COMMUNITY SCHOOLS FORWARD
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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SHARED ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As federal, state, and local governments marshal unprecedented resources to support the recovery from the disruption and harm inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a significant and growing interest in the community school strategy. Community schools are an opportunity for educational renewal and reimagining and are only possible through having the necessary technical assistance resources. This report summarizes the findings of a national study exploring community school technical assistance needs and assets.

Community school practitioners

This study has three guiding questions:

1. What are the current challenges, best practices, and emerging trends in community schools?

2. How are technical assistance, capacity development, and onboarding for new employees in community schools currently provided?

3. What type of technical assistance, coaching, and learning do education practitioners in community schools want and need?

Respondents were recruited through the National Center for Community Schools listserv, the Coalition for Community Schools network announcements, the Full Service Community Schools (FSCS) staff communications at the U.S. Department of Education to their grantees, and individual outreach. The planning team from the National Center for Community Schools developed an interview protocol that was implemented in 30- to 60-minute sessions with 28 individuals. Participants included seven district leaders, three technical assistance providers, two researchers, five FSCS project managers, and seven community school coordinators.

Study findings

The challenges that participants identified were staffing shortages and absences due to COVID-19, lack of model clarity, difficulties achieving collaborative leadership and overcoming deficit mindsets, barriers to equity, and imperfect data systems and practices. Strategies to address these challenges included developing a common language for all stakeholders, creating advisory and steering committees, and utilizing continuous improvement for collaborative problem-solving.

As the community school landscape expands, community school technical assistance providers would do well to offer support and guidance in a variety of contexts and modalities. Technical assistance should prioritize:

- **Model clarity for all stakeholders:** ensuring all stakeholders have the same understanding of community schools and their role within the model.

- **Structures and systems for community voice and collaborative leadership:** developing mechanisms that invite democratic processes within a community school.

- **Development of relational and strategic skills for coordinators:** relationally supporting coordinators to leverage a system in which they have very little formal power, build connections with the school and external partners, facilitate the system for inclusion, and cultivate trust with stakeholders; strategically guiding coordinators to analyze and present data, and manage projects and budgets.

- **Asset-based thinking:** cultivating a perspective that focuses on the strengths of the students, families, and community.

- **Sustainability:** navigating multiple funding sources and "telling the story" to funders in a way that accurately reflects the work; developing a model or network that is supported by the community and leadership, and not vulnerable to leadership changes.

- **Reimagining systems for equity:** reviewing existing school processes and structures to determine if the current approach is meeting all student, family, and community needs; changing those systems that are not meeting all stakeholders' needs.

- **Data systems and data culture for continuous improvement:** developing systems for data collection that capture accurate data that are connected to identified outcomes and aligned with a logic model; creating a positive and collaborative environment where problems can be solved using data and inquiry.

Transforming school climates, systems, and structures is lengthy and complex work. The challenges described in this study will not be solved in silos, and thus technical assistance providers should align and join forces as the landscape of community schools continues to evolve. Community schools are strongest when they collaborate and leverage the best thinking from all stakeholders—training and support for community schools should follow this same blueprint.

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant and growing interest in the community schools strategy among federal, state, and local governments seeking to advance educational and economic opportunities and address historic educational inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Building off this momentum and with support from Ballmer Group, four national partners—the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution (CUE), the Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools (NCCS), the Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) at IEL, and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI)—are collaborating with education practitioners, researchers, and leaders across the country to strengthen the community schools field in a joint project called Community Schools Forward.

Community Schools Forward comprises three core strategies:

- Align: Foster increased cohesion around core community school concepts and frameworks.

- Scale: Identify investment structures that sustain community schools at scale and for the long term.

- Build: Design infrastructure for technical assistance and professional learning that promotes high-quality implementation.

In February 2021, the Brookings Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools launched a report titled "Addressing inequality with a next generation of community schools: A blueprint for mayors, states, and the federal government." In this report, the task force positions community schools as a critical strategy to address education inequality and offers recommendations on how to scale them nationally. The four partners are building on this initial work by convening a second task force to steer and advance the objectives of Community Schools Forward.

Consistent with the values and practices of effective community schools, the partnering organizations are committed to engaging many groups of stakeholders in every facet of the project to ensure that we honor and learn from the field's expertise and experience as we collectively shape and promote the future of this work.

One such opportunity is the appraisal of technical assistance and capacity-building needs among community school leaders and practitioners across the country. We define technical assistance as the developmental process of building the capacity of community school stakeholders to start, scale, and sustain transformational community schools. Informed by a comprehensive needs assessment and guided by a plan jointly developed with the client, technical assistance is "about organizing communities of action, facilitating connections to power, and providing the tools and skills for inventing effective strategies for change."[1] This report aims to summarize the process and findings of an assessment conducted in early 2022 by the National Center for Community Schools with support from staff from the Brookings Institution and Learning Policy Institute.

COMMUNITY SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS

A planning team of community school practitioners and technical assistance providers designed the interview process and prompts to gauge emerging needs and best practices in implementing community schools and technical assistance. This study had three guiding questions:

- What are the current challenges, best practices, and emerging trends in community schools?

- How are technical assistance, capacity development, and onboarding for new employees in community currently provided?

- What type of technical assistance, coaching, and learning do education practitioners in community schools want and need?

We recruited respondents through the National Center for Community Schools listserv, announcements from networks convened by the Coalition for Community Schools, communications from the FSCS staff at the U.S. Department of Education to their grantees, and individual outreach. The planning team developed interview questions that were asked in 30-to-60-minute sessions with 28 individuals. The interviewees represented a range of roles, settings, and geographic regions:

- Roles: seven district leaders, four chief executive officers of nonprofit organizations, three technical assistance providers, two researchers, five FSCS managers, and seven community school coordinators.

- Settings: 16 urban, two rural, and eight suburban community schools.

- Geographic regions: Northeast, Midwest, the Carolinas, Arizona, and California.

Respondents volunteered to be interviewed by videoconference, and were disproportionately district leaders and administrators, and nonprofit executives. To ensure broader representation, we also followed up with a few technical assistance providers recommended by both the Community Schools Forward Task Force and interviewees.

Members of the Community Schools Forward project team worked together to code and analyze the data alongside technical assistance providers from the National Center for Community Schools. The following needs and opportunities in technical assistance —ordered by frequency of mention— emerged from this analysis.

- **Model clarity for all stakeholders:** ensuring all stakeholders have the same understanding of community schools and their role within the model.

- **Structures and systems for community voice and collaborative leadership:** developing mechanisms that invite democratic processes within a community school.

- **Development of relational and strategic skills for coordinators:** relationally supporting coordinators to leverage a system in which they have very little formal power, build connections with the school and external partners, facilitate for inclusion, and cultivate trust with stakeholders. Strategically guiding coordinators to analyze and present data, manage projects and budgets.

- **Asset-based thinking:** cultivating a perspective that focuses on the strengths of the students, families, and community.

- **Sustainability:** navigating multiple funding sources and "telling the story" to funders in a way that accurately reflects the work. Developing a model or network that is supported by the community and leadership, and not vulnerable to leadership changes.

- **Reimagining systems for equity:** reviewing existing school processes and structures to determine if the current approach is meeting all student, family, and community needs. Changing those systems that are not meeting the needs of all stakeholders.

- **Data systems and data culture for continuous improvement:** developing systems for data collection that capture accurate data that is connected to identified outcomes and is aligned with a logic model. Creating a positive and collaborative environment where problems can be solved using data and inquiry.

These themes are woven throughout this document, which will discuss the current challenges to successful community school implementation shared by interviewees, structures and systems to address these challenges, and technical assistance and professional development opportunities to address these needs. This document was reviewed by the Community Schools Forward Task Force, which provided feedback and discussed implications.

FINDINGS

The study uncovered five main challenges to the implementation of a community school approach and three main strategies to developing community schools structures (Figure 1).

Challenges to community school implementation and strategies to overcome them

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES
✓ Staffing shortages and chronic absence due to COVID-19	✓ Common language and understanding for all stakeholders
✓ Lack of model clarity	✓ Development of advisory and steering committees
✓ Overcoming deficit mindsets to achieve collaborative leadership	✓ Continuous improvement methodologies
✓ Disrupting existing power structures to achieve equity	
✓ Managing data and telling community school stories	

5 challenges to successful community school implementation.

Interview participants were asked about the current challenges in their community schools and how they were navigating these challenges. Many challenges were related to pandemic recovery, including school staffing and retention, and student attendance. However, broader questions of community school model clarity, leadership, data collection, concrete evaluation metrics, and data-driven storytelling also emerged, reinforcing that common historical challenges in education must be addressed to advance and scale the community school model.

CHALLENGE 1: STAFFING SHORTAGES AND CHRONIC ABSENCES DUE TO COVID-19

"As COVID plays out in our community, people are missing a lot of school and missing a lot of work. People who are at school or work just have way too much on their shoulders, more than humans can possibly handle in a sustainable way." Interview respondent.

Community schools, like other schools, have struggled with the impact of COVID-19 on staff, students, and the broader community. However, because of their history of addressing out-of-school student needs, deep engagement with family and community, and connections to partner organizations, community schools were better positioned to respond to the pandemic by providing crisis support, collaborating with health care practitioners, connecting regularly with families, securing technology and internet access to ensure continued instruction, and much more.

Practitioners are exhausted. After two years of unpredictable crisis response, programmatic reimagining, and navigating leadership and staffing shifts, some are leaving the field. Staffing shortages –particularly for social workers, coordinators, nurses, and educators– remain a primary concern for district and network leaders. Many shared difficulties in onboarding and recruiting these staff members while simultaneously managing day-to-day operations. One network leader is developing a local commission to devise new pipelines for teachers, social workers, and other school professionals with local relationships and expertise to "grow their own." Working in partnership with universities, technical assistance providers, and partner organizations can present an opportunity to rethink how we prepare and identify talent.

Student attendance has also been impacted by COVID-19. Building programming to address attendance and chronic absence is core to the community school strategy in many districts, such as the **New York City Department of Education**.[2] Nationally, community schools have developed

"success mentor" programs to support chronically absent students, providing case management to students who have missed or are on track to miss 20 or more days per year. However, as quarantine policies have changed and the nation has faced different coronavirus variants, frequent absences have become more commonplace, thus addressing the underlying causes of absences have become increasingly complex. Community school practitioners have been in the eye of the storm, restructuring and prioritizing student needs as attendance policies have been rethought and evaluated. Even as COVID-19 infection and hospitalization rates in many cases have decreased, practitioners still grapple with developing the best strategies to address chronic absences, staff shortages, and other competing needs.

CHALLENGE 2: LACK OF MODEL CLARITY

"A lot of us were new project directors, so to say: Here is an immersive one - or two-day training on what the community school model is, how long it has existed, what it looks like, how it's been done well, what are pitfalls–all the things. What I ended up doing was identifying other grantees and scheduling calls and learning from others who have done it well. That was a much slower process than if we'd had a little bit more in place from the start." Interview respondent.

Many practitioners noted that, "When you've seen one community school, you've seen one community school." While the strategy is built on local wisdom and collaboration, the processes and essential elements of a community school remain the same. Technical assistance providers can support the mechanisms for developing community schools by explaining both what to do and why to do it.

One-third of interview participants shared that lack of model comprehension was a barrier to developing successful community schools. According to respondents, model confusion has contributed to insufficient support from district leaders and principals, unreasonable data and outcome requests based on implementation progress, and less opportunity for

meaningful engagement and leadership for families and youth.

Cultivating superintendents' understanding of the model is seen as nonnegotiable. Participants shared many experiences of superintendent turnover or lack of support undermining the community school strategy. Community school staff and leaders spend considerable energy encouraging partners and colleagues to slow down decisionmaking to ensure inclusion, creating systems that involve reflection and feedback, and utilizing participatory research or community forums for continuous school improvement. However, they felt if school and district leaders had a clearer understanding of both "the why" and "the how" of community schools when beginning the strategy, the community school development process would be more productive. Likewise, recipients of the federal FSCS grant expressed a desire for more training and support on the model upon receipt of the grant, as expressed in the quote on model clarity above.

In cases where organizations and districts have a high-level conceptual understanding of the strategy, they need more granular and embedded support with implementation. Unsurprisingly, technical assistance providers explained that the "how" of developing and sustaining community schools was the lion's share of their work with clients. At the same time, practitioners warned against oversimplification when discussing the strategy. Amplifying community voices and developing a trusting school climate are priorities in most community school approaches. However, practitioners on the ground explained that cultivating a positive school climate where trust has been breached or underdeveloped and shifting operations and mindsets toward inclusion is a lengthy, adaptive, and time-consuming process. For example, while collaborative leadership is central to the community school philosophy, leaders are unsure how to shift their approach and create structures to authentically support local leaders and coordinators.

Community school coordinators also asked for a clear "implementation roadmap" for the work, explaining they often felt "creation fatigue" continually reinvent the

wheel. Across the country and within this study, there is a wide range in the pay, job description, qualifications, skills, and experience level for the community school coordinator position. There is consensus locally and nationally that training, concrete guidance, and products such as a guide for developing and managing an advisory committee, communications strategies, or a database with a student dashboard would be welcome support.

CHALLENGE 3: OVERCOMING DEFICIT MINDSETS TO ACHIEVE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

"I would not say with any confidence that we believe that there is a role for communities in school, and that's the problem. So, I would say that is the number one barrier for our hub directors to be successful, that there is not belief at a systems level that this matters, and this is worth us doing the hard work to move beyond where we currently are." Interview respondent.

Insiders often refer to collaborative leadership as the "third rail" of community school strategies. In some schools, there is little shift in practice aside from hiring a coordinator and ensuring that person is on the school leadership team. Guaranteeing the coordinator is seen as an additional leader in the school is not straightforward, and is only one ingredient in developing and maintaining collaborative leadership. Multiple respondents pointed to an inconsistent understanding of the community school coordinator position within the school's ecosystem. Some see the role as another assistant principal who takes the lead on school climate, social-emotional learning, family engagement, and partnerships, but this was not consistent across organizations, schools, and districts. In fact, confusion regarding the role was the one constant in discussions about community school staffing. Others identified the importance of clear expectation-setting upfront and detailed memoranda of understanding prior to entering into a school partnership and becoming a community school.

Beyond the coordinator, collaborative leadership is about developing formal structures for students, families, school staff, and community members. For example, it includes ensuring young people have a meaningful voice in the classroom and are provided opportunities to reflect on community issues with an eye toward social change. Developing comprehensive collaborative leadership is a paradigm shift for school leadership and all members of a school community. This shift needs shared focus, support, and guidance to navigate the complex political terrain of schools. When successful, collaborative leadership is a grassroots strategy in an educational system that has historically been top-down and bureaucratic.

Nearly half of respondents identified a deficit mindset as the underlying obstacle to collaborative leadership. Combating "toxic charity"[3] and developing an asset-based approach to all components of a community school was a theme that wove through nearly every conversation. As participants explained, we need to ensure teachers and school leaders understand community assets and cultural wealth.[4] Without developing structures for listening and learning from students and the community, such as community mapping or restorative practices, the school staff will not fully appreciate what the community can contribute to the school. Seeing community schools as a method focused primarily on providing more services to a local public school can reinforce a deficit mindset. However, when community schools are seen as an approach to facilitate teaching and learning environments grounded in collaborative problem-solving and community led transformation, deficit mindsets are less likely to prevail. To adopt a transformational model, leaders and all school members must rethink their approach to schooling. Likewise, all school members must examine their school and community with a strength-based lens, identifying assets and cultural capital. As one coordinator shared, "I want to get tattooed on my arm, 'we are not the experts, we are not superheroes,' because it is so easy to fall into doing 'for' the community instead of 'with' them."

CHALLENGE 4: DISRUPTING EXISTING POWER STRUCTURES TO ACHIEVE EQUITY

"The public education system is full of injustice and full of deliberate miseducation of kids and families, and not concerned with valuing these different people. And it's a systems problem. It's not individual schools, because I know we could do it—individual schools wise." Interview respondent.

Equity is the first guiding principle in the implementation standards developed by the Coalition for Community Schools,[5] and more than half of participants believe that the community school strategy is one of equity. That is, equitable schools ensure that students get what they need and have access to resources. However, interviewees expressed fear that by merely adding services into an oppressive and broken educational system and not successfully challenging the underlying systems behind the status quo, we fall short of achieving equity. Likewise, if practitioners build a community school without discussing and dissecting the ways in which our work can disrupt or reinforce oppressive power structures, we are missing opportunities to build schools that work for all students. As one participant shared, this work is about having tough conversations about racial disparities, making sure that those with the lived experiences of those disparities are at the decisionmaking table, and designing systems change. For some, this is developing advisory and steering committees that represent the community and guide community schools with power to guide priorities and partnerships. For others, this is deconstructing systems of oppression with students, learning local histories in partnership with the community, and analyzing data by root cause analysis. The work of the community school is connected to addressing larger inequalities. One participant explained: "We are trying to plug a hole, but it doesn't really address the overall nature of the system, and it doesn't bleed into the fact that students are still going out into a community that doesn't have jobs, housing, or medical centers." It is difficult to disrupt a system without naming the power structures at play, and many coordinators felt powerless

themselves, making it difficult to initiate conversations on power, racism, classism, and equity. If the community schools movement is serious about equity, our technical assistance must prioritize anti-oppressive practices and understanding systems of oppression. Thus, when onboarding new practitioners or analyzing data, we must conduct a root cause analysis and center an examination of larger societal structures.

CHALLENGE 5: MANAGING DATA AND SHARING COMMUNITY SCHOOL STORIES

"I think there's a culture around data or a narrative that it's really just for compliance purposes rather than learning and growth. Changing that narrative is a huge undertaking—trying to understand that it's okay if we look at a number and it's bad." Interview respondent.

Managing and analyzing data is a challenge for community school practitioners. Specifically, practitioners struggle to identify accurate indicators and outcomes appropriate to their school or district's stage of community school development. There were different use cases for how leaders and staff could utilize data to strengthen their work. From a reporting and accountability perspective, community schools staff often need to "manage up" with funders and superintendents to find community school assessments and reporting structures that accurately represent the evolution of the strategy and its intended impact. In addition, while strong and sustainable community school strategies are built on "braided funding," which is working with a combination of city, state, federal, and private grant requirements and can often lead to a jumble of reporting expectations and at times conflicting measures of success. Even when organizations and networks developed internal logic models to guide intentional community schoolwork, they expressed interest in a national outcomes framework as a point of reference with funders and policymakers, particularly as the community school strategy continues to expand. Technical assistance providers can support practitioners to operationalize their logic models and develop systems of continuous improvement with targeted data.

Ideally, every community school has accurate, high-quality data to drive partnership development, program design, and sustainability efforts. Coordinators reported furiously inputting data and navigating a sea of outputs to capture and communicate the impacts of their work. However, many feel hindered by not having a consistent stream of data from their school and/or external partners. Barriers cited included not being able to access student-level data due to federal privacy laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), or not having data infrastructure in place that enables reliable and efficient collection and analysis. Practitioners desire a system with a student-level dashboard that dynamically provides information at the individual or sub-group levels on metrics such as attendance and grades, as well as enrollment and participation in services. For some schools, an early warning system was key to their ability to document and respond to student needs, but such a system is not ubiquitous.

Overall, data challenges are compounded by the struggle of navigating braided funding, which has sometimes led to "fiscal whiplash"—going from windfalls to cliffs —and the associated need to manage so many funding sources and reporting expectations. Respondents also spoke about difficulties telling their stories with both qualitative and quantitative data for policymakers and funders.

3 strategies to develop community school structures

As we continue to grapple with the expanding inequities that have emerged from COVID-19 and the additional related challenges, practitioners want support and guidance. Respondents requested assistance communicating about how to lift up community voice and foster innovation. Core strategies that were identified by interviewees included establishing advisory and steering committees, building coalitions, conducting assets and needs assessments, examining root causes of inequities, and promoting continuous improvement.

STRATEGY 1: COMMON LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDING FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

> "I think it kind of goes back to what we are saying about the role of clarity. Folks know you do a lot, but they don't know maybe the full picture of it and how it impacts the school as a whole." Interview respondent.

The first step toward developing model clarity for community schools is having common language and understanding for all stakeholders in schools, districts, and communities. In a community school, teachers, staff, students, and parents need to know both the shared collective vision and goals of the school, and how they can contribute their expertise and perspectives to co-construct what it will become. Some organizations have developed online courses for their community school stakeholders as a way to build a foundational knowledge base about the essential elements of the community school model. Multiple respondents expressed that this initial level-setting helped individual staff across roles and institutions get on the same page. For one organization, this included training sessions on needs assessment, planning, integrated student supports, partnerships, monitoring and adjusting, and evaluation. Others offered a

"community school 101" course and provided training for all members of their district.

Community school practitioners posited that unclear roles within schools—particularly the community school coordinator role—was an indication that site and district leaders did not have a clear or shared understanding about the model. Coordinators often felt conflicted when pulled into tasks that derailed them from the main purpose of their work, but also wanted to be a team player and build relationships. However, managing deliverables while serving lunch duty or filling in for missing school staff only added to role confusion and made it challenging to stay focused on core work. One coordinator shared, "I work so hard all day, and at the end it is hard to capture all I have done." Some coordinators expressed feeling vulnerable to power dynamics in the school—without union protection, like some of their school colleagues— and found it difficult to say no to additional requests from leaders, partners and school stakeholders. Coordinators and administrators recognized the paradox—how can they collect compelling data to track and quantify the impact of a community school coordinator and explain the need to prioritize certain components of the role when the role cannot be fulfilled because of lack of shared understanding among staff and partners.

Another common challenge for community school practitioners was describing and differentiating between different community school models and providers. One participant shared, "Everyone is calling it something different, but we are all doing community schools." This participant was model agnostic, which speaks to the issue of participants using different frameworks to guide their practice and lack of clarity on the model. Policymakers and practitioners need to be clear about the nonnegotiables and core constructs of community schools, but also recognize that there are different ways to advance and deepen work toward shared goals.

STRATEGY 2: DEVELOPMENT OF ADVISORY AND STEERING COMMITTEES

> "How do we really form the steering committee that then impacts the policies that consist of localized voices? Because that requires shared power—all of these bigger systems that you need to work and, at the same time, do community organizing. That's super complex work, and if it's not something that you focus on as an organization, it's easy to put aside." Interview respondent.

Advisory and steering committees guide the work of community schools and intentionally preserve space for community voices. A powerful advisory board can both hold the school accountable and ensure strong bonds with local community members. For some, this body determines the annual priorities for community schools. Others rely on advisory boards to identify community issues, including naming and disrupting entrenched patterns of systemic community harm. Working with advisory boards that do not have decisionmaking power, lack structure, or have a narrow scope are a few challenges that were identified in this inquiry. Advisory committees should evolve from a comprehensive asset and needs assessment during the first year of community school development and represent a diverse group of community stakeholders and leaders. The goal of an assets and needs assessment is to develop priorities for each community school. However, some community schools have seen positive changes in school culture and climate simply by conducting a comprehensive assets and needs assessment, because students, teachers and staff felt they were being heard and their concerns were being taken seriously. By rooting the needs and assets assessment in community conversations, the resulting strategic plan reflects and prioritizes local knowledge and formal and informal community wisdom.

At the district/community level, a steering committee convenes leaders from local partnership organizations to ensure strategic alignment and interdependence of community and district goals. The steering committee supports partnerships at each school by working together to remove barriers to collaboration, such as supporting goal setting processes, data sharing, or developing comprehensive and realistic memoranda of understanding. While school - and district-level committees serve different purposes, they help to ensure community voices and accountability beyond traditional leadership structures in schools—they are both formal examples of collaborative leadership.

STRATEGY 3: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT METHODOLOGY

> "It is the work of our community school coordinators and leaders to dig into root causes of a lot of the issues that our students and families face – obviously, a lot of injustices have been happening for centuries." Interview respondent.

Continuous improvement and structured data inquiries are the cornerstones of community schools. One technical assistance provider explained that when helping schools understand the "how" of community schools, it was like cultivating a new way of thinking using data and reflection. Another provider described problem-solving—the cornerstone of community schools—with practitioners to ensure their assets and needs assessment includes all stakeholders and engages a significant majority of the school community. Thus, by setting up teams who are identifying problems and utilizing an improvement methodology such as "plan, do, study, act," cycles or results-based accountability, practitioners can develop systems that use community data and experiences to transform schools. Likewise, in the classroom, teachers and young people engaging in participatory action research is an essential element of continuous improvement. However, combating a negative culture around data is an obstacle. Data is often used as "a hammer as opposed to a flashlight" in education. Fear around negative data points and a long history of punitive responses to data leave practitioners "data wary" or in "analysis paralysis." Finding the proper metrics—appropriate for their context—was one way participants wanted to learn from the national landscape.

PRIORITIES FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVISION

With a few rare exceptions, participants expressed a desire for more technical assistance. The requests varied from a community school helpline and a community of practice for seasoned practitioners to intensive training and coaching. Because of this diversity of needs, community school technical assistance providers would do well to offer support, guidance, and connections in a variety of contexts and modalities, some of which are outlined below. Regardless of the structure or mode of delivery, technical assistance should prioritize the following: model clarity for all stakeholders, structures and systems for community voices and collaborative leadership, development of relational and strategic skills, asset-based thinking, sustainability planning, practices to reimagine systems for equity, data utilization, and a continuous improvement culture.

Key role of support

As discussed throughout this document, all members of a community school need a common understanding of the community school strategy, its core concepts, and its roles. Three roles in particular, however, were identified by respondents for specialized support and onboarding, particularly within the landscape of school turnover and community school scale up: community school coordinators, principals, and teachers. In each of these roles, much guidance is needed, and intensive training early should be coupled with ongoing support and communities of practice, with multiple points of entry. For example, a principal could receive support from a cohort of new principals or receive mentoring from a seasoned community school principal. These principals could attend a webinar specific to an entrenched problem or join a monthly research to practice group.

COMMUNITY SCHOOL COORDINATORS

"There are several schools that have community school coordinators. But that position looks different in just about every single school. And it all depends on what the superintendent is really looking for, so I think that has been a huge challenge for everybody. Because there doesn't seem to be one model to follow, schools, in my opinion, don't really have an idea what the model is." Interview respondent.

A designated staff member or community school coordinator who orchestrates programs and services is an established component of the community school model. However, there is less consensus around preparation for this role. Training and support varied widely; some coordinators had zero formal training in preparation for the position, while others were provided 200 hours of training within the first year. The coordinator role requires a combination of relational

and strategic skills. Relationally, coordinators must leverage a system in which they have very little formal power, build connections with the school and external partners, facilitate for inclusion, and cultivate trust with stakeholders. In many schools, the coordinator is the person who helps a community school understand the model and their role within it. Thus, communication of the strategy is fundamental to preparing a new coordinator. Strategically, they analyze and present data, and manage budgets and projects. Finding this confluence of skills is difficult, and thus, support with recruitment, training, and hiring for this essential role is a need.

Systems of support for community school coordinators varied from providing a coach to a cohort of multiple coordinators to an entire web of support, with a department focused on data/finance, another on compliance, and a third on relationship building. One critique of the current landscape of training and supervising community school coordinators is the outsized focus on new coordinators, with the majority of opportunities aimed at the first year or two of starting the position. In the same way that community schools are developmental, the skills of a coordinator evolve and need continued nurturing and support.

PRINCIPALS

"We're constantly having to remind principals what their role is, you can't have a community school and then have a principal who's just kind of like, I don't really need to be involved, that also doesn't work. So just highlighting the importance of their work, and how they don't have to be the sole person, but they are the ones who have a say, and can bring people together." Interview respondent.

Helping principals understand their role in a community school continues to be a struggle for many district leaders. Often the principal determines the extent to which community voices and shared leadership occurs within a community school. Principals have difficulty finding a balance and seldom have safe spaces to ask crucial questions. School leaders wrestle with how to share power when they are ultimately responsible for outcomes or how to promulgate community leadership that capitalizes on strengths and aligns with school priorities and vision. As one participant explained, very few school leadership preparation programs focus on community schools or community engagement. While

some district leaders recommend convening principals for cohort learning around specific problems, others requested more formal support, such as guides or a training bootcamp for new principals. Likewise, clear protocols and support in helping superintendents guide principals in their role might alleviate confusion and frustration.

TEACHERS

"My students (in the teacher preparation program) are typically not from the community, they're from the suburbs. They know nothing about the community, or for that matter, the kids. Because they're coming in with these deficit views. So before we even begin our work in the schools, they do community asset mapping and to learn what is the culture of the community to learn the history, all of the work that they do in this particular course focuses on learning about kids." Interview respondent.

Siloes can occur in all schools, but community schools work best when they are broken down. Often community school staff work with parents, students, and the student support team (which includes social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists, and other nonteaching school employees), but work less closely with teachers. Participants identified teacher engagement in community schools as a concern. Nationally, we must consider how teachers' training and roles differs when a school is a community school. One participant argued that the classroom was not the domain of community schools, while others point to community-based, experiential, project-based learning as core to the strategy. This is an area where consensus, training, and support is needed. While some higher education institutions are requiring teacher candidates to student teach in community schools, engage in asset mapping, and utilize a "funds of knowledge"[6] approach to curriculum design, teacher education programs that prepare teachers for community schools are the exception not the rule. One participant explained that we ask so much of teachers and engaging the community seems like one more request; however, helping them understand and connect with their students make them better teachers. Another shared the quote above related to her experience teaching educators, as they are often not from the community where they teach and lack of familiarity can

cultivate a deficit mindset. Training for teachers and teacher preparation programs can help cultivate asset-based mindsets, youth voices, and the space to reimagine education systems. Resources and benchmarks for teachers in community schools would be helpful, as well as initial understanding about their role in a school becoming a community school.

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT

"I think communities either feel like they need to reinvent the wheel, or just say this is successful so we're going to do it now, but we need to find a middle ground where we're learning from what other communities are doing and bringing it to our local context and figuring it out." Interview respondent.

After years of isolation due to COVID-19, both new and experienced practitioners expressed the desire to connect with and learn from others in similar roles and stages of community school development.[7] While many attend the Coalition for Community Schools conference, the National Center for Community Schools Fundamentals conference, and the Federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's annual conference, they need additional specialized and sustained support. They want more opportunities to visit other schools—virtually or in person—and speak with practitioners who are innovating and experiencing success. While in-person conferences are valuable learning opportunities and essential to fortifying practices, some participants found it difficult to attend due to travel expenses and time constraints, and requested a more diverse range of options.

Time and space for reflection and dialogue that enables practitioners to gain a "balcony view"[8] of the work, virtual sessions lifting up best practices, or curated spaces to grapple with colleagues and discuss thorny problems were clear recommendations. While some technical assistance providers shared that the virtual space misses some of the connection they need, other coordinators appreciated the ease of access. Developing a virtual or in-person cohort learning model would be a value-add for many struggling with community school development or scaling. Even those who have been doing this for a while need support, one interviewee shared: We all need thinking partners to help us navigate this work.

As the above quote highlights, participants want to learn from other similar communities, and co-create with their local community. For example, one respondent posited, rural poverty is unique. Building rural community schools looks very different from developing the model in New York or Chicago. Community school coordinators in rural schools want to connect with other schools with similar demographics. Currently, the community school landscape is largely focused on urban community schools, and while some challenges are similar, many are unique to rural demographics. Beyond rural or suburban, additional roles for specific communities of practice are desired. For example, data practitioners want to meet with colleagues in the same role in other states. As community schools expand, specialized opportunities for learning exchange are needed.

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While many tangible resources have been developed, practitioners are looking for roadmaps and guidance. They want guides and coaches, videos, and forums. Coordinators asked for mentoring or even a hotline to call for advice, finding it helpful to speak to someone with an external vantage point. Developing a resource repository that is accessible to all providers would be a tremendous service to the community school landscape, and help identify where gaps exist.

Following the model developed in Florida, a certificate program for a national model for community schools might ensure model clarity. As community schools grow, it is important to ensure communication is clear and training is comprehensive. Developing a "train the trainer" approach would be a good way to ensure consistent messaging. Clear criteria for high-quality technical assistance co-created by providers and practitioners are a resource that the Community Schools Forward Task Force plans to develop in the near future.

Community schools are about reimagining schooling. Community schools support the whole child and connect with the local community. The strategy is informed by and prepares students for democracy. These are complex concepts and require significant paradigm shifts. Support is needed. Practitioners deserve options and multiple modalities to learn and engage in continuous improvement. The challenges described in this study are entrenched and complicated, thus, technical assistance providers should collaborate and align so they can support schools to listen, innovate, and organize.

Recommendations for harnessing community schools for "doing school differently"

Far beyond an intervention for a discrete group of students or merely the co-location of programs and services, a community school is a whole-school strategy that has implications for the beliefs and behaviors of every individual. It is a new way of "doing school"[9] that requires significant effort, leadership, and capacity across the entire school community. To evolve into a community school, therefore, guidance cannot be provided only to those with "community school" in their title. Principals, teachers, families, community partners, and other related stakeholders need to rethink both their role and their approach to schooling.

Additionally, to develop collaborative leadership, stakeholders must name, deconstruct, and restructure power dynamics in the school. While a deficit mindset can be attributed to a lack of connection with students and their community, it also stems from classism, racism, white supremacy, and other forms of bias.[10] As Shawn Ginwright shares in his book The Four Pivots,[11] the work of social change and organizing requires us to move beyond simply asking "what do I need to do," and instead ask, "who do I need to become?" Ginwright urges us to use a mirror to examine our actions, biases, and mindsets as the first step toward justice. This is the challenge for community school technical assistance providers—to push practitioners to examine assumptions, reflect, and evolve not only their practices, but also their underlying beliefs. As one interviewee explained, technical assistance is much more than technical—it requires engaging hearts and minds. Our participants and task force members encouraged funders and policymakers to support technical assistance by designating funding specifically for this work and including allocations for technical assistance in all publicly and privately funded requests for proposals.

NEXT STEPS

While this document highlights needs, best practices, and a few recommendations for technical assistance providers, the Community Schools Forward Task Force will continue to develop resources for the national community schools movement. As a follow-up to this project, the Coalition for Community Schools will share criteria for effective technical assistance organizations on its website. Additionally, at the Coalition for Community Schools' annual conference in June 2022, the Community Schools Forward project team surveyed participants to prioritize the themes identified throughout this study. We further investigated if these themes resonate with a larger audience. We will continue to explore the best ways to support the development and scaling of community schools and share our findings.

END NOTES

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ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

The Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings is a leading policy center focused on universal quality education and skills development around the world. The center plays a critical role in accelerating education change so that all learners can thrive in a rapidly changing world. CUE helps inform the development of policy related to global education and promotes actionable strategies for governments, civil society, and private enterprise.

The Children's Aid National Center for Community Schools (NCCS) is a practice-based technical assistance provider that builds the capacities of schools, districts, community members, service providers, government agencies, and other stakeholders to start, scale, and sustain community schools. Established in 1994, NCCS leverages Children's Aid's three decades of experience implementing community schools in New York City to inform its approach. NCCS is a founding member of the Coalition for Community Schools and is recognized nationally and internationally as a leader of the movement.

The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) is represented by leaders of all ages, stages and contexts from youth to grandparents; from educators to elected officials; from families to institutions; from health & human services to out of school time; and from government agencies to grassroots organizations. Together, we work to grow excellent and sustainable Community Schools. The Coalition is dedicated to advancing this mission through a shared set of principles: to build on community strengths, invest in trusting relationships, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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