



WHOLE CHILD

Fueling Development for Learning and Life



January 2026

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Evidence-Informed Practice Brief

This brief is part of our series of evidence-informed practices supporting the whole child. We organize the series using the ten domains of the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\)](#) model. In this brief, we introduce the **Community Involvement** domain.

WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Community Involvement refers to partnerships between school and community-based groups or organizations.¹ Community-based groups and organizations can include local businesses, civic organizations, social service agencies, farms, health clinics, colleges and universities, and faith-based organizations. Partnerships can involve formats such as service-learning opportunities for students (e.g., volunteering, community service activities) and resource sharing (e.g., space, services). Sharing of resources can be particularly helpful in promoting service access by extending supports offered by the school into the community (e.g., adult learning opportunities), facilitating access to additional supports in the community (e.g., enrichment opportunities, wraparound services, charitable food system), and integrating community resources into the school environment (e.g., farm-to-school initiatives). All partnerships rely on communication to connect and coordinate information across school and community contexts.

Community involvement can build school capacity to align practices with needs and priorities in the community. Therefore, engaging in community partnerships should be a priority for school systems.² Federal initiatives, such as Title IV of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), require districts and schools to develop programming for school-community partnerships and to involve community members on district or school wellness committees.^{3,4} Schools can enhance their capacity for community involvement by first developing plans for engagement and some may choose to create advisory groups.^{2,5} These groups should be reflective of the community. Schools can collaborate with community partners to conduct a needs assessment of the strengths and areas for improvement of available supports (e.g., resources, services) in the school and community, and then create a shared vision and plan that includes partnership strategies and timelines.⁵ Schools and community partners can also work together to evaluate partnerships and develop plans to sustain collaboration over time.⁵ In addition, schools can inform students and families of meaningful opportunities and supports available in the community.²



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WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO CHILD OUTCOMES?

Physical Health Outcomes

Community involvement has important connections to student physical health. For example, school-based programs targeting obesity prevention in early elementary students that incorporate a community involvement component are associated with greater decreases in the body mass index (BMI) of students compared to programs without community involvement.⁶ Further, coordination between schools and community partners has shown to enhance health outcomes for students, schools, and the community.^{7,8,9} For example, school health programs that include community partners and supports demonstrate improved dietary intake and increased levels of physical activity among students.⁸ In addition, research has found that when schools coordinate their school and community health-related policies with interventions that address varied needs, both children and families demonstrate significant improvements in physical health (e.g., BMI, physical fitness).⁷

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Health Outcomes

Community involvement can promote positive outcomes for student social, emotional, and behavioral health. For example, participation in activities at religious centers or places of worship is associated with positive mental health outcomes for adolescents.^{10,11} Further, involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, clubs) and employment may serve as protective factors against adolescent mental health concerns.¹⁰ In addition, youth who are actively involved in political, community, and helping activities report higher levels of self-esteem, optimism, and perceived social supports.¹² Adolescent involvement in the community is associated with higher quality of communication with family members, life satisfaction, and social self-esteem along with reduced feelings of loneliness.¹³ Community involvement that includes mentoring and service learning has been shown to promote positive behavior and prevent problem behaviors.¹⁴ In addition, schools that collaborate with community mental health centers are more likely to implement targeted intervention programs for students demonstrating social, emotional, or behavioral concerns.¹⁵

Academic Outcomes

School-community partnerships are associated with positive outcomes for student academic performance and overall school improvement.^{16,17} Specifically, these partnerships are associated with higher levels of student achievement and success, increased attendance and graduation rates, and continued success later in life.^{18,19,20} In turn, school attendance is related to student academic performance and achievement,²¹ especially among high school students.^{22,23} Partnerships between schools and community organizations are also associated with increased feelings of school connectedness among students, which is critical given that higher levels of connectedness are related to student academic success.²⁴



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: EVIDENCE IN ACTION

The strategies provided here summarize a review of available evidence and best practice recommendations in this domain. Strategies are grouped by anticipated resource demand (e.g., funding, time, space, training, materials).*

Level 1 Strategies: Low resource demand

Involve community members in existing prevention efforts

- Prevention programs that involve community members (e.g., an obesity prevention program that involves community members on the data team) are more effective than programs without community involvement.²⁵
- Schools can modify existing prevention and intervention initiatives (e.g., obesity prevention, drug and alcohol education, district or school wellness teams) to increase collaboration with a range of community partners (e.g., universities, government agencies, farms, neighborhood or religious groups).^{25,26}

Evaluate existing community involvement initiatives

- Strong family-school-community partnership programs are planned and implemented by a team of teachers, administrators, families, and community members who collaborate to engage families and the community through activities that map onto school goals and support student achievement.^{27,28}
- A team of school administrators and staff, family members, and community members can collaboratively evaluate current policies and programs to ensure they are matched to the varied needs of students and the community.^{19,20}

Level 2 Strategies: Moderate resource demand

Invest in building relationships that connect all families

- Relationships that meaningfully engage community agencies or respected community members can help to establish trusting connections between families and school personnel, and facilitate collaborative work to address mutual goals (e.g., reducing absenteeism, welcoming new families to the school community).
- Interpreters can help to make communication (both verbal and in writing) more accessible to linguistically diverse students and families.^{29,30}

Incorporate service learning activities into curricula

- Service learning that incorporates community involvement is associated with improved student academic performance, particularly when opportunities relate to student learning objectives.^{31,32} Service learning can also improve civic engagement, social skills, and student attitudes toward self, school, and learning.^{31,33}
- Schools can use service learning (e.g., community service or volunteer experiences) to provide students with opportunities to acquire skills and socially responsive behavior.^{20,34} These opportunities can draw from the real-world expertise and experiences of a range of community partners to supplement school curricula.²⁰

Establish shared-use agreements for school and community spaces

- Shared-use agreements outline the terms and conditions of shared or joint use of school grounds and facilities by the school and a city, town, or community entity³⁵ and can increase implementation and use of programs that benefit student, family, and community health.³⁶
- Districts and community partners can establish shared-use agreements to allow coordinated and collaborative use of indoor and outdoor spaces³⁵ and increase use of school grounds and facilities,³⁶ physical activity, and provide access to healthy foods for students, families, and community members.³⁵

Level 3 Strategies: High resource demand

Implement a school-based mentoring or volunteer tutoring program

- Participation in school-based mentoring programs can reduce student absences and discipline referrals and can benefit student emotional well-being and self-concept;^{14,24} volunteer tutoring programs can improve academic outcomes for students, particularly in reading.³⁷
- Schools can implement mentoring and volunteer tutoring programs to build positive, caring connections between students and members of the community (e.g., retired adults, college students, older students) who can serve as role models and provide students with social and academic support.³⁸

Establish programming in collaboration with community partners

- After-school programs can offer a range of activities (e.g., art and music, martial arts) and be implemented by school staff or community members.³⁹ These opportunities can improve access to enrichment activities and student attendance, academic achievement, and attitudes toward school and community.^{40,41}
- Community partners can help to extend school resource offerings to families (e.g., food pantries; family resource centers; mediation programs to increase conflict management skills and reduced reliance on exclusionary discipline).

**For more information about the systematic review process we used to identify evidence-based practices, please refer to our [overview brief](#).*



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Note: The [WellSAT WSCC](#) allows users to evaluate district policy alignment with 'best practices' in policy associated with Community Involvement and other WSCC model domains.

Child Trends

[Students and Communities Can Be Better Served via Partnerships Between Community Organizations and Schools](#)

This practice guide focuses on community-school partnerships and their potential to transform school systems.

Great Schools Partnership

[Equitable Community Engagement](#)

This webpage links to tools about community engagement focused on the categories of an introduction to community engagement, community conversations, and policy.

Institute for Educational Leadership

[Coalition for Community Schools](#)

This resource explains the values of community schools as well as strategies for strengthening community involvement.

National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)

[Resource Library](#)

This searchable database lists resources dedicated to family, school and community engagement.

National Farm to School Network

[Main Website](#)

This organization is a networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems.

National Youth Leadership Council Resource Library

This resource library provides tools for youth interested in strengthening their communities, including resources on service-learning.

K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice

This document provides educators with standards for implementing an effective service-learning program or curriculum.

Ohio Department of Education & Workforce

[Framework for Building Partnerships Among Schools, Families, and Communities](#)

This webpage provides a framework that can help schools build effective partnerships with families and community members, along with resources for facilitating discussions within schools for strengthening partnerships.

Youth Service America

[YSA Knowledge Center](#)

This online resource center provides guides, toolkits, and other resources to aid in promoting service-learning, volunteering, and engagement in the community for youth.

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