

Community Schools FAQs

What are Community Schools?

Community Schools are a powerful and proven strategy for achieving the goal of educational equity. Using schools as hubs, Community Schools bring educators, families, policymakers, and community partners together to increase the resources, supports, and services available to children, families, and communities. They are schools designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their ZIP code, can receive an excellent education that cultivates and inspires their hope, skills, and sense of self-efficacy.

Operating year-round from morning to evening and serving both children and adults, Community Schools help to **close educational opportunity gaps**.

When children arrive at school hungry, when they lack access to needed medical, mental, or dental healthcare, when they live with social, environmental, or physical violence and trauma, even the highest-quality curriculum cannot assure them of the best educational experience. Yet, every community has tremendous assets that can be drawn upon and leveraged to support student learning and student success.

The truth is: schools and educators alone cannot balance the scales of opportunity for children and their communities. Nor can schools alone deliver all of the support that every child deserves.

Schools need partners who understand and embrace the need for systemic change, dismantling policies and practices that preclude some children from having a fully welcoming, supportive, and positive educational experience. There is an urgent need to increase educational equity and opportunity, eradicating the pronounced racial and economic disparities characterizing children's educational experiences today.

How do Community Schools address equity issues?

- **They address the needs of the whole child.** Community Schools offer comprehensive, coordinated resources, services, and supports for children, families, and communities.
- **They are customized to local context.** No two Community Schools are alike: each reflects and responds to its students' and communities' particular challenges, cultures, interests, and assets.
- **They are locally designed and led.** Community Schools are the product of a partnership between educators, families, policymakers, and community organizations—embracing all who are truly invested in supporting students, schools, and the very best in public education.

Where is the Foundation’s Community Schools grantmaking focused?

Community Schools are found nationwide, but there are far fewer of them in the South—home to more than one-third of the country’s population. Despite some measurable gains over time, the opportunity gap in southern public schools has widened between many Black, Hispanic, and low-income students and their higher-income and white classmates. Tragically, the South also consistently receives considerably less philanthropic investment than other regions, particularly for initiatives that seek to bring about systemic transformation.

In August 2020, the Foundation made our first grants to support the planning and development of Community Schools in:

- Little Rock, Arkansas;
- East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana; and
- Jackson, Mississippi.

Each funded community has demonstrated a deep commitment to serve as an exemplar over time, helping to expand the reach of Community Schools throughout the South, both in city and rural settings.

What are the grants for and why?

We know that those who create Community Schools often have difficulty in obtaining funding to support quality planning—a critical first step in building Community Schools. Planning partners need time and support to begin to reimagine together what a quality public education should entail. Planning teams need time and resources that enable them to develop an authentic shared vision and roadmap for moving forward.

The Foundation’s Community Schools planning grant recipients will be able to use Foundation funds to further develop their partnerships, engage a large number of stakeholders, identify the needs and interests of all stakeholders, determine what local capacities exist or need to be developed to support their Community Schools, create a Community School(s) work plan, and develop a school implementation budget. The process generally takes from 6 to 12 months.

Are Community Schools effective?

Yes, in three important respects:

- **Community Schools improve student outcomes.** Community Schools spur improvement on every key educational metric: student attendance, student grades and credit accumulation, appropriate on-time grade level progression, high school graduation, and parent involvement. They dismantle disruptive policies and practices, such as the over-policing of schools and high rates of suspension and expulsion. Through their inclusion of deeper, “real-life” learning

experiences (experiential learning) extending well beyond the classroom, they infuse a joy of learning back into school communities' culture.

- **Community Schools are cost-effective.** By leveraging and coordinating the many resources already found in their neighborhoods, Community Schools deliver services and resources more efficiently and effectively. Teachers and students can make the most of class time, no longer hindered by unmet needs. Ample research points to up to \$15 in social value and economic benefit for every dollar spent developing a Community School. That's a huge return for families, schools, and neighborhoods once impacted by historical disinvestment and persistent systemic barriers to opportunity.
- **Community Schools help to build local trust, resilience, and leadership.** They lift and celebrate the voices of all stakeholders, inviting students and adults to co-create their schools. They coordinate, integrate, and align critical supports and services. They become hubs of hope, energy, and community pride.

The value of Community Schools has been reaffirmed with the emergence of COVID-19. Given their preexisting partnerships, Community Schools have been able to quickly mobilize educational and other support services during COVID-19 for families and neighborhoods hit hardest by the virus.

What does a Community School look like?

Although tailored to their location, the work of all Community Schools is supported by four interrelated pillars:

- **Integrated student supports.** These include culturally responsive and supportive experiences, social and emotional learning, conflict resolution, trauma-informed and trauma-responsive strategies, restorative justice practices, and other approaches that help to generate environments conducive to learning. Common Community School services and supports also include medical, dental, and mental health care services; tutoring; and other academic enrichment.
- **Expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities.** Community Schools are open year-round, often beyond the traditional school day—from early morning to evening and on weekends. They draw on local talents and resources to offer a strong instructional core emphasizing real-world application of academic concepts, project-based learning, community and civic engagement, and practical problem-solving. They also sponsor extracurricular experiences in the arts, sciences, and athletics.
- **Family and community engagement.** A Community School is a place where everyone can feel safe, welcomed, heard, and united in a common purpose. And opportunities aren't limited to children: Community Schools often offer adults things like English as a second language classes, job training and placement, housing assistance, financial literacy programs, citizenship preparation, computer skills, nutrition programs, and art classes.

Collaborative leadership. Community Schools embrace distributive leadership and shared governance. The partners work together to shape school priorities, advocate for families and communities, and implement solutions.

Are Community Schools a new trend?

The idea for Community Schools goes back to the work of Jane Addams, Booker T. Washington, Julius Rosenwald, and other innovators who understood that problems rooted in discrimination and disinvestment cannot be addressed superficially or in isolation from one another. Momentum and support for Community Schools has accelerated over the past two decades, as gaps in income and learning outcomes have widened dramatically.

Why is the NEA Foundation getting involved with Community Schools now?

For more than five decades, the Foundation's grantmaking has championed and funded educator-led initiatives and innovation, resulting in measurable and sustainable improvements in public schools. We have a direct connection to the lived experience of millions of America's teachers, and we believe schools and policymakers that embrace educators, youth, and families as thought leaders and partners are better able to respond to pressing educational challenges.

These investments are part of a new and broader Foundation strategy to accelerate educational justice, equity, excellence, and opportunity through strategic grantmaking, advocacy, and both knowledge- and network-building.

What does the NEA Foundation bring to the table?

The Foundation takes a collaborative, rather than prescriptive, approach to change. Our experience and commitment to working as a trusted partner—complementing and advancing existing assets, resources, and relationships—is very much in keeping with the strategy of Community Schools.

Along with grantmaking, the Foundation will engage an extensive network to support local organizations and to provide our grantees with customized coaching, technical support, and opportunities to exchange ideas with Community School participants and experts throughout the nation.