How can Maryland districts turn evidence-based ideas for community schools into promising implementation practices?

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Community schools are key to the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

Community schools—which aim to strengthen connections between schools, families, and communities with the goal of improving students' outcomes and well-being[1]—are a key component of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The state's education reform automatically designates schools as "community schools" based on their four-year average of students living in poverty, which makes them eligible for additional state funding through Concentration of Poverty grants.[2, 3]

The number of community schools in Maryland has grown substantially over the last several years, from 206 in 2019-20[4] to 621 as of July 1, 2024.[5] The theory of action undergirding this policy effort is that an expansion of community schools will facilitate an expansion of wraparound services (e.g., extended learning time, behavioral health support) to students who need them.[6]

Districts' ***implementation*** of community schools is a critical factor in their potential to fulfill these transformative aims. This brief explores how Maryland districts are implementing a community school model, based on an analysis of implementation plans submitted to the Accountability and Implementation Board[7] in May 2024. Our analysis included 22 of Maryland's 24 districts, given that Calvert and Queen Anne's Counties did not have any community schools when 2024 implementation plans were finalized. Our analysis was guided by academic literature and sought to identify challenges with and strategies for implementing community schools. In this brief, we highlight the most promising strategies districts are using to develop and maintain community schools.

Minimal Challenges, Ample Promising Strategies

Despite the transformative and comprehensive nature of community schools, Maryland districts did not discuss challenges with implementing them. They did, however, describe ample strategies for doing so. Districts' implementation strategies fell into six phases, in alignment with academic literature:

- Developing a shared vision for community schools across stakeholders[8]
- Practicing shared leadership, including creating a leadership structure that engages multiple stakeholders[9]
- Assessing the needs of communities schools serve[10]
- Building capacity for implementation, including through institutional structures and staff training opportunities[11]
- Addressing community needs by identifying and instituting aligned resources and services[12]
- Monitoring progress toward addressing community needs, including through data collection and evaluation[13]

Most districts that had community schools were engaging in all of these strategies, suggesting that this policy initiative has potential to fulfill its transformative aims.

District Strategies to Implement Community Schools

	Most Promising	Potentially Promising	Total
Developing a Shared Vision	7	13	**20**
Practicing Shared Leadership	13	7	**20**
Assessing Community Needs	6	16	**22**
Building Capacity	14	8	**22**
Addressing Community Needs	22	0	**22**
Monitoring Progress	5	17	**22**

Limited detail raises questions about implementation progress.

While it is encouraging that districts' strategies to implement a community school model are aligned with the academic literature, the limited detail with which districts described them raises questions about their potential for success. For example, while 20 of the 22 districts that had community schools described developing a shared vision for them, few discussed how and with whom that vision was collaboratively developed. Furthermore, strategies were consistent across contexts, to the extent that many districts used the exact same language to describe their implementation efforts. Altogether, these limitations make it challenging to garner specific insights about how the implementation of community schools is progressing.

At the same time, our analysis revealed some instances where districts described in detail their evidence-based efforts to implement a community school model. We highlight promising examples of the six aforementioned implementation strategies in the following sections.

Developing a Shared Vision for Community Schools in Frederick County

Frederick County Public Schools (FCPS) described establishing a shared vision for community schools that incorporated input from district staff, families, students, community partners, and the FCPS Community School Workgroup. The district also noted that this shared vision for community schools informed "commitment statements" that shape ongoing implementation, and that it is "referenced during all community school meetings with any stakeholders."

Practicing Shared Leadership of Community Schools in Harford County

Harford County Public Schools discussed their efforts to enhance collaboration by establishing the "Partner Community School Collaborative," which comprises community partners, district and school staff, and families. This group "advocates for community empowerment and engagement" and meets bimonthly to discuss progress toward community school implementation.

Assessing Community Needs in Baltimore City

Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) described how each community school in the district conducts a needs assessment that includes information from students, families, staff, community partners, and community members. City Schools noted that its first cohort of community schools gathered key information from "conversations with 1,070 students, 730 staff, 700 families, 320 partners, and 410 community members."

Building Capacity for Community School Implementation in Montgomery County

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) described efforts to build capacity for community school implementation—which is critical for the sustenance of this initiative—by creating new staff positions and offering professional development to support the acquisition and delivery of resources provided by community schools. For example, MCPS used local funding to hire a "Community School Coordinator" and a "Fiscal Assistant," who work with other staff to "ensure the community school strategy is implemented with fidelity." The district also noted that these staff members meet biweekly with school and district leaders to support community school implementation, including providing training for other staff involved (e.g., Community School Liaisons).

Addressing Community Needs in Districts across the State

All districts who had community schools at the time of this analysis were using evidence-based strategies to address community needs, which they had identified through needs assessments. These efforts included asset mapping, which involved identifying resources and services available in schools' local communities, and developing partnerships with community organizations. Districts described offering seven types of resources and services, some of which were supported by Concentration of Poverty grants. The most frequently mentioned resources and services were healthcare, including vision, hearing, and dental services; behavioral health support, including counseling and mental health services; and out-of-school programs, including after-school childcare and programs run by community partners.

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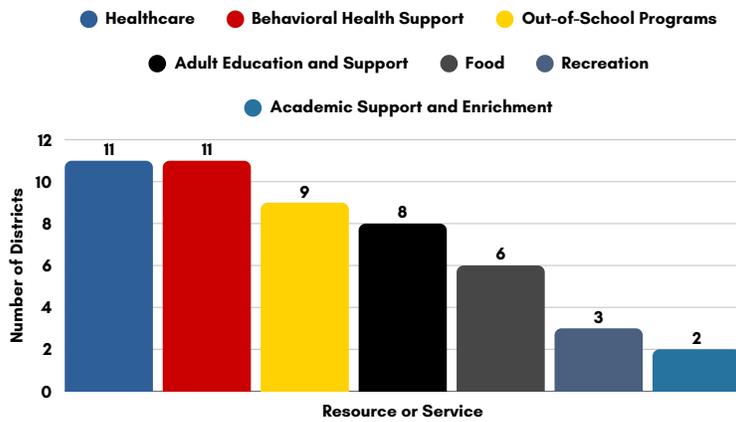
Monitoring Progress of Community School Implementation in Kent County

Kent County Public Schools (KCPS) described how they were collecting and evaluating data to track progress toward their implementation goals. The district noted that its community school coordinators engaged with community partners to "monitor the achievement of program outcomes" and provided an example of how these efforts have already brought on success. One KCPS elementary school noticed a decrease in the number of students accessing its "backpack program" and administered a survey to families "to identify what they would want to see in the backpack." The school revised the program in accordance with families' feedback, and saw subsequent increases in the number of students taking part in it.

These examples of community school implementation strategies offer helpful insights about how Maryland districts can ensure that evidence-based implementation ideas become promising implementation practices.

Endnotes

[1] Community Schools Forward (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation.*

[2] Maryland State Department of Education. (n.d.). *Office of Community Schools and Expanded Learning Time.*

[3] The poverty threshold for designation as a community school will change over time. In 2021-22, schools where 80% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals were deemed community schools; in 2029-30, the threshold will be 55%. (Maryland Out of School Time Network, [n.d.]. *The CPG toolkit: Implementing the Concentration Poverty provision of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.*).

[4] Choudhury, M. (2021). *Maryland's community schools and the concentration of poverty grant.* Maryland State Department of Education.

[5] Maryland State Department of Education (2024). *Community schools + concentration of poverty grants.* Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

[6] Choudhury, M. (2022). *Coordinated community supports in Maryland.* Maryland State Department of Education.

[7] Accountability and Implementation Board. (n.d.). *About the Accountability and Implementation Board.* Maryland State Government.

[8] Lubell, E. (2011). *Building community schools: A guide for action.* Children's Aid Society.

[9] Daniel, J., Malone, H. S., & Kirkland, D. E. (2020). A step closer to racial equity: Towards a culturally sustaining model for community schools. *Urban Education, 58*(4), 1–31.

Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities.* Teachers College Press.

Monica A. Medina, Cosby, G., & Grim, J. (2019). Community engagement through partnerships: Lessons learned from a decade of full-service community school implementation, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 24*(3), 272-287.

[10] Lubell (2011)

[11] Fehrer, K., & Leos-Urbel, J. (2016). "We're one team": Examining community school implementation strategies in Oakland. *Education Sciences, 6*(3), 1-24.

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[12] Lubell (2011)

[13] Lubell (2011)

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