

District Leaders' Strategies for Funding and Implementing Community Schools

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Introduction to community schools funding and implementation

Community schools (CS), also referred to as full-service community schools and community hub schools, represent an increasingly prominent strategy to create more equitable and effective learning environments for underserved students and families. CSs are characterized by four pillars of practice: [integrated service provision](#), [extended learning opportunities](#), [family and community partnerships](#), and [collaborative leadership and decision making](#). Through these four pillars, CSs implement a variety of practices that build on students' and families' assets and respond to their needs.

Given the breadth of services and programs provided by CSs, implementation of this strategy requires a combination of diverse sources of funding, both public (e.g., federal, state, school district, and city) and private (e.g., local businesses and private foundations). Successful implementation of CSs also requires strategies that build public awareness of these schools, the professional capacity of their staff—especially the community school coordinator (CSC)—and the quality of their practices. To identify funding sources and strategies that can support the expanded implementation of CSs, Child Trends conducted qualitative interviews with CS leaders in four local education agencies (LEAs).¹ The four focal LEAs were purposively selected to represent a range of district sizes, settings, and geographical areas in order to provide insights into different approaches to CS funding and implementation.

We found that the focal LEAs used different context-specific funding strategies but have all been able to scale up their efforts using a combination of district, state, federal, and community funding sources to cover the costs of CSCs and other CS staff, services, and infrastructure. Implementation of the CS strategy has evolved in these districts over time (ranging from 6 to 20 years, depending on the LEA) and has followed a pattern of initiation, expansion, and institutionalization.² While each stage has unique features, there can also be overlap between them as the CS strategy expands from a few schools in an LEA to most schools.

- The **initiation stage** begins with a few pilot schools and requires one or more champions at the community or district levels to support the strategy in its earliest stages. The CS leaders to whom we spoke identified visionary superintendents and community advocates who worked tirelessly to introduce the CS strategy and philosophy to educators, families, and policymakers.
- The **expansion stage** is characterized by the success of the CS strategy in the pilot schools and, over time, by the greater availability of public and private funds—through state, federal, foundation, and agency grants—to increase the number of schools implementing the CS strategy.
- The **institutionalization stage** is marked by the development of district or state policies that officially adopt the CS strategy, the hiring or assigning of district-level personnel to oversee its implementation, and the appropriation of dedicated state and local funds sufficient to cover the costs of CS staff (minimally a CSC/school site specialist) and to scale up CS implementation to all or most schools in the LEA.

In this resource, we first briefly describe CS implementation and funding approaches in each of the four focal LEAs, and then offer five strategies for scaling up funding to CSs, based on CS leaders' insights about sources, roles, and practices.

¹ Child Trends conducted 30- to 60-minute interviews with district leaders overseeing the CS strategy from May 10 to June 10, 2022. We analyzed transcripts and notes from the interviews to identify key themes. Each interviewee reviewed the summary of their district for accuracy. Findings have been anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

² While we use the term community schools to generically refer to the whole child strategy—which includes integrated services, family and community engagement, collaborative leadership, and expanded learning opportunities—the leaders we interviewed used different terms to describe the strategy in their districts.

Community schools implementation and funding, by stage

District 1: A midsize urban district in the Midwest

District 1's implementation began with a limited number of CSs in 2001; now all the district's pre-K-12 schools are designated as CSs.

- **Initiation:** CSs were initially championed by two backbone organizations, the United Way and a nonprofit education foundation, that primarily funded salaries for CSCs.
- **Expansion:**
 - In 2009, the district's school board developed a policy requiring the superintendent or a designee to oversee implementation of the CS strategy.
 - Funding for CSs was expanded to include federal funds (primarily Title I and Title IV, Part B/21st Century Community Learning Centers).
- **Institutionalization:**
 - The district established a CS manager position to provide support and guidance to school-level staff.
 - In 2018, the district revised its CS policy to include all pre-K-12 schools and established guidelines for a CSC at each school.

District 3: A midsize urban district in the Northeast

District 3 began with 13 CSs in 2016, and now has 24 CSs (slightly more than one third of pre-K-12 schools in the district) funded primarily by state education dollars.

- **Initiation:**
 - CSs originated with a supportive superintendent who championed the model.
 - The district initially partnered with United Way to receive federal Full-Service Community Schools grants to fund a small subset of CSs.
- **Expansion (approaching Institutionalization):**
 - The state increased funding for CSs in the district to the current funding levels (about \$21 million) in 2020.
 - Federal funds are used to pay for some community supports such as parent centers.
 - State funds are used to pay for CSCs, school counselors, and other personnel; meals; summer learning; and other programs.
 - The district conducts a proposal process to select lead agencies that provide support and services (including out-of-school-time programming) at designated CSs.

District 2: A large urban district in the South

District 2 began with a limited number of CSs in 2012, and now has 128 (almost 95 percent of pre-K-12 schools in the district).

- **Initiation:** CSs in the district were initially funded with resources provided by backbone organizations and the city council.
- **Expansion:**
 - In 2016, the school board adopted a policy outlining its commitment to the implementation and expansion of CSs.
 - In 2019, district offices were reorganized, and staff expanded, to support CS implementation.
- **Institutionalization:**
 - General district funds, federal funds, and community partner funds are used to cover the costs of CS services and activities. The district also has two other major funding streams: city funding (through the city council) and state funding (through a state grants program) to cover personnel costs.
 - Since 2020, the district has become a lead agency for the majority of its CSs, using state grant funds (about \$30 million) to cover personnel (i.e., CSCs/site specialists and health care practitioners) and some wraparound services.
 - CS principals have discretion in developing their budgets and designated district staff help them ensure compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines.

District 4: A small suburban district in the South

District 4 began with one CS in 2005. It now has eight CSs with CSCs and uses components of the CS strategy with all 11 schools in the district.

- **Initiation:**
 - CSs originated with a backbone organization/lead agency that provided funding and hired CSCs.
- **Expansion:** The district took over funding and oversight in 2013 and the CS strategy was written into school board policy.
- **Institutionalization:**
 - Federal Title I funds are used to pay for CSCs, who are district employees.
 - City bonds are used to fund infrastructure and non-consumables (e.g., books, equipment, buildings).
 - Multiple local foundations, faith-based organizations, and other nonprofit and corporate partners provide funding for programs and services (e.g., community health clinics, a college and career readiness center, out-of-school-time programming, and summer learning), or provide in-kind donations (e.g., food, transportation, clothing, classroom supplies).

Maximizing community school funding: Insights from district leaders

To secure, expand, and sustain CS funding over time, the district leaders we interviewed recommended a “whole village” approach—one that is multivocal, multisectoral, and locally responsive. Drawing on their extensive experience with CSs, these leaders shared five practices to maximize CS funding and move CS implementation from initiation to institutionalization.



Work closely with community-based and grassroots organizations — including faith-based organizations and institutions of higher education—to facilitate broad understanding and support for the CS strategy.



Leverage existing services (e.g., youth development and out-of-school-time programming), **initiatives** (e.g., college and career readiness, and school renovations), and **partnerships** (e.g., school parent councils and nonprofits) to promote the growth and benefits of the CS strategy



Build awareness of the CS strategy among decision makers at all levels (e.g., school boards, teacher unions, city and state elected leaders) to ensure its inclusion in legislative and budget processes.



Establish district-level position(s) to assist CSs with coordinating, managing, and using funds to strengthen implementation of the CS strategy.



Secure dedicated city and state dollars (and policies) to sustain implementation of the CS strategy and buffer it against changes in district and local leadership and funding priorities.

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