

Addressing education inequality with a next generation of community schools

A blueprint for mayors, states, and the federal
government



Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools
February 2021

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**Universal
Education**
at BROOKINGS

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About the Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools

The [Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools](#), convened by the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, is comprised of individuals ranging from experienced educators, practitioners, and researchers to key decisionmakers in education policy. This task force has identified what it would take at the federal, state, and local levels to successfully invest in addressing education inequality and scaling a next generation of community schools to every neighborhood across America. The findings are captured in this report with the twin goals of shaping our educational recovery out of the COVID-19 crisis by implementing community schools in the neighborhoods hardest hit by the pandemic as a first step and paving the way for a new approach to student-centered teaching and learning that better serves the holistic needs of all students and their families.

The Task Force members and their affiliations are listed below:

Robert Balfanz, Director, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University

Richard R. Buery, Jr., President, Achievement First

Hedy Chang, Executive Director, Attendance Works

Leslie Cornfeld, President and CEO, National Education Equity Lab

Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus, Stanford University;
President, Learning Policy Institute (LPI)

Abe Fernández, Vice President of Collective Impact and Director, National Center for Community Schools, Children's Aid

Kristen Harper (Task Force Vice Chair), Director of Policy and Outreach, Child Trends

Reuben Jacobson, Senior Professorial Lecturer and Director of the Education Policy and Leadership Program, American University

Sarah Jonas (Task Force Chair), Executive Director, Office of Community Schools, New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE)

John King Jr., President and CEO, The Education Trust

Kristin Anderson Moore, Senior Scholar and Past President, Child Trends

Jose Muñoz, Director, Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)

Jeannie Oakes, Presidential Professor Emeritus in Educational Equity, University of California, Los Angeles; Senior Fellow in Residence, Learning Policy Institute (LPI)

Andre Perry, Senior Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution

Sarah Peterson, Director of Research and Development, Office of Community Schools, New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE)

Gema Quetzal, Next Generation Coalition Co-Chair, Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)

Jane Quinn, Director 2000–2018, National Center for Community Schools, Children’s Aid

Todd Rogers, Professor of Public Policy, Harvard University

Ian Rosenblum*, Executive Director, The Education Trust–New York

Robert Runcie, Superintendent, Broward County Public Schools

Rey Saldaña, President and CEO, Communities in Schools

Scott Sargrad*, Vice President of K–12 Education Policy, Center for American Progress (CAP)

Kyle Serrette, Senior Policy Analyst, National Education Association (NEA)

Tony Smith, Founder and CEO, Whyspeople

Tony Thurmond, State Superintendent of Public instruction, California Department of Education

Anne Wicks, The Ann Kimball Johnson Director of the Education Reform Initiative, George W. Bush Institute

Rebecca Winthrop (Task Force Vice Chair), Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution

Dr. Brian T. Woods, Superintendent, Northside Independent School District

Sheena Wright, President and CEO, United Way of New York City

**Notes task force members that have contributed to the effort but prior to this report publication have handed over membership to colleagues.*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the members of the Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools for their strategic vision, guidance on framing, detailed and thoughtful contributions to this report, and advice on the process accompanying its development. Many thanks also go to colleagues who generously went out of their way to share their knowledge, skills, experiences, and ideas on the report throughout its various stages, including: Ary Amerikaner, Zakiyah Ansari, Jim Balfanz, Robert Balfanz, Martin J. Blank, Dia Bryant, Grace Burke, Vaughan Byrnes, Christopher Caruso, Jennie Carreon, Zara Chaudary, Corinne Christison, Heather Clawson, The Coalition for Community Schools, Coalition for Community Schools Excellence, Leslie Cornfeld, Yalenis Cruz, Sharon Deich, Ashley Denny, Marielys Divannes, Brittany Drygas, Abe Fernandez, Sue Fothergill, Ellie Garner, Jodi Grant, Khalilah Harris, Jamison Hartley, Kellie Hinkle, Audrey Hutchinson, Reuben Jacobson, Paul Lee, Nikki Lin, Jaymie Lollie, Yolanda McBride, Tiffany Miller, Deborah Moroney, Mary Nicely, Andrew Moore, Sarah Peterson, Karen Pittman,

Jane Quinn, LaShawn Robinson, Mary Roche, Lisa Brice Rochford, Rey Saldaña, Matt Schaffer, Bela Shah Spooner, Ariana Sharghi, Gislene Tasayco, Deborah Temkin, Winnie Tjioe, John Tupponce, Cruz Vargas-Sullivan, and Terrence Winston. A special thank you to the families and young people who participated in the Youth and Family Focus Group for sharing their honest feedback and contributing to a rich discussion to inform the report. Finally, a thank you to the task force chair and vice-chairs for their time and stewardship of the process: Sarah Jonas (chair), Kristen Harper (vice-chair), and Rebecca Winthrop (vice-chair).

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During few times in our country's history has leadership in education been more critical. Far too many communities continue to face the enduring impacts of systematic racism and generational poverty. Our nation's schools have also been [impacted](#) by COVID-19 and, for many, the effects are staggering and could last for years. At the same time, as the pandemic shuttered school doors across the country, numerous education allies rose to the occasion—from families to community nonprofits to employers to media companies. As argued in the Brookings report [“Beyond reopening schools: How education can emerge stronger than before COVID-19,”](#) public support for the central role schools play in community life has never been higher. Taken altogether, this situation presents a series of linked challenges, as well as what may be a once-in-a-century opportunity to reimagine school in ways that nurture the gifts and talents of every child and family. By seizing the moment, we can lay the foundation for a new way of schooling that our nation needs—one that is flexible, customized to local needs, and equitable and that brings together educators, communities, and families to support every student every day. This will require an immediate investment in the scaling of a proven solution that addresses educational inequities and leapfrogs our school system toward a new way of teaching and learning that honors local assets and helps students develop the competencies and skills they need to thrive in work, life, and citizenship.

We, the Brookings Institution's Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools, recommend the transformation of U.S. schools into community schools, centering initial efforts on the 4 percent of school districts that educate approximately 40 percent of the country's children, include urban and rural communities across the nation, and have the greatest concentration of unmet student needs. Community schools would integrate, rather than silo, the services that children and families need, thus ensuring that funding for health, mental health, expanded learning time, and social services is well spent and effective. Therefore, we recommend these four steps to scale a next generation of community schools' nationally:

1. **Prioritize:** Galvanize key stakeholders at the federal, state and local levels to immediately scale the community schools approach to at least half of the 4 percent of school districts with greatest unmet need.
2. **Promote:** Promote policies and high-quality capacity building that result in broader, effective implementation of the community school strategy.
3. **Innovate:** Pursue a robust research agenda that examines the impact of next generation of community schools on educational outcomes.
4. **Sustain:** Repurpose and provide funding to initiate and sustain systemic scaling of a next generation of community schools.

By taking this approach of progressive universalism, the mayors, states, and the federal government would rapidly reach the greatest numbers of students and families most in need of support today and create a critical mass of schools that embody a powerful and community-informed educational approach that closes the equity gap and lays the foundation for 21st century teaching and learning.

Education inequality inflamed by COVID-19

Across the country, states and cities are grappling with how to address the catastrophic toll of the pandemic on student learning and well-being. In a nationally representative [survey of high school students](#), one-third of young people reported being unhappy or depressed. School districts nationwide are reporting large increases in the number of students receiving [failing](#) first semester grades, foreshadowing a decline in the high school graduation rate. [Estimates](#) of lost instructional time are running up to six months or more, and community college enrollments are [down](#). If trends from preliminary [statewide data from Connecticut](#) and a [cross section of districts in California](#) continue, chronic absenteeism rates could potentially double from eight million students pre-COVID to one out of three students this school year 2020-21.

These educational consequences of COVID-19 compound systematic failures to provide equitable opportunities to marginalized communities, including persistent [underinvestment](#) in schools serving majority Black and Brown students. [Recent evidence](#) shows that low-income students, students of color, and Native American students, who have historically been poorly served by our education systems, are being hit particularly hard. Many households lack the resources and reliable internet access to simulate an academic learning environment at home. A [recent poll](#) found that low-income Black and Latino students are more likely to be participating remotely than higher-income white children. Teachers [report](#) that the students participating in remote learning the least are those who are struggling the most academically. As such, barriers to learning, such as lack of [digital access](#) or a dearth of critical academic and health supports, have led to significant [lost instructional time and disengagement from schooling](#) for many students of color.

When placing the hardships of the pandemic on top of existing inequalities, it becomes clear that the educational and human impact is not evenly distributed across the country. The effort to transform all of the nation's schools into community schools should begin with a powerful and comprehensive response working with families hardest hit by the pandemic to strengthen students' academic and social-emotional competencies and support their well-being. While there are many ways to identify which communities have been hardest hit by the pandemic, we look at those districts that a) had deep educational disadvantage prior to the pandemic and b) have severe negative impacts from the pandemic. COVID-19 has exacerbated underlying inequalities, and we believe it is important to illustrate a possible path for feasibly addressing the impacts of the pandemic and with it, underlying education inequalities.

When data on critical educational outcomes before the pandemic are combined with data on the severity and spread of COVID-19 within communities, a stark picture emerges. A very small number of the nation's school districts disproportionately house large numbers of students and families in need and represent communities that have faced deep education inequality and are now severely impacted by COVID-19. Our analysis shows that there are approximately 466 school districts with large numbers of highly impacted students and families. Surprisingly, these districts represent just 4 percent of the nation's 13,500 school districts but collectively educate almost 40 percent of the nation's children. They include the largest urban districts, inner-ring suburbs, small cities, and county districts with rural areas; they are spread across the country following the contours of both poverty and the pandemic from the urban northeast, through the south and rust belt cities, to the southwest, and up the Pacific coast (see Figure 1).

While it is ultimately up to each community to embrace and invest in the next generation community schools approach, we have identified these 4 percent of school districts to illustrate that it is possible to address a large percentage of students and families in need with a focused effort in a relatively small number of places. We are not saying that these 466 districts are the only districts that would benefit from a community schools approach—it is up to decisionmakers at the national, state, and local level to determine how to identify which districts should be of highest priority.

Instead, we offer a “district locator” analysis, which illustrates one way school districts with large numbers of students with unmet needs can be identified, as the starting point for prioritization.

The district locator analysis centers on the school districts with the greatest unmet needs and defines unmet need using five criteria (Box 1).

Box 1. The District Locator explained: How we identified school districts with large numbers of students with unmet needs

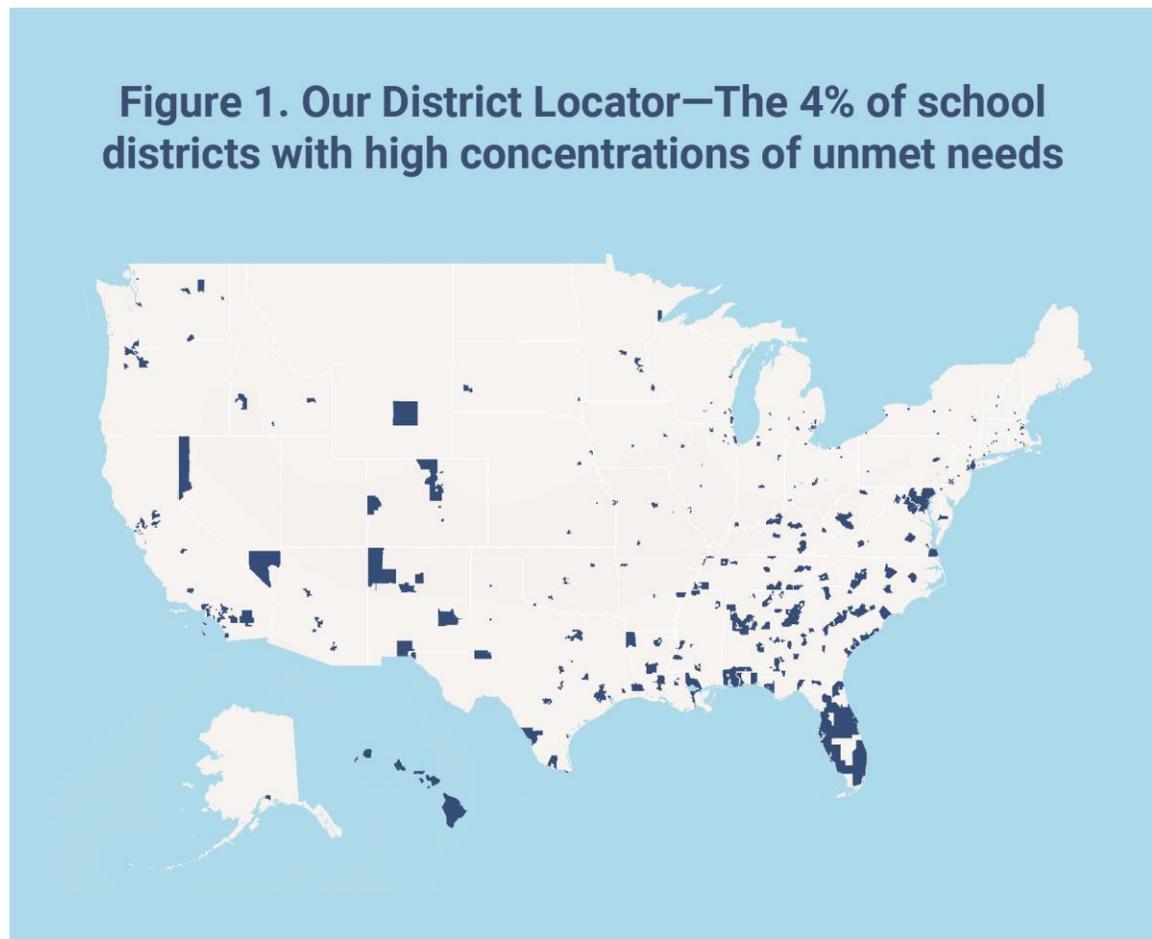
	Criteria	Measure	Rationale
Pre-pandemic education outcomes	Graduation rate	Among districts with largest number of students who do not graduate high school.	Low graduation rates yield economic, employment, health, and social costs.
	Graduation rate for Black and Latino students	Among districts with largest number of Black and Latino students who do not graduate high school.	Low graduation rates yield economic, employment, health, and social costs and among Black and Latino students are a key driver of educational and economic inequity.
	High poverty schools with extreme rates of chronic absenteeism	Among districts where majority of high poverty (75% > FRPL) elementary, middle, and high schools with chronic absenteeism rates of 30% or more are located.	Chronic absenteeism leads to lower educational achievement and attainment. When schools have chronic absenteeism rates of 30% or higher, it negatively impacts students in the whole school.
	Concentrated neighborhood poverty	Among districts where 50% of children who live in a neighborhood with a 40%+ poverty rate are located.	Concentrated poverty impacts student success and health beyond individual impacts of poverty.
Pandemic impact	COVID-19 death rate	COVID-19 death rate topped 100 deaths in the county where the school district is located.	Death rate is above average nationally. The sudden death of a family member is one of most traumatic experiences students can have and also can have economic impacts.

We define unmet need based on a combination of pre-pandemic educational outcomes and pandemic impacts. We first defined unmet educational need at the school district level as having large numbers of students who are not graduating from high school, which has large economic, employment, and social costs. Thus, if the district was among those districts who produced half of all students in the country who do not graduate high school within four years, this was our first identifier of districts with large numbers of students with unmet needs. To make sure we took an equity-based approach, we checked to ensure that the final set of identified districts also contained at least half of all Black students and half of all Latino students not graduating on-time, which they did.

Next, to check if looking at graduation rates alone would leave out districts with large numbers of students with unmet needs in earlier grades, we also ensured the final identified set of districts also contained at least 50 percent of the high poverty schools, which are (a) identified as at least 75 percent of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rates and (b) have extreme rates of chronic absenteeism at 30 percent or higher. Through this selection criteria, we identified the schools where large numbers of low-income students had, pre-pandemic, experienced interrupted schooling and instructional loss. Finally, to ensure we were not missing districts with large numbers of students who faced out-of-school challenges, but perhaps fell just shy of our cut points, we made sure the final set included districts in which half the children in the nation who live in neighborhoods with the highest levels of concentrated poverty—defined as 40 percent or more of families living in poverty—are located. All four measures taken together produced a final set of 511 school districts that met our criteria for having large numbers of students with unmet educational needs. These districts contain 64 percent of Black non-graduates and 65 percent of Hispanic non-graduates, account for about 69 percent of students who attend high-poverty and extreme rates of chronic absence schools. Collectively they are just 4 percent of all school districts but enroll 39 percent (almost 20 million) of all students in the nation.

We then cross-referenced unmet educational needs with criteria for the severity and spread of the pandemic by measuring the number of deaths in a county where a

school district is located. COVID-19 deaths are associated with the level of community spread, poverty, and race/ethnicity, which in turn is related to the likelihood that children experience more remote schooling and therefore challenges related to remote learning, such as lack of connectivity and digital devices. Moreover, the death of family members and members of a child's close social network are among the most traumatic events students can experience. Tragically, we found that most districts with large unmet educational needs also suffered severe impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. In only 45 districts was this not the case and hence we removed them resulting in 466 districts with the highest concentration of unmet need (see references section for data sources).



The importance of prioritizing the whole child

The [science of learning and development](#) tells us that every child can learn and thrive when their full set of needs are met, including academic, physical, and social-emotional. The pandemic has revealed the vast energy and contributions of a wide range of actors outside the school walls—from families to food banks to employers—who are powerful education allies for supporting this holistic development of young people. Through the scaling up of a community schools approach, we can harness the contributions a community makes to promote whole-child development, which is a powerful way to interrupt growing education inequality.

What are community schools?

According to the [Coalition for Community Schools](#), a community school is “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities.” In [community schools](#), every family and community member is a partner in the effort to build on students’ strengths, engage them as learners, and enable them to reach their full potential. Although community schools look a little different in each community, [research](#) indicates that four core pillars of work drive improved student outcomes:

- **Expanded and enriched learning time.** This includes after-school and summer programs, as well as enriching the curriculum through culturally relevant, real-world learning opportunities.
- **Active family and community engagement.** This includes both service provision and meaningful partnership with students, families, and community members in which families and communities support children’s learning through leadership and decisionmaking roles in the school.

- **Collaborative leadership and practices.** This includes the coordination of community school services, as well as site-based, cross-stakeholder leadership teams, teacher learning communities, and the ongoing sharing and use of early warning data to drive continuous improvement in support of students and their families.
- **Integrated student supports.** This includes supports such as mental and physical health care, nutrition support, and housing assistance, which are often provided through strategic community partnerships.

The synergy and interaction among the four pillars create the necessary conditions for a robust learning environment for students within and beyond the classroom.

A central role in [every community school](#) is the community school director (also referred to as a community school coordinator)—a senior-level staff person who can be a school employee or hired through a local community-based organization to work in the school. The community school director partners with the principal, school staff, students, and families to conduct a cross-stakeholder assets and needs assessment and create a vision for the school that meets student needs. Further, the community school director efficiently uses data and coordinates resources from within the school and beyond to meet students' and families' social-emotional, academic and physical needs. Also key to the [success of the community school](#), and to the work of the community school director, is a principal who values shared leadership and power with community partners, students, and families, and who holds a holistic view of child development.

Community schools movement

The [community school](#) movement has long envisioned schools as the hub of young people's education and development, powered by shared leadership between schools and families, as well as strong partnerships between schools and health, social welfare, universities, employers, and other sectors. Historically, community schools have their roots in the progressive education movement in the early 1900s, including John Dewey's argument for schools as social centers and Jane Addams' focus on

social work and providing resources for those in need. Over the last century, the vision of community schools has [evolved](#) to a comprehensive approach that includes integrated student supports and high-quality instruction to dismantle historic inequity. Prior to the pandemic, over 8,000 schools across the country had embraced a community schools approach to support the physical, social, emotional, and academic needs of the whole child and family and strengthen neighborhoods. Since COVID-19, community schools have rapidly adapted to address [issues](#) exacerbated by the pandemic, such as the digital divide, barriers to school-family collaboration to support student learning, hunger, health and homelessness. They have done this because of their deep and established family and community partnerships that deliberately focus on identifying and responding to student and family needs.

Evidence of impact

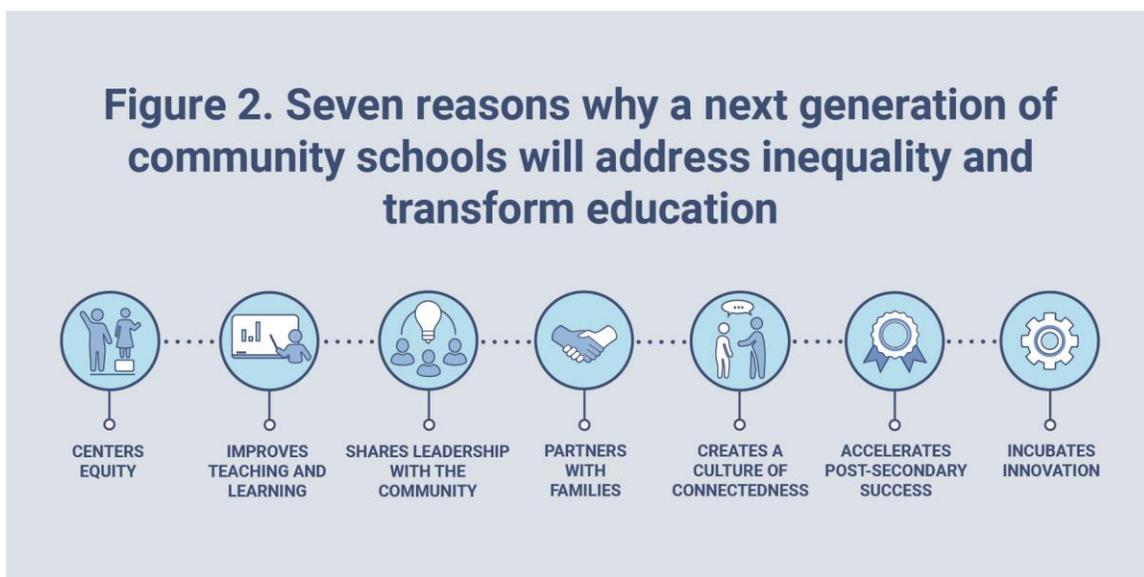
We know that community schools equip students to succeed. A growing body of research finds that the community school strategy helps students attend school more often, feel safer in school, and graduate on time. A [multiyear impact study](#) of the New York City Community Schools initiative conducted by the RAND Corporation reported a significant reduction in student chronic absenteeism as an early outcome and, later, found an increase in academics and graduation rates for all students—particularly for students in temporary housing and for Black and Brown students. [A Learning Policy Institute–National Education Policy Center review](#) of 143 studies on community schools nationwide found that the existing evidence about their effectiveness met all four levels required by the [federal Every Student Succeeds Act](#). Additionally, a Child Trends [review of rigorous evaluations](#) of integrated student support initiatives found promising results and strong alignment of this approach with what is needed to support child and youth development. Further, community schools provide a high return on investment ([here](#) and [here](#)), and can draw on support and funding from multiple sectors outside of education, such as health, human services, and labor, which have the potential to bring a more sustainable resource base that few education reforms can match.

Leapfrogging to a next generation of community schools

The proven effectiveness of community schools has laid the groundwork for a [growing network](#) of education leaders and partners working to scale a next generation of community schools across the country. Driven by trusting relationships and deep partnership between schools, families, and communities, a next generation of community schools will ensure that the combination of strong student support services—and an equally strong and [culturally relevant](#) core instructional program—propels all students to find joy in learning and achieve success in school and life.

We believe all schools should be a next generation of community schools because the approach not only addresses inequality but also opens the possibility for more dynamic and applied approaches to teaching and learning. However, to start this scaling journey—moving from the current 8,000 community schools to having the almost 100,000 schools in the country use the approach—it is essential that our initial focus centers on the 4 percent of school districts hardest hit by the pandemic. If we can reach a majority of the almost 20 million students across these 466 districts in the first four years of the new U.S. administration, it would be transformational for our nation and its most historically underserved students and communities. What follows is a blueprint for why and how a next generation of community schools will do just that.

Seven reasons why a next generation of community schools can address education inequality and lay the foundation for 21st century teaching and learning



1. **Community schools serve as an equity strategy.** A [growing body of evidence](#) shows that community schools increase equitable access to resources and whole child supports that create the conditions for learning and healthy development for all children, including students of color, English language learners, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities. Through their coordinating infrastructure, community schools cultivate cross-sector partnerships, [leverage existing resources](#), and connect students and families to supports, such as physical and mental health care, to [close opportunity gaps](#). Community schools in [New Mexico](#)—which were formed on tribal lands including Kha’ p’ o Community School, Nenahnezad Community School, and Haak’ u Community Academy and established through access to resources and partnerships in Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Santa

Fe—met or exceeded results seen in other district schools, even though they enrolled far greater proportions of students from low-income families than other schools. Local evaluations of these schools find higher attendance, course grades, and graduation rates, as well as positive effects on student behavior and well-being. During COVID-19, many community schools [nimble adapted](#) to the changing conditions by providing real-time access to key resources such as health services, food, [WiFi, and technology](#), which were critical to ensure student and family engagement in blended and remote learning. By providing access to a network of culturally relevant supports, a next generation of community schools will center equity and build learning environments in which vulnerable youth feel safe, experience joy, and achieve success in school and in life.

2. Community schools improve teaching and learning. Community schools actively engage students as learners by blurring the lines between school and community and by offering rigorous, project-based curricula and culturally responsive [pedagogy](#) that [connects to students’ lived experiences](#). During the traditional school day, as well as during afterschool and expanded learning time, students in community schools identify real-world issues affecting their neighborhoods and work together with teachers, families, and community partners to design and implement projects that connect what is being taught in the classroom to the surrounding community. Students’ work with real-world issues remained true during the pandemic, where schools like the [UCLA Community School](#) in Los Angeles adapted quickly to the virtual environment—engaging students through articles, data, videos, and research to explore COVID-19’s disparate impact on people of color and employing street maps and data to dig into the issue of local environmental waste. Recent [research](#) indicates that educational experiences that utilize these [innovative pedagogical approaches help develop](#) both the [cognitive and life-long learning skills](#) and competencies needed to thrive in today’s world. Critical school features that harness the insights from the learning sciences to help students develop a breadth of skills needed for the 21st century are outlined in [new research](#) from the Learning Policy Institute and include: a) commitment to whole child development, b) collaborative structures (teacher teams, distributed leadership, and peer based professional learning), c) strong relationships with students and families, and d) a community “we are all in this together” mindset.

Notably, these features are all core components of the community schools approach. Hence a next generation of community schools holds great promise for helping chart a path toward school redesign that leverages the latest evidence on teaching and learning to help all young people develop the skills they need to succeed.

3. Community schools are community driven. A predominant feature of the country’s most mature and effective community schools’ initiatives is that they value and embrace community knowledge and assets and have been launched and sustained through authentic collaboration and shared leadership across school districts, students, families, and community-based organizations. Case studies indicate that where school districts and communities co-create and jointly develop the vision, design, and implementation of community schools, student outcomes improve and the strategy is more sustainable. In the 18 years since its inception, the Cincinnati Community Learning Centers initiative—which now involves all 65 Cincinnati Public Schools—has continually convened neighborhood-based consultations with families and other residents in order to root its school-change efforts in the community’s strengths and unmet needs. Through a [board policy](#), Cincinnati also established Local School Decision Making Committees (LSDMCs) that include families and community members and that have authority over a wide range of decisions, including budgeting, hiring, and partner selection. The slow, steady growth of the Community Learning Center strategy and the continued community commitment have led to [demonstrable results](#): From 2006–15, the achievement gap between Black and white students was reduced from 14.5 percent to 4.5 percent; third grade literacy increased by 20 percentage points; and [high school graduation rates increased](#) almost seven percentage points to 77.9 percent over the 2014–18 period. By engaging in extensive community organizing, planning processes, and collaborative leadership, a next generation of community school leaders and districts can connect top-down (“tree-tops”) with bottom-up (“grass-roots”) reform, build community strength and resilience, and ensure that the design and implementation of their community schools reflects the vision, needs, and interests of students and families.

4. Community schools partner with students and families. A growing body of [evidence](#) indicates the benefits of family engagement and leadership in driving student

academic outcomes. Schools that have developed trusting relationships with families and provided leadership training, family networking and mentoring opportunities, and information on the education system and how to navigate it experience improved student attendance, achievement, graduation rates, and engagement in post-secondary education.

In community schools, family engagement is a driver of the day to day functioning of the school. Many have adopted the [dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships](#) developed by Harvard University professor Dr. Karen Mapp, which recognizes that effective school-family partnerships require skills and knowledge on both sides of the partnership. School administrators and educators, as well as families and other caregivers, have [equally important roles to play](#) in developing strong and co-owned school-family visions for the school and partnerships centered on the well-being and success of each child. For example, the Cajon Valley Union School District, which is a member of the Brookings' s [Family Engagement in Education Network](#) and that has embraced the collaborative principles of the community schools movement, invested in building connections to families before and during the pandemic. In one exercise, using the dual-capacity building framework, educators spend a “day in the life” of the families and caregivers of their students. Even as a simulation in the school gym, this exercise helps build empathy, understanding, and trust between schools and families. A diverse district with migrant and refugee students from multiple countries, the Cajon Valley Union School District has invested heavily in creative strategies to ensure open and frequent communication with families, including employing a network of Community Liaisons who are parents with language and cultural skills to build strong relationships between families and schools. The high level of engagement among families helped shape how the district [pivoted](#) during the pandemic, including working with families as they simulated the classroom at home, staying open for students of essential worker parents, extending before and aftercare, and reopening schools when most other school districts remained shuttered. A next generation of community schools would build on these lessons learned and carry forward the deepened level of partnership with families post-pandemic to ensure that students reap the benefits.

5. Community schools create a culture of connectedness. [Evidence indicates](#) that being connected to school is the strongest universal prevention strategy that we have as a society to help young people stay and succeed in school. [The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development in their Youth Call to Action writes](#) that young people learn best when adults know them, make them feel safe, hold them responsible for their own learning, and help them work constructively and productively together. A culture of connection in school leads not only to better attendance, grades, test scores, high school graduation rates, and post-secondary success, but also to better physical and mental health, fewer suicides, less depression, reductions in teenage pregnancies, and reduced involvement with the juvenile justice system. [A recent \(2020\) book](#) titled “The Way We Do School: The Making of Oakland’s Full-Service Community School District” outlines how the school district’s citywide community schools initiative, which focused on cultivating supportive learning environments for all students, generated a wide-scale culture shift that led to increases in high school graduation rates, participation in student services, and meaningful family engagement and decreases in disciplinary action, in-class disruptions, and lower chronic absence. As schools reopen, a next generation of community schools will leverage tutors, social workers, afterschool providers, and [“success mentors”](#) from the community, national service organizations, and school staff to provide 1:1 support and help students feel connected to adults and to health and mental health services. Students will be part of a community of care, in which they experience trusting relationships and feel valued by adults and their peers.

6. Community schools serve as “post-secondary success accelerators.” [Research indicates](#) the benefits of supporting students with college and career readiness activities. During COVID-19, significant numbers of high school seniors in the class of 2020 and 2021 faced not only interrupted schooling, but also interrupted futures as they delayed or opted out of continuing their education and entered a labor market that provided [few opportunities](#) for high school graduates. To set students up for future success, community schools have provided college and career development exposure that has led to positive student outcomes both before and during the pandemic. [Communities in Schools \(CIS\)](#), which operates in 2,900 schools in 26 states and the District of Columbia, helps students understand the college application

process, conduct practice interviews, identify scholarship opportunities, and visit college campuses. CIS also supports students planning to enter the workforce by connecting them to internships, job shadowing, and leadership training. Several community school networks across the country, including New York City, Los Angeles, and Flint, Michigan are partnering with the [National Education Equity Lab](#) to offer students actual credit-bearing online college courses from top colleges and universities—including Yale, Howard, Cornell, and the University of Connecticut—through teacher-led high school classrooms. Over 80 percent of all students completing these college courses during COVID-19 succeeded and earned widely transferable college credits. A next generation of community schools would help students make direct connections to higher education institutions by offering middle and upper grades access to college-level opportunities, such as earning college credits while in high school and participating in apprenticeships and internships.

7. Community schools are incubators of innovation. Community schools are laboratories of learning and have been well suited to spreading innovations developed by schools and community partners. Important to this are the data-informed collaborative structures that community schools have in place. [Orchard Collegiate Academy](#) community school in New York City set out in 2015 to serve a diverse student population—89 percent of whom live in poverty—and to “educate the whole child, exposing them to a diverse array of academic and extracurricular opportunities including music and arts classes, leadership opportunities, AP classes, and more.” The principal, school staff, and the community school director convened [weekly attendance meetings](#) to assess the effectiveness of these programs on student outcomes and make adjustments to services, where needed. Five years later, the school had successfully reduced chronic absenteeism by 27 percent and increased graduation rates by 47 percent.

As we build back better, a next generation of community schools would create a culture of R&D that ensures new educational solutions are culturally relevant, community-driven, data informed, co-created with teachers, students, and families, and are monitored for impact by school leaders, researchers, and the community. In the spirit of the work promoted through [Reimagine America’s Schools](#), a next

generation of community schools would explore the ways in which the school can be redesigned and create [playful learning spaces](#)—including using technology and repurposing school facilities in unique and new ways—to be more inclusive and supportive to students, families, and teachers. In this effort, educators and community partners will develop a potpourri of “whole-child advancement metrics” to measure progress toward academic outcomes, bolster social-emotional well-being, and deliver key support to students, especially the most vulnerable. Recent research from the Brookings [Millions Learning](#) initiative has shown that “ensuring that more children learn requires a strong ethos of experimentation, collecting learning data, and using it for continuous improvement.” A next generation of community schools would provide this and as a result, have the potential to drive major advancements in 21st century teaching and learning.

Scaling up: Fidelity of implementation matters

Recent roadmaps for transforming education after the pandemic, including from the [Learning Policy Institute](#), call for a widespread implementation of the community school approach, but much more needs to be done to provide a systemwide enabling environment for uptake. As a first step, policymakers, educators, technical assistance providers, and the broader community must support schools with quality implementation and a strong instructional program. Avoiding a scattershot approach to the adoption of the [four core pillars](#) is critical. This will require transparency in the collection and sharing of whole-child advancement data to drive outcomes across academic performance, chronic absenteeism, socio-emotional well-being, health, graduation, college matriculation, and academic and personal behaviors. A set of [standards](#) and a network of technical assistance partners will help to guide successful implementation. Essential to the standards—and to the vision of a community school—are the core principles: pursue equity; invest in a whole child approach to education; build on community strengths to ensure positive [conditions for learning](#); invest in trusting relationships and structures to support collaborative leadership; use data and community wisdom to guide partnerships, programs, and progress; commit to interdependence and shared accountability; and foster a learning organization. Building ongoing evaluation into every community school initiative to assess the near- and long-term impact of the strategy should be part and parcel of all efforts to scale in the months and years ahead.

Seizing the moment

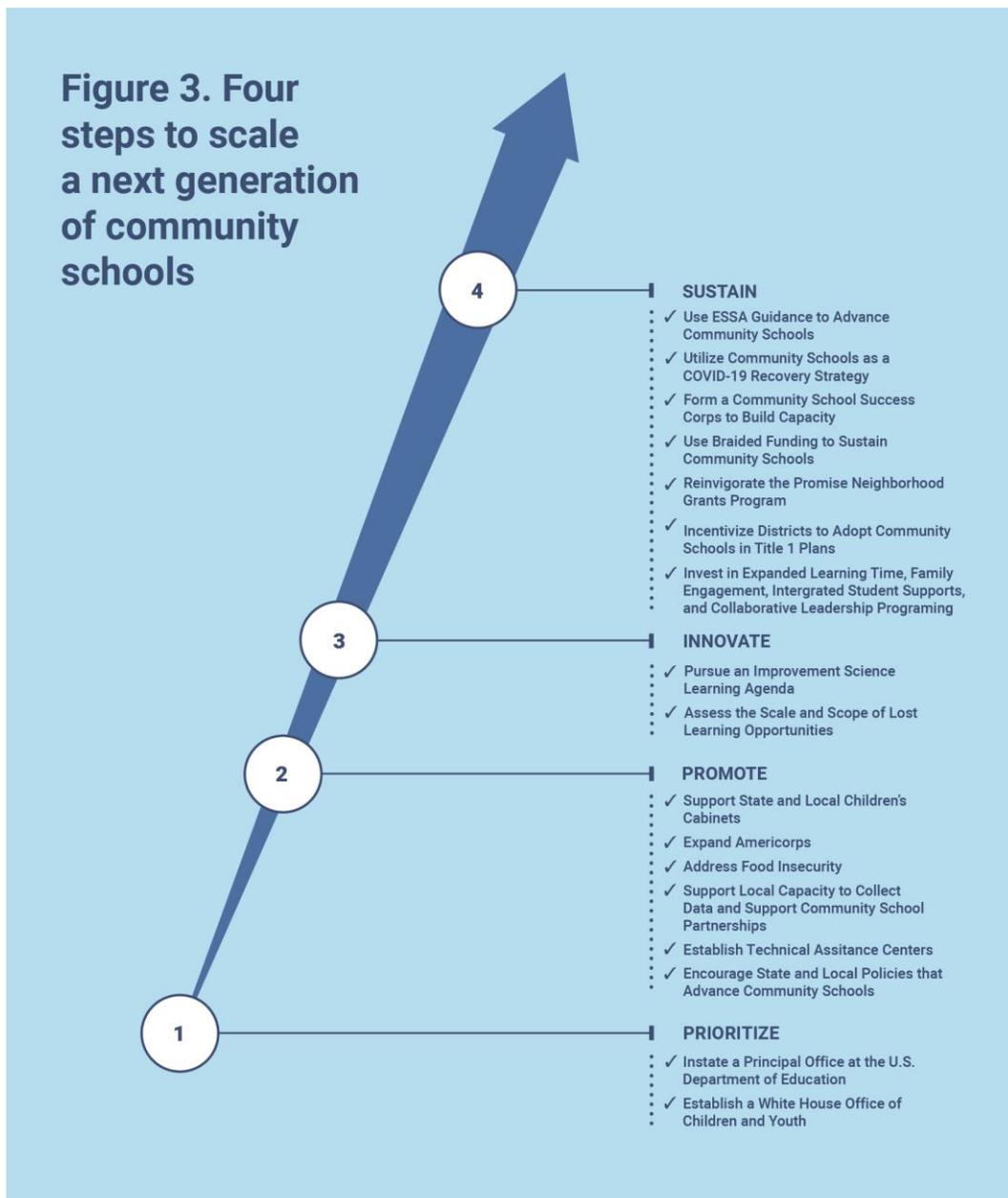
Today community schools represent up to [8 percent](#) of all the country's schools. Following the pathbreaking examples of [Cincinnati](#), [Florida](#), [Kentucky](#), [New York City](#), and [Oakland](#), additional cities and states are just beginning to adopt community schools as a preferred reform strategy to promote whole child well-being, student success, and educational equity. The scaling of the community school strategy will

require a shared understanding of the strategy among funders, policymakers, and practitioners and the intentional alignment of resources and policies around that common vision. A focus on identifying the “early adopter” schools or school districts that have demonstrated interest in this work and a willingness to adopt the strategy will pave the path for this work.

The good news is that a strong infrastructure of support stands ready to help and promote the adoption of the community schools approach across the country. There is a diverse array of organizations dedicated to advancing next generation community schools including the [Coalition for Community Schools](#), teachers’ unions, parent organizations, advocacy groups, and state and local coalitions, as well as expanded learning providers, higher education institutions, not-for-profit organizations (e.g., Communities In Schools), charter school networks, and capacity-building intermediaries. This collection of actors—representing a [meso network](#) committed to supporting the whole child, leveraging the strength of communities, and developing shared accountability for results—can be a strong engine for scaling a next generation of community schools approach nationwide.

Four recommendations to scale a next generation of community schools nationally

The conditions for scaling exist, and the time to scale is now. As such, the four steps below provide a blueprint for scaling a next generation of community schools that can be used by federal, state, and local level policymakers (see Figure 3).



STEP #1: PRIORITIZE

The U.S. administration should take the following immediate executive actions to galvanize key stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels to scale the community schools approach to at least half of the 4 percent of school districts with greatest unmet need:

A) Reinstatement of a principal office. Reinstatement of a principal office—with senior political leadership—at the U.S. Department of Education focused on supporting the whole child. The current Office of Safe and Supportive Schools (former Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools) should be elevated and expanded to provide national leadership on strategies to ensure the health, safety, and overall well-being of students in schools and champion the next generation community schools initiative. The revived office would oversee the following:

- 1. Fund a next generation of community schools:** Establish and oversee the provision of grant funding for sustainable community school initiatives, including matching grants to states providing incentives for “early adopters” of the strategy, and for repurposing existing available facilities to create playful learning spaces;
- 2. Promote R&D:** Develop consistent whole child advancement metrics to assess the next generation community school initiative’s impact, and partner with the Institute of Education Sciences to create a national research agenda;
- 3. Provide support and develop policy:** Develop technical assistance and thought leadership to further advance school and community supports and partnerships, community-based economic development, school infrastructure, and fidelity to the essential steps needed to reverse the lost instructional time caused by the pandemic;
- 4. Convene key partners:** Advance a next generation of community schools through bringing together key partners, including:

- a. The federal government (e.g., CDC, SAMHSA, HUD, and USDA) and nongovernmental organizations to create a unified, whole-child agenda;
- b. A U.S. Department of Education Community School Cities gathering of 100 mayor-superintendent partners and family/community groups in year one to implement community school initiatives, with more partners added in later years, expanding upon the lessons learned and paving the way for the development of new community schools. The event would be hosted in concert with the U.S. Conference of Mayors targeting the cities most impacted by COVID-19;
- c. Governors to spur state-level policy and funding in support of community school expansion in their respective states;
- d. State and local children's cabinets to ensure successful adoption of the strategy; and
- e. Youth leaders and community members to shape a national community schools agenda.

B) Establish a White House Office of Children and Youth. *Establish a White House Office of Children and Youth that will organize cross-departmental and inter-agency efforts, including to ensure rapid recovery from COVID-19, address longstanding impacts of structural inequality and systematic racism, and advance opportunity.* For the work to flourish, a centralized office at the federal level would need to message and embrace a cross-sector approach to education and youth development, all anchored in this next generation community school strategy. This approach is consistent with the recommendation made by the Nemours Children's Health System, Mental Health America, First Focus on Children, Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Forum for Youth Investment, and others. Further, a White House Office signals to the public and to agency leadership that children and youth are priorities for the administration and that they should further the Office's priorities in areas including safe and stable housing, health, justice, and education. The work of this office would ensure that:

1. resources are targeted and used effectively;
2. data are captured from multiple sources to make informed decisions;
3. budgets are coordinated to maximize efficiency; and
4. assets of multiple agencies are mobilized and repurposed with a focus on equity.

STEP #2: PROMOTE

Promote policies and high-quality capacity building that result in broader, effective implementation of the community schools strategy, including:

A) Support children's cabinets. *Support expansion and enhancement for state and local level children's cabinets that facilitate the integration and coordination of cross-sector resources for whole-child supports.* Many states already have [children's cabinets](#) (councils, commissions, or [P-20 groups](#)) that work to create a shared vision, compare data, align and coordinate services, and set common outcomes for children and youth. Likewise, many localities have adopted structures and practices that support the collaborative use of funds. These children's cabinets—both state and local—exist across the country from Maine to California. Some are permanent structures and others are term-limited. Examples include:

1. ABC Community School Partnership in Albuquerque adopted a joint powers agreement in 2007 to provide a structure and financing for community schools. As a permanent body, it offers stability through the natural cycle of leadership change and continued engagement of key stakeholders. Members include the mayor and two city councilors; the superintendent and two school board members; and the county manager or designee; and two county commissioners. The ABC board also has four seats that can be filled by organizations committed to supporting the growth and development of community schools. With the Joint Powers Agreement, the three agencies can and do move resources across agencies to support community schools without

always having to undertake a lengthy request for proposal processes, making it easier to get needed services to the right schools more quickly.

2. In 2007, the Florida governor signed legislation that created the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet. The Cabinet promotes coordination, collaboration, and information sharing between and within state agencies to ensure that services for youth (from prenatal through transition to adulthood) are planned, managed, and provided in a holistic and integrated manner. The Cabinet is organized around a shared vision—“All children in Florida grow up safe, healthy, educated and prepared to meet their full potential”—and helps to promote improved access to data (through data sharing systems) and funding to support healthy child development.

The federal government should incentivize the growth and coordination of state and local children’s cabinets in support of community school expansion through challenge and innovation grants and through guidance encouraging governors to use the COVID-19 relief funds at their disposal for this purpose.

B) Expand AmeriCorps. *Expand [AmeriCorps](#) to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students, particularly those in the 466 school districts most adversely impacted by COVID-19.* During the pandemic, AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps senior volunteers have served their communities through providing tutoring and mentoring programs, including virtual programs, conducting wellness checks, and collecting and distributing millions of pounds of food and prepared meals. Moving forward, AmeriCorps members can be strategically leveraged through placements in community schools, where they can support classroom teachers by providing one-on-one and small group support to students in the classroom and in afterschool programs, and partner with community-based organizations to meet family and community needs. For example, the NYC Community Schools Corps—an AmeriCorps program launched in partnership between NYC Service and the NYC Department of Education’s Office of Community Schools—places corps members at community schools in high-need neighborhoods to serve as success mentors, with a focus on decreasing chronic student absenteeism and strengthening student academic achievement.

C) Address food insecurity. *Address food insecurity to support students' engagement in learning.* Extend waivers allowing universal school meals and extend pandemic–Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) SNAP benefits for school–age children through at least September 2022. [Feeding America](#) reports that hunger negatively impacts a child's ability to learn and impairs healthy development. Pre–COVID–19, food insecurity impacted [one in eight Americans \(about 37 million people, including 11 million children\)](#) and only half of these families met federal qualifications for free school lunch and SNAP. Since the onset of the pandemic, food insecurity has [remained persistently elevated at record levels](#). While school meal programs are critical to combating child hunger, including school meal hubs established during the pandemic, prepared meal programs alone reach only a fraction of the eligible population. The pandemic–EBT program was effective and reached more families than the prepared meals program when schools were closed. Extending waivers allowing universal school meals and extending the pandemic EBT program through at least September 2022 would effectively reduce food insecurity among the nation's children and families and would provide much–needed certainty for school leaders.

D) Support local capacity. *Build capacity within the U.S. Department of Education to support local educational agencies (LEAs) and state education agencies (SEAs), as well as their governmental (e.g., Department of Health) and nongovernmental (e.g., community nonprofits) partners, to strengthen community school partnerships through high–quality technical assistance.* Both the Department of Education (e.g., National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments) and the Department of Health and Human Services (e.g., Afterschool Investments Project) have a long history of providing technical assistance to grow and support evidence–based policies that promote the educational well–being and success of children and youth. A new technical assistance capacity can build on previous successful models to:

1. ensure that state administrators have up–to–date information on the effective uses of funding to share with local system leaders;
2. collect and share examples of effective collection and use of real–time, high–quality data to guide action and prioritize use of resources;
3. create tools, templates, and data structures to promote implementation; and

4. create networks of state and local leaders to work together to solve problems and share effective strategies.

E) Establish technical assistance centers. *Establish next generation community school national and regional technical assistance centers to build the professional capacity of community school leaders and to create national peer learning communities, with a focus on the 4 percent of school districts most affected by the hardships of COVID-19.* Community schools represent a shift in the way schools operate, placing much greater emphasis on collaborating and sharing leadership with students, families, and community partners. Consequently, educators, district leaders, partners, and others will require support through high-quality technical assistance centers that utilize knowledge from research and practice—and emerging trends tied to implementation—in order to help local communities effectively create and sustain successful community school initiatives. Universities, nonprofits, and state and local agencies have been developing capacity to provide technical assistance, and these resources could be advanced widely across regions while also targeting specific areas (e.g., a focus on rural, inner-suburban, and special-population schools).

F) Develop state and local policies. *Develop [state and local level community school policies and regulations](#) that enable the advancement of robust community school initiatives through financial, implementation, and technical support.* As is the case at the federal level, the alignment of policies and resources across public agencies (e.g., health and human services, education, and parks and recreation) is key. For example, state board of education regulations, school board resolutions, and county/city resolutions or joint agreements lay out a vision, define key principles, establish roles and responsibilities for districts and partners, outline governance structures (e.g., steering committees that include students, families, and community members), and provide guidance for implementing and sustaining community schools. Also, [financing mechanisms](#) provide support for planning and start-up costs, a full-time community school director, and sustainable implementation—particularly for community schools located in communities of concentrated poverty. At the state level, these mechanisms can include state education funds, community school and afterschool grant programs, after school grants, and inclusion of community schools in state funding formulas. At

the local level, these can include school district funds, dedicated revenue from cities or counties, and local tax levies.

STEP #3: INNOVATE

Pursue a robust research agenda that examines the impact of next generation of community schools on educational outcomes including:

A) Invest in an improvement science learning agenda. *Make community schools a priority area for a rapid-cycle learning agenda and a ten-year improvement science research and development effort, as well as a focus area for Institute of Educational Science (IES) and Education and Innovation (EIR) grants.* Community schools are a growing strategy, and there is much to learn about how they operate in different settings. Scaling up the community schools' approach provides an invaluable opportunity to learn what strategies work where to address a range of questions, such as: how to provide an enriched learning experience that gives young people a chance to bring their learning to life with real work application? How to build trusting relationships with families and support active family and community engagement? How to support collaborative leadership practices? How to best support students with integrated services from mental health to nutrition? Community schools are well placed to pursue this type of research agenda because they utilize a continuous improvement process—constantly collecting data on needs, assets, and impact in order to make data-informed and community-driven decisions, as well as measure the effectiveness of implementation. For example, community schools would address a particularly pressing need to identify the meaningful leading warning indicators across distance as well as in-person learning to activate supports and herald course correction as early as possible. Ideally, such research would be conducted early enough to inform data monitoring and collection in fall 2021. [A scan of state policies](#) conducted by Attendance Works, for example, shows that COVID-19 has had an enormously detrimental impact on the collection of timely and consistent attendance metrics. Attendance is no longer always taken daily, and with the exception of a few states like Connecticut, the definition does not ensure that a student was exposed to a meaningful amount of instruction in order to be marked present. A national research agenda that leverages this culture of improvement would help to create more

effective policies, whole child advancement metrics, and guidance for the implementation of community schools that achieve results.

B) Assess lost learning. *Assess the scale and scope of lost learning opportunities.*

Work with IES and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) to conduct short-term strategic data analysis to determine the scale and scope of lost learning across all states and territories utilizing multiple measures of student attendance, participation, and engagement—including reduction in enrollment, lost contact with families, low levels of attendance, participation in hybrid, remote, and in-person schooling, and access to and participation in expanded learning (afterschool and summer programs). Utilize findings from the research to direct resources, explore how to make adequate broadband internet universally available, and provide for policy and practices to support a coordinated response to improve the educational outcomes of children who were most vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. Insights could inform the work of various entities working with young people including the Interagency Council on Homelessness and Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs.

STEP #4: SUSTAIN

Repurpose and provide funding to initiate and sustain systemic scaling of a next generation of community schools by:

A) Use ESSA guidance and regulations. *Within the Department of Education, use Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) guidance and regulations to advance a next generation of community schools.* Federal title programs support broad and flexible strategies to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. Community schools are a natural vehicle for delivering coordinated supports for students by knitting together services provided by multiple federal programs into a coherent whole. Updating and issuing new non-regulatory guidance on the use of ESSA funds to include a specific focus on the community schools strategy can be done in the short run by the Department of Education. Revised guidance can focus on supporting community schools by:

1. Making explicit that community schools are an allowable and encouraged use of school improvement funds by adding community schools to the list of

allowable, evidence-based interventions in the current guidance. In addition, under ESSA Section 1111(d), states have the flexibility to set aside a percentage of funding to support school improvement activities in schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support. Revised guidance can call out an amount of funding a district can hold back to support community school administration at the district and building level.

2. Starting with Title I, Title II, and Title IV, provide guidance and examples of how community schools are an allowable use of resources for each of the following federal education title programs:
 - a. *Title I:* Add community schools to the list of “examples of use of funds in schoolwide programs” in the current guidance. Make clear that Title I funds can be used to support the community schools’ infrastructure (i.e., a director or coordinator), as well as services to support each of the four community school pillars—expanded and enriched learning time, active family and community engagement, collaborative leadership and practice, and integrated student supports. Indicate that adopting a community schools strategy supports all of the required components of a schoolwide program (conducting a comprehensive needs assessment; preparing a school-wide plan, and annually evaluating and updating the plan) and more by addressing family engagement and integrated student supports and promoting a well-rounded and student-centered education.
 - b. *Title II:* Add an explicit reference to collaborative leadership (one of the four evidence-based features of a community school) as a skill required for school transformation to current guidance. This would allow for the use of Title II funds to support teachers, principals, and principal supervisors to develop and refine the skills and competencies needed to work effectively with community partners while better engaging students and families. The guidance can also make clear that relevant community partners can join and, in some cases, lead relevant training for school staff to coordinate support for students and promote a well-rounded education. This could

include training on supporting social and emotional learning, as well as academic subjects that are a focus of school transformation.

- c. *Title IV–A*: The Student Support and Academic Enrichment program (SSAE), like Title I, is intended to improve students’ academic achievement by increasing the capacity of SEAs, LEAs, and local communities to provide all students with access to a [well-rounded education](#); improve [school conditions for student learning](#); and improve the [use of technology to enhance the academic achievement and digital literacy of all students](#). Regulatory guidance for this program also calls for LEAs and schools to engage with community partners to expand student opportunities. Here, too, guidance can specifically call out support of the community school infrastructure as an allowable and encouraged use of resources, including the hiring of staff critical to the functioning of community schools. Such staff include, but are not limited to, community school directors (also known as coordinators), social workers, guidance counselors, family engagement specialists, positive behavior and intervention support specialists, and out-of-school time program directors.

B) Utilize community schools for COVID–19 recovery. *Utilize community schools as a critical COVID–19 recovery strategy and an eligible use of federal COVID–19 relief dollars.* COVID–19 has shown the power and potential of community schools to serve as a source of community strength and adaptiveness, to promote equity, and to improve whole child outcomes. Through trusting relationships with students and families and coordinating neighborhood resources—including in hybrid or remote settings—community schools are strategically positioned to effectively leverage COVID–19 relief dollars. Including the creation and expansion of community schools as an eligible use of funds in any COVID–19 relief plan could help pave the way for state fiscal stabilization funds and governors’ discretionary funds for community schools. This funding would allow states and districts to harness the power of community schools to direct and align resources to the local needs of students, families, and communities.

C) Form a community school success corps. *Form a Community School Success Corps (CSSC) to provide diverse teams of critical additional “people-powered” support and infrastructure to expand community schools with the capacity needed to provide holistic, personalized support to positively impact students, families, and communities across the country.* The CSSC would be comprised of teams of diverse AmeriCorps members serving full time on teams in community schools, partnering with teachers, counselors, and others to form developmental relationships with students and provide near-peer, research-based holistic supports and supplemental capacity in classrooms to personalize learning. CSSC participants would serve before, during, and after school to create the connective tissue between students’ lives and their educational experience. They would support foundational elements of the community school model—adding capacity to implement integrated student support models, extended and applied learning opportunities, family and community engagement activities, and collaborative practices alongside teams of other school personnel. At the school level, CSSC members’ efforts would be coordinated and integrated into community school activities and efforts by site coordinators. These activities would be subsidized through AmeriCorps—who in partnership with school leadership and data use—could leverage the additional capacity from CSSC, as well as other partners, to provide targeted and integrated supports to students during and outside of school.

This approach has already been effectively implemented in New York City, where City Year has partnered with the Office of Community Schools to provide teams of student success coaches—adding critical capacity and supports to create equitable learning environments for students. Leveraging student success coaches through AmeriCorps show signs of working. A City Year [report](#) highlights the more time students spend with student success coaches, the better their social, emotional, and academic outcomes—and as [Deloitte found](#), coaches are effective in supporting with student persistence, study skills, and program completion. CSSC could be formed, managed, and funded through an interagency partnership between the Department of Education and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), targeting support where the inequity is greatest.

D) Support children and youth. *Direct the U.S. Department of Education to work with other departments that support children and youth to reduce barriers associated with braiding and blending funding from multiple federal departments, agencies, and programs that support community schools.* Community schools are an authentic voice for the local community and therefore can address local needs. While public agencies set the broad requirements for communities, allowing flexibility in funding to reflect local decision making would equip local schools and communities to best meet the needs of students, families, and schools. Examples of this approach include:

1. Aligning common criteria for program eligibility—including ages, grade levels, family income, etc.—to promote coordination. For instance, some youth programs end when youth turn age 18, while education-funded programs cover students who are still in school. By aligning these eligibility criteria—perhaps stating “through age 18 or attending public school,”—services for students will not be disrupted and reporting can be simplified.
2. Creating a working group and pilot program to develop common applications—including budget and reporting templates—across discretionary grant programs issued across federal departments and agencies for all programs that relate to school health, school mental health, school safety, and other issues. This could include examples of how to budget for and report on funding from two or more programs (braided funding). Pilot sites could build on flexibilities approved in comprehensive state education plans. For instance, a common template could build on successful practices often used by states and districts, such as qualifying students for a range of supports based on eligibility for free and reduced-price meal status. Finally, funding and expertise should be provided to support federal agencies to better align administration of programs that support children and youth. Without dedicated staff and access to experts, it would be difficult for a working group to carry out this important, yet complex and time-consuming work.

3. Creating model language to allow for enhanced data collection and sharing while maintaining Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA sometimes creates barriers to the reasonable and responsible use of data across agencies. Clarifying what is allowable under FERPA—and providing sample consent forms and memorandums of understanding—would allow for more consistent and compatible data that would simplify reporting and support more rigorous evaluation.

E) Reinvigorate and expand the Promise Neighborhood Grants Program. Center the promise neighborhood grants program around the community school strategy and focus funding on the 4 percent of school districts most impacted by COVID-19, as a way to activate and connect local community resources to invigorate building back better. Throughout the pandemic, Promise Neighborhood teams have connected community residents to needed services and supports—from food and shelter to technology to at-home schooling. In some places, Promise teams have been an important bridge between schools and families that are more difficult to reach through regular channels. The U.S. administration can strengthen Promise Neighborhood by:

1. Making the connection and role that school leaders play in supporting Promise Neighborhoods more explicit by requiring that the district or target schools support the infrastructure for collaboration, including designated staff, data sharing, and joint planning.
2. Requiring that initial grant budget requests for Promise Neighborhoods include a plan for sustaining services and supports at the conclusion of the grant.
3. Allowing grantees to extend the length of the grant, from five to eight years, to create a more realistic path to sustainability. This would provide grantees the same amount of funding but over a longer time horizon. This could be accomplished by reducing funding during the first year of operation; it takes time to hire staff, convene partners, and plan, and many grantees carry over unspent funds from the initial year. Likewise, funding can be slowly stepped down in the last years of the new longer grant (years 5–8) to allow more time for weaving together funds from other sources as federal funds are reduced.

Savings from reductions in the first few years can be redirected to later years to help reduce the funding cliff.

E) Include community schools in Title 1 plans. *Create incentives for local school districts most affected by the pandemic and use the community school strategy as part of their Title I plans.* Community schools' ability to effectively coordinate resources allows districts to take full advantage of the many flexibilities built into Title I, while addressing the needs of individual schools, families, and students. By leveraging neighborhood assets and partners, community schools can address the real issues children and families face and support children's academic success and well-being. This is especially critical for high-poverty schools, for which the community school strategy can help to level the playing field, bringing additional partnerships and securing resources more typically found in better resourced schools. Build incentives for community schools as part of infrastructure revitalization. Encourage the location of critical community services within schools, including technical certification/job training programs and social service agencies (e.g., community health and mental health providers), as part of funding to build a more modern and sustainable community infrastructure. Further, encourage a hub and spoke model to connect and align community-based learning spaces to the school. Incentivizing districts to adopt the community schools strategy for their high poverty schools would promote a more equitable distribution of community assets and help to ensure that all students have the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

F) Increase federal funding. *Ensure robust support for the federal funding streams that support community schools.* The following funding streams and programs that support the core pillars should all be increased:

1. **Expanded and enriched learning time.** This includes after-school and summer programs, as well as enriching the curriculum through culturally relevant, real-world learning opportunities. Key federal funding streams include: the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (Title IV Part B), Child Care Development Block Grant, AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA, and WIOA Youth Formula Program.

2. **Active family and community engagement.** This includes both service provision and meaningful partnership with family and community members in which families and communities support children’s learning through leadership and decisionmaking roles in the school. Key federal funding streams include: Statewide Family Engagement Centers, Title I Part A.
3. **Collaborative leadership and practices.** This includes the coordination of community school services, as well as site-based, cross-stakeholder leadership teams and teacher learning communities. Key federal funding streams include: Title I Part A and Title II.
4. **Integrated student supports.** This includes supports such as mental and physical health care, nutrition support, and housing assistance. Key federal funding streams include: Title IV Part A, USDA Child Nutrition Programs, Choice Neighborhoods Programs (HUD), and School Based Health Center funding (ACA).

Conclusion

The events of summer 2020, in which the once-in-a-century public health pandemic collided with unprecedented racial violence and resulting protests, appear to have made a dent in the nation’s consciousness—and conscience. As many observers have pointed out, the notion of returning to normality in the post-pandemic environment is totally unacceptable since “normal” in education has, for too long, connoted inequitable and ineffective. Writer and social activist Arundahti Roy—in an influential essay titled “[The Pandemic as Portal](#)”—observed that “Nothing could be worse than a return to normality...we need to be ready to imagine another world—and ready to fight for it.” She stated that the pandemic can be a portal to a more just future but first we must acknowledge the rupture caused by the virus. Her analysis is relevant to the world of public education in general and to the community school strategy specifically. The closing of schools across the country in mid-March spurred widespread recognition of the critical roles played by public education systems in the daily life of most American families. The appreciation for the “essential caretaking role schools play in society has skyrocketed,” according to one [Brookings report](#). The move to remote learning also highlighted the deep inequities in access to technology among groups of students, with low-income students and students of color having much greater difficulty participating in the online learning environment. Roy’s call to “imagine another world” resonated deeply with our task force and served as the cornerstone for our recommendations—a consensus view of experienced education and community leaders from across the country that the community school strategy represents a feasible, evidence-based approach to strengthening public education for all our children.

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