

“Leading collaboration” is how the Family League of Baltimore describes the work it has been doing for almost 25 years to create positive outcomes for youth and families. The Family League has been an innovator, weaving funds, working across systems, integrating different strategies, and in the past decade partnering more closely with the Baltimore Public Schools.

These strengths were demonstrated three years ago when the Family League aligned its after-school and community school efforts. Julia Baez, the senior director of initiatives there, says she remembers talking about obliging “everyone to play nice together.” This was a new idea for many, and a hard question to ask—can those who have been advocating separately come to the same table and share resources?

The two existing strategies were aligned so that schools, lead agencies overseeing community schools and after-school programs had to collaborate to receive funding. The goal was to create a more integrated approach to improving outcomes for students academically through the enrichment, health and social support programs available to families.

Now looking back, Baez says that while some after-school advocates and providers had reservations about the new direction, “people have seen that this relationship and this partnership is mutually beneficial.”

### *Expanding Access for Students*

The first piece of evidence to support the benefit is that participation rates in after-school programs has increased. Baez attributes that to the fact that because providers are working in partnership with community school coordinators, there is “constant communication” involving teachers, coordinators and providers when a slot opens and therefore students who would most benefit from an extended learning program can be readily identified. “Before there was no consistent vehicle to continually recruit kids,” she says. “All of those conversations have just grown tremendously since the alignment.”

Higher participation rates are also translating to better attendance and gains in achievement for students. The Baltimore Education Research Consortium is finding that compared to students not in after-school programs, those who attend for at least two years have higher attendance rates and are less likely to be chronically absent. Schools that have been operating as community schools for five years or more also have much higher attendance rates and lower rates of chronic absenteeism, compared to non-community schools. Individual schools are also seeing a drop in suspensions.

“Before I couldn’t tell you the outcomes,” Baez says. “Now we have that foundation to stand on.”

Baltimore, where almost 85 percent of the district's students live in poverty, currently has 45 community schools. Each community school has a full-time coordinator, with about a dozen different lead agencies, including the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, community-based groups and youth development organizations such as the YMCA, and neighborhood groups such as the Greater Homewood Community Corporation, Access Arts, and Higher Achievement. The community schools are currently serving close to 22,000 of the district's 84,730 students. They are spread across all grade levels, with 14 elementary schools, 22 K- or PreK-8s, three middle schools and six high schools.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's office is the primary source of funding for community schools, but in all, there are more than 10 different organizations—including the State of Maryland, foundations, nonprofit organizations and the National Football League—providing financial support for community schools. Some schools direct federal School Improvement Grant funds toward community school operations, and other schools have come to value being a community school so much that they are using flexibility within their own budgets to cover the costs of coordinating programs and services. In the 2014-15 school year, three schools have become part of the community schools strategy using outside funding, with another slated to join during the 2015-2016 school year with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center resources.

A Family League convened a city-wide Community and School Engagement Steering Committee provides direction for the Family League's community schools work. It includes representatives from the school district, the mayor's office, the Baltimore Teachers Union, the city health department, the Department of Social Services as well as principals, community partners and coordinators. Short- and long-term goals are aligned to the city's overall priority areas of babies born healthy, school readiness, grade-level achievement, dropout reduction and college graduation.

Recently, the steering committee, along with the Baltimore City Health Department formed a school health workgroup to delve into issues around students' health, gather information on promising practices and make recommendations to the full committee on how community schools can support the health needs of students and families. A growing partnership with the Baltimore City Department of Social Services will also mean that coordinators will be able to make direct referrals to a family stability program for families—a service that will streamline the process for many families and reduce the stress and waiting involved in going to government offices.

At the school level, educators, coordinators and community partners review needs assessments and performance data each spring to determine goals and objectives for the next year. Goals are set in the following areas—physical and mental health, youth development, academic support, community engagement and development and family support. Each plan also includes a communication and marketing

framework so that Community Schools are broadly advertising the work happening in each community to better connect students and families.

“Nothing is done in a vacuum,” says Henriette Taylor, the coordinator at Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary. “The idea is that we’re strategically growing these partnerships.”

Kelvin Bridgers, the principal at Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary, is just completing his first year as a principal in a community school, but he says almost every day he has a story to share about how partners come together and the community school approach helps to meet the needs of students without him having to initiate the process. Partners, he says, are “rallying” together to improve attendance rates through phone calls and home visits, and the school has applied for a grant to offer a summer transition program for young children.

Milestones are also being reached in the areas of family and community engagement. More than 140,000 volunteer hours were given in support of schools and communities in 2014. And in the 37 community schools examined as part of the Baltimore Education Research Consortium’s study, parent response rates on a school climate survey were significantly higher than in non-community schools—providing schools an additional source of data on the concerns and hopes of parents.

### *Reaching ‘Another Level’ of Work in Schools*

The aligned community school strategy has also meant that many providers have found themselves working with schools in different ways than in the past. “We’ve always been clear that we have to build a constituency of parents and students and community partners to get a sense of what the needs are,” says Carol Reckling, the executive director of Child First Authority Inc., which had been providing after-school programs and is now a lead community schools agency in seven schools.

“We would uncover needs, but we didn’t have the resources to provide for those needs,” she says. “This lifted our work to another level.” Now, in collaboration with community partners, children’s needs could be met even when schools were closing early due to the civil disturbances in Baltimore in April. After-school programming was cancelled on one of the days of unrest, but children were still able attend programs in a local church and a recreation center and still receive the evening meals that many depend on.

“Community schools were doing the work that needed to be done,” Baez adds. “They were the anchors of the community, the food pantries, the safe place. They were the front lines of what was going on.” In these neighborhoods, families and students turned to their schools, and because they were integrated into the community and had partnerships in place, coordinators and principals were among the first to respond to the crisis.

The Family League of Baltimore has also devoted considerable resources toward making sure the community partner organizations and coordinators that are new to community school work develop the skills that will help them be more effective in their roles. In 2014, 113 professional development opportunities were provided, reaching roughly over 1,400 participants. Sessions for coordinators included topics such as Common Core, trauma-informed care, family engagement and youth development best practices. The Family League also runs a summer institute for coordinators and has created the position of “cohort leader”—a coordinator who will provide support to other coordinators within a geographic area and increase opportunities to share knowledge and lessons learned.

Growing support for the community school strategy throughout the city is also being reflected in organizations such as the Y of Central Maryland, which has made community schools one of its strategic priorities. Baltimore is also one of three cities involved in ExpandedED, a network of schools that are “reimagining” the school day by creating modified schedules that run from breakfast through dinner and include science, arts and enrichment activities in partnership with community providers. The partnership with The After-School Corporation, which launched the ExpandedED model, has brought additional resources into community schools and helped schools serve students that, otherwise, would be on waiting lists.

“For the first time, I feel like all these different diverse partners are having the same conversation at the same time,” Baez says. “There are so many places where this strategy is now able to take hold.”

### *21st Century School Buildings*

In addition to guiding how the Family League approves proposals from after-school providers, the community school strategy is also figuring prominently in the city’s plans to renovate or build new schools. As buildings are modernized or built from scratch—with bond funding approved in 2013—collaborative spaces will be included in the design and schools will be open extended hours to meet the needs of students, families and community members. The district envisions these schools as being anchors for revitalization in their neighborhoods that are “integrated into their communities, providing resources and support that extend beyond the school day.”

The beginning of this process has also included open community meetings to get residents and parents involved in thinking about what they want their schools to provide. “It’s not just about a new building. It’s also about what is going on in that building and how the school relates to the community,” says Reckling, whose agency has been heavily involved in the meetings because of its expertise in community organizing and building parents’ capacity to be more involved in their children’s education.

For example, John Eager Howard Elementary, one of the first schools to go through this design phase, is expected to have not only preschool classrooms, but also recreation facilities, because of a partnership with Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks, adult education and workforce development spaces and a teaching kitchen for both students and adults. Both students and community members are also expected to have access to a media studio and a video room in the new facility.

While the funding strategy and growing emphasis on community schools in Baltimore is attracting attention outside of the city, Reckling says there is still work to do in terms of getting school board members and many principals to develop a deeper understanding of community schools. The school district is developing a board policy that will help communicate the definition and further solidify the district's support of the strategy. Focusing on sustaining the work into the future, the Family League is also seeking flexibility in Title I funding so it could be used to support the role of a coordinator and resources for out-of-school time programs.

"Community schools provide schools with a way to better address the needs of students and families, and thereby build community confidence in public schools and better contribute to the community," says Tina Hike-Hubbard, a member of the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners.

Her efforts, and those of others, reinforced the Baltimore City Council's decision to pass an important resolution, calling on the mayor to increase the budget for community schools and out-of-school-time to \$10 million from its current level of \$6 million. This resolution came in the wake of unrest in Baltimore, and was advocated for by many partners, teachers, parents and students.

The history of community schools in Baltimore is "so very grass roots," and emerging from local community partnerships, Baez says. But now those efforts have been joined with the "grass tops," meaning community leaders have a shared vision for community schools and are aligning systems to support educators and other practitioners working with young people in Baltimore's public schools.

"We're learning best practices and gleaning that information for the city," she says. "We're all around the same table."