Practices of a Healing-Centered Community School

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A healing-centered community school is intentionally designed and organized to support student well-being as both a facet of learning and an ultimate goal. This practice brief describes the core practices of implementing comprehensive community school strategies. Healing-centered community schools must be organized so that students, educators, families, and community partners can meaningfully work together to create high-quality teaching and learning conditions that: (a) center racial equity and justice by repairing and earning trust; (b) provide support and capacity; (c) offer opportunities to learn, lead, explore, and thrive; and (d) are rigorously accountable for multiple preconditions and dimensions of student success.

This practice brief is part of a publication set that includes the policy brief *Healing-Centered Community Schools: A Key Investment for COVID-19 Recovery* and the infographic *Foundational Practices of Healing-Centered Community Schools*. These publications, produced by PACE in partnership with California Children's Trust, Californians for Justice, and Advancement Project California, provide guidance for educators, policymakers, and advocates who wish to deploy state and federal pandemic recovery resources strategically to address immediate student needs as well as build sustainable systems and practices that serve all students and advance equity.

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Introduction

The connection between well-being and learning is increasingly confirmed by research as we learn more about the neurobiology of learning and development.[1] In particular, the link between the adverse impacts of trauma and stress and student learning outcomes[2] offers a lens through which to understand persistent achievement gaps and the disparate impacts of race, zip code, and socioeconomic status on educational outcomes. But although science continues to bear out what students, educators, and families have known for generations, most public school systems are ill equipped to transform fundamentally the core systems, structures, practices, and cultures of teaching and learning. Educators must also address how traditional systems and experiences of schooling may in fact unintentionally perpetuate and exacerbate the traumas and other inequities that students might be facing in other parts of their lives.

Some education reformers have looked to community schools[3] as a promising approach to mitigate the learning impacts of social and economic distress. Most of these efforts are characterized by organizational partnerships, student supports, family supports, and other "wraparound" services. The logic advances a fairly basic (and often incomplete) understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—you must fulfill the fundamental physiological and safety needs of students before you can attend to their cognitive needs.

While a strategy of delivering care where students are located is logical, the implementation of effective and comprehensive community school strategies is often seen as an enormous feat outside of the locus of control—and the budget limitations—of schools and districts. Some community school examples are limited to offering colocated student and family resource centers that in effect outsource the responsibility of "removing" students' "nonacademic" barriers. Even when using trauma-informed practices,[4] a solely service-minded implementation of community schools runs the risk of unintentionally further marginalizing and pathologizing the most vulnerable students and families. This, too, contributes to the siloed response that assumes a student's healing and well-being is exogenous—instead of foundational—to their ability to learn and that minimizes the importance of the collective healing that also implicates relationships with and among educators and other caring adults.

A healing-centered community school requires a fundamental repositioning of students and their school communities. Students are more than diagnostic data points, clients, patients, or cases. They are not passive recipients of the expert knowledge of the adults around them. Students are central and dynamic actors within a community and are empowered in the learning, health, and welfare of themselves and their peers. In order to activate the capital inherent in students, caring adults (e.g., educators, content experts, policy influencers, decision makers) ground their work in listening to young people; understanding their individual and collective histories, lived experiences, and contexts; and, from that place, creating the conditions for them to thrive.

This brief focuses on the core practices of implementing comprehensive healing-centered community school strategies. The companion policy brief, *Healing-Centered Community Schools: A Key Investment for COVID-19 Recovery*, lays out a vision for how leaders at all levels of education, health, early learning and other child-serving systems can build the capacity and integration needed to sustain such strategies into the future.

Community Schools and COVID-19

As districts and schools continue to contend with the implications of the pandemic, growing racial and economic inequality has fueled urgency around how school systems need to prioritize relationships and student-centered, collaborative practices to be more responsive to the learning and development of students. Community school models prioritize strategic structures for integrating academics and collaborative leadership with health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. By moving beyond a cursory understanding of community schools as a service-based intervention of integrated supports, education leaders might recognize this moment of "crisis teaching" as an opportunity to reimagine how they might center student wellness and healing throughout classrooms and schools as part of a fundamental transformation of the relationships and practices of teaching and learning.

Healing Is Central to Teaching and Learning in Community Schools

The goal of a healing-centered community school is radically simple: high-quality teaching and learning that supports individual students' well-being. That is, supporting and developing students from early learning through secondary school to achieve academically so that: (a) students have choice regarding and control over their life circumstances along with the ability to pursue their dreams; (b) students are driven by a sense of hope, possibility, and a positive future; and (c) students are connected to and share responsibility for their community.

Applying a healing-centered community school framework requires rethinking organizational infrastructures, human resources, budgeting, safety and security, and supervision.[5] The following implementation principles guide the work of healing-centered community schools.

Relationships are at the heart of learning. Bonds between and among students and adults have a substantial influence on students' success and on how they understand their own sense of safety, self-worth, and capacity. Schools should demonstrate in small but meaningful ways that each member of the community—student, educator, and family member—is important and valued.[6] Healing-centered community schools create consistent, unrelenting, and "beyond the perfunctory" pathways by which students and families can authentically participate with educators in teaching and learning across early learning and K–12 systems.

Healing explicitly recognizes that history shapes the present and the future. Children and adults make sense of the world around them and internalize messages they receive about their identity, their relationships, and their community. Healing-centered community schools strive to integrate and transform how historical, generational, and individual trauma—such as the impacts of systemic racial injustice—affect teaching and learning. Healing-centered community schools contradict and actively dismantle damaging beliefs and expectations that children and adults have about themselves, about school, and about learning. Students are not known first for their diagnosis or challenge—for example, English language learners or youth in foster care—but educators and school partners instead start with knowing the student, and intentionally help young people build on their strengths and develop the competencies, values, and connections they need for life and work. In addition, focused efforts are made to earn the trust of students, families, and educators by acknowledging prior experiences of harm enacted by school systems.

Healing refers to both individual and collective agency, resulting in a more holistic, community approach to allow students, teachers, and families to meet their needs, to realize their aspirations, and to persist and thrive within their environments. Community and individual strengths are assets that contribute to positive conditions for learning. Healing-centered community schools utilize the assets of the entire community—including the people who live and work there, namely parents, caregivers, residents, and community partners—to create optimal learning conditions for each student. Students and families are seen as having rich experiences, perspectives, and skills that are valuable teaching and learning resources to support the success of their peers and educators.

A healing-centered community school strategy addresses change throughout the entire ecosystem of teaching and learning—individual, interpersonal, and institutional.[7] While students, educators, and families do require individual systems and practices of support and well-being, a comprehensive community school strategy must also address interpersonal realities and relationships among individuals, particularly across race and power, as well as the institutional policies and practices that present harm or restore healing.

Regular shared use of formal data and community wisdom as well as inclusive decision-making structures are integral to strong, long-term partnerships, programs, and progress. Reliable, community-specific data coupled with the wisdom of children, youth, families, and residents guide how educators and community partners work together to achieve measurable results. Traditional systems of power and access often exclude students, families, and communities—those most affected by decisions that are all too often made without them. Decision makers and influencers across the multiple youth- and community-serving public systems need to commit actively to shared responsibility (including funding, staffing, and accountability) for the success of healing-centered community schools and of desired outcomes for young people.

Core Practices of a Healing-Centered Community School

The critical distinction of a healing-centered community school is that it is intentionally designed and organized to support student well-being as both a facet of learning and an ultimate goal. It is not enough to remove the basic-needs barriers to learning without also supporting students and educators to feel that they are understood and trusted, are valued, and have the agency, opportunities, and support they need to be successful.[8]

Healing-centered community schools are organized so that students, educators, families, and community partners can meaningfully work together to create high-quality teaching and learning conditions by focusing on the following implementation priorities.

Center Racial Equity and Justice by Repairing and Earning Trust

It is essential to recognize that schools are communities that represent human relationships, experiences, and biases—all of which have a bearing on the viability of a particular reform or initiative. For many communities—particularly those subjected to systemic racial injustice and structural inequality—these relationships also reflect a long history of distrust and harm, sometimes at the hands of well-intentioned educators. Healing-centered community schools prioritize reconnection and repair as part of an antiracist commitment to building an interdependent and thriving teaching and learning environment.[9]

Practitioners at Seneca Family of Agencies describe the reality of how many young people and communities experience schools and how these relationships must be healed and strengthened as part of supporting student success:

> *Parents come to expect that schools lack either the willingness or the ability to help their children. … Students make sense of the system by figuring out what others expect from "students like them" and acting out their assigned role accordingly. Staff squabble over the few resources that exist and blame each other for the gaps in supports and services available.*[10]

School leaders should first explicitly name the relational strains of unjust habits and their influence on the climate, culture, and practices of a school before they can meaningfully advance reforms meant to transform the nature of schooling, for example, instruction, discipline, engagement, and student support. Schools and caring adults should consistently demonstrate a different approach that recognizes past experiences and narratives and that creates new paths forward. School partnerships[11] with community organizations should be woven into the fabric of the school and reflect a consistent and coherent approach to strengthening relationships.

Provide Support and Capacity for Coherence and Collaboration

Community school conversations often lead with the idea of partnering with outside agencies and organizations to provide support and capacity and to help schools address noninstructional needs. In a healing-centered community school, however, there is the explicit recognition that support and capacity are not exogenous to the school community but fully integrated into the culture, systems, and practices of the school. For example, in partnering with a community-based behavioral health organization, specialists are "pushed in" to classrooms to support the student to access classroom instruction and to support the educator to build their skills and confidence in working with that student. Community schools that integrate early learning support smooth transitions and continuity for children and build off close connections with families. In another example, a peer mentoring and mediation program empowers students to be the primary support and capacity-building resource for the school community. Students are trained as peer leaders and restorative practice mediators as part of their school-day curriculum and are formally and informally deployed and empowered to support students and educators as needed.

In addition to specific partnerships and programs, a school's systems and processes are just as important to creating and sustaining a dependable structure for members of the school community to access what they need. This includes having a dedicated staff role with the authority and capacity to serve as a school-based administrator to collect accurate data; determine the needs and assets of students, staff, and families; procure resources through partnerships and collaborations to fill gaps; and develop strategies that prioritize alignment and coherence.

Offer Opportunities to Explore, Learn, Lead, and Thrive

Community schools are first and foremost schools whose purpose is to support students' academic success with ambitious instruction, a student-centered learning climate, and a comprehensive whole child and science of learning design approach. Instructional strategies accommodate the fullest range of students possible via multiple means of engagement, representation, and expressions of learning. In healing-centered community schools, approaches like mastery-based learning, project-based learning, personalized pathways, and opportunities for student choice and agency create access points for all learners.

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Proponents of "universal design" in education[12] encourage educators to design instruction at the "margins"—instead of for a contrived notion of an "average student"—to improve teaching and learning for all students. In assuming learner variability and allowing for different means of academic engagement, educators allow students to explore "core content" in ways that are meaningful and that push them to show their best selves. This might entail empowering students to demonstrate their comprehension and mastery in real-life contexts and using varied approaches to assess student understanding and interests.

In addition, core content standards are used as a basis for creating alignment and innovation across disciplines and with community youth-development organizations. Out-of-school learning programs, including before school, after school, and summer, are often celebrated for offering students ways to explore their interests, think differently, and demonstrate their skills and knowledge in diverse ways.

Schools cannot be healing centered without the leadership of students: Children and youth are valued leaders and participants in their own learning and have meaningful decision-making roles in their schools and communities. This can mean using data from student responses on school climate surveys, having students collaborate with administrators and educators through youth-driven "design teams"—to adopt new curricula and practices that create opportunities for applied learning and that support a culture of positive relationships—or having students play meaningful roles on staff hiring committees.

These same principles of voice and engagement are also important for sustaining meaningful continuing learning opportunities for school staff, families, and partners. In healing-centered community schools, teachers and school staff are valued as professional experts and can design knowledge-building opportunities that support their efficacy and success. School leaders are skilled facilitators and community organizers. Families are valued as long-term partners and advocates with experiences and perspectives that enhance and contribute to student and school success.

Are Rigorously Accountable for Student Success

Schools are being held more and more accountable for decreasing inequitable outcomes and increasing the quality of schooling while there is a recognition of the complex interdependence between school and "nonschool" factors. Educators and partners in a healing-centered community school accept shared responsibility for student outcomes and work together to ensure success. This includes developing a shared and comprehensive approach to data and continuous improvement—for students, families, educators, school leaders, and partners. Data systems should be designed to allow for disaggregation by race to support deep reflection on how schools are addressing (or sometimes exacerbating) racial equity challenges.

Reliable data support strategic planning, organizational learning, and progress assessment. For a healing-centered community school, this means going beyond the anecdotal "feel good" stories of collaborative partnership highlights and/or piecemeal snapshots of student success. Instead, schools need to identify explicitly what they are measuring and how they will know if anything is changing. This includes disaggregated data about student engagement performance, student needs and assets, sense of belonging and safety, teacher support and satisfaction, family engagement, culture and climate, and school-specific areas for improvement. Healing-centered community schools also regularly review data available from partner organizations to have a holistic understanding of student, staff, and family needs—for example, mental health data and aggregate community needs assessments.[13]

Rigorous and reliable data are not limited to quantitative measures like attendance rates or standardized tests—what Shane Safir refers to as "satellite data."[14] In addition, qualitative data that center the voices of those who are often underrepresented and marginalized can democratize access to decision-making processes by using methods such as storytelling, focus groups, portfolio assessments, surveys, and interviews. Young people, families, educators, and community partners provide valuable guidance to knowing what data need to be collected and what can be done with them.

School improvement and accountability are not individual work or responsibilities held only by instructional leaders—particularly around issues of racial justice and equity. Shared accountability rests on intentional investments to create and maintain systems, practices, trusting relationships, and adequate resources (including dedicated staff and staff time) to promote collaboration and improvement. This also means that students and families are actively involved in accountability and improvement conversations and processes.

Conclusion

Community school systems and practices can be much more than reactive attempts to control or mitigate factors outside school or to reduce the symptomatology of an unjust society. Being healing-centered is a necessary extension and expansion of trauma-informed practices, with a prevailing focus on long-term disruption of the practices and daily interactions that can create systematic disengagement for so many students, families, and communities. **In a healing-centered community school, treatment is never the end goal; the end goal is healing and the restoration of well-being.** This ethos is embedded in each classroom and the school community, with the recognition that effective teaching and learning is a human and relationship-based process and set of actions, not a transactional diagnosis and set of interventions.

Proactive and transformative healing-centered community schools must reimagine the foundational practices of teaching and learning environments to reflect more functionally the human, social, and relational realities of students, educators, families, and communities.

Endnotes

[1] Science of Learning & Development Alliance. (n.d.). *What we've learned.* soldalliance.org/what-weve-learned

[2] Carlson, P. (2019). Impact of adverse childhood experiences on academic achievement of school-aged learners [Master's thesis, Concordia University-St. Paul]. Digital Commons@CSP. digitalcommons.csp.edu/teacher-education_masters/4

[3] In this brief, the term "community schools" refers to *the operational and organizational strategy* promoting a whole child approach to teaching and learning—not only a physical location or an administrative label. This is different from (but not mutually exclusive to) California's court and community schools—alternative public schools that are administered by County Offices of Education. Students attending court and community schools are usually referred by departments of probation or school attendance review boards, or because they have been expelled from traditional school systems. Community schools are also sometimes posited as being antithetical to charter schools. This is a false dichotomy and an incomplete representation of the community school strategy, which intentionally builds whole child, whole school systems, structures, and practices such as those described in this brief. All schools can, and should, be community schools by this definition.

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[10] Detterman et al., 2019. Quotation on p. 34.

[11] Vance, F., Wolforth, S., & Kimner, H. (2021, February). *Expanded learning partnerships: A foundation for rebuilding to support the whole child* [Policy brief, Infographic]. Policy Analysis for California Education. edpolicyinca.org/publications/expanded-learning-partnerships

[12] Avallone, A. (2018, December 3). *Universal design for learning: Because one size fits none.* Next Generation Learning Challenges. nextgenlearning.org/articles/universal-design-for-learning-because-one-size-fits-none

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[14] Safir, S., (2019, March 6). Street data: A new grammar for educational equity. *Education Week.* blogs.edweek.org/edweek/next_gen_learning/2019/03/street_data_a_new_grammar_for_educational_equity.html

About the Author

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Related Publications

Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2020, November). ***Restructuring California schools to address barriers to learning and teaching in the COVID-19 context and beyond*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gee, K., Murdoch, C., Vang, T., Cuahuey, Q., & Prim, J. (2020, August). ***Multi-Tiered System of Supports to address childhood trauma: Evidence and implications*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Kimner, H. (2021, August). ***Healing-centered community schools: A key investment for COVID-19 recovery*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Kimner, H. (2020, July). ***Community schools: A COVID-19 recovery strategy*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

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