engagement, student engagement, and student outcomes). By co-creating the scope and direction of the UACS work and identifying shared beliefs, a foundation was laid for establishing trust and clarifying what a university-assisted community school could be. This was especially important not only because universities have a history of instilling *university-controlled* rather than *university-assisted* practices when engaging in off-campus work (McClure & Orphan, 2023), but also because an attempt to establish a community school framework at PWMES one year earlier by a non-university entity had been unsuccessful. This was in part because school staff felt a model was being imposed on them as opposed to being invited to build something together (co-creation).

While Duke, NCCU, and ECU have made impressive gains in their work, North Carolina's contemporary community schools movement started prior to *any* UACS work taking shape on these campuses. Beginning in 2009 in the western part of the state, the United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County (UWABC) launched community-wide listening campaigns to explore different whole-child frameworks for their K-12 students, revealing significant gaps in extended learning opportunities for middle school students. The UWABC partnered with AmeriCorps to place VISTA Corps members in after school programs. By 2015, the schools recognized the need for a more comprehensive and sustained strategy and formally launched their community schools initiative by hiring coordinators to support implementation in district middle schools, while also partnering with Western Carolina University to place Master of Social Work interns in all pilot schools.

As reflected in these developments across the state, the UACS activity that emerged organically highlights the value of leveraging university assets into community school spaces and the mutual benefits that result. These activities began to create the fertile ground from which SRCUACS officially emerged in 2023, which we turn to now.

Seeds of Statewide Coalition: Regional Efforts Unite to Launch SRCUACS

With the UWABC initiative serving as an early implementation model for the rest of the state—and the development of UACS partnerships taking shape at Duke, NCCU, and ECU—representatives from each of the institutions of higher education (IHEs) came together to imagine a statewide strategy to deepen their work. The work first began to converge

under the North Carolina Community Schools Coalition (NCCSC) in 2022. The NCCSC structure formalized the community school movement as a statewide coalition through an emphasis on local leadership, rural involvement, and public accountability—values directly descended from the Rosenwald legacy.

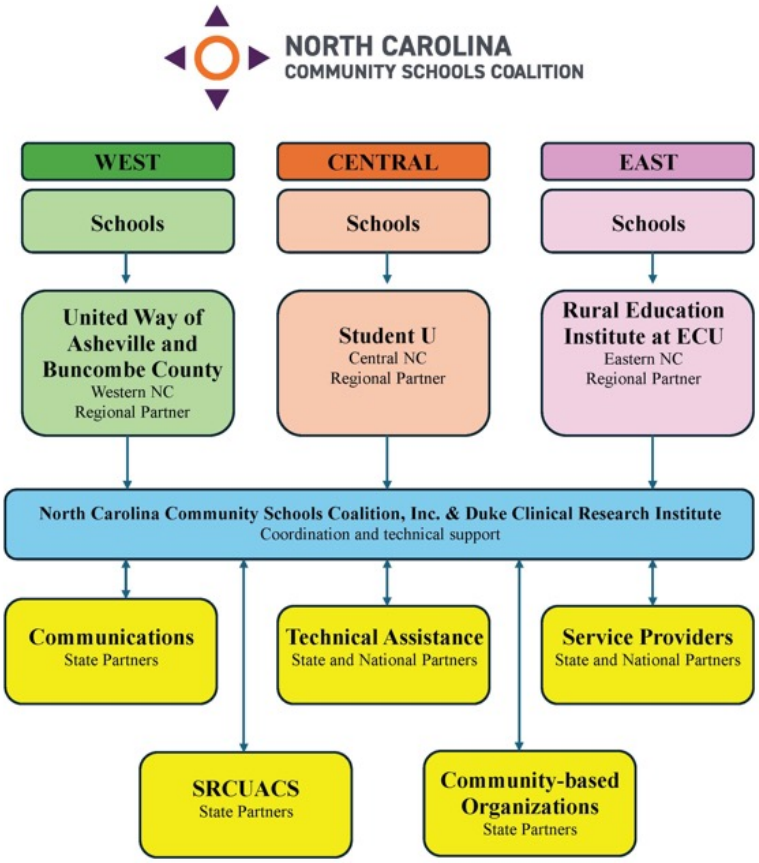
The triennial request for proposals for regional training centers on UACS, organized by Penn's Netter Center for Community Partnerships, emerged as a compelling opportunity for organizing a regional center led by Duke, NCCU, and ECU. In 2023, our organization, the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS), was born through critical funding from the Netter Center, and since then, we have put forward a visionary structure that aims to mobilize other IHEs to enhance practice and advance policy change for the expansion and sustainability of community schools. We established six foundational principles to help guide the vision: coalition building, storytelling, connecting, pipeline development, policy change, and research. Each principle was designed to imagine how IHEs could leverage their unique assets to assist the growing community school projects taking shape across North Carolina—transforming a once disconnected effort into a coalition.

Figure 1 *SRCUACS Guiding Principles*

The formation of SRCUACS highlighted the power of connecting practitioners statewide to learn from and with one another, and the UACS strategy has emerged as a dynamic approach to anchor community school expansion and sustain interdisciplinary partnerships across districts. By 2022, our growing network of aligned practitioners from IHEs, health care, social services, and policy began envisioning ways to expand the existing infrastructure to support more public-school communities. In 2023, the NCCSC joined forces with SRCUACS, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and a varied group of statewide partners to submit a proposal for the Full-Service Community Schools grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education to scale the community school strategy across the state, with university involvement as a compelling element of the proposal. After the grant was awarded (to Duke as lead applicant), the NCCSC began developing a statewide regional implementation strategy driven by three key elements: the local expertise of core partners, the rural low-income designation prioritized by the U.S. Department of Education, and the development of relationships with superintendents. Moreover, it leveraged the unique regional strengths of three key partners: United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County in Western North Carolina, the community-based organization Student U in Central North Carolina, and the REI at ECU in Eastern North Carolina.

Today, the SRCUACS coalition serves as an integral statewide partner to the NCCSC, strengthening relationships with IHEs in each region and mobilizing their resources to support local community school needs.

Figure 2 *NCCSC Organizational Chart*



Groundwork for SRCUACS Growth: Regional and Statewide Organizing

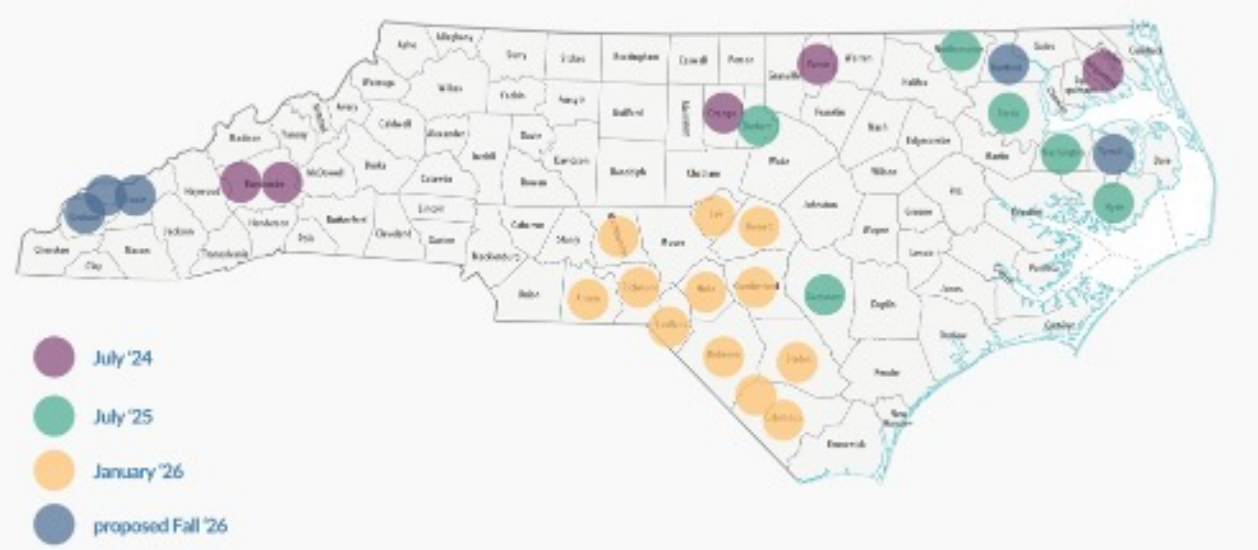
Given the historical and contemporary similarities shared by many states across the South, our coalition established a professional learning community for UACS practitioners throughout the region by organizing virtual and in-person gatherings. The virtual gatherings center shared successes, challenges, and opportunities to learn *with and from* one another across states and regions. In person gatherings, such as the SRCUACS Symposium, uplift the voices of community school coordinators, school and district leaders, and university partners, along with the sharing of research and best practices. Additionally, we have aligned with statewide efforts to increase the number of community schools in North Carolina and strengthen capacity for university partnerships with surrounding community schools.

The following section details how community school expansion plans and advisory council development contributed to effective statewide scaling of the UACS model.

Supporting Pathways for Expansion of Community Schools in North Carolina

Through the statewide partnership with the NCCSC, SRCUACS has led the coordination and implementation of UACS partnerships in North Carolina, which is home to over 100 public, private, and community colleges and universities. The districts identified by NCCSC for expansion during the first two years of implementation align directly with a varied group of IHEs (including public and private, research-intensive and regional comprehensive, HBCUs, and a Native American-Serving Nontribal Institution), allowing us to leverage our network of relationships across the state.

Figure 3 *NCCSC Plans for Statewide Expansion*



The statewide local educational agency mapping exercise enabled SRCUACS to begin planning for the development of small UACS advisory councils that would support statewide expansion by anchoring community schools to nearby universities with the intent of creating connections and building capacity. The first council officially linked Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) with Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools (ECPPS), strengthening an already deep yet informal engagement. The ECSU advisory council has proven to be an effective organizing strategy. With our support, council members meet bi-weekly alongside the school district's liaison and regional expansion partners from ECU to assess emerging needs in ECPPS and identify how ECSU can leverage its resources and institutional connections in response. Members also convene on an ad hoc basis to advance specific partnerships requiring additional attention. (See article by Rogers et al., this issue.)

Our coalition remains actively engaged with NCCSC and district leaders throughout the expansion process, helping foster relationships with IHEs in each region. We are eager to build on this advisory council in eastern North Carolina and establish new ones in the central and western regions.

Cultivating Growth: SRCUACS Implementation Strategies

What started organically as a *coalition of the engaged* gained structure and purpose over the course of several months through intentional work sessions that focused on articulating foundational principles and developing an agenda for SRCUACS. Armed with a deep understanding of SRCUACS' assets (gathered from considerable time learning about the strengths of individuals and organizations within our coalition, e.g., disciplinary expertise, practical experience, technical capacity, and professional networks), we identified opportunities to activate these assets to address specific regional challenges. These opportunities became the primary focus areas of the SRCUACS agenda, allowing us to leverage our strengths and implement aligned activities with a clear sense of purpose. Implementation began immediately (even as strategic planning continued) with purposeful communication about what a UACS is (e.g., workshops at IHE-focused conferences in NC) and outreach to colleagues at other IHEs to consider how they could contribute to the broader work.

Our implementation efforts are advancing the UACS model throughout the region by strengthening relationships between universities and community schools, equipping educators with resources to build capacity, and creating a framework for state and regional coalition building. Below, we offer a sampling of recent and developing activities to demonstrate our guiding principles in action.

Strengthening Relationships: Family Engagement at P.W. Moore Elementary School

Engaging the Community: Dinner, Dessert, and Dialogue

Following initial meetings with school and district leaders, ECU hired a full-time Community School Coordinator (CSC) at P.W. Moore Elementary School (PWMES) to lead family and community engagement efforts, support within-school engagement activities led by school staff, and make connections between needs identified by the school and existing assets reflecting varied forms of *community capital* (Flora & Flora, 2013; Pigg et al., 2013). To guide those efforts, the ECU REI team hosted a community learning exchange (CLE) at a local church to share information about the community schools framework and to initiate involvement of families and community. The CLE invited participants to consider two guiding questions: *What do you want for children? What do you expect of your schools?* Community feedback shaped the project's agenda and, more notably, set the tone for ongoing fellowship and informal conversations over a shared meal.

The CSC also organized an on-site ice cream social within the community by securing an ice cream truck to travel to an apartment complex located within the attendance area of the school and serve ice cream to children and families. The entire teaching staff and school leadership team attended, as did the Elizabeth City mayor, school board chairperson, and ECU partners. Conversations among participants continued the dialogue from the community learning exchange, held the previous spring, around their hopes for the school, along with the general beginning-of-the-school-year information sharing.

Recognizing the relationship-building benefits of informal interactions across a shared meal and building on the momentum of the CLE and ice cream social, PWMES began hosting monthly family dinner nights. With an average attendance of over 300 individuals, the team used a rotation structure that consisted of three simultaneous groups: one group of families ate with their students' teachers and school leaders in the cafeteria, another participated in a workshop activity, and the final group observed a student performance.

Each event included a catered meal and activities aligned with the community schools framework. Through the grant, the university provided funding for the meals as well as subject-matter experts to conduct workshops for parents on topics such as mental health. Most importantly, the selection of activities was driven by needs and opportunities shared by local families and communities. For example, some sessions were led by ECU faculty from various academic units (e.g., home literacy strategies for parents, STEM enrichment activities for students, and financial literacy and emotional wellness workshops for family members) and others led by community partners (e.g., vision screenings, vaccinations, and sports physicals).

Reclaiming Community History: The P.W. Moore Alumni Breakfast

Another idea and request that came out of early interactions with families and community was to reclaim the proud history that the P.W. Moore school name represents. In its first incarnation, P.W. Moore High School was recognized across the state and the southeast region for academic and athletic success during segregation—an asset that community members recognized and wanted to leverage. They believed reclaiming this history would serve to build school spirit and student confidence.

In response, the CSC worked with community partners to organize an alumni breakfast at the school, which included graduates of P.W. Moore High School, Middle School, and Elementary School. Teachers, school and district leaders, and more than 100 P.W. Moore alumni attended. The ECU team contributed by providing logistical support and leveraged faculty expertise in place-based curriculum and instruction (Yemeni et al., 2023) to develop and deliver instructional activities (e.g., an oral history project wherein students interviewed prominent P.W. Moore alumni). This collaborative effort not only reclaimed the school's history but also reinforced the relationships that sustain the PWMES community.

Securing resources for out-of-school time learning: Grant writing collaboration

A consistent message delivered by families from the earliest exchanges in Elizabeth City was the need for after school and summer learning and enrichment experiences for school-aged children. In response, the ECU team identified the alignment with possibilities offered by 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants (a federally funded program, administered through state departments of education, to provide out-of-school activities for students). The ECU team then led a collaboration between university partners, school staff, and a grant writer to prepare and submit a successful proposal, securing a three-year grant to support after school programming at PWMES. (Nearby institution, Elizabeth City State University, is also now providing after school tutors at PWMES as described in Rogers et al.'s article.) This kind of collaboration illustrates how a UACS framework fosters the role of connectors (Johnson et al., 2009; Morse, 2014) that bring together existing assets to meet challenges.

Strong, trusting relationships are foundational to effective community schools. They enable collaboration that supports student success, strengthens communities, and fosters long-term, sustainable impact. Our coalition's initiatives in the state's eastern region illustrate the value of university engagement and underscore the potential of sustained partnerships for innovation, equity, and mutual growth. Vignette 2 highlights the perspective of a superintendent in another rural district in eastern North Carolina on how UACS partnerships are impacting his district.

Vignette 2

A North Carolina Superintendent's Reflection on UACS Partnerships

I'm excited about the partnership between Washington County Schools and ECU REI because it opens doors for collaboration, innovation, and shared expertise that will make a real difference for our schools and community. It gives us a chance to strengthen our connections with families, local organizations, and community members—relationships essential to supporting the whole-child needs of our students.

When schools and the community work hand in hand, students feel seen, supported, and valued. That sense of belonging not only helps them succeed academically but also nurtures their social and emotional well-being. Together, we can create learning experiences that are meaningful, engaging, and connected to the world our students live in....

In the end, this partnership is about giving our students every opportunity to succeed—not just in the classroom, but in life.

–Dr. David White, Superintendent of Washington County Schools (personal communication, August 13, 2025)

Building Capacity and Growing Together: Supporting Schools with Human Assets

Expanding School-Based Support: Assistance from Master of Social Work Interns

Student U[2], serving as the lead agency for the NCCSC's central region, has partnered with Master of Social Work students at NCCU and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) to create placement opportunities in local community schools. Specifically, MSW interns work under the supervision of community school coordinators to co-facilitate therapeutic groups, plan family engagement events and student exploration opportunities, and cultivate relationships with community organizations to expand partnership opportunities. In addition, they assist families and caregivers by staffing Family Resource Centers, collecting and disseminating information about local resources, and conducting outreach to encourage participation in school and community events.

[2] Student U is a nonprofit based in Durham, North Carolina that provides academic support, college-readiness programming, social-emotional development, and leadership opportunities for first-generation and under-resourced students, while advocating for systemic change in public education. Student U is the regional expansion partner for community schools in central North Carolina.

Ashley Peters, Senior Director of the Community School Model at Student U, describes the interns as "passionate about creating equitable education systems and supporting whole families" (A. Peters, personal communication, September 23, 2025). She goes on to say that intern placements "provide a high-quality learning environment for professional degree students of many disciplines," who are coached by site task supervisors and learn from weekly cohort meetings.

Overall, this partnership provides meaningful university support to schools while giving MSW students hands-on experience in the field. By increasing the capacity of coordinators and expanding the range of services available, the internship program directly benefits students, families, and communities.

Cultivating Achievement and Leadership: The Voyager Mentor Program

The Voyager Mentor Program at New Hope Elementary in Hillsborough pairs students in grades three through five with college mentors from NCCU and UNC-CH. Mentors provide academic support, socio-emotional guidance, and meaningful play opportunities throughout the school year, with an emphasis on belonging and encouragement. A key feature of the program is its intentional pairing process. Students from the NCCU Circle K International Club and the New Hope Elementary Voyagers are thoughtfully matched to foster strong one-on-one relationships. These bonds are designed not only to support the academic growth of elementary students but also to inspire them to pursue higher education, especially in fields such as STEM. Representation plays a central role, as college mentors serve as visible role models for young students, reinforcing the belief that higher education and community leadership are within reach. To ensure success, the college students are carefully prepared through pre-tutoring training to engage in the public-school setting with an understanding of New Hope's demographics. Cherokee McAdoo, New Hope's community school coordinator, described:

> Our college mentors gain valuable hands-on educational experience, service hours, and the chance to grow their leadership capacity. We are proud to partner with outstanding student organizations from NCCU and UNC-CH to make this program possible. Together, we are investing in future leaders—both the young students discovering their potential and the college mentors sharpening their skills to lead in their communities. (C. McAdoo, personal communication, October 10, 2024)

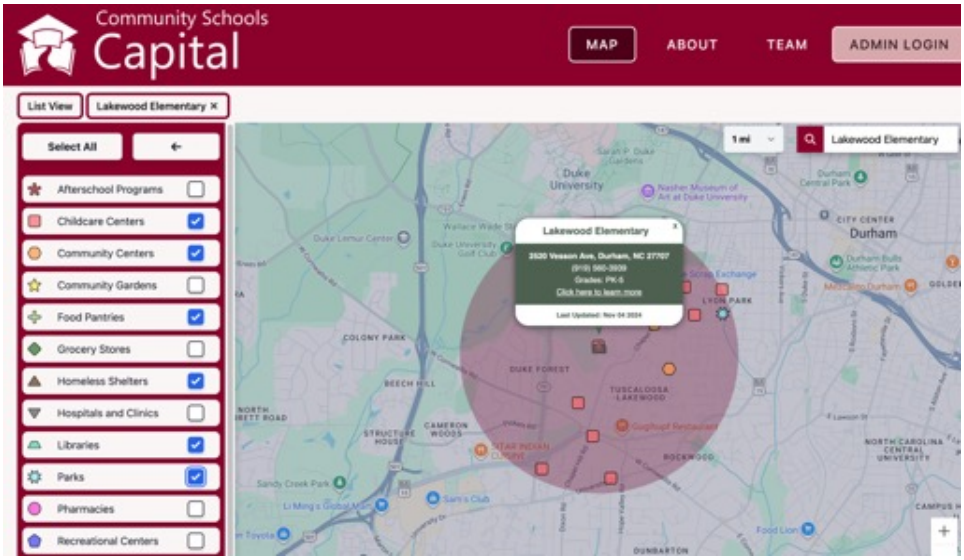
This statement captures the dual benefit of the program: elementary students receive consistent, individualized attention, while college mentors build their own professional and civic capacities. The Voyager Mentor Program thus represents a reciprocal model, leveraging community schools as democratic, shared spaces for learning.

Simplifying Systems: The Community Schools Capital Website

Beyond on-site programming, universities can contribute to community schools by developing innovative tools. One example is the Community Schools Capital website, an interactive dashboard that maps community assets located near schools, such as libraries, childcare centers, recreation facilities, and health providers. For families, the website offers user-friendly information about nearby resources, while an administrative mode allows school staff to track partnerships and manage collaborations.

The tool itself reflects years of collaboration. Undergraduate students from NCCU and Duke partnered with the DPS Foundation to develop the initial prototype, aligning resources geographically with schools in the district. Building on this prototype, computer science students and Duke's Office of Information Technology further refined the platform, designing a model with the capacity to scale across the state.

Figure 4 *Homepage of the Community Schools Capital Website*



In practice, the website allows leaders to save time, maintain continuity of family access to local supports during staff transitions, strengthen family engagement, and inform long-term planning. By reducing the administrative burden of researching local resources, it increases the capacity of coordinators to focus on building community partnerships (DePriest et al., 2025).

The three implementation strategies described above illustrate the unique contributions universities can make when they help develop community schools.

Increasing Opportunities for STEM Learning through Collaboration with University Partners

Transforming Learning Spaces: The CES STEM Lab

Activities to support science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) learning in the central North Carolina regions provide another example of UACS partners connecting assets with challenges to create learning opportunities. Central Elementary School (CES), a STEM-designated school in Orange County, presented a UACS partnership opportunity when the school administration expressed interest in developing a dedicated STEM lab. Although CES had designated a classroom for STEM instruction, the space had devolved into a storage area, and the school lacked a qualified teacher to lead the STEM lab.

The need identified by CES presented an opportunity to engage Duke students and faculty in supporting the research, design, and sourcing of a new STEM lab. Two students from the Pratt School of Engineering collaborated with their faculty mentor, Dr. Adrienne Stiff-Roberts (Associate Dean for Community-Based Innovation), and the community school coordinator to better understand staff needs and explore best practices for K–5 STEM labs. Over eight weeks, the students worked to declutter and organize the space, design lesson plans and slide decks for teachers, order supplies, and develop systems to ensure the lab would be self-sustaining. Dr. Stiff-Roberts reflected:

> The partnership with CES has been an excellent opportunity for the Pratt School of Engineering to put our principles of community engagement into action. Beginning with conversations that included the principal, teachers, and Student U, we learned about the challenges that needed to be addressed to make the STEM classroom useful and aligned with the CES community's vision. Our students brought valuable experience in STEM outreach and makerspaces and understood the importance of learning from field experts and responding to stakeholder needs. As a result, they created systems to support the lab's ongoing use, helping to ensure the sustainability of their work beyond the summer. (A. Stiff-Roberts, personal communication, August 15, 2025)

Following the completion of the lab, CES partnered with service-learning students at UNC-CH, who are adapting many of the STEM lab lessons to engage families at quarterly STEM nights. Community schools across the state have expressed interest in replicating the lab model. Kandis Sauls, Principal of CES, described:

> The STEM lab, enriched by Duke's support, is more than a classroom, it is a launchpad for innovation, creativity, and career exploration. Our students are developing the skills, confidence, and vision they will carry into their futures, and we are hopeful for the many possibilities this collaboration will continue to bring. (K. Sauls, personal communication, August 27, 2025)

Figure 5 *Duke engineering students (Ben Barronton and Anna Edgecomb) inside the new STEM Lab at Central Elementary School, which they co-designed and sourced.*

Equipping Educators: Professional Development via Duke's Outreach Design Lab

The STEM lab partnership at CES served as a catalyst for expanding STEM-based UACS initiatives in Orange County Schools (OCS). The Duke Outreach Design Education (ODE) program was established in 2022 by engineering professor Dr. Aaron Kyle, who originally launched the program at Columbia University in 2013 and continued this work in Durham's public schools. Each year, different cohorts of students and teachers engage in addressing pressing challenges in the medical field through the engineering design process.

A key component of the ODE program is a free, five-week summer biomedical engineering design camp at Duke's Pratt School of Engineering that serves approximately 25 high school students and three teachers. Participants receive guest lectures by world-renowned engineers, access to campus makerspaces with training on how to use tools and materials, and mentorship from Duke students. Teachers are compensated for their participation and receive funding to purchase classroom supplies.

The excitement generated by community school implementation through projects like the STEM lab and summer camp inspired OCS to think more broadly about UACS partnerships. Jeffrey Faulkner, a science teacher at Orange Middle School and ODE summer camp design participant, described how the engineering design process "integrates all aspects of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM), which makes our teaching more interdisciplinary." He added that, "The process also accommodates the diverse learning styles of our students ... [who are] from very diverse backgrounds" (J. Faulkner, personal communication, August 16, 2025). The district leveraged the ODE partnership to fund a new summer STEM camp for multilingual students in grades four through seven. Mr. Faulkner and another ODE alumnus led the camp by immediately applying their newly acquired skills to serve 100 students within the same summer.

What started as a single classroom transformation grew into a district-wide effort to expand access and promote innovation in STEM education. By aligning university resources with local school needs, these collaborations empower both students and educators, creating lasting systems for learning, professional growth, and community impact.

Advancing Community Schools Through Storytelling and Policy Research

In addition to supporting school-based UACS partnerships, IHEs play a critical role in the national expansion of community schools by serving as technical assistance centers and lead evaluators. SRCUACS recognizes the mutual benefits of UACS for both IHEs and communities and has committed to advancing the movement in North Carolina through community-engaged storytelling and policy research.

Centering Voices: Community School Coordinator (CSC) Narratives

To better understand the roles of CSCs, students from Duke and NCCU undertook a research project documenting the experiences and voices of coordinators from seven schools across the central region. Over an academic year, the students visited local community schools to gain firsthand insight into the daily responsibilities and experiences of coordinators.

The students authored the first edition of *Narratives from Community School Coordinators in North Carolina* in Spring 2025. In it, the coordinators shared stories about their varied paths into the role, initiatives they are most proud of, challenges they have faced, and advice for new or aspiring coordinators. A unifying theme throughout all the narratives was the importance of building trusting relationships within school communities.

Printed copies were distributed to new coordinators statewide as part of their onboarding process in Fall 2025. The book was also shared with superintendents, principals, leaders from the Department of Public Instruction, education media outlets, and public-school advocates across North Carolina. An expanded edition, featuring stories from over 20 additional coordinators, is planned for release in Spring 2026. The publication honors the coordinators' voices and reflects SRCUACS's guiding principle of storytelling as a tool for sharing knowledge, building connections, and shaping practice across community schools.

Figure 6 *Book cover for CSC narratives published by DUACSRC students*

Analyzing Policy Models: Lessons from State Case Studies

The sustainability of North Carolina community schools relies heavily on a blended and braided funding strategy, supported by both public and private institutions. In partnership with the Public School Forum of North Carolina (PSFNC) and the NCCSC, we advocate for strong policy efforts that promote public funding for community school implementation across the state.

This policy plan draws from research on how similar funding efforts have succeeded in states with comparable political demographics to North Carolina. To support this work, students from Duke and NCCU spent ten weeks during the summer of 2025 collaborating with PSFNC to develop case studies on four states: New Mexico, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia. Each case study illustrated key lessons for lobbying efforts in North Carolina. Students demonstrated how different states build support for community schools by aligning implementation with existing policy priorities and establishing clear accountability structures.

The case studies also highlight the importance of flexible scaling models that preserve the distinct value of the community schools framework while thoughtfully coordinating with broader school-based initiatives. The project advances priorities announced by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction in August 2025. Learnings from the first year of implementation align with and accelerate all eight pillars in the state's five-year strategic plan (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2025).

The case studies affirm that the direct involvement of higher education is not ancillary to the mission of public schools; it is central to building the sustainable, community-centered educational systems that today's students deserve.

Strengthening Community through Curricula

The SRCUACS coalition is committed to developing community resources focused on curriculum and pedagogy, including a curriculum designed for college student volunteers in Durham Public Schools, and a history of the Rosenwald schools for high school students to learn about the history of the educational opportunities afforded to Black children in the early 20th century.

Preparing College Volunteers for Effective Engagement

To explore the impact of university-school partnerships in Durham, student researchers from Duke and NCCU gathered data through peer interviews, teacher focus groups, and university faculty/staff surveys. Respondents raised specific concerns about the preparedness of college student volunteers, pointing to a lack of training in Durham's school and community history. Teachers especially emphasized the need for volunteers to understand the communities they served to better support students.

In response, student researchers designed an eight-module curriculum to prepare volunteers to effectively facilitate K12 student learning in ways that are conscious of place and attentive to context. Written in a conversational style for college audiences, the modules incorporated multimedia content, key terms, reflection prompts, and guided exploration of resources. The final module provided a deep dive into Durham's demographics and community assets, supported by the Community Schools Capital Website (as described above). A companion teacher's guide offered strategies for facilitating lessons and managing discussions.

Kaylin Hernández, one of the student researchers and a co-author of the curriculum, noted that her work on the team crystallized what she had long suspected—education cannot be disentangled from the broader systems and structures that shape young people's lives:

> The goal was not to prescribe answers but to create a space for volunteers to enter schools as thoughtful partners rather than transactional outsiders. This work convinced me that institutions can, and should, leverage their privilege and resources to normalize community-focused collaboration. (K. Hernández, personal communication, September 26, 2025)

Over several years, new cohorts of student researchers refined and expanded the curriculum. In its sixth year, the completed curriculum was transferred to the Canvas Learning Management System, making it accessible to Duke and NCCU faculty for course inclusion. In Spring 2025, the curriculum was piloted in a Program in Education course at Duke, marking a key step in preparing volunteers with the knowledge and skills to engage in Durham's schools.

The Rosenwald Curriculum: Reclaiming Black History in Today's Classrooms

After learning about the rich history of the Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina, student researchers from Duke and NCCU took on an important and timely issue: reclaiming and teaching others about a community-based innovation that was integral

[3] The state's strategic plan is organized around eight pillars, each viewed as critical for the goal of making North Carolina's public schools the best in the nation. For more detailed information about the pillars, see Achieving Educational Excellence: 2025–2030 Strategic Plan for North Carolina Public Schools.

to the history of public schooling in North Carolina and the south. Discussions around this issue led to the development of a five-week curriculum that highlighted Black educational history, particularly lessons learned from Rosenwald Schools. The curriculum included thought-provoking readings, interactive lessons, and reflective activities designed and compiled by the student researchers. The curriculum was piloted in Durham in Summer 2025 with three classes of eighth and ninth graders enrolled in an extended learning environment through the Student U High School Summer Academy. The course was taught by Imani Spaulding, an NCCU student researcher who co-designed the curriculum:

> I was compelled to contribute because I believe in the power of education to transform communities and wanted to help preserve and share this critical piece of Black history. The Rosenwald movement represented opportunity and resilience ... and I felt it was my responsibility as a future educator to amplify those stories (I. Spaulding, personal communication, September 17, 2025).

For Spaulding, the project was not only about historical preservation but also about envisioning the kind of classrooms she hopes to create as a teacher. The experience revealed the deep connections between schools and community, reinforcing her commitment to create classrooms that value representation, perseverance, and historical awareness so that students can see themselves as part of a rich public school legacy.

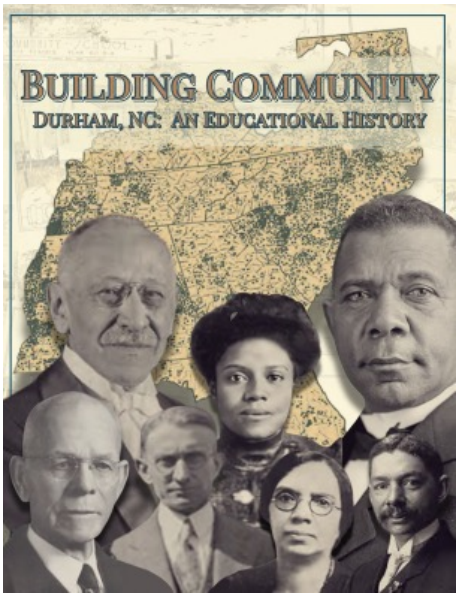


Figure 7 *Cover of the Rosenwald curriculum developed by DUACSRC student researchers: Building Community Durham, NC: An Educational History*

Harvesting the Future: A Call to Action

What we have learned over the past few years will drive our efforts in the years to come. First and foremost, we have learned that forming and nurturing relationships based on trust and mutual commitment to shared goals is the foundation of everything we do in a UACS model. That will continue to be our touchstone as we expand our work in North Carolina and the Southeast United States. Second, we learned the potential of UACS work to impact schools and communities in positive ways both immediate (i.e., in terms of how schools are organized and operated to better serve children, families, and communities) and long-term (i.e., as a vehicle for expanding and promoting access to civic life). We will reflect on this potential and use it as both motivation and a guidepost as we continue to expand and deepen our work.

Finally, we have learned that this work benefits from an inside-out approach, identifying and activating the assets of a single unit (say, an academic department) and expanding outward (to a college or school within the university, then to the university and ultimately to the network of partner universities). Importantly, at each stage of this "expansion" (which we conceptualize as a series of concentric circles), the focus is on building authentic collaborative relationships and engagement—not merely extracting useful resources for our work.

We will continue to nurture our existing UACS relationships while at the same time growing the number of UACS partners and programs in North Carolina and the Southeast region.

References

Benton, J., & Anderson, A. (2022). Durham Policy Implementation: Organizing for Community Schools. *Community Schooling, 3*. https://communityschooling.gseis.ucla.edu/journal-issue-3-policy/

DePriest, K., Glasgow, L., Bayer, E M., Weiss, S., & Hacker, K. (2025). Building healthy, equitable, and resilient communities: Lessons learned from multisector community partnerships addressing the social determinants of health. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice 31*(1), 83-89. DOI: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000001998.

Flora, C., & Flora, J. (2013). Rural communities, legacy and change (3rd edition). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Hanchett, T. W. (1988). The Rosenwald Schools and Black Education in North Carolina. *North Carolina Historical Review, LXV*(4), 387-444.

Hoffschwelle, M. S. (2012). Preserving Rosenwald Schools. Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Johnson, J., Thompson, A., & Naugle, K. (2009). Place-conscious capacity-building: A systemic model for the revitalization and renewal of rural schools and communities through university-based regional stewardship. *Rural Society, 19*(2), 178-188.

Leandro I (1997): Leandro v. State, 488 S.E.2d 249 (N.C. 1997).

Leandro II (2004): Hoke County Bd. of Educ. v. State, 599 S.E.2d 365 (N.C. 2004).

McClure, K.R., & Orphan, C.M. (2023). *A call to action: Translating the spirit of stewardship of place into practice.* American Association of State Colleges and Universities. https://aascu.org/resources/a-call-to-action-translating-the-spirit-of-stewardship-of-place-into-practice/

Medlin, E., & Putt, A. (2022). *Rosenwald Schools in North Carolina*. NCpedia. State Library of NC. https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/rosenwald-schools-nc

Morse, S.W. (2014). *Smart communities: How citizens and local leaders can use strategic thinking to build a brighter future.* Jossey-Bass.

NCDPI (2022). Technical Guide for School Accountability and Testing Results. NCDPI Office of Accountability and Testing. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/ncdpi-school-grade-technical-guide/open

Pigg, K., Gasteyer, S., Martin, K., Apaliyah, G., & Keating, K. (2015). *Community effects of leadership development education.* Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

Public School Forum of North Carolina (2025). Leveraging the community schools framework to advance NC DPI & SBE Strategic Plan: Achieving educational excellence. https://www.ncforum.org/leveraging-the-community-schools-framework-to-advance-nc-dpi-sbe-strategic-plan-achieving-educational-excellence/2025/

Watkins, C. S., Cason, X. L., Greenwald, A., Dunston, Y. L., & Vo, Q.-C. (2022). Combating racism through the application of an ecological systems framework to an inter-institutional research collective. *North Carolina Central University and Duke University*.

Yemeni, M., Engel, L., & Simon, A. (2023). Place-based education: A systematic review of the literature. *Educational Review, 77*(1), 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2023.2177260

Building Bridges Through Reciprocal Relationships: How a University–Community Partnership is Engaging and Elevating Local Education

Tarsha Rogers, Nicole Austin, Antonio Rook, and Tony Coley

Tarsha M. Rogers, Ph.D., serves as the Director of the Center for Teaching, Learning & Digital Education at Elizabeth City State University where she leads faculty and staff professional development efforts and oversees immersive learning and experiential labs (esports and virtual reality). Her passion and research is grounded in transformative learning theory, including the areas of student success, immersive learning and technologies, organizational communication and development, and student development.

Nicole Austin, Ph.D., serves as the Director of Undergraduate Research and Associate Professor of Education at Elizabeth City State University. Her scholarly interests include educator preparation—particularly innovative approaches to preparing new teachers and addressing enrollment and retention challenges in education programs. Additionally, she examines professional development practices with a focus on culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) strategies and the advancement of early childhood education professionals through targeted professional learning.

Antonio Rook serves as the Program Director for the North Carolina – Mathematics Science Education Network (NC-MSEN) Pre-College Program at Elizabeth City State University serving grades 6-12 from seven local counties. Mr. Rook provides summer STEM enrichment programs for elementary and middle school students to enhance their critical thinking, problem solving skills, and overall scholarly development to prepare them for professional STEM careers.

Tony Coley serves as the Coordinator for Academic Advising at Elizabeth City State University. Mr. Coley manages the distribution of advising responsibilities and ensures that the advising team effectively supports new students by reviewing academic plans of study for students and collaborating with various academic departments to recommend updates or improvements to the academic catalog.

Abstract

University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) represent a dynamic model of civic and educational engagement—one that positions the university as a lead partner in supporting neighborhood schools through integrated, sustained collaboration. Since the initial conversations introducing Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) to this work, their partnership with the local school district has provided the opportunity to impact local education.

This article seeks to express the importance of the reciprocal relationships a higher education institution can have with K-12 community schools. Throughout its first year, the ECSU UACS team has worked diligently to identify how the university can support the needs of local schools by leveraging their resources to enhance the learning community. Creating a UACS advisory council, undergraduate research collective, community school site visits, professional development for K-12 staff, and summer STEM enrichment opportunities for K-12 students are just a few of the successes from year one described in this article. Those successes have continued the conversation about other connections that are needed and how to continue to impact local education moving forward. We conclude with individual reflections on lessons learned for our collective work ahead.

Introduction

University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) represent a dynamic model of civic and educational engagement—one that positions the university as a lead partner in supporting neighborhood schools through integrated, sustained collaboration. At the heart of UACS is an emphasis on connecting university and K-12 curricula to address locally identified challenges and enhance both the quality of life in the community and the learning that takes place in school at every level. UACS school sites serve as comprehensive neighborhood hubs that "educate, engage, activate and serve students, their families, and other members of the community" (University of Pennsylvania Netter Center, n.d., para. 2). The UACS model provides an important means for Elizabeth City State University to impact local education.

Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) is a small Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in rural, northeastern North Carolina, founded with the primary focus on preparing minority teachers to educate freed slaves after the Civil War. Today, ECSU serves over 2,300 students and has 27 undergraduate and four graduate degree programs, continuing the historic mission of advancing educational opportunity. The goals of ECSU's UACS work are twofold: first, to foster access to learning and holistic supports for all students; second, to integrate our institution's teaching, research, and service capacities into responsive, community-centered practices. As Harkavy and colleagues have eloquently stated, "University-assisted community schools constitute the best practical means for democratically transforming universities, schools, and communities in order to develop participatory democracy" (Harkavy et al., 2013, pp. 525-6). Through UACS, we aim to cultivate deeper reciprocal learning, strengthen community wellbeing, and contribute to systematic equity in education and beyond.

Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) & University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS)

State Context: The Community School and University-Assisted Community School Movement in North Carolina

It is notable that the community schools concept in our region is largely influenced by the Rosenwald Schools. The Rosenwald Schools—built across the South through the partnership of Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald (a philanthropist)—played a foundational role in strengthening Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in North Carolina. Rosenwald Schools dramatically expanded access to quality primary and secondary education for Black children between the years of 1912 and 1932 and created a significantly larger and better-prepared pool of students who could pursue higher education. The initiative also fostered community investment, local leadership, and a culture of educational advancement that aligned closely with the mission of HBCUs. Like community schools, the Rosenwald School program had a direct effect on the long-term growth and social impact of the communities in which they were situated (Palatnik, 2020). The legacy of Rosenwald Schools to strengthen quality education for Black students is something we seek to continue through our UACS work.

Elizabeth City State University's engagement in UACS is a product of the growing movement across our state for community schools and UACS. While much of this work emerged organically over time, it has coalesced and grown largely through coalitions led by the North Carolina Community Schools Coalition (NCCSC) and the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS), established in 2022 and 2023, respectively (see article by Dunston et al., this issue). Of particular note for the eastern region of our state, East Carolina University's Rural Education Institute has been working with several school districts, including Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools, as the state's regional implementation partner since 2022.

Origins of UACS Work at Elizabeth City State University

The specific engagement of Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) in UACS work began in the spring of 2024, when a former ECSU student, who now teaches in the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools (ECPPS) district, organized a

meeting between Alec Greenwald of Duke University, who also serves as Director of the Southeast Regional Coalition for University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS), and Dr. Tarsha Rogers of ECSU.

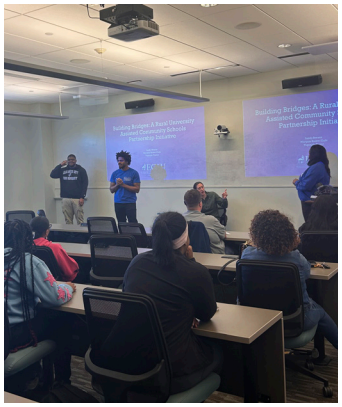
Although East Carolina University (ECU) had already initiated a partnership with ECPPS's P.W. Moore Elementary School, NCCSC, SRUACS, and local leaders recognized the need for a broader and sustained, place-based collaboration in Elizabeth City. ECSU's involvement became instrumental due to its close proximity to P.W. Moore and two other designated community schools within the ECPPS district. ECSU's staff, students, and resources could provide a wealth of knowledge and expertise to help identify and address unmet needs of the neighboring schools and community. Alec Greenwald (Duke), Dr. Jerry Johnson (ECU), and Dr. Yolanda Dunston (NCCU) led the initiative to create the ECSU UACS Advisory Council, which included representatives from Duke University, ECU, ECSU, and the ECPPS school district. The advisory council officially began to meet in the fall of 2024. The ECSU UACS advisory council aims to strengthen collaboration between the local community schools and universities in Elizabeth City. Our goals include to: establish connections, facilitate engagement, provide support and resources, and strengthen statewide relationships. The formation of a UACS Undergraduate Research Collective became an important foundational step, which we will now describe.

The ECSU UACS Undergraduate Research Collective

ECSU initiated its UACS efforts by forming a UACS Research Collective, consisting of the ECSU UACS Advisory Council members and a group of five ECSU undergraduate students. Working through ESCU's Undergraduate Research program, the Advisory Council sought to form this research body as a group of undergraduate students that would examine questions emerging from the ECPPS community schools, similar to the conceptualization of Durham's UACS Research Collective. The Research Collective draws its inspiration from the pioneering model developed by the Netter Center at the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia nearly four decades ago—rooted in Deweyan ideals of community as the focus for learning. To recruit undergraduate students, UACS Council members at ESCU referred students in their respective departments, as well as advertised the opportunity by sharing a flyer with students and faculty. Students who applied learned more about the research opportunity and the community school model, which helped them solidify their decision to join this effort. Once the Research Collective was determined, the Advisory Council oversaw weekly meetings where students learned about the history of community schools, research methods, and potential topics of interest for research. In these meetings, students built the infrastructure for introductory and interdisciplinary research methods in support of local community schools in ECPPS.

The ECSU Research Collective attended a meeting held at North Carolina Central University in October 2024, where ECSU students, advisory council members, and ECPPS community school practitioners traveled to Durham to learn from and with UACS partners in central North Carolina. This trip helped ECSU continue to learn about the community schools and the UACS model with the Durham UACS Research Collective and other partners in the central region of North Carolina. A few days after the statewide gathering, two UACS Advisory Council members and two undergraduate researchers traveled to Baltimore, MD, with Durham researchers and faculty from Duke University and North Carolina Central University (NCCU) to see community schools in an urban area outside of North Carolina. The team visited different community schools supported by Towson University, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Other members of our Advisory Council attended the Community Schools & UACS National Conference at the University of Pennsylvania in November 2024. The Research Collective then visited the three community schools in our local school district to observe how they could use what they learned in Baltimore and Philadelphia to support schools locally.

These experiences gave the advisory council and students meaningful insight into the implementation of the community school and UACS model and provided ideas that could be brought back to the ECPPS community schools to incorporate into their work.

We have found that site visits are an essential aspect for Research Collectives, as the knowledge gained through those visits clarifies community school models and how we can better serve our local schools.

The Collective continued to meet weekly throughout the academic year, as they worked to complete the *Building Bridges: A Rural University-Assisted Community Schools Partnership Presentation*, which they presented at the ECSU Undergraduate Research Week and the Southeast Regional Coalition of University-Assisted Community Schools (SRCUACS) Symposium in April 2025. This presentation focused on the history of community schools, how the ECSU Undergraduate Research Collective was formed, the students' community school visits in Baltimore, MD, the local ECPPS site visits, and the challenges faced as a first-year undergraduate research collective.

We have begun to apply some of this knowledge into practice. The following section describes some of ECSU's initiatives being implemented with local community school partners, followed by our current efforts to strengthen the research collective and to institutionalize UACS at ECSU.

Early UACS Initiatives: STEM Enrichment, 3D Printer Workshops, and After School Tutoring

One of the first initiatives we collaborated on with local schools was the summer STEM enrichment program for elementary-age students. ECSU collaborated with North Carolina State University's School of Engineering, the Engineering Place, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's (UNC) Morehead Planetarium and Science Center to provide access to STEM enrichment summer programs for students in our region. The I-ENGINEER program is a one-week STEM enrichment experience designed to nurture critical thinking and problem-solving skills through problem-based learning tasks that address real-world issues. Considering that the other iterations of this program are located in urban areas with a pay-to-participate model to cover program expenses, the UACS partnership provided the opportunity to fund multiple one-week, grade-level I-ENGINEER camps at no cost to parents. Funding for the summer enrichment experiences was generated through secured external grants and SRCUACS funding. The excitement of our students and parents to have the same experiences in their local community, provided to them at no cost, has been strongly supported. This partnership also seeks to hire local educators who are in search of summer employment given that North Carolina K-12 educators do not receive their teaching salary over the summer months. These local educators gain valuable professional development and can share the curriculum with their schools and students during the upcoming academic year. The program has seen a rise in enrollment, thanks to the UACS partnership, from twenty-five students (in two classes, with four staff members)

to 88 students (in four classes, with eight staff members) over the past two years, with more than 150 applications received each enrollment period.

Another initiative emerged when a local community school media coordinator reached out to the UACS Advisory Council regarding the district's newly purchased 3D printers, seeking guidance on setup, training, and ways to integrate the technology into curriculum and instruction. Professor Clarence Goss, Jr., Assistant Professor of Graphic Design and Director of 1704 Media Productions at ECSU, was identified and agreed to facilitate a 3D workshop before the start of the upcoming academic year. The workshop was open to other media specialists and educators across the district to sign up. Participants engaged in a two-day (8-hour total) training session that resulted in content-related lesson plans, which could be collected, stored, and used by other teachers in the district. Each participant received a stipend upon completing the training and submitting a lesson plan for their respective course discipline or related content for their grade level. Reflecting on the collaboration, Professor Goss shared:

> My partnership with ECPPS has been a rewarding experience that's helped me grow as an ECSU faculty member while building stronger connections in our community. Working with teachers and media specialists on 3D printing has sharpened my skills, inspired new teaching ideas, and given me a deeper appreciation for the creativity and dedication in our local schools. This collaboration extends beyond the classroom—it equips educators with tools that spark innovation, prepares students for future careers, and strengthens Elizabeth City as a whole. It has been an honor to learn from each other and work together toward a more creative, connected, and forward-thinking community.

In another focused UACS initiative, ECSU is partnering with P.W. Moore Elementary School to support their after-school program. The local community school needed tutors for its after-school program, which currently serves 125 students, and contacted ECSU to see if it could support students with small-group instruction in math and reading. The ECSU UACS Advisory Council recruited students who were awarded work-study as part of their financial aid package, including by attending a university "job fair" to recruit students seeking university employment and work-study assignments. We also wanted to ensure that those students were well-prepared for their roles. We contacted the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs (NCCAP) to seek their assistance and expertise in designing an after-school tutoring program and providing training that would certify students in their role as tutors. NCCAP designed an eight-hour training workshop for the students to certify them as afterschool tutors before allowing them to serve in the program. This ensures our student tutors are well-versed and prepared to serve in their capacity and navigate different situations beyond the mere subject matter of reading and mathematics. With the additional support provided by ECSU student after-school tutors, P.W. Moore was able to sustain the program, provide additional support to educators, and bring their unique skills (martial arts, aviation science, music, gardening, etc.) to enhance the after-school program and expose the elementary students to other topics beyond just course content. With seven students who signed on to be tutors for the current academic year (2025-2026), and the possibility of adding additional students in the spring, the program has the potential to grow beyond P.W. Moore into the other local community schools.

New Developments to Strengthen the Research Collective

As we embark upon our second year as a UACS Research Collective, several new initiatives are fueling our passion. One initiative is to recruit a new Research Collective, comprising returning members and new students, to continue building upon the initial year of the success we achieved with the Collective. This would involve learning from the challenges of the first year and gaining a deeper understanding of the community school model. One way we plan to be better prepared for students to remain committed to participating in the Research Collective is by creating a commitment letter that each student will be required to sign. Having a commitment letter in place will hopefully deter undergraduate members from only participating in the more "enjoyable" aspects of traveling for community school site visits or conferences, only to leave the Collective once it is time for the research writing process or presentation preparation. Additionally, the UACS Advisory Council contacted university faculty who may have interested students in joining the new cohort of researchers. A professor who attended the Spring 2025 Undergraduate Research Week was impressed with the Research Collective presentation and, in additional conversations, expressed possible interest in identifying students to join the next Collective and serving as a mentor to their research. There was also a professor researching local Rosenwald schools who could serve as a mentor for the Research Collective who could in turn assist in her research.

Another initiative to maintain and strengthen the Collective is adding a research course to our university curriculum, allowing undergraduate researchers to obtain course credit for their participation. Work on the course creation and approval process began at the conclusion of the Spring 2025 semester. The intention now is to have the course process approved this academic year, so it will be available for students to enroll in the Fall 2026 semester. Without an incentive in our first year, we experienced students' participation in the Collective as a challenge at times, resulting in them discontinuing their commitment and leaving the research to be completed by the remaining members. Our university does not require community service or service-learning to fulfill graduation requirements (an incentive that has proven useful for other UACS initiatives in NC). Without a formal budget to compensate students for participation, the course credit approach provides an alternative incentive for members of the Collective. This research course model is similar in design to the Duke University/North Carolina Central University format they have been using to facilitate their Research Collective.

Institutionalizing UACS at ECSU

With new university administrators (Chancellor, Provost, Vice Chancellors, and other Cabinet members), ECSU has embarked on developing a new Strategic Plan for the next five years. This Strategic Plan provides two objectives that directly impact students and faculty/staff. First, the plan seeks to ensure our undergraduate students have a wealth of research opportunities to develop them as future professionals. Second, the Strategic Plan desires faculty and staff to seek professional development opportunities to broaden impact and service to the university and the community through a myriad of scholarly activities (grant funding, research, publications, consulting) that also includes our students. Our UACS partnerships provide both the ECSU UACS Advisory Council and Research Collective with a direct opportunity to assist the university in realizing these tenets of the new Strategic Plan. One significant step has been our work to add research courses developed through our UACS work into the official university course catalog and course inventory. By embedding these courses within the university's academic structure, UACS moves beyond being a stand-alone initiative and becomes an ongoing part of students' educational pathways. As described above, the course incentive also ensures that undergraduate research opportunities are consistently available, credited, and recognized as an integral part of the curriculum rather than as a temporary program.

Additionally, the ECSU UACS Advisory Council is actively seeking partnerships with faculty across diverse disciplines, including Psychology, Education, Honors Program, and English to serve as mentors for specific research topics of the Research Collective. These collaborations broaden the scope of our UACS work, embed it into existing academic programs, and create sustainable faculty buy-in. By aligning UACS with the teaching, research, and service missions of different departments, we strengthen its relevance across campus and establish a culture where undergraduate research is valued and supported institutionally.

The UACS Advisory Council also hosted two Community School Teach-Ins during the fall and spring of last academic year. The Teach-In was part of a North Carolina Community Schools Coalition initiative that allowed participants from both universities and community schools to learn about on-the-ground community school strategies being implemented around the country and brainstorm what could be adapted to their school districts. The Teach-In sessions brought together educators, community partners, the ECSU UACS Advisory Council and Research Collective, and university faculty to support community schools across the region. It also created a collaborative space for sharing best practices, highlighting creative approaches, and addressing challenges faced by schools implementing the UACS model. This effort not only showcased successful strategies but also fostered a collective vision for expanding and sustaining UACS work to benefit students, families, and communities. Students in the ECSU UACS Research Collective were encouraged to attend the sessions and participate in the discussions, bringing in a student perspective.

We are also working to incorporate UACS as a formal Faculty Learning Community within our Center for Teaching, Learning & Digital Education (CTLDE). By positioning UACS in this manner, we establish a faculty-facing hub for innovation, collaboration, and professional development that is closely tied to undergraduate research. This connection helps institutionalize UACS not only as a student initiative but also as a resource for faculty development and curricular integration. Additionally, we are engaging with university leadership and Academic Affairs to align UACS with the broader institutional goals, ensuring it contributes to the university's strategic priorities (such as the Strategic Plan referenced earlier) and long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, through initiatives such as the Faculty Learning Community, we will have the opportunity to develop more intentional strategies for marketing and communication, ensuring that faculty and staff are fully informed about the vision, resources, and opportunities associated with UACS. By consistently presenting information through workshops, presentations, and internal communications, we aim to build broad awareness and foster buy-in across the campus community. This deliberate outreach will not only elevate the visibility of UACS but also create pathways for our faculty and staff to integrate the model into teaching, research, and service, thus strengthening the university's long-term commitment to community-engaged learning.

Sustainability and Expansion of the UACS Program

The ECSU UACS team is currently collaborating with the three designated community schools in our local school district to identify their needs and determine how the university can best provide support. Meanwhile, in our second year, the North Carolina Community Schools Coalition (NCCSC) has expanded to include four additional school districts with six additional community schools in our region. These new community schools are located 60 miles or more from ECSU making it geographically challenging to provide the same level of services that we currently offer to the three community schools in our immediate area. The ECSU UACS Advisory Council has sought to engage community colleges in proximity to those new districts to provide support for their community schools. The goal is to identify "champions" at these respective institutions who are passionate and intentional about leading this work. It is also important to identify the resources that local institutions offer and how they can support the community schools in their area.

Within our own district, ECPPS, growing efforts are also underway with the College of the Albemarle, our local community college, to support community schools. College of the Albemarle houses the school district's early college students and is

involved with the Aviation Academy at Northeastern High School. Together, they are piloting a program with our campus to channel students into ECSU's Aviation program. Coursework will translate to college credit for students who enroll and take advantage of this great partnership (Elizabeth City–Pasquotank Public Schools, n.d.).

To better understand how universities can serve and support their needs, the ECSU UACS Advisory Council requests the annual needs assessment from both local and new districts. Additionally, the Research Collective may gather information about possible needs or research topics upon visiting each site, observing, and inquiring with the community school coordinators. The Advisory Council is working with each community school, focusing on the goals identified in their community school plan. Specifically at Elizabeth City Middle School, we have identified one of four school goals that the UACS team is currently supporting. Our UACS partnership has particularly strengthened the Family Engagement key indicator (Elizabeth City Middle School, 2023). The school regularly communicates with parents/guardians about its expectations of them and the importance of the curriculum at home (what parents can do at home to support their children's learning). The university has supported multiple family engagement events and plans to become more involved in planning of events in the future.

To further engage university stakeholders in community school initiatives, the community schools coordinator shares school events with the UACS advisory council and asks for recommendations. Within these events, community school faculty and staff present announcements and celebrations for the public to be aware of. In these events, feedback from the community is welcome, ensuring continued partnerships that grow beyond the parents of current students. Local businesses and neighborhood homes are encouraged to partner, regardless of whether they have school-age children.

Key Lessons Learned through the UACS Collaborative

To conclude, we, the co-authors of this article, each reflect on the specific lessons we have learned in developing UACS partnerships. Although our experiences were similar, our takeaways were impacted by our various roles, academic backgrounds, and perspectives.Each author thought that reading similar articles from other early UACS partnerships would have been helpful prior to our own involvement. Hence, we felt it critical to share these stories with one another as a means of expanding UACS work and partnerships across the nation.

Mr. Antonio Rook

"I have learned purpose and passion from others who have been serving and supporting community school initiatives throughout the United States. There is excellent work going on, and it is positively impacting their communities. There are also moments of frustration that can cause one to question the totality of the work we are embarking upon. Conversations with those who have been engaged in community school work for a greater time than we have reminded us that there will be many challenges to overcome involving this transformational work. Some aspects will be very smooth and rapid while others may not seem like it is moving at all and there is a challenge course to navigate. However, it is essential to be flexible, agile, adaptable, and purpose-driven to propel yourself forward and make a positive impact, especially during challenging times. It is very encouraging to see the students' involvement and their interest in continuing the work well after their undergraduate experience has ended. Those students either serve in a community school or as a community partner to a school in the community. The work you engage in makes a difference in the lives of all those being served or those serving with you."

Dr. Nicole Austin

"One of the most important lessons I have learned is that building UACS work is a gradual process that requires intentional relationship-building, both within the university and in the community. It is not enough to design programs; the sustainability of the work depends on cultivating trust, aligning with shared goals, and creating opportunities for collaboration that feel meaningful. I have also learned the importance of embedding the work into existing structures—

whether through courses, faculty engagement, or campus-wide initiatives—so that it does not feel like a temporary program to students, but rather an integral part of the university's goals. Another lesson is that UACS work flourishes when we include students as creators rather than just participants. Their voices, energy, and creativity enhance the work, providing relevancy and responsiveness to the needs of our community schools and the broader community surrounding our campus. Ultimately, I have come to realize that patience and persistence are essential. The most meaningful impacts often take time to develop. However, the long-term benefits of having students more engaged and a stronger university connection to our local schools make the journey worthwhile."

Dr. Tarsha Rogers
"Working within the University-Assisted Community Schools (UACS) advisory council alongside colleagues at ECSU and from East Carolina University, North Carolina Central University, Duke University, and local community schools has highlighted the value of collaboration, shared vision, and authentic community engagement. One key lesson learned is that building sustainable partnerships requires intentional listening and trust-building with both university and school stakeholders, ensuring that initiatives align with community-identified needs rather than solely institutional goals.

Another lesson centers on the importance of leveraging the unique strengths of each partner—universities provide research, training, and opportunities for student engagement. At the same time, schools and communities contribute critical local knowledge and lived experience. Together, this reciprocal approach can foster innovation, create more impactful outcomes, and strengthen the long-term viability of our UACS work. Insights from our team's experiences may help guide others seeking to initiate or deepen their UACS efforts by emphasizing the importance of co-creation, transparency, and shared accountability."

Mr. Tony Coley
"The learning gained throughout the partnership has emphasized an important realization: there is no single, uniform model that defines a community school's framework. Instead, each partnership is unique, shaped by the needs, priorities, and strengths of the communities it serves. As stakeholders working through this process, it is essential to understand that community school partnerships are not 'one-size-fits-all,' but instead living collaborations that adapt to the circumstances and voices of everyone involved.

Our participation in the University of Pennsylvania Netter Center Conference helped strengthen this perspective, highlighting that while community school models can serve as valuable references, they are not intended to be replicated in exact form. Each partnership is intentionally designed, reflecting the distinct culture, context, and goals of its respective community. Ultimately, both the aims of the partnership and its outcomes must remain specific to the community it supports, ensuring the work is relevant, authentic, and impactful."

These reflections on ECSU's first full year of UACS work help highlight our successes, challenges, and opportunities. Through reflection, we hope to provide ideas and lessons learned for other institutions seeking to join in this work, as well as help our team better understand where we have been so we can build on past efforts and increase effectiveness in the year ahead.

References

Brookings Institution. (2022). Why local leaders should champion 'community schools' to improve student, family, and neighborhood well-being. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-local-leaders-should-champion-community-schools-to-improve-student-family-and-neighborhood-well-being/

Elizabeth City Middle School. (2023, October 18). *Comprehensive progress report*. Elizabeth City Pasquotank Public Schools. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1698160899/ecppsk12ncus/ferxug0p841fvwz9y4du/ECMS.pdf

Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools. (n.d.). Aviation Academy – Northeastern High School. Retrieved October 18, 2025, from https://www.ecpps.k12.nc.us/departments/program-services/aviation-academy

Harkavy, I., Hartley, M., Hodges, R. A., & Weeks, J. (2013), The promise of university-assisted community schools to transform American schooling: A report from the field, 1985–2012, *Peabody Journal of Education, 88*(5), 525-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2013.834789

Northeastern High School. (2023, October 18). *Comprehensive progress report*. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1698161706/ecppsk12ncus/j7v4akifhwizwemcumx9/NHS.pdf

Palatnik, M. (2020). Rosenwald invests in education. American Heritage, 65(1). P.W. Moore Elementary School. (2023, October 6). *Comprehensive progress report*. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1698162230/ecppsk12ncus/sgtf3jgebp1yfoyw1wu2/PWM.pdf

UCLA School of Education & Information Studies. (n.d.). First generation college persistence: University-assisted schools and their influence on college degree attainment. Retrieved from: https://scispace.com/pdf/first-generation-college-persistence-university-assisted-2jlldt3m3e.pdf

University of Pennsylvania Netter Center for Community Partnerships. (n.d.). University-Assisted Community Schools. Retrieved from: https://www.nettercenter.upenn.edu/what-we-do/university-assisted-community-schools

Toward Massachusetts' First University-Assisted Community School: Early Lessons from the Ruth Batson Academy–UMass Boston Partnership

Tara L. Parker, Lorna Rivera, Kya Roumimper Ascani, Kendra Kelley, Azure Parker, and S. Tiffany Donaldson

Tara L. Parker, Ph.D. is Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Lorna Rivera, Ph.D. is Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development & Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Kya Roumimper Ascani is a doctoral student in Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Kendra Kelley is a doctoral student in Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Azure Parker is a doctoral student in Urban Education Leadership Policy Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

S. Tiffany Donaldson, Ph.D. is Associate Dean of Research and Community Partnerships in the College of Education & Human Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Abstract

This article documents the launch of Massachusetts' first University-Assisted Community School (UACS), a partnership between the Ruth Batson Academy (Boston Public Schools) and the University of Massachusetts Boston. Writing from the perspective of university partners with the school community, we describe how and why the collaboration formed, the co-leadership structure that emerged, and the local context that shaped our approach. We outline notable first-year milestones, including developing "community-affiliated" university library access for high school students, expanding college pathways and scholarship supports, co-creating arts and cultural learning experiences, and schoolwide professional development. We also explain our adaptation of the Learning Policy Institute's community school pillars, adding a fifth pillar: Collective Visioning and Continuous Improvement. Our early lessons suggest the importance of beginning with relationships and small wins; centering school community expertise through shared governance; aligning university systems to sustain equitable access; and designing with, not for, multilingual learners and families. We conclude with implications for urban public universities seeking to serve as co-leads in community school partnerships grounded in equity, reciprocity, trust, and continuous learning.

Introduction

For more than 50 years, the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston) has been neighbors with two Boston Public Schools: the Paul A. Dever Elementary School (Grades K-5) and the John W. McCormack Middle School (Grades 6-8) on the Columbia Point peninsula in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. Over the years, the university partnered with its K-8 neighbors to address various school needs and to provide resources, but activities were sometimes piecemeal, lacking strategic alignment. In 2022, the school district closed and merged the McCormack Middle School with the Boston Community Leadership Academy to create a new 7-12 high school renamed the Ruth Batson Academy (RBA). In 2024, UMass Boston partnered with Boston Public Schools and this new high school to co-create RBA as Massachusetts' first University-Assisted Community School (UACS). This groundbreaking partnership with UMass Boston was both the culmination of years of planning and the beginning of a renewed commitment to educational equity in the Columbia Point neighborhood.

In this article, we explore the origins of our partnership and reflect on our first year of collaboration with the Ruth Batson Academy as a UACS. We also offer some of the early lessons learned along the way and our hopes for the future of our partnership's development. While we value the reciprocal nature of our relationship with the school community, this article is written from the perspective of UMass Boston staff, relatively early in the UACS partnership's unfolding, with the aim of sharing experiences that may inform other universities considering similar initiatives.

We understand University-Assisted Community Schools as a distinct kind of partnership within the broader community schools movement. As Harkavy et al. (2025) describe, "The key defining feature…is that it engages the university as the lead partner, providing broad-based, comprehensive and sustained support for the community school" (p. 470). While community schools may partner with other local organizations, universities bring unique educational resources, research capacities, and civic responsibilities that position them to act as enduring institutional partners.

Scholars trace the community schools movement to the work of John Dewey and other social reformers, notably Jane Addams, who viewed schools as foundational democratic spaces for participation, relationship-building, and access to resources (Harkavy et al., 2025, p. 469). This vision resonates with UMass Boston's founding urban mission of advancing educational opportunity and equity as Boston's only public university. Our UACS partnership with Ruth Batson Academy builds on both this historic public purpose and contemporary calls for universities to serve as co-leaders in advancing community well-being and educational justice.

Background

With the generous support of a private foundation gift in 2018, the university, led by the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD), entered into an agreement with its neighboring schools. At the same time, the Dever School was in its fourth year under state receivership, and Boston Public Schools (BPS) administration had proposed a plan to phase out middle schools, starting with the McCormack School. The initial goal of the agreement was to achieve educational transformation at the Dever School in hopes of exiting the receivership status, and co-construct areas of engagement that are driven by the needs and strengths of both schools, rather than by university interests. This work was intended to lay a foundation for continued engagement at the new 7-12 grade high school.

Then, in 2022, Boston Public Schools merged McCormack Middle School with Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA), a high school located in another part of the city. In the first two years, the newly merged school was called BCLA/McCormack and lacked a cohesive school identity. Most students attended classes in what was previously the middle school building in Dorchester. Seniors, however, continued to have classes in their original school building, eight miles southwest. During this time, UMass Boston's CEHD funded transportation costs to bring the entire school community together, allowing seniors to attend important activities alongside the rest of the grade 7-12 school community.

Many changes in BPS, along with the growing pains of a newly merged school and leadership changes at UMass Boston, particularly in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD), delayed the full realization of the partnership's plans. Still, UMass Boston's desire to partner with our neighboring public school, to mobilize our resources for transformational work, and to advance educational equity has always remained strong. In 2023, with new institutional leadership (including a new Dean of the College of Education and Human Development), buttressed by a new university strategic plan that further solidified UMass Boston's commitments to community engagement and shaping education for the future, the partnership was rejuvenated (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2022).

Our current UACS partnership deepens our university's public mission by connecting teaching, research, and service to the pursuit of educational equity in our city; for the school, it expands access to academic, cultural, and material resources that strengthen student success and collective well-being. Together, these efforts illustrate how universities and schools can partner as co-educators to promote justice and expand opportunity.

New Beginnings

Co-creating a New High School

To further gain inspiration and learn more about the UACS approach, UMass Boston Chancellor Marcelo Sáurez-Orozco led a group of leaders from the university (including the current Dean of CEHD), Boston Public Schools, and other educational organizations to visit the community schools at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which he led when he was dean of their school of education. In March 2023, the Boston team visited two UCLA community schools and met their staff and students. Our team heard from high school students in an advanced research course where they spent a year studying a topic of interest to them. We also heard from teachers, students, and families who shared how the partnership with UCLA transformed their school. Following the school visits, we met with faculty and staff from UCLA's school of education, who shared lessons they had learned from their partnership with two public schools in the city of Los Angeles.

Upon returning to Boston, the CEHD Dean and the then-head of school at the BCLA-McCormack School, as well as a representative from the City of Boston Mayor's Office, began meeting regularly to talk about ways to co-create the new high school as Massachusetts' first UACS. Building on 50 years of UMass Boston's partnership with BPS and bolstered by a shared social justice mission and geographic proximity, UMass Boston and the BCLA-McCormack School were well positioned to advance this invigorated educational partnership. Further, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by UMass Boston, BPS district, and school leadership reflected the partners' deepened commitment to actualize a high-quality educational experience.

By 2024, all BCLA-McCormack students were together on the Dorchester campus, and the school changed its name to the Ruth M. Batson Academy in honor of the civil rights leader who fought for racial equity in schools (Boston Public Schools, 2024; City of Boston, 2022; Eyes on the Prize II, 1988; Gengenbach, 2017). The name helped to create a unified school identity and symbolized the work we were doing together in co-creating Massachusetts' first UACS. The previous school leader shared that through our UACS work, we would "pick up where Ruth Batson left off" in her fight for equity and social justice. Our UACS work is therefore driven by our shared interest in creating more equitable schools for underserved populations.

Today the Ruth Batson Academy is an open-enrollment, pilot public high school for grades 7-12 in the Boston Public School district. Like all BPS district high schools, the newly renamed school serves a diverse city-wide student body. Unlike some of the more resourced BPS high schools, RBA does not currently require an exam for admission. The current student population is 89% Black and Latine, and 86.6% of students come from households experiencing financial hardships. English is an additional language for 63.2% of students, and more than a third are English learners. Due to a concentration of high-need and historically marginalized students (95.9%), the school community continues to work against longstanding disparities in resources, which

are reflected in academic performance relative to district and state benchmarks (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2024). Despite the challenges, the people of the school are rich in community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Shared Pillars

Grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy and practice, we strive to promote academic excellence and address educational inequities for RBA students, their families, and the broader community. Having a concept note from the earlier grant work as our guide, we adopted the Learning Policy Institute's original four pillars of community schools (Maier et al., 2017) and added one of our own:

- Integrated student supports
- Enriched and expanded learning time and opportunities
- Active family and community engagement
- Collaborative leadership and practice
- Collective visioning and continuous improvement (new addition)

While the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) has since expanded to six pillars, including a sense of belonging and a rigorous curriculum and learning, our framework builds upon the initial four. While we are indebted to LPI's work, we continued with our pillars because we view rigorous, community-connected classroom instruction and a culture of belonging, safety, and care as foundational to our work. In other words, creating a sense of belonging and rigorous community-connected teaching and learning are not separate components, they are embedded throughout our foundation. Similarly, BPS maintains a network of community hub schools that also draw on LPI's six-pillar framework (Boston Public Schools, 2025). While we work closely with the leadership of these community hub schools and actively seek new opportunities for collaboration, our UACS model was designed to be a distinct integrated approach (Boston Public Schools & University of Massachusetts, Boston, 2024)—one that fits the context of UMass Boston and Ruth Batson Academy.

The UACS leadership design is also distinctive and has been developed collaboratively, with consideration of our communities' specific context. Some community school models emphasize the role of a community school coordinator, because they are often instrumental in organizing the flow of resources to and through the school and community (Adams, 2019). Frequent turnover and shifting district priorities often threaten the viability of models that rely on sustained commitment to relationships built over time (Dinon, 2024; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022; Herrenkohl et al., 2019). Thus, our approach emphasizes co-leadership and the importance of centering the expertise, cultural wealth, and wisdom across the RBA school community.

In our model, RBA educators and staff collaborate closely with UMass Boston faculty to co-lead what we have termed the pillar teams. Instead of relying on a single person, our collective approach forms a team of individuals, organized by our five pillars, to lead our work and coordinate resources and activities. Despite the areas that may make us unique among community schools, we share what we deem most important: a shared purpose and values. Like many other UACSs, we seek to transform education by promoting equity, social justice, and academic excellence for the school's students, families, and communities. What follows describes our approach to working with the Ruth Batson Academy at UMass Boston.

Collective Visioning

Prior to entering the school building or engaging with the school community, UMass Boston faculty and CEHD leadership established a UACS Championship Team to discuss and outline some of the basic guidelines and principles to consider in this work. After the trip to Los Angeles, Dean Tara Parker began to talk with the CEHD community at UMass Boston about an

opportunity to bring the varied work we do across Boston Public Schools together to address local concerns at our closest public high school. At college-wide and other meetings, faculty and staff were invited to sign-up for more information about a potential new partnership. The CEHD Dean also sent invitations to faculty or staff who were nominated due to their expertise and/or partnerships with Boston Public Schools. Our first meeting brought together over 25 administrators, faculty, and staff. Graduate Assistants have also supported our UACS work by managing our communications with school partners, organizing meetings, and documenting the overall history of the UACS partnership.

At our UACS Championship Team meetings and retreats, we emphasized the importance of recognizing the cultural wealth within the school community and centering its expertise and knowledge. We also reflected on our own positionality and our reasons for engaging in this work. Too often, university researchers have partnered with schools with the implicit assumption that they can "fix" the school (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). Such assumptions negate the knowledge, experiences, and cultural wealth of the school community. Through our meetings and discussions, we sought to counter those assumptions by prioritizing collaboration, reciprocity, and community voice (Guishard, 2009).

Together, we also read *Preparing and Sustaining Social Justice Educators* written by colleagues at UCLA (Francois & Quartz, 2021). Due to our chancellor's previous leadership when he was at UCLA and the subsequent site visit, UCLA's work, captured in this book, inspired UMass Boston's collaborative approaches. In particular, it "tempered" expectations of some members of the team who wanted to act more quickly, as UCLA emphasized how trust and relationship-building were essential for how they created their community schools. Given the transitions the RBA school community had already experienced, building trust and relationships was key for UMass Boston and the newly merged school.

Like most urban public schools, the Ruth Batson Academy has been impacted by frequent policy changes and inconsistent, unsustainable reforms. When we initiated the UACS partnership with the school, some RBA staff were still getting to know each other following the BCLA/McCormack merger and were skeptical of "the next shiny thing." Furthermore, we at the university had to acknowledge the distrust our institution may have created over the years with our own historical starts and stops. To overcome some of this skepticism and merger exhaustion, we learned from our UCLA colleagues that it would be important to develop relationships and build trust:

> The process of transformation must contend with stakeholder mistrust built over decades of community divestment and traditional governance structures that are not conducive to community participation. The school design team was able to win the community's trust only by listening fully to stakeholders and delivering positive outcomes well before the partnership was formalized. As we moved from reimagining and crafting the plan to implementing and sustaining the plan, the challenge of maintaining trust continued to be a balancing act. (Francois & Hunter Quartz, p.186)

A dedication to building trust, learned from UCLA Community Schools, remains at the forefront of our work, which is why we added Collective Visioning and Continuous Improvement as a fifth pillar. The heart of a successful community school is the cultivation of trusting relationships, dedicated teams, and collaborative leadership. This approach prioritizes students' needs by incorporating and valuing the voices of the school community in discussions (Caldas et al., 2019) to identify strengths, discuss challenges, and generate solutions for success. We spent considerable time at the school in the hallways and visiting classrooms to learn from the school community in informal ways. These interactions provided us with insights into the school's interest in the partnership and helped to raise awareness at the school. These consistent, informal, individual conversations also helped to demonstrate why this UACS partnership was different from other "partnerships."

One of the most impactful early experiences of this visioning work was RBA's development of shared school values, where students and staff from the former BCLA high school and the former McCormack middle school collaborated to envision the type of school they wanted to create. Members of our team joined weekly professional development sessions to co-develop core values and later worked with RBA staff to operationalize them. RBA's core values—CARE: community,

accountability, respect, and empathy—embody the heart of our collective visioning process. Together, they express the shared purpose of our UACS work: creating a school community where everyone feels they belong, can learn, and thrive.

In September 2024, we organized a boat cruise, using a boat from UMass Boston's fleet, as a networking event to facilitate introductions and relationship-building among RBA and university faculty and staff. Before we left the university docks for our harbor cruise, we held a brief information session for staff and faculty who were new to the partnership, which at this point, was nearly everyone at Ruth Batson Academy. The session and cruise were effective in developing relationships and exploring ways teachers and professors can collaborate on curriculum and academic projects.

Additionally, we held formal listening sessions with teachers and staff at the school. These sessions allowed us to formally document the school's interests, needs, and assets. They also gave us an opportunity to demonstrate the bidirectional nature of the partnership by further articulating the value of their expertise and the myriad assets individuals bring to the UACS work. This is important as we believe that those who are part of the RBA every day—teachers, staff, and families—are best positioned to guide this community school's partnership work. For us, collective leadership is not only a core value, but a key strategy for ensuring long-term sustainability and meaningful impact. Graduate students helped to organize and summarize Listening Sessions with school leaders, teachers, and staff. Throughout the year, we began implementing recommendations from those listening sessions and meetings—particularly around access to resources, student belonging, and visibility of school culture—which shaped the priorities described below.

Notable Milestones

The following milestones represent early examples of how the partnership has translated the priorities identified by the RBA community into concrete action. Each emerged directly from conversations with educators, students, and families during the first year of UACS development. Together, they demonstrate the range of strategies—policy, pedagogical, and cultural—that can anchor a sustainable university-community school partnership.

Development of the Community-Affiliated Student ID

Early in our partnership, we focused on achieving small wins by building on some of the previous goals and commitments made before the formal start of the UACS partnership. Some of the school leadership's primary interests included student access to campus facilities, specifically our library and recreational areas. Indeed, given that Ruth Batson Academy used to be a middle school, the library was no longer suitable for the new student population. Because UMass Boston is a public university, RBA students already had access to our physical library building; however, it became clear that students were unfamiliar with how to best utilize the resources in the university library. Thus, one of our earliest joint meetings was between the university and the school librarians. The librarians' introduction proved invaluable, as several 11th- and 12th-grade classes subsequently visited the library and participated in workshops to learn how to use library tools to develop research papers and projects.

It soon became clear that RBA students could benefit from having access to our university library's electronic resources. Providing access to our electronic databases faced multiple challenges including concerns about protecting students' personally identifiable information from online websites and associated costs (i.e. license; labor costs). Our library and information technology department staff partnered with enrollment management, the registrar, and the CEHD Dean's Office and committed to finding a feasible solution. Most recently, we agreed to pilot a new category of university identification currently referred to as "community affiliated" students. This new category is expected to be available by fall 2026 and will provide RBA students with access to our university's electronic databases, thereby greatly expanding their access to peer-reviewed research, primary sources, and multimedia tools. Access to resources, combined with training on how to use them, can develop students' research skills, deepen their understanding of subject matter, support academic success, and prepare students for college.

The development of the community-affiliated student ID represents a significant advancement at UMass Boston. This identification will provide students not only with access to our electronic databases but also to recreational facilities and campus events. Some staff talked about how this greater access may also serve as an incentive for behavioral interventions at the school. This new access will also foster greater inclusion as students may begin to see themselves as future college students and a part of the UMass Boston community.

Creating this new student designation is significant, in part, because under our MOU, the university agreed to develop pathways for RBA students to enroll at UMass Boston. A recent outcome of the UACS partnership and a significant step towards advancing those pathways is the CEHD's launch of the Ruth and Robert Starratt Scholarship, which provides tuition support at UMass Boston for RBA graduates who plan to pursue a career in education. Funded by a $1.9 million endowed bequest, the scholarship enables students to graduate debt-free. The Starratt Scholars commit to returning to BPS as educators, bringing the expertise they've gained back into the public school system. To date, seven Ruth Batson graduates have received this transformative scholarship award.

Expanding the Early College Program

UMass Boston's Early College program has another long-term impact on the broader school community. The Early College partnership began with the former BCLA high school in 2022 (Office of Communications, University of Massachusetts, 2025). The Early College initiative continues to benefit RBA students, who can take UMass Boston college courses without cost. As a result, RBA students can potentially graduate with six college courses that are transferable to any college they choose to attend. RBA staff have identified the need to expand opportunities for more RBA students to take college classes. Conversations to offer additional dual enrollment courses to expand electives and advanced placement courses as part of the RBA curriculum are ongoing.

Enrolling high school students in college courses has also increased awareness of the multifaceted nature of college preparation (Supiano, 2025). Students may have the academic skills, but they may not be prepared for the faster pace of college courses. We are working at the university and the school to identify ways to better support high school students who are taking college courses. Given the large population of English Learners at RBA, for example, we are also investigating whether some of these college credit courses could have a dual language component at UMass Boston.

Mutually Beneficial Relationships through UMass Boston Student Engagement

As indicated, the proximity of the Ruth Batson Academy to the UMass Boston campus offers other unique opportunities for sharing campus resources, spaces, and teaching and learning exchanges, which also support our university students. It is also important to note that UMass Boston and the Ruth Batson Academy not only share geographic proximity, but they also share demographic proximity. Our college students share many similarities with the RBA students and frequently seek service-learning opportunities to support local communities, rather than those located farther from our campus. The relationships that students are developing are truly supportive, caring, and beneficial to both the high school students and the university students. UMass Boston students majoring in Psychology, Sociology, and Criminal Justice, for example, have been serving as interns in Restorative Justice classes at RBA even before our formal UACS partnership. Other UMass Boston students earn clinical and student teaching hours at the school. We have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from students and staff about UMass Boston students who volunteer and complete internships and practica at RBA. Thus, we have been working with the Student Affairs division to develop UACS specific internship courses where UMass Boston students would develop projects with students at RBA.

Increasing Belonging and Opportunity through the Arts

Recognizing that chronic absenteeism is a significant issue at most urban public schools, including RBA, we sought to expand and enrich learning opportunities, believing these experiences promote students' mental health and sense of belonging at

school (O'Donnell et al., 2024), helping to reduce absenteeism. Creating more arts experiences was identified as a high priority at the school, both to provide students with more arts opportunities and because theater arts have been found to improve student academic and non-academic outcomes (Goble et al., 2021). When we first began our UACS partnership, the school was in the process of developing its first theater production in the 70-year history of the school (including the McCormack middle school years). We were thrilled to provide financial resources to support the Lion King production in our first year and their second theater production, Once Upon This Island. Since then, members of our UACS team have been actively involved in planning efforts for the RBA Drama Club's 2026 production, including fundraising and sustainability.

Another highlight from our first year with RBA was a visit with acclaimed poet and legendary civil rights activist Nikki Giovanni in March 2024. UMass Boston's College of Education and Human Development invited Ms. Giovanni to give a public lecture at UMass Boston, followed by a private reception. More than 500 people attended, including RBA students, staff, and families. We also arranged for Nikki Giovanni to spend the following day at the RBA, where she presented a powerful lecture and poetry reading for about 200 RBA students. Prior to Giovanni's visit, a UMass Boston English professor worked with English Language Arts classes to support students' learning about Ms. Giovanni's poetry and her role in the civil rights movement. During the talk, Ms. Giovanni read some of her poetry and opened the floor for questions. Some students shared their poetry with Ms. Giovanni and the school audience impromptu. Following her talk with students, Ms. Giovanni met with teachers in the school library (see Figure 1). The visit was significant not only because it provided students and faculty with the opportunity to learn from Nikki Giovanni, a world-renowned poet, but also because it represented, for many, the promise of a meaningful partnership.

Collectively, these milestones reflect the partnership's steady movement from vision to practice. Each example underscores how the priorities identified by the RBA community—access, belonging, and opportunity—continue to shape our shared work, reinforcing the UACS commitment to reciprocity, sustainability, and equity-driven collaboration.

Figure 1. Nikki Giovanni and Ruth Batson Academy Teachers

Advancing the Work Forward

Although significant progress has been made in building trust and advancing longstanding goals within the school community, what we've shared here and other work we've done to date represent only initial steps in a broader, ongoing effort. Trust is something that we must continue to build and nurture. Furthermore, it is critical that we strike a balance between our expectations for immediate outcomes and our more methodical and strategic approach, which is designed to yield results over time. At the same time, we have work to do at the university to deepen our commitments campus-wide.

We have spent the first year developing trust and relationships between RBA and UMass Boston educators. In summer 2025, RBA welcomed a new head of school who brings a new level of enthusiasm to this work. We are building relationships

with the new school leader and working with her and others to set priorities within each of the community school pillars. Teachers have expressed interest in pursuing more professional development opportunities for teaching and learning with English Learners, students with disabilities, and workshops on trauma-informed practices. These are certainly areas where UMass Boston's faculty and staff have particular expertise, presenting new opportunities for collaboration. We are currently developing a Spanish for Educators course in response to requests from the school, given their large student population of Spanish speakers.

Family and community engagement continues to be an area that needs particular attention. A survey sent by RBA to all families indicates that awareness of the UMass Boston UACS partnership has increased significantly since the partnership's launch, as we have presented at new family orientations and "Back to School" nights, as well as presented scholarships at their graduation ceremonies. Families have identified additional student supports needed and the classes they would like their students to be able to take at UMass Boston. Some families have requested legal education and workshops to help those facing immigration and housing instability. Next, we are planning to conduct listening sessions with families to learn more about their goals for the UACS partnership.

To be truly successful, we will also need to look inward and examine the changes UMass Boston may need to make to enable more faculty, staff, and students to engage in this work, as well as to make our campus policies and practices conducive to our partnership with the school. With a strong foundation in place, we anticipate discovering new ways to offer student access to advanced coursework and on-campus resources. The university, therefore, must be receptive to these goals. In June 2024, for example, we had planned to hold RBA's graduation ceremony on campus. Despite the chancellor's and provost's support, some campus personnel raised concerns about liability and the associated expenses. Ultimately, RBA staff decided to change venues. The following year, however, we were better prepared. Framed within our university's commitment to community engaged scholarship, UMass Boston leadership worked with facilities staff throughout the year to make a plan for RBA's graduation ceremony. In June 2025, UMass Boston held graduation ceremonies for the Ruth Batson Academy and four other BPS schools on campus (see Figure 2). We look forward to hosting the RBA 2026 Commencement Ceremonies.

Figure 2. Ruth Batson Academy Student and UMass Boston Dean Tara Parker at Graduation, 2024

We are also seeking ways to learn from others as we continue with our UACS journey. We are currently looking to hire a new tenure-track professor in the College of Education and Human Development who has expertise in community school leadership. Hiring a faculty member with this specific expertise will inform our engagement with the school and advance our research in this area, similar to the work that has been established by community school faculty at Binghamton University. We have also significantly benefited from our relationships with our colleagues at UCLA, along with Cory Bowman and the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. The UACS National Network they have created has inspired and supported us.

Most recently, we have participated in the newly formed Massachusetts Community Schools Coalition, a statewide initiative supported by the United Way Massachusetts Bay. The coalition aims to promote community schools in Massachusetts and mobilize public support for this initiative. We were proud to host the first coalition "Kick-Off" on our campus in the summer of 2024 (see Figure 3). In June 2025, we had the opportunity to present some of our UACS work with the Ruth Batson Academy at another coalition gathering that also took place on the UMass Boston campus. Participation in the coalition deepens our collective learning, allowing us to both draw on and contribute to a statewide network of practitioners shaping

policy, practice, and shared frameworks for UACS development across Massachusetts. Most recently, we were awarded a large grant from a private foundation to provide professional development and community school education in Boston and beyond.

Figure 3. Massachusetts Community Schools Coalition Kick-Off Meeting

To advance our work, we are learning, listening, and letting the school guide us in future directions. We are documenting the process, the effectiveness of implementation, the impact, and the achievement of community outcomes. We are committed to ensuring that our UACS partnership creates transformative learning experiences and opportunities for RBA students, educators, families, and community members.

Conclusion

We continue to approach our UACS partnership with heightened awareness that the university and the school are neighbors, united by a shared goal of transforming public education for the sake of equity and academic excellence. We are part of the same community and are in this partnership for the long haul. In reflecting on our first year, we have learned that building a sustainable university–school partnership requires more than good intentions; it depends on trust, shared values, mutual respect, and honest communication. Our experience at the Ruth Batson Academy demonstrates that small wins—such as shared values, increased access, and new pathways—can catalyze broader systems change when guided by authentic collaboration and community expertise. As Massachusetts' first UACS, this partnership offers early lessons on how universities can operationalize equity through co-leadership, reciprocity, and sustained investment. We are grateful to work alongside such an extraordinary community of dedicated teachers, staff, and students at the Ruth Batson Academy, and we look forward to contributing to the growing movement of community schools and university-assisted community schools in the years ahead.

References

Adams, C. M. (2019). Sustaining full-service community schools: Lessons from the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 24(3), 288–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2019.1615924

American Experience. (2023). *The busing battleground: The decades-long road to school desegregation* [Film]. PBS. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/busing-battleground/#transcript

Anderson-Butcher, D., Bates, S., Lawson, H. A., Childs, T. M., & Iachini, A. L. (2022). The community collaboration model for school improvement: A scoping review. *Education Sciences, 12*(12), 918. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120918

Batson, R. (2001). *The Black educational movement in Boston: A sequence of historical events, a chronology.* Northeastern University.

Batson, R. (2009). *Papers of Ruth Batson, 1919–2009, 1951–2003.* Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/8/resources/12687

Boston Public Schools. (2021) Archives of historical documents for Build BPS and BCLA/McCormack school merger. https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/archive/buildbps-11/active-projects/bclamccormack

Boston Public Schools. (2024, May). *Renaming committee: Ruth Batson Academy, presentation to the school committee.* https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/06/Renaming%20Committee.Ruth%20Batson%20Academy.May%202024.pdf

Boston Public Schools. (2025). Boston Community Hub Schools. https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/academics/boston-community-hub-schools

Boston Public Schools & University of Massachusetts Boston (2024). Memorandum of Understanding.

Caldas, S. J., Gomez, D. W., & Ferrara, J. (2019). A comparative analysis of the impact of a full-service community school on student achievement. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 24*(3), 196–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2019.1615921

City of Boston. (2022). Black history Boston: Ruth Batson. https://www.boston.gov/news/black-history-boston-ruth-batson

City of Boston. (2024, June 4). *BPS' Ruth Batson Academy invited to state's major school renovation funding process: Batson Academy renovation will advance city's long-term facilities vision and allow deeper collaboration with neighboring UMass Boston to expand college and career pathways.* Boston.gov. https://www.boston.gov/news/bps-ruth-batson-academy-invited-states-major-school-renovation-funding-process

City of Boston. (2024, June 12). *Mayor Michelle Wu, Boston Public Schools, UMass Boston present inaugural full ride scholarship to graduate of BCLA/McCormack.* Boston.gov. https://www.boston.gov/news/mayor-michelle-wu-boston-public-schools-umass-boston-present-inaugural-full-ride-scholarship-0

Daniel, Seth. (2024). BCLA/McCormack school on Point is renamed the Ruth Batson Academy; Honors a longtime educational activist. *Dorchester Reporter.* https://www.dotnews.com/2024/bclamccormack-school-point-renamed-ruth-batson-academy-honors-longtime

Dinon, R. (2024). Community schools during the COVID-19 pandemic: A phenomenological study of community school coordinators' experiences (Order No. 30995763). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3060705052). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/community-schools-during-covid-19-pandemic/docview/3060705052/se-2

Eyes on the Prize II. (1988). *Interview with Ruth Batson* [Interview by Jackie Shearer]. Film and Media Archive, Washington University in St. Louis; American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress). https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-26c21b22df9

Executive Office of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts. (2023, March 20). *The Healey-Driscoll administration announces nine new early college programs across the commonwealth.* Mass.gov. https://www.mass.gov/news/the-healey-driscoll-administration-announces-nine-new-early-college-programs-across-the-commonwealth

Francois, A., & Quartz, K. H. (Eds.). (2021). *Preparing and sustaining social justice educators in urban schools.* Harvard Education Press.

Gengenbach, H. (2017, March 6). *She had a dream: Ruth Batson & equal education in Boston.* Public History at UMass Boston: Partners in History Project. https://blogs.umb.edu/pha/2017/03/06/she-had-a-dream-ruth-batson-equal-education-in-boston/

Goble, G. H., Van Ooyik, J., Robertson, T., & Roberts, G. J. (2021). Effects on students' academic and non-academic outcomes and student participation in theatre arts: A research synthesis. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice, 32*(3), 1–22.

Guishard, M. (2009). The false choice between participation and protection: Critical insights from a youth-driven research agenda. *Educational Forum, 73*(4), 357–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720903166777

Harkavy, I., Balfanz, A., & Sun, F.(2025). Realizing Higher education's democratic promise through university-assisted community schools. In J. Dresden, J. Ferrara, J. E. Neapolitan, & D. Yendol-Hoppey (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of school–university partnerships* (pp. 467–482). Cambridge University Press.

Herrenkohl, L. R., Napolitan, K., Herrenkohl, T. I., Kazemi, E., McAuley, L., & Phelps, D. (2019). Navigating fragility and building resilience: A school–university partnership to support the development of a full-service community school. *Teachers College Record, 121*(12), 1–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912101203

Kearney, L. L. (2015). *Ruth M. Batson: Mother – educator – civil worker: Public history exhibit at UMass Boston Archives.* Omeka. https://bosdesca.omeka.net/exhibits/show/ruth-m--batson--mother---educa

Larkin, M. (2024, April 10). Boston set to rename a school for Ruth Batson, a force for equitable education. *WBUR News.* https://www.wbur.org/news/2024/04/10/boston-school-name-change-ruth-batson

Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence. *Learning Policy Institute.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606765.pdf

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2024). *Ruth Batson Academy (00350558): Contact information and enrollment, 2024–2025.* Boston Public Schools. https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/general.aspx?topNavID=1&leftNavId=100&orgcode=00350558&orgtypecode=6

Mpofu, M. (2024, April 24). Boston renames Dorchester school for civil rights icon Ruth Batson. *Bay State Banner.* https://www.baystatebanner.com/2024/04/24/boston-renames-dorchester-school-for-civil-rights-icon-ruth-batson/

O'Donnell, A. W., Redmond, G., Gardner, A. A., Wang, J. J., & Mooney, A. (2024). Extracurricular activity participation, school belonging, and depressed mood: A test of the compensation hypothesis during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 28*(4), 596-611. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2022.2053805

Office of Capital Planning, Boston Public Schools. (2024, March 27). *Memo: Renaming BCLA McCormack to Ruth Batson Academy.* Boston Public Schools. https://ma01906464.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/162/Memo%20Renaming%20BCLA%20McCormack%20to%20Ruth%20Batson%20Academy%20March%202024.pdf

Office of Communications, University of Massachusetts. (2025, June 18). *UMass Early College expansion and designations bring free college credit to more high school students.* University of Massachusetts. https://www.massachusetts.edu/news/umass-early-college-expansion-and-designations-bring-free-college-credit-more-high-school massachusetts.edu

Penuel, W. R., & Gallagher, D. J. (2017). *Creating research–practice partnerships in education.* Harvard Education Press.

School Yard News. (2024, January 24). BCLA-McCormack students perform *The Lion King* at the Strand Theater: A student persuaded the school to start a theater program, now he's the stage manager. https://schoolyardnews.com/bcla-mccormack-students-perform-the-lion-king-at-the-strand-theater-2d35f82f8fd3

Supiano, B. (2025, July 1). The crumbling boundary between high school and college: How pushing students to and through higher ed has altered their learning. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-crumbling-boundary-between-high-school-and-college

Theoharis, J. (2005). "They told us our kids were stupid": Ruth Batson and the educational movement in Boston. In J. Theoharis & K. Woodard (Eds.), *Groundwork: Local Black freedom movements in America* (pp. 17–44). New York University Press.

University of Massachusetts Boston. (2022). *A new strategic plan for UMass Boston, 2022–2032* [PDF]. https://www.umb.edu/media/umassboston/content-assets/documents/pdfs/Strategic-plan-2022-2032.pdf

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*, 69-91. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Netter Center
for Community Partnerships
University of Pennsylvania

UNIVERSITIES AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
A Publication of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania

Netter Center for Community Partnerships
University of Pennsylvania
3819-33 Chestnut Street, Suite 120
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3171

www.nettercenter.upenn.edu