



Community Schools and the Science of Learning and Development What We Are Learning From the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative

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We know from the science of learning and development that education systems should serve the interests, abilities, and needs of every student and that a set of practice components exist that can be employed to design learning environments that support the achievement of each of these outcomes for young people (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Community schools represent a tangible strategy that can be used to apply many of the science of learning and development practice components. They support whole-child development and positive family and community outcomes through cross-sector partnership with community agencies and providers. The community school model, when implemented well, can positively influence a variety of student outcomes and enhance the effectiveness of schools, particularly those schools serving a high proportion of students and families living in poverty (Maier et al., 2017).

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has partnered with the Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative (CPS CSI) since 2011 to examine both the implementation of the initiative and the outcomes it has been able to achieve. CPS CSI is a multipronged strategy supported by a variety of funding sources serving more than 100 schools within the district. AIR works specifically with 65 schools that receive grants through the Illinois 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program.

In this brief, we a) describe the pillars of community schools and how they align with the science of learning and development and b) share what we are learning from our work with community schools in Chicago.

Community Schools and the Science of Learning and Development

Community schools are designed to be service hubs in their neighborhoods and communities, uniting families, educators, and community partners to accelerate equitable student outcomes in health, education, and employment. Key to the success of community schools is the coordination and alignment of services, activities, and supports around a widely shared vision for how the school and its partners can support student development and family and community well-being. Community schools are places where everyone's voice matters and where typically there are multiple structures and platforms in place for shared and authentic decision making relative to implementation of the strategy.

Effective community schools and the activities and services they provide respond to local contexts and student, family, and community needs. This attention to local context means that community schools may vary in terms of the programs or services they offer and how they operate. However, implementation of a

community school strategy typically relies on four pillars that are foundational to most community school models and initiatives:

- **integrated student supports** to address and remove barriers to learning outside of school through partnerships;
- **expanded learning time and opportunities** to provide additional activities for learning and development, including before-school, afterschool, weekend, and summer programs;
- **family and community engagement** to partner with parents and other community members and share decision-making power in students' education; and
- **collaborative leadership and practice** to create a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility (Maier et al., 2017).



Community schools represent a strategy to apply the practice components from the science of learning and development. This science is a cross-disciplinary body of knowledge that tells us how people learn, develop, and thrive across settings, offering powerful insights that can be used to transform education systems, advance equity, and help every young person thrive. Recently, this body of knowledge has been synthesized and elevated by the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance, a partnership of leading education research, practice, and policy organizations. The SoLD Alliance outlines five practice components that are essential for young people to learn, develop, and thrive (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019):

- **positive developmental relationships** through interactions with peers and adults, which in turn help develop interpersonal relationship skills, trusting relationships, and self-confidence;
- **environments filled with safety and belonging**, where youth are comfortable trying new things, building skills, and learning;
- **rich learning experiences** that offer hands-on and project-based activities that combine youth interests and passions; incorporate youth voice; and allow young people to explore, engage, and make meaning with new and existing knowledge;
- **development of knowledge, skills, mindsets, and habits** by incorporating skill building, goal setting, modeling, and reflection into activities; and
- **integrated support systems** by partnering with schools and families and ensuring that staff working with youth understand how to support young people outside of their program offerings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Moroney et al., 2020).

The research on community schools and the science of learning and development, taken together, offer a potentially powerful path regarding how we can address the needs and support the ongoing development of the whole young person, their families, and the broader community.

What We're Learning From Community Schools

In this brief, we focus on the first two pillars of community schools: integrated supports and expanded learning time and opportunities. These two areas represent the elements of the community school strategy that most immediately impact young people and where there is the greatest opportunity to apply the practice components from the science of learning and development. We share what we are learning from our community school work with CPS CSI.

Integrated Student Supports

Integrated student supports address and remove young people's barriers to learning, development, and thriving (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Maier et al., 2017; Moroney et al., 2020). Integrated student supports require partnerships between schools and communities, such as community programs, health service providers, and social service agencies. Service referrals may be for individual students or their families and could involve a single occurrence (e.g., a vision exam for new eyeglasses, an appointment to apply for rental assistance) or ongoing supports to enhance student or family-member wellness (e.g., behavioral health counseling, care for a substantive medical condition). What is important here is the identification of a student or family need and the intentional connection of the student or family member to a CPS activity or service to address that need. Partnerships created as part of the adoption of a community school model allow schools to expand the programming and services they provide to students, families, and communities (Naftzger, Diehl, Bradley, Vinson, Bishop et al., 2020).

Below, we share what we are learning about integrated student supports.

- **Leveraged partnerships with community agencies result in a substantial expansion of resources for students and families provided at CPS CSI schools.** Lead partner agencies working with CPS CSI schools have contributed, leveraged, or otherwise procured multiple millions of dollars' worth of additional programming and services that benefit students enrolled in community schools and their families. For example, in one study completed by AIR, lead partner agencies working in 126 community schools provided an estimated \$18 million worth of contributions and leveraged value to CPS CSI schools during one programming year (Vinson, 2010).

Decisions on what services and activities to provide at a given school are ideally informed both by **needs assessments** that take into consideration the voices of key stakeholder groups in the school community and through **shared decision making efforts** supported through advisory committees which provide guidance and decision making support around community needs, preferences, and what aligned activities and services should be offered. The creation of such partnerships helps schools respond to the unique needs of each young person, providing them with the **integrated support systems** needed for them to thrive and doing so in a way that reflects the specific context of the school community and the neighborhood it serves. As part of this process, **resource coordinators**, typically employed by a community-based organization, take the lead in developing CSI activities and services and developing leveraged partnerships with community providers to provide targeted supports and opportunities to students and their families.

- **Community schools help create trusting relationships with students, families, and the broader community.** CPS schools that demonstrated more effective implementation of the community school strategy tended to create intentional efforts to establish **positive relationships**; develop a shared vision characterized by reciprocity, mutual respect, and collective decision making; and create a shared commitment to and sense of responsibility for crafting learning **environments filled with safety and belonging** for students and their families (Naftzger, Diehl, Bradley, Vinson, Bishop et al., 2020). Such environments are key to building trusting relationships with families, which enhance the likelihood that families will seek out and take advantage of integrated supports for their students and households more broadly.
- **Community schools help create a continuum of integrated supports that help students and their families navigate learning opportunities across the district.** In one CPS community school serving a large proportion of recent immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia, the school has been working with the local agency supporting family resettlement to build a connection with refugee families. These efforts include sending teachers to participate in activities hosted by the community agency where recently arriving families are attending to build connections with student’s families, and school and community agency representatives meeting regularly with area high schools to help ensure they are aware of issues pertinent to the community and their students so that the young people will be more apt to make a successful transition from eighth to ninth grade. The goal of these outreach efforts is to support integrated, intentional, collaboration in order to provide a web of support to students and families.
- **Community schools have pivoted in order to better respond to student and family needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Schools and their partner organizations worked together to shift their programs’ focus to nonacademic enrichment programs and social and emotional support to better respond to the emerging needs of students and parents during the onset of the pandemic. The coordination of service providers working in community schools also helped scale the distribution of food and meals, provided materials to increase technology access, and brokered access to supports for physical and mental health. Each of these efforts likely was supported by capitalizing on the following advantages afforded by a school’s adoption of a community school strategy:

 - the existence of two-way communication channels between the school and home that facilitated efforts to identify student and family needs, develop solutions to address those needs, and obtain feedback on the efficacy of adopted solutions and what gaps may still exist
 - access to family and community voice and leadership, thereby ensuring that schools are fully informed of the realities on the ground in terms of what families are facing when making and implementing decisions

Expanded Learning Time and Opportunities

Expanded learning time and opportunities happen outside of the school day—before school, after school, on weekends, or during the summer. Such opportunities vary in what they offer, including academic instruction, individualized academic support, enrichment activities, and learning opportunities that emphasize real-world learning and community problem solving (Maier et al., 2017). For example, they may include providing afterschool programming focused on the arts or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

As part of CPS CSI, schools receive support from the 21st CCLC program to enhance the provision of out-of-school-time programming at each CSI school. The goal of the expanded learning time and opportunities provided by out-of-school programs is that participation should result in a variety of positive outcomes among enrolled youth, including improvements in academic achievement, the development of behaviors important to school success, and better health and well-being.

Below, we share what we are learning about expanded learning time and opportunities in CSI schools.

- **CSI schools tend to offer a range of rich learning experiences through expanded learning programming by providing students with experiences that promote positive youth development.** Enrichment programming related to STEM is common among CPS CSI schools—including robotics; computer coding; and science, engineering, and environmental clubs—as is arts and sports programming. Arts enrichment programs include offerings like dance, music, theater, drawing/painting, knitting, and cooking, while popular sports and physical activities include offerings like the martial arts, basketball, and soccer. Academic support programming primarily focuses on subject-specific tutoring and homework help, with high schools commonly providing academic programming related to college preparation (e.g., SAT preparation). Programming supporting students’ social and emotional health also is frequently provided and includes mentoring and counseling programs.
- **Expanded learning programs are more likely to have a positive impact when youth have a series of positive developmental experiences while participating in programming.** The CPS CSI evaluation has shown that when students feel more engaged in expanded learning programming, experience positive emotions and a sense of agency, enjoy skill-building experiences, and have positive interactions with their peers, they are more apt to demonstrate improvements on key youth development–related outcomes, including positive mindsets, interpersonal skills, and self-esteem (Naftzger, Diehl, Bradley, Vinson, Liu, & Vote, 2020). In addition, schools where students are more likely to have these types of experiences in expanded learning programming demonstrated greater improvement on several overall school climate dimensions.

These findings are consistent with the practice components described by the science of learning and development in terms of the focus on **developmental relationships; rich learning experiences; and opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, positive mindsets, and good habits**. The key here is ensuring that expanded learning opportunities are designed in a such a way that they support youth in having these types of positive developmental experiences.

- **Similar types of youth development and social and emotional outcomes have been reported by key stakeholders associated with CPS CSI schools,** including resource coordinators, administrators, advisory board members, and program staff. Among these stakeholders, participation in CSI programming is seen as benefitting participating students in a number of ways, including the development of new interests, improved self-management/self-regulation skills, increased **sense of belonging**/mattering, and improved **relationship**-building skills (Naftzger, Diehl, Bradley, Vinson, Liu, & Vote, 2020). Youth report similar benefits from participating in CSI programming, listing developing a positive self-concept, experiencing positive social interactions, and developing new interests as the three most common ways they benefit from participating in out-of-school programming (Naftzger, Diehl, Bradley, Vinson, Liu, & Vote, 2020).

- Finally, **there is some evidence that sustained participation in expanded learning programming provided by CSI schools can support a variety of constructive school-related outcomes**, including academic achievement, positive school-related behaviors, and a positive school climate (Naftzger & Liu, 2019). To date, we have found evidence that these outcomes are more likely to occur among youth who stay enrolled in expanded learning opportunities over time.

What's Next?

The evaluation work we have completed to date in relation to the CPS CSI demonstrates the potential for community schools to apply the practice components from the science of learning and development in real and tangible ways. But there is additional research needed, both as part of the CSI evaluation and in the field more broadly, to better understand how key community school structures shape CSI program offerings and what this means for what youth experience while participating in CSI activities. The AIR team intends to study these structures further to better understand what role they play in effective implementation of the strategy and to elevate those practices that warrant broader adoption and replication. Next steps also include thinking about how these practices can best be disseminated to the field, such as: (a) how existing quality improvement processes can be leveraged to help schools become familiar with these practices and (b) how measures of community school implementation can be refined to provide schools important feedback on how they are doing in implementing the strategy.

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