



More Idaho School Districts Are Embracing The Community School Strategy

Community Schools in Idaho are positively impacting student achievement and family success, and support of these schools is a strong investment in Idaho families.

- Idaho Coalition for Community Schools (ICCS) -

More Idaho schools are using the Community School Strategy, an evidence-based framework, to organize existing resources and work toward a shared local vision. Using the nationally recognized strategy, Idaho schools are leveraging the power of their communities to ensure everyone can thrive.

What are Community Schools?

A Community School is a neighborhood public school that brings together families, school staff, community members, and community-based organizations to support students with needed resources and opportunities. While every Community School is as unique as the neighborhood that surrounds it, all Community Schools are driven by the principle that every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, and many children and families need supports that go beyond teaching and learning. Schools that use the Community School Strategy engage in broad collaborations to address the holistic interests and needs of their specific community and leverage the school building as a community hub.

United Way of Treasure Valley (UWTV) introduced the Community School Strategy to Idaho in 2015 as a proven practice in helping to ensure that all kids and families have access to the opportunities and resources they need. The first four Community Schools launched in Idaho were in the Boise School District in 2016. The Strategy has spread and there are 35 Community Schools across 19 school districts in urban, rural, elementary, and secondary schools in every region of the state.

Two of the biggest roadblocks for Community Schools are funding and the misunderstanding of what Community Schools are and how they operate. From a funding perspective, each Community School is a district-led initiative that is paid for by tight school budgets and support from other organizations such as nonprofits, private foundations, and businesses. There is no state funding for districts to draw from to support this work, and most often districts use a combination of Title I and Title 4A dollars to support Community School personnel.

The misunderstanding stems from the relative infancy of Community Schools in Idaho. One way to educate stakeholders – school administration, school board members, community members – is to highlight districts and schools that successfully use the Community School Strategy.

Two districts – Marsing and American Falls – are shining examples of what Community Schools can be in rural areas. Leadership from both districts regularly make themselves available for inquiries and promote the Community School Strategy to peers in other districts. This has helped other districts in their decision of whether to pursue a Community School Strategy.

Growth of Community Schools across Idaho is supported by the Idaho Coalition for Community Schools (ICCS), staffed by United Way of Treasure Valley. The ICCS is a strong coalition of Community School champions representing key stakeholders invested in seeing the Strategy grow. The ICCS creates awareness around the Community School Strategy, helps districts plan and implement, provides a peer learning network, and integrates new champions and partners.

The Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health (the Foundation) is dedicated to giving back to Idaho and addressing the root causes that impact health. The Foundation recognized schools impact community health and led the launch of a collaborative funding partnership under the umbrella of ICCS in 2022. With a mutual goal to work together to support and grow Community Schools, the collaborative fund pools resources from funders across Idaho to start, support, and expand the Community School Strategy in public schools. The collaborative fund has supported 22 Idaho schools, assisting existing Community Schools to enhance and expand their current work and supporting new schools in the exploration of the Community School Strategy.

Seven of these districts were awarded implementation grants to support the hiring of full-time Community School coordinators to lead the Strategy at their schools. By being a part of the

statewide cohort of Community Schools, districts have received support for planning, implementation, and continuous improvement, as well as vital technical assistance through the National Center for Community Schools.

Continued support for expansion of the Community School Strategy is being offered by ICCS through statewide coalition meetings, a monthly learning network for Community School coordinators, and ongoing learning and grant opportunities for existing and exploring districts. A request for proposals was released in December 2022, supported by the ICCS collaborative funders, to fund guided professional technical assistance for schools interested in exploring and planning the use of the Community School Strategy. Awarded participants who successfully complete planning activities will be eligible for upcoming implementation grant opportunities to hire a full-time coordinator.

What is a Community School Coordinator?

Community School coordinators are a key to a successful Community School. Coordinators are full-time staff members embedded in the school to assess, plan, coordinate, and support the multifaceted elements of the Community School Strategy. Coordinators are essential to the effective facilitation of partnerships and the delivery of services and ensure alignment of efforts to meet desired outcomes for the school and community. Working with local stakeholders including parents and families, community members, and school staff, the coordinator integrates the school's strategy to drive solutions around community needs. Coordinators use four pillars to guide efforts and build approaches to support that are rooted in best-practices to ensure successful outcomes.

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Four-Pillar Approach

The Community School Strategy is based on a four-pillar approach that supports local schools in building on the strengths and collaboration of their community to create an environment of success across the lifespan of the program.¹ The strategy is rooted in four key concepts:

- 1. Collaborative Leadership:** Investment from all stakeholders of the school community through shared responsibility and decision-making among families, students, school staff, community members, leaders, and community partners

By establishing stakeholder groups, schools leverage thoughts and ideas of families and others in the community to help make decisions and guide efforts. Together, school staff, parents, and community members identify needs and develop plans to bring resources and opportunities to the school to help ensure everyone can succeed.

- 2. Family and Community Engagement:** Impactful opportunities for families to learn and engage in the life of the school and actively participate in the educational success of their children

With families at the center of their work, Community Schools leverage parents as partners in the academic life of their students. Schools host activities bringing kids and families together for learning and fun. Using the school building as a community hub, Community Schools open their doors to host supportive resources like parenting classes, family programs, student-led conferences, volunteer opportunities, and special events.

- 3. Expanded and Enriched Learning:** Meaningful learning experiences during and outside of the school day to support a love of learning and foster real-world opportunities

Understanding that learning happens both inside and outside of the classroom, Community Schools seek ways to offer enrichment and enhanced learning to students and families through

extracurricular activities such as clubs and before- and after-school programs. Schools may offer opportunities such as tutoring programs, STEM clubs, cooking classes, reading buddies, or job shadowing. These resources provide access and exposure to opportunities that build on academic learning and establish essential life skills. Early childhood education is often a key component, supporting families in building school-readiness skills in young children through preschool and early learning programs.

- 4. Integrated Supports:** Coordinated services to meet the holistic needs of students and families by providing the right resources, to the right people, at the right time

Community Schools work to connect students and families to the resources that are right for their unique needs and interests. Schools collaborate with partners to address needs identified, which can range from support for basic needs (school pantries providing food and hygiene products), health and wellness care (dental clinics or mental health supports), or mentorship opportunities. These supports are different at every Community School because they are driven by the specific interests of the community, addressing the holistic needs that impact student and family success.

The Community School Strategy Works for Idaho

The hyper-local Community School Strategy works for Idaho schools because it can address the unique needs of every community. Community Schools are not a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather a customizable strategy that can meet the specific needs of the school and community through intentional engagement of parents, families, and community members. By building trusting relationships with families, Community Schools are driven by the interests and needs identified by the community and addressed by local resources and solutions.

Marsing, a rural community in southwest Idaho, is a great example of the

Community School Strategy working to serve students and families. Its HUB includes several community services including preschool, a school-based health center, a food and clothing pantry, adult learning classrooms, and after school programming.

“Marsing’s overall community school strategy from the beginning has been to take quick and deliberate action with support from our staff and community,” Marsing Superintendent of Schools Norm Stewart said. “Hard work, combined with an established community culture of service to others have been the keys to our success. We have pressed forward without letting fear of failure slow us down in making the HUB what it is today. Our staff and community have stepped up to take ownership of all the HUB components to help improve the overall quality of life for all Marsing families. The result is that our community now has overall health and educational resources available for our students and parents that did not exist in Marsing before the HUB.”

Building on the assets of the community, the Community School Strategy relies on collaboration to bring together families, students, school staff, community members, and community-based organizations to find solutions that provide the resources that help everyone to succeed. By leveraging trusted community partners, Community Schools convene the community to work together to identify, navigate, and provide comprehensive support and opportunities to address barriers and increase opportunities for students and families.

In eastern Idaho, American Falls School District is another impactful example of the Community School Strategy in practice. Through its efforts, the district has identified unique opportunities for family engagement and purposeful enrichment to support students and families.

“One way of trying to engage with students and families is we had a Throwback Thursday at the high school where we had parents shadow their children throughout their school day,” American Falls School Board Trustee Jesalee Smith said. “We run a Fired-Up Friday program since we only have

a four-day school week. The kids get to choose from art, sports, taekwondo, dance, and tumbling. These are the opportunities the children might not get otherwise, and it helps with teaching them self-confidence, discipline, and coordination.”

This holistic framework has effectively helped schools support the whole child, improving student outcomes and addressing needs of families in urban, suburban, and rural communities alike. Rooted in strong family engagement, Community Schools are able to be nimble and mobilize quickly by bringing the community together to address the ever-changing needs of students and families. With the school at the center of this intentional collaboration, Community Schools become uniquely positioned to leverage funding and resources for their school and community that may not otherwise be available. Across the country Community Schools have demonstrated an impressive return on investment, showing for every \$1 invested a Community School Coordinator returns approximately \$7.11 in net benefits. ²

References:

1. “Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy: A Review of Evidence”. Research Brief, Published December 2017. A. Maier, J. Daniel, and J. Oakes. Accessed 12/1/22. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>.
2. “Return On Investment of A Community School Coordinator: A Case Study” Published May 2019. M.R. Bloodworth, A.C. Horner. Accessed 9/13/22. https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf

The rapid growth of Community Schools across Idaho demonstrates the high demand for support for the implementation of this effective strategy. Community Schools offer a strong return on investment in Idaho communities, supporting student achievement and family success. Public investments and additional philanthropic support are needed to maintain these strides and grow impact. Through the Community School Strategy, communities can come together in strategic, innovative ways to address issues that matter most to them making lasting impact on students and families.

To learn more about the Community School Strategy and explore if it might be right for your school, please visit the Idaho Coalition for Community Schools at: www.idahocoalitionforcommunityschools.org.

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