

Policy Recommendations Related to the Community Schools Policy and Procedures

Over the past month, the Teachers' Democracy Project has attempted to understand the full implications and backstory behind the newly proposed Community Schools Policy. TDP staff and fellows have listened to teachers, parents, lead agencies, community schools coordinators and others on their thoughts about what would make this initiative better. This document defines both policy and procedures people see as necessary. We ask that you bring together a group of people for a series of in-depth discussions about school climate and democratic decision-making—discussions that include the community schools initiative, but also look beyond the formally designated and funded community schools to look at the kinds of support that all schools need to begin the work of embracing this philosophy.

We are clear that the need for the policy is: to make sure that we have principal buy-in; to ensure high-level, coordinated involvement of district office staff; and to create an expectation for all schools that school climate shifts. The policy goes part way to meeting the first goal regarding expectations of principals, but needs to go further; it appears to meet the second goal, but potentially at the expense of real input from other stakeholders; and it only weakly implies a systemic shift in school culture.

We have heard that it is impossible to make this single policy into the “kitchen sink” of policies. However, our conclusion is that the problems that prevent ideal implementation of the Community Schools policy--in addition to issues of inadequate funding--require us to come up with a more expansive and integrated policy and procedural approach. We need to do the hard work of shifting school culture in the direction of inclusive decision-making; we need services that are integrated into the entire school, that include teachers, and that address deep needs holistically. We believe that the solutions require a move away from a pure service model of community schools to a community-empowered model in which families and teachers are in authentic partnership, and have the power to make decisions about how to address the needs they see in their neighborhood schools. We also acknowledge that this shift necessitates thoughtful processes, which will allow for healing, support and training for community members that bear the scars of generational disinvestment and systemic racism. At the same time, this shift will require a fundamental review of district office policies and procedures across multiple offices, and a willingness to engage in training around racial equity issues and communicating across cultural divides.

We hope that the board and the CEO will consider this analysis and the recommendations prior to voting on this important policy. We have divided our recommendations into those that should be in the new policy; those that should be addressed in the near future with respect to the coordination and implementation of related policies; and procedural recommendations that may not fit within policy, but should be strongly considered in support of this and other policies. We have also grouped our recommendations under seven inter-related themes.

Governance of Community Schools: Composition and Role of the Community Schools Steering Committee and Advisory Board

Background/Analysis:

The unanimous feeling we have heard is that communities should have more control in school decision-making. Though there is currently some diversity in representation in the steering committee, we believe that, for this committee to work as intended, community members on the proposed Community Schools Steering Committee need a space to work through their ideas and build their own power outside of the high-pressured environment of this decision-making body. This should be built into the governance strategy.

The issue of how community partners and the lead agencies get chosen and removed is also problematic. The current policy favors lead agencies that have a fairly extensive infrastructure. While the Family League attempts to support the application process for groups that have a less well-established infrastructure, we have received extensive feedback that it is difficult for genuine community-based organizations to participate.

Community School Policy Recommendations:

- The policy should have as a goal that with a fully functioning democratically organized School Family Council (SFC), the recommendations of the council SFC should carry the most weight in choosing the lead agency. While this decision making power cannot be devolved lightly, we believe that in schools that have done the work to create a system of checks and balances, and where the principal is truly accountable to the whole community, it is this body that best represents the interests of those being served.

Procedural Recommendations:

- Community Schools should work in tandem with an initiative to activate robust School Family Councils--councils that ensure the existence of a highly organized parent/teacher body.
- Smaller organizations that are led by residents should be given support to be able to apply as lead agencies. There should be funds for groups other than the management agency to provide this support.
- Student representatives who often need their own space to think about their agenda before coming to meetings should be supported by, trained by or drawn from groups such as Citybloc, the Baltimore Algebra Project or Youth as Resources--groups that have the background, skills and voice to engage youth in a representative democracy.
- Other members of the steering committee should have access to training by an outside group for how to have an effective voice on a serious, policy level committee.
- Those who are used to working within the city schools systemic structure should have training on authentic communication, listening, trusting diverse voices, etc. This could include training in building consensus across diverse stakeholders as well.
- The data requirements for community schools are too extensive and focus too heavily on data points that fail to recognize relationship building, leadership development, and other meaningful outcomes that respond to key school climate improvements. This indicates a need for a useful program theory or framework such as the one created by the National School Climate Center. The data

requirements should be layered to allow smaller organizations to participate. Volume of service should not be the primary measure of success. Since it is labor intensive to assess school climate at this level, this recommendation is tied to the recommendation regarding a single school plan and periodic comprehensive assessment (such as the School Effectiveness Review) as opposed the constant demand for data collection. One meaningful school plan; one meaningful assessment.

Expectations for Principals

Background/Analysis:

The new policy puts in place the idea that the City Schools CEO and the management agency are a partnership, but does not yet hold principals accountable to the model nor address what might make it difficult for principals to form an authentic partnership with their community schools coordinator.

Community School Policy Recommendations:

Make the policy with respect to expectations for principals more clear by:

- Making full use of the planning process for becoming a community school by combining all strategic planning required of community schools (School Family Engagement Plan, the School Performance Plan, the documents required for the Title I and the School Effectiveness Review, and any other strategic plans that are supposed to have community and teacher input). Since we consider the integration, efficacy, and accessibility of all strategic planning processes an important policy recommendation for all schools, we have included a separate recommendation below. For community schools, however, this could be accomplished within this new policy. To accomplish this, there would need to be a framework that lays out how we define school climate in a community school.
- Require that community school principals be held accountable through their evaluation for this community-empowered, integrated plan.

Related Policy Recommendations:

- In addition to having the capacity to advise the principal on a variety of things like the budget and school improvement plan, School Family Councils should have input into the evaluation of their principal. This ensures that principals take partnership and community schools seriously.

Procedural Recommendations:

- Until principals can be held responsible via effective School Family Councils, the community (parents, teachers, students and community members) should have the opportunity to engage in a series of discussion/focus group that provide in-depth feedback to administrators throughout the year.
- Systematically review the messages sent to schools by the network leads. Networks should: support principals in emphasizing a welcoming environment over prioritizing compliance; support principals in considering how to view the school from a parent's perspective (office procedures, notes home, phone calls, conflict resolution approaches), particularly when a parent or group of parents present as critical of the school; de-emphasize immediate test score increases in favor of activities that make students feel they belong in the classroom and in the school. Increased academic achievement should be considered as a goal that is

achievable when there is a foundation of positive climate and empowered involvement of community and parents in schools.

- Schools need to collaboratively create a set of core principles that establish a baseline of agreed upon values and culture. These core values also establish guidelines for how these more collaborative decisions are made.

Radical School Climate Change: Restorative Justice and Democratic Decision Making in Schools

Background/Analysis:

Everyone we heard from on the community schools policy considers school climate change essential. We also heard that culturally responsive pedagogy (where teaching is student-centered and honors students' strengths and culture) and school wide Restorative Practices are a vital part of this change. Done well these practices are considered (in the research and by many community members) as the most likely set of practices that have the potential to change school climate. Though climate is a primary concern of the Community Schools policy, it appears that these practices are seen as outside its scope. We instead see this as an opportunity to look across policies and strategies and strive for courageous, big change. The problem we also found, however, is that flawed and/or partial implementation of both culturally responsive practices and Restorative Practices has made them into buzzwords in many schools rather than deeply ingrained initiatives.

Each of these practices, when adopted deeply, creates new kinds of relationships between and among teachers, staff and students, and, ideally, school staff and parents. Full implementation of these practices requires a comprehensive look at: schedules and how restorative practices/community building fit into a day; curriculum and how it can integrate community concerns, while also meeting standards; an expanded role for teachers and principals with respect to involvement in the community; and coordination between the network, the CSC, teachers and staff. The feedback we received is that time and structures for across stakeholder learning and reflection is essential, and currently in short supply.

Community School Policy Recommendation:

- Revisit this policy, along with other relevant policies once the district has made its commitment to Restorative Practices clearer.

Related Policy Recommendation:

- Implement a model of Restorative Practices that is focused on transformation of all relationships in school spaces so that staff and students alike are seen as part of generating school climate by jointly defining values, making decisions and working through difficulties. Some schools currently focus on a therapeutic model where RP is seen as a way to address trauma, or a model where RP is an alternative to suspension. These models may offer some useful tools but we'd like to see a school transformation model considered.

Procedural Recommendations:

- The academic office must examine its directives to schools and recognize that they may be interpreted as requiring an overly strict adherence to schedules that preclude relationship building, effective communication, and adaptation of the curriculum to meet student needs.

Including Teachers: Professional Development Across Stakeholders

Background/Analysis:

The goal for community schools includes an integrated approach to academics across in-school time and out-of-school time. And yet we see no place where teachers and in-school academics fit into the Community Schools Policy. The feedback we received speaks to a clear need for teachers to have more than a token presence in this initiative. We met teachers who did not even know they teach in a community school. Teachers and community members have many ideas about how they could get linked in.

Community School Policy Recommendation:

- Teachers should participate in evaluating the school's partner organization. Part of this evaluation should include the degree to which they have been consulted on the specific partnership arrangements, and the activities of the CSC.

Procedural Recommendations:

- Regular interactive PD's that include principals, school coordinators, teachers and parents *in the same sessions* as a way to understand the different perspectives of school stakeholders with respect to safety and order concerns, accountability, decision making, and humane relationships.
- Teachers engage in PD and staff meetings where they can talk to each other about how to make the community part of their classrooms. The CSC, parents and partners could be included.
- Teachers need training on how being a "community teacher" is not antithetical to meeting testing requirements, but rather a prerequisite.
- Teachers should be asked to recommend strategies for CS programs and should be part of the planning process for the CS application
- Part of the work of the CSC could be to connect community resources to the classroom.

Overhaul various policies to align goals and activities and produce a Single School Plan

Background/Analysis:

There is no rational reason for a school to have more than one plan to drive its decision-making, assess its progress, and evaluate its outcomes. Nor is there any justification at the school level for making the community school application separate from the primary strategic planning process at any school. There should be one, all encompassing, parent-teacher-student inclusive, and manageable plan per school. This plan should replace the current myriad of plans that a school has to write: School Performance Plan, Title I Plan, Family Engagement Plan, Community Schools Plan, the School Effectiveness Review Report, and perhaps others that we are unaware of.

The support required to write this single plan would entail the equivalent of the outside support (both financial and consultative) currently promised to schools applying for Community School status. The Single-School-Plan would, in many ways, bring life to the idea that all schools move along a continuum toward a full Community School model because the writing of the plan would require partnerships, a needs assessment, a curricular focus, and a conception of the school as being part of a larger community. This would also mean that all schools have the same process that charter schools currently have.

Related Policy Recommendations:

- Require that a single strategic planning process for schools that includes all stakeholders take place under the guidance of the SFC.
- Require that all principal evaluations be tied to the details of this integrated plan.

Procedural Recommendations:

- The district would need to conduct a thorough review and understanding of the bottom line requirements from the Federal and State governments and produce a set of clear directives for schools in which the jargon and complex language is minimal.
- Review [models](#) from other cities as part of a process to revamp the Family and Community Engagement policy in a way that combines the work and activities of the School Family Council and the innovations that are part of Community Schools into one policy. These are not isolated initiatives. This would require a review of the Family and Community Engagement office functions and how those functions align with other offices within the district.
- Provide substantial support from district offices, working in unison, for developing this combined plan that can serve the needs of the Community School plan (for all schools),

Title I Spending and Additional Grants to Support Community Engagement

Background:

There is ample evidence that Baltimore City has been unable to fully expend its Title I funds on an annual basis (with the result that funds have to be returned). These funds are supposed to be used to support community engagement. There are also additional Federal grants available that have not been applied for that would support the work of bringing community and parents into a substantial planning process.

Procedural Recommendations:

- Either align internal resources or contract with an outside agency to pursue Title I grants and to streamline the process by which schools spend Title I funds that are currently unspent.
- Ensure that new, more lenient ESSA regulations are incorporated into the spending approval process for Title I funds.
- Seek out Title I funding to support a single-plan per school option that would meet Title I requirements in a way that integrates rather than isolates school-level initiatives.

Ratio of students to Community School Coordinators

Background:

The equivalent program in Boston has a 1:400 ratio of CSCs to students. Schools with more students need another CSC. Since it is a stated goal that all schools move toward community school status, we need far more substantial support provided to schools with respect to their strategic planning process that envisions schools as integral to the communities they serve.

Community School Policy Recommendations:

- Since setting a limit on the ration of CSCs to students would require substantially more funding, there should be stronger aspirations language to indicate the amount of additional funding required.
- There should also be aspirational language to indicate the amount of additional funding required to support, at minimum, support for the planning process for community-empowered strategic planning for all schools.