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Community Schools

A Journey for Collective Success

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"If not us, who? And if not now, when?"

–John F. Kennedy



Learning, change and improvement happens in the context of relationships, it's not a solo journey. Community schools embody this collective journey.

My understanding of the collective power of community school strategies began over three decades ago, long before the label of “community schools” became part of popular education policy. As a social worker, focused on child and family services, family therapy, and adolescent mental health, I recognized that the potential life-changing influence of critical supports and services does not happen in a vacuum, but in a fuller context that brings together the assets of caring adults, family and community. Working within schools, I established systems to support the synergistic teamwork of schools and community by building programs focused on social and emotional learning and mental health that resulted in both academic growth and gains in students’ social and emotional wellbeing. As a district-level administrator in San Francisco Unified and Oakland Unified, I experienced the magic of teams—administrators, teachers, families, students, and community partners—coming together to transform their schools.

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Today, California’s historic \$3 billion investment in the community schools approach, provides an opportunity to formalize the power of collective impact in schools. California’s Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) provides the support and resources to transform more than a thousand schools across the state into places where students are provided the learning opportunities and environments that strengthen the connection between well-being and achievement. CCSPP brings to life advances in the science of learning and development, and decades of powerful examples and experiences to support communities and healthier families so that kids are able to thrive in schools. Community schools bring all stakeholders together to set a vision—a North Star—based on the rich culture, history, geography and identity of each school community and what they want to be true for their children and their families.

Community schools provide a roadmap for bringing people together to operationalize and address issues of equity and social justice to reach that North Star.

Schools are often conceptualized as impermeable brick and mortar settings situated within a neighborhood, that may or may not serve the students in the neighborhood. Community schools, in contrast, prioritize the permeability and interdependence between schools and their community. By galvanizing the assets of students, families, neighbors, community organizations and businesses, powerful learning experiences, both in- and out-of-the-classroom, are created. Community schools represent a strategy—not an individual program or a collection of programs. It’s not a health clinic, an after school program, attendance strategies, restorative practices, academic interventions, or social-emotional learning, but all of these things coordinated, happening and integrated together.

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CCSPP demands that all of us, whether we’ve been implementing the community schools approach for years or are new to it, step back and reflect on our common North Star of building thriving communities. CCSPP provides a moment, especially on the heels of the pandemic, to make sure that our staff, families, students, and partners engage in a generative space to move beyond crisis mode to think about what we want to create, collectively. In [Oakland Unified School District](#), our community schools approach has been built over the course of a decade and five superintendents. As we’ve navigated one crisis after another, community schools have served as a powerful and stabilizing through line. The engagement of the community and organizing groups who have come together to bring their wisdom to school transformation for every student allowed us to weather difficult times. As Oakland and other districts across the state navigate one of the most challenging times in a generation in education, CCSPP implores us to tap into that wisdom and galvanize people to address these challenges. Staff and families are hurting, our students and communities have had trauma. Superintendents, principals, teachers are rethinking their careers, and we are losing students across the state as they make different decisions about life, where they’re going, and where they’re showing up. CCSPP provides the support to reinvent strategies, rethink how we do schooling for students across California and to apply these innovations.

Let’s be real, the work ahead will be challenging and sometimes feel slow, yet these moments are full of opportunity. We are asking our school communities—schools that have been through so much over these

past couple of years and in many ways, struggling for a very long time to reach every student—to transform into places where school, family and community are mission and values-aligned, all rowing in the same direction. To realize and sustain success, we need to provide schools and districts – and their partners – with technical assistance that goes beyond the provision of rubrics and templates, and inspires folks to think about what they want to be true for their children and their communities. Tactics, tools and strategies to support the work must grow from the shared knowledge and expertise of all stakeholders—nurturing this collective knowledge and creativity requires a bold new vision of how we do school and how we get there. Though the road ahead will be arduous, signs of progress will be clear. When you walk into a school and there's a culture of people that love their students, demonstrate deep care for their school community, and are working together to enact change, that will carry the day. Community schools embody this collective journey.

About the Author

Curtiss Sarikey is currently Chief of Staff with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and brings over thirty years of experience in social work and education. He was most recently at the Stuart Foundation from 2016-17 as Senior Director where he led work for the Foundation on educator leadership, labor management collaboration and state-level policy. He was also the Deputy Chief of Community Schools and Student Services in OUSD from 2011 to 2016. In 2016 Curtiss was awarded the Community Schools Initiative Leadership Award from the National Coalition for Community Schools. He was adjunct faculty for University of San Francisco School Counseling Program where he taught courses in family engagement and school improvement. He spent ten years with San Francisco Unified School District as a school social worker and student support services supervisor. He also served as Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the East Bay, Inc., and Director of Oakland Naval Medical Center's Family Advocacy Program, where he addressed issues of family violence and trauma. He is a member of the National Coalition for Community Schools Steering Committee, Vice President of the Board for the CDE Foundation, Advisory Board Member and Sr. Advisor for the Community Schools Learning Exchange, and faculty with Transformative Educational Leadership. He has consulted with cities and school districts across the country in the areas of community schools, collective impact and social emotional learning. Curtiss received a BA from the State University of New York at Geneseo and a Masters of Social Welfare from the University of California at Berkeley. He is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and has education pupil services and administrative credentials from San Francisco State University and Sonoma State University.

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