Advancing Educational Equity through Community Schools: A Research Brief on Addressing Out-of-School Factors in St. Louis

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Executive Summary

Community schools offer a promising approach to addressing the complex out-of-school factors that impact student learning and well-being, particularly in disadvantaged communities. By providing integrated support services, family and community engagement, expanded learning opportunities, and collaborative leadership practices, community schools aim to create the conditions necessary for all students to thrive. This research brief examines the potential of community schools to advance educational equity in St. Louis, drawing on evidence from successful models in other cities and analyzing the specific needs and assets of the St. Louis context. The brief concludes with recommendations for district and community leaders to support the development and sustainability of effective community schools in St. Louis.

Background

St. Louis faces significant challenges in ensuring equitable educational opportunities and student outcomes. The city has a long history of racial and economic segregation, resulting in concentrated poverty, housing instability, and limited access to health care, nutrition, and other essential services in many neighborhoods (Gordon, 2015). These out-of-school factors profoundly impact student learning and development, contributing to persistent achievement gaps and disparities in educational attainment (Berliner, 2013).

Traditional school improvement efforts focused primarily on in-school factors, such as curriculum, instruction, and teacher quality, have needed more success in closing these gaps (Rothstein, 2010). Educators and policymakers increasingly recognize the

need for a more comprehensive approach that addresses students' and their families' social, emotional, and physical needs (Dryfoos, 2002). Community schools represent a promising strategy for providing this integrated support and fostering the conditions for student success.

Critical Components of Community Schools

Community schools vary in their specific design and implementation but share four key components (Oakes et al., 2017):

1. Integrated student supports: Community schools provide a range of health, mental health, and social services to address the out-of-school barriers to learning. These may include school-based health clinics, counseling services, food assistance programs, and housing support.
2. Expanded learning time and opportunities: Community schools offer enriched learning experiences outside the traditional school day, such as afterschool programs, summer learning, and internships. These opportunities complement and enhance classroom instruction, providing students additional academic support and exposure to new skills and interests.
3. Family and community engagement: Community schools actively engage families and community members as partners in supporting student learning and school improvement. This may include adult education classes, parent leadership programs, and community events and services.
4. Collaborative leadership and practices: Community schools foster a collaborative culture among staff, community partners, and families. School leaders work to build relationships, align resources, and share decision-making to support students' holistic needs.

Research on the Impact of Community Schools

A growing body of research suggests that community schools can positively impact student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students. A 2017 review of 143 studies found that community schools are associated with improved student attendance, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and social-emotional well-being (Maier et al., 2017). The review also found that community

schools can reduce gaps in achievement between low-income students and their more affluent peers.

Specific examples of successful community school models include:

- The Harlem Children's Zone, a comprehensive network of community services and schools in New York City, has significantly improved student achievement and college readiness (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011).
- The Community Schools Initiative in Cincinnati, Ohio, has shown improvements in student attendance, behavior, and academic performance, as well as increased family engagement and community partnerships (Superville, 2018).
- The SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Community Schools in Multnomah County, Oregon, have demonstrated positive impacts on student attendance, academic achievement, and social-emotional skills, as well as reduced disciplinary incidents and student mobility (Furrer et al., 2016).

These models offer valuable lessons for designing and implementing community schools in St. Louis.

Community Assets and Needs in St. Louis

Developing effective community schools requires a deep understanding of the local context, including the specific needs and assets of students, families, and neighborhoods. In St. Louis, some key considerations include:

- Health disparities: Many neighborhoods in St. Louis face significant health challenges, including high rates of asthma, lead poisoning, and trauma (St. Louis Regional Health Commission, 2018). School-based health services and partnerships with local health providers can help address these needs.
- Food insecurity: Over 20% of children in St. Louis face food insecurity, which impacts their ability to learn and thrive (Operation Food Search, 2019). Community schools can partner with local food banks, community gardens, and nutrition programs to provide students and families with healthy meals and food assistance.
- Housing instability: St. Louis has a high student mobility rate, with many students changing schools multiple times due to housing instability (Tate et al.,

2014). Community schools can work with housing agencies and community organizations to provide support and resources for families experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.
- Community violence: Gun violence and crime are prevalent in many St. Louis neighborhoods, creating stress and trauma for students and families (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2022). Community schools can offer safe spaces, counseling services, and violence prevention programs to support student well-being and resilience.

At the same time, St. Louis has a rich array of community assets that can be leveraged to support community schools, including:

- Strong neighborhood associations and community organizations can partner in providing services and support to students and families.
- A network of non-profit and faith-based organizations with expertise in youth development, health and wellness, and family support.
- Cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and arts organizations can provide enriching learning experiences and exposure to new ideas and perspectives.
- Local businesses and industries that can offer students internships, apprenticeships, and career exploration opportunities.

Recommendations for Developing Community Schools in St. Louis

Based on the research evidence and local context analysis, the following recommendations are offered for district and community leaders to support the development and sustainability of effective community schools in St. Louis:

1. Conduct a comprehensive needs and assets assessment: Engage students, families, and community members in mapping each school community's specific needs and assets to inform the design of tailored support services and partnerships.
2. Develop a district-wide community school strategy: Articulate a clear vision and framework for community schools as a core district strategy for advancing

educational equity and student well-being. Provide guidance and resources to support school-level implementation.

3. Invest in coordination and collaboration: Hire dedicated community school coordinators to facilitate partnerships, align resources, and manage integrated support services. Provide professional development and planning time for school staff and community partners to collaborate effectively.
4. Advocate for sustainable funding: Leverage diverse funding streams, including federal, state, and local dollars, as well as philanthropic and corporate support, to sustain community school initiatives over time. Advocate for policies that provide dedicated funding for community schools as a strategy for educational equity.
5. Engage families and community as authentic partners: Develop the capacity of families and community members to participate in school governance, guide programming decisions, and contribute their expertise and assets to support student learning.
6. Continuous improvement and evaluation: Establish clear goals and metrics for success and regularly collect and analyze data to inform ongoing improvement efforts. Partner with research institutions to conduct rigorous assessments of community school initiatives and contribute to the broader evidence base.
7. Scale and sustain successful models: Identify and scale community school models that positively impact student outcomes and community well-being. Build systems and structures to maintain effective practices and partnerships over time.

By investing in community schools as a critical strategy for educational equity, St. Louis can create the conditions for all students to thrive and succeed. Community schools offer a holistic, responsive approach to addressing the out-of-school factors that impact learning and empower families and communities as partners in supporting student success. With strong leadership, collaboration, and sustainable resources, St. Louis can become a model for effective community schools that advance educational excellence and equity for all.

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