

# COMMUNITY SCHOOL EXPANSION IN MARYLAND: PROMISE AND PRECARITY

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## CENTRAL QUESTION

**As Maryland rapidly expands community schools, how will districts sustain them?**

Children across the United States face challenges outside of school—such as racism, poverty, and food insecurity<sup>1</sup>—that traditional school models generally have not been equipped to support. In response, practitioners and scholars have advocated for schools to provide wraparound services (e.g., counseling) that meet the behavioral and physical health needs of children and their families.<sup>2</sup> Research, including some randomized controlled trials, has found that wraparound services have a number of academic and mental health benefits.<sup>3</sup>

Expanding wraparound services to students living in poverty is a primary goal of The Blueprint for Maryland's Future—a comprehensive state education reform passed in 2021.<sup>4</sup> The main mechanism for expanding these services is the **community school model**. While scholars define this education reform in varied ways,<sup>5</sup> community schools generally aim to strengthen connections between schools, families, and communities with the goal of improving students' educational outcomes and well-being.<sup>6</sup> The community school model is also leveraged to build political capital among marginalized families and communities.<sup>7</sup>

In Maryland, community schools are designated by the four-year average percentage of students living in poverty<sup>8</sup>—roughly the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price meals<sup>9</sup>—which makes them eligible for additional state funding to expand wraparound services. As of 2021-22, schools with 80% or more students living in poverty are considered community schools. By 2029-30, schools with 55% or more students living in poverty will be considered community schools.<sup>10</sup> Additional funding for

community schools comes through two types of **Concentration of Poverty (COP) grants**:

- **Personnel grants** are used to hire professional healthcare practitioners and community school coordinators, who coordinate the implementation of services.
- **Per-pupil grants** are based on the number of students living in poverty and are used to provide wraparound services such as extended learning time and access to mental health practitioners.<sup>11</sup>

Schools receive COP funds the year after they become eligible.<sup>12</sup> Between 2019-20 and 2023-24, Maryland allocated \$649 million in COP funds to districts with community schools.<sup>13</sup>

In this brief, we draw on Maryland districts' May 2024 Blueprint implementation plans and related documents to explore the expansion of community schools across the state. Our analysis identifies rapid progress in districts' implementation of the community school model, but also raises questions about the quality and sustainability of this initiative. We offer implications that aim to support district and school leaders' efforts to expand wraparound services to Maryland students through community schools.

## KEY FINDINGS

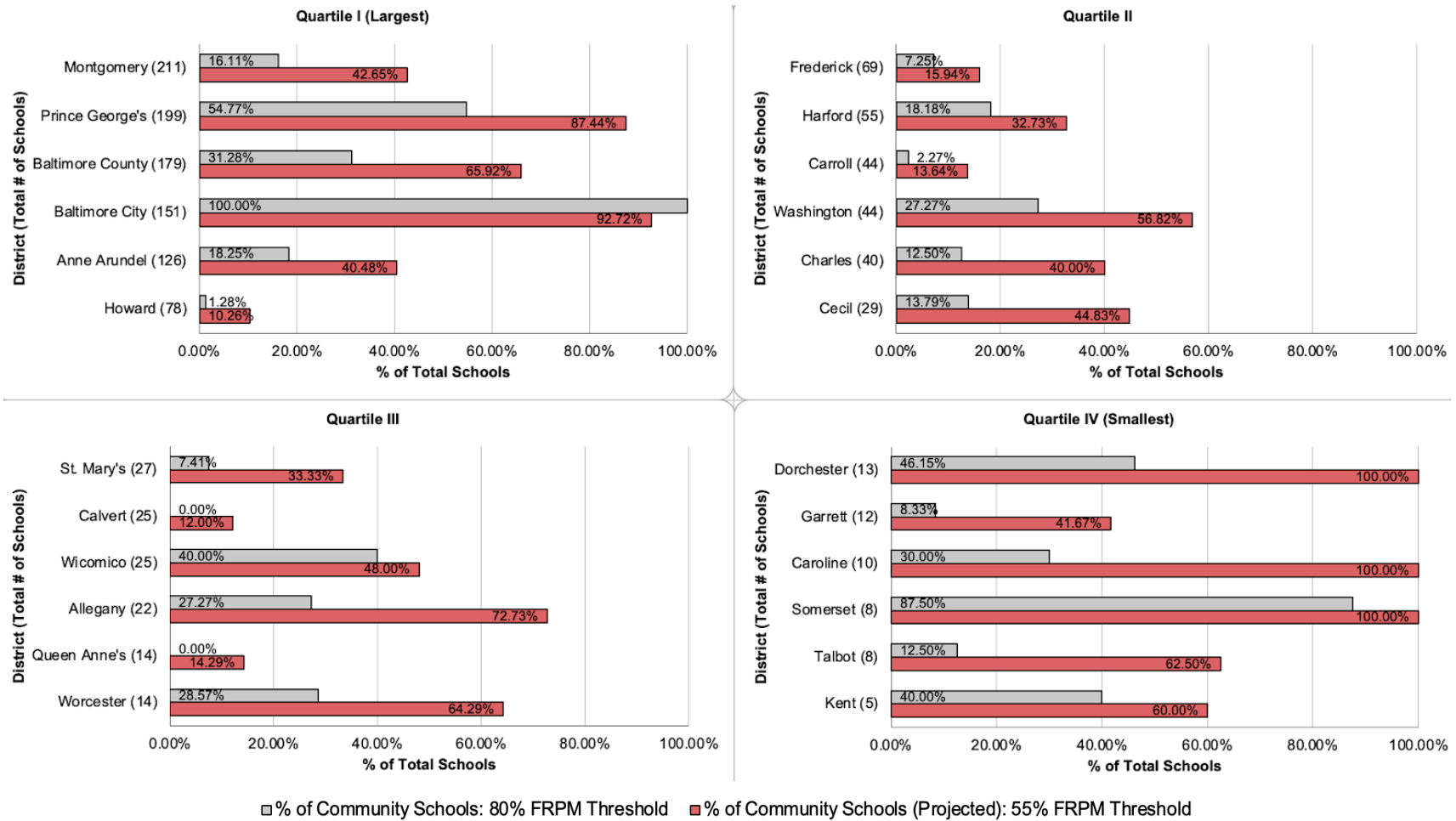
**The Blueprint has facilitated rapid growth in the number of community schools in Maryland.**

Some Maryland districts—namely, Baltimore City<sup>14</sup>—established community schools as early as 1993.<sup>15</sup> While it is unclear how many existed prior to the Blueprint, it is clear that this reform has fostered steady growth in the number of community schools across the state. In 2019-20, Maryland had 206 community schools. As of October 2023,

**About this Brief.** The University of Maryland College of Education's **Maryland Equity Project (MEP)** seeks to improve public education through research that supports an informed public policy debate about the quality and distribution of educational opportunities in Maryland and nationally. This brief is one in a series on **The Blueprint for Maryland's Future**—a significant statewide investment to transform Maryland's public schools in service of educational equity. The purpose of this brief series is to support districts in their efforts to plan and implement Blueprint initiatives through information-sharing and research-based recommendations.

**COMMUNITY SCHOOL EXPANSION IN MARYLAND**

**Figure 1. Number of Community Schools and Projected Expansion, Organized by District Size**



Note: Grey bars represent the number of community schools as of October 2023, when the FRPM threshold was 80%, reported by the Maryland State Department of Education. Red bars represent projections for the number of community schools in 2029-30, when the FRPM threshold will be 55%, based on our own calculations using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (NCES CCD). We used 2022 FRPM data for those calculations because 2023 FRPM data were not yet available.

Sources: NCES CCD, 2023 (Total # of Schools); NCES CCD, 2022 (# of Schools with ≥55% FRPM); Maryland State Department of Education (n.d.)<sup>18</sup>

## COMMUNITY SCHOOL EXPANSION IN MARYLAND

that number had increased to 454.<sup>16</sup> It is expected to increase to 557 by 2026-27.<sup>17</sup>

The current and projected number of community schools varies greatly by district (Figure 1). As of October 2023, 22 of 24 Maryland districts had at least one community school. Baltimore City and Somerset Public Schools had the highest shares of community schools. We estimate that the number of community schools in most districts will at least double by 2029, when schools with 55% or more students living in poverty will be eligible. Aligned with these data, many districts noted in their Blueprint implementation plans that they will see increases in community schools in 2024-25. Conversely, Carroll County Public Schools will go from having two community schools to one in 2025-26.

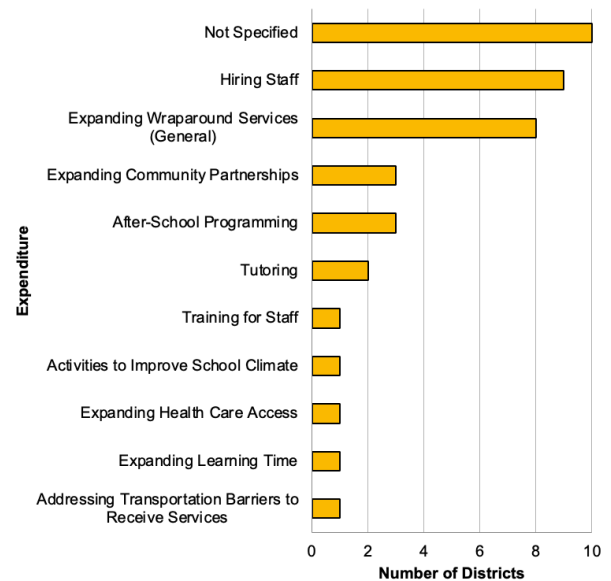
### Districts are using Concentration of Poverty grant funds to hire personnel and expand wraparound services.

The proliferation of COP grants does not *necessarily* mean students are receiving more wraparound services. However, our analysis suggests that many schools are spending this money as the state intended. While implementation plans did not require districts to specify how schools spent COP funds, many explicitly stated how they used these funds (Figure 2). Districts most frequently said they spent COP funds on hiring new staff. For example, Allegany and Anne Arundel County Public Schools used COP funds to hire school counselors and social workers while Somerset County Public Schools used them to offer after-school programming.

### Districts are using similar strategies to implement the community school model, including developing shared leadership and community needs assessments.

Districts with schools receiving COP funds described similar strategies for implementing a community school model, most likely driven by state requirements. For example, districts frequently discussed implementing a shared leadership model that brought together diverse stakeholders, including school leaders and staff, students and their families, and community partners. Districts often described having “steering committees” dedicated to community school leadership. In line with state requirements, many also described having a community school coordinator to facilitate partnerships and services schools offered to students and families.

Figure 2. Maryland Districts’ Concentration of Poverty Grant Expenditures



Note: Based on districts’ explicit mentions of COP grant expenditures in their May 2024 implementation plans. Calvert and Queen Anne’s Counties were excluded from this analysis because they did not have any community schools at the time plans were submitted.

All districts receiving COP funds also discussed how community school leaders conducted needs assessments to identify what wraparound services students and families required. The state requires that all community schools complete a needs assessment within one year of receiving a COP grant and specifies that the assessment should gauge the “health needs of the students, their families, and their communities.”<sup>19</sup> Complying with this requirement, districts discussed needs assessments that took various forms (e.g., surveys, focus groups) and sought feedback from various groups (e.g., students, families, community organizations). For example, Baltimore City Public Schools described how their needs assessments across 64 community schools involved conversations with 1,070 students, 700 families, 320 community partners, and 410 community members.

Also in alignment with state requirements,<sup>20</sup> districts described how they used data from needs assessments to inform decisions about what wraparound services to offer and what organizations with whom to partner. For example, Anne Arundel Public Schools shared that one community school in the district learned from a survey of families that the community was interested in developing more financial literacy. In response, the school hosted a financial literacy event for families and is offering follow-up resources.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This brief draws on a content analysis of the community schools component of the Blueprint implementation plans districts submitted to the Accountability and Implementation Board, which oversees the implementation of Blueprint initiatives, in May 2024 and several publicly available documents describing state requirements related to community schools. We conducted a qualitative analysis of these data using inductive codes (e.g., community school operations) derived from a preliminary review of implementation plans. Our analysis identified themes regarding how districts are spending COP funds and what strategies they are using to implement a community school model in eligible schools.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our findings suggest that the proliferation of COP grant funds—and thus the dramatic increase in community schools—has expanded wraparound services for Maryland students. But research suggests that implementing a community school model is a long and resource-intensive process.<sup>21</sup> This evidence raises several questions about community school expansion moving forward.

### Do districts and schools have the capacity to keep up with the rapid expansion of community schools?

The Blueprint is providing districts and schools with some financial capacity to support the transition from traditional to community schools, but implementing a complex policy like the community school model requires forms of capacity that are non-financial, too.<sup>22</sup> For instance, while the state is providing funds to hire community school coordinators and professional health practitioners, those funds do not ensure a pool of prospective candidates for those positions or the institutional support required for those individuals to carry out their work. In fact, we found in a [separate analysis](#) that districts are facing severe shortages of behavioral health staff.<sup>23</sup> Another key resource for implementation is time, which is required to develop a clear vision for the school, establish partnerships, and begin building trust between school leaders, students, families, and communities.<sup>24</sup> Whether districts and schools have the capacity to support the transition from traditional to community schools is critical because it is likely to affect the quality of wraparound services offered.

### To what degree are communities involved in community schools?

Community school models aim to leverage community voice in school decision-making and can be a form of equitable collaboration. Another aspect of community schools that is critical to effective implementation is partnerships with community organizations. The reason that community voices and organizations are central is they more often than not reflect the needs of communities. In many cases, families have been excluded from school or policy decisions. Communities ought to have mechanisms to voice concerns, observe their ideas and experiences as valid and incorporated into policy implementation, and have pathways to hold school, district, and state-level policymakers accountable.<sup>25</sup>

We found some evidence that community school implementation in Maryland aligns with these recommendations. For instance, many districts described how their community schools are providing services in response to needs assessments and building partnerships with local organizations. These findings are encouraging. But fulfilling the transformative goals of the community school model requires sustained, systemic efforts. Whether and how Maryland's community schools are shifting power and access for communities are important questions yet to be answered.

### Are state requirements for community school operations supporting implementation across varied contexts?

In response to state requirements, districts described very similar strategies for implementing the community school model. While this structured approach to community school operations may help the state hold districts accountable for transitioning to a community school model, it may also be overly restrictive. Maryland's districts and schools have vastly different social, economic, and political contexts. The strategies and timeline that work for a small, rural district like Allegany County may not work for a large, suburban district like Montgomery County. Likewise, what works for districts opening their first community schools may be less helpful for, and perhaps even detrimental to, districts that have operated community schools for decades. Districts' implementation plans revealed that they are *complying* with state requirements around community school implementation, but it is unclear whether those requirements are the ones that can generate supportive

and sustainable relationships between schools, families, and communities.

### Is state funding for community schools sustainable?

The COP grants that are supporting community school expansion will be phased in through 2029-30, at which point hundreds more schools will be deemed community schools.<sup>26</sup> Documents from the Blueprint's governing arm, the Accountability and Implementation Board, suggest that COP grants are expected to continue beyond 2029-30.<sup>27</sup> But given the state's recent and impending struggles to fund the Blueprint,<sup>28</sup> it is possible that COP grant funds will be available for a finite period of time. If and when the state ends COP grants, it is unclear how districts will sustain the resources required to maintain community schools—particularly when many counties are already struggling with budget cuts stemming in part from Blueprint requirements.<sup>29</sup>

Our findings suggest that at least one district is facing the issue of funding uncertainty already. Carroll County Public Schools noted that it will lose one of two community schools—and associated COP funds—in 2025-26. The district specified that this school was identified as a community school in 2023-24 based on “anomalous data.” It appears that the state has attempted to safeguard against dramatic fluctuations in COP grant eligibility by using a four-year average rather than year-to-year rates. But the Carroll County case suggests that rates can change quickly—perhaps more quickly than the time it takes to build the systems and relationships that make and sustain community schools.

It is unclear whether the state and districts have a plan to support community schools if and when COP funding ends. What is clear is that this issue is an important one to address—particularly as the state phases in COP funding for schools on the lower end of the poverty spectrum, who will be more likely to fluctuate between eligible and ineligible.

### Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2024). *Blueprint for Maryland's Future*.

<sup>5</sup> Oakes et al. (2017). Rodriguez, S. (2020). Community-school partnerships as racial projects: Examining belonging for newcomer migrant youth in urban education. *Urban Education*, 1-32. Warren, M. R. (2005). Communities and schools: A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133-173.

<sup>6</sup> Community Schools Forward (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation*. Coalition for Community Schools (2017). *Community schools: A whole-child framework for school improvement*.

<sup>7</sup> Rodriguez (2020), Warren (2005).

<sup>8</sup> The four-year average excludes the 2020-21 school year. Source: MSDE (2024). *Community schools & concentration of poverty grants*.

<sup>9</sup> As a part of the Blueprint, the state is implementing a new Neighborhood Indicators of Poverty measure to improve how accurately it identifies students living in poverty, which it uses as a proxy for students who require additional resources. MSDE presented its recommended measure in a January 2023 report. Sources: Accountability and Implementation Board (2023). *Blueprint for Maryland's Future: Comprehensive implementation plan*. MSDE (2023). *Blueprint for Maryland's Future: Report on neighborhood indicators of poverty*.

<sup>10</sup> Maryland Out of School Time Network (n.d.). *The CPG toolkit: Implementing the Concentration of Poverty provision of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future*. MSDE (2024). *Community schools & concentration of poverty grants*.

<sup>11</sup> MSDE (2024). *Office of Community Schools and Expanded Learning Time*.

<sup>12</sup> MSDE (2024). *Community schools & concentration of poverty grants*.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Inspector General for Education (2024). *Investigative audit of Maryland State Department of Education - Concentration of Poverty Funds management*.

<sup>14</sup> Appleton, A. (2019, June 28). *The rise and fall—and rise?—of Baltimore's community schools movement*. *The Baltimore Sun*.

<sup>15</sup> MSDE (2021). *Community schools in Maryland: Supporting success for students, families, and neighborhoods*.

<sup>16</sup> MSDE (2024). *Providing resources to schools and communities in need*.

<sup>17</sup> Maryland State Education Association (n.d.). *Community schools*.

<sup>18</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (2023). National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (2022). MSDE (2024). *Providing resources to schools and communities in need*.

<sup>19</sup> MSDE (2021). *Community schools in Maryland: Supporting success for students, families, and neighborhoods*.

<sup>20</sup> MSDE (2021). *Community schools in Maryland: Supporting success for students, families, and neighborhoods*.

<sup>21</sup> Lubell, E. (2011). *Building Community Schools: A Guide for Action*. Children's Aid Society. Yu et al. (2020).

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<sup>23</sup> Carson, N., Bill, K., & Rodriguez, S. (2024). *Navigating the crisis: School district approaches to alleviating behavioral health staff shortages*. [Research Brief]. Maryland Equity Project.

<sup>24</sup> Lubell (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Ishimaru, A. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press. Warren (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Maryland Out of School Time Network (n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> AIB (2023). Department of Legislative Services (2021). *Overview of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future: New policies, timelines, and funding*. Office of Policy Analysis.

<sup>28</sup> Hacker, K., & Walker, C. (2024). *Blueprint or budget-breaker? No one knows how to pay for Maryland's massive education reform*. *The Baltimore Sun*.

<sup>29</sup> Price, L. (2024). *Maryland's Blueprint reform plan is pouring billions into education. So why are schools facing budget cuts?* *The Baltimore Sun*.



Appendix

COP Grant Expenditure											
District	Hiring Staff	Training Staff	Expanding Community Partnerships	Expanding Health Care Access	Expanded Learning Time	Transportation to Receive Services	After-School Programming	Tutoring	Improving School Climate	Expanding Wraparound Services (General)	Not Specified
Allegany	X		X		X	X	X				
Anne Arundel	X							X		X	
Baltimore City							X			X	
Baltimore County											X
Caroline											X
Carroll											X
Cecil	X		X							X	
Charles	X			X							
Dorchester											X
Frederick											X
Garrett	X									X	
Harford	X									X	
Howard											X
Kent								X		X	
Montgomery											X
Prince George's	X		X							X	
St. Mary's	X										
Somerset		X					X		X	X	
Talbot											X
Washington											X
Wicomico											X

Note: Based on districts' explicit mentions of COP grant expenditures in their May 2024 implementation plans. Calvert and Queen Anne's Counties were excluded from this analysis because, at the time the plans were submitted, they did not have any community schools.

