



Community Schools Race to the Top of the Class

A Brief for Governors, Other State Leaders & Local Education Agencies

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Introduction

Race to the Top Funds present a rare and challenging opportunity for Governors, other state officials, and local school leaders to drive transformative change in public education. As state and local leaders seek ways to support struggling schools, the Coalition for Community Schools urges that they mobilize the assets and expertise of families and communities to support student success.

This approach, described by Secretary Duncan as turning schools into centers or hubs of the communityⁱ and implemented in 150 Chicago schools, is also known as **community schools**, community learning centers, or full-service schools. Research indicates that the *schools as centers of community* approach has positive impact on student achievement as well as other key factors proven to lead to achievement such as attendance, family involvement, behavioral incidents and school climate.

Community schools are open before and after school, evenings, weekends, and summers. Drawing in community partners to work shoulder to shoulder with school personnel, community schools offer an array of support and opportunities to improve student learning, strengthen families, and promote healthy communities. They also provide:

- A strong core curriculum that incorporates community-based learning opportunities like service-learning, project-based, and civic education;
- Enriched youth development activities to enhance children's social, emotional, and academic learning;
- Intensive family and community engagement activities;
- A comprehensive and cohesive system of school and community supports to address a range of barriers to learning, development, and teaching; and
- Linkages between schools and early childhood programs that ensure children are ready to learn when they enter school.

Community schools align school and community resources to achieve specific results. Educators and community partners coordinate efforts to ensure that children succeed

academically by being ready to learn, healthy, engaged in learning, and active in their communities.

Community schools strengthen families by purposefully involving them in their children's education. By involving families and building relationships within the community, they weave an interconnected web of support that contributes to communities being desirable, safe, and supportive places to live.

The community schools approach responds to the factors— in and out of school—that influence student achievement. An updated report from the Educational Testing Service, [Parsing the Achievement Gap II](#)ⁱⁱ, highlights these factors. It makes clear that teacher quality and rigorous curriculum matter, but also recognizes that parent participation, high student mobility, health and nutrition, and summer learning opportunities are directly correlated with the achievement gap. Community schools address these factors in order to close the achievement gap.

Support for Community Schools Grows

We are seeing a growing trend where Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) are joining with local governments, United Ways, philanthropists, businesses, along with public and private agencies to invest in community schools. Local leaders are engaging in serious dialogue about how to harness the shared capacity of schools and communities to achieve common goals. They are applying leadership, vision, flexible funding, and a focus on results to overcome barriers to interagency collaboration. Rural, suburban and urban communities, such as Chicago; Portland, Oregon; the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania; Cincinnati and Akron; Evansville, Indiana; New York City; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Lincoln, Nebraska; and South King County, Washington, are leading the way.

A recent report to states from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation and MCREL supports the community school approach. Using the framework in the KnowledgeWorks Map of Future Forces Affecting Educationⁱⁱⁱ, the report [Transforming Urban Education: Implications for State Policy Makers](#)^{iv}, recommends that states develop a

comprehensive approach to urban schooling, suggesting that schools be hubs or the educational center for students, families, and communities, where the “walls between the school and community break down.”

From the U.S. Department of Education, ARRA guidance explicitly recognizes community schools as a strategy to turn around persistently low performing schools. The guidance permits funding to “support community schools that offer art, reading clubs, and other academic enrichment while also engaging community, social service and health organizations to better serve students and their families.”

Connection to ARRA and State Incentive Grant Priorities

Community schools offer states a unifying strategy to address the priorities of ARRA and the State Incentive Grant program. The strategy improves academic performance in struggling schools, turning them around by addressing barriers to learning, and offering enriched learning experiences connected to the real-world. By taking the community schools approach as a leading state education reform strategy, Governors can effectively mobilize state and local assets in support of the education of our children.

Community schools improve teacher effectiveness by bringing in community supports and services that allow teachers to focus on the business of teaching. The strategy is based on data systems that not only measure academic success, but also capture early warning signs of academic failure including early chronic absenteeism, reading by grade 3, and key health indicators, such as vision and hearing screening and treatment. They operate on rigorous college and career readiness standards, standards that not only outline what students should know, but encourage an enriched curriculum connected to the real world. Community schools improve results by aligning early learning, extended learning time, and more effective use of technology toward common goals.

A Framework for State Action

The Coalition offers the following framework for Governors, other state leaders, and local education agencies to consider as they prepare their applications for the Race to the Top Fund.

Policy and Capacity Building – Inter-departmental Teams

With the support of the Governor, Chief State School Officer, and other state agency leaders, states can organize inter-departmental teams to support the *schools as centers of community* strategy. Existing interagency entities, such as Children’s Cabinets, should be aligned to this purpose. The state team would develop changes in state level data systems, academic standards, and assessment frameworks, and also formulate the state professional development and capacity building strategy. State teams also would be charged with adjusting state funding practices to enable LEAs and their communities to better align state and federal programs.

Local Results-focused Partnerships

Governors can use Race to the Top Funds to provide incentives for partnerships at the local level that are focused on implementing the *schools as centers of community* strategy. Community schools intentionally align resources and relationships toward specific results for students, families, schools, and the community.^v

Therefore, we suggest that states invite LEAs with high numbers of struggling schools—in urban, suburban and rural areas—to apply for funds. An RFP process would ensure equity in the distribution of funds and enable states to select LEAs that have demonstrated efforts in building relationships that lead to partnerships, committed local leadership from the school and key institutions, and a willingness to commit local resources to community schools. Local resources could include public or private dollars from any source: LEA, city, county, United Way, or philanthropy.

Comprehensive Data Systems

We propose that states also use Race to the Top Funds to build comprehensive 21st century data systems that include an array of academic measures and factors that recognize and address the warning signs of academic failure. The data system would include non-academic factors, such as early chronic absence, reading by grade 3, family involvement, student engagement, key health indicators^{vi}, and others, as featured in the research mentioned earlier, that correlate with the achievement gap.

State policy should make this data available in a disaggregated format and accessible to state and local leaders and the public, so they can take action to address the multiple factors that influence student achievement.

Professional Development and Capacity Building

Professional development and capacity building should be key components in a state's Race to the Top strategy. Professional development from a community schools perspective would:

- Ensure that teachers not only have strong pedagogical skills, but also know how to work with families, including conducting home visits and engaging in effective parent-teacher conversations;
- Enable principals to recognize the assets within their communities and effectively integrate those assets into the life of the schools; and
- Provide opportunities for school personnel and people in related disciplines and organizations, such as social services, youth development, health and mental health, and community development, to share high quality learning opportunities.

On the capacity building side, local partnerships will need support to enable them to develop sustainable strategies that will be in place when Race to the Top Funds are no longer available. Issues to be addressed in these capacity building efforts include: results-based planning, partnership development, evaluation, financing and communications, among others. States should look at successful community school initiatives for capacity building ideas.^{vii}

Standards and Assessments

High standards are a key element of community schools. Standards should not mean standardization that can lead to diminished student engagement. States can use funds to ensure that standards enrich curriculum that engages low-performing students. States should review their standards

to ensure that they facilitate experiential pedagogy, such as service learning, place-based, work-based, and project-based learning. These strategies, when embedded throughout the curriculum, have great potential to engage students and improve their academic performance. On the assessment side, states should use Race to the Top Funds to implement more sophisticated assessment methods that reach beyond “bubble” tests, such as portfolios, culminating events, and project presentations.

Learning Communities and Documentation

Capturing the lessons of this work through a learning community and third party documentation will enable states to build on their Race to the Top work when funding concludes—avoiding the cliff. We suggest that states organize cross-state and local learning communities to share strategies, tactics, tools, and lessons. Documentation will help states monitor progress, capture lessons learned, and meet an ARRA requirement to ensure transparency, reporting, and accountability.

Support for Struggling Schools

Supporting struggling students and schools is at the heart of both the Race to the Top Funds and the community school approach. When schools become centers of the community, they are open more hours per day, more days per week, and more weeks per year, providing opportunities and supports for children and families that are connected to academic and life achievement. Community schools surround youth with a safety net of caring adults—parents, neighborhood residents, and other citizens who are helping them prepare for college, work, and citizenship.

[Local sites can include their own description in this section, along with the Coalition info.]

The Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, is an alliance of national, state and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government and philanthropy as well as national, state and local community school networks. The Coalition supports the community school strategy because it provides access and leverage of local resources and programs, changing the look and feel of the traditional school structure to best meet the needs of children and families in the 21st century. For related briefs, visit:

www.communityschools.org.

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ⁱ See Secretary Duncan comments about schools as center of community on the Charlie Rose Program at www.communityschools.org

ⁱⁱ Coley Richard and Barton Paul, Parsing the Achievement Gap, Educational Testing Service, 2009. <http://www.ets.org/> Search for Parsing the Achievement Gap 2009. The previous report issued in 2003 is also available at that site.

ⁱⁱⁱ KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Map of Future Forces Affecting Education, 2005. An updated version of the Map entitled 2020 Forecast: Creating the Future of Learning is now available at <http://www.futureofed.org/>

^{iv} Laura Lefkowitz and Barbara Diamond, [Transforming Urban Education: Implications for State Policymakers](http://www.mcrel.org/futureofschooling/PDF/4005PI_OH8_Brief_1_021709.pdf). KnowledgeWorks Foundation and MCREL, 2009 http://www.mcrel.org/futureofschooling/PDF/4005PI_OH8_Brief_1_021709.pdf

^v "Community Schools Promoting Student Success: A Rationale and Results Framework." Coalition for Community Schools.

<http://communityschools.org/resultshome.html>

^{vi} Visit <http://www.childtrendsdatbank.org/WhatWorks.cfm> for a complete list of health indicators.

^{vii} Please visit www.communityschools.org for more information on existing community school initiatives.